

# Nothing about us without us: Student wellbeing

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*Schools cannot simply rely on their positive culture and respectful relationships to promote wellbeing but need to provide opportunities for students to make decisions about their wellbeing and to be active in leading their learning, Education Review Office, 2016, p. 18.*

The wellbeing of young people is increasingly an area of focus for schools here in Aotearoa New Zealand, as well as overseas. In the past, we have possibly relied too heavily on an implicit approach to the wellbeing of our staff, students, and school community that:

- teachers and students have a good rapport
- leaders have an 'open door' policy whereby any issue can be raised at any time
- the school environment has a positive feeling.

While these are indeed all strengths schools can build upon, this isn't an approach to wellbeing in and of itself. If we see wellbeing as important, then it must be reflected in all areas and aspects of a school. Wellbeing requires an explicit approach, as the Education Review Office (ERO) calls for in the quote above.

What is wellbeing? When I asked participants this very question at a recent CORE Breakfast, this is what people said:



A synonym I like to use is flourishing (as did one or two others!). That our young people are nurtured to do more than exist; they thrive. They have the right to be who they are without having to leave any aspect of their identity (such as their ethnicity, culture, gender, sexual orientation) at the school gate.

This is all very laudable, but how do schools go about explicitly planning for our young people to flourish and thrive?

Both ERO and the [New Zealand Council for Educational Research \(NZCER\)](#) have produced useful work for schools focusing on the wellbeing of students. When we bring this material together, we can see that both organisations call for:

- a whole-school approach to wellbeing
- taking a youth development perspective in wellbeing work
- seeing young people as active agents in their lives.

Whole school really means whole school: that wellbeing goals are reflected in school policy, curriculum, the physical environment, pastoral care practices, in the staffroom, in the boardroom, and in the classroom. It means that we monitor the wellbeing of all students and staff, and that we iteratively design and evaluate wellbeing strategies and initiatives.

Taking a youth development perspective requires moving beyond our previous practices of focusing on responding to specific issues as they present themselves (bullying, teen pregnancy, smoking, for example) to promoting wellbeing. It also means that students are actively involved in developing and leading wellbeing programmes. This goes hand-in-hand with treating young people as agentic. Young people are experts in their own lives; they have knowledge that deserves respect and offers learning opportunities for adults.

Last year, I had the privilege of being selected for the Lifehack Flourishing Fellowship. [Lifehack](#) was a systems-level intervention in youth mental health and wellbeing in Aotearoa New Zealand. One of the amazing resources I was introduced to was the '[Mapping and Mobilising Conditions for Youth Wellbeing and Hauora](#)'. This is a tool primarily designed for youth work teams and organisations to "identify and strengthen their practices and ways of working across areas that are known to promote youth wellbeing, hauora, and positive youth development." As soon as I saw it, I got excited. I could see its potential to be used in schools as a reflection tool. I tested it with a group of teachers, and we had a think about both its format and its language. Based on their feedback and thoughts, I had a play to create this version for use in schools and Kāhui Ako: [Pathways towards student wellbeing](#).

In it, I pose three key questions:

1. Agency and Engagement: How are young people involved?
2. Cohesion and Collaboration: How do we learn and work together to nurture wellbeing systemically?
3. Environment and Community: Do our environments show that young people are valued and important?

## Agency and engagement

Much of the literature about youth wellbeing places emphasis on agency — that young people are involved in the planning, leading, and implementation of wellbeing programmes and initiatives. We should work towards the consistent involvement of diverse groups of young people, including initiatives and programmes they co-design and lead.

As a prompt to consider where you might be at in your school with regards to agency and engagement, you may like to consider student leadership.

- Who are the student leaders in your school?
- How are they selected?
- What role(s) do they fulfil? How much agency do these leaders have?
- Who is not represented in student leadership roles?

And perhaps more broadly:

- To what extent are young people involved in the design of programmes/initiatives and in decision-making generally?
- Are there are a variety of opportunities for young people to participate and be involved in meaningful ways?

## Cohesion and collaboration

To grow the capacity of a school to support youth wellbeing, it is important to be a learning community. The principle of ako is crucial here: how do we learn with and from one another; how do we share this learning; and, how do we curate this learning? The challenge in this space is to have a commitment to cohesion, innovation, and collaboration, and iterative ways of working and learning both internally and externally.

As a prompt to consider where you might be at in your school with regards to cohesion and collaboration, you may like to consider learning as inquiry.

- Who decides what is taught and how?
- To what extent is learning through inquiry a basis for learning in classrooms; as professional learning and development; as building capacity for leadership?
- How do we share the learning from our inquiries with one another?

And perhaps more broadly:

- To what extent are individuals, groups, teams and/or departments operating in silos or in isolation?
- How do individuals and teams draw on and contribute to data and a shared knowledge base?

## Environment and community

The third aspect to consider is that of environment and community. This is intentionally broad, encompassing all aspects of the environment: the physical, cultural, social and emotional environments of the school. It is important that the input and value of young people are reflected in places, spaces and governance structures.

As a prompt to consider where you might be at in your school with regards to environment and community, you may like to consider what's on display on the school and classroom walls.

- Do we display learning in progress or finished products?
- Who decides what is displayed?
- Who decides where material is displayed?
- How often is material for display changed?
- What isn't displayed on walls?

And perhaps more broadly:

- Do young people feel welcome and included in our spaces and community places?
- Does the design and management of amenities and spaces specifically incorporate young people's needs?

These are big issues for schools to grapple with. However, starting by asking young people what is happening for them in their lives and in your school; auditing wellbeing programmes, initiatives and data; and then considering the strengths the school has to build upon, are useful beginning steps. The key theme is that of agency: Nothing about us without us. This is a wero all schools should wrestle with.

Resources:

- [5 ways to wellbeing](#) (Mental Health Foundation)
- [Education Matters to Me](#) (Office of the Children's Commissioner, 2018)
- [From "student voice" to "youth-adult partnership"](#) (Bolstad, NZCER, 2011)
- [Infographic: Making a difference to student wellbeing](#) (NZCER, 2017)
- [Junior Cycle Wellbeing Guidelines](#) (NCCA, 2017)
- [Learning environments, belonging and inclusion](#) (CORE Education, 2016)
- [Mapping and mobilising conditions for youth wellbeing](#) (Lifehack, 2017)
- [Te Whare Tapa Whā](#) (Ministry of Health)
- [Wellbeing @ School](#) (NZCER, 2011)
- [Wellbeing for Success](#) (ERO, 2016)

Let's not forget about the importance of supporting the health and wellbeing of all staff in centres, schools and kura, too.

Discover the [Hauora | Wellbeing programme](#)



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