

Promoting Wellbeing:

Understanding the What, Why, and How

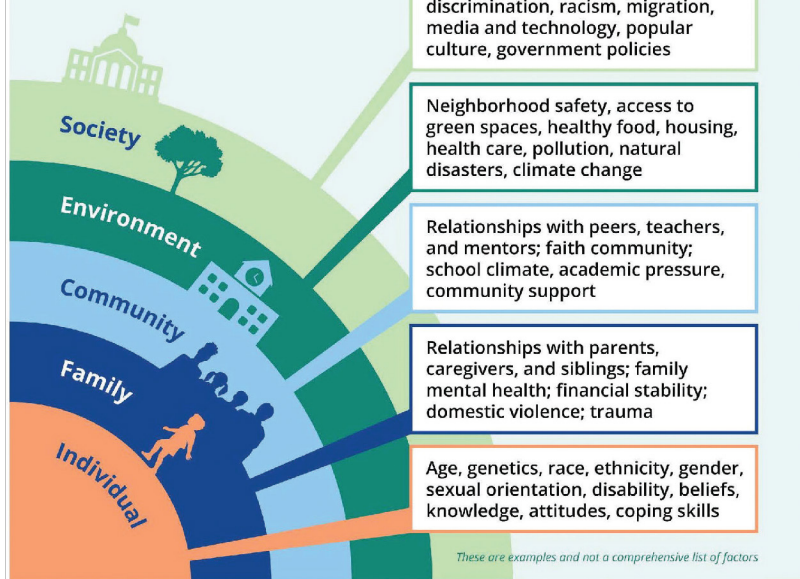


A Guide to Cultivating Mental Health and Wellness in Schools



FACTORS THAT CAN SHAPE THE MENTAL HEALTH OF YOUNG PEOPLE

Source: Adapted from WHO's Determinants of Adolescent Health Development: An Ecological Model, 2014 and Bronfenbrenner & Ceci (1994)



7 Key Wellness Design Principles

While no two wellness spaces are alike, there are seven guiding design principles that offer a framework for creating an inclusive wellness environment in education. Incorporating these principles into any wellness space will promote a holistic and diverse space. However, the first step to creating an effective wellness space is to conduct a survey and evaluate the wellness interests and needs of your faculty and students. Then prioritize the design principles below based on the survey response. This feedback will not only guide design but provide direction for phased plans when initial budgets are modest or uncertain.

7 Key Wellness Design Principals

Welcoming Environment

Set the tone with an inviting atmosphere upon entering so users feel comfortable, relaxed and welcomed.



Supportive Staff

Ensure that all individuals, regardless of physical ability, can access and navigate the space to foster inclusivity and promote participation for all.



Accessibility

Ensure all individuals, regardless of physical ability, can access and navigate the space.



Flexible Lighting

Adjustable lighting options and natural light with optional shading allows users a customized environment to suit their preferences and needs.

Adaptable Furniture

Furniture that supports both group and individual activities, with privacy options that can be easily reconfigured fosters an inclusive environment.



High Performance Fabrics

Durable yet inviting materials in muted colors create a calming and comfortable environment, and evoke a sense of well-being.



Secured Storage

Provide secure storage solutions to ensure the confidentiality and safety of sensitive materials.



Acoustic Control

Acoustical products manage noise levels within the space, to create a peaceful and relaxing environment for concentration and communication.



CREATING A WELCOMING ENVIRONMENT

This guide will explore three comprehensive designs for Primary, Secondary/Post-secondary, and Faculty wellness spaces. Our designs are meant to inspire and guide administrators as to how to engage stakeholders in meaningful discussions and shape wellness spaces that best suit their individual needs.



Having a wellness coordinator is critical to the center's success. Paraeducators are ideal wellness coordinators. Trained coordinators should be able to identify when to escalate matters to the principal or school psychologist, while being skilled at building trusting relationships with students. Coordinators should check students in and out to ensure their safety while determining students' needs through a series of questions.

Using a check-in system where students answer questions, ranking their emotions and what brought them to the center is a great way to identify triggers, justify additional funding for specific programs and determine the center's impact. While most students are seeking quiet and a place to decompress, some may simply want to talk.

The wellness center should include options for students seeking solitude as well as those who want to discuss what they are experiencing with a counselor.

COUNSELING & RECHARGE ZONES

Environments that offer students access to specific SEL services and professionals that promote student wellness. These spaces are traditionally thought of as offices, but they provide much more than just a space to house SEL professionals. They are a space for students to interact one-on-one with mental health professionals and gain valuable support and resources. These spaces should be acoustically and visually private while at the same easily, accessible to students. The spaces should have access to natural light and ample space for physical comfort. These professional spaces provide a safe place for building trust between the counselor and the student.

In addition to their offices, counselors may utilize supplemental spaces for specific therapies. While primary-aged students often benefit from “play therapy” - where trained therapists use various toys, games, Legos, art materials, and other play items to help children explore their feelings – secondary and post-secondary-aged students may use the same space for expressive arts therapy, mindfulness exercises, or traditional group therapy sessions. Ideally, these spaces are adjacent to counselor’s offices, equipped with multiple seating options, adequate storage, visibility to the main area and equipped for individual or small group activity. This adjacency allows for seamless integration of various therapeutic modalities and ensures students can move between different types of therapy without disruptions or loss of privacy.

Another alternative therapy space often utilized independently or accompanied by a therapist, are sensory environments or recharge zones. These spaces are designed to provide a calming and supportive atmosphere for neurodivergent students who may experience sensory sensitivities or seek sensory stimulation for regulation. Typically, they include elements such as soft lighting, comfortable seating options, tactile materials like textured surfaces or fidget toys, soothing sounds or music, and sensory tools.

Students can engage in mindfulness activities tailored to their sensory needs, such as deep breathing exercises, progressive muscle relaxation, or guided visualization. The environment is intentionally designed to minimize sensory overload and promote a sense of calm and wellbeing. Sensory spaces can be particularly beneficial for neurodivergent students with conditions like autism spectrum disorder, ADHD, sensory processing disorder, or anxiety.

It may also feature active play equipment, such exercise equipment, yoga mats and balancing balls. This space can be used to decompress or recharge.

SOCIAL ZONES



In addition to the 3 key zones already discussed - Check-in, Counseling and Recharge/Sensory zones - the Primary-aged wellness center’s main space should include two additional zones – **Social** and **Cocoon**.

The Social Zone(s) is designed to facilitate social interaction, collaboration, and peer support among children. It may include areas for group activities, such as circle time or cooperative games, as well as seating arrangements that encourage conversation and connection. The Social Zone fosters a sense of belonging and community among students.

COCOON ZONES

Cocoon Zone(s) provides a cozy and nurturing environment where children can retreat for quiet time, relaxation, or self-soothing activities. This zone may include soft seating, floor cushions, or even small, enclosed spaces like alcoves or nooks where children can feel safe and secure. The Cocoon Zone supports emotional regulation and stress reduction, allowing children to recharge and restore their energy in a comforting space. Guided by the previously mentioned seven key design principles, these zones provide opportunities for socialization, relaxation, and active play, supporting children's overall development and well-being in a positive, safe, and inclusive setting.



While the overall design principles remain consistent, secondary/post-Secondary wellness spaces may feature furniture and amenities that are scaled to accommodate older students. This could include larger seating options, adjustable desks or tables, and additional amenities like charging stations or workstations to support academic or personal projects. Older students often value autonomy and independence, so wellness spaces for secondary/post-secondary students may offer more opportunities for self-directed activities and decision-making. This could involve providing flexible seating arrangements, designated study areas, or quiet spaces where students can work independently or engage in personal reflection. Spaces may include technology-equipped areas for hosting presentations, workshops, or educational sessions focused on various aspects of well-being, such as nutrition, exercise, mindfulness, or mental health awareness. These spaces can accommodate guest speakers, multimedia presentations, or interactive learning experiences to engage students in discussions and activities related to their overall health and wellness.





FACULTY WELLNESS SPACE

Finally, we can't forget our faculty and their well-being. Teachers play a crucial role in the educational experience of students, and their well-being directly impacts their effectiveness as educators.

Teachers and other faculty working in school settings are particularly vulnerable to work-related stress. 89% said they had been enthusiastic about teaching when they started the profession, but only 15% reported being enthusiastic at the time they completed the survey. – National Library of Medicine (2017) 46% of teachers in K-12 settings report high levels of daily stress during the school year. This level of stress is like that of nurses (46%) and physicians (45%) and is the highest ever recorded. - Gallup-Health-ways Well-Being Index (2020) 78% of teachers reported feeling physically and emotionally exhausted at the end of the day. - American Federation of Teachers (2020). The stress that educators experience affects their enthusiasm about the profession, longevity in the field and absenteeism at work.

The cost of absenteeism in schools is significant, both in terms of financial resources and the impact on student learning. Implementing a teacher wellness programs can help address the underlying causes of absenteeism and promote a healthier and more productive work environment.

Unlike other workplaces, when an employee is absent, the workload is shared by the others, or the work is left undone. However, this is not the case at schools. Schools must pay both the absent employee's wage and that of the substitute or replacement. The expense of having an absent employee in school is frequently double that of absenteeism in other workplaces.

“The stress that educators experience affects their enthusiasm about the profession, longevity in the field and absenteeism at work.”

Faculty wellness spaces are designed to provide a dedicated area where educators can prioritize their physical, mental, and emotional well-being. These spaces offer a retreat from the demands of the classroom and serve as a supportive environment where faculty members can recharge, relax, and engage in activities that promote their overall health and wellness. This space should include comfortable seating, independent or small group arrangements, natural elements, technology and charging, as well as a kitchenette for faculty members who may not have time to leave the school premises during breaks or lunch periods.

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In 2023, the U.S. Department of Education awarded more than \$188 million across 170 grantees in over 30 states to increase access to school based mental health services and to strengthen the pipeline of mental health professionals in high-needs districts. These grants will enable communities to hire approximately 5,400 school-based mental health professionals and train an estimated 5,500 more to build a diverse pipeline of mental health providers in schools.

Funding wellness initiatives for both students and faculty requires a strategic approach and collaboration across various stakeholders. In addition to ESSER funds and other federal grants and programs, local businesses will respond to the call for donations to get your wellness environment up and running. Principals who are prioritizing mental health may be able to shift funds to launch Phase 1, while raising funds for Phase 2.

STRATEGIES TO CONSIDER



Strategies to consider when funding your wellness space initiatives are:

- **Government Grants and Programs:** Explore available government grants and programs at the federal, state, and local levels that support mental health and wellness in schools. This could include grants specifically earmarked for mental health initiatives, as well as broader education funding streams that can be allocated to support wellness programs.
- **Partnerships and Collaborations:** Forge partnerships with community organizations, non-profits, universities, and businesses that have an interest in supporting mental health and wellness initiatives. These partners may be able to provide funding, resources, expertise, or in-kind support to help implement and sustain wellness programs.
- **Philanthropic Foundations:** Research philanthropic foundations that focus on education, mental health, or child welfare. Many foundations offer grants or funding opportunities for initiatives that align with their mission and priorities. Develop proposals and grant applications to seek funding from these organizations.
- **District and School Budgets:** Advocate for allocating resources from existing district and school budgets to support mental health and wellness initiatives. This could involve reallocating funds from other areas, such as administrative costs or non-essential programs, to prioritize mental health and wellness.
- **Community Fundraising:** Organize fundraising events, campaigns, or drives within the school community to raise funds for mental health and wellness initiatives. This could include events such as charity walks, auctions, or donation drives, as well as online crowdfunding campaigns.
- **Parent and Alumni Donations:** Engage parents, alumni, and other members of the school community in donating to support mental health and wellness initiatives. Develop targeted fundraising appeals and communication strategies to solicit donations and support from these stakeholders.
- **Grant-Writing and Fundraising Skills:** Invest in building grant-writing and fundraising skills among school staff members or dedicated personnel. Training staff members on how to write effective grant proposals and solicit donations can increase the school's capacity to secure external funding for wellness initiatives.
- **Advocacy and Awareness:** Advocate for increased funding and support for mental health and wellness initiatives at the local, state, and national levels.

Raise awareness about the importance of mental health in schools and the need for adequate resources to support these initiatives.

By employing a combination of these strategies and actively seeking out funding opportunities, schools can secure the resources needed to implement and sustain effective mental health and wellness initiatives for students and staff. Physical and mental health have a measurable impact on student performance and faculty turnover. Through thoughtful wellness design, school districts can promote physical activity, mental health services and a holistic approach to student and faculty mental health and wellness.



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