

Concerned about student mental health? How wellness is related to academic achievement

January 9 2024, by Gabrielle Wilcox



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Supporting student mental health and well-being has become a priority

for schools. This was the case even prior to the increased signs of child and youth mental health adversity in and after the pandemic.

Supporting student [mental health](#) is important because students of all ages can experience stressors that negatively affect their well-being and sometimes lead to mental health diagnoses.

However, [some have suggested](#) we can either [support academic success or mental health](#)—and that mental health is [more important than academic achievement](#).

However, [we can and should support both academic success](#) and mental health—because they affect each other.

As a researcher who examines school-based mental health and also as a former school psychologist, it's clear to me that one of the best ways to support mental health is to support [academic development](#), especially early in children's education.

Well-being in education

[Well-being in educational](#) settings involves all aspects of students' lives: physical, cognitive, social and psychological functioning.

Education policymakers, schools and educators must attend to student well-being holistically rather than targeting one area at the expense of other areas.

A great deal of research shows that early academic performance predicts mental health and well-being. Most of the research showing this relationship between well-being and academic success is in the area of reading.

Recent reports [from both Ontario](#) and Saskatchewan [human rights commissions](#) highlighted the important role of strong reading instruction for student well-being, confidence and academic engagement.

Stronger reading abilities, positive outcomes

In the example of reading and mental health, gaining reading skills increases positive student outcomes. Good readers report being more [satisfied with their lives](#).

Later, they have [fewer symptoms](#) of anxiety and depression. Teachers rate students with strong reading skills as more prosocial and as having fewer behavior problems.

These students are also [more confident, have higher emotional intelligence and demonstrate more empathy](#). These [positive outcomes](#) are related to reading skill development, an important early indicator of academic success.

Poorer reading skills, worse outcomes

Being a poor reader, however, increases the risk for poor outcomes. [Weak readers](#) in early grades are more likely to have behavioral problems later. They also have [poorer self-concept and self control, difficulty with relationships, shame, anxiety, depression, suicidality and delinquency](#).

Students who [drop out of school](#) are more likely to be poor readers, and poor readers are more likely to be [involved with the criminal justice system](#). It is particularly telling that one of the best ways to keep youth from re-offending is to [teach them to read](#).

Students with dyslexia

The relationship between dyslexia and poor well-being and mental health further reveals the interaction between academic success and mental health. Students with dyslexia, which is characterized by difficulties gaining reading skills, have more [difficulty making friends](#), and having friends is an integral part of mental health.

They are also [more likely to be bullied](#) and to have low self-esteem. More specifically, having dyslexia increases the risk for also having [anxiety, depression](#) and [behavioral problems](#).

Equity, reading instruction and well-being

Further, [students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds](#) are at greater risk both of not gaining adequate reading skills and of worse mental-health outcomes.

Language and literacy researchers [Joan F. Beswick and Elizabeth A. Sloat](#) contend that adequate access to strong reading instruction is a social justice issue. Their research, and [other findings](#), document how students from poorer neighborhoods are less likely to receive adequate reading instruction. This disproportionately puts them at risk for mental health problems that reduce their well-being.

The relationship between academic success and well-being is not limited to elementary school reading. High-school students who [achieve academically](#) also have [better mental health](#).

A two-way relationship

It is important to note, nevertheless, that the relationship between

[academic achievement](#) and mental health is bidirectional.

Some research shows that [poor mental health, including behavior problems, affect academic outcomes](#).

The relationship between academic success and mental health is complex and likely interactive with both [poor achievement and excessive competition for high marks contributing to poor mental health](#).

Academic performance and mental health each affect the other—either supportively or adversely.

Unhealthy academic competition

Strong academic performance supports mental health and well-being, but [unhealthy levels of academic competition negatively impact mental health and well-being](#). Reining in this unhealthy focus on intense academic competition is important.

But only focusing on stressors of classroom competition in the relationship between academic performance and mental health could have adverse effects in the short- and longer term: It could reduce the mental health of students by not supporting healthy academic growth that promotes mental health and well-being.

It could also fail to teach students practices or habits required to navigate challenges with resiliency.

Need to support both

If we want to support student well-being and mental health, we need to support mental health directly by developing healthy school climates, teaching social emotional learning, and providing psychological services

in schools.

But we also must support [student](#) academic success. This is the case especially as our most vulnerable students are at risk of both academic difficulty and mental health problems.

We don't have to choose: we can and should support students' academic success and mental health.

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Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Concerned about student mental health? How wellness is related to academic achievement (2024, January 9) retrieved 30 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-01-student-mental-health-wellness-academic.html>

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