Making a difference to student wellbeing

This research summary aims to give schools practical ideas about ways to enhance students' wellbeing and decrease aggressive and bullying behaviours.

Why is student wellbeing important to schools?

A sense of wellbeing is central to students' success at school and in life.

New Zealand students face challenges to their social and emotional wellbeing. We have high rates of school bullying compared with other countries.[1] Involvement in bullying behaviour (as a perpetrator or a target) is associated with negative health and education outcomes for young people. Being a target of bullying is a factor that contributes to suicide, and New Zealand has one of the highest rates of youth suicide in OECD countries.[2] We need to do more to foster young people's wellbeing and help them develop skills and competencies to manage their wellbeing.

Multifaceted Whole School Approaches are an effective way for schools to promote wellbeing and address bullying behaviour.[3] These approaches have multiple components aimed at different aspects of the school system.

We wanted to know what the data could tell us about the effective components of a Whole School Approach. We focused on all students, as well as Māori and Pasifika students.

What is bullying behaviour?

Bullying is deliberately harmful, repeated behaviour, which involves a power imbalance. Bullying is a form of aggressive behaviour that is different from other behaviours such as one-off acts of aggression or fighting.

Bullying is not an individual action, it is influenced by victims, peers, and adults, as well as school, home, community, and societal environments.

Do you have ways of finding out what is happening at your school?

Many students experience bullying behaviour at some point in their life. Studies show that bullying behaviour is often not reported to adults.

1. Ministry of Education. (2017). *PISA 2015 New Zealand students' wellbeing report.* Wellington: Ministry of Education.
2. OECD. (2009). *Doing better for children.* Paris: OECD.
3. Ttofi, M., & Farrington, D. (2011). Effectiveness of school-based programmes to reduce bullying: A systematic and meta-analytic review. *Journal of Experimental Criminology*, 7, 27-56.

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What data did we use?

We used Wellbeing@School survey data. This data was provided by 400 New Zealand schools from 2013 to 2016.

We used the data from

58,337 students (Years 4-13)

3,416 teachers

The Wellbeing@School student and teacher surveys explore the extent to which aspects of school life create a safe and caring social climate that deters bullying. The student survey also collects data on students' experiences of the main forms of aggressive behaviour that together constitute bullying.

For more information go to **www.wellbeingatschool.org.nz**

How did we analyse the data?

We created two measures from the student data:

1 The **student wellbeing** measure included 13 questions about social and emotional wellbeing (students' perceptions of belonging and safety at school, and competencies in managing their social and emotional wellbeing).

2 The **student aggressive behaviour** measure included 12 questions about the extent to which students experience aggressive and bullying behaviour at school.

We also created two measures from the teacher data:

1 The **school-wide actions** measure included questions about how schools foster a safe and caring climate, and school-wide practices and procedures that promote wellbeing and deter bullying behaviour.

2 The **teaching for wellbeing** measure included practices that teachers use in the classroom to foster social and emotional wellbeing.

Bullying is not just one type of behaviour

It comes in four common forms

Verbal

Physical

Social/relational

Cyber

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Building a model

We designed a statistical model that connected student and teacher measures from the same schools. Our main focus was to look for practices that were more common at schools where students reported higher levels of wellbeing or lower levels of aggressive behaviours.

Question examples

Student measures

Student wellbeing

- Agreement with 'I can say how I am feeling when I need to'
- Agreement with 'I feel I belong at school'
- Agreement with 'I feel safe at school'

Student aggressive behaviours

- How frequently 'Are you bullied by other students?'
- How frequently 'Do other students hit, push, or hurt you in a mean way?'
- How frequently 'Do other students tell lies or spread rumours about you?'

Teacher measures

School-wide actions

- Agreement with 'School leaders promote the school as a caring and culturally inclusive community'
- Agreement with 'We provide extra support for students who are the target of bullying or harassment'
- Agreement with 'We have school-wide guidelines that help us recognise and address student behaviour incidents of differing severity'

Teaching for wellbeing

- Agreement with 'I create a strong sense of trust and community in my classes'
- Agreement with 'I use cooperative learning strategies in ways that build students' capacity to relate well to others'
- Agreement with 'Students learn and practice strategies they could use to resolve conflicts'

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What schools do makes a difference

Here are the main findings from the model.

Both student wellbeing and aggressive behaviour vary substantially between and within New Zealand schools.

What schools do makes a difference: teaching for wellbeing activities are associated with higher levels of student wellbeing, whereas school-wide actions are associated with lower levels of aggressive behaviours.

Some of the effective teaching for wellbeing actions are less commonly practised across schools.

Schools with higher levels of student wellbeing have lower levels of aggressive behaviours. Students are also less likely to experience aggressive behaviour when their school has school-wide policies and practices in place that promote wellbeing. The extent to which a range of school-wide actions are in place varies between schools.

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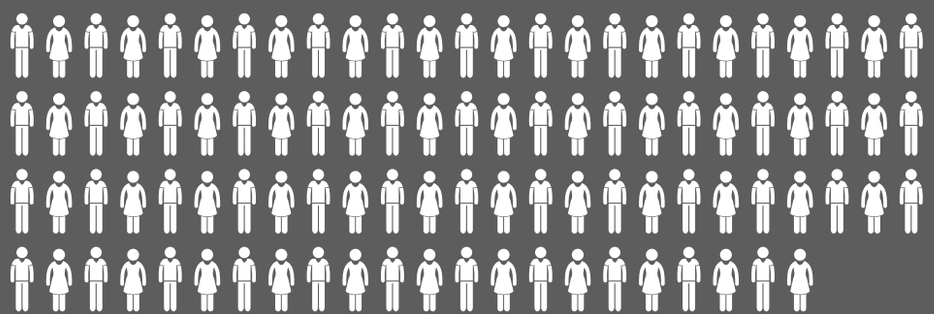
Student wellbeing varies between schools

Student wellbeing varied both between and within schools.
Teaching for wellbeing practices were more strongly associated with student wellbeing than school-wide actions.

Student wellbeing varied between schools.
For example, agreement with 'I feel I belong at school' varied

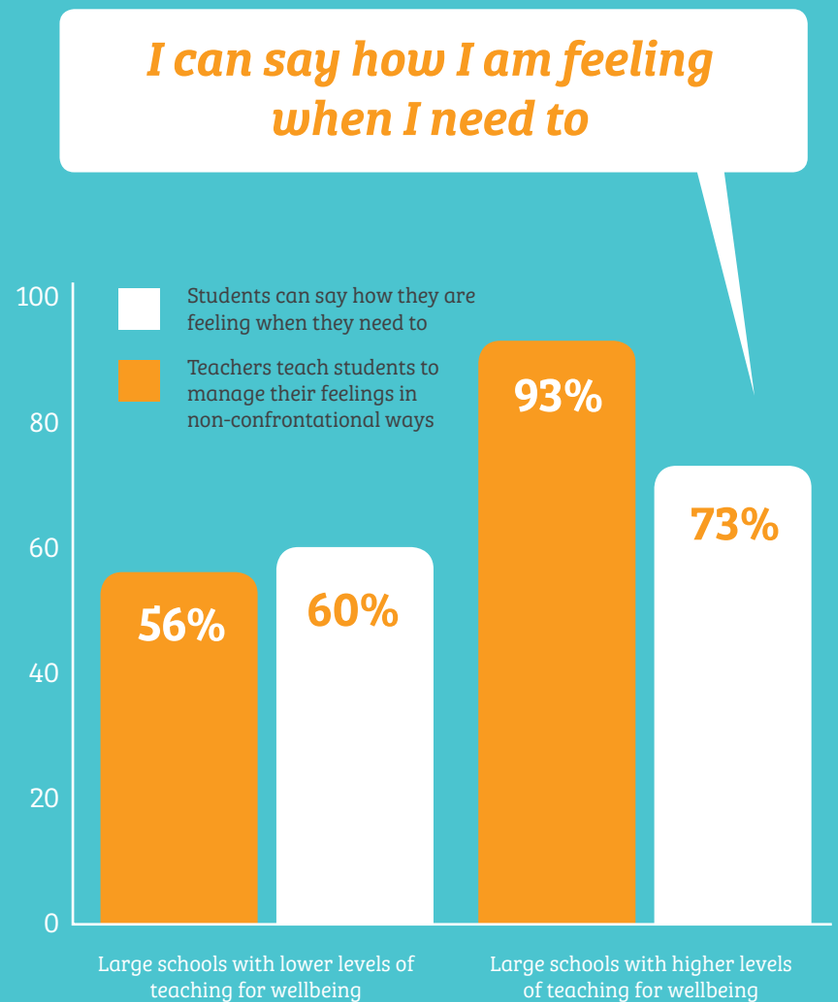
from 68% of students in a school

to 97% of students in a school



The information in this section is from 183 large schools. We used large schools to give us reliable percentages.

Students had higher levels of wellbeing when teachers actively taught wellbeing strategies in the classroom.



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What teachers do in the classroom makes a difference for student wellbeing

Some classroom activities were closely associated with student wellbeing. Most of these activities were active forms of learning that gave students opportunities to talk about concerns and practice strategies. Planning was also important. The classroom activities associated with student wellbeing are listed below. Some of these activities were more common than others across all schools.

Are these practices in place in your classrooms?

Average % of teachers agreeing this activity happens

Active teaching for wellbeing

- **97%** praising students for helpful and caring behaviour
- **86%** working with students to develop a charter or commitment to a shared set of class values or behaviours
- **78%** teaching students strategies for managing their feelings and emotions in non-confrontational ways
- **74%** using classroom discussion time for students to share and resolve any concerns they have
- **66%** teaching students ways of intervening in conflict or bullying incidents to support each other
- **53%** using role play or drama activities to support students to develop and practise effective strategies for relating to others

Planning for wellbeing

- **97%** tailoring teaching materials to students' skills, needs, and backgrounds
- **73%** including in class planning a focus on the social and behavioural skills this school would like students to develop

Important for Māori students' wellbeing

- **98%** creating a strong sense of trust and community in the classroom

Important for Pasifika students' wellbeing

- **73%** encouraging students to set goals that develop their skills in relating to others

Schools with higher levels of student wellbeing also had lower levels of aggressive behaviours.

These teaching for wellbeing activities were particularly associated with student wellbeing for Year 5-8 students. The practices that teachers show the most or least agreement with were similar across primary and secondary schools.

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The extent of aggressive and bullying behaviour varies widely between schools

Across schools, a sizable minority (15%) of students reported being bullied at least weekly. Even at schools with low overall levels of student aggressive behaviours, there were small numbers of students who experienced bullying and other aggressive behaviours.

15%
of students reported being bullied at least weekly

The level of student aggressive behaviours, and students' experiences of bullying behaviour, varied a lot between schools.

At primary schools from

2 to 42%

of students reported experiencing bullying at least weekly

At secondary schools from

2 to 26%

of students reported experiencing bullying at least weekly

The information in this section is from 101 large primary and 82 large secondary schools.

Some schools had more success at deterring aggressive and bullying behaviours. Students were less likely to report experiencing aggressive behaviours when their schools had policies and practices that actively promoted social wellbeing.

	What do low levels of support practices look like?	What do high levels of support practices look like?
Teacher reports that their school provides extra support for students who are the target of bullying or harassment	19%	88%
Student reports of being hit, pushed, or hurt in a mean way at least weekly	19%	12%

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School-wide actions make a difference to student aggressive behaviours

At schools with higher levels of school-wide actions, students reported experiencing lower levels of aggressive behaviours. The school-wide actions are grouped into five main aspects of practice.

Does your school have practices like these in place?

School-wide actions

Aspects	Examples of practice	Average % of teachers agreeing the practice is in place
Creating a wellbeing culture	• School leaders promote the school as a caring and culturally inclusive community.	92
	• Students' successes are shared widely (e.g., in assemblies, staff meetings, newsletters).	91
	• Staff treat each other with respect.	82
	• Staff share a strong collective vision.	80
	• Staff have a strong sense of belonging.	76
Collaborative leadership	• We listen to, and take action to address, the concerns of parents and whānau.	93
	• Students are treated as responsible citizens who have a say in what happens.	85
	• The leadership team works collaboratively with staff to set school directions.	73
	• Staff approach new developments or problems as a team.	71
	• We seek input from all key stakeholders (staff, students, parents and whānau) when we are making changes.	68
Effective policies & procedures	• We actively address student behaviours such as harassment, violence, bullying, and cyber-bullying.	85
	• We have school-wide guidelines that help us recognise and address student behaviour incidents of differing severity.	77
	• We have a school-wide behaviour management policy or procedure that is easy for our school community to understand.	75
	• Behaviour management policies or procedures are applied consistently and fairly to all students.	68
	• We actively address staff workplace harassment and bullying.	68
Support for students	• We have effective support systems for students with special learning needs.	86
	• We select new approaches or programmes based on student data and needs.	85
	• We have effective systems for referring students with behavioural concerns (if necessary).	80
	• We provide extra support for students who are the target of bullying or harassment (e.g., counselling).	75
	• We offer effective support and programmes for students with social or behavioural needs (e.g., anger management).	74
Prioritising PLD	• Professional learning provides opportunities for teachers to work together to develop, trial, and refine new approaches.	84
	• Professional learning enables teachers to observe their colleagues modelling new practices.	67
	• When we start new approaches, school leaders make sure all staff have enough information and training.	66

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