

Student Well-being: A Collective Responsibility

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Quality Learning Environments: The Foundation for Well-being

ANNIE KIDDER: So if we're thinking about the well-being of the school or the school community, again, there is lots of evidence about what builds a quality learning environment. At this conference, Jean Clinton has been talking about relationships. And that's not just because she's an emotional human being who thinks relationships are important, it's because the evidence is so strong that in a school community, the relationships between teachers, between teachers and students, between students, between administration and teachers -- all of those are kind of vital building blocks in terms of providing a high-quality learning environment. So you can call that the well-being of the learning environment. And there are other pieces in that well-being.

So here, people talk about student voice a lot. And sometimes my concern is that we think about it in a kind of passive way. If we provided the opportunity for student voice, we've kind of done our job. But there's another aspect to that, which is, how are we building those competencies in students, which is part of creating well-being? So how do you have a school that, A, understands that the competency to end up having a voice starts with teachable, learnable skills to do with understanding yourself, other people? Being able to collaborate, learn together, but building that sense of agency. And then how in a school do you ensure that now that we've taught you all about having that sense of agency, that you have opportunities to express those, whether you're in kindergarten or grade 12. So how are we all able to recognize the importance of each other, listen to each other, understand the aspects of this that are embedded in education in the curriculum; they're not an extra, and an add on? And that we have to ensure that we don't just have a very narrow idea of what -- how we define educational success. So part of that, part of how we define educational success should include -- and not the well-being of the school community; it's not just whether or not everybody's happy. But it's more complex than that. It's about the relationships. It's about the voice. It's about respect. It's about understanding diversity. It's about bringing many opinions to the table and working together.

I think what's important is, we have that well-being conversation at a lot of levels. And for us in our organization, we kind of like to start from the outside in, so what kind of country or world, really, do we want to live in? And in that case, what's the role of public education in that? So I think we have a big well-being issue right now, in terms of how everybody's feeling about the state of the world. The kind of intense polarization, in a way, that's going on, the state of the environment, the gap between rich and poor. So we have these big global issues. And I'm not suggesting education should cure all those. But I think it's important to remember that that's part

of our kind of state of well-being, or lack of well-being, is how we are collectively. So there's the big, big well-being, and then there's the well-being of our school communities, or even the school itself, and then individuals. And my concern has to do with -- we have a tendency to focus on individuals and forget all those other pieces of well-being. But they are interconnected. There's lots of evidence about how we can make shifts and change it. But I think the big, big responsibility is, how can we educate the next generation to be able to deal with the complexity and the sometimes worrying aspects of the world that we live in?

If we teach our kids from the very beginning from when they're four years old, this is all kind of in the domain of social emotional learning, to understand themselves, to understand their feelings, to understand the interaction with other people who have different feelings. Some of things are citizenship skills, too. But if we see that as part of the job of education, and we figure out better ways to embed that in curriculum -- so whatever grade I'm in, I'm learning about the War of 1812, but I'm also learning a deeper understanding of different perspectives, for instance, which adds to my sense of well-being, and a collective sense of well-being.

We have a great citizenship scholar who talks about -- who says that he thinks that the kind of core capacity in citizenship is teaching kids how to not get along. And I love that concept. And if we think of well-being in a more structured way, of partly it has to do with understanding that you can come from a very different place than me, with very different views, with very different cultural perspective. And I can be totally different from you, and actually not agree with you about lots of things. But it doesn't mean that we can't communicate with each other, and it doesn't mean that your well-being will affect mine, or that they kind of nix each other out.

So I think that for us, it goes to -- and for me, and the what I'm going to try and communicate at this conference is, let's make sure we're not talking about well-being as just, how do I feel good? Or how does an individual student feel okay, or even not anxious? Because there is a danger in the world, thinking about well-being as little bit airy-fairy, and it's not. It's a real serious thing. So we have to understand it as more than about how I feel, or how a student feels, and more about how is the teaching and learning happening in our schools to ensure that we've built the foundation for well-being.