EVERYBODY THRIVING:

CREATING A CULTURE OF WELLBEING IN SCHOOLS

What do we want to achieve?

- Embed mental health and wellbeing as a core priority in schools.
- Create supportive, inclusive environments for all learners.
- Schools that value personal development alongside academic learning.
- An education system and a society where everyone can thrive.

Where are we now?

The education system places significant stress on students and educators. Pressures such as high-stakes assessments, a top-down curriculum and inflexible behaviour policies undermine the wellbeing of children, young people and adults, and contribute to an escalating mental health crisis.

How can we create a culture of wellbeing in schools?

1. **Adopt a multi-tiered approach.** Recognise that mental health and wellbeing are complex, multidimensional issues. Create a comprehensive strategy to address threats to mental health and wellbeing at their roots.
2. **Embed mental health and wellbeing in national policy.** Ensure national policies value mental health and personal development alongside academic achievement.
3. **Signal a paradigm shift.** Prioritise mental health and wellbeing by shifting from high-stakes accountability to 'do no harm'.
4. **Invest in mental health prevention.** Scale up proactive, as well as reactive, mental health support to address immediate needs and reduce future costs.
5. **Create a more diverse, responsive curriculum.** Create flexible programmes of study that allow for more relational and vocational learning alongside academic progression.
6. **Reform assessment methods.** Create a bottom-up, strengths-based assessment system that celebrates the successes and milestones of every student and which provides 'success for all'.
7. **Create a wellbeing-focused accountability system.** Build an accountability system that prioritises safe, supportive, and inclusive learning environments.
8. **Publish national guidance for schools.** Provide clear guidelines around best practice in making mental health and wellbeing central to school policies and practices.
9. **Provide research-informed training on relational behaviour policies.** Equip educators with professional learning in trauma and attachment-informed approaches, restorative practice, and insights from neuroscience.
10. **Create a culture of belonging.** Cultivate a sense of belonging through strong, supportive relationships to make sure all children and young people feel seen, values, and supported in their learning and development.

Why do we need to change?

The current high-accountability system, characterised by high-stakes exams and 'zero tolerance' behaviour policies, is eroding wellbeing and fuelling a mental health crisis. Rising levels of absenteeism, burnout and attrition illustrate the unsustainable nature of this approach. Reform is urgently needed to create schools that prioritise the mental health and wellbeing of children, young people, and adults, alongside academic achievement.

THE EDUCATION POLICY ALLIANCE

EVERYBODY THRIVING:

CREATING A CULTURE OF WELLBEING IN SCHOOLS

Introduction

This paper sets out a vision for a new approach to improving mental health and wellbeing in schools. It follows a consultation survey which was completed by 156 respondents – primarily mainly parents and carers. The paper is organised into eight sections:

A. Where have we been?
B. Where are we now?
C. Why do we need to change?
D. Where do we want to be?
E. How will we get there?
F. How will we know when we've got there?
G. How should we implement change?
H. About the Education Policy Alliance

In preparing this report, we carried out a thematic analysis of the survey responses we received. We have used anonymised quotes where necessary to illustrate the themes to emerge from the survey responses. In writing the report, these survey responses have been combined with educational and health research literature, and by the collective expertise of the EPA's steering committee. Together, these three strands provide the foundation for the ten recommendations outlined in Section E, which aim to promote mental health and wellbeing with targeted reforms designed to create an education system more supportive of human flourishing.

There is compelling evidence to suggest that preventing or mitigating challenges to mental health and wellbeing is far more cost-effective than addressing the problems further down the line. [1] Being proactive to promote wellbeing saves a great deal of money. Many of the suggestions in this report require little more than the belief that they matter and the will to enact them.

A. Where have we been?

The prevalence of mental health challenges in the UK has gradually increased among both children and adults since the post-war period. The NHS Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey (2014) found that 1 in 6 people aged 16+ had experienced symptoms of a common mental health problem, such as depression or anxiety, in the past week. [2]

[1] e.g. see McDaid, D. & Park, A. (2022) *The economic case for investing in the prevention of mental health conditions in the UK*. London School of Economics and Political Science / Mental Health Foundation.
[2] NHS Digital, Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey 2014, Table 2.4

Among children and young people, the NHS reported that approximately 1 in 5 individuals aged 8 to 25 exhibited probable mental health challenges in 2023. After a rise in prevalence from 2017-20, these rates remained stable across age groups between 2022 and 2023. [3]

Evidence suggests that the education system affects the mental health of both children and adults in various ways. Schools provide children and young people with an important opportunity to develop stable, nourishing relationships with peers and adults, fostering wellbeing, connection and a sense of belonging.

Schools provide children and young people with the opportunity to build stable and nourishing relationships, both with adults and peers, which can be a great source of wellbeing and connection to the wider community. Likewise, for adults, working with children and young people can be incredibly enriching, and can serve as a positive source of mental wellbeing.

However, studies have also identified the education system as a significant stressor for young people's mental health. [4, 5, 6, 7] Many children and young people feel that school prioritises grades over their personal views and ambitions, leaving those who struggle academically or find the curriculum irrelevant feeling worthless. This can contribute to anxiety about their future, negatively affecting self-worth, physical health, and mental wellbeing.

The education system can also impact the mental health and wellbeing of teachers, leaders, and support staff. Workload, Ofsted inspections, and pupil behaviour are frequently cited as significant stressors. [8, 9, 10]

Although less research has focused on parents and carers, the Times Education Commission's (2022) final report suggested that parents prioritise student wellbeing over academic attainment by a factor of ten to one. A 2021 YouGov poll found that 64% of parents believe mental wellbeing is more important than academic achievement, with 67% wanting schools' mental health support included in accountability measures. [11]

B. Where are we now?

[3] Newlove-Delgado T, Marcheselli F, Williams T, et al. (2023) Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2023. NHS England, Leeds.
[4] States of Mind (2020) *When it comes to developing as a person, the school system is failing us.* Available at: https://www.statesofmind.org/journal/2020/10/21/education-system-and-identity.html
[5] British Youth Council (2022) *Make Your Mark 2022: Understanding our Communities Report.* London: British Youth Council.
[6] The Children's Society (2020) *Good Childhood Report 2020.* London: The Children's Society.
[7] Jacobs Foundation (2020) *Children's World Report 2020.* Zurich: Jacobs Foundation.
[8] Ofsted (2019) *Teacher wellbeing at work in schools and further education providers.* London: Ofsted. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/teacher-wellbeing-at-work.
[9] Education Support (2022) *Teacher Wellbeing Index 2022.* London: Education Support.
[10] Headrest (2023) *Annual Headteacher Wellbeing Report 2023.* London: Headrest.
[11] Tes (2021) Put wellbeing above academic progress, most parents say. *Times Educational Supplement Magazine.* Available at: https://www.tes.com/magazine/news/general/put-wellbeing-above-academic-progress-say-most-parents.

Schools play an important role in promoting mental health and wellbeing, offering young people a space to form relationships, make friends, and develop social skills. During the pandemic, we saw the adverse effects of losing this protective environment. For many educators, working in schools provides a sense of purpose and connection. However, the positive feedback about schools was heavily outweighed by concerns raised in survey responses. This is also reflected in the surprising finding that many children and young people reported improved mental health during their time away from school during the pandemic. [12]

In recent years in the UK, an increasing number of schools have started to operate zero-tolerance, 'no excuses' behaviour policies. These policies can have a significant deleterious impact on mental health and relationships, as identified by research over several decades. [13]

Many respondents shared troubling experiences of school. For example, some expressed the view that the system requires 'too many hours in school and [overlooks] the importance of free time and play', placing 'unnecessary pressure on young people that if they don't pass all their exams their life is over'. For some, this pressure has lasting effects, as illustrated by one parent who shared that their child suffers from PTSD due to their experience of school.

Assessments and testing

High-stakes testing emerged as a major source of stress for students, often impacting their mental health and self-worth. Many children feel a constant pressure to perform academically, creating a sense of dread rather than motivation. For some students, the fear of failure extends beyond school, affecting their outlook on life.

> *'The pressure to perform and achieve is overwhelming… The promises of a trip but only if everyone gets above a certain grade resulting in horrendous peer pressure… The self-harm caused by high-stakes exams.'*

These exams often send the message that students' futures depend solely on academic performance, leading to cycles of anxiety, self-doubt, and stress.

Lack of understanding around diversity, neurodiversity and child development

Many responses highlighted a lack of support for neurodivergent students, who often feel isolated and misunderstood. Negative language and labels can severely impact self-esteem, with one respondent noting how being sent to the SEND room caused a feeling of 'I'm not good enough'. Neurodivergent students often face bullying, further contributing to feelings of alienation.

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[12] For example, see Hertz-Palmor, N., Gothelf, D. Unexpected mental health improvement in children and adolescents during COVID-19-who benefits from staying at home? *Eur Child Adolesc Psychiatry* 33, 1235–1237 (2024).

[13] e.g., see Children & Young People's Mental Health Coalition (2023) *Behaviour and Mental Health in Schools Report*. Retrieved from: https://cypmhc.org.uk/publications/behaviour-and-mental-health-in-schools-report. See also Skiba, R., Reynolds, C.R., Graham, S. et al. (2006). *Are zero tolerance policies effective in the schools? An evidentiary review and recommendations*. Zero Tolerance Task Force Report for the American Psychological Association.

'The rigid education system… is not suiting [children]. The tidal wave of diagnoses of emotional and mental health issues… represents the sensitive children telling us that this is wrong for everyone.'

'[Being sent to the SEND room] causes massive sense of 'I'm not good enough'. And then being referred to as SPAGS and retards causes a toxic environment for any neurodivergent kids.'

The mismatch between developmental stage and expectations in relation to academic achievements and behaviour means that neurodivergent children and those who have experienced trauma and adverse life experiences are made to feel like they don't measure up and don't matter in school. This often leads to anxiety, poor self-esteem, and negative self-identities, which follow children through their school career. Many neurodivergent children develop school-based trauma and burnout.

'Hostility, disrespect, and bullying from other neurotypical pupils can be very damaging to neurodivergent pupils' self-esteem and make school a living hell.

'I believe that the current epidemic of mental health issues in children is due to the rigid education system which is not suiting any of them. The tidal wave of diagnoses of emotional and mental health issues should be seen as a warning to those in power that the system is broken and the incredible rise of children showing signs of neurodiversity and [emotional and mental health] issues represent the sensitive children telling us that this is wrong for everyone.'

School environment and culture

The school culture can either support or undermine wellbeing. For many students, schools are a source of anxiety, with some parents noting that schools are quick to blame parents or students rather than addressing systemic issues. This constant pressure to conform often leaves students feeling misunderstood.

'Schools become associated with anxiety and constant pressure to please adults despite the child's obvious distress and discomfort. Teachers will tell you this is good for the child; it isn't. No wonder so many children and young people simply can't cope in school.'

In extreme cases, the school environment is so distressing that it becomes a primary cause of trauma, underscoring the need for cultural change within educational settings.

'They're not attending because, for them, the environment is toxic. Look to change the environment, not the individual student.'

'Gaslighting child and parents, rather than seeing that the school environment is the problem.'

C. Why do we need to change?

The evidence that schools can negatively impact the mental health and wellbeing of children and adults is both compelling and concerning.

While the education system's purpose is to prepare young people for future careers and qualifications, these goals cannot be achieved without first meeting students' psychological and basic needs. Positive mental health and wellbeing are prerequisites for educational success. Yet, in enforcing high standards, the education system places so much pressure on students and educators that it often becomes self-defeating.

Increasingly, both students and educators are "voting with their feet." Around 2 million students (over 1 in 5) are persistently absent, with poor mental health frequently cited as a contributing factor. Similarly, the Teacher Wellbeing Index reports that 59% of staff have considered leaving due to mental health pressures. These trends are worsening, pushing pupil absenteeism and teacher retention toward crisis levels, risking a future with few learners and fewer teachers.

Diagnostic vs systemic factors

The rising diagnosis of ADHD suggests systemic challenges within schools, raising questions about how student needs are identified. Focusing solely on individual diagnoses contributes to a culture which places the "problem" within the child, rather than examining systemic factors that may be contributing, such as high-stress classrooms, limited physical activity, or an overly rigid curriculum. These environmental influences are often misaligned with students' developmental needs.

A more balanced approach would involve adapting school environments to support diverse learning needs, reducing reliance on individual diagnoses. By fostering flexible learning spaces, offering social-emotional learning, and promoting self-regulation, schools can address behavioural challenges holistically, creating a more inclusive, supportive environment for all students. Schools can also address behaviours that challenge through relational, trauma and attachment-focused, restorative approaches, ensuring that interventions are rooted in understanding and empathy rather than punitive responses.

D. Where do we want to be?

The Education Policy Alliance is driven by a vision of an education system rooted in human flourishing. When the current education system was designed, our understanding of child development, the importance of play, and adolescent brain development was limited. Today, many countries have demonstrated that it's possible to place wellbeing at the heart of education while still achieving high academic standards. In particular, many of our northern European neighbours such as the Netherlands, Denmark and Norway consistently score highly in measures of mental well-being, physical health, and academic and social skills. [14] We believe that the UK can join these forward-thinking nations in reimagining education to better serve the mental health and happiness of all students and

[14] World Economic Forum (2020) *These are the countries where children are most satisfied with their lives.* Retrieved from https://www.weforum.org/stories/2020/09/child-well-being-health-happiness-unicef-report.

staff. Rather than viewing wellbeing and academic learning as a trade-off, research suggests that when wellbeing is at the heart of a school, not only is there better mental health and more pro-social behaviour but academic results can also improve. [15]

Our vision is of an education system where children, young people, and adults not only attend school but genuinely want to be there, because they feel safe, supported, and engaged. Schools should be places of joy, discovery, and connection, where mental health and wellbeing are as central to the curriculum as academic subjects. This means moving beyond a singular focus on exams and grades to value a broader spectrum of achievements, recognising each individual's unique strengths, interests, and learning pace.

In this future, students would be empowered to shape their learning, finding purpose and meaning in their education rather than feeling constrained by rigid benchmarks. They would experience a curriculum that balances academic rigour with practical, life-enriching subjects, preparing them not only for exams but for real-world challenges and lifelong learning. Teachers, meanwhile, would work within an environment that values their professional autonomy and wellbeing, with access to ongoing training, flexible working conditions, and adequate mental health support.

Our vision also includes a more inclusive approach to neurodiversity and special educational needs, where schools are equipped to support diverse learning profiles and treat these differences not as obstacles but as valuable facets of the learning community. With sufficient early intervention resources and flexible teaching strategies, students can thrive without relying on labels or diagnoses, and instead experience a system that adapts to their needs.

Finally, we envisage a culture of collaboration and trust, where accountability supports growth and improvement rather than driving stress and compliance. (See our previous policy paper on A New Accountability System for Schools [16]). Schools, policymakers, and communities would work together to uphold wellbeing as a shared priority, creating environments that foster resilience, respect, and a love of learning. In this transformed system, academic achievement would emerge as a natural outcome of an environment that truly nurtures human potential.

E. How will we get there?

Mental health and wellbeing is complex, with many contributory factors. As a consequence, the response to the problems set out above needs to be similarly multi-layered. To achieve the vision set out in Section D, drawing together suggestions for system reform identified in the survey responses, the education and health research literature and the collective expertise of the EPA steering group, we propose the following ten recommendations:

[15] Noble, T., McGrath, H., Roffey, S. & Rowling, L. (2008). *A scoping study on student wellbeing*. Canberra: Department of Education, Employment & Workplace Relations (DEEWR).

[16] The Education Policy Alliance (2024) *A New Accountability System for Schools*. Available at: https://www.educationpa.org/publications.

Recommendation 1: Adopt a multi-tiered approach

A key theme in this paper is to recognise the fact that mental health and wellbeing are complex, multidimensional issues, and that creating a culture of wellbeing therefore requires a multi-tiered approach. Recent work undertaken by three members of Education Policy Alliance's steering group illustrate this point in different ways. These are not presented as a comprehensive plan for reform, but rather as examples of the ways in which multi-tiered thinking can address mental health and wellbeing.

A. Cultivate supportive school environments at five levels

Andrew Speight, an EPA youth representative, introduced the concept of a 'culture of wellbeing', viewing wellbeing as essential for academic success. [17] This aligns with advocacy from organisations like YoungMinds, which call for prioritising wellbeing in schools. [18]

Speight outlines a framework with five levels, or tiers, for achieving a culture of wellbeing (Figure 1). Each tier in this inverted pyramid represents the level of change and effort required, as well as its effectiveness in creating a supportive school culture.

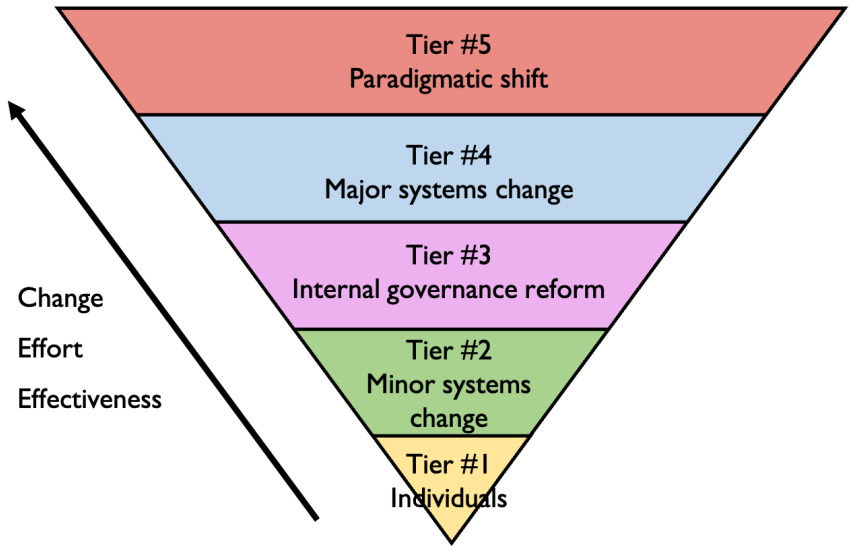

Figure 1. Cultivating supportive school environments: 5 tiers of change

Briefly, these tiers represent change of the following kinds:

Tier #1	Individuals modify their words and actions to avoid causing distress and to strengthen relationships.
Tier #2	Schools implement initiatives to improve wellbeing, such as updating behaviour policies or staff training on neurodiversity.

[17] Speight, A. (2023). A Culture of Wellbeing: why we must put positive mental health at the heart of our schools. *Buckingham Journal of Education, 4(1).* 111-125.

[18] Young Minds (2021). *Coronavirus: Impact on young people with mental health needs.* Retrieved from: https://www.youngminds.org.uk/media/esifqn3z/youngminds-coronavirus-report-jan-2021.pdf

Tier #3 Focuses on systemic change, especially if existing systems negatively impact mental health. [19] This includes democratising school governance by involving students, parents, and a diverse staff group in decision-making.

Tier #4 Advocates for policy changes at the national level to address social, cultural, and economic influences on school environments. Following Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, reforms such as assessment changes and increased SEND funding help create environments that support diverse needs. [20]

Tier #5 Calls for a paradigm shift in education, where physical and psychological safety are viewed as prerequisites for academic and vocational learning. [21]

B. The "Ship's Wheel" model

Dr James Mannion, a teacher trainer and EPA member, is currently collaborating with the Welsh government on a national initiative to promote learner effectiveness across the 14-16 curriculum. Central to this initiative is a conceptual model which reflects the multidimensional nature of learner effectiveness. The "Ship's Wheel" model comprises six domains: physical, emotional, behavioural, relational, cognitive, and navigational, each contributing to students' development as learners (see Figure 2). [22]

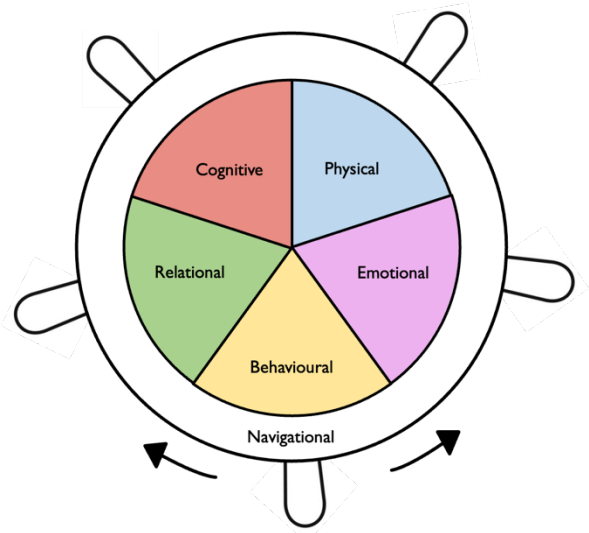

Figure 2. The "Ship's Wheel" model

The ship's wheel model provides a framework for fostering wellbeing in schools at the level of individuals. Currently, most schools focus primarily on the 'cognitive' domain. However, if barriers to learning are located elsewhere, focusing solely on cognition may not enable

[19] Prilleltensky, Isaac (2003). Understanding, resisting, and overcoming oppression: toward psychopolitical validity. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 31(1–2), 195–201.

[20] Bronfenbrenner, U. (2005). Ecological systems theory (1992). In U. Bronfenbrenner (Ed.), *Making human beings human: Bioecological perspectives on human development* (pp. 106–173). Sage Publications Ltd.

[21] Gray, P. (2013), *Free to Learn.* New York City. Basic Books.

[22] Mannion, J. (2025) *Learner effectiveness is multidimensional.* Available at: https://drjamesmannion.substack.com/p/learner-effectiveness-is-multidimensional.

pupils to thrive. By helping children and young people develop in each of these domains, each of these areas, schools can promote a more holistic approach to personal development, ensuring students feel supported and engaged on multiple fronts:

- **Physical** – ensuring students are physically well (e.g., sleep, nutrition, movement, access to resources).
- **Emotional** – developing emotional literacy and self-regulation; helping students understand and manage their feelings and responses.
- **Behavioural** – cultivating effective learning habits (e.g., managing time, workflow, reducing distractions and procrastination).
- **Relational** – enhancing self-awareness and communication skills; experiencing positive interactions with oneself, others, and the wider world.
- **Cognitive** – helping students develop cognitive strategies for learning, memory, and knowledge transfer.
- **Navigational** – empowering students to identify personal goals relating to the other five domains, and working systematically towards achieving them.

By fostering personal growth and development within each of these domains, schools can create a culture where wellbeing is recognised as integral to academic learning, not just an add-on. For children and young people, applying the ship's wheel model ensures that their needs are addressed holistically, beyond just the cognitive domain. This approach helps remove barriers to learning by supporting their physical, emotional, behavioural, relational, cognitive, and navigational development. It enables students to thrive not only academically but also personally, ensuring they feel supported and engaged on multiple fronts.

Equally, it's important to consider how this framework applies to staff. All teachers, leaders, and support staff benefit from opportunities to reflect on their practice through these lenses and to model these principles in their interactions with students. A supportive workplace culture is crucial, where staff are physically and emotionally supported by school leaders and their peers. Reflective supervision, accessible support channels, and opportunities for personal development help educators maintain their own wellbeing across these domains. This dual focus acknowledges that fostering a culture of wellbeing in schools requires holistic support for both young people and the adults who guide them.

C. The ASPIRE framework

Dr Sue Roffey, a psychologist and academic and EPA member, has developed the ASPIRE framework, which offers offering a model for promoting healthy child development, resilience, and effective learning (2024a, 2024b). [23] ASPIRE is based on international psychological and educational evidence and has global academic endorsement. The acronym stands for:

Agency	Giving both teachers and pupils a voice and choice

[23] Roffey, S. (2024a). *ASPIRE to Wellbeing and Learning in the Early Years and Primary: The Principles Underpinning Positive Education.* Routledge. Roffey, S. (2024b). *ASPIRE to Wellbeing and Learning in Secondary Settings: The Principles Underpinning Positive Education.* Routledge.

Safety	Ensuring physical, emotional, psychological, and digital safety
Positivity	Fostering strengths, solutions, and positive emotions that enhance cognitive pathways
Inclusion	Building a sense of belonging and contribution
Respect	Honouring individuals, their ideas, and their culture
Equity	Addressing the gap between privileged and disadvantaged students

ASPIRE provides a practical, research-backed framework for schools that aim to create supportive, inclusive, and high-achieving environments. By embedding these values, schools can cultivate a culture where every student feels valued, safe, and empowered to learn. This framework equips educators with concrete strategies to foster agency, resilience, and a sense of community, making it adaptable to diverse educational settings worldwide. ASPIRE's commitment to equity and respect not only addresses the academic needs of students but also promotes their social and emotional development, preparing them for lifelong learning and active citizenship in an interconnected world.

Recommendation 2: Embed mental health and wellbeing in national policy

Survey respondents stressed that mental health and wellbeing must be prioritised in national education policy, with a focus on diverse student needs and a recognition that there is no one-size-fits-all approach. Policies should support students from varied backgrounds, making education a space where all children can thrive.

> *'A change in national policy should focus firstly on individualised, personalised education and support plans for each child… and secondly, a move away from a blame culture, to one of support instead.'*

To meet these needs, respondents suggested more specialist provisions for students with high-functioning autism, ADHD, and dyslexia, as well as support for those who struggle in mainstream education. This flexibility would empower families and foster inclusivity.

> *'More specialist provisions – especially for high-functioning ASD, ADHD, and dyslexic pupils… Support the families to access them when they are far away but the best option.'*

Respondents advocated for policies that prioritise mental health on par with attendance and safeguarding. They called for a shift towards long-term, research-based strategies that address the root causes of mental health issues, rather than short-term solutions.

> *'Supportive and integrated mental health and wellbeing-specific policies conceived of at the national level… and given the same importance as other policies such as attendance and safeguarding.'*

> *'A strong framework for what is expected. Policies need to get to the root causes of children's mental health and wellbeing issues rather than just addressing the*

symptoms. A thorough appraisal needs to be undertaken of how current educational priorities and approaches affect mental health.'

Integrating neuroscientific, clinical and educational psychology research into policy development was also recommended, along with ensuring that the voices of students, parents, and educators are central. Policies should allow for student choice, flexible learning, and alternative assessment options, supporting students in pursuing their strengths.

'We need more student voice, parent voice, and teacher voice – what do they want/need/expect from education? How can we deliver that and use technology to mobilise systemic change?'

'Real choice needs to be created… The national curriculum needs to become far less prescriptive, with room for diversity in what children learn, so they're not judged on areas that hold no interest for them but can pursue their passions and excel.'

Ellie Costello, EPA Steering Group Member and Executive Director of Square Peg, has published 12 recommendations for Government. [24] These include the suggestion that government should develop a national Wellbeing & Inclusion Strategy to ensure that the mental health, wellbeing and psychological safety of babies, children and young people is placed at the heart of all government policies and reviews.

By ensuring the social determinants of mental health and long-term health inequalities are integrated with the development, implementation and delivery of education, child and family policy, services and systems (especially for the most vulnerable and marginalised such as children with disabilities and additional needs), there will be a built-in protective effect through joined-up social design and appropriate person-centred strengths-based outcomes where every child succeeds and thrives. See the work of The Harvard Centre on the Developing Child for evidence-based research on context and place in policy to promote healthy development.

By integrating the social determinants of mental health and long-term health inequalities into the development, implementation, and delivery of education, child and family policy, services, and systems, we can create a protective effect. This is particularly critical for the most vulnerable and marginalised, such as children with disabilities and additional needs. A joined-up social design, combined with person-centred, strengths-based outcomes, ensures that every child has the opportunity to succeed and thrive. The Harvard Centre on the Developing Child recently published helpful research on the importance of environmental factors in shaping the foundations of healthy development. [25]

[24] Square Peg. (2024). *12 recommendations to government*. Retrieved from: https://www.teamsquarepeg.co.uk/12-recommendations-1.

[25] Harvard University Centre on the Developing Child. (2024). *Place Matters*. Available at: https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/inbriefs/inbrief-place-matters.

Recommendation 3: Signal a paradigm shift

Academic pressures are a significant factor contributing to adolescent suicide and self-harm in the UK (e.g. see Varley et al, 2022). [26] The education system's first responsibility should be to 'do no harm'. While schools play a vital role in providing stability and connection, an intense focus on high-stakes focus on accountability and high-stakes assessments has profoundly affected the mental health and wellbeing of both students and educators. In light of the escalating youth mental health crisis, a bold and systemic shift in educational policy is urgently required.

> *'Make mental health a priority. Without good mental health, a child will not thrive. The whole system needs an overhaul to better reflect the society we are living in. It cannot continue to disregard mental health in children.'*

At present, the education system prioritises exam results as the primary measure of success, often at the expense of personal growth and wellbeing. We believe that schools should focus on fostering students' individual strengths and interests, rather than enforcing a one-size-fits-all approach that pressures students to conform to narrow academic standards.

> *'A rethink of education – go back to values, not academic standards. Value each and every child and find what they are good at and help foster that.'*

We welcome the words of the Secretary of State for Education, Bridget Phillipson, in her recent speech to the Confederation of School Trusts, in which she said that "Exam results open important doors to opportunity for young people; they show what pupils know and can do; they are and will continue to be the anchor of our education system. But A*s alone do not set young people up for a healthy and happy life. And where previous governments have had tunnel vision, we will widen our ambition… Wellbeing and belonging hold the key [for improving the lives of young people]… if we want to tackle the epidemic of school absence, children need to feel like they belong in school." [27]

To reinforce this message, we recommend creating a communications plan to ensure that this message is shared by a wide range of voices, through a wide range of channels, to a wide range of audiences. People throughout the education system need to hear this not just as a signal of a change in the direction of travel, but as a repeated mantra that everyone needs to get behind. This also includes taking a hard look at policies and practices of the present and the past, to identify the sources of disconnection and isolation that so many children and young people feel. As one respondent wrote, we need 'a *root and branch reassessment of current policies and admit past mistakes have been made if necessary.'*

Recommendation 4: Invest in mental health prevention

Many of the responses to our survey highlight the need for more funding to support

[26] Varley, D., Fenton, C., Gargan, G., et al. (2022) A systematic review of systematic reviews exploring the factors related to child and adolescent self-harm. *Adolescent Psychiatry*, 12(2), pp. 79-114.

[27] Adams, R. (2024) Phillipson to ask schools to end exam 'tunnel vision' and look to wellbeing. *The Guardian*, November 6th. Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/education/2024/nov/06/phillipson-to-ask-schools-to-end-exam-tunnel-vision-and-look-to-wellbeing.

mental health and wellbeing in schools. While a detailed breakdown of costs or funding sources is beyond the scope of this report, we would make the following three points:

1. Prioritising mental health can drive significant progress even within existing budgets.
2. Improving mental health and wellbeing is likely to require significant funding, as detailed below
3. The cost of doing nothing is far greater. Research increasingly links inadequate mental health support to chronic ill health unemployment, social disorder and violence, as the Mayor of London recently argued in his call for expanded services. [28] Failing to invest in mental health now will mean higher future costs in policing, healthcare, and welfare. A recent analysis by the London School of Economics estimated that mental health problems cost the UK economy at least £118 billion a year. [29]

The connection between poverty and educational outcomes also makes this a broader social issue, calling for a joined-up approach that includes children's services and social policies.

One survey respondent summed up the need for political commitment to fund mental health reform in our schools:

> *'[There needs to be a] recognition of the amount of resources and money needed to overhaul education. To prioritise wellbeing. To recognise that the current education [system] is failing many children and causing a mental health crisis.'*

In this section, we outline two key areas in need of strategic funding: a) health services, and b) schools.

a) Funding for health services

Meeting students' mental health needs requires both reactive and proactive services. Survey respondents highlighted serious gaps in both areas, emphasising urgent funding needs.

Reactive support

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and school wellbeing teams are crucial for reactive support, but limited provision or long waiting times often delay help. As one respondent noted:

> *'More funding for child mental health services where waiting times are a national disgrace.'*

[28] Crerar, P. (2024) Untreated mental health issues too often leading to violent crimes, says Khan. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from: https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/may/01/mental-health-services-key-to-preventing-violent-crimes-says-khan.

[29] LSE (2022). *Mental health problems cost UK economy at least £118 billion a year - new research*. Retrieved from https://www.lse.ac.uk/News/Latest-news-from-LSE/2022/c-Mar-22/Mental-health-problems-cost-UK-economy-at-least-118-billion-a-year-new-research.

These delays frequently lead to crises before care is available, underscoring the need for immediate investment to reduce bottlenecks.

Square Peg's 12 recommendations suggest government should ensure all CAMHS funding is ring-fenced for investment and delivery in local areas. [30] In addition to CAMHS, support from Speech and Language Therapists (SALT) and Occupational Therapists (OT) is essential. Increased funding for these services would help address students' needs promptly, reducing the escalation of mental health issues in schools.

Proactive support

Proactive measures, such as early intervention, are vital to manage demand on mental health services by addressing issues early. Respondents stressed the importance of these measures:

> *'Investment in child NHS services to ensure early diagnosis and support for neurodivergent children and young people.'*

This preventative approach enables schools and families to support students, particularly those who are neurodivergent or have suffered trauma, from the outset. Other proactive suggestions included:

- Develop a more responsive, accurate approach to identifying and responding to children and young people's specific needs.
- Educational psychologists working with schools as organisations as well as with individuals, providing leadership teams with evidence-informed advice, training and support.
- More trained CAMHS clinicians to improve access and timely care.
- Funding for parental support groups.

By expanding both reactive and proactive health services, more young people will receive timely support, creating a balanced and sustainable approach to improving mental health and wellbeing.

b) Funding for schools

Improving mental health and wellbeing in schools requires supporting both pupils and staff. Positive change depends on meeting the needs of each group.

Improving outcomes for teachers, leaders, and support staff

Enhancing teacher recruitment and retention requires targeted funding to address the pressures on educators. Key areas include:

- **Increased pay:** Better compensation for teachers and teaching assistants is essential to attract and retain staff. As one respondent noted, pay should be increased 'so they are not so hard to recruit and retain.'

[30] Square Peg. (2024). *12 recommendations to government*. Retrieved from: https://www.teamsquarepeg.co.uk/12-recommendations-1.

- **Flexible working conditions:** Providing options like part-time schedules, flexible hours, and remote working where feasible can help reduce burnout and improve job satisfaction.
- **Professional development opportunities:** Funded opportunities for advanced education, such as MA-level courses, offer staff growth pathways, enhancing skills and motivation.
- **Training opportunities:** Comprehensive training in relationship-building, neurodiversity, and mental health equips educators to create inclusive environments.
- **Parallel process of support:** Education is the only front-line keyworker service without clinical supervision to scaffold and support its workforce. Early Years providers, schools, Further Education and Higher Education settings should be supported to deliver supervision support systems for their staff. [31]

Improving outcomes for pupils

Investing in inclusive practices is vital for pupils' wellbeing and academic success. Key areas for funding include:

- **Early years interventions for disadvantaged communities:** Programmes like SureStart offer early support that fosters resilience and reduces future barriers to learning, especially for families in disadvantaged areas.
- **Universal wellbeing approaches:** Schools need funding for proactive mental health approaches, embedding support into daily school life to build resilience before challenges arise.
- **A stronger focus on social-emotional learning:** This would support UNESCO's pillars of 'learning to be' and 'learning to live together'.
- **Greater checks and balances in labelling and support for SEND students:** Increased funding is required to improve oversight of SEND labelling in schools to ensure consistency of practice throughout the UK.
- **Enhanced SEND funding and adjustments:** Funding for additional SEND places, adjustments, and mental health support is essential. Educational psychologists, currently under-resourced, should receive adequate funding.
- **Embed neuroscience at the heart of all training:** By deepening understanding of how children (and adults) think, feel, and develop in relation to their environments, educators can create environments where children feel safe, valued, and that they belong – essential foundations for their success and ability to thrive.

Strategic investment in these areas will create a preventative framework, improving mental health and reducing long-term social and financial costs. Such investments support a sustainable education system that benefits future generations. It's also important to acknowledge that significant change can be achieved with little or no financial investment, and many of the ideas and recommendations in this report require minor amendments to existing policy and practice.

[31] For example, see Solihull Approach Reflective Supervision. Available at https://solihullapproachparenting.com/supervisors.

Recommendation 5: Create a more diverse, responsive curriculum

Our survey revealed a widespread desire among parents and carers for curriculum reform to improve mental health and wellbeing. Respondents emphasised the need for a curriculum that fosters engagement, relevance, and personal growth, essential for agency and motivation.

Self-determination theory and the role of agency

Deci and Ryan's self-determination theory suggests that wellbeing relies on autonomy, relatedness, and competence. Applying these to the curriculum means students need control over their learning (autonomy), connection to others (relatedness), and the chance to develop skills (competence). However, current policies often impose a rigid, one-size-fits-all approach, leaving many students feeling disengaged.

> *'The curriculum needs to suit the learning needs of all pupils, not just those aiming for university. We need creative subjects and a stronger focus on PSHE and wellbeing.'*

Broadening the curriculum for engagement and practical skills

Students need a curriculum that reflects their interests and the realities of modern life. Many respondents called for more hands-on, practical learning and life skills, rather than a focus solely on exams. This approach would equip students with the tools to thrive personally and professionally.

> *'Create a more hands-on curriculum and bring back the fun to education. Young children need to be moving, singing, laughing, speaking and PLAYING!*

> *'To not be exam-driven, to enable children to reach their potential. To teach life skills, effective communication, and inclusivity so they can function in today's world.'*

Reflecting diversity and real-world relevance

Respondents also emphasised the importance of a curriculum that reflects societal diversity and teaches real-world skills like financial literacy and civic responsibilities, moving away from rote learning.

> *'Bring in a more diverse curriculum... the texts we learn in English are all written by dead white men. Show me what an interest rate change or national insurance change means to my earnings... not the sides of a triangle being equal to... Make it real and practical.'*

> *'Look at where industry is today and embrace an open-minded, interest-driven education on a broad range of topics. Allow young people to follow their passions instead of cramming all of them into the same box on the same path doing the same thing.'*

Incorporating outdoor learning and physical activity

Outdoor learning and physical activity were highlighted as essential for mental health. Many respondents noted that time indoors affects wellbeing, especially for teenagers, and called for regular outdoor activities and physical play.

Self-determination theory emphasises the importance of supporting autonomy, competence, and relatedness – all of which can be nurtured through outdoor learning and self-directed play. These activities are crucial not only for mental health but also for developing emotional, social, and cognitive skills, as well as psychological resilience, particularly during the early years.

However, pressure on schools to focus on classroom-based teaching aimed at "teaching to the test", combined with Ofsted's emphasis on "safe playgrounds", has led to reduced time for play and an increase in restrictive rules. This limits the kind of risk-taking play children need to build resilience and learn how to navigate challenges effectively.

> *'Schools should be a place where all children and adults thrive. We need to place psychological safety at the centre of school cultures, values and policies and create more free time for self-directed play and socialising.'*

A more flexible, interest-led curriculum

These responses call for a collaborative, flexible, interest-led curriculum that includes creativity, outdoor learning, and life skills. A 21st-century curriculum should value a range of interests and abilities, supporting students' autonomy and holistic growth.

> *'A 21st Century curriculum should offer something across the breadth of interests and abilities. Creativity and skills should be valued. Stage, not age, acknowledging that people develop at different paces, at different times.'*

A wider variety of approaches to learning

There is a need to increase the range of learning opportunities provided in schools alongside explicit, teacher-led instruction. This might include approaches such as project-based learning, problem-based learning, philosophical inquiry, self-directed learning and inderdisciplinary learning. There is also a need to provide greater opportunities for children and young people to engage in cooperative learning, learning to work better *with* one another as well as *than* one another. This would better help children and young people develop the knowledge and skills needed to thrive in a rapidly changing world. [32]

Recommendation 6: Reform assessment methods

Many survey respondents highlighted the need to reconsider the role of standardised tests, such as SATs, which place significant pressure on students and are often used to rank schools in league tables. Many argued that these assessments do not reflect the

[32] e.g., see Kruchoski, P. (2016). 10 skills you need to thrive tomorrow – and the universities that will help you get them. *World Economic Forum*. Retrieved from: https://www.weforum.org/stories/2016/08/10-skills-you-need-to-thrive-tomorrow-and-the-universities-that-will-help-you-get-them.

diverse abilities and interests of students, nor do they prepare them adequately for the complexities of the modern workforce.

> *'Drop SATs, lower the number of GCSEs, bring in vocational qualifications at school, teach subjects relevant to real-world jobs, focus more on tech.'*

Some respondents suggested that league tables and SATs contribute to a narrow focus on exam results, detracting from a more holistic view of student growth and potential. Eliminating SATs and league tables would allow for a more balanced approach, reducing the pressure on schools and students alike.

Broadening assessment to reflect diverse interests

There were also calls for a more flexible and inclusive assessment system that recognises diverse learning styles and interests. Current measures like the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) and Progress 8 were criticised for limiting the curriculum, pushing students toward academic pathways that may not align with their strengths or career aspirations. Respondents argued that these measures should be revised or abolished to enable a broader curriculum and fairer assessments.

> *'Change or abolish EBacc, Progress 8, and SATs to widen the curriculum to cater better for more children with diverse learning styles and interests.'*

Providing pathways for functional skills and vocational learning

A key suggestion was to introduce functional skills exams in subjects like maths and English, designed to cater to different career paths and practical needs. This approach could offer multiple levels to suit varied abilities, reducing the one-size-fits-all pressure of GCSEs and making assessments more relevant for students with different aspirations.

> *'Introduce better thought-out maths and English functional skills exams (maybe with several levels/sections to cater for different careers) for the 30% who will always fail these GCSEs.'*

Expanding the options for assessments and qualifications would also allow further education (FE) colleges to offer a wider range of GCSEs, including subjects not commonly available in schools, such as statistics, business studies, and textiles. This would open up additional pathways for students to pursue their interests and gain practical skills.

> *'Allow FE colleges to offer GCSEs in various subjects, including some not often available in schools such as statistics, business studies, textiles, etc.'*

Recommendation 7: Build a wellbeing-focused accountability system

Survey respondents identified high-stakes accountability as harmful to the mental health and wellbeing of students and educators. For students, this pressure stems largely from exams; for educators, it is linked to school inspections and performance management. There is a strong call for an accountability system that prioritises wellbeing, inclusivity, and collaboration over competition and narrow academic metrics.

Broaden the definition of success

Current measures like Progress 8 and exam results focus narrowly on academic outcomes, overlooking the broader needs of students. Respondents called for a shift toward schools being environments where children feel safe, supported, and happy.

> *'The measures for schools need to change from Progress 8 and academic outcomes to inclusive practices and the holistic development of all pupils, how safe and happy they are at school.'*

Move beyond grades and league tables

With OFSTED's recent decision to end one-word judgements, there is a move toward less grade-focused evaluations. Respondents recommended removing league tables and focusing on schools' broader responsibilities, including creating neuro-friendly environments and providing mental health support.

> *'Scrap league tables. Put child wellbeing at the centre of a school's responsibilities. Ensure school environments and practices are neuro-friendly. That high-level counselling is available for all who request it. Not rationed as it is often now. Improved access to smaller school environments for those that can't or barely 'exist' in mainstream schools. These young people have a right to be valued and to flourish like everyone else.'*

Prioritise wellbeing alongside attendance and attainment

Respondents advocated for a focus beyond attendance and attainment, recognising that some students face barriers due to mental health or SEND needs. A compassionate approach would support these students without punitive measures.

> *'Stop obsessing over attendance percentages and pressuring children who can't attend due to mental health needs or unmet SEN.'*

Build a system based on trust and collaboration

An alternative vision for accountability includes fostering trust and collaboration between schools and accountability bodies. Respondents supported a self-improving system that moves away from competition, allowing schools to work together for better outcomes.

> *'We need a system that is more based around trust. Resetting the relationship with schools and prioritising trust would fundamentally alter the overall dynamic at all levels. This would*

require the removal of high-stakes accountability and a move to a self-improving system based on collaboration and the common good rather than competition.'

Create a more holistic, wellbeing-focused accountability system

Overall, survey responses call for a shift from a competitive, exam-focused model to one that balances academic outcomes with student and staff wellbeing, creating an environment where the entire school community can thrive.

> *'We need a system that is more based around trust. Resetting the relationship with schools and prioritising trust would fundamentally alter the overall dynamic at all levels. This would require the removal of high stakes accountability and a move to a self-improving system based on collaboration and the common good rather than competition.'*

Recommendation 8: Publish national guidance for schools

Support mental health and wellbeing in school policies and practices

Survey respondents emphasised the need for clear, consistent guidance to help schools prioritise mental health and wellbeing. They called for policies that make mental health a core part of safeguarding, school culture, and student development.

> *'Much greater recognition within educational approaches and across all school policies that mental health and wellbeing are key to life, safeguarding, academic success, high attendance, and thriving communities.'*

Schools should have frameworks that address mental health proactively. Respondents suggested giving prominence to wellbeing activities—such as outings and forest school visits—to create a positive environment.

> *'Give wellbeing activities prominence and importance, such as visits out (even to local park, Forest School).'*

Create safe and inclusive environments

Respondents highlighted the need for tailored support for diverse student needs, especially for those who struggle in conventional settings. Schools should acknowledge neurodiversity, trauma, and masking behaviours, providing accommodations rather than imposing a one-size-fits-all approach.

> *'It needs to be acknowledged that, for some children, school is a cause of trauma and that accommodations must be made. Provision of better alternatives to school for those children who cannot cope and/or do not thrive in that environment… [Schools should] genuinely value the wellbeing of all the children… and prioritise this above academic achievement.'*

> *'Oh gosh. So many things. Firstly, high schools should be set up so the year 7 and 8's are together and not integrated with the older kids… We need more support staff so*

the children who struggle can get the help they need… Rather than one size fits all, the support needs to be tailored to the individual child!'

Having neurodivergent staff and actively listening to parents were also recommended to foster inclusivity and understanding, moving away from ableist practices.

'Neurodivergent staff in every school, listen more to parents, ban teachers from saying "but they're fine in school.""

Enhance access to mental health support and professional resources

There was strong support for embedding professional mental health resources in schools, such as counsellors, educational psychologists, and external support agencies, to benefit both students and staff.

'School counsellors being available and viable support at all times.'

'There need to be routes to seeing an Education Psychologist. Exam needs assessments need to actually exist... Isn't this the LA's job?'

Finally, respondents recommended the establishment of a suicide prevention policy across all schools and educational organisations, with clear protocols to support students in times of crisis.

'We need a suicide prevention policy in every organisation in the country.'

Recommendation 9: Provide research-informed training on relational behaviour policies

Professional development in behaviour management should go beyond traditional approaches by incorporating relational, trauma-informed, and restorative practices. These approaches create a flexible, research-informed framework for supporting student wellbeing and positive relationships.

Build a flexible approach to mental health and SEND training

Survey respondents highlighted the need for professional development that equips teachers to support students' mental health and diverse learning needs. Given the complexity of these issues, there is no one-size-fits-all approach; training must be adaptable and comprehensive to address varied needs.

As a foundation, all staff working in schools should be offered an evidence-based practical and theoretical framework for modelling healthy relationships, such as the Solihull Approach training in children's emotional development. [33]

[33] See https://solihullapproachparenting.com/solihull-approach-training-for-practitioners.

'The understanding that not all children are round pegs. Some are square that don't fit the system. Training, training, and more training needs to be given to educators.'

Provide essential training on mental health and neurodiversity

Respondents stressed the importance of training all school staff on mental health and neurodivergence, with an emphasis on creating psychologically safe environments. This training should be ongoing and not limited to new staff.

'Embedding a national requirement for all school staff to attend training on the signs and support mechanisms for young people who may be struggling. This can't just be for newly qualified staff – it has to be done by all current and all new employees regardless of position held.'

'All teachers need to be trained in co-regulation and relational practices which help young people feel psychologically safe in school. Only then will all young people reach their potential.'

Training should also address specific needs like autism and speech and language difficulties, equipping teachers to recognise and support SEND students.

'All teachers to have full training in SEND including speech and language needs. What to look for, how to write reports for EHCPs. If we want SEND children in mainstream, then schools need the training and tools to do this. That's why we have a crisis.'

Respondents recommended training designed and delivered by neurodivergent individuals to provide first-hand insights into their experiences, fostering empathy and understanding.

'Staff need to be educated on neurodivergence by courses that are designed and delivered by neurodivergent people. There are so many children undiagnosed and unsupported, and staff don't have a clue the harm being done to these children.'

'Better training in mental health, especially around autism. Consistency [is important] – in our case the staff changed every few months, and we had to keep starting over and over again.'

A collaborative, child-centred approach to attendance and achievement

In addition to mental health training, respondents advocated for a collaborative, child-centred approach to attendance, focusing on the barriers some students face rather than rigid targets. This approach promotes collaboration between teachers, students, and families, prioritising wellbeing.

'Much more training for schools around SEND and mental health. Specialist support to enable children to attend and achieve, with attendance targets abolished in place of a collaborative, child-centred approach.'

This vision for teacher training calls for a flexible, varied approach that recognises each student's unique needs, helping create an inclusive, supportive environment where all students can thrive.

The government should introduce a Mental Health and Wellbeing registration code for school absences. This would ensure parity of esteem for mental health conditions, separate absence data from seasonal illnesses, and serve as a pastoral flag to identify new absences linked to declining wellbeing or emerging mental health concerns. [34]

Recommendation 10: Create a culture of belonging

To foster mental health and resilience, schools must prioritise an environment of belonging, where students feel seen, valued, and supported. As highlighted in the recent *Belonging Schools* report (Greany et al., 2023), a sense of belonging is foundational to inclusive education. [35] Belonging is essential to create a sense of connection that enables not only academic learning but also the relational and emotional aspects that contribute to a positive school culture, which are often overlooked in a system of high accountability.

Prioritise relationships and supportive networks

The responses to our survey conveyed a strong sense that a culture of belonging starts with strengthening relationships within the school community. One respondent wrote that *'strong pastoral relationships with staff'* are essential for a supportive environment, underscoring the need for approachable and empathetic staff who students trust. Schools should integrate mentoring systems, peer support, and restorative practices to help students navigate social and academic challenges. As the *Belonging Schools* report emphasises, every child deserves to feel known, valued and supported.

Foster inclusivity through individualised approaches

In line with fostering belonging, schools should adopt policies that recognise and accommodate the diverse needs of students. By embracing inclusive practices, such as flexible behaviour policies and a curriculum that facilitates a greater degree of agency and choice, schools can help each student feel seen, understood and celebrated for their unique strengths and interests.

Prioritise smoother transitions for vulnerable students

Transitions can be particularly challenging for students with SEND, neurodiversity, trauma, or chronic ill health, often disrupting routines and connections. Schools should implement tailored transition plans, such as gradual familiarisation with new settings, introductions to key staff, and clear visual or written guides, while working closely with families and professionals. Thoughtful support during these critical moments helps vulnerable students feel secure and valued, fostering a stronger sense of belonging and continuity in their well-being and learning.

Engage families and community in belonging initiatives

[34] See https://www.teamsquarepeg.co.uk/3asks.

[35] Greany, T., Pennacchia, J., Graham, J & Bernardes, E. (2023). *Belonging Schools: How do relatively more inclusive secondary schools approach and practise inclusion?* Teach First.

Building a culture of belonging extends beyond the school gates. Engaging families and the wider community is essential for creating a supportive community that reinforces students' sense of security and connection. As one respondent suggested, *'school is only one part of a wider network that needs to work together to support our children.'* Schools should foster open communication and partnerships with parents and community organisations, enabling a shared commitment to students' well-being.

Emphasise restorative practices and second chances

Restorative approaches to discipline, highlighted in the *Belonging Schools* report, play a crucial role in maintaining students' sense of belonging by repairing the damage that can be done to relationships through miscommunication and poor behaviour. We believe that restorative practice should be implemented alongside traditional approaches to school discipline, rather than being seen as an alternative. Schools that focus on understanding the root causes of behaviour and offering second chances create a safe environment where students learn from their experiences. This approach builds trust and respect within the school community, reinforcing the values of empathy, inclusion and forgiveness.

As we argued in recommendation 1, to cultivate a culture of belonging, schools need to commit to a multidimensional approach that incorporates a range of approaches to nurturing the emotional well-being of every student.

F. How will we know when we've got there?

To ensure that mental health and wellbeing improvements are both meaningful and sustained, an independent annual review should be conducted by external researchers, such as universities and research organisations. This review would provide both local and national insights into the impact of mental health initiatives across schools. Key measures of success could include the following:

Comprehensive feedback from all stakeholders

Annual surveys, focus groups, and interviews should be conducted with a diverse range of stakeholders, including teachers, leaders, support staff, parents and carers, and children and young people. Gathering perspectives from these groups would provide valuable qualitative data on the effectiveness of wellbeing initiatives and highlight areas needing further improvement.

Ongoing data collection on key indicators

To track trends in wellbeing over time, schools should continuously collect data on attendance, attainment, mental health and wellbeing, and behaviour. This quantitative data would offer a baseline for understanding the impact of policy changes and allow for responsive adjustments to support ongoing improvement.

Regular policy reviews across all levels

An annual review of policies at school, trust, local authority, and government levels would help ensure that mental health and wellbeing remain prioritised in practice as well as policy.

Evaluating these policies regularly would help identify any gaps or inconsistencies, ensuring that wellbeing remains central to the education system.

By establishing these milestones, we can monitor and evaluate progress toward a more supportive, wellbeing-focused environment for students, staff, and the wider school community.

7. How should we implement change?

Establish an interdisciplinary working party

To ensure effective and sustainable reform, we propose that the Secretary of State appoint an interdisciplinary working party to evaluate and implement the recommendations outlined in this proposal. This working party would bring together diverse expertise to approach mental health and wellbeing in schools from multiple angles, ensuring that changes are comprehensive and responsive to real needs. By including representatives from across the education system and beyond, this group would also guard against groupthink and provide a well-rounded perspective on reform.

The working party should comprise:

- Policymakers
- Researchers
- Educational psychologists
- CAMHS clinicians
- Executive headteachers / trust CEOs
- Headteachers
- Senior leaders
- Middle leaders
- Classroom teachers
- Support staff
- Parents/carers
- Children and young people

A collaborative, economically sound approach

One of the primary aims of this working party would be to establish a preventative model of support, recognising that early intervention is not only more effective but also far more economical. Research indicates that the cost of addressing mental health issues reactively – 'picking up the pieces' – is far higher than early intervention and preventative measures. By prioritising early support, the working party would pave the way for a system that is both financially viable and far more supportive of student wellbeing.

Key responsibilities of the working party

The working party would be tasked with developing and overseeing a national plan for reform, moving the education system toward a more wellbeing-focused model. The key responsibilities would be to:

1. **Create a comprehensive transition plan**

   Develop a detailed roadmap to shift from the current system to one that prioritises mental health and wellbeing. This plan would outline clear steps, timelines, and necessary resources to ensure that changes are implemented smoothly and with minimal disruption.

2. **Conduct a national consultation**

   Engage a wide range of stakeholders through a national consultation process, gathering feedback to refine and adapt the plan based on the experiences and needs of those it will affect.

3. **Revise the plan based on consultation feedback**

   After the consultation, the working party would refine the plan to reflect the diverse insights gathered, ensuring that the final approach is both inclusive and practical.

4. **Oversee implementation**

   The working party would monitor and guide the rollout of the plan, ensuring that reforms are implemented effectively and that progress is tracked against agreed-upon benchmarks.

By establishing this working party, the government can ensure that mental health and wellbeing reforms are both strategically sound and grounded in the lived realities of those within the education system. This collaborative, inclusive approach to decision-making, paired with a strong emphasis on early intervention, would lay the foundation for a more sustainable, inclusive, and impactful approach to improving mental health and wellbeing in our schools.

8. About the Education Policy Alliance

The Education Policy Alliance is a grass-roots think tank dedicated to crowd-sourcing education policy. Our steering group comprises volunteer primary and secondary headteachers, classroom teachers, teacher trainers, educational psychologists, parents/carers and young people.

We have no political affiliation – we seek to work with politicians and policymakers from all parties to improve outcomes and promote wellbeing among educators, children and young people and their families.

For media enquiries, or for more information, visit educationpa.org.