

Box 3.1.

Promoting students' overall well-being in Ottawa (Canada)

The Canadian government introduced the Health and Physical Education curriculum for 6- to 14-year-olds (grades 1 to 8), which underlines key steps that schools can take to promote students' physical and psychological well-being. The curriculum is based on the belief that an active lifestyle that promotes physical and psychological well-being through sports and eating choices can impact various educational and social and emotional outcomes such as:

- Increased productivity and readiness for learning
- Improved morale and better stress-coping mechanisms
- Decreased absenteeism
- Decreased antisocial behavior such as bullying and violence
- Increased personal satisfaction

In this light, the Health and Physical Education curriculum focuses on students' holistic development from a physical and psychological well-being perspective, and incorporates the following social and emotional skills to improve overall well-being:

- Students learn to identify and manage their emotions in order to help them function and interact more effectively. Through learning new movement skills and interacting with others in physical activity, students develop self-awareness and learn how to express their feelings. Activities such as using feeling charts to depict emotions are encouraged within classrooms to reach this goal.
- Students are encouraged to cope with stress using strategies such as deep breathing, guided imagery and unplugging before sleep. Over time, they use these activities to build a personal "coping toolbox" that helps them manage stress and builds resilience against daily issues.
- Students are taught how to stay motivated and persevere despite difficult circumstances through simple practices such as expressing gratitude, appreciating the positive aspects of situations, and reframing negative thoughts. Teachers encourage students to use positive affirmations and to share positive messages with their peers to achieve these outcomes.
- Students learn to mutually respect diversity and establish healthy, cooperative relationships with their peers. Through class activities such as role-play, students are taught how to be more tolerant of others' opinions and engage in effective conflict resolution.
- Students are taught how to think creatively and critically in order to make informed judgements in a variety of settings and contexts. Teachers use various organisational strategies and tools to develop students' strategic thinking skills and help them make connections, solve complex problems, set goals and create plans, thereby enhancing their work skills and innovative mindset.
- Students are also encouraged to explore their identities so that they feel a sense of belonging in a variety of social and cultural contexts. This enhances their well-being by enabling them to support choices that are suitable for their personal growth. To achieve this, students are encouraged to reflect on their strengths and accomplishments while also monitoring their progress in skill development.

The implementation of the Health and Physical Education curriculum is dependent on the promotion of a healthy school environment that helps students make responsible decisions about all aspects related to their well-being. Therefore, the Ministry of Education in Ottawa has identified five important areas that, when implemented together, constitute a holistic environment for students to grow in:

- Ensuring effective implementation of the curriculum and its key ideas and practices by promoting professional learning opportunities for teachers and principals
- Establishing an efficient school and classroom leadership structure, which identifies shared goals and responsibilities among various stakeholders, and is responsive to the needs of the school community
- Promoting student engagement and sense of belonging by providing opportunities to take up leadership roles in both academic and non-academic settings
- Designing healthy school spaces that contribute to the positive cognitive, physical and social and emotional development of students, and cultivate sustained social relationships among peers and members of the community. Schools can achieve this by investing in recreational spaces that provide students opportunities to engage in physical activities as well as build key social and emotional skills such as collaboration and building healthy relationships with their peers. Encouraging home, school and community partnerships by providing parents, community groups, school staff and extended family the opportunity to support healthy learning inside and outside the classroom. This can be achieved through the creation of student and parent councils, and providing community programmes such as childcare and family support.

Source: Ontario Public Service (2019[9])

Test anxiety

SSES measured test anxiety using three items with five response options, ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”: a) I often worry that it will be difficult for me taking a test, b) Even if I am well prepared for a test I feel very anxious, and c) I get very tense when I study for a test. These items are a subset of the five items originally used in PISA 2015 where it was referred to as an index on schoolwork-related anxiety. Based on responses to the following three items an index of test anxiety was created. Test anxiety can be described as “the set of phenomenological, physiological, and behavioural responses that accompany concern about possible negative consequences or failure in an evaluative situation” (Zeidner, 2007[10]). It typically arises in educational settings where students believe their abilities are stretched or exceeded by the demands of the test situation.

In SSES a sizeable proportion of students indicated experiencing test anxiety (Figure 3.3, Table A3.9 and Table A3.10). On average, approximately 50% of older students and slightly more than 40% of younger students “strongly agreed” or “agreed” with all three statements. In the majority of cities, older students reported higher test anxiety than younger students. Ottawa (Canada) (21 percentage points) and Daegu (Korea) (19 percentage points) have the largest age gap in test anxiety while Bogotá (Colombia) (1 percentage point), Manizales (Colombia) (3 percentage points) and Sintra (Portugal) (3 percentage points) have the smallest. Only Moscow (Russia) has a negative age gap as younger students reported higher test anxiety than older students. Anxiety levels typically increase as students get older (McDonald, 2001[11]). Studies regularly find that older students experience more school pressure or stress related to schoolwork.