

2023 Premier’s Hicksons Lawyers Health Education and Wellbeing Scholarship

Playing the Long Game:

*A Positive Transition Towards Student Wellbeing*

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# Introduction

Prioritising student wellbeing is essential for creating a positive and supporting learning environment where students can flourish and reach their full potential. It is important to recognise that student wellbeing encompasses not only academic performance, but also physical, social, emotional, and mental health.

Wellbeing is a multidimensional concept. It is not just the absence of disease or illness, but a state of overall health and satisfaction with life. Physical health and mental health are interconnected and each affect the other. By undertaking regular physical activity and play, as well as periods of rest, sleep, and good nutrition, school students can improve their overall levels of mental health and wellbeing. This in turn can lead to reduced levels of stress, anxiety and depression. When students are happy, healthy and secure, they are more likely to engage with their studies, interact positively with peers and teachers and have a more fulfilling educational experience at school.

It is essential to recognise that wellbeing is a dynamic state that can change over time, depending on personal circumstances and life events. Prioritising and maintaining wellbeing requires a holistic approach that addresses the physical, mental, emotional, social and spiritual needs of students, particularly as they age and transition from primary school to secondary school.

‘Playing the Long Game’ recognises many of the challenges that students, schools, parents and communities face in 2023. Throughout this research, various strategies will be explored to understand how we can better support students and promote student wellbeing through physical activity and play within all types of schools.

# Focus of Study

Research has shown that physical activity and play can have numerous benefits for students, including positive academic performance, reduced risk of diseases and improved mental health and wellbeing. However, many students tend to become less physically active as they transition from primary to secondary school, which prompted my curiosity and formed the basis of this research.

To explore this further, schools need to address potential barriers to student physical activity and play, particularly during recess and lunch breaks. It is also important to work specifically with students to get their feedback and advice on why levels of student physical activity generally drops as students progress through the school years. It is essential that schools work with key stakeholders, such as parents, sporting associations, community groups, the P&C, administrators, department policy makers and all levels of government to satisfy the needs of young people within our schools.

“Play is often talked about as if it were a relief from serious learning. But for children, play is serious learning. Play is really the work of childhood” – Fred Rogers.

# Significant Learning

According to the Australian Government’s Physical Activity and Exercise Guidelines for Children and Young People (5-17 years), school students should be completing at least 60 minutes each day of moderate to vigorous physical that makes the heart beat faster. These activities can include and are not limited to bike riding, dancing, swimming and playing a variety of ball sports. At least three days per week, children and young people should incorporate vigorous activities that strengthen muscle and bone within those 60 minutes. Some muscle strengthening activities include running, swinging on monkey bars and climbing. Further to this, the guidelines state that children and young people need to limit their time sitting or lying down, especially in front of screens, including mobile phones. It is recommended that no more than two hours of sedentary recreational screen time occurs. Throughout the research tour, I found that this definitely was not the case when it came to school-aged children, particularly if schools permitted mobile phone use throughout the day.

Recently, the 2022 Active Healthy Kids Australia Report Card was released by the Australasian Society for Physical Activity (ASPA) and leading universities and research institutes across Australia. By monitoring and advocating for higher physical activity levels and support for children and young people, the report card highlighted unique opportunities for social change to encourage improved levels of physical activity for this particular group. Australia’s score for overall physical activity in 2022 was a ‘D’. This remained largely unchanged from 2018 and signified minimal improvement in Australia’s physical activity benchmarks since the Report Card initiatives began in 2014. The ‘D’ result meant that fewer than 25% of Australian children and young people were meeting the Physical Activity and Exercise Guidelines needed for optimal health and wellbeing. Overall physical activity, physical fitness and screen time all received ‘D’ grades. Anecdotally, these results could be partly attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic, restrictions brought from lockdowns and social isolation. This ultimately led to children being less physically active in this period, which negatively impacted the mental health and wellbeing of students.

During this research project, it was evident that the majority of school leaders, teachers and parents of the 32 schools I visited were consistent in their messaging; Physically active children and young people had much greater chances of being happy, healthy and resilient whilst at school. According to research conducted by the Gonski Institute for Education, active kids were more likely to be active adults, which benefits society by helping reduce the impact on our health care systems. According to the Report Card results, the ‘Schools’ indicator has declined since the 2018 edition, with only 30% of primary schools in NSW and VIC meeting school physical activity policies. The outcomes of the Report Card reinforce there’s more work to be done to get students moving whilst at school, particularly during recess, lunch and after school.

Schools have a vital role to play in supporting student’s physical activity levels, together with their mental health and wellbeing. The establishment of whole-school physical activity interventions, such as lunchtime workouts and competitions, loose parts play, opening up new school spaces, after-school sporting clubs or even playing music during break times can create simple movement-based incentives within school settings that can boost engagement levels, establish and maintain relationships and build positive wellbeing practices within school settings. This was positively demonstrated in a number of the Independent, Catholic, Government, Steiner and Montessori schools that I visited during my research study.

Students need to feel safe, valued and included at school. They want to take ownership over learning spaces and crave autonomy within their learning. During my research, these extra-curricular activities were more likely to be successful if students could voice their opinions in the consultation process combined with high-quality, enthusiastic and dedicated teachers, known as ‘enablers’, who were keen to see the best possible outcomes for all students. An example of this occurred at *Simmonds Catholic College*, an inner-city Melbourne high school, where the principal acted on feedback from students to introduce 15 permanent table tennis structures in a previously disused, undercover space in the school. This resulted in a massive spike in student participation numbers at recess and lunch time. The principal reported lower levels of anti-social behaviour and bullying within the school, whilst classroom teachers reported improved student learning and engagement during lessons directly following break times.

“Experience has shown that when children have a chance at physical activities which bring their natural impulses into play, going to school is a joy, management is less of a burden and learning is easier” – John Dewey.

Of the 32 schools I visited during my research, each was vastly different. Despite differences in school contexts, location, student numbers, demographics and socio-economic status, reoccurring themes began to develop as to why student engagement in physical activity and play seemed to diminish as they progressed through the school years. The disparity of resources available to schools throughout my research was clearly evident. On the whole, Independent and Catholic schools tended to be better equipped, with resources ranging from improved play areas, extensive sporting equipment and the latest technological programs and applications available to students. *Aquinas College*, a Catholic Independent K-12 Boys school in Perth had access to elite sporting coaches as part of their after-school sporting programs with the school itself positioned directly on the Swan River to conduct their rowing programs. Indeed, the school environment had an important role to play regarding the promotion of physical activity and student play. Schools that had plenty of green space and bushland highlighted how students had multiple opportunities to ‘run around’ and explore their natural environment. Unfortunately, not all schools were so lucky to have these spaces and had to be creative in the school playground layout to further encourage student participation levels.

Despite differences in school funding models compared to other school sectors, many government schools, both primary and secondary, regularly accessed government funding to build or renovate spaces in their schools to provide opportunities for students to activity participate with their peers. Unfortunately, this was viewed as a rather time consuming and stressful event, one that was reliant on the teachers,often referred to ‘enablers’, who would go above and beyond in their roles as educators to provide the best possible opportunities for students to succeed.

Weather and uniformwere also equally important when looking at barriers to student participation rates and physical activity at both recess and lunch time. *Humpty Do Primary School*, a government school just outside of Darwin had recently installed a large undercover shade area covering the school’s play equipment. It was evident that if the shelter had not been erected, the hot and humid temperatures of the tropical north would have greatly impacted the participation rates of students. This is another example of a school that problem solved and actively sought solutions to better support their students in their own school context.

The older and more traditional schools that I visited definitely had a strong sense of school culture and identity. This was evident at *Toowoomba Anglican School*, a renown independent school, where there were 112 years of school culture, tradition and student achievement as part of its rich history. Culture also had other roles to play, as evidenced by students who had migrated to Australia from other countries with their families. *Dr Anne Aly*, Federal Minister for Youth and Early Childhood Education was indeed one of those students when she was growing up. “As a migrant child, I wasn’t very sporty…I'd be picked last for the sporting competition, but that didn't mean I wasn't physically active”. “Within the cohort of young people, there are young people for whom organised physical activity is not part of their cultural makeup or there are barriers to organised physical activity, such as costs, understanding the system or knowing that there's a club that you can join”.

Parental engagement was vital in establishing effective and sustained relationships with schools and teachers to best support students during their schooling. Having supportive parents who were educated on the benefits of physical activity and play was pivotal in boosting student activity rates. *Dr Shane Pill*, Associate Professor of Education, Psychology and Social Work at Flinders University explained why it was so important to have positive relationships between schools, students and their parents. “In physical activity, the research is pretty clear that parents are the key drivers of children’s physical activity. So no matter what we’re doing in PE, if the school doesn’t have a program for the kids to go into and the parents aren’t taking the kids to get into something (physical activity), it’s not happening for the child”. Cronulla Sharks rugby league captain *Dale Finucane* also agreed that there were opportunities for parents and schools to encourage greater student participation. “As a parent, I want to leave as much social media out of it as best I can…I want to show my kids the benefits of being fit and active in the park, as opposed to being on your phone and being inactive”. “Educating parents is also important about the lack of sleep which can affect student’s concentration at school and their ability to do their work”.

Technology use, particularly the use of mobile phones in schools had the biggest impact on physical activity levels, together with student mental health and wellbeing. *Dr Rachael Sharman*, a senior lecturer in psychology at the University of the Sunshine Coast believes that phones are a big distraction to students and have a negative impact on wellbeing. “I’m a big fan of the banning of phones in high schools…We know that the phone, particularly the games and the way that messaging and all of that is set up is quite deliberately addictive…I think it is nonsense to suggest that we ask teenagers to self-regulate”. Renowned psychologist, *Dr Michael Carr-Gregg* agrees that mobile phone use plays a role in decreased levels of physical activity. “Phones and technology play a major role…I’m particularly motivated by the fact that many of the schools that had banned mobile phones, from first bell to last, were saying to me that one of the by-products of that move was a massive increase in recess and lunch time ball play”. *William Doyle*, author and Fulbright Scholar from the University of Eastern Finland believed that technology, particularly mobile phones were having a negative impact on school students of all ages in Finland. “The scores here have been plunging and nobody knows why…They (the schools) let them have phones at recess and often in class and I think that just does chaos to what made this system great. I think they’re spending too much money on technology that doesn’t have proven benefits”. “Banning (phones) is a good idea. Or if not banning them, having a process of putting them in lockers or shut off in backpacks”. Coincidently, schools that had implemented bans or alternate storage mechanisms for mobile phones during the school day, such as yondr pouches or safe containers, reported increased socialisation and physical activity amongst students during break times as a result.

In the first part of a two-part nation-wide survey by NAB, titled: ‘Student wellbeing - how young people really feel about their lives’, students in Years 7-12 across Australia’s Independent, Catholic and Government school sectors shared in-depth insights into how they feel about their lives, and [how schools’ student wellbeing programs can be improved](https://www.theeducatoronline.com/k12/news/the-problem-with-australias-school-wellbeing-programs-and-how-to-fix-them/280663). The survey indicated that 20% of Australia’s high school-age students identified as having ‘low’ levels of mental wellbeing, with schoolwork, tests or grades the top driver of their anxiety and worries. Private Catholic schools reported more students with low emotional or mental wellbeing (29%) – nearly twice as many as private independent schools (17%) Girls also reported low physical wellbeing more frequently (19%) than boys (11%), and year 11 students reported it more often (19%) than years 7-9 (9%). However, nearly half of students surveyed said their school wellbeing programs do not help much, with those from co-educational and girls’ schools reporting the lowest scores for their schools’ wellbeing programs. By school type, students at private independent schools said they were helped the most (51.9), The impact was broadly consistent across all year levels. Overall, almost 1 in 2 (45%) students said the programs did not help much compared to 6% of parents.

The results pose challenges and opportunities for schools with an increasing focus on mental health and wellbeing and growing parental expectations around comprehensive, proactive and tailored wellbeing solutions for all students. Positive mental health and wellbeing not only influences student learning outcomes, but success in learning enhances student wellbeing. *Professor Pasi Sahlberg* from the University of Melbourne is adamant that schools in Australia need to do more to cater for the whole student, equally focusing on learning and health, particularly wellbeing for optimised development. “For schools in Finland, student wellbeing is the number one priority, especially after the pandemic”.

Educators and school communities play such a significant role in supporting and developing student wellbeing. The schools I visited used a variety of strategies and programs to support student wellbeing and mental health. This included school-wide mental health and wellbeing promotion; early targeted support for students with emerging or moderate mental health concerns; and targeted or crisis response for students with complex mental health needs. *Loreto College Marryatville*, an independent K-12 girls school in Adelaide used a digital check-in service, known as ‘ei Pulse’ to gauge the mood of both students and teachers on a weekly basis. This provided real-time data and student wellbeing insights that could then enable meaningful action to take place to best support individuals.

# Conclusion

Children are naturally creative, but they need to be given the time to flourish. Students who have access to the best facilities, environmental settings and sporting equipment have a much easier chance of engaging in play and physical activity. That being said, students from a lower socioeconomic background have an opportunity to increase their levels of play and physical activity, but schools and teachers need to think outside of the box and be innovative when looking at spaces throughout a school. Currently, there are many unsuitable and/or unusable spaces within schools, due to original designs and subsequent upgrades that may have taken place. Teachers and administrators, working in conjunction with students, need to identify areas of the school that can be enhanced or better utilised, particularly at break times to enable students the opportunity to be active and engaged with their peers. This can be improved through education and professional learning, increased funding, innovative thinking and improved access to equipment and recreational resources by students.

“Children need the freedom and time to play. Play is not a luxury. Play is a necessity” – Kay Redfield Jamison.

In order to boost the physical activity levels of children and young people in Australia, a range of procedures must be implemented to have the most positive impact. The school environment is of great importance. By adding handball lines in the school yard, or installing netted soccer goals on the oval, can provide opportunities for physical spaces to become engaging. Parents, teachers and in particular, the school executive need to improve their views on the role of play within educational settings and the prevailing culture of play in the wider school community. We also need to improve children’s play skills by providing more choice in their play. This could be enhanced by providing free sports equipment hire both during the school day and over the weekends. The attitudes to play and what determines them can be quite diverse and varied, driven not only by the prevailing risk-adverse approach to governing play, but also by the individual play histories and backgrounds of the teachers and parents themselves, who often supervise the play.

It is crucial that schools, parents and community organisations work together to achieve positive outcomes for students. Students and parents also need to be educated that engaging in physical activity is a great way to have a healthy lifestyle whilst improving academic performance, mental health and wellbeing. Students need the opportunity to develop practices that will enable them to be life learners, particularly when it comes to physical activity, health education and wellbeing. From what they learn in school, students will develop autonomy and will hopefully encourage others, especially friends and family members to get out of their comfort zone and challenge themselves physically in a supportive and fun environment. This needs to be highlighted by creating the necessary awareness of what is required for all individuals to meet the daily physical activity guidelines to maintain their health and wellbeing. Schools, particularly teachers have an important role to play. Not only must they contribute to the education of students in conjunction with their parents, they need to be innovative in the way they design and provide school environments to learn, be active, play and have fun in, particularly as students get older and progress throughout the school years.

“We don’t stop playing because we grow old; We grow old because we stop playing” – George Bernard Shaw.

By improving the physical space that children play in, or by creating innovative and engaging areas from previously disused spaces around the school, students have a greater chance of engaging in physical activity with their peers. This is vital to the student’s physical and mental health and emotional wellbeing. Continuing to provide explicit education and support for parents and carers around the benefits of play and physical activity, good nutrition, regular sleep and sound mental health and wellbeing practices will further support school students. Providing activity sheets or check off sheets for families to complete over the weekend as a homework task or family challenge could also provide information and guidance on how different sport and recreational activities could benefit students, both physically and mentally. This could also involve engaging community partners and organisations to assist in the process, such as YMCAs or PCYCs.

“The lifelong success of children is based on their ability to be creative and to apply the lessons learned from playing” – American Academy of Paediatrics.

Despite the distinct differences and inequity across the variety of school sectors I witnessed during my research study, principals and teachers are still viewed as vitally important in their individual school settings when it comes to promoting physical activity and wellbeing practices amongst their students. They are responsible for setting the tone of the school and are vital in creating a positive school culture where students and teachers are supported, encouraged and celebrated to continually improve on a daily basis. Schools are encouraged to continue working with parents and community organisations, creating effective partnerships moving forward for the good of the students. By establishing strong bonds with local schools, positive and meaningful relationships can be formed to create greater collaboration. This will also be effective in the positive transition between primary and high school for students moving forward. The mental health and wellbeing of school students is extremely important. If they can be afforded similar opportunities across the different school sectors to play and participate in physical activity, they will ultimately have a much greater chance of achieving positive student outcomes as a result.

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