

Many schools are neglecting students' health and wellbeing, warn experts

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Many schools in England are neglecting – and may be actively harming - students' health and wellbeing, warn experts in an editorial published in *BMJ* today. Professor Chris Bonell at the Institute of Education and colleagues argue that education policy shouldn't focus solely on academic attainment.

Education policy in England "increasingly encourages schools to maximise students' academic attainment and ignore their broader wellbeing, [personal development](#), and [health](#)," they write.

They point out that personal, social, and health education (PSHE) remains a non-statutory subject, and argue that schools "spend less and less time teaching it because of pressure to focus on academic subjects."

They suggest that these developments are apparently underpinned by two ideas. Firstly, that more time spent on health and wellbeing results in less time for academic learning and therefore lower attainment. Secondly, that improving attainment is singularly crucial to increasing [economic competitiveness](#).

But they believe that both these ideas are "deeply flawed."

They point to a growing body of evidence suggesting that promoting students' broader wellbeing and development also benefits their academic learning.

Rigorous evaluations suggest that [school](#) programmes to improve students' health also benefit their attainment. And countries such as Finland, Sweden, Australia and Singapore - that all place greater emphasis on students' overall development and wellbeing - achieve better academic attainment than in England, they add.

Evidence also suggests that an effective labour force does not merely require [cognitive skills](#) gained from academic learning, they write. Non-cognitive skills such as resilience and team working skills are also needed, and productivity increases as workers' health status improves.

They warn that some schools not only neglect students' health but may actively harm it, by focusing on the more able students, and not engaging other students or recognising their efforts. Research also suggests that "teaching to the test," which commonly occurs in school systems with a narrow focus on attainment, can harm students' mental health.

"This all suggests that schools need to teach [students](#) not only academic knowledge and cognitive skills, but also the knowledge and skills they will need to promote their own mental and physical health, and successfully navigate the world of work," write the authors. They say this could be achieved by delivering programmes which have already been evaluated as effective.

Education policy could support health interventions "by making PSHE a statutory subject, by mandating school inspectors to report specifically on health and personal development, and requiring schools to deploy evidence based PSHE and health promoting interventions to achieve 'outstanding' status overall," they conclude.

More information: Editorial: Why schools should promote students' health and wellbeing, *BMJ*, 2014.

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