



The Bays Cluster schools got involved in World Character Day by making this video on a local beach.

# FROM SURVIVING TO THRIVING WITH POSITIVE EDUCATION

Positive Education is the umbrella term for wellbeing education and character development within a school context. As New Zealand representative of the International Positive Education Network, DR LUCY HONE explains what positive education looks like in schools. She also shares insights from the pilot scheme she's been running to implement 'Pos Ed' in five Christchurch primary schools this year.

**P**ositive Education brings together robust science from positive psychology with best practice teaching in order to support schools and individuals to flourish.

It's critical to understand that positive psychology isn't about 'thinking positively' or positive affirmations.

Rather, it concerns the theories and practices enabling individuals, teams, organisations such as schools, and even entire nations to go beyond surviving, to actually thriving.

While psychology was traditionally deficit based – focused on moving people from say, minus five back to par – positive psychology works to get people operating on the positive side of the mental health balance sheet, from minus two to plus three and beyond.

This is important.

As Martin Seligman, the field's founder, once said: "Traditional psychology wasn't designed to produce wellbeing, just to curtail misery. Same goes for Prozac: it may lift your depression but it won't make you happy. Wellbeing is a process over and above the absence of depression, anxiety and anger" (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

Now that we have around 20 years of positive psychology theory and empirical findings, we are well placed to pass on the fruits of that research to help promote healthy functioning.

If our goal is universal wellbeing promotion then it makes complete sense to disseminate these insights in schools where the environment is set up for learning.

That's the aim of positive education, to integrate scientifically validated practices from positive psychology throughout schools and their communities to build resilience, increase wellbeing and open pathways to community flourishing.

## PROMOTING WELLBEING

Wellbeing is now a hot topic both domestically and globally, as around the world people are recognising the tangible benefits of focusing on wellbeing.

Promoting wellbeing in schools is a worthy endeavour for a number of reasons. Firstly, given the escalating mental health problems among New Zealand youth it makes sense to teach students ways to promote and protect their own mental health while they are at school. While some businesses are now implementing evidence-based employee wellbeing programmes, these still operate randomly.

Teaching students the strategies and tools that protect against depression and anxiety has to be the most effective way to systematically address this crisis: only schools offer the opportunity for sustained universal wellbeing promotion, and they have far broader reach than a handful of pro-active companies or any other civic institution.

Secondly, wellbeing is vital for student success and is strongly linked to learning (Noble & Wyatt, 2008). A growing body of research now documents the benefits of cultivating wellbeing and character in students.

Of course, how children and young people feel and function at school has a major impact on how well they learn. In an education setting, improved levels of wellbeing have been shown to be associated with better academic results, higher levels of academic engagement and participation, higher retention rates, stronger social and emotional skills, higher levels of optimism, fewer symptoms of depression, a reduction in conduct problems and lower clinical levels of depression and anxiety (for a review see Robinson, 2016).

Fortunately, the application of positive education in schools around the world now provides something of an evidence-based roadmap informing best practice. Teaching wellbeing in addition to national priorities is not without its challenges, but the *New Zealand Curriculum* provides ample opportunity for promoting wellbeing in schools and research suggests that doing so is likely to contribute to lifting student achievement in priority areas.

Furthermore, a mandate for this work already exists in professional frameworks including The Code of Ethics for Registered Teachers, Registered Teacher



Criteria, the National Administration Guidelines, and United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Vulnerable Children Act.

Student wellbeing is not only an ethical and moral obligation for teachers, leaders and trustees, but also a legal responsibility (Education Review Office, 2013).

### A NEW PROJECT

At the start of this year I began work with five Christchurch primary schools on a Ministry of Education funded project.

The Bays Cluster Wellbeing programme presented a blank slate and incredible opportunity to test what positive education looks like in New Zealand schools.

A number of fundamental insights gleaned from my International Positive Education Network (IPEN) colleagues guided this process, such as the importance of placing the initial focus on staff wellbeing and PLD so that they became confident with key terms and practices, to measure wherever possible, to start slowly in order to reassure staff we weren't going to add to their burden, and to harness parent, staff and student voice wherever possible.

The first step was to appoint two Wellbeing Champions for each school (Mount Pleasant Primary, Heathcote Valley School, Redcliffs School, Sumner School and Our Lady Star of the Sea School).

These teachers were given classroom release time for professional learning and development in positive education. We came together as a cluster for two three-hour PLD sessions in the first term, then three hours per term thereafter.

We also took over the Bays Cluster combined staff meetings each term for full staff PLD on wellbeing

and character education, covering key terms and concepts. Each of the Wellbeing Champions also completed Coursera's Teaching Character and Creating Positive Classrooms certificate.

As a team we worked together to conduct a situation analysis of each school's existing wellbeing provision. By setting up a Google doc showing ERO's newly published Wellbeing Indicators, leaders and staff listed all the activities and initiatives their teams currently offer to promote ERO's nine indicators of wellbeing: belonging and connectedness; achievement and success; resilience; physically active, included; socially and emotionally competent; safe and secure; nurtured and cared for; confident in their identity. This process focused on students, staff, parents and the wider community and is a live document that has continued to evolve over the course of this year.

Next we surveyed staff wellbeing. While many schools currently use the Wellbeing@School teacher survey it evaluates schoolwide climate and practices, whereas we wanted to investigate staff's personal and collective wellbeing.

Employing the Assessment of Wellbeing in Education (AWE) evaluation tool we measured staff wellbeing across all five schools and within each school independently using both qualitative and quantitative methodology.

While AWE is a relatively new measure of staff wellbeing and has yet to be empirically validated, it comes from one of New Zealand's leading psychometric researchers, Dr Aaron Jarden, and offered us a number of advantages:

- » Operationalises the multidimensional nature of wellbeing, according to latest theoretical and empirical models of wellbeing.
- » Contains many empirically validated scales, such as the Flourishing Scale, for which published population norms for New Zealand workers are available.
- » Offers flexibility so we could choose (as a cluster) from a range of validated scales to match our specific needs.
- » Provides individual participants with immediate feedback in the form of an easy to read personal confidential report.
- » Provides whole-school reports using aggregated data.
- » Allowed me to request participant permission so I can use the data for publishing this research once we have year-on-year findings in 2017.

Later in the year we also surveyed student wellbeing, working as a team together to create a purpose-built online survey with questions taken from ERO's Wellbeing Indicators.

In terms of in-class resources we decided (in conjunction with the cluster's leadership team and the wellbeing champions) to limit our focus to two aspects of wellbeing promotion during this first year: systematic and evidence-based character education and an introduction to mindfulness.

While New Zealand schools have an admirable history of promoting school values these are often chosen based on their fit with an acronym relating to school culture.

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## Skylight's Travellers programme offers a range of supports for vulnerable young people, and aims to develop protective factors for those experiencing change, loss and transition events and early stages of emotional distress.

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**T**he programme offers selected students eight to ten 90 minute group sessions, run during class time. The sessions feature modules which are built around the metaphor 'Life is a Journey'.

Funded by the Ministry of Health as part of New Zealand's Suicide Prevention Strategy, the Travellers programme continues to expand throughout the country. Skylight launched Travellers in 2001 and it has now been introduced in over 220 New Zealand schools.

Today students face increasingly complex life situations and research indicates higher rates of emotional and mental health difficulties than in previous decades. Schools report growing numbers of students who are preoccupied by stress, anxiety, lack initiative, fear failure and deal with it poorly, and a lack of self-esteem that sabotages their ability to engage or learn.

Building student resilience helps tackle these challenges successfully because it develops the competence to adapt well in the face of adversity.

### Travellers assists schools to:

- understand the current emotional wellbeing, hauora, and health of students
- have unequalled, proven tools to identify vulnerable students who need resilience development

- provide targeted support or intervention for students who might otherwise go under the radar
- increase student engagement, connectedness and learning achievement

Skylight's Travellers programme uses the results of a short, confidential, online wellbeing survey, which all Year 9 students at a participating school complete. Over 100,000 students have taken the Wellbeing Survey since 2001, providing an incredibly rich data resource and incomparable insights into the lives of young New Zealand teens over the last 15 years.

### The data reveals the 5 major life events which consistently have the greatest impact:

- the death of someone close
- separation or divorce in the family
- loss of an important friendship
- illness of someone close
- moving from another country

Training for Travellers occurs in a two-day workshop, most often with school guidance counsellors but may include other pastoral care staff, such as year Deans, RTLBs, School Health Nurses and Youth Workers. The training is facilitated by Travellers staff from Skylight. Those who train in Travellers experience it as the students would, to offer them the best insights into running the programme.

### Guidance counsellors engage and empower Travellers students in small group settings to:

- Safely explore difficult change, loss and school transition experiences
- Develop personal resilience, support circles and new confidence
- Learn to navigate through difficult life situations in safe, adaptive ways
- Learn to manage thoughts, emotions and behavior
- Improve their learning outcomes and achievement at school

Skylight has always been committed to adapting, updating and improving elements of the programme to provide the best outcomes for students, schools and facilitators. Travellers' effectiveness is evaluated on a 3 year cycle and has undergone 4 independent evaluations, most recently in 2016 by the Collaborative Trust research group to explore short and medium term outcomes of the programme. They found that Travellers is an intervention that is helpful for students, with facilitators reporting increased confidence in students' ability to cope, deal with stress and anxiety, and express their views and feelings in front of others.

To learn more see [www.travellers.org.nz](http://www.travellers.org.nz) or contact Skylight: 0800 299 100 or [travellers@skylight.org.nz](mailto:travellers@skylight.org.nz)

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While not wanting to detract from the importance of school values, Positive Education advocates for a more systematic and scientific approach to character development.

Schools and society in general have long been interested in the cultivation of good character, but it wasn't until 55 distinguished scientists got together at the turn of the century that any scientific study into what 'character' is and how it can be promoted occurred. Following a three-year project in consultation with these scientists, Martin Seligman and Chris Peterson came up with a definition of character and a framework of 24 character strengths that were universally valued across cultures and demographics.

Their work enabled subsequent empirical research showing that intentionally applying these 24 strengths has significant positive consequences: using character strengths buffers against mental illness, predicts greater levels of wellbeing, improves relationships, enhances physical wellbeing, and even improves academic outcomes.

The Bays Cluster character education programme kicked off with all staff going online to take the VIA Survey of Character Strengths, a free scientific survey on character strengths that has been rigorously validated and used internationally. Once staff had identified their top five 'signature strengths' from the online test, these were shared, spawning interesting conversations about mutual character strengths and how individuals used them to promote wellbeing and resilience in their own lives.

As the VIA Youth survey is validated for identifying the character strengths profile among children over 10, all year 7 and 8 students also took the online test, which provided them the opportunity to identify individual and classroom strengths.

Using the VIA as an organisational framework allowed a shift in school culture from an implicit focus on students and staff strengths to embrace an explicit systematic and evidence-based approach. The VIA's 24 strengths are gradually becoming visible in all aspects of school operations and practices.

For example, across the cluster, application of any of the character strengths is recognised with classroom reward systems (jars are labeled with different strengths and used for 'strengths spotting'), assemblies are dedicated to single character strengths, new entrant parents are directed towards the VIA survey and asked to write a short biographical sketch highlighting their child's strengths, strengths provided a fresh angle for the year 7/8 annual debating competition ('my strengths are better than yours') and a brilliant Pinterest library showcasing books

personifying each of the 24 individual character strengths was created by Mt Pleasant librarian Tracey Hull.

This latter initiative provided an incredibly useful resource that can be accessed by all teachers, not just those at the Bays Cluster schools, allowing staff to quickly select an age-appropriate book to provide an easy entry point for discussing any of the 24 strengths (see [goo.gl/nZrrxm](http://goo.gl/nZrrxm)).

Feedback from staff suggested that the greatest value to come from using the VIA classification of 24 character strengths was twofold: firstly it provided a shared language around which to explore and promote character across and within the five schools; secondly it allowed all staff and students to spot and discuss positive resources/assets in every member of every classroom, broadening positive attention to all students. Teachers were supported to use deliberate acts of teaching to engage students to use their character strengths in the key competencies.

Mindfulness was introduced to the five Bays Cluster schools by my colleague John Quinn who ran several PLD sessions training the staff in mindfulness, paying particular attention to the benefits it offers student and staff wellbeing (including increased focus, decreased anxiety, engagement in learning, recognise and reduced stress, and restoring a sense of calm to the classroom).

For the duration of 2016 staff were supplied with resources and given the option to implement mindfulness in their classrooms, but from 2017 these schools are planning to use the MindUp mindfulness programme is going to be used in a more systematic fashion. MindUp is a teaching and learning framework aimed at increasing knowledge about the brain, providing resources for 'brain breaks' and mindfulness practices to help focus attention and regulate behaviour in the classroom.

### WHAT'S NEXT?

Having focused our attention on PLD and providing resources to promote character education and mindfulness in these schools in the first three terms of this year, we took the opportunity in term 4 to take stock and seek staff voice via a SWOT analysis of the programme so far.

This inquiry informs our plans for taking the programme forward in 2017, but we are looking to the implementation of MindUp to help systematically introduce the theory and findings of Carol Dweck's Growth Mindset work across all staff next year. We will be working with students and staff to remove any Americanisations from the character strengths language and resources and ensure that wellbeing is explicitly included in the overall goals and strategic

direction of each of the five schools, as well as regular team planning and evaluation.

One of the main strengths of the programme comes from the collaboration across the five local schools, providing the opportunity to share best-practice (a positive psychology validated intervention known as 'What went well?') on character education and mindfulness, achieved by once-a-term meetings that will continue to be dedicated to these important topics.

2017 will be a period of consolidation as the school leaders and Wellbeing Champions work towards embedding these practices to ensure wellbeing is promoted through effective and sustainable systems in these schools. This will of course involve an ongoing process of inquiry and evolution, but ultimately, we believe that looking after staff and student wellbeing will support every student to become a confident, connected, actively involved lifelong learner. ★

*Dr Lucy Hone, a research associate at AUT University, represents New Zealand in the International Positive Education Network. [www.ipositive-education.net](http://www.ipositive-education.net). She is presenting at NZ's Inaugural Positive Education conference on Friday 10th March 2017 (see <http://positiveeducation.nz/pec17>)*

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### SUPPORTING STUDENT WELLBEING SPARX

Funded by the Ministry of Health, SPARX is therapy in the format of an online game and aims to help young people struggling with difficult emotions.

SPARX is a clinically tested, evidence based online game targeted at 12 – 19 year olds (but can be of interest to younger students also) and is designed to help them feel better.

The game uses cognitive behavioural therapy to help young people change how they think about things and how they behave which leads to improvements in how they feel.

#### Passion Arena

Passion Arena is a programme that aims to support

schools to deliver 'non-cognitive skills' such as academic behaviours (attending and participating), perseverance (grit and self-discipline), mindset (feeling a sense of belonging within an academic community and believing that ability and competence can grow with effort), learning strategies and social skills.

This online programme breaks down these skills into short (5-7 minute) videos, each introducing a single concept. Students then answer some simple questions to help put a personal context around the idea they've just been introduced to, and parent and teacher resources are also included.

While Passion Arena has only recently launched, it is already being trialled in two prominent Auckland schools and is receiving positive feedback.

### Travellers programme

Skylight's Travellers programme offers support for vulnerable young people. Funded by the Ministry of Health as part of New Zealand's Suicide Prevention Strategy, Skylight operates resilience programmes for young people as a not-for-profit, charitable trust.

The Travellers programme uses the results of a short, confidential online wellbeing survey to assess students' personal concerns. The data provides a snapshot of the wellbeing of the student cohort and enables targeted support.

To date, more than 100,000 students have completed the wellbeing survey since 2001 and it has provided incomparable insights into the lives of young New Zealand teens.