

Why are we not taking happiness seriously?

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A recent Washington Post article highlighted the increasingly depressive nature of schooling as a child grows older. Measuring 4th and 8th graders, the study asked if students were happy at school. In 4th grade, 49% of students were happy “all or most of the time”, compared to 26% of 8th graders. Both numbers are staggering. Although a similar test has not occurred for high schoolers, it can be easily hypothesized that this number continues to dwindle.



Where's the alarm bells? Why is there no national call-to-arms for every educator to solve this problem? *Why do our school systems value standardized test scores, GPAs, and attendance ratings over happiness?* Perhaps it's because social and emotional well-being are not taken as seriously as they should be.

Oftentimes, practicing mindfulness in school is seen as hippie-ish. It's not real school. You know, the school that you went to when you were younger. “I turned out just fine!” Incorporating relaxation techniques,

reflecting on one’s life, de-stressing — how could this possibly fit into rigorous academic instruction? It should be a no-brainer: if students are happy, they’ll learn more. However, we don’t need a quantitative research study to prove this. In fact, the act of seeking one out shows us how systemically inclined education has become. We should — hopefully — simply want *children to be happy*, even if mindfulness practices do correlate with increased performance.

Perhaps it’s because happiness is subjective? How do you measure well-being? How would you even address these needs? In any case, all the things we do in school are subjective. We may take precautions to ensure that grading or testing is without bias, but we know this is not the case. Imagine what the educational landscape would look like if happiness was a major factor on a school’s report card? Not only would classrooms feature more focus on community building, relationships, and tolerance — but schools would need to reach out to families and become more active in their local communities — as happiness isn’t just a school issue.

DISTRICT NAME	INDICATORS MET GRADE	PERFORMANCE INDEX SCORE GRADE	4-YEAR GRADUATION RATE GRADE	5-YEAR GRADUATION RATE GRADE	OVERALL VALUE-ADDED GRADE	GIFTED VALUE-ADDED GRADE	LOWEST 20% VALUE-ADDED GRADE	SWD VALUE-ADDED GRADE	AMO GRADE	K-3 LITERACY IMPROVEMENT GRADE	ACHIEVEMENT COMPONENT GRADE	GRADUATION COMPONENT GRADE	PROGRESS COMPONENT GRADE	GAP CLOSING COMPONENT GRADE	K-3 LITERACY COMPONENT GRADE	PREPARED FOR SUCCESS GRADE
Columbus City	F	D	F	D	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	D
South-Western City	F	D	C	C	F	F	F	F	F	F	D	C	F	F	F	D
Olentangy Local	A	B	A	A	F	F	F	F	C	NR	B	A	F	C	NR	B
Hilliard City	F	C	A	A	F	F	A	D	F	D	C	A	D	F	D	C
Westerville City	F	C	C	B	F	B	D	F	F	F	C	B	D	F	F	C
Dublin City	B	B	A	A	F	D	C	F	F	C	B	A	D	F	C	B
Pickerington Local	D	C	A	A	F	F	C	D	F	D	C	A	D	F	D	C
Worthington City	D	C	A	A	A	A	B	A	F	D	C	A	A	F	D	C
Gahanna-Jefferson City	D	C	A	A	A	A	A	C	F	D	C	A	B	F	D	C

School rankings in Columbus, OH. What’s missing? What’s wrong?

That being said, there’s many flaws in this system: won’t low-income schools face tougher situations? Access to healthcare, healthy food sources, safe environments, and other necessities to a well-off life aren’t present. Of course, this is already going on in the educational field. Embracing a mindset of this nature requires all hands on deck: the government need to support communities that need it most, teachers need to be trained on mindfulness practice, students need to embrace positive mindsets and develop an affirming school culture.

One step *any teacher* can take is ensuring that students are happy in their classroom. Most teacher training programs rarely speak of this, instead it’s “how do you know students are learning?” — “how can you make a great

hook to draw kids into the lesson?” — “how are you differentiating for all learners?” Where is the focus on deep, emotional and social well-being? We can mask our lessons well and perhaps engage for a day, but real change involves a solidified focus on mindfulness.

None of this is rocket science, it just requires time — a resource most teachers are unwilling or hesitant on giving up. However, it is necessary — much more so than any content piece. Who cares if kids can solve algebraic equations if they’re miserable?

- Allow students to share their feelings in comfortable, safe environment.
- Let breaks occur often. Trust students to do the right thing.
- Don’t make assumptions of kids based off their behavior. Avoid labelling.
- Stop acting like you’re entitled or “an overlord” as a teacher.
- Actually teach mindfulness: how does one relax? why should we?
- Practice mindfulness yourself. Do what you preach.
- Design lessons and invite questions on real issues. Don’t limit instruction to standardized practice.
- Develop authentic relationships with students and reach out to *all students*. Have blocked time for students to reach out to you.
- Don’t think that games and fun have no place in school. In fact, why not just play a game today? “Fun” shouldn’t be reserved for the beginning and end of the school year.
- Constantly invent new ways for students to develop their school community, and emphasize a vision of a positive environment.



And this problem goes much deeper. From 2005 to 2014, reports of a depressive mood that lasts longer than 2 weeks among teenagers rose 37%. 30% of girls and 20% of boys have had an anxiety disorder. In 2015, the suicide rate among teenage girls hit a 40-year high. Report after report demonstrates how anxious — how dissatisfied — how angry — how depressed many of our students are. (Edit: Since writing, I was contacted by Jenn Miller who shared this fantastic personal story from Ashley Santangelo on how mental health affects the teenage brain.) It has nothing to do with grades or engaging lessons. It doesn't have to do with just bullying or just social media obsession. It's not only "13 Reasons Why" or a perceived attractiveness to those labelled or seeking help.

We, as a society, have very little to no actual focus on a child's well-being. There may be recommendations, teachers may be commemorated for their relationships with kids, some schools may offer mindfulness PD, but where is the accountability on happiness? Where is the massive influx of corporate-minded companies offering training and workshops for positive student behavior? Where's the report on a student's well-being at their school? This is more than standardized testing — it's more than academic futures — and it's more than "getting a job." This is a deep, underlying issue that questions the humanity of education. We need to organize, express, and preach why our kids need help. It's the only way this problem will diminish.