

# How does the science of wellbeing inform an education strategy across the life course?

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## Introduction

Under a life satisfaction lens, the purpose of educating children should be to produce **happy children and happy future adults**, and to benefit society more broadly through spillover effects.

Moreover, investment in education does not stop with children. Research on a number of fronts, including the science of happiness, gives us reason to expand and revise our investments in education.

The sections below link wellbeing interventions for **primary school through to retirement**. In all cases, **non-cognitive skills** like understanding and managing emotions, goal-setting, building lasting and positive relationships, empathy, love, ethics, problem-solving, management, leadership, child-rearing, intimate relationships, mental hygiene, mental first-aid, and self-care play an important role.

The scope of the effort needed **transcends jurisdictional boundaries**.

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different stages (career progression; retirement)

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## The world has changed

Why might we require a re-think about “education” in Canada?

1. Static skills are insufficient; lifelong training is essential; industrial transformations lie ahead
2. Policy objectives are shifting towards wellbeing
3. Longer lifespan requires new life skills at

## Does education matter for wellbeing?

Most studies of education have focused on test scores as the outcome, rather than wellbeing.

Interestingly, estimates of the effect of each extra year of schooling on an individual's later wellbeing (life satisfaction) often come out to near *zero* after other outcomes like income are taken into account (Clark et al., 2019, pp. 51–59), and sometimes even when everything is taken into account!

There are other reasons than individual benefits (i.e., more rational civic participants; less crime; higher productivity, which funds public goods; etc) to pursue education policy, but maybe studies focused on the value of an extra year (quantity of education) are missing the point.

To add further mystery, class size appears to have no effect on scholastic outcomes (Clark et al., 2019, p. 190). Neither do the normal measurable characteristics and qualifications of teachers!

Yet studies reliably show that *which teacher* a primary school student ends up with *does* make a large difference in their outcomes. Moreover, the impact of individual teachers on the **emotional health of children** is larger than the impact on performance in cognitive outcomes like math. The critical difference across teachers may be in the attitudes and non-cognitive skills they impart.

In addition, **impacts on behaviour and emotional health endure over time**, and help academic performance, while the direct effect of an individual teacher on math skills fades quickly.

In summary, teaching non-cognitive (social and emotional) skills to students has immediate and lasting benefits. These benefits are established for wellbeing but they also, astonishingly, benefit subsequent test score outcomes as well, and more so than any intervention specifically targeting cognitive measures.

## Action for Happiness school toolkit

The [Keys to Happier Living Toolkit](#) for teachers comes in versions for ages 5–7 and 7–11. These are evidence-based programmes to promote the emotional wellbeing and resilience of children. They give children the chance to think about the things they can do in their everyday life to improve their own and others' lives. This is the low-investment end of the intervention spectrum, focusing only on the children involved.

## Positive Education

This is a formal but highly adaptive and context-dependent wellbeing framework for transforming educational environments to promote wellbeing as a buildable life-long resource (Seligman and Adler, 2019). Seligman, Ernst, et al. (2009) “speculate that **positive education will form the basis of a ‘new prosperity’**, a politics that values both wealth and well-being.”

Examples from the many implementations around the world include the University of Adelaide's teacher education program, which by 2024 will have graduated 750 teachers who will reach over 90,000 students. Another example is from the Bhutanese Ministry of Education, where ten non-academic “life skills” are taught over 15 months for secondary students: mindfulness, empathy, self-awareness, coping with emotions, communication, relationships, creative thinking, critical thinking, decision making, and problem solving.

Experience shows a strong link between **teachers' wellbeing** and the success and satisfaction of students. The implementation of new curricula takes time and starts out focused on teachers. It works best with a whole-school approach, multi-stakeholder engagement, local cultural adaptation, and measurement of outcomes.

When outcomes are measured, they tend to be extraordinarily positive for standardized test

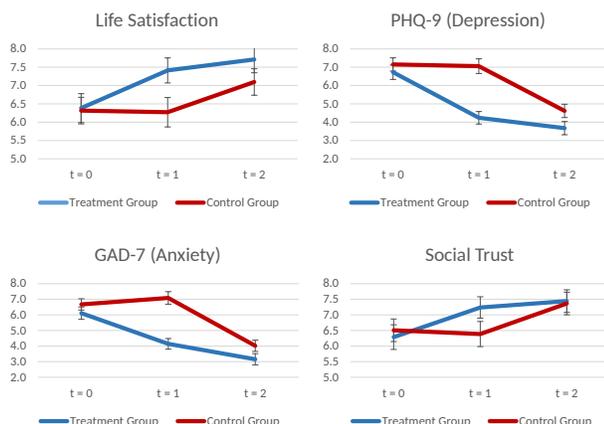
scores (cognitive skills), reduction of risky behaviour, and physical health in adulthood, in addition to improvements in the targeted social and emotional outcomes.

## Other schooling initiatives

Numerous other programmes exist in this space (e.g. [toolboxproject.com](http://toolboxproject.com)), even though good measurement of the outcomes and controlled experimentation of the interventions are rare. Notable is a recent “Healthy Minds” intervention in high schools (Lordan and McGuire, 2019). A good review of the evidence is forthcoming.

## Community randomized controlled trial

In a remarkable RCT, community volunteers taught Action For Happiness’s “Exploring What Matters” 8-session course to groups from the general population (implementation cost £90/pp). The course taught a range of non-cognitive social/emotional skills (habits, skills, attitudes) as well as sharing evidence from the science of wellbeing. Impacts on each of the ONS4 subjective wellbeing measures, as well as on mental health and pro-sociality (compassion, trust, etc) were large and significant. For instance, the effect on life satisfaction was akin to that associated with a 10× increase in income.



Treatment Group was treated between  $t=0$  and

$t=1$ ; Control Group was treated between  $t=1$  and  $t=2$  (Krekel et al., 2020).

## Opportunities throughout the life course

We already intervene with “expensive” guidance and nudges in many ways, such as RRSPs and free schooling (which likely save public money in the long run, besides improving lives). Who will provide equitably accessible, reliable, evidence-based advice to each generation on:

- Marriage and long-term relationships
- Saving
- Parenting
- Management skills and workplace relationships
- Retraining, career transitions
- Civic engagement and organising
- Retirement
- Eldercare
- ...

Thorough, formal education in these could go far to reduce inequalities and inter-generational transmission. Note that they also help those who are doing well, as well as those who are not.

## Conclusion

Re-inventing our approach to education

1. must embrace the full implications of aiming to improve individuals’ wellbeing and their ability to contribute to others’;
2. implicates all levels of government, leveraging community workshops, public health infrastructure, labour market institutions, and so on;
3. builds a life-long approach to self-improvement and wellbeing;
4. is already well supported by evidence.

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# Other briefs in this series

**BRIEFING NOTE** (V. 2020-08-27, CLICK HERE FOR LATEST VERSION) 1

**What would a pan-jurisdictional wellbeing-budgeting framework look like?**

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July 2020

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**Introduction**

Wellbeing budgeting is attractive because it promises to be able to integrate accounting of benefits, and link decisions, across agencies and also across jurisdictions. A notable conception of human wellbeing, rooted in individual experience, aims at changing its meaning according to which jurisdiction is asked. In the end it does not matter for wellbeing which jurisdiction was responsible for a positive change. Such differently wellbeing outcomes of policy can eventually be tracked across jurisdictions, as well as across traditional thematic domains of policy.

In addition: (a) Capacity and resources can be tracked across jurisdictions, as well as across traditional thematic domains of policy. (b) The ability to compare and benchmark with peer jurisdictions and provinces is an important feature when building measurement frameworks. (c) Learning each local government to research and derive its own framework, when there would be the end play of community, would be a costly inefficiency. And (d) no local jurisdiction can generate enough evidence or expertise to provide it with the best knowledge on how policies will affect wellbeing, having some consistent indicators across the country provides a common evidence base for wellbeing budgeting.

All this is to say that the shared responsibility and funding for many factors influencing wellbeing make collaboration, coordination and even a shared vision important. An ideal wellbeing budgeting framework in Canada would be designed to serve all jurisdictions, while allowing local governments to choose the extent to which they adopt common measures or adjust to their own context. Therefore, any ideally-designed framework should go beyond federal government's needs, in order that it can offer all jurisdictions a toolkit (or several) for national measurement, and a toolkit for decision making.

This note outlines some suggested features of an integrative wellbeing budgeting framework. It also emphasizes why asking which suggests wellbeing relates to a given level of government is important. And it suggests how to use a wellbeing dashboard.

**Desirable features**

- 1. Separation of domains of expertise (and supports of wellbeing) from policy areas.
- 2. Ability of indicators of wellbeing to be expressed at different geographic scales.
- 3. Peer comparability: some commonality in measures across regions.
- 4. Common evidence base for choosing wellbeing reporting policy: local regions can leverage expertise elsewhere.
- 5. Integration and synergy of accounting of public benefits across jurisdictions.

**BRIEFING NOTE** (V. 2021-01-27, CLICK HERE FOR LATEST VERSION) 1

**Integrating a wellbeing budgeting framework with existing priorities and commitments**

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**Introduction**

Aligning policy under an overall quality of life framework is attractive for several reasons. It should help to correct long-standing policy bias towards a market growth orientation. It may help to align work across agencies and to build more integrated policies. It should help to communicate government's ultimate goals and its accountability to its constituents of Canadians.

Objective measures can inform us about levels of income and employment and housing in a society, but they can never tell us what it feels like to be poor or rich, to be unemployed or underemployed, to have no private space, or to be alone in a house. By going elsewhere by visiting offices across departments and agencies, a life satisfaction approach is likely, first of all, to respond and engage outcomes-based policy-making in terms of existing objectives measurable, its ultimate promise is that it can provide both intuitive meaning and analytic valuation to any series of objective goals.

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- 5. Net-Zero Carbon Strategy
- 6. Health in All Policies
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**SDGs**

The SDGs and their measurement framework as a set of goals, like those to look, with an intended way to prioritize across them. Nevertheless, the task to create an index which combines all of these goals presents policy makers with a daunting task.

There is a tendency to create indices of progress or wellbeing which combine multiple, disparate outcomes with arbitrary arbitrary weights, leaving their underlying open society, even after attracting initial public and political attention. Worse, such indices often combine, i.e., add together, measures related to human experience with measures related to ecological limits. An example is the single (arbitrary) index created to track the highly influential U.N. Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in a sum of 170 indicators, all treated as equally important, which cover the disparate ideas captured by the SDGs. On the last and last (2023) note.

**BRIEFING NOTE** (V. 2021-09-27, CLICK HERE FOR LATEST VERSION) 1

**Has COVID changed everything? Opportunities and priorities in the pandemic and RECOVERY**

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**Introduction**

What decision, cautious governments when it comes to COVID-19?

- How to trade off among income, unemployment, mental health, physical health, public confidence, and other factors? "What price should we assign to lives?"
- How to balance the wellbeing of different groups, including young and old, health workers and others?
- How to act on the face of uncertainty? and how to evaluate costs now and costs over the next decade?
- How to weigh death versus quality of life?

While the stakes are enormous and the uncertainties bounding, this crisis in some sense presents a perfect example of the value of a life satisfaction framework which can integrate the expert priorities of epidemiologists, macroeconomists, and others.

This document has some starting thoughts for reflection on wellbeing budgeting in the (post-)pandemic context, but it is short on prescriptions.

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- 1. What's been learned?
- 2. Costs in terms of wellbeing
- 3. Data
- 4. Death
- 5. We are social beings
- 6. Non-cognitive skills
- 7. Decisions: necessary

**What's been learned?**

There may be new broad public awareness on issues such as:

- What matters:** People may generally have new reflections on what matters most in life, who was missing during the pandemic, what is essential.
- Disparities:** suffering has varied based on traditional predictors of disadvantage. The following have been publicly highlighted: ability to distance at work; ability to work from home; security of employment; pre-existing health; access to healthcare; housing security; housing density; violence at home.

**BRIEFING NOTE** (V. 2022-05-27, CLICK HERE FOR LATEST VERSION) 1

**How can sustainability enter a budgeting framework for human wellbeing?**

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**Introduction**

Facing a choice of "the economy or the environment" is a notorious false dichotomy. It is politically divisive and represents a debilitating source of cognitive dissonance for the general public. Facing our options as separate choices is, naturally, misleading. Regardless of the true trade-offs, humans need a positive vision of the future to liberate our most proactive, creative, analytic, empathetic, open, and prosocial selves.

Fortunately, insights about human wellbeing provide for future trajectories which are both positive and feasible (Barrington-Leigh 2021). Nevertheless, these potential benefits of a life satisfaction framework can be lost when resources of progress take on conflicting goals, undermining our ability to advocate for other wellbeing or sustainability.

A key challenge is that uncertainty about long term outcomes can overwhelm decision processes in the short term. Calculating or articulating budget tradeoffs between near-term benefits and the most uncertain (likely) and long-run outcomes is doomed to fail when it is not possible to precisely quantify the true side of the equation. Bringing such issues together presents productive resource allocation from happening in the present, largely by collating objective and dividing resources.

This note outlines some prominent approaches to conceptualize sustainable wellbeing and some related associated public, I advocate for keeping the notion of wellbeing, and its practical application, separate from a historical approach to ecological constraints. This framework focuses on promoting the compelling objectives of wellbeing, while separating out the more prescriptive long-run constraints. More (non-technical) detail is available in a 25-page paper.

**Why life satisfaction?**

Traditional macroeconomic indicators like growth rate, inflation, or unemployment. Low life satisfaction is associated with energy towards the policies in the first Trump election and with energy going to France.

Based on what is known about the determinants of life satisfaction, it seems feasible to engineer a society with high life satisfaction but which is running down the resources left for future generations. If government policy is to shift towards an accountability to human wellbeing, how do we incorporate ecological health and sustainability into our objectives?

**BRIEFING NOTE** (V. 2022-01-29, CLICK HERE FOR LATEST VERSION) 1

**How does the science of wellbeing inform an education strategy across the life course?**

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**Introduction**

Under a life-course lens, the purpose of educating children should be to produce happy children and happy future adults, and to benefit society more broadly through spillover effects.

However, investment in education from birth may yield children, through a number of factors, including the science of happiness, given an intention to respond and receive our investments in education.

The science behind life wellbeing encompasses to primary school through to retirement. In all cases, more cognitive skills like understanding and managing emotions, goal-setting, building lasting and positive relationships, empathy, love, ethics, problem-solving, management, leadership, citizenship, intimate relationships, mental hygiene, mental first-aid, and self-care play an important role.

The scope of the effect needed transcends jurisdictional boundaries.

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**The world has changed**

Why might we require a rethink about "education" in Canada?

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- 2. Policy objectives are shifting towards wellbeing
- 3. Longer lifespan requires new life skills at

different stages (career progression, retirement)

- 4. Value of social and emotional skills in workplace, now better understood
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