Improving Student Outcomes with Real-Time Wellbeing Check-Ins

How to identify and support students in need. Provide students with a safe and accessible way to reach out for help.

Linewize
by Qoria

Introduction

There has never been a more important time in history to support the mental health of our students.

A study revealed that one out of every six children has a mental health disorder, like anxiety or depression.

In the state of Iowa, 14% of children had experienced a depressive episode, but only 31% of those children had received any mental health care to help them cope.

This is true across the United States and becoming a worldwide problem. Caring for young people's mental health hasn't kept pace with the increases in their struggles. Over the last two decades, the suicide rate for young people ages 10 to 24 has increased by more than 50%. At the same time, 70% of students who need mental health services will never receive them.

Certainly, teachers and administrators want students to have positive mental health and wellbeing in general. But a negative outlook on life also affects students' learning outcomes. Many studies have proven a high correlation between student outcomes and wellbeing.

For instance, students who are anxious or depressed are three times more likely to be absent from school than their peers. Mental health issues also influence self-confidence and concentration, which in turn, can impact success in school.

One of the reasons it can be difficult to help students with mental health struggles in schools is that educators don't always know the extent of the problem, let alone each student's individual concerns. Large-scale surveys are not enough to fully monitor students' mental wellness. Many schools only track students' wellbeing once or twice a year, a check-in that's so infrequent, it doesn't allow for administrators to initiate interventions that can affect student outcomes and wellbeing more immediately.

Regular check-ins are important to ensure students' continued success in school. In this guide, we explain why students' wellbeing has such a close connection to their learning and life outcomes. We also go over how annual surveys that measure wellbeing are not efficient in changing a school culture that could hinder students' mental health. Finally, we discuss how Linewize's Pulse, an app that asks students to assess their mental wellness each week, can help you build support networks for students that immediately address their concerns.

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What is Wellbeing?

"Wellbeing" can be a catch-all term to describe several states of being. It may seem difficult to measure wellbeing **because it can be rather conceptual.**

Research firm Gallup explains how they've made wellbeing "relevant and measurable" in their own surveys:

The idea of wellbeing is used frequently as a synonym for ideas like "mental health," "work-life balance" or "wellness." "Wellness" traditionally focuses on a limited scope of physical and emotional health, and although we can see the effects of mental health and a well-balanced work-life relationship on overall wellbeing, they are not the same. Conceptualizing wellbeing in a way that feels both relevant and measurable starts with looking at what people need to thrive in their lives.

Gallup set out to measure wellbeing in education by identifying five key qualities in "well" young people: purpose, or enjoyment of life on a regular basis; social development, or connection to the people around them; financial safety, or the security to meet needs; community, or a sense of belonging at a school or in a community; and physical safety, or bodily wellness.

The Programme for International Student Assessment echoes Gallup's sentiment in defining wellbeing:

"Students' wellbeing refers to the psychological, cognitive, social and physical functioning and capabilities that students need to live a happy and fulfilling life."

The Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth takes a similar approach in its framework. Gallup also draws a connection between wellbeing and engagement. Engaged students are involved at school and feel a sense of belonging there.

They are also skilled in social-emotional learning, or the ability to manage their emotions and make connections with others. All these qualities give engaged students a hope for the future that their disengaged peers often lack.

"Wellness traditionally focuses on a limited scope of physical and emotional health..."

Why Do Today's Students Have Less Positive Mental Health?

As previously noted, students today have more serious mental health challenges than their peers in earlier generations did. These young people may be struggling with their mental health for various reasons, including that they experienced a traumatic event—like divorce, the loss of a loved one, abuse, or other stressors—before the age of eighteen.

Accordingly, there has been an increased demand for in-school mental health responses that has largely gone unmet in the United States. In K-12 settings, students are twenty-one times more likely to meet with a mental health counselor at their schools, but the counselor/student ratio isn't keeping pace. In American schools, the average is one counselor to 482 students, making it nearly impossible for that one individual to check in on every student's individual needs.

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Approximately **72% of children** in the United States have or will have experience a traumatic event."

Why Does Mental Health Impact Learning Outcomes?

Poor mental health **affects students' success** in school in several ways.

The Child Mind Institute notes the risk factors associated with poor mental health, including:

- Children are 89% more likely to be expelled in pre-kindergarten if they're in classrooms without access to psychologists or psychiatrists.

- In special education classrooms, 64% of students with emotional disturbances were expelled.

- If children had "emotional disturbances," they dropped out of school at a rate of 38.7%; compare this to an average dropout rate of only 7%.

If a student drops out of school, then their future is much bleaker than it would otherwise be.

Mental health issues and dropping out of school both make students more likely to abuse illegal substances, participate in criminal activity, or commit suicide. These aren't factors that only older children and teens face either. Mental health issues can start as early as infancy in some children.

Many students are unable to perform well in the classroom because of the untreated trauma that they've experienced and how it influences their participation in the classroom. Trauma can be exacerbated by the commonplace occurrence of teachers sending a disruptive student out of the classroom. Armeda Wojciak, assistant professor in couple and family therapy at the University of Iowa, explains this cycle:

If a child is dysregulated, they are not going to be in the thinking part of the brain which is associated with learning, that means that they are sitting in class and aren't able to encode that information.

With children that have experienced trauma, the working memory can be impaired and they can have difficulty with recall.

Classroom engagement matters too. Engaged students are more likely to earn higher grades. As previously noted, Gallup connects wellbeing with engagement. Engaged students are two-and-a-half times more likely to earn high grades than their less-engaged peers.

How Can Students' Mental Health Be Improved?

The reality of students' mental health issues and the academic benefits of engaged students is clear. **But how can schools make a difference in students' wellbeing?**

The National Association of School Psychologists provides a few ideas:

- Offer mental health services for students who are not in special education and don't meet "disability" requirements.

- School psychologists cannot meet the needs of students on their own. They also need connections to community mental health agencies. As NASP notes, "The reality is that, to improve our system of mental health services, neither sector can afford to go it alone. Both are necessary elements of the continuum of mental health care and must work in concert."

- Build partnerships with families so they can monitor their students' mental health and connect them with resources. Families shouldn't have to go through specific channels to promote student outcomes and wellbeing.

- Create multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS).

These programs connect with all students, not just those who have already been diagnosed with mental health concerns. For instance, NASP recommends implementing both programs for social-emotional learning and universal screenings for mental health problems.

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration elaborates on the value that MTSS can provide in improving students' mental health outcomes:

MTSS can serve as the framework to provide universal programs to help all students develop critical social and emotional skills, as well as provide school-wide approaches to teach appropriate behavioral skills and manage problem behaviors.

MTSS also includes the provision of "targeted" services for students displaying the emergence of problematic behaviors and emotions, as well as "intensive" services for students with chronic psychological issues or maladaptive behaviors. Effective elements of MTSS include the use of student data to screen for "risk" or the potential development of social, emotional, and behavioral problems.

Problems With Annual Wellness Checks

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) noted that social and emotional issues were the most significant factors influencing students' performance in schools. Superintendents across the United States agreed, noting that students' "behavioral health needs" were their top priority.

Despite this understanding, a breakdown in students' ability to connect with services that could improve their wellbeing still happens somewhere.

Specifically, around 70% of students who could benefit from mental health services will never receive them.

Mentally-unwell students face not only the risks of dropping out but also the lifelong risk factors described previously. Some students are only discovered to have mental health issues when they start exhibiting negative behaviors or their grades drop. Schools may overly rely on teacher "nominations" to connect students with mental health support.

However, the National Alliance on Mental Illness recommends universal health screening to identify students who may need support, regardless of if they are exhibiting problematic behavior. These proactive screenings differ from a "reactive, wait-to-fail" model that only connects students to services if they are already struggling.

Many schools use infrequent school-wide mental health checks to determine students' social and emotional wellbeing. But the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration suggests that this data collection is too infrequent to provide the timely interventions that students need: "Early identification of risk factors or signs of adjustment difficulties provide an opportunity to intervene before problems develop into more significant and costly impairments. Unfortunately, signs are often ignored and not met with supports for the child."

Regular mental health screenings can provide support for students who need it more immediately. Less-frequent ones are better than the reactive approach described above but may still miss many students.

Here are the benefits of more frequent mental health screenings:

- Around 20% of students may have mental health issues in a given year. These issues may increase in between annual campus screenings. Early intervention is important so mental health issues don't worsen.

- Teachers, administrators, and staff can address problems immediately, rather than wait for the results from the survey. For instance, the National Center for School Mental Health (NCSMH) notes, "If screening reveals high levels of student stress and anxiety, teaching coping skills to help reduce anxiety may be a helpful strategy to implement in classrooms. Screening with follow-up support can also detect and address student mental health problems early before they escalate." With infrequent mental health screenings, the ability to mobilize data into actionable programs can take too long to meet student needs.

- There can be a sense of shame surrounding mental health issues on a school-wide basis. NCSMH notes that regularly asking all students about their mental health can reduce the "stigma around asking youth about mental health within the school setting."

Creating More Frequent and Automated Check-Ins

In responding to the COVID-19 quarantine, teacher Cathleen Beachboard recommends more frequent check-ins with students. In her online classes, she checks in with students regularly, asking them questions about the most positive part of their days and then offering them choices to describe how they're feeling, like, "I'm great," "I'm okay," "I'm struggling," or "I'm having a hard time and would like a check-in."

Beachboard's strategy is an effective one on a small teacher-to-teacher scale. However, school leaders need to deploy a standard, unified strategy so no students fall through the cracks. Linewize Pulse allows students to check in once a week. These short, sixty-second check-ins can scale Beachboard's classroom check-ins to the point of engaging every student at the school, using technology that they can usually access: their phones.

These check-ins have pre-selected answers that let students rate their mental wellness or reach out for help, as necessary.

Linewize wanted to give schools a tool to efficiently check in with students about their mental health. Teachers needed a way to connect with students that was private and didn't take up their class time for the day. So, Linewize created Pulse, which acquires feedback about students more regularly than a once- or twice-a-year survey about their wellbeing and engagement at school.

Each week, students can check in with Linewize Pulse about how they're feeling, answering four questions about their engagement. The check-in isn't burdensome and doesn't take more than sixty seconds for students to complete, so teachers don't have to worry about losing valuable class time.

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You would like to ask **Carol Counsellor** for help.
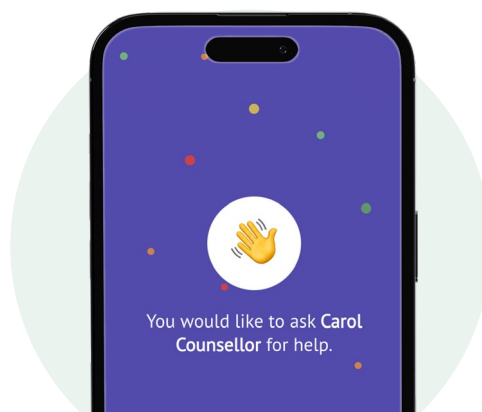
With a simple touch of a button, they can connect to a teacher or other trusted adult at their school any time that they're struggling with their mental health.

Furthermore, students know that reaching out to trusted adults on the platform will generate action.
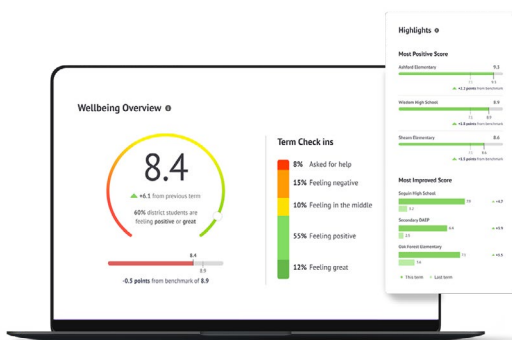
Why Linewize Pulse Works

This method not only helps individual students, but it also gives teachers and administrators data about students' mental wellness in their classrooms and campuses. Campus leaders can then use this data to **design programs that meet students' current needs**, rather than their hypothetical needs.

Too many campus leaders still rely on traditional once- or twice-yearly campus-wide mental health assessments. Dr. Joe Thurbon, Linewize's CTO, explains why the data traditionally collected by schools can be almost valueless: "Transforming a school into a 'healthy school' is implicit in the ubiquitous 'School Improvement Plan' but the data principals have is often incomplete, difficult to obtain, or out-of-date. Take for example measuring engagement and wellbeing of staff and students. It should not just be a once a year survey." So, why do these infrequent mental health assessments continue?

Part of the reason is how much time that these assessments would historically take. It was also difficult to create surveys that were both customized and comprehensive enough to be part of a formative assessment. But now, mental health assessment can take much less time because of the ubiquity of smartphones. The National Institute of Mental Health extols how useful technology can be in the regular tracking of mental health concerns: "Mobile mental health support can be amazingly simple but effective.
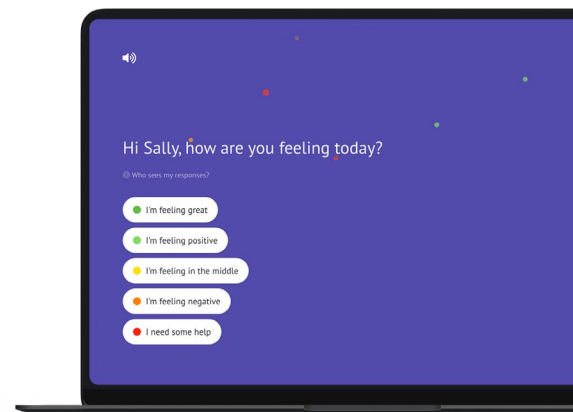
For example, anyone with the ability to send a text message can contact a crisis center. New technology can also be packaged into an extremely sophisticated app for smartphones or tablets. Such apps might use the device's built-in sensors to collect information on a user's typical behavior patterns."

"Linewize believes that transforming the measurement of school health into something that is frequent, familiar and formative will lead to a radical improvement in outcomes and assist principals in transforming their school," Dr. Thurbon continues. With Pulse, schools can have an idea about their campus climate and track it as it changes over time. Pulse offers the ability for leaders to keep tabs on at-risk individuals over time and helps them track demographics and other risk factors by aggregating this data. This way, leaders can be better informed about what programs to fund and where to intervene. After new initiatives are in place, Pulse also gives leaders the ability to track the results of these measures.

"It measures your school's overall health—the wellbeing and engagement of your students, staff, and parents. And like all of our programs, it is safe, simple, and easy to use," says Dr. Thurbon.

Student Engagement With Linewize Pulse

Of course, none of this data would matter if student engagement with Linewize Pulse wasn't high. Pulse was designed so that students would feel comfortable using the app. Two-thirds of teens have access to internet-connected devices like smartphones and spend an average of nine hours a day online outside of their homework. Checking in regularly on a smart device is a familiar occurrence for most teens.

Furthermore, Pulse's language is simple and straightforward. Students are asked questions in a down-to-earth style similar to what's used on other apps that they may extensively use. For instance, students may be asked, "How excited are you about going to your classes?" and "Hi _____, how are you feeling today?" This familiar, warm tone encourages students to share their feelings.

Students can also respond to these questions using simple, automatically generated answers. For example, they can say, "I'm feeling great," or "I need some help." They also have a list of trusted adults at the school with whom they can contact when asked the question, "Who would you like to ask for help?" Students can then immediately connect with someone, simplifying the process.

Craig Bassingthwaite, the Headmaster of Somerset College, explains how Pulse drives student engagement: "The impact on school culture is that students feel that they are engaged in the process and teachers are readily embracing that."

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Conclusion

K-12 students' mental health is on the decline, and current practices of yearly in-school mental health assessments aren't keeping pace to improve student outcomes and wellbeing. Linewize Pulse's real-time wellbeing monitoring offers teachers and administrators the tools they need to check in regularly with students weekly, instead of annually.

This tool gives school leaders information about campus climate and gives students familiar technology with which to seek help. With wellbeing data always available, teachers and staff can make better-informed connections with struggling students, and administrators can fund data-driven intervention programs.

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