ACSI Leading Insights

ACSI’s Leading Insights series highlights the latest thinking on best practices for Christian school educators in areas of key importance in their schools. Each monograph in the series draws on leading experts, as well as Christian school perspectives and voices, to share fresh ideas for advancing your school’s Christ-centered mission in an important area of focus.

This monograph, Mental Health and Well-Being, features practitioners, experts, and researchers in school counseling, student mental health, and wellness. The authors, who have worked in and with Christian schools, share valuable insights and practical strategies for attending to mental health needs and promoting well-being in Christian education. With a focus on creating a faith-based foundation and modeling best practice, this monograph encourages Christian educators as they seek to care well for the students and adults in their school communities—in and through Christ.
Mental Health & Well-Being
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Introduction
Lynn E. Swaner, Series Editor

At the heart of Christian schools’ missions is ministry to children. Christian educators desire that students flourish and achieve their God-given potential both educationally and spiritually. And yet, the reality of living in a fallen world means that every student will experience brokenness at some point in their lives, whether from family issues, relational conflict, trauma, poor self-image, social pressures, or a variety of other sources. And research suggests that mental health issues are on the rise among today’s school age students; the American Psychiatric Association found in 2017 that 34 percent—over one-third—of students were being treated for some sort of mental health issue, compared to 19 percent of students in 2007 (Ketchen et al. 2018).

Most Christian school leaders and teachers perceive the urgency of this trend and desire to care for the whole student. Yet most will find themselves unprepared to meet students’ needs, as addressing students’ mental health concerns is not typically part of either formal educational preparation or on-the-job training for Christian educators. Complicating matters further, many Christian schools do not have the resources necessary for hiring full-time, qualified mental health personnel on staff. These realities can create a serious gap in Christian schools’ duty to care for individual students in need, as well as to provide a healthy learning environment conductive to all students’ flourishing.

This is to say nothing of the growing mental health concerns for educators, who face increasing levels of stress and burnout (Miller et al. 2020). These trends have only been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Will 2021) with Christian school leaders citing overwork of teachers and the mental health of all staff as their top concerns (Swaner and Lee 2020). While troubling in and of itself, the decline in educator well-being is even more concerning because of its potential
impact on students; as research has shown, “teacher burnout appears to affect the stress levels of the students they teach” (Lever et al. 2019, 6).

These concerns—and the corresponding risk to students, leaders and teachers, and the school community as a whole—can be mitigated if schools become more proactive and intentional in addressing student and educator mental health. This will certainly require increases and improvements in schoolwide prevention efforts, safety nets, systems of care, collaborative support teams, staff training, and clear policies and procedures. But it will also mean developing a whole-school approach to well-being—one that is grounded in a biblical philosophy of education and tailored to each school’s unique context. Research has demonstrated that constructs within the Flourishing Schools domain of well-being are correlated with flourishing in the Christian school setting (Swaner and Wolfe 2021), including stress (feelings of being overwhelmed for teachers and leaders) and resilience (students’ ability to handle stress effectively and respond well to difficult situations).

This issue of ACSI’s Leading Insights series aims to help Christian schools to develop systematic programs and policies to not only address mental health concerns of students, but also promote overall student well-being. This unique resource draws upon research and best practices in the field of school-based mental health, with the goal of helping Christian educators—whatever their school setting, population, and resources—to care well for individuals and the entire school community. To this end, the monograph is divided into three sections:

- In the first section, on Philosophy and Research, chapters address topics like defining well-being and developing a schoolwide philosophy of mental health (Chapter 1); understanding factors, influences, and trends impacting student mental health (Chapter 2); and exploring unique factors affecting faith-based schools (Chapter 3).

- In the second section, on Christian School Perspectives of mental health and well-being, readers will gain insights from
a school counselor in a Christian school setting (Chapter 4); a director of evaluation services who specializes in supporting students in the classroom through trauma-informed instruction (Chapter 5); and two wellness advocates and consultants who explore educator well-being and the importance of leader and teacher mental health (Chapter 6).

• In the final part of the monograph, on Programs and Practices, licensed professional counselors share specifics around how schools can develop a comprehensive approach to student mental health and well-being, including core components for care (Chapter 7), how to systematize support for students (Chapter 8), and the basics of crisis intervention in the school setting (Chapter 9). Real-life case studies and reflection questions are also provided across several of the chapters, as well as a final resources section.

Christian educators will find this resource useful, whether their schools are just beginning the process of addressing student mental health, or have already begun developing programs and policies. When taken together, practical recommendations in these areas can help administrators to reduce their sense of vulnerability in the face of mental health concerns, while equipping all educators to care holistically for students and the school community’s needs. However, while this monograph aims to be comprehensive, it should not be taken as exclusive. Throughout many of the chapters, readers will be reminded that addressing mental health and well-being in their unique setting begins with developing a partnership between the school and mental health professionals and resources in their communities. Not only are these individuals and resources key to caring for students well, but they also should be consulted as schools develop their policies, procedures, and practices in this area.
Ultimately, as we consider the mental health and well-being of our students and all within our school community, we can take encouragement from Psalm 115:14 (NIV): “May the Lord cause you to flourish, both you and your children.” This blessing certainly applies to us as educators, and also to the children within our own families, but also may be extended to Christian schools as they seek to partner with parents in fulfilling their Deuteronomy 6 responsibility to disciple their children. May we seek to excel all the more at intentionally addressing student and educator mental health, with the goal of increased flourishing for all those in our care.
Part 1: Philosophy and Research
The Bible is filled with references to God’s faithfulness, demonstrated in His awareness and care for the well-being of His children. In fact, we see instances in both the Old and New Testament (Gen. 28:15, Ex. 14:13, Ps. 55:22, 1 Tim. 5:8, 1 John 5:14-15) that describe the Lord’s providential protection. Importantly, we see that this care is evident in the midst of the human brokenness that is ever present in our daily lives. Whether we are young adults, children, or elders, we see throughout Scripture that how we, God’s children, experience life does not go unnoticed.

Well-being is a dynamic concept that includes psychological, social, and spiritual dimensions. Often, the terms well-being or wellness are used interchangeably to denote the presence of positives and the absence of negatives—for example, a person is defined as being physically well in the absence of physical ailment or sickness. The same logic is often applied to psychological well-being; thus, the presence of mental health means the absence of mental illness. This framework demands that mental health and mental illness exist on a continuum as polar extremes. Many professionals and researchers in the field of mental health question this continuum and ask whether better terminology—such as human flourishing (Keyes 2007)—could be used to promote a more positive view of mental well-being.

But is that how the Bible defines well-being? Informed by Scripture, well-being reflects a comprehensive (physical, cognitive, affective, behavioral) view and approach that acknowledges the complexity of human beings who are fearfully and wonderfully made (Psalm 139:14).
behavioral) view and approach that acknowledges the complexity of human beings who are fearfully and wonderfully made (Ps. 139:14). A biblical view of well-being also acknowledges the factors of here-and-now environmental influences—such as peer groups, family dynamics, and life stressors—as well as the eternal purpose of humanity and our dependence on God, in whom we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28). We believe that such a view honors our biblical responsibility to rely on God through prayer and other spiritual disciplines, appreciates that human beings are complex though fallen creations, and recognizes that God has graciously gifted us with knowledge and tools that can be used to effect healing and restoration in this fallen world. While well-being can be complex and at times complicated, “the gospel impacts every area of our lives and God can—and does at times—supernaturally heal every kind of illness. Yet, God often chooses to do so through an approach that includes prayer, study, Christian community, and medical intervention” (Stetzer 2013).

Well-Being in Childhood and Adolescence

It may be surprising to learn that when viewed in light of human history, our understanding of childhood and adolescence as distinct developmental stages is relatively new. Until the late nineteenth century, children’s experiences (including child labor and teen marriage, which are still common in many parts of the world) looked remarkably similar to that of adults. This changed in most Western countries when economic shifts brought a need for a skilled labor force (best developed through formal education), which resulted in the establishment of compulsory public education, child labor laws, and scientific investigation of child and adolescent development in the early twentieth century (Meece 2002).

Many argue that the children and teenagers of today are influenced by societal shifts not unlike those brought on by the industrial
revolution a century and a half ago. But whereas the printing press, sewing machine, and automobile revolutionized life for earlier generations, current generations of students experience a technological revolution on almost a yearly basis (or with the newest version of the iPhone, whichever comes first). Andy Crouch (2017) writes in *The Tech-Wise Family,* “Technology is literally everywhere… not only the devices in our pockets but the invisible electromagnetic waves that flood our homes. This change has come about overnight, in the blink of an eye in terms of human history and culture” (16). The impact of the technological revolution is not always a positive one; as Miller, Latham, and Cahill (2017) assert, for many children and adolescents “the ‘Gutenberg to Google’ revolution has generated a perfect storm of discontent, dysfunction, and disengagement” (4) in school. And of course, technological change is but one of many significant shifts occurring today (including changes in social values and conceptions of morality, disintegration of the traditional family, and marginalization of faith and religion).

Certainly, readers—having been through childhood and adolescence themselves—can recall the physical, emotional, intellectual, and social challenges that occur during the school years. However, the rapid period of change occurring today makes most students’ experience of growing up not only vastly different from those of their teachers, but also more marked by mental health issues. For example, some researchers suggest that anxiety, in particular, is becoming a normative part of growing up. As reported in *The New York Times* (Williams 2017):

> The fidget spinner is nothing but nervous energy rendered in plastic and steel, a perfect metaphor for the overscheduled, overstimulated children of today as they search for a way to unplug between jujitsu lessons, clarinet practice and Advanced Placement tutoring. According to data from the National Institute
of Mental Health, some 38 percent of girls ages 13 through 17, and 26 percent of boys, have an anxiety disorder.

In addition to anxiety disorders, self-injurious behavior like cutting is on the rise (Peterson 2008), and data presented at the 2017 Pediatric Academic Societies Meeting pointed to a doubling of hospital admissions for thoughts of suicide or self-harm in young children and adolescents over the past decade (Fottrell 2017). Another study reported a 24 percent increase in inpatient hospitalization of children for mental health and substance abuse over a three-year period (CDC 2013). All these trends have only been heightened by the COVID-19 pandemic that impacted schools and communities worldwide (Racine et al. 2021).

Most Christian school administrators and teachers can confirm that their schools are not impervious to these trends. While engagement with faith-based organizations and resources is often a protective factor when it comes to mental illness and substance abuse (SAMHSA 2015), Christians are not immune to mental health challenges. In fact, the Bible shows that even the faithful struggle with anxiety (Prov. 12:25), fear (Josh. 1:9), depression (Ps. 42:11), and mental anguish (Ps. 6:2–3). Christian educators should expect to encounter students with these struggles, given the fallen world in which we live and the weakness of the human condition. With all indications seeming to point to a significant rise in mental health concerns among today’s children and youth, amplified by the effects of the pandemic era, adequately addressing the mental health needs of students needs to be a priority for educators in Christian school settings.

As much as we might wish it, students don’t set aside their mental health needs when they come through the school doors. Scripture is clear that we have a mandate to care for those who are hurting and in need, by bearing another’s burdens, and so fulfilling the law
of Christ (Gal. 6:2, Rom. 15:1a). With this in mind, most Christian schools’ missions have at the center of them the holistic education of the mind and the heart. This requires that we proactively address well-being through our programs and curricula. How Christian schools, administrators, and other staff participate in forming both a culture and practice of awareness and support for mental health concerns will necessarily shape the well-being and perception of well-being for their students.

**First Steps/“Do Now”**

While the remainder of this monograph offers many practical strategies for addressing well-being in Christian schools, it is important to pause at the beginning to reflect on the broader picture discussed in this chapter. To this end, we recommend two valuable exercises for Christian schools:

1. *Conduct a Self-Audit.* Purposefully gauge your and your school’s awareness of your students’ mental health needs. Gather a cross-constituency group to ask questions about how the leadership team, teachers, and others address those needs, including:
   - Do you have a grasp of what kinds of mental health needs are present in your student body?
   - Are your efforts to meet those needs intentional, having originated in an articulated philosophy and approach? How does the biblical mandate to care for students fit into the philosophy?
   - Are efforts consistent across staff and divisions/departments, or are they inconsistent or haphazard?
• Are efforts proactive, or largely reactive?

• Is your school’s approach to addressing mental health needs in keeping with the laws and requirements of your state? In addition to your legal obligations, what are the requirements of the school’s insurance carrier? Who can you ask to help you in answering these questions (i.e., school attorney, public school counterparts, state office for nonpublic schools)?

2. Put It in Writing. Your school may have policies and procedures written down for addressing mental health concerns. However, at the outset, does your school have an articulated philosophy for how you approach these needs in general? If not, consider:

• Creating a committee comprised of school leadership, select teachers, the school nurse, any counseling and resource staff, parents, and area mental health professionals in your networks. If yours is a church-sponsored school, include representation from the pastoral staff.

• Tasking the group with researching and then writing out your school’s philosophy and overall approach to mental health.

• Having the group look at the results of the self-audit and identify gaps. Consider ways to fill those gaps in practice.

• Examining any existing policies and procedures, and where they do not align with your school’s overall philosophy, work to align them.

This foundational work may seem nonessential for school leaders who are pressed for answers as to how to deal with students’ immediate mental health needs or crises. However, ultimately it will help
positively position your school and staff for handling those needs with intentionality, consistency, and integrity—with a focus on the school’s Christ-centered mission, achieved through a holistic education that is grounded in biblical truth and focused on flourishing.
It’s Time To Flourish

Think for a moment: In 100 years, what legacy do you want to leave for the students who sat in your classrooms? ACSI wants to come alongside you and help your school community flourish how God intends—bibically.

ACSI has been leading Christ-centered education toward excellence for more than 40 years, always seeking to understand what truly impacts and improves a Christian school. Through a multiyear endeavor, ACSI Research identified thirty-five constructs that support five primary domains of flourishing, which contribute to a school community marked by healthy spiritual, emotional, and cultural characteristics. This research was validated by a rigorous independent review and has blossomed into the ACSI Flourishing Initiative, which aligns ACSI Research, Professional Development, and Accreditation with a focus on flourishing students, educators, and Christian schools.

ACSI Leading Insights: Special Education advances Christ-centered education by focusing on schools’ responsiveness to special needs, which is a validated construct in the flourishing domain of Expertise & Resources.

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The Inclusion Journey: From Program to Identity
Elizabeth Lucas Dombrowski, All Belong Kate
E. Strater, Calvin University

For many years, the answer to the challenges of disability in Christian education has been the formation of a program. It is easy to see how appealing this approach can be: programs give us neat boundaries and concrete edges, which in turn provide us with the confidence of knowing our capabilities and what our capacities are. Programs have understandably proliferated throughout our schools—from programs addressing dyslexia, to programs for students with autism, to programs for students with academic talents, to entire schools for students with a specific type of disability. In many cases, these

ACSI Leading Insights Special Education and Inclusion
This monograph, Special Education and Inclusion, features experts in theology, research, and practice related to serving students with disabilities in the Christian school setting, along with the alumni, parent, and head of school perspective on inclusive education. The authors share new insights on how Christian schools can create cultures of belonging and mutual care that reflect God’s heart for all children—who are each uniquely made in His image—and in doing so, shine a beacon of hope for families in their communities.

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