

A Proposal to Teach Lifetime Wellness Skills in the Public Schools of Brookline

This proposal recommends that the Public Schools of Brookline adopt as a core value, "Wellness: Physical, Mental, Emotional and Social." While existing courses and other activities already promote wellness, this proposal highlights Lifetime Wellness Skills that might enhance wellness in the K-12 curricula.

Positive reinforcement has been shown to be more effective than punishment in changing behavior. Positive behaviors and self-control are more likely to occur when students recognize, understand and accept the real benefits that go with good wellness habits. This requires honest and appropriate responses to all questions students may have regarding the costs and benefits of learning wellness skills.

Decision Making Skills – How to get more of what you want (e.g. fun, independence, time with friends, control over daily life) and less of what you don't want (e.g. arguments with parents or other authority figures, conflicts with peers, social drama, loss of privileges, being told what to do). How to assess a situation, think about it, make a decision, evaluate the decision, and learn from both mistakes and successes. How to recognize dangerous situations quickly and leave them immediately. How to move from the emotional part of the brain to the more rational part of the brain (e.g. through mindfulness practices or talking with a trusted adult). How to respond to stress in ways that support healthy brain development.

Sleep – The human body needs sleep to restore itself and prepare for the next day. Sleep disturbances can contribute to poor academic performance, social difficulties, resistance to learning good wellness habits, cravings, ineffectiveness in daily functioning, weight gain, diabetes, obesity, low immune system functioning, hypertension and cardiovascular disease. It can also lead to a shortened life. By learning good sleep habits and removing the obstacles to sleep such as poor diet and exercise, and caffeine, drug and alcohol use, students can improve their lifestyle significantly.

Exercise – Exercise can help students manage stress, anxiety, weight issues, and emotional well-being. Physical health increases self-confidence and feelings of well-being. A wide range of sports provide good opportunities for physical activity. Two forms of exercise shown to be especially helpful in reducing stress are yoga and martial arts. Yoga increases body awareness, relieves stress, reduces muscle tension, sharpens attention, and calms and centers the nervous system. These benefits have made yoga an important wellness skill. Growing research has shown that yoga enhances social well-being through a sense of belonging, while reducing

symptoms of depression, ADHD, and sleep disorders. Martial arts have also been shown to offer affective, cognitive, and behavioral benefits. They promote mental and physical health with a focus on fitness, character training, mind expansion and relaxation.

Nutrition – Healthy nutrition is vital to personal wellness. Cooking is a basic skill for daily living. It can also be an enjoyable social experience, entertaining leisure activity, and effective wellness practice. Students can learn kitchen safety, diet and nutrition facts, and how to have a healthy relationship with food. They can also improve their social skills, sensory awareness, physical health, ability to plan and organize, time management skills, self-esteem and sense of accomplishment.

Stress Reduction – Stress occurs when we imagine a situation "better" than our current situation and try to choose the imagined situation. The harder we try to choose the imagined situation, the more stress we feel. Once we understand how this process works, it becomes easier for us to let go of imagined situations and our resistance to the only situation we actually have. As we let go of this resistance, we can relax and bring our attention fully into the present moment. Relaxed present moment awareness allows us to experience the enjoyable feelings we want such as peace, joy and love. The more we experience this awareness, the more we are able to enjoy life.

Mindfulness – Mindfulness means paying attention to the present moment without judgment or resistance. Practicing mindfulness has been shown to reduce stress and anxiety, improve self-control, and help people cope with urges to use substances. Observing and understanding one's own emotions can increase positivity, decrease self-blame, and support wellness while reducing the need for medications. Here is a 5-step mindfulness practice: (1) stop what you are doing and slow down; (2) focus on your breathing and take your mind away from compulsive thinking; (3) observe what you are thinking, realizing you are not your thoughts; (4) notice thought patterns and habitual reactions, being honest to have an accurate self-perception; and (5) choose healthy thoughts. Healthier thoughts lead to healthier behavior and better performance.

Meditation – Dr. Herbert Benson, founder of the Benson-Henry Institute for Mind Body Medicine at Massachusetts General Hospital, reports that meditation induces a host of biochemical and physical changes in the body collectively referred to as the "relaxation response." The relaxation response includes changes in metabolism, heart rate, respiration, blood pressure and brain chemistry. Meditation can reduce pain, anxiety, negative emotions and negative personality traits; can improve attention, learning and memory; and can bring a deep feeling of peace, connectedness and relief from stress.

A study published in the April 6, 2011 edition of the *Journal of Neuroscience* states, "This is the first study to show that only a little over an hour of meditation training can dramatically reduce both the experience of pain and pain-related brain activation....We found a big effect – about a 40 percent reduction in pain intensity and a 57 percent reduction in pain unpleasantness. Meditation

produced a greater reduction in pain than even morphine or other pain-relieving drugs, which typically reduce pain ratings by about 25 percent.

Choosing Healthy Thoughts – There are connections between our thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. Learning to replace negative and self-defeating thoughts with positive and self-affirming thoughts can improve mental and emotional wellness. Examples of thought distortions include (1) always being right; (2) blaming; (3) catastrophizing; (4) disqualifying the positive; (5) emotional reasoning; (6) exaggeration; (7) fallacy of change; (8) filtering; (9) jumping to conclusions; (10) labeling and mislabeling; (11) magnification; (12) minimization; (13) overgeneralization; (14) personalization; (15) should statements; and (16) all-or-nothing thinking. Examples of healthy thoughts include (1) I'm a person and people make mistakes; (2) I can choose to be happy; (3) I can meet whatever challenges I face; (4) I have talents and skills; (5) how I feel isn't who I am; (6) I am enough; (7) I can be at peace even if others don't change; (8) I can have a broad and balanced perspective; (9) I can assess a situation thoughtfully; (10) other people are human, too; (11) how important is it; (12) there are challenges I need to face; (13) a little data doesn't prove anything; (14) it's not all about me; (15) I can choose how I want to live; (16) I can consider a range of possibilities; (17) I can experience peace, joy and love; (18) I can forgive myself and others; (19) I can let go of resentments; (20) I can find the guidance I need; (21) I can learn from mistakes; (22) I have the courage to face whatever life brings me; (23) I am worthy of success; (24) I radiate beauty, charm and grace; (25) I can respond to fear with love; (26) today is the day I have today; (27) I am creative; (28) I deserve to have time for relaxing and playing.

Self-Discipline – In *The Road Less Traveled*, which was on the New York Times Bestseller List for more than 13 years, psychiatrist M. Scott Peck presents four basic practices for self-discipline: delay gratification, accept responsibility, seek the truth, and maintain balance.

Coping Skills – Students can learn and practice coping skills such as focusing on personal strengths; stress reduction techniques; building healthy relationships and support systems; effective communication and intimacy skills; and choosing wellness rather than escape.

Time Management – Good time habits can provide us with relaxation, refreshment and recreation without wasting time. These habits may include preparing a time budget, setting appropriate goals, and applying tips for using time effectively to optimize performance.

Wellness Goals – Students can adopt and help each other develop personal goals that are SMART: Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic and Timely. These goals can motivate students, providing them with an uplifting and encouraging "can do" attitude that helps carry them through each day. Over time, students can review and revise their goals based on their actual accomplishments.

One on One Time – Spending one on one time with mentors can provide support and guidance to address individual concerns and needs.

Self-Advocacy – How to look out for yourself, speak up instead of letting others speak for you, and tell people appropriately what you need. Getting your needs met in mature and effective ways that benefit, or at least don't harm, others. Making effective transitions from child-adult relationships to adult-adult relationships.

Navigating Adolescence – Skills especially helpful in the transition from childhood to adulthood include expressing feelings effectively and appropriately; healthy competition; appropriate risk taking; improving relationships with parents; building healthy friendships; initiating and exploring romantic relationships; responding appropriately to the sexual desires, needs and emotions of oneself and others; sexual health; and understanding male and female perspectives.

Relationship Skills – Relationship education, building, collaboration, and problem-solving can help reduce tension and stress while creating a strong support network. Tips and encouragement for nurturing relationships can help students build strong friendships based on respect, trust and empowerment. Students can improve their relationships with teachers, other students, friends and family.

Empathic Listening Skills – Empathy can be demonstrated while listening to others using the OARS approach: ask Open-ended questions, give Affirmations, use Reflective listening (be quiet and actively listen, then reflect back the essence of what the person said) and Summarize. Empathic listening skills help others feel heard and understood, which can help motivate them to develop healthy coping skills, have insight into their behavior, and feel good about themselves.

Conflict Resolution Skills – How to resolve conflicts through cooperation and problem solving rather than avoidance or violence. Finding solutions that benefit everyone involved. Respecting the rights of others and your own rights. Speaking calmly, listening attentively and asking useful questions. Using a polite tone when brainstorming possible solutions. Being willing to compromise when appropriate. Learning to say "no" gracefully yet firmly when urged to take part in behaviors that are unsafe, unhealthy, against your values, or you simply don't want to do.

Mutual Support – Sex, drugs and rock & roll are powerful forces in mainstream U.S. culture. Students with strong wellness skills can be healthy role models for other students, especially those who are younger. Students can help other students learn a broad range of wellness skills, as well as helping other students academically and socially.

Community Wellness Skills – Skills for living in the community can be learned through volunteer service and part-time jobs. Support for these activities can be provided in wellness meetings, by adult volunteers, and by other students.

Vocational Skills – How to find a part-time job; exploring career possibilities through Internet research, interviews and internships; indentifying current skills and new skills to learn; how to prepare a resume; how to interview; how to dress for success.

Financial Management – How to prepare a budget. Setting appropriate financial goals. Tips for using money effectively to meet financial goals.

Smoking Cessation – Quitting smoking can improve one’s health in multiple areas. Studies have shown that in small amounts of time a quitter can lower their blood pressure, improve circulation and lung function, and reduce the risk of stroke and heart disease. By introducing quitting strategies and providing support and health tips in a group setting, students in the process of giving up smoking can have the opportunity to gain all of the health benefits.

Stages of Change Model – This model describes five stages people tend to go through when changing lifestyle habits. The model states that behavioral changes do not happen in one step, but through a series of distinct, predictable stages. Realizing the stage of change you are in may help you succeed. The model has been used successfully with smoking cessation and recovery from other addictions; improving nutrition and eating habits; getting better exercise; and improving sleep. The five stages of change are precontemplation (I don't have a problem), contemplation (I'm looking at the costs and benefits of change), preparation (I will make a significant change within the next month); action (I am making the change now); and maintenance (I am doing what is necessary to sustain the change).

WRAP – The Wellness Recovery Action Plan (WRAP), as developed by Mary Ellen Copeland PhD, is a structured system for monitoring, reducing and eliminating uncomfortable or dangerous behaviors and feelings. The process of preparing an individual WRAP can help students increase their awareness and understanding of their own emotions and behaviors. Students focus on their own personal resources, strengths and wellness practices. The plan enhances student empowerment and personal responsibility.