

# How to promote mental well-being in schools adopting a whole-school approach? From evidence to action

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# Summary

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- Schools are one of the most important settings for promoting the mental well-being of young people
  - focus on the social and emotional well-being of young people in the educational system
  - adopting a whole-school approach
  
- Evidence-based approaches and their implementation in practice
  - evidence of what works in promoting youth social and emotional well-being in schools
  - evidence into action - implementing a whole-school approach in complex school contexts
  
- ***Implementing a whole-school approach to promoting mental well-being for all young people***

# The school as a setting for promoting youth mental well-being

# Promoting youth mental well-being in schools

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- The school is a unique setting for promoting the mental well-being of young people
  - critical skills for school, work and life can be taught and learned
  - provides a socializing context that has a significant influence on positive youth development
  - sense of connectedness with family, community and broader society
- Promoting mental well-being is integral to positive youth development (WHO 2021; UNICEF, 2021)
  - enables young people to grow, learn and flourish, reduces the risk of poor mental health, promotes well-being
  - broad range of cognitive, social and emotional skills are needed for positive youth development
- Increasing focus on developing social and emotional skills within the educational system (OECD, 2021)
  - teaching and learning of skills, attitudes and resources that are valuable for life
  - communicate effectively, work as a team member, resilience in the face of difficulties, problem-solving, coping strategies, sense of control/efficacy

# Promoting youth mental well-being in schools

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- Negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on youth mental health and well-being
  - rising rates of depression, anxiety, stress – school closures
  - negative impacts increased existing inequities (UNICEF & WHO, 2021)
- Need for a different approach to youth mental health extending beyond individually-oriented treatment
  - approaches that will support young people in protecting and enhancing their mental health and well-being and reduce mental health inequities (IUHPE, 2021)
  - universal (for all) and targeted (those at higher risk) mental health promotion strategies
- WHO advocate a comprehensive public health approach to mental health (WHO, 2002; 2021)
  - treatment approaches on their own are not sufficient to improve population mental health
  - embrace promotion and prevention alongside treatment and recovery

# Concepts of mental health

*'more than the absence of mental health problems'*

Mental health may be defined as:

*"A state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, to realize their abilities, to learn well and work well, and to contribute to their communities."* (World Mental Health Report, WHO 2022)

- Concept of positive mental health (Keyes, 2002; Huppert, 2005; Ryff *et al.*, 2006)
  - subjective well-being and life satisfaction
  - positive functioning, engagement and social well-being
  
- Determinants of mental health – multiple interacting biological, psychological, physical, social, cultural, economic and environmental
  - cumulative impact of risk and protective factor across the lifecourse

➤ ***Mental health is created where we live our everyday lives***



# Promoting youth mental well-being in schools

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- Building academic success on social and emotional well-being
  - promotes academic learning, motivation and sense of connectedness to school
  - promotes student well-being and the development of emotional and social skills
  - prevention and reduction of mental health problems (e.g., depression anxiety and stress)
  - improves school behaviour and reduces problem behaviours (bullying, aggression, conflict, substance misuse)
  - reduces school drop-out rates
  - improves staff-student relationships, stress reduction and well-being
  
- Role of education in addressing social and health inequities

# Approaches to promoting mental well-being in schools – what works?



# Approaches to promoting mental well-being in schools

- **Classroom-based approaches-** teaching of skills through a developmentally appropriate curriculum
  - **Universal** – for all students e.g. social and emotional learning (SEL) programmes e.g., *PATHS, FRIENDS*
  - **Targeted** – for students at higher risk e.g. depression and anxiety prevention programmes e.g., *Penn Resiliency Program; Coping with Stress, CBT programmes*
  
- **Social and emotional learning**
  - the process of acquiring a set of skills or competencies to recognise and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, appreciate the perspectives of others, establish and maintain positive relationships, make responsible decisions, and handle interpersonal situations constructively (Elias et al., 1997)
  
- *essential or core skills for social and emotional learning in schools for young people (CASEL, 2004, 2010, 2015)*



# Approaches to promoting mental well-being in schools

- **Whole-school approach** aims to create a supportive context within the school as a whole and involves coordinated actions between three main components:
    - curriculum teaching and learning
    - school ethos and environment
    - family and community partnerships

*Examples: Positive Action, KiVa*
  - Health Promoting Schools initiative (WHO, 1998; WHO & UNESCO, 2021)  
*“a school constantly strengthening its capacity as a healthy setting for living, learning and working”*
  - Integrate the promotion of mental well-being into daily interactions and practices - shape the whole context, including management and organizational structures
- ***Embraces the entire school community – all staff, teachers, students and families***

# What works in promoting mental well-being in schools

## Classroom-based programmes that promote young people's social and emotional skills

- **Focus:** universal skills-based social and emotional learning (SEL) programmes
- **Evidence:** strong and consistent support for the value of SEL programmes implemented by school staff (Taylor *et al.*, 2017; Van de Sande *et al.*, 2019) long-term positive effects:
  - enhanced social and emotional skills
  - improved attitudes towards self, school and others
  - positive social behaviours – fewer absences and suspensions
  - reduced conduct problems - aggression, bullying
  - reduced emotional distress - stress and depression
- **Students' educational outcomes** (Durlak *et al.*, 2011; Corcoran *et al.*, 2018):
  - **improves ability to learn – only when delivered by teachers**
  - achieve academically (+11 percentile higher on standard tests)
  - skills that enhance capacity for positive development

# What works in promoting mental well-being in schools

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## Targeted prevention programmes to reduce problems such as anxiety and depression, stress, behavioural problems

- **Focus:** access to targeted programmes for students at higher risk
- **Evidence:** substantive body of research demonstrating the positive impact of targeted prevention programmes (e.g. CBT), including those delivered digitally (Caldwell *et al.*, 2019; Feiss *et al.*, 2019; Werner-Seidler *et al.*, 2017; 2021)
  - reduced anxiety, depression, psychological stress
  - reduced behavioural problems, substance misuse

# What works in promoting mental well-being in schools

## Whole-school approaches to promoting young people's social and emotional well-being

- **Focus:** coordinated and sequenced approach across the curriculum, ethos and environment, school policies and community partnerships
- **Evidence:** positive impact on social, emotional and educational outcomes (Goldberg *et al.*, 2019; Weare & Nind, 2011)
  - improved social and emotional adjustment
  - enhanced behavioural adjustment
  - reduced symptoms of anxiety, depression
  - reduced bullying
  - higher risk children benefit more

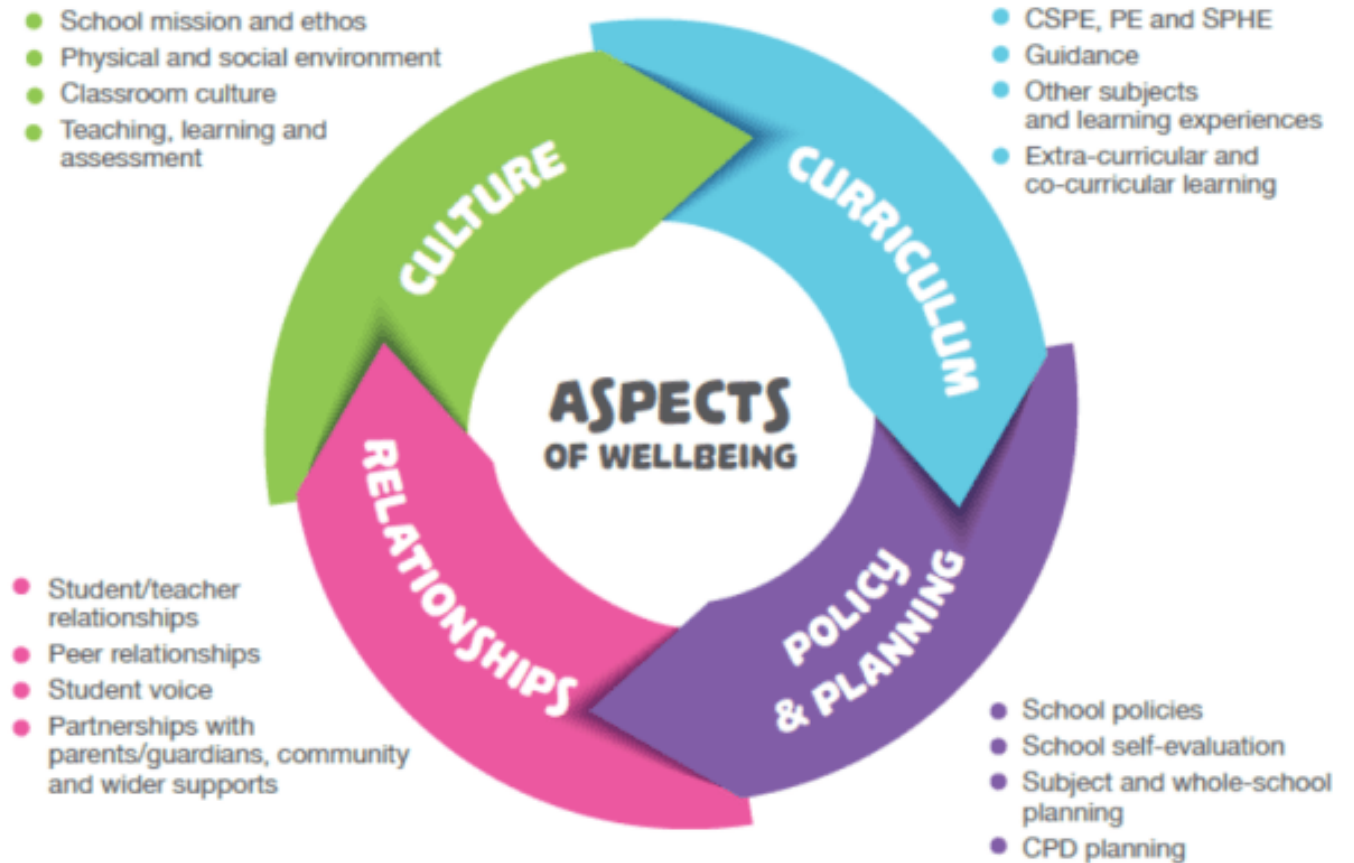
### Impact improved by

- family and community involvement
- high quality implementation



# Adopting a whole school approach

- **Content** - what is to be implemented, teaching strategies, school policies etc.
  - **Context** – school setting and whole school practices in effecting change; parental and community involvement
  - **Capacity** – how it is to be implemented – skills and resources required
- *need for system-wide support*
- *shift from discrete programmes to organizational and system-level practices*



# Challenges in implementing a whole-school approach in practice

- Integrating the approach within the school's educational mission of academic learning
  - overcrowded curriculum; cross-curricular learning
  - recognition of the interconnectedness of social and emotional well-being and academic achievement
- Leadership and management
  - adopting a whole-school approach in practice
  - embedded in wider school policies
  - supportive structures - time and space in the curriculum, whole-school planning and engagement
- Implementation support
  - training in interactive teaching methodologies - active learning, student participation - ongoing support
  - coordinated approach – explicit and sequenced approach
  - evidence-based approaches that can be embedded into the core business of the school
  - strengthening the schools's capacity as a setting for promoting mental well-being

➤ ***Partnerships – supportive policies and practices across the education and health sectors***

# Challenges in implementing a whole-school approach in practice

- Complex interaction of factors operating at the classroom, school and wider community level
  - role of teachers – attitudes, skills, motivation, well-being
  - student participation and engagement
  - parental involvement; teacher-parent relationships
  - contextual factors in the local community – social and economic factors
  
- Understanding whole school practices- organizational and cultural contexts of schools (Samdal & Rowling, 2013)
  - readiness for change – professional development
  - strategies for school organizational change
  - planning and policy anchoring
  
- ***WHAT, WHO, HOW and WHERE of delivery***
- *importance of contextual factors and supportive structures for high quality implementation*



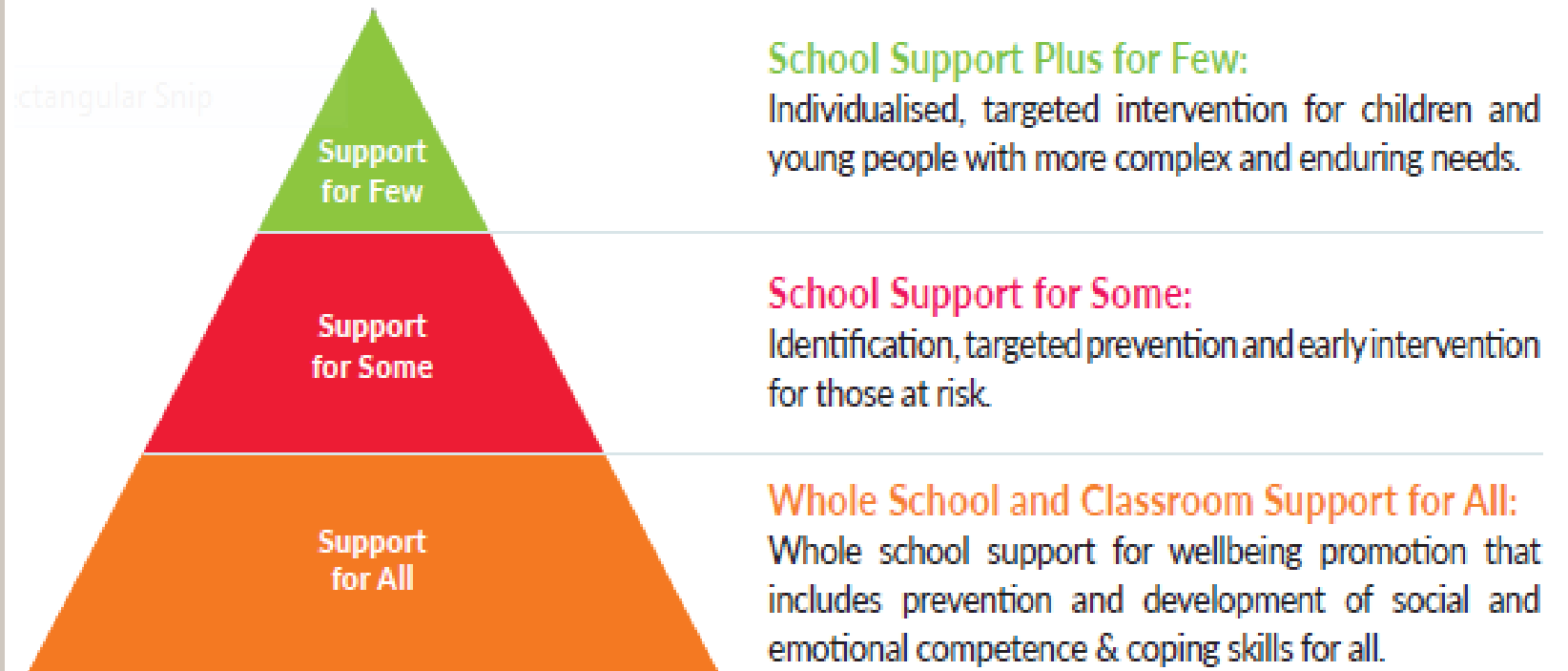
# Insights from implementation of mental well-being programmes in Ireland

# Implementing mental well-being programmes in Irish schools

*Well-being Policy Statement and Framework for Practice* (Department of Education and Skills, 2018-2023; revised 2019) – multicomponent whole-school approach to promoting well-being in schools

- Culture and environment
- Curriculum - teaching and learning
- Policy and planning
- Relationships and partnerships

Table 1: Continuum of Support

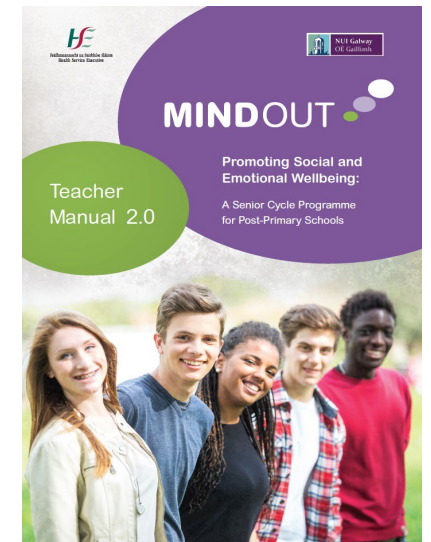


# Implementing mental well-being programmes in Irish schools

- **Implementation:** Tiered delivery within a whole-school approach
  - embedded in educational policy
  - teacher training and implementation support
  - resources to support teachers in planning, teaching and learning

## **MindOut programme** - universal SEL programme for adolescents (15-18 years)

- based on CASEL's core competencies
- developed in collaboration with key stakeholders, including young people and teachers
- structured manual - interactive teaching strategies
- delivered by teachers through Social Personal and Health Education - mandatory curriculum



# MindOut Programme

*Promoting social and emotional well-being: A senior cycle programme for post-primary schools*



Evaluation study - cluster RCT (N= 675) in 32 disadvantaged schools

- improved social and emotional skills - positive coping and emotional regulation
- improved mental health and well-being - reduced stress, depression; and anxiety (for girls)

**Implementation quality varied and impacted on positive outcomes**

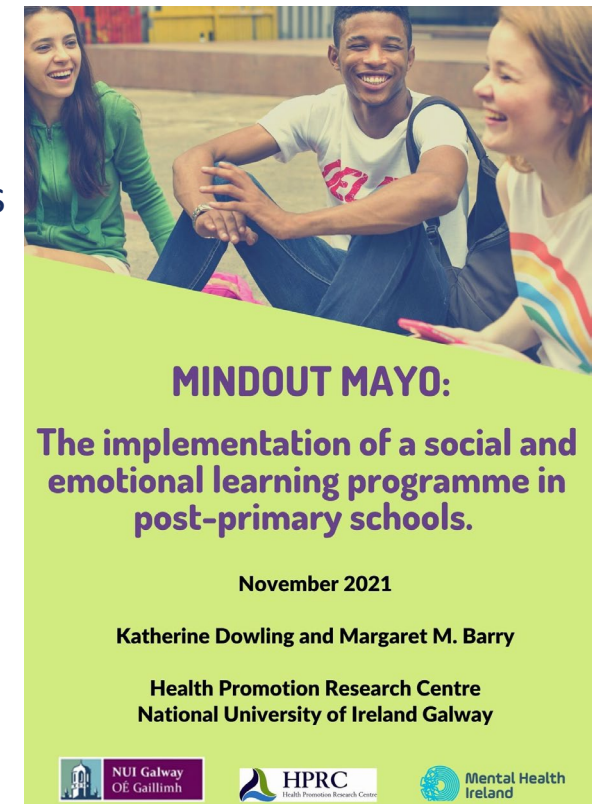
- schools with high level of implementation – more significant positive student outcomes that lasted longer

# MindOut Implementation study

## ○ In-depth analysis of the quality of implementation - wide variation across schools

### Implementation factors:

- Programme – relevance, design, materials, delivery methods
  - Providers - teachers’ knowledge, attitudes, self-efficacy, personal attributes
  - Participants - students’ attitudes, group dynamics, class size
  - School setting – culture, resources, leadership, engagement
  - Outer setting - external policies and community partnerships
  - Process – planning, timetabling, engaging key stakeholders
- *Positive outcomes dependent on the quality of implementation*
- *Need for whole-school training and implementation support*



# Conclusion

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- Evidence supports the use of comprehensive skills-based programmes, employing universal and targeted interventions, delivered within a whole-school approach.
  - Create supportive school environments and cater for the needs of all young people in the school.
  - Quality of implementation is a predictor of positive outcome.
- *Need for whole-school training and implementation support*

# Conclusion

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- Implement what we know works in improving young people's mental well-being in schools
  - most effective evidence-based approaches - equity impact for disadvantaged and minority youth
- Supportive educational policies and practices in embedding effective whole-school approaches that can be sustained
  - approaches that are feasible and can be integrated into core school business
  - tailoring approaches to the needs of schools and diverse student groups
- Effective implementation, especially in low-resource settings, maximising whole school participation, reach and impact
  - resources, training, technical assistance, materials, organizational capacity, systems change at a whole school level
- Invest in mainstreaming school policies and practices that create supportive school environments that will empower young people, enhance their skill development and enable them to grow and flourish

# Thank you for your attention

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