

Press release

For immediate release: 6th February 2025



New think tank report calls for urgent action on mental health and wellbeing in schools during Children's Mental Health Week

It's time to put wellbeing at the heart of education – because when wellbeing thrives, so does learning.

As the nation marks Children's Mental Health Week, organised by Place2Be – a charity for whom HRH The Princess of Wales is the Royal Patron – the Education Policy Alliance (EPA) has released a landmark report, *Everybody Thriving: Creating a Culture of Wellbeing in Schools*. This timely report sets out a bold vision for how schools can better support the mental health and wellbeing of students, teachers, and school leaders.

The report builds on extensive consultation with parents and carers, alongside educational and health research, to present a compelling case for reform. It argues that the education system must move beyond its narrow focus on exams and accountability, instead prioritising wellbeing as the foundation for academic learning and societal thriving.

The findings come at a crucial moment as the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill continues its progress through Parliament, currently at the committee stage in the House of Commons. The proposed legislation aims to embed safeguarding and the welfare of children at the heart of education policy, and reflects many of the key concerns shared by the EPA. However, *Everybody Thriving* goes much further. For example:

Children not in school

'They're not attending because, for them, the environment is toxic. Look to change the environment, not the individual student.' (Parent respondent)

- The Schools Bill introduces stronger local authority oversight and formal procedures to monitor children not in school.
- *Everybody Thriving* identifies mental health struggles as a key driver of absenteeism and argues that many students are 'voting with their feet' because the system itself is harming them.

The role of assessment and accountability

'The pressure to perform and achieve is overwhelming... The promises of a trip but only if everyone gets above a certain grade resulting in horrendous peer pressure... The self-harm caused by high-stakes exams...' (Parent respondent)

- The Schools Bill does not address the pressures of exams and testing

- *Everybody Thriving* argues that high-stakes testing is a major cause of student anxiety, stress, and self-harm, calling for a shift towards alternative assessment models.

Addressing root causes of poor mental health

‘Policies need to get to the root causes of children’s mental health and wellbeing issues rather than just addressing the symptoms.’ (Parent)

- The Schools Bill primarily focuses on *reactive* solutions, such as safeguarding, attendance enforcement, and care services.
- *Everybody Thriving* argues that the education system itself contributes to the mental health crisis among children, young people and educators. It calls for *preventive* measures that tackle the mental health crisis at its roots, rather than responding to problems once they arise.

The recommendations build on mounting evidence that the current education system is contributing to a mental health crisis among students and staff. Persistent pupil absence has surged to over 20%, and 59% of educators have considered leaving the profession due to stress. The EPA argues that without systemic change, these trends will only worsen.

‘Wellbeing and academic success are not competing priorities – they are deeply connected,’ said Dr James Mannion, chair of the EPA steering group. ‘A system that prioritises wellbeing will produce not only happier and healthier young people, but also better educational outcomes.’

The EPA calls on policymakers, school leaders, and educators to work together to implement these urgent reforms. *Everybody Thriving* provides a roadmap for schools to create environments where all students and staff feel valued, supported, and able to flourish.

Download the report, and the one-page theory of change (see below) [here](#).

About the EPA

The Education Policy Alliance is a grassroots think tank dedicated to crowd-sourcing education policy. Our steering group includes teachers, school leaders, health professionals, education professionals, parents, carers, and young people. We have no political affiliation – we work with policymakers from all parties to improve outcomes and promote wellbeing across the education system. For more information, visit educationpa.org.

EVERYBODY THRIVING:

CREATING A CULTURE OF WELLBEING IN SCHOOLS

What do we want to achieve?

- Embed mental health and wellbeing as a core priority in schools.
- Create supportive, inclusive environments for all learners.
- Schools that value personal development alongside academic learning.
- An education system and a society where everyone can thrive.

Where are we now?

The education system places significant stress on students and educators. Pressures such as high-stakes assessments, a top-down curriculum and inflexible behaviour policies undermine the wellbeing of children, young people and adults, and contribute to an escalating mental health crisis.

How can we create a culture of wellbeing in schools?

1. **Adopt a multi-tiered approach.** Recognise that mental health and wellbeing are complex, multidimensional issues. Create a comprehensive strategy to address threats to mental health and wellbeing at their roots.
2. **Embed mental health and wellbeing in national policy.** Ensure national policies value mental health and personal development alongside academic achievement.
3. **Signal a paradigm shift.** Prioritise mental health and wellbeing by shifting from high-stakes accountability to 'do no harm'.
4. **Invest in mental health prevention.** Scale up proactive, as well as reactive, mental health support to address immediate needs and reduce future costs.
5. **Create a more diverse, responsive curriculum.** Create flexible programmes of study that allow for more relational and vocational learning alongside academic progression.
6. **Reform assessment methods.** Create a bottom-up, strengths-based assessment system that celebrates the successes and milestones of every student and which provides 'success for all'.
7. **Create a wellbeing-focused accountability system.** Build an accountability system that prioritises safe, supportive, and inclusive learning environments.
8. **Publish national guidance for schools.** Provide clear guidelines around best practice in making mental health and wellbeing central to school policies and practices.
9. **Provide research-informed training on relational behaviour policies.** Equip educators with professional learning in trauma and attachment-informed approaches, restorative practice, and insights from neuroscience.
10. **Create a culture of belonging.** Cultivate a sense of belonging through strong, supportive relationships to make sure all children and young people feel seen, valued, and supported in their learning and development.

Why do we need to change?

The current high-accountability system, characterised by high-stakes exams and 'zero tolerance' behaviour policies, is eroding wellbeing and fuelling a mental health crisis. Rising levels of absenteeism, burnout and attrition illustrate the unsustainable nature of this approach. Reform is urgently needed to create schools that prioritise the mental health and wellbeing of children, young people, and adults, alongside academic achievement.