

Student Well-being and School Belonging: Definitions

A research overview prepared by Deborah Han, PhD and Elizabeth Day, PhD

How do researchers define “student well-being”?

Student well-being is a multidimensional concept that encompasses students' cognitive, psychological, and social-emotional domains of functioning.

Some conceptualizations also include physical health and academic achievement as essential dimensions of student well-being.

Other commonly used or related terms

School well-being; mental health; psychosocial well-being; flourishing

A scoping review of 33 studiesⁱ identified eight overarching domains of student well-being from students' perspectives:



Researchers recommend a holistic approach that integrates cognitive, psychological, and social perspectives, as well as captures both affective and functioning aspects.

Measurement

Most common: Quantitative surveys (E.g., Student Well-being Questionnaireⁱⁱ; Student Subject Well-being Questionnaireⁱⁱⁱ)

Other approaches: Qualitative methods^{iv} (E.g., Interviews and focus groups; Student written reflections; Field diaries)

How do researchers define “school belonging”?

School belonging is the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment.^v

School belonging is widely recognized as a component of student well-being and is often a dimension of school climate (e.g., a subscale within the School Climate Measure).

Other commonly used or related terms	School connectedness; school engagement; school bonding; school identification; school attachment; sense of community
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A systematic review conducted in 2018^{vi} evaluated the psychometric properties of 15 self-reported school connectedness measures and identified 15 subdomains within three broader categories:

Affective

- Acceptance, inclusion, and belonging
- Respect
- Value
- Safety
- Autonomy and independence

Behavioral

- Value parents place on school
- Involvement, participation, and engagement
- Effort and persistence
- Conduct
- Interest or motivation

Cognitive

- Academic self-efficacy
- Teacher relations and support
- Peer relations and support
- Academic support
- Discipline, fairness, and order

A more recent scoping review identified 31 unique measures of school belonging, although many of these were specific to the university setting, not K-12 education.^{vii}

Measurement	
Most common: Quantitative surveys (E.g., Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale ^{viii} ; School Climate Measure ^{ix} ; Student Engagement Instrument, 35-item ^x)	Other approaches: Qualitative methods (E.g., Interviews and focus groups; Teacher report and observations)

Note: While earlier definitions of school belonging primarily focused on the psychological sense of belonging, more recent perspectives highlight the influence of sociocultural and political processes, which may be best captured via qualitative methods (e.g, ethnography or policy analysis).^{xi}

Is school climate related to student well-being and school belonging?

Yes. Overall, evidence suggests that certain aspects of school climate—particularly, **positive relationships** and **perceptions of school safety**—are associated with higher student well-being and school belonging.



- A 2018 systematic review of 48 studies found that positive relationships with teachers and peers and positive perceptions of school safety were associated with (1) higher adolescent psychosocial wellbeing and prosocial behaviors, and (2) lower prevalence of mental health issues and risk behaviors.^{xii}
- A 2018 meta-analysis of 51 studies found that perceived safety of school environment was associated with higher school belonging.^{xiii}
- A 2025 systematic review of 16 intervention studies (11 of which included sufficient data for meta-analysis) found that interpersonal and school environment techniques (e.g., cultural changes) showed improved students' connectedness, belonging, and/or engagement.^{xiv}

Note: Although existing evidence offers promising findings, the evidence base remains limited by the small number of studies and modest effect sizes.

Additional Resources

[AttendanceWorks Toolkit on Student Connectedness](#)

[EdInstruments School/Classroom Climate and Belonging Measures](#)

[National Center for Safe Supportive Learning Environments \(NCSSLE\)](#)

[OECD Topics: Students' well-being](#)

[OECD Students' Wellbeing Indicators](#)

References

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Methods

Findings presented in this brief come from a literature review of academic peer-reviewed publications. Given the rapid nature of this research, other relevant studies and resources may exist. In addition, please note that we did not use formal methods for summarizing results, assessing study quality, or exploring reasons for differences in findings across studies.

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