

## ■ GOOD SCHOOLS GUIDE ■

### MENTAL WELLNESS

# PASTORAL CARE A PRIORITY

After some of the world's toughest and longest-lasting pandemic restrictions, Hong Kong schools recognise the need to address students' mental health, writes **Jolene Otremba**



There is no doubt that the pandemic has had a pronounced impact on the mental well-being of students. For this reason, pastoral care and well-being have become key priorities at many of the city's schools.

"The impact of Covid-19 on students in Hong Kong has been far-reaching, affecting many aspects of their lives. One of the most significant impacts has been on students' mental health," says Tracey Chitty, safeguarding and well-being adviser, student support services at the English Schools Foundation (ESF).

"The pandemic has caused a great deal of stress, anxiety and uncertainty for students."

Like millions of children around the world, Hong Kong students have lived through extended school closures, changes in social norms, and up until very recently, prolonged mask wearing.

According to Unicef, at least one in seven children worldwide have been forced to remain at home under countrywide public health orders or recommendations, and more than 330 million youngsters have been stuck at home for at least nine months up to March 2021. The UN has said this has subsequently driven a rise in anxiety, depression and developmental delays, among a range of other health concerns.

Ominously, international experts say that we are only now beginning to scratch the surface of the effects the pandemic and associated restrictions had on children.

"In many ways the wider effects of the pandemic and nationwide lockdowns on children and young people have been greater than the Covid-19 infection itself," says expert researcher, Jessica Morris, a researcher at the Nuffield Trust, an independent health think tank, in an article in the British Medical Journal in 2022.

In Hong Kong, educators agree that they are grappling with the fallout.

"I think we are still trying to understand the impact of Covid-19 on students," says My Thanh Mac, head of upper school guidance at the Canadian International School of Hong Kong (CDNIS). "Anecdotally, it is clear that students' maturity has been delayed after several years of a lack of routine and structure that schools would usually provide. Social skills have been impacted."

And she is not alone to express this view.

"Social interaction has changed," adds Ryan Copley, acting vice-principal of Renaissance College Hong Kong (RCHK). "There's a lot more emphasis now on computers, and students are attached to their devices more than maybe they were previously, since the computer was their window to the rest of the world during that time."

Aside from learning impairments and developmental delays, emotional well-being has suffered. A survey conducted in 2022 by an NGO, Baptist Oi Kwan Social Service, showed that of the 1,192 secondary school students surveyed, a whopping 48 per cent expressed

symptoms of depression, with 36 per cent displaying moderate to severe signs of depression, while 51 per cent exhibited symptoms of anxiety. When asked the causes, respondents replied that what upset them the most was variously, the pandemic, their education and the state of society today.

While this paints a glum picture, most educators are optimistic that having a strong support system in place at schools could go a long way to remedying the situation. Furthermore, My points out that it's not only Covid-19 that has brought students' stresses to the fore. Hong Kong's academic culture and climate are also impetus for schools to focus on well-being.

"I do feel strongly that in a climate like Hong Kong's where students are often pushed to academically excel, there is a need to constantly remind them that they have to be well to do well," she continues.

So, what does well-being mean for students?

Overall, the schools agree that well-being isn't something that a school has to "do" to a child, but instead should be integral and wholistic, encompassing all the students' experiences from their relationships to activities to their learning and assessments. The school's role in all this is to create an environment that supports students to thrive.

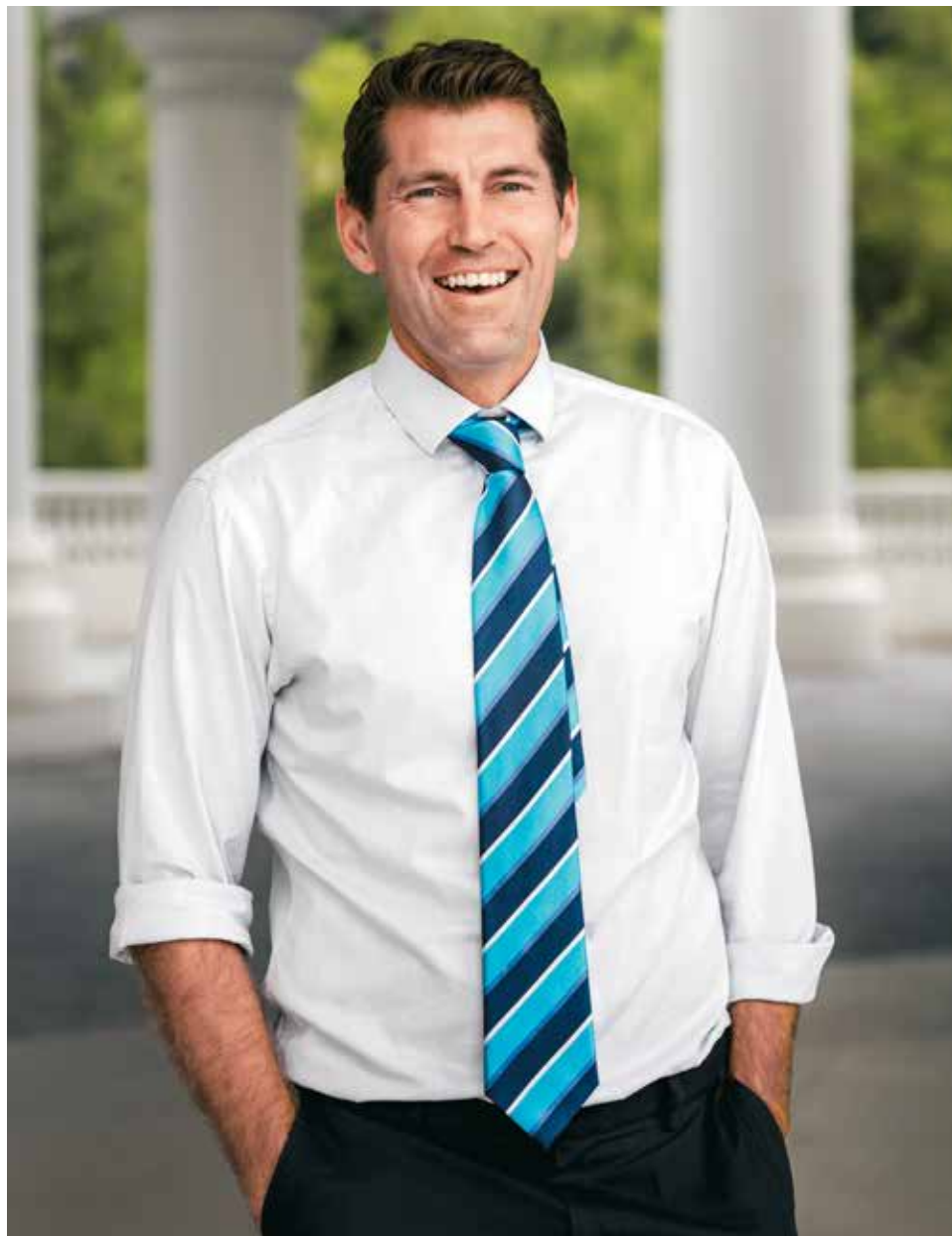
"There needs to be layers of support which allow that scaffolding around the pupil at different stages of their

**Many children are showing negative effects from the relative isolation they faced during the pandemic.**

Photo: Harrow International School Hong Kong



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**TOM HICKS, HARROW HONG KONG**

**Tom Hicks, principal deputy head of pastoral and well-being of Harrow International School Hong Kong.** Photo: Handout

development," explains Tom Hicks, principal deputy head of pastoral and well-being at Harrow International School, Hong Kong. "We know that child development isn't linear and they're going to have ups and downs and bumps in the road, and so we have to make sure that there's a range of people all the way along that journey to walk alongside them, support them, to pick them up and to challenge them."

He emphasised that that was certainly not the role of one person or one department specifically, but instead is the responsibility of the entire school. From the teachers and support staff, to the lunch lady and even the school bus driver, everyone plays a part.

"As the children develop their own independence and resilience, they've got champions all the way, and that's what we mean by a culture of pastoral care," Hicks says.

The importance of that support cannot be understated. Numerous studies show that student well-being and achievement are underscored by wellness, and their emotional and physical state has a significant impact on their academic performance.

"When students feel supported, safe and happy, they are more likely to engage in their studies and perform better," reaffirms ESF's Chitty.

In that respect, schools today are mindful that creating a caring environment is paramount. While each school might do things their own way, pastoral care involves key components and building blocks, the experts say. These include building a community, creating values, nurturing a culture of support, offering support through academics and using the help of technology to track wellness.

To this end, well-being should be overseen and supported by professionals who can address the social, emotional and academic needs of students. This could include guidance counsellors, social workers and learning support specialists, among others.

"The saying that it takes a village to raise a child couldn't be more true. At RCHK, we don't like the idea that you can pass a well-being problem to somebody else because it's not your expertise or your field," says Copley.

So what schools can do is build teams around their needs, advised Hicks. At Harrow Hong Kong, for example, its team of support staff includes 24-hour nursing care, a host of professional guidance counsellors and well-being specialists to cater for its day and boarding students.

Another important element is reinforcing values throughout the school.

Copley explained that at RCHK, its "Heart of RCHK" model is embedded into its core curriculum from Year 1 all the way to Year 13. The model recognises five roots to well-being – health, appreciation, sense of accomplishment, relationships and environment. The school focuses on five strategies to foster these: character strengths, mindfulness, mindset, resilience and positive emotions.

"It's not just a poster that we stick on a wall and forget about it, we live it and make sure that it's part of our identity," Copley says.

In a similar vein, Harrow Hong Kong also drills their "Harrow Values" of honour, courage, fellowship and humility, adding a social vision statement that the school should be a caring and respectful community where everyone thrives.

"And that's really crucial as those statements are absolutely central and guides our community ... so by giving them a framework, there's a value structure," adds Hicks.

Driving home these values and creating a well-being culture has to be done in a systematic way.

"Schools can use tiered systems of support to recognise that that first layer of support is proactive and preventive in nature," My says. "And this should take the form of the curriculum."

My points to a growing body of research that suggests that a social and emotional learning (SEL) curriculum needs to be a core component of education. Included in the curriculum should be topics such as self-awareness, decision-making and emotional regulation.

"These skills are just as important as the knowledge students learn in classrooms," My adds.

Vice-principal of primary (well-being) at RCHK, Dr Stephanie Howdle-Lang, agrees, explaining how its "Heart of RCHK" programme is deeply embedded in every unit and topic that the school covers and that everything is linked back to pillars that support students. "Our approach is to embed well-being throughout the school, we consider it in all decisions we take, too" she says.

On top of a professional guidance team, the school uses systems that help students to feel part of smaller groups like houses. Then it introduces opportunities for them to develop skills of listening and representing others through peer mentors, student councils and so on. Even their primary school is now developing a training programme for "Playground Ambassadors" to promote peaceful and friendly playtimes.

"We want every student to feel known, so we make sure that as well as class teachers, we have other adults who can form relationships with the children, such as counsellors, emotional literacy support assistants and educational assistants," she explained.

Not everybody has the facilities and capabilities to do it all, but it should always be a goal, says Copley.

"Academics and well-being really go hand in hand. The minute you disregard it in favour of academics, it will cause bigger problems down the line."

**My Thanh Mac, head of upper school guidance with students at the Canadian International School of Hong Kong (CDNIS).** Photo: Handout

