

Executive summary

Well-being and social progress are high on the policy agenda of OECD countries.

The policy climate surrounding issues of development and prosperity has gradually shifted during the last decade. There is growing interest in looking beyond the traditional economic measures of success, such as income, employment and gross domestic product (GDP), towards non-economic facets of well-being and social progress, such as health, civic engagement and happiness. Recent prominent initiatives include the French government's Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress (chaired by Joseph Stiglitz, Amartya Sen and Jean-Paul Fitoussi) and the World Health Organization's Commission on Social Determinants of Health (chaired by Michael Marmot). These global actions have been triggered by concerns that society is not as cohesive as it should be, and that citizens are not as healthy and happy as they deserve to be. Several OECD countries have witnessed a decline in indicators of social cohesion such as voting, volunteering and interpersonal trust, changes which may well have major consequences for the quality of democratic societies. Health challenges, triggered by an increasingly high prevalence of obesity and depression, have become a major public health concern, as they lead to a significant reduction in quality of life and raise public expenditures.

Education can play a significant role in promoting well-being and social progress. Moreover, it can be considered a cost-effective approach.

A large body of literature suggests that education is strongly associated with a variety of social outcomes, such as better health, stronger civic and social engagement, and reduced crime. A smaller number of studies further suggest that education has a positive effect on most of these social outcomes. More importantly, from a policy perspective, education has been shown to be a relatively cost-effective means of improving health and reducing crime. This report suggests that school-based interventions can be a cost-effective way to tackle obesity. Hence, education policy can be a viable health policy.

Education empowers individuals by increasing their knowledge and their cognitive, social and emotional skills, as well as improving habits, values and attitudes towards healthy lifestyles and active citizenship.

Education helps individuals make informed and competent decisions by providing information, improving their cognitive skills and strengthening their socio-emotional capabilities, such as resilience, self-efficacy and social skills. As such, education can help individuals follow healthier lifestyles, manage illness, increase their interest in political issues and understand why immigrants can bring substantial benefits to society. Moreover, education can offer an ideal environment for children to develop healthy habits and participatory attitudes. For instance, nutritiously balanced school meals can help develop healthy eating habits and complement classes that inform students about the importance of maintaining a well-balanced diet and nutrition. Open classroom climate, civic classes that require practical involvement in civic matters and school ethos that promote active citizenship can be conducive to stronger civic participation.

But education cannot play its role in isolation...

Children only spend about half of their non-sleeping hours in schools. Certain home and community environments can easily undermine the efforts made by policy makers, teachers and school administrators. For instance, school-based actions to promote healthy lifestyles and habits may not be effective when children have easy access to fast-food restaurants on their way home from school and when they indulge in sedentary activities at home. Likewise, school-based efforts to form active citizens may not be successful if local communities do not provide sufficient opportunities for children to engage in civic activities (*e.g.* girl scouts) and when children do not have enough opportunity to reinforce civic values and attitudes by discussing civic matters with parents at home. Peer effects also matter. Children who engage in risky health behaviour outside of schools (*e.g.* under-age drinking, smoking) are likely to have detrimental peer effects. Clearly, parents and those involved in setting the community environment need to be mindful of what it takes for school-based efforts to work.

... and the power of education is limited if children's cognitive, social and emotional skills are not developed early.

Essential competencies are better acquired even before children start compulsory schooling. Basic cognitive skills, positive attitudes, healthy habits and other personality traits such as patience, self-efficacy and self-confidence can be nurtured in the family environment early in life. Children who start primary school equipped with these basic skills and personality traits

are more capable of enhancing them, developing higher-order competencies and achieving better outcomes in terms of health and social cohesion. Given that a significant fraction of children, mostly from disadvantaged households, are deprived of quality home environments and/or access to quality early childhood education, compulsory and remedial education have an important role to play. For equity purposes, education policy should help address the skills deficits of children who have missed the opportunity to develop basic competencies early in life.

Education policy makers, teachers and school administrators can play an essential role in enhancing health and social cohesion ...

Education policy makers are increasingly challenged to improve results with limited public expenditure. Teachers and school administrators are already over-burdened by pressures to meet the criteria that define success, *e.g.* raising student performance in high-stakes tests, improving the quality of curricula and instruction, and dealing with children from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Does this report suggest that these education stakeholders need significantly more resources and new sets of tasks in order to address diverse societal needs? It is important to realise that education's contribution to addressing societal challenges such as health and social cohesion does not necessarily require significant investments in major curriculum reform, teacher training and reduction of class size. Significant investments have already been made to raise competencies that help improve social outcomes, since these are known to affect educational and labour market success. Moreover, this report proposes changes in the learning environment (school norms and ethos) that would help improve a culture of health, civic engagement and lifestyles among children. This can be accompanied by adjustments in curricular and extra-curricular activities so that children learn active citizenship, healthy lifestyles and balanced diet through practice. In this way, children can improve their competencies (including health competencies or citizenship skills). They would be better prepared to prevent health problems, address health challenges when they occur and to engage in and contribute to the broader society. All of these changes are likely to yield significant societal returns with modest additional investments.

... but the success of these efforts is likely to depend on coherent policies and actions among those working to improve well-being and social progress. This calls for a whole-of-government approach.

School-based efforts to foster well-being and social progress are likely to work better when the home and community environments are synchronised with what children experience in schools. There is also a need to ensure

that educational institutions provide services that are consistent as children progress through education. This suggests the importance of adopting a holistic approach, with all stakeholders fully aware of their responsibilities and those of others. Policy coherence requires governments to promote strong linkage horizontally (*i.e.* across ministries of education, health, family and welfare), vertically (*i.e.* across central, regional and local levels of government) and dynamically (*i.e.* across different levels of education). This is a challenge, as OECD governments have limited experience in fostering such linkage. Governments may consider enhancing governance and management structures as well as policy instruments to improve horizontal, vertical and dynamic collaboration and adopt a whole-of-government approach to social progress.