

**A Collaborative Approach to Evaluating Well-Being in the  
Middle School Setting**

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### **Abstract**

The benefits of a strength-based approach to working with children and adolescents are clearly indicated in the literature while Strengths-Based School Counseling embraces the positive development of students and learning environments. An interdisciplinary research team formed a partnership with a middle school community to intentionally investigate school climate, life satisfaction, wellness, and student motivation in order to promote positive development and overall well-being of middle school students. Students rated moderate to high levels of satisfaction, perceptions of school climate, and overall wellness. Differences in grade levels were indicated. Implications for interdisciplinary teams, evaluation methods, and recommendations to support student wellness are offered.

## **A Collaborative Approach to Evaluating Well-Being in the Middle School Setting**

A large body of literature supports the benefits of a wellness, strength-based approach to working with children and adolescents (McWhirter, McWhirter, McWhirter, & McWhirter, 2006; Myers, Sweeny, & Witmer, 2000; Weissberg, Kumpfer, Seligman, 2003.). Myers et al. defined wellness as “a way of life oriented toward optimal health and well-being in which body, mind, and spirit are integrated by the individual to live more fully within the human and natural community” (p. 252). The field of psychology traditionally has focused on pathology (i.e., diagnoses, maladaptive behaviors, and coping) rather than resilience and well-being. As a result of this focus on pathology, children and adolescents may not be receiving services that are conducive to personal, social, and academic thriving and resilience. Conversely, Strengths Based School Counseling (SBSC) fosters “positive youth development for all students and for the environments that enhance and sustain that development” (Galassi & Akos, 2007, p.2.).

Therefore, with the intention of exploring the multiple dimensions of well-being and helping students thrive in a middle school setting, an interdisciplinary team of faculty members (the authors of this article) from the fields of school counseling, community counseling, school psychology, and educational psychology formed a partnership with Mabry Middle School (this name is fictitious to protect the identity of the school), a local public school. The team agreed to investigate school climate, life satisfaction, wellness, and student motivation in order to understand and hence promote the overall well-being of middle school students in the school.

This team approach is consistent with recommendations of researchers such as Keys, Green, Lockhart, and Luongo (2003), who wrote that school counselors and school psychologists will ideally work collaboratively with other professionals in the school and community to enhance educational and psychological well-being. In addition, the American School Counselors Association's (ASCA) National Model, as well as literature in the field of school counseling, encourage collaborative approaches, such as school, family, and community partnerships, to enhance students' personal, social, academic, and vocational success (American School Counselor Association, 2003; Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy, 2004; Cicero & Barton, 2003). Miller's (2006) exploration of a university-school partnership approach also indicates promising results for intentional, collaborative efforts to strengthen services offered to students in the schools. School, community, and university partnerships can increase the overall effectiveness of research and intervention efforts to enhance the lives of students, especially when school counselors, school psychologists, and other school and community professionals embrace the role of advocate.

In attempting to follow the ASCA National Model's mandate to address the comprehensive needs of their students, the authors completed an extensive literature review in the fields of school counseling, school psychology, and educational psychology in order to determine the concepts most directly related to student wellness. School climate, life satisfaction, and wellness emerged as relevant issues. In addition, the authors chose to include an examination of student motivation. Individual orientations toward motivation are inextricably linked to perceptions regarding the

school experience (Midgley & Edelin, 1998), and further enrich the study by revealing additional information about the participants' interpersonal dynamics.

### **Construct Definitions**

Multiple definitions of school climate are found in the literature (Anderson, 1982; Hoy & Hannum, 1997; Peterson & Skiba, 2001). Often *school climate* is defined in terms of perceptions of important stakeholders regarding interpersonal relationships, and qualities of the school environment. Stevens and Sanchez (1999) have defined school climate as a combination of attitudes, beliefs, and values that influence relationships between and among students and school personnel (i.e., teachers and administrators). Hernandez and Seem (2004) in their conceptualization of school climate offer three components for consideration including: the context of the school (i.e., how the people in the building treat each other); psychosocial variables such as behavioral expectations, communication and student perceptions of control and input; and school based behaviors of staff and students. School climate guides behavioral and attitudinal norms and has been shown to be linked to academic achievement as well as social interaction patterns (Koth, Bradshaw, & Leaf, 2008). School climate has been connected to a variety of student outcomes including absenteeism, self concept, behavior, and rate of suspension (Anderson, 1982; Haynes, Emmons, & Ben-Avie, 1997). Further, collaborative school climates have been found to positively influence school counselors' perceived involvement in promoting school-family-community partnerships (Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy, 2007).

Life satisfaction is a cognitive, global evaluation of one's contentment with life as a whole and involves domains such as self, school, family, friends, and environment

(Huebner, Suldo, & Gilman, 2006). Life satisfaction, along with positive and negative affect, is one of the three major components of one's level of happiness (McCullough, Heubner, & Laughlin, 2000). Relationships exist between students' life satisfaction and school experience, (Suldo, Riley, & Shaffer, 2006) as students' perceptions of their academic ability, teacher support, and satisfaction with school have been found to be connected to overall positive life satisfaction.

Wellness, which connotes the self-evaluation of well-being and optimal health, typically suggests a holistic view of one's life in which cognitive and affective aspects are intentionally integrated with a spiritual dimension (Myers et al., 2000). Because wellness suggests the potential of one's optimum health from a holistic standpoint, it is a particularly relevant consideration for school counselors and psychologists focusing on primary prevention (Rayle & Myers, 2004). As suggested by Doll, Zucker, and Brehm (2004), school-based personnel must continue to look beyond specific "change-the-child" strategies to long-lasting, effective ecological changes that can be fully integrated into the school environment to support and enhance students' wellness. Scales (2005) indicates that " a comprehensive and ecologically sensitive school counseling program would include as an additional intentional element the building of students' individual and collective (i.e., school-wide) developmental assets." Counselors working within this model would embrace the promotion of student wellness and positive school climates.

Motivation can be studied from a variety of perspectives, but in line with the other well-being constructs, we adopted a social-cognitive approach by investigating students' personal motivational orientations for their schoolwork as well as their perceptions of the motivational climate of the school. In particular, this achievement goal framework

evaluates the different goals that are pursued by students and that are promoted in the educational environment (Ames, 1992; Dweck, 1986; Nicholls, 1984). Researchers argue that the particular type of achievement goal adopted (or promoted in the school's climate) shapes how students approach, experience, and react to their school work, while also dramatically impacting students' subsequent affect, cognitions, and behaviors. Two general types of achievement goals have been proposed: mastery and performance. When pursuing *mastery goals*, a student's purpose is to develop competence by acquiring new knowledge and skills. When pursuing *performance goals*, a student's purpose is to demonstrate competence relative to others (or to avoid demonstrating incompetence). Existing research connecting achievement goal pursuit with well-being outcomes argues for the promotion of mastery goals and the minimization of performance goals, especially in middle school settings (Midgley & Edelin, 1998).

### **Goals of the Research Team**

The goals of the interdisciplinary research team were to: (a) use initial survey results to establish baseline markers of school climate, life satisfaction, student wellness, and motivation; and (b) work with Mabry Middle School's Improvement Team to develop an applied research program to understand and affect positive climate, wellness, and motivation. In their review of research and through their own study, Mitchell and Bryan (2007) affirmed that school, family, and community partnerships can result in positive outcomes for students, parents, and schools. Thus, the team took a comprehensive and collaborative approach to data gathering.

In keeping with this collaborative approach, the authors met with school personnel, including members of the School Improvement Team, the principal, and the school counselors in order to determine the most appropriate research procedures. The researchers' involvement in Mabry middle school evolved as the team moved to a deeper, more contextual understanding of this school community. Initially the researchers met with the school principal to elicit primary areas of strengths and needs of the school. They then met with members of the School Improvement Team and listened as members discussed current school improvement goals and their perceptions of the unique school experience at Mabry Middle School. Based on these dialogues, the research team finalized the evaluation measures to ensure that all domains of student wellness that were relevant and of stated importance to the Mabry school community were incorporated in this study. This article outlines the research protocol that was used, the results of our investigation, and recommendations that were made to Mabry Middle School. In addition, suggestions for examining and enhancing student well-being in middle schools, in general, are included.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The sample included 159 middle school students from a public middle school in central Virginia. Seventy-four (74) male and 80 females participated. Five students did not indicate their gender. Students from all three grade levels completed the surveys, resulting in 45 6<sup>th</sup> graders, 56 7<sup>th</sup> graders, 52 8<sup>th</sup> graders, and 6 students who did not indicate their grade level. The majority of student participants were White/European American (N=106). Other participants identified as Black/African American (N=31),



Latino/Hispanic (N=5), and Asian/Pacific Islander (N=3). Nine students identified their ethnicity as Other, and five did not identify their ethnicity.

In addition to the student sample, the research team collected data from 150 parents of the middle school students. In the parent sample, 31 were male and 117 were female (2 did not indicate gender). Parents from all three grade levels completed the surveys (56 indicated having at least one child in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade, 61 having at least one child in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade, and 52 having at least one child in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade). The majority of parent participants were White/European American (N=101) followed by Black/African American (N=27), Latino/Hispanic (N=12), Native American (N=3), and Asian/Pacific Islander (N=1). One parent indicated Other, and five parents did not identify their ethnicity.

## **Measures**

**The Elementary and Middle School Climate Survey – Student Version Revised.** This measure (Emmons, Haynes, & Comer, 2002) consists of descriptive statements designed to assess students' attitudes about their school experience and school climate. This survey measures six different dimensions of school climate from the students' perspective: fairness, order and discipline; parent involvement; sharing resources; student interpersonal relations; and student teacher relations. Each item on the survey is rated on a 3-point scale using the format of agree, not sure, and disagree. Lower scores indicate greater agreement by students that a particular school climate dimension is being promoted in the school.

**The Revised Parent Version of the School Climate Survey.** This measure (Emmons, Haynes, & Comer, 2002) consists of descriptive statements about parents'

perceptions of conditions at the school and its climate. This survey measures eight dimensions of school climate from the parents' perspective: academic focus; achievement motivation; principal caring and sensitivity; collaborative decision making; parent involvement; school building; school-community relations; and student-teacher relations. Each item on the survey is rated on a 5-point scale using the format of strongly agree, agree, not sure, disagree, and strongly disagree. Lower scores indicate more agreement by parents that a particular school climate dimension is being promoted in the school.

**The Multidimensional Students' Life Satisfaction Scale (MSLSS).** The MSLSS (Huebner, 2001) was created due to the increased interest in the promotion of psychological well-being in children and adolescents. Life satisfaction, one component of overall well-being, is a cognitive appraisal or perspective of one's own life. The MSLSS was designed to examine five different dimensions of life satisfaction of a child or adolescent: family, living environment, friends, school, and self. Each item on the survey is rated on a 6-point scale using the format strongly disagree, moderately disagree, mildly disagree, mildly agree, moderately agree, and strongly agree. Higher scores indicate greater agreement by students that they are experiencing life satisfaction in that particular domain. In addition, an overall total score for life satisfaction can be calculated by averaging all of the responses. The validity and reliability of this measure have been adequately shown in work by Huebner (2001).

**The Wellness Evaluation of Lifestyle Inventory (WEL).** The WEL (Myers et al., 2000) is based on a theoretical model called the Wheel of Wellness to represent the overall and specific well-being of an individual. The WEL reflects a holistic approach to

measuring wellness over the lifespan and is based on the theories of Adler, Jung, and Maslow. Specifically, this survey measures five different dimensions of students' wellness: essential self, social self, creative self, physical self, and coping self. Higher scores indicate higher perceptions of wellness for that particular dimension.

Researchers using the WEL also commonly report results in terms of percentage scores, which reflect the amount of endorsement (out of 100%) that an individual reports regarding her or his wellness. This provides a quick profile to use with students and schools to capture their wellness strengths and areas for improvement. The WEL total score reliability has been reported at .91 (Myers et al., 2000).

**The Pattern of Adaptive Learning Scales (PALS).** The PALS (Midgley et al., 1998) are a set of measures based on contemporary approaches to studying students' achievement motivation using Achievement Goal Theory. In the current study, we measured students' perceptions of the achievement goal climate promoted in their classes and by their teachers, as well as their personal achievement goal orientation. Specifically, three dimensions of achievement goal climate and three dimensions of personally adopted achievement goal orientations are assessed with the PALS. Each item on the survey was rated on a Likert-type scale using the format not at all true, somewhat true, and very true. Higher scores indicate greater agreement by students that a particular dimension is true for them or for the climate. The validity and reliability of this measure have been adequately shown in work by Midgley et al., (2000).

## **Procedures**

Packets with information about the Well-being Research Team and the surveys were sent home to the parents of approximately 350 students enrolled in the school.

Parents had the option of completing the parent consent form and the parent school climate survey as well as signing the student consent form, allowing their child to participate in the survey, and sending the packet back to school. Researchers came to the school and distributed surveys to students in 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> grade English classes throughout the day. The student survey consisted of a packet that contained four separate questionnaires (The Elementary and Middle School Climate Survey, MSLSS, WEL, and PALS). Only those students who returned signed consent forms were permitted to take part in the study. Students were also asked for their assent to participate on the day of the study and were free to withdraw from participating at any time.

## **Results**

The relationships between the overall measures of student well-being were examined through correlation analyses. Moderate correlations would suggest related but separate constructs of well-being. Moderate and significant correlations were noted between the measure of student wellness and the measure of life satisfaction. Lower, significant correlations were noted between the measure of student mastery motivation and measures of wellness and life satisfaction. Correlations are reported in Table 1.

### **School Climate**

Student participants reported a moderate total school climate score ( $M=1.95$ ,  $SD=.33$ ). Student participants gave the strongest endorsement (i.e., indicating this dimension is supported and evident in the school) to the dimension of Student-Teacher Relations ( $M=1.56$ ,  $SD=.51$ ). Participants also favorably endorsed Sharing Resources ( $M= 1.75$ ,  $SD=.55$ ) and Fairness ( $M=1.81$ ,  $SD=.58$ ). In contrast, three dimensions

Table 1

*Pearson Product-Moment Correlations between Constructs*

	1 (N=156)	2 (N=159)	3 (N=159)	4 (N=154)	5 (N=154)	6 (N=154)
1. Perceived School Climate	–	-.462*	-.286*	-.339*	-.22*	-.13
2. Life Satisfaction		–	.615*	.518*	.35*	.10
3. Wellness			–	.486*	.38*	.28
4. Mastery Goal Orientation				–	.66*	.42*
5. Performance Approach					–	.66*
6. Performance Avoidance						–

\* $p < .001$ 

received mean scores greater than 2, indicating that participants were less likely to agree that these dimensions were being promoted in school. Parental Involvement ( $M=2.34$ ,  $SD=.55$ ), Order and Discipline ( $M=2.15$ ,  $SD=.45$ ), and Student Interpersonal Relations ( $M=2.09$ ,  $SD=.46$ ) were not strongly endorsed by student participants as evident in the school.

There were no significant mean differences between female and males students on the six dimensions of school climate. Perceptions of school climate were also examined by membership in ethnic groups. No significant differences between ethnic groups emerged with the exception of Asian/Pacific-Islander participants, who reported significantly higher ratings of Order and Discipline than the other ethnic groups,

suggesting that they were less likely to agree that this dimension was promoted in the school (it should be noted that there were only three participants in this ethnic group).

Sixth grade students gave significantly stronger and more favorable endorsement to overall school climate as compared to 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade students,  $F(2,148)=10.71$ ,  $p<.001$ . Significant differences between sixth grade and upper level students were noted on the Fairness dimension,  $F(2,148)=6.64$ ,  $p<.01$ , Order and Discipline dimension,  $F(2,148)=9.24$ ,  $p<.01$ , Parent Involvement,  $F(2,148)=1.62$ ,  $p<.01$ , and Student Interpersonal dimension,  $F(2,148)=6.48$ ,  $p<.01$ . Sixth grade students reported stronger endorsement that these dimensions of favorable climate were evident in their school as compared to 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade students.

Parent participant ratings of the dimensions of school climate were also examined. All eight dimensions (Academic Focus, Achievement Motivation, Principal Caring and Sensitivity, Collaborative Decision Making, Parent Involvement, School Building, School-Community Relations, and Student-Teacher Relations) received mean scores less than 3, indicating that parents were likely to endorse these dimensions as being promoted in school. Parent participants gave the highest endorsement to the School Building dimension ( $M= 1.77$ ,  $SD=.48$ ), indicating they believed the school building was inviting and safe. Parents gave the lowest endorsement to the Parental Involvement dimension ( $M=2.88$ ,  $SD=.83$ ), which suggests they felt meaningful parental involvement was not necessarily promoted at the school.

### **Life Satisfaction**

Student participants reported moderate to high life satisfaction with mean scores above 3 in all domains and a total life satisfaction score in the high range ( $M=4.5$ ,

$SD=.70$ ). Participants indicated highest satisfaction ratings in the Friends domain ( $M=5.28$ ,  $SD=.69$ ) and lowest satisfaction in the School domain ( $M=3.75$ ,  $SD=1.09$ ). The Family domain ( $M=4.52$ ,  $SD=1.14$ ), Living Environment domain ( $M=4.06$ ,  $SD=1.14$ ) and the Self domain ( $M=4.89$ ,  $SD=.87$ ) were all within the moderate range. There were no significant mean differences between female and male participants in the domains of life satisfaction, and no differences noted between ethnic groups. Sixth grade participants reported significantly higher satisfaction with school ( $M=4.31$ ,  $SD=1.22$ ) as compared to 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade participants,  $F(2,150)=8.93$   $p<.01$ .

### **Wellness**

The Total WEL score (based on the subscales of essential self, social self, creative self, physical self and coping self) was in the moderate to high range ( $M=80\%$ ,  $SD=9\%$ ). The WEL dimension receiving the strongest endorsement from participants was the Social Self ( $M=80\%$ ,  $SD=10\%$ ). The social self consists of friendship and love. The WEL dimension receiving the lowest endorsement from participants was Coping ( $M=70\%$ ,  $SD=9\%$ ). The coping self consists of leisure, stress-management, sense of worth, and realistic beliefs. The mean percentage for essential self (spirituality, self-care, gender identity, and cultural identity) was 79% ( $SD=9\%$ ). The mean percentage for creative self (problem-solving, emotional awareness, sense of control, humor, and work) was 73%. The mean percentage for physical self (nutrition and exercise) was 77% ( $SD=15\%$ ). There were no significant differences between female and male participants, ethnic groups or grade level of participants on the Total WEL or on any of the WEL subscales.

## Motivation

Student participants gave the strongest endorsement to the classroom Mastery Goal ( $M= 4.12$ ,  $SD=.79$ ), as compared to the classroom Performance-Approach Goal ( $M=3.32$ ,  $SD=.82$ ) and the classroom Performance-Avoidance Goals ( $M=2.85$ ,  $SD=1.08$ ). This aligns with current goal orientation theory regarding the benefits of higher levels of mastery goal climate and lower levels of performance goal climate in classrooms. Similarly, the students gave highest endorsement to the personal Mastery Goal ( $M= 4.01$ ,  $SD=.79$ ), as compared to the Performance-Approach goal ( $M=3.47$ ,  $SD=.87$ ) and the Performance-Avoidance goal ( $M=4.44$ ,  $SD=.96$ ).

In summary, students rated school climate, life satisfaction, overall wellness, mastery goal classroom climate and mastery goal personal orientation in the moderate to high ranges. Some differences between grade levels were found, with sixth graders tending to give stronger endorsements to measures of school climate and life satisfaction. Table 2 illustrates the significantly different findings between grade levels for these variables.

## Discussion

Consideration of student well-being, based on the premises of positive psychology, requires a comprehensive and intentional examination by school personnel. In this study, four overarching constructs were evaluated, including perceptions of school climate, cognitive appraisals of overall and domain-specific life satisfaction, student self-perception of wellness (e.g., coping self, social self), and achievement motivation patterns. As expected, variables of well-being were related to each other yet remained separate entities with moderate to low significant correlations noted between



Table 2

*School Climate: Significant Differences in Variables by Reported Grade Level*

	<b>6</b>		<b>7</b>		<b>8</b>	
	(N = 45)		(N = 56)		(N = 52)	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Fairness	1.57	.54	1.98	.55	1.83	.58
Order and Discipline	1.92	.50	2.29	.55	2.20	.40
Parent Involvement	2.12	.57	2.46	.49	2.41	.57
Student Interpersonal Relations	1.89	.45	2.20	.55	2.15	.50
Total Climate	1.78	.33	2.05	.27	1.99	.32
School Satisfaction	4.31	1.22	3.56	.90	3.51	.98

the variables. Positive ratings of school climate from students were related to greater student life satisfaction and to higher scores on wellness indicators. In addition, ratings of achievement motivation indicative of a mastery orientation as opposed to a performance orientation were associated with higher ratings of school climate, life satisfaction, and wellness indicators.

The participants in this study reported moderate to high indicators of well-being, as demonstrated in previous studies examining various constructs of positive psychology (Huebner, Drane, & Valois, 2000). Generally, middle school students viewed school climate favorably. However, an analysis of specific dimensions of school climate does highlight targeted areas for prevention and intervention work. For example,

middle school students as a whole did not view parental involvement as evident in their school. They also reported more negative impressions of order and discipline and student-interpersonal relations.

Sixth grade students in this study expressed significantly more favorable views of the specific dimensions of school climate as compared to 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders. Thus, replication of certain components of the 6<sup>th</sup> grade experience at this school for the other grade levels would be recommended. School personnel might also consider if this particular cohort of 6<sup>th</sup> graders shared previous experiences, attitudes or school programming leading to higher perceptions of current school climate as compared to the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade cohorts (i.e., an obvious cohort effect).

Parents in this study expressed most concern about low parental involvement. In contrast, parents endorsed positive perceptions of the school facility, which is a necessary component to favorable school climate. This perception provides administrators with helpful justification for resources needed to create and maintain quality physical environments but suggests that parents who perhaps want to be involved in the school either do not participate as much as they would like.

Students in this study expressed moderate to high levels of overall satisfaction. As found in previous examinations of domain-specific student life satisfaction, students expressed lowest satisfaction with their school experience. Cognitive appraisals of satisfaction are related to optimal psychosocial functioning; high life satisfaction can serve as a protective factor for a variety of mental health concerns (Gilman & Huebner, 2006). Promotion of well-being for these middle school students could therefore emphasize school factors such as the presence of supportive adults and safe

environments. Again, 6<sup>th</sup> graders in this study demonstrated higher levels of overall and domain-specific life satisfaction, providing school personnel with a more targeted audience for prevention and intervention efforts. This finding also suggests that the experience of 6<sup>th</sup> graders in this school is worthy of further investigation to better identify what resources and supports seem to contribute to student satisfaction.

Students in this study endorsed moderate to high views of their social, creative and physical self. As shown in other research examining coping of middle school students, student coping strategies such as stress management and promotion of realistic beliefs were in need of support. Students endorsed views of mastery achievement motivation as opposed to performance motivation both in the classroom environment and within themselves. This aligns with current goal orientation theory where higher levels of mastery goal climate and lower levels of performance goal climate in individual classroom settings and within the personal view is desirable (Brophy, 2004; Midgley & Erdelin, 1998). Thus, the students and teachers were apparently exhibiting beneficial approaches to motivation.

### **Limitations of the study**

Although the collaborative research team and members of the Mabry Middle School community gathered comprehensive data from students and parents that were useful in determining baseline benchmarks of well-being, some limitations were evident in this study. First, additional constituents such as teachers should be included in future data collection regarding student well-being. Positive teacher-student relationships are critical to the overall well-being of students, and teachers' voices must be represented and heard. Also, archival and existing data sources that emphasize student success

indicators might be included in future examinations of student well-being. For example, data regarding student participation in school sponsored activities, parent participation in school sponsored events, attendance rates for parent-teacher conferences, and achievement markers would provide relevant information about all the research constructs. Future evaluations of student well-being might include additional constructs such as perceptions of student belonging or connectivity to the school. Finally, the findings of this study cannot be generalized to other school communities; rather, they are specific to this middle school.

### **Suggestions for School Counselors**

This article presents an example of a collaborative approach to evaluating and promoting multidimensional well-being in the middle school setting. School personnel were receptive to these findings, and the university and school team worked together to review findings and determine intervention steps. Overall, the authors were impressed with the receptivity of Mabry Middle School administrators, faculty, parents, and students. These various constituents demonstrated high levels of interest in the welfare of Mabry's students and appeared to want to enhance the school experience. The existence of the School Improvement Team was an example of their commitment to continually assess and positively influence Mabry's students. Obviously, school counselors and other school personnel should continually promote the purpose, goals, and practical utility of school improvement teams. Based on the results of the study, the authors proposed several steps meant to build on the existing level of investment of members of the Mabry Middle School community as described below.

Simcox, Nuijens, and Lee (2006) outlined four levels of intervention for collaborative partnerships used to promote cultural competence in the school setting. These levels of inter-collaborative intervention are a useful framework for organizing the recommendations our team made to Mabry Middle School. Simcox et al. identified Level I as "Student Centered Interventions," Level II as Family Empowerment, Level III as Collegial Consultation, and Level IV as Brokering Community Resources. Evidence-based recommendations made by the university team to the school can be found in the Appendix. These recommendations grew out of a collaborative decision-making process as well as consultation with the School Improvement Team regarding the research results. The intention to assess and enhance student well-being by examining constructs such as life satisfaction, wellness, and motivation are laudable and suggest that the school administration of Mabry Middle School are focused on prevention and positive action. Thus, the primarily positive findings of this research are not surprising. Even so, the recommendations provided in the Appendix are, to some degree, applicable to middle schools in general. Through their involvement with Mabry Middle School, the researchers were struck by several issues that seem relevant for middle school personnel.

First, although the intrapersonal, interpersonal, and physical maturation of middle-school students varies widely, the transition from elementary to middle school is a significant psychological shift that warrants attention and perhaps intervention. At Mabry, the school personnel attended to this shift in part by physically separating the 6<sup>th</sup> grade students from the older students as much as possible. In addition, school counselors and psychologists are encouraged to balance an elementary school- vs.

middle school-based approach to their interventions by acknowledging the comfort of the past while emphasizing the potential of the future. Classroom guidance lessons, for instance, could allow students time to share their hopes and fears regarding middle school, and school counselors and psychologists could assist teachers in responding appropriately to the students' developmental levels. Koth et al. (2008) found that implementing within-school strategies to improve relationships of teachers and students as well as peer relationships may be more effective in increasing ratings of school climate than school-wide interventions such as decreasing class size. From these findings, school personnel might assume that prevention and intervention strategies which involve parents, increase physical and psychological safety of students, and promote student connectedness and friendship, would be of value to the overall well-being of all students. Given the limited school personnel and resources often available to promote prevention and intervention activities, consideration of the obvious varying needs by grade level would be prudent.

In addition, the three groups of students typically represented in most middle schools undoubtedly face distinct challenges. School counselors and psychologists could offer professional development training to teachers and other school personnel regarding the unique challenges and joys of being 6<sup>th</sup> graders "on the fringe," 7<sup>th</sup> graders "in the middle," and 8<sup>th</sup> graders "on the cusp." These types of training opportunities could also be extended to parents and families, many of whom may welcome the chance to learn more about reasonable expectations for this age group. As parents are invited into the school for these types of events, the potential for positive reactions toward parental involvement are enhanced. Finally, school counselors who wish to

establish a partnership to evaluate well-being in their own schools might consider taking the following steps. First, school counselors can bring together an in-house collaborative team comprised of school personnel such as school counselors, school psychologists, teachers, administrators, and student and parent representatives. The school may wish to use an already established team, as did Mabry Middle School.

Second, the team leader could contact local universities and/or community agencies invested in improving schools through research and practice. The university represented by the authors promoted K-12 partnerships and made public its commitment to the enhancement of K-12 education in the state. University academic departments and/or programs such as counseling or counselor education, psychology, school psychology, education, or a campus research office could be initial points of contact. Some universities have centers dedicated to collaborative work with school systems.

Third, the school team and university team could meet and determine the most appropriate research protocol for the particular school. Focus groups, narrative interviews and other qualitative methods should be considered. In addition, the team may wish to involve community organizations which are known to promote evidence-based research and practices to enhance the well-being of children and families. Once the research protocol is determined, methods of collecting and analyzing data should be agreed upon, including determining who "owns" the data. Parental permission must be obtained and in keeping with Section G.1.c. of the American Counseling Association's (2005) Code of Ethics, "When independent researchers do not have access to an Institutional Review Board (IRB), they should consult with researchers who are familiar

with IRB procedures to provide appropriate safeguards” (p. 17).

Fourth, after the data are collected, the consulting teams should come together and review the results, determining next steps that are most appropriate for the school. Open communication with all constituents is recommended, inviting participation from all to enhance the school community for everyone. A strength-based approach to enhancing well-being should be maintained so that assets discovered are highlighted and celebrated.

Finally, the school, university, and community teams involved can work together to implement and assess the effectiveness of the interventions determined. If the teams work together to determine intervention steps as well as evaluation procedures for these steps, improvements in school climate, life satisfaction, wellness, and achievement motivation will likely be achieved.



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## Appendix

### Evidence Based Recommendations to Support Student Wellness

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#### **I: Student Centered**

- Explore developmentally appropriate ways to replicate aspects of the sixth grade environment for 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders.
- Consider potential remedies for some students' concerns about order and discipline in the school (i.e. focus groups of students and school personnel, review efficacy of discipline procedures).
- Consider programs focused on wellness-based coping skills, targeting stress-management and realistic beliefs.
- Ask for 6<sup>th</sup> graders to provide their views, individually or in focus group format, what they like about school.
- Ask 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders to provide their views, individually or in focus group format, what, if anything, they miss about their 6<sup>th</sup> grade experience.

#### **II. Family Empowerment**

- Further investigate avenues of expanding parental involvement beyond the sixth grade.
- Invite family members to serve as liaisons to the School Improvement Team; charge them with helping to find effective ways of increasing parental involvement.

- Develop specific initiatives to highlight vital participation by all parents in their children's school and life experiences (i.e. meetings, psychoeducation, newsletters, community events and celebrations).
- Hold focus groups, meetings, or social events to review results and gather family input.

### **III. Collegial Consultation**

- Consult School Improvement Team about findings and ask them to determine additional recommendations.
- Ask School Improvement Team how future research efforts could be made stronger for the benefit of school constituents.
- Hold focus groups, meetings, or social events with all school personnel to review results and gather input for school-specific interventions.

### **IV. Brokering Community Resources**

- Hold focus groups, meetings, or social events to review and gather input from community organizations that intersect with Mabry Middle School (i.e. after-school programs, community mental health services, the city's Office on Youth).
  - Co-construct relevant programs to strengthen relationships between and among students, families, and schools by tapping into community resource events (i.e. family community nights, safety trainings, middle-school social events, community health fairs, etc.)
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### **Biographical Statements**

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Dr. Tammy D. Gilligan is Professor and faculty member of the School Psychology Program at James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Virginia. She is a Licensed Clinical Psychologist in Virginia and worked as a school psychologist in Nebraska, Pennsylvania, and Maryland before joining the faculty at JMU in 1998. She obtained her Ph.D. in School Psychology at the University of South Carolina. Dr. Gilligan teaches courses in consultation and system intervention, cognitive and behavioral interventions, ethics and legal issues of school psychology and coordinates the internship in school psychology. She is Past President of the Virginia Academy of School Psychology and remains a current board member. Dr. Gilligan has presented at state and national conferences on issues of school climate, student well-being and promotion of satisfaction and healthy development of children and adolescents.

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