

Well-Being, Success, and the Gallup Student Poll

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Some people think that well-being is a byproduct of doing well in school and succeeding at work. Recent research suggests that well-being leads to success in both school (Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005) and work (Boehm & Lyubomirsky, 2008; Judge & Hurst, 2008).

The Gallup Student Poll items that measure well-being reflect a broad view of the concept. Nobel laureate Daniel Kahneman makes note of the distinction between evaluative well-being and experienced well-being. As described by Kahneman, evaluative well-being is the way people remember their experiences after they are over and experienced well-being is concerned with momentary affective states and the way people feel about experiences in real-time. Evaluative well-being is rooted in the remembering self and includes individual assessments of life. On the other hand, experienced well-being seeks to bypass the effects of judgment and memory and capture emotions as close to the subject's immediate experience as possible.

Well-Being and Success

Well-being, how we think about and experience our lives, tells us how our students are doing today and predicts their success in the future.

In an examination of evaluative well-being, high school freshmen with high well-being earned more credits with a higher GPA than peers with low well-being. Specifically, the typical student with high well-being earns 10% more credits and a 2.9 GPA (out of 4.0), whereas a student with low well-being, completing fewer credits, earns a 2.4 (Gallup, 2009a).

Regarding experienced well-being, most directly measured as positive affect, Lyubomirsky (Boehm & Lyubomirsky, 2008; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005) reviewed cross-sectional, experimental, and longitudinal evidence and found that reports of feeling joyful,

excited, or pleasant among other positive emotions are predictors of success and numerous behaviors associated with success. In an exploratory study of the experienced well-being of high school freshmen, those students who reported they experienced joy and interest yesterday (versus those who had not) had better academic records (Gallup, 2009a).

Well-Being and Findings From the March 2009 Gallup Student Poll

The Gallup Student Poll surveyed 70,078 students in grades 5 through 12 from 335 schools and 59 districts located in 18 states and the District of Columbia. The online poll was completed on school computers during one of four March fielding options; polls were open Tuesday through Friday during school hours.

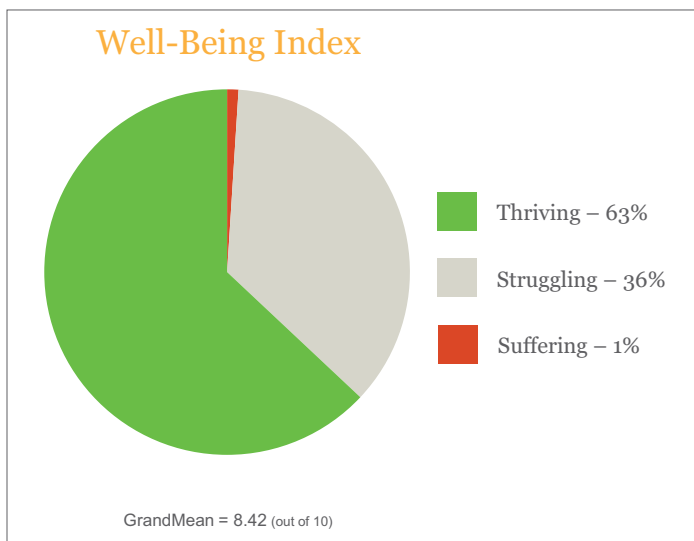
Evaluative well-being -- how we think about our lives -- is measured by the Gallup Student Poll Well-Being Index. The following items comprise the index:

Please imagine a ladder with steps numbered from zero at the bottom to ten at the top. The top of the ladder represents the best possible life for you, and the bottom of the ladder represents the worst possible life for you. On which step of the ladder would you say you personally feel you stand at this time? (presented with an interactive ladder graphic)

On which step do you think you will stand about five years from now?

When students were asked to respond to the questions based on the classic Cantril Self-Anchoring Striving Scale (ladder questions presented above), the average response was 7.32. When asked: "On which step do you think you will stand about five years from now?" students' average response was 8.42. Evaluative well-being varies little across grade levels.

The well-being classification system of Thriving, Struggling, and Suffering is used to summarize a student's responses to both items. Nearly two-thirds of students are thriving; they think about their present and future life in positive terms, and they tend to be in good health and have strong social support. Just over one-third of students are struggling or suffering. Those individuals with low well-being tend to lack adequate personal and social resources.



Experienced well-being -- how we feel about our lives -- is measured by the Gallup Student Poll Positive Yesterday Index, made up of these items:

- Were you treated with respect all day yesterday?
- Did you smile or laugh a lot yesterday?
- Did you learn or do something interesting yesterday?
- Did you have enough energy to get things done yesterday?

Almost 52% of respondents were treated with respect all day yesterday. Over three-fourths (80%) of students indicated that

Only 30% of American students reported having a positive yesterday

they smiled or laughed a lot yesterday. Around 70% reported that they learned or did something interesting yesterday. Most students (72%) had enough energy to get things done yesterday. Only 30% of the March 2009 students who completed the poll said "yes" to all four items.

Additional analyses on these four items suggested that there is a downward well-being trend by grade; students, as a group, experience fewer positive yesterdays as they advance from elementary school to high school. Also, class size is negatively associated with the Positive Yesterday Index; larger the class, lower the well-being.

Neither the Well-Being Index nor the Positive Yesterday Index for schools were associated with a rough indicator of income, the percentage of students received free or reduced lunch within a school.

Boost Well-Being

Well-being is malleable (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009; Suldo, Huebner, Michalowski, & Thalji, in press). We can boost well-being in America by intentionally targeting students' thoughts and feelings.

References

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*Students responded "yes" to all four items that make up the Positive Yesterday Index.