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Toward a Framework for Educational Leadership for Well-being

Whitney M Hegseth¹, Rebecca Lowenhaupt², Gabrielle Oliveira³, Sarah Bruhn⁴, Betty Lai²

¹ Educational Leadership & Higher Education, Boston College, ² Boston College, ³ Harvard University, ⁴ University of Pennsylvania

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In the United States, youth well-being is at risk. In October of 2021, the American Academy of Pediatrics and others declared a national state of emergency in children's mental health. What is more, for the millions of students in U.S. public schools who are labeled English learners, the more universal challenges to their well-being can be compounded by factors such as losses during the immigration process, or discrimination and exclusion in schools and society. This paper responds to these obstacles for youth by working toward defining a framework for educational leadership for well-being. Informed by previous literature, our definition of well-being extends beyond individual wellness and involves equipping youth to create a better world. Further, we comprehend leadership as being distributed, extending across sectors, and requiring ongoing partnership with youth and their communities. Informed by both the literature and our research-practice partnership aimed at understanding and improving youth well-being, our framework emphasizes the following when thinking about leadership efforts to support well-being: 1) well-being is situated; 2) well-being can be supported systemically; and 3) supports for youth well-being should consider youth's conceptualizations of well-being, and of their community. This framework thus invites researchers and educational leaders alike to work in increasingly distributed ways, actively involving youth and the community when tackling matters of well-being and equity.

Toward a Framework for Educational Leadership for Well-being

In the United States, youth well-being is at risk. In October of 2021, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, and the Children's Hospital Association declared a national state of emergency in children's mental health (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2021). In that same year, three in five teenaged girls in the United States reported feeling persistently sad or hopeless — a 60% increase over the past decade (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023) — and the U.S. Surgeon General warned that young people “are facing ‘devastating’ mental health effects as a result of the challenges experienced by their generation, including the coronavirus pandemic” (Richtel, 2021, para. 1). What is more, for the more than 5 million students in U.S. public schools who are labeled English learners (ELs) (NCES, 2019), these more universal challenges to their well-being can be compounded by losses during the immigration process, pressure to learn the dominant language and culture,

and/or discrimination and exclusion in schools and society (Harklau & Moreno, 2019; Juang et al., 2018; Rishel & Miller, 2017). To put it simply, our young people — especially those most marginalized — are facing complex and often overwhelming obstacles as they strive toward wellness.

This paper responds to these obstacles for youth by working toward defining a framework for educational leadership for well-being. Like other scholars and practitioners, our vision of well-being includes equipping youth to build a better world, in addition to tending to their physical, mental, and social health (Shirley & Hargreaves, 2022; World Health Organization, 2020). Importantly, our focus on youth and community well-being is inextricably bound up in leadership efforts at equity, addressing those root causes that impact well-being (Bishop & Noguera, 2019; Germain, 2022). Further, given we grapple with how to enact educational policies and practices that enable young people to achieve and maintain well-being in all aspects of their lives, and not just academically, our framework is relevant to a moral vision of educational leadership.

The framework we develop here is informed by putting previous literature in conversation with the empirical research our team has conducted. Our longitudinal study focuses on a cross-sector initiative, the Children's Cabinet, that we have participated in establishing with our district partners in a small city in the Northeast. Children's Cabinet initiatives have been undertaken in primarily urban areas around the U.S. to provide a “designated forum for regular collaboration among all the government agencies and external organizations that serve children and youth” (Ed Redesign, 2019, p. 4). Our research team has been a core partner in this Children's Cabinet since its inception in March, 2021. The structure of the Cabinet is depicted in [Figure 1](#); it includes over 30 institutional and community leaders and was spearheaded by the public school district and city manager. Our participatory design study has engaged these diverse stakeholders in a community process of understanding, assessing, and improving well-being as situated in one immigrant-serving community. In this way, we respond to calls to work across sectors and to involve the broader community when thinking about how to lead for well-being (Germain, 2022; Heineke et al., 2023; King et al., 2014).

This paper focuses on *leadership* for well-being. Previous scholars have already worked extensively to define and outline well-being; its subjective and objective dimensions, and its relational and interactive characteristics (e.g., Diener et al., 1999; Heineke et al., 2023; McGregor et al., 2007). Building upon their work, we argue that, in order to lead for well-being, it is important to recognize that well-being is situated, and that it can be supported systemically. What is more, when thinking through school and community supports for youth well-being, such supports should consider youth's own conceptualizations of well-being and of their community. Understanding such nuances in how the term well-being can be defined and

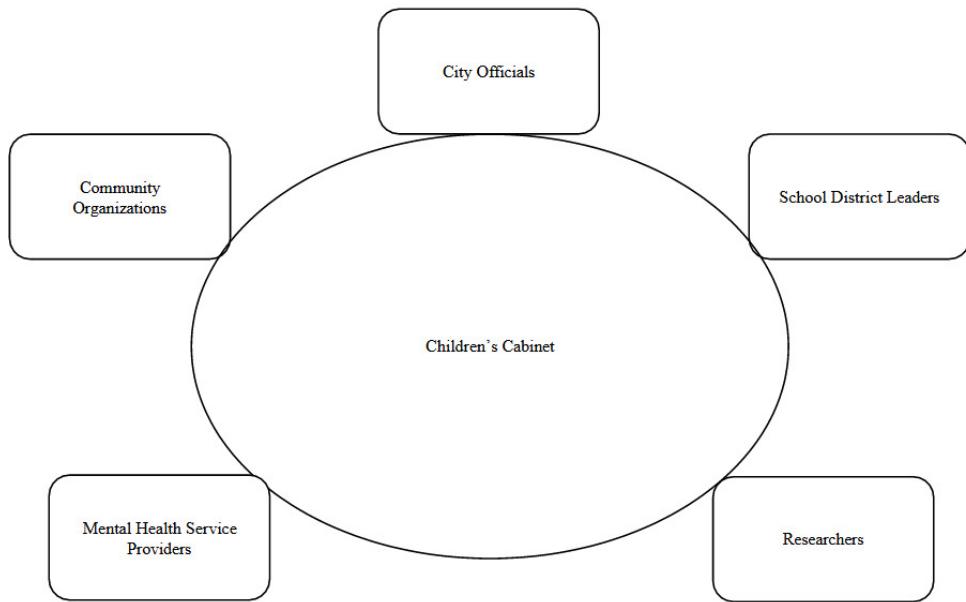


Figure 1. The structure of the Children's Cabinet.

operationalized is a step toward leading schools and communities through a process of integrating concern for well-being alongside concern for academic excellence and equity.

This paper proceeds as follows. We first review the relevant literature, and then outline a framework for educational leadership for well-being, which emphasizes the situated and systemic nature of well-being, and how the concept should be defined from the ground up. We then reflect on the ways in which our framework and our research-practice partnership have evolved and informed one another. Finally, we conclude with implications for research and practice pertaining to educational leadership for well-being.

Review of the Relevant Literature

In this section, we review three relevant themes from the literature, which inform our own theorizing about educational leadership for well-being. These themes relate to: 1) defining well-being; 2) well-being in schools; and 3) educational leadership for well-being.

Defining Well-being

Over the past few decades, researchers across disciplines (e.g., psychology, development, education) have worked to define and conceptualize well-being. This scholarship highlights that:

- a) well-being is multi-dimensional;
- b) some dimensions of well-being are subjective, others are objective; and
- c) although dimensions of well-being have been validated across cultures and contexts, there is also a need to assess locally relevant indicators of well-being.

Scholars have defined multiple, sometimes conflicting, dimensions of well-being. For example, when discussing well-being as a construct for expanding equity, Germain (2022) discusses three interrelated dimensions of well-being: opportunity, trust, and agency. Harrell (2014, 2015) argues that well-being has two dimensions: *hedonic* (comprised of positive emotion and cognition) and *eudaimonic* (focusing on the meaning of life and self-actualization). Based on this framework, Harrell developed a measure of well-being that assesses psychological, physical, relational, collective, and transcendent aspects of well-being. Harrell argues (2014) that for children to be well, we must tend to them physically, psychologically, socially, and spiritually.

Despite multiple definitions of the dimensions of well-being, scholars recognize that well-being is comprised of both subjective and objective dimensions, as well as the interaction between the two. When discussing well-being, which they state ranges from misery to elation, Diener and colleagues (1999) explain the need to examine interactions between personal characteristics and situational factors, as different people will respond to the same situation in different ways. Similarly, McGregor and colleagues (2007) cite the need to combine subjective and objective dimensions when defining well-being. Such a conceptualization permits an understanding of both the agency inherent in individuals' actions and aspirations, along with the affordances and constraints of broader social structures. By considering both subjective and objective dimensions of well-being, we can better understand why some people are better able to achieve and maintain wellness.

Just as well-being can be defined in subjective and objective terms, the concept can be defined both universally and locally. In their literature review of well-being, even as they argue for the person-specific and culture-specific nature of well-being, King and colleagues (2014) cite seven foundational dimensions of well-being, stating these dimensions have been validated across multiple different cultures. The dimensions are: (1) material, (2) bodily, (3) social, (4) emotional, (5) psychological, (6) productivity/accomplishment, and (7) autonomy. Similarly, in their efforts to introduce a methodology for researching well-being, McGregor and colleagues (2007) offer one way to reconcile local and global definitions of well-being when stating, "we build the case for recognition that social and cultural resources are significant at a universal level for understanding how different households meet or fail to meet needs, but equally affirm that the local details of the processes involved are essential for correct interpretation of the results" (p. 128). In this way, well-being can be both universally and locally understood, and defined.

While some objective components of well-being exist, there are subjective aspects that will vary by individuals and situational context that must also be considered.

Well-being in Schools

Thinking about well-being in the context of schools has become an important topic globally (Buchanan et al., 2023). When Clark and colleagues (2018) synthesized several international studies relating to well-being, they

concluded that schools can positively affect the emotional health of children, as well as their academic performance and behavior. There is a body of international evidence that suggests school-based interventions that promote Social Emotional Learning (SEL) lead to long-term benefits for young people, including improved mental health, social functioning, academic performance, and positive health behaviors (Barry et al., 2017; Durlak & DuPre, 2008; Payton et al., 2008; Weare & Nind, 2011). The research also indicates that the development of social and emotional skills provides the skill base for the prevention of a wider range of problem behaviors, such as substance misuse, anti-social behavior, and risky health and sexual behaviors (Institute of Medicine Report (IOM), 2009; Weare & Nind, 2011). Thus, school support for youth well-being has promising short- and long- term implications.

In the United States, the recent uptick in discussion and action related to student well-being in schools has focused almost exclusively on one facet of well-being: SEL. This interest in supporting SEL predates the COVID-19 pandemic; school districts were spending over \$20 billion a year on SEL in the United States, and teachers reported spending 8% of their time on it (Krachman & Larocca, 2017). However, in a 2021 survey, 84% of educators reported that SEL had become more important since the pandemic (Hanover Research, 2021). Today, many U.S. states have learning standards that are explicitly concerned with SEL; SEL frameworks exist, such as the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (Greenberg, 2023).

Alongside these standards and frameworks, there was Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief funding to support SEL in schools (Bergin et al., 2023). In these ways, SEL is increasingly being supported within schools.

Even as schools have relied heavily on SEL programs, such initiatives have been critiqued for relying on individual strategies and models of self, while failing to address the systemic and community issues that hinder youth well-being (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2018; Hoffman, 2009; Jagers et al., 2019; Simmons, 2019). What is more, research on youth receiving school mental health care found that racial/ethnic minority youth were more likely to receive school-based mental health services in separate settings (J. G. Green et al., 2020). Despite this focus on SEL, there also exists research and action around promoting other facets of well-being in schools. For example, Challenge Success draws on previous research and their current partnerships with school communities to identify key drivers of student stress — grades, workload, and lack of sleep — and to promote practices to support student well-being in schools (e.g., rethinking assessment, starting the school day later, see Miles & Pope, 2023).

For the framework we propose here, we align our conceptualization of well-being to that which is put forth by other researchers (Shirley & Hargreaves, 2022) and organizations like UNESCO and WHO. Specifically,

in the term “well-being,” we comprehend something that extends beyond SEL, and even more multifaceted wellness: the term also includes youth’s efforts to build a better world, one in which achieving and maintaining such wellness is more viable.

When discussing educational leadership for well-being, then, we recognize that well-being exists on a spectrum from misery to elation (Diener et al., 1999) *and* that schools can equip youth to move the needle on that spectrum, for themselves and for the world at large.

Educational Leadership for Well-being

Leadership efforts to support youth well-being can and must necessarily extend beyond the classroom-level. Indeed, student well-being is included in each of the ten Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015). Further, at the state level, more guidance and resources are being channeled toward social-emotional well-being supports (Yoder et al., 2020). As promising as these national and state-level supports may be, research suggests that district-level leaders are still in the early stages of conceptualizing and enacting care and support for student well-being (Kennedy, 2022). Given how omnipresent this term has become in response to the global pandemic and ongoing social tensions around race, racism, and identity, educational leaders need a framework for well-being that allows them to address the situated and evolving challenges facing youth.

When developing educational policies and practices, leadership efforts to support well-being must also strengthen relationships to account for the holistic, lived experiences of youth (Allbright et al., 2019; Kennedy, 2019). Scholars who address equity issues in schools have highlighted the role care plays in leadership practice, asserting that it is essential for leaders to embrace an ethic of care for individual students (Khalifa, 2020; Rivera-McCutchen, 2021).

Scholarship focusing on social justice has similarly emphasized the need for educational leaders to attend to the whole person to counteract dehumanizing structures and policies in schools (Scanlan, 2023; Theoharis, 2007). At the heart of these leadership perspectives is a focus on building relational trust and care (Bryk & Schneider, 2002), both among educators working in schools and with the youth they serve.

Recognizing the need to support the holistic experiences of youth, some scholars have highlighted that these experiences are not bounded by schools and call for a consideration of community assets when attending to the whole experience of childhood (T. L. Green, 2017). Taking this perspective, our framework conceptualizes leadership for well-being as necessarily bringing community efforts together to address well-being. In this vein, we recognize leadership for well-being as distributed, occurring among individuals and taking place through interactions and relationships (Spillane, 2012). Drawing on distributed leadership theory, we acknowledge that various actors engage in leadership individually and collectively (Harris, 2020; Harris et al., 2022;

Spillane, 2012), and we consider how both formal and informal leaders enact change across roles (Spillane et al., 2001). Our framework thus accounts for the ways in which educators, community members in various institutions, and the youth whom educators are seeking to support engage in leadership practices that can foster well-being.

In this paper, then, our view of leadership is as comprehensive as our definition of well-being. When defining a framework for leadership for well-being, we contend such leadership efforts are strengthened when they are shared, cross-sector, and in continual conversation with youth and the broader community. While some scholars have begun to consider the supports and practices district leaders need to further well-being within schools (e.g., Kennedy, 2022), our understanding of educational leadership here adds to that work by taking a more comprehensive perspective on leadership that moves beyond the boundaries of school and formal leadership roles.

Theorizing Educational Leadership for Well-being

We now propose a framework concerned with educational leadership for well-being, which resulted from putting the above literature in conversation with our own empirical work drawn from a case study of our ongoing research-practice partnership. As previously mentioned, this partnership centers a Children's Cabinet aimed at improving youth well-being in a small, urban, primarily Latinx community composed of recent immigrants and children of immigrants from various parts of Latin America (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). Within this community's schools, approximately 90% of students identify as Hispanic and speak a language other than English, and approximately 40% of students formally identified as English Learners in the 2021-2022 school year.

Our research team has been a core partner in the Cabinet since its inception in March, 2021. We draw on the principles and tools of Participatory Design Research (PDR) to support our collaboration (Bang & Vossoughi, 2016; Ishimaru et al., 2018; Penuel, 2019), and we rely on case study methods to document and share insights from our design process (Yin, 2009). Data sources we are gathering for the project include: 1) semi-structured interviews with cabinet members; 2) semi-structured interviews with high school youth; and 3) ethnographic fieldnotes taken during planning and cabinet meetings as well as community events led by the Children's Cabinet. Given we are still undergoing formal analysis of the varied data sources, in this paper, we reference data not to report on empirical findings, but rather to reflect on the ways in which our framework and our research-practice partnership are evolving and informing one another.

In this framework, which is represented in [Figure 2](#), we emphasize the following when thinking about leadership efforts to support well-being: 1) well-being is situated; 2) well-being can be supported systemically; and 3) supports for youth well-being should consider youth's conceptualizations of well-being, and of their community. In the sections that follow, we will

elaborate upon these assertions and begin to discuss their implications for educational leaders. When reviewing these sections, it is important to keep in mind our comprehensive definitions of both well-being, and of leadership. That is, well-being extends beyond individual wellness and involves equipping youth to create a better world. Further, educational leadership for well-being is distributed, extending across sectors, and requiring ongoing partnership with youth and their communities.

Well-being is Situated

To support well-being, educational leaders must recognize its situated nature. The experiences of youth are shaped by myriad features of their ever-changing context, including sociopolitical, cultural, economic, historical, and geographic. In light of this, our framework centers the notion that context-specific understandings of youth well-being are needed to explicitly address the systemic injustices these young people encounter.

Drawing on both the literature and our empirical work, in the sections below, we theorize that educational leaders must approach well-being as situated in two key ways. First, we discuss the ways in which well-being requires leaders to enact place-based strategies, recognizing that one key dimension of context for well-being is the particularities of location. Second, we explore the temporal dimension of well-being, considering how the particularities of time in the developmental trajectory of youth profoundly impact definitions of well-being. We conclude with implications that suggest leaders adjust their conceptualizations and approach to well-being in accordance with their context, and with changes in the broader environment across time.

Well-being is Place-Based

Youth well-being is situated in —and in constant interaction with — place. The physical, social, structural, and economic conditions of a community affect the well-being of the children, families, and individuals who live there (Duff, 2011; Liu & Berube, 2015). For example, emerging scholarship highlights how immigrant youth experiences of safety and belonging influence and are influenced by surrounding discourses, organizational practices, and the individual and collective identities of the communities in which they are situated (Bruhn & Gonzales, 2023; Lowenhaupt et al., 2021; Rodriguez et al., 2022). Youth well-being is thus tied to the local resources, relationships, and histories which influence their lived realities. It interacts with both the formal and informal care arrangements youth experience across systems (Cooke et al., 2019). And, beyond solely influencing whether or not youth flourish, situated contexts can fundamentally shape what it means to flourish. Put simply, well-being looks different in different locations.

Given the importance of context, addressing youth well-being requires educational leaders to enact place-based strategies that consider these particularities. Enacting place-based strategies, in turn, requires leaders to fully understand the nuance of context and to acknowledge the reality that

youth and their families navigate multiple, often unaligned systems of care (Lowenhaupt & Montgomery, 2018; Miller et al., 2017). As such, leadership for well-being requires situated, cross-sector efforts to address the physical, social, structural, and economic conditions of a community that impact the flourishing of its children and their families.

Well-being is Temporal

Although much of the literature reviewed above does not directly address the temporal nature of well-being, our empirical work has surfaced the importance of time alongside considerations of place. For example, our recent research on youth experiences of the pandemic in a small, Northeastern city suggests that youth understandings of well-being shifted during and in the aftermath of disruption. Interviews with high-school youth highlight evolutions in their definitions of well-being, and their ideas of what best supported their well-being. That is, what these youth needed to feel a sense of well-being corresponded to changes in their surrounding environment: life pre-pandemic, life during lockdown, and life after students returned to in-person school, even as they dealt with the ongoing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, they expressed developmental changes in their sense of well-being that evolved as they got older.

Recognizing the ways in which well-being evolves over time, both for individuals and for communities, is an important consideration for educational leaders. While there are ways in which temporal and place-based understandings of well-being overlap, there are particular ways in which accounting for time and timing can shape how leaders approach efforts to foster well-being. For instance, there may be particular supports youth need to feel a sense of well-being when they first join a community, which may become unnecessary as they become more established. Additionally, as historical events such as the COVID-19 pandemic occur, what it means to flourish will likely shift. Leadership practices to support well-being will also likely need to shift as schools reckon with ongoing social upheaval caused by racial injustice, climate-related crises, and economic crises (Ladson-Billings, 2021). As such, attending to temporal and evolving features of context is an essential component of addressing the situated nature of well-being.

Taken together, previous literature and our own data suggest that, even as well-being is comprised of dimensions that are validated across multiple contexts and cultures, supporting well-being requires educational leaders to be mindful of both place and time. In addition to understanding how to leverage assets in the community context (T. L. Green, 2017), educational leaders can also identify ways to learn about community conceptualizations of well-being that may shape how schools seek to foster well-being in place-based ways. They must be cognizant of changes in the broader social and political environment, particularly when addressing more collective forms of well-being, which move beyond individual wellness and work toward building a better world for us all.

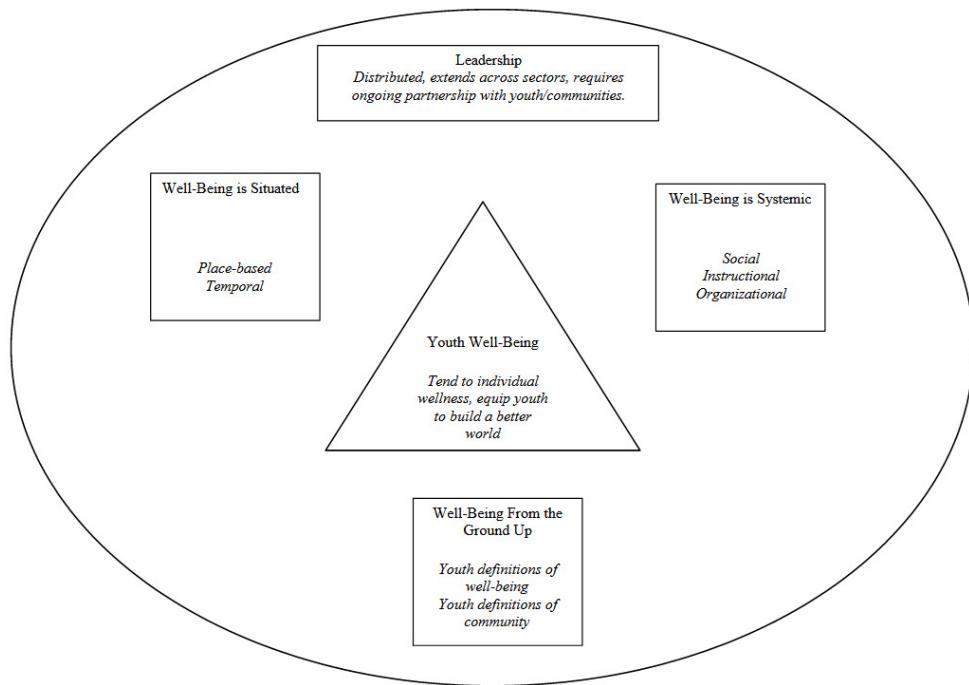


Figure 2. A framework for educational leadership for well-being.

Well-being is Systemic

In addition to recognizing the situated nature of well-being, our framework contends that leading for well-being must be a systemic effort. So, as can be seen in [Figure 2](#), when thinking about supporting well-being within classrooms and schools, educational leaders might consider various instructional and organizational moves, in addition to focusing on more straightforward social interactions.

In the sections that follow, we draw on a framework that one of the authors outlined for mutual respect (Hegseth, 2024) — which she defines as the work of intervening on power asymmetries typically found in classrooms by way of acceding children increased equality, autonomy, and equity. In her framework, Hegseth contends that mutual respect can be operationalized instructionally and organizationally, as well as via social relations. We apply those ideas to thinking about educational leadership for well-being., and conclude this section with leadership implications related to systemically supporting well-being in schools.

Well-being and Social Relations

One way to support youth well-being systemically is by focusing on social interactions within the organization of school. With a growing emphasis on SEL in schools in the United States, there has increasingly been time allocated during the school day to work with students on thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors related to self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (e.g., Greenberg, 2023). There exist school programs that support the psychological health of students

by explicitly teaching them skills that foster emotional and social competencies (e.g., Bergin, 2018; Cipriano et al., 2023). Such programs focus, in part, on understanding, expressing, and regulating one's own emotions.

Another part of these programs works with students to develop perspective-taking, social problem solving, and conflict resolution skills. By implementing SEL programs and other programs related to well-being, and by making time for explicit coaching around healthy social interactions, educational leaders can help schools become more inclusive and affirming spaces.

As with SEL, in schools one may find myriad attempts to teach and cultivate respect via social interactions, and by way of stand-alone programs. The research suggests that schools teach respect in their efforts to ameliorate bullying (e.g., Langdon & Preble, 2008), increase tolerance (e.g., Burns et al., 2017; Donnelly, 2004), combat student disengagement (e.g., Cothran & Ennis, 2000; Keiler, 2011), or generally work toward school turnaround (e.g., Battistich et al., 1999; Dean & Galloway, 2008; Willie, 2000). By bringing in explicit teaching around respect, school leaders may hope students will improve; that they will become better behaved, more engaged, more....respectful. Further, many of these programs that teach respect could be added onto an existing way of schooling, combined with a whole array of other initiatives and/or academic standards (e.g., Dean & Galloway, 2008). Such character education programs are not holistic ways of schooling themselves.

Thus, the research suggests — for both respect and for well-being — there exist programs that can be layered onto the technical core of schools, and that aim to support youth by focusing, in large part, on social interactions.

Well-being and Instruction

In addition to operationalizing respect via social interactions, mutual respect can also be integrated into instruction, in order for such efforts to become part of the technical core of schooling. For example, when working to intervene on power asymmetries between adults and children, and among diverse groups of children, a teacher might accord children more autonomy by permitting them choice over a topic they research, and a final product they produce to demonstrate their learning (Haddix & Sealey-Ruiz, 2012; Rubin, 2008). Or, this same teacher may mutually respect her students by according them more equity, ensuring students have frequent and easy access to resources that provide them with the required support or enrichment. These are just some examples, which are further discussed elsewhere (Hegseth, 2023a, 2023b, 2024), of how to integrate mutual respect into instruction.

In similar ways, the framework we sketch here contends that educational leaders can integrate efforts to support well-being into instruction.¹ In addition to stand-alone time to learn mental health strategies and cultivate interpersonal skills, teachers might integrate well-being into instruction by selecting relevant texts for students to read (e.g., discussing anxiety with Francesca Zappia's *Eliza and Her Monsters*, or depression with Adib Khorram's *Darius the Great is Not Okay*), or by crafting related writing prompts. And, to support a more comprehensive view of well-being, teachers and leaders might design learning experiences that train young people in leadership and advocacy. Through such instruction, teachers and leaders can support student wellness while also cultivating agentic youth who work to create a world in which wellness is more attainable.

Well-being and Organization

Finally, mutual respect can be supported via school and classroom organization. For example, when working to intervene on power asymmetries within a classroom or school, a teacher or leader might organize for equity, ensuring students are grouped in ways where they learn the value of diverse experiences, skills, and perspectives (e.g., Boaler, 2006). Or, a leader may adjust how the school day is organized to permit students more autonomy when determining how long they work on a given task before moving on to the next one.

In terms of leading for well-being, this framework similarly asserts that school leaders can organize to systemically support student well-being. As previously discussed, schools might support well-being by organizing for late start times, being mindful of the sleep adolescents need to feel physically well (Miles & Pope, 2023). Educational leaders might also facilitate organizational routines in which teachers meet and coordinate their homework and testing calendars, ensuring both are manageable for students, and thereby mitigating student stress and anxiety. Finally, in terms of supporting a more comprehensive view of well-being, educational leaders might organize the school day in ways that permit students to leave school and get credit for working with and learning from the broader community, perhaps through partnerships with local community-based organizations working on relevant issues such as environmentalism and addressing poverty. By engaging with the broader community, students could gain real-world experience related to improving wellness in society at large.

Defining and Supporting Well-being from the Ground Up

As educational leaders strive to enact meaningful strategies to support well-being, our framework highlights the importance of listening to, learning with, and collaborating alongside young people to better understand their

¹ Bergin and colleagues (2023) similarly discuss ways to integrate SEL into instruction and organization.

definitions and perceptions of well-being. As can be seen in [Figure 2](#), our framework emphasizes the need for leaders to engage with youth's understandings of well-being, and of the community that could best support their well-being. In the sections that follow, we review the literature and our empirical data that inform these assertions. We conclude with some discussion of how educational leaders might engage in more participatory processes when determining how to support youth well-being.

Youth's Definitions of Well-being

Youth are often lauded as partners in their own education, but are rarely central to school decision-making (Bertrand et al., 2020; R. Hart, n.d.; R. A. Hart, 2008; Wilson et al., 2023).

Some strands of educational researchers have sought to address this lacuna of youth as agents via processes of learning and leading in their schools and communities. For instance, youth participatory action research (YPAR) aims to incorporate young people's interests and ideas about what aspects of their lives are important to study, but even thoughtful YPAR practitioners struggle with the contradictions between youth voice and adult-centric school structures (Brion-Meisels & Alter, 2018). Beyond school walls, young people in recent years have mobilized to address gun violence and climate change (March For Our Lives, 2023; Sunrise Movement, 2023). These powerful, politically astute movements have caught the public's attention, and in some cases, made a dent in policies to address the epidemic of gun violence and climate devastation. Schools, however, continue to be places where young people are situated as objects of study and in need of remediation, rather than authors of their own worlds, learning, and well-being.

To lead for well-being requires adults to move away from their own needs and perspectives and toward a system of education that centers youth's ideas, hopes, and understandings. Our partnership with the Children's Cabinet provides one example of taking steps to include youth voice and ideas for supporting their well-being. In the early stages of the Cabinet, the research team interviewed cabinet members to understand how different community members defined and worked to support youth well-being. From these interviews emerged three key areas for the cabinet to address in order to bolster well-being, which included building out-of-school opportunities, ensuring college and career readiness, and supporting mental health. In addition to these adult perspectives, however, the research team gathered youth perspectives by interviewing high school students about their definitions of well-being, and their views of supports and barriers to their well-being. From these youth interviews we uncovered a range of conceptualizations. Some of their definitions corresponded to how the Cabinet is addressing well-being, such as helping students to stay on track so they can graduate high school prepared for their desired next steps. Importantly, however, some of the ways these youth conceptualized well-being were not central to the Cabinet's efforts. For example, some youth

emphasized needing to feel physically safe, and thus appreciating more supports like the lockdown drills and backpack checks that occurred at their school.

As leaders work to build systemic supports for well-being that are situated in the particular needs of their communities, youth perspectives must be a central dimension of defining and leading for well-being. By gathering youth's definitions and suggestions, educational leaders can learn to see the children and adolescents they serve as central to improving well-being. As they listen and learn from young people, leaders will have a better idea of how to support well-being in inclusive and multifaceted ways.

Youth's Definitions of Community

For adults and children alike, a sense of well-being is intertwined with a sense of community (Stewart & Townley, 2020). So as educational leaders incorporate youth's views on well-being, it is also important to understand the relationships between community and well-being, with careful attention to the structural inequalities woven into young people's experience of community, and to the shifting and expanding needs of youth over time.

One of the enduring features of life in the U.S. is the deeply entrenched racial and economic inequality that marks our neighborhoods and schools. While community and neighborhood are not synonymous – communities can emerge online, in religious institutions, in youth sports and other programs that aren't directly linked to the bounded neighborhoods where youth live – neighborhood inequalities profoundly shape young people's daily lives and routines (Candipan et al., 2021; Sampson & Raudenbush, 2004). For low-income Black and Latinx youth, place-based community life is structured by housing policies that intentionally divested resources from minoritized neighborhoods and invested in middle-class white neighborhoods (Desmond, 2017; Taylor, 2019). Yet young people are not defined by these stark, racist inequalities; they contest, redefine, and embrace the strengths and challenges of their communities (Duncan-Andrade, 2009; Wilson et al., 2023). Leading for well-being, then, means grappling with these inequalities and how they impact young people alongside listening to youth's perspectives on the assets and power that emerge from the communities in which they are embedded.

While neighborhood change may be slow, how young people define their communities and what they seek from them evolves as they develop (Bruhn & Gonzales, 2023). When interviewing some of the young people we work with, we came to understand how they conceived of community in variable ways, mapping onto their needs as adolescents. For some, community was synonymous with extended family. For others, community was tied closely to people and programs affiliated with their school. Finally, some youth discussed community in a way that extended beyond family or school to encompass spatial features of their city, like public parks, friendly encounters on the streets, and a range of ethnic restaurants and businesses. Young children's conceptions of community may be more centered around their

immediate family and school encounters, while youth entering adulthood may shift their focus to the features of their neighborhood and communities that matter for employment or post-secondary educational opportunities.

As leaders consider how best to support youth well-being, it is important to consider how young people define community in variable and developmentally-contingent ways, and to garner youth perspectives on which facets of their community may best support their well-being. Young people's voices should thus inform and be a part of leadership decisions, community engagement, cross-sector partnerships, and advocacy efforts to meaningfully enhance youth well-being at scale.

Reflections From the Field: Evolving Partnership, Evolving Framework

In the preceding section, we proposed a framework for educational leadership for well-being, in which we emphasized that well-being is situated, it can be supported systemically, and supports for youth well-being should consider youth's own conceptualizations of well-being, and of their community. In this section, we briefly reflect on our partnership, discussing how this partnership and our framework are evolving together, in constant conversation with one another. Again, given we are still undergoing formal analysis of the varied data sources, the data we reference below are not meant to be interpreted as empirical findings. Rather, these examples from our data serve to animate our evolving framework.

Well-being is Situated

Our research-practice partnership helped confirm previous scholarship that asserts the place-based nature of well-being (e.g., Duff, 2011; Liu & Berube, 2015). Additionally, however, it was the specific period of time in which our partnership persisted that helped us appreciate the temporal nature of well-being. By engaging with the topic of well-being throughout different stages of the pandemic — interviewing cabinet members and high school youth at multiple points between 2021 and 2023 — we learned to emphasize time as much as place when discussing the situated nature of well-being in our framework.

From our initial interviews with institutional and community leaders, some themes about well-being emerged that might be generalized to other dense, urban areas, such as the need for welcoming, safe spaces for teenagers to congregate and more recreational outdoor spaces. Other areas of focus, however, were uniquely situated in the community context of the city. For example, several members of the cabinet shared that the intergenerational, bilingual, and bicultural community would benefit from providing youth opportunities to support younger children and learn from elders in more hybrid spaces and programs. One community leader elaborated that the specificities of this work require much coordination:

I do feel that there needs to be more coordinated work, and because I think everyone has been so focused on their own area of priority that the connections that really need to happen in order to share resources more efficiently.... I do feel like the resources are there and available. It's just a matter of how to coordinate and collaborate better.

A strong commitment to engaging in service, advocacy, and education was voiced by youth in their interviews as they described their own understanding of well-being in the close-knit, community-oriented city. At the same time, many youth in this community need to work outside of school, but have little access to paid opportunities for work that do not interfere with these commitments and can conflict with school schedules. As we continue to partner on initiatives to support well-being, we have seen the need for place-based approaches that center on the shared values, culture, and community of the small, vibrant city in which we are situated.

Our partnership began more than two years ago, at a particular time of crisis in the city when students had just finished a full year of remote schooling. These youth had limited access to additional supports, and the community as a whole was struggling with pandemic disruptions leading to ongoing health issues, increased food insecurity, and evictions. As district leaders navigated the return to in-person schooling, we learned from youth about the specific supports needed for their well-being as they shifted back to the daily life of school. In interviews, some youth expressed a sense of loss with the return to in-person schooling, making observations like, “it was more comfortable just being at home.”

In addition to taking comfort in the routine of home, some youth were surprised to find they appreciated how remote schooling permitted more space and time to reflect on their own needs and pursue their own interests. For these students in this moment in time, the return to the social dynamics and relentless schedule of in-person schooling emphasized for them the need for space. Space and independent time as a form of well-being became central to their coping through school closures. Thus, both our framework and our partnership have evolved to emphasize how leaders must account for the specificities of time and place when designing supports for youth well-being.

Well-being is Systemic

As previously mentioned, we applied one of our author's frameworks related to mutual respect to our own considerations of leading for well-being. With the help of this mutual respect framework (Hegseth, 2024), we understand how schools can systemically support well-being with instructional and organizational practices, as well as with more social supports.

Additionally, however, it was our ongoing partnership with community members alongside the school district that helped us appreciate ways to extend beyond the school system when considering systemic supports to youth well-being; we emphasize this in our framework for educational leaders.

As the partnership has evolved over the past two years, the research team and members of the school district have continuously endeavored to center community voices, ensuring the Children's Cabinet is truly cross-sector, as opposed to simply being a district initiative. For example, the research team interviewed community leaders as well as youth, sharing themes from those interviews as part of the agenda for Cabinet meetings. As previously mentioned, three themes identified in initial interviews with cabinet members were the shared desire to focus on: after school activities, college and career readiness, and mental health initiatives. Additionally, ongoing refining of meeting structure ensured that community leaders had opportunities to add to or change the agenda of the meetings, in addition to having enough time and space to voice their perspectives within those meetings.

By partnering in a more distributed way, we have learned — and thus incorporated into this framework — how to design systemic supports that extend beyond school walls. In Cabinet meetings, leaders of after-school and recreation programs, mental health clinics, the library, and police all share insights about how issues facing youth span their varied organizations. Engaging in these cross-sector conversations surfaced ways to coordinate resources and services across these organizations to address well-being systemically. For example, in one cabinet meeting, school staff expressed the concerns that waitlists for mental health needs in the area were very long. Another cabinet member responded by noting that their team had received funds to conduct group mental health services, and that these could be placed in schools to address student mental health needs quickly. Similarly, one could imagine that, in future meetings, representatives from the community college may partner with the district to design instructional supports that cater to the facet of well-being concerned with equipping youth to build a better world. These are just some examples, empirical and hypothetical, of ways that community providers might offer social, instructional, and organizational supports to youth well-being, in addition to the school district.

Through our cross-sector partnership, then, we have gained a deeper understanding of the systemic nature of well-being for youth who navigate multiple institutions and communities that shape their experiences. Our framework has evolved as we continually strive toward more distributed leadership.

Defining and Supporting Well-being from the Ground Up

Incorporating youth voice has been one of our guiding principles throughout this research-practice partnership. When speaking about his work with one of the leaders of our research team, a district leader said “[she] was adamant about having youth voice present.” Importantly, the more we solicited youth voice, the more we recognized a need to scaffold and equip

youth to partner with us in our efforts to understand and improve their well-being. Youth interviews inspired our increasingly authentic collaboration with young people as co-leaders in the partnership, which, in turn, informs our emphasis in the framework on defining well-being from the ground up.

Our project began in 2021 as an adult collaboration between one of the authors and a district leader who has a strong interest in using research to guide educational leadership. As the Cabinet was established, it remained a coalition of adults working across sectors to serve young people in the community. But, even as the research team interviewed youth to garner their perspectives of well-being, in the initial years of the Cabinet, no young people had a seat at the decision-making table.

Noticing and naming this problem led to the development of a youth leadership initiative, where high school teachers and leaders recruited a diverse group of students to participate in a week-long institute in the summer of 2023 at the authors' institution. The aim of this program, which will also occur in the summer of 2024, is to support youth's leadership skills and to better understand their perspectives on the strengths and challenges of their community. These initiatives serve as a launchpad for more ongoing collaboration with youth participants.

We are still actively contemplating ways to integrate youth with the Cabinet, and to equip them to research and advocate for improved well-being for themselves and their peers. As we consider how to structure time and resources for their continued efforts related to the partnership, we are ever-mindful of how much we have learned about well-being and community from their insights and those of their peers. Thus, both our framework and our partnership are evolving to collaborate with youth in increasingly authentic ways, so that they become true leaders in efforts to support youth well-being in their community.

Conclusion and Implications for Leadership Practice and Future Research

By working to define a framework for educational leadership for well-being, we endeavor to address the many obstacles youth are facing as they strive toward wellness, and toward building a world in which wellness is more attainable. With our expanded conceptualizations of both well-being and of leadership, we suggest a framework that emphasizes the need for leaders to recognize the situated and systemic nature of well-being, and to incorporate youth perspectives of well-being, and of the community that can best support their well-being.

It is important to note that, as our partnership continues, and as we proceed with data collection and analysis across time and with diverse stakeholders, our framework will also continue to evolve. Indeed, in the previous section we reflect upon the ways in which our partnership and

our framework have already evolved and informed one another. Though this framework continues to develop, it has enough of a foundation to suggest some implications for both leadership practice and future research.

Our evolving framework has important implications for leadership practice. First, in conceptualizing well-being, educational leaders need strategies to develop a clear, specific and situated understanding of how youth in their particular school conceptualize well-being, and how those conceptualizations may evolve over time. Facilitating regular discussions or empathy interviews with youth about their current needs, concerns, and ideas for support might be one useful approach to this. Additionally, leadership practices that structure and strengthen meaningful relationships will also help leaders build this understanding. Through developing new opportunities to strengthen caring relationships, leaders might center relationships as they review and refine existing policies and practices in their schools. For example, examining current discipline practices and their impact on well-being might yield opportunities to make changes that strengthen relationships and improve well-being.

A second implication for leadership practice is this: addressing well-being in a situated way requires coordinating roles, resources, standards, etc. to promote well-being in an integrated way throughout the school (and across schools in a given district/system). Building infrastructure — such as structured time for vertical and horizontal collaboration — can support coordination among teachers across departments, as well as with youth and their families. Additionally, given that nearly 25% of public school students have at least one immigrant caregiver, coordinating language learning structures in a way that attends carefully to students' and families' well-being should be a top priority for leaders. For instance, how, when, and from whom children receive additional support for English learning should consider the socio-cultural, geographic, and political contexts for learning and should take into account young people's strengths as multilingual people embedded in multilingual families and communities. Such design and coordination of infrastructure is crucial for deepening commitments schoolwide to supporting well-being in responsive, systemic ways.

Third and similarly, recognizing well-being as situated within communities requires leaders to coordinate beyond school and in partnership with other youth-serving organizations. Cross-sector initiatives such as the Children's Cabinet may provide useful models for how to coordinate caring relationships across organizations and ensure that communities work in sync to support well-being. Importantly, our framework calls for the active participation of youth in both defining well-being and designing supports for their well-being that account for the subjective, situated components of most consequence to them.

In terms of implications for research, the framework we propose here motivates the need for researchers — much like educational leaders — to work in distributed ways. That is, just as our framework emphasizes how

educational leaders should partner with youth and with community when determining how best to support youth well-being, educational researchers should be similarly intentional and persistent with their partnerships. By ceding some control over the various stages of the research cycle — for example, inviting and compensating youth to co-lead data collection, analysis, and/or writing (e.g., Conner et al., 2023) — researchers can conduct studies that are increasingly supportive of school and community needs. This is particularly important when addressing matters of well-being and equity within educational research.

A second, related implication for research is to both honor and cultivate youth agency when examining their well-being. Throughout this paper, we have endeavored to emphasize an expanded notion of well-being. It is not solely up to adults to ensure the well-being of youth; rather, an integral part of well-being is scaffolding skills and attitudes that enable youth to work toward a world that makes well-being more attainable. We are attempting just that with our youth leadership initiative. Thus, there is a need for future research that places a particular emphasis on the practices and policies, within and beyond schools, which can help youth learn to build a better world. So, too, is there a need for more research focused on youth agency as it pertains to their own well-being and the well-being of others.

Well-being matters as young people develop from infants to children to adolescents and into adulthood, allowing them to feel a sense of positive life satisfaction and a sense of efficacy in responding to obstacles that are often out of their control (Keyes, 2006; Park, 2004; Stewart & Townley, 2020). For example, a young person with relatively high levels of well-being may have managed the stress and uncertainty of the initial school closures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic differently than a similarly situated peer who had lower perceptions of their own well-being. While structural factors, such as stable housing, immigration status, or environmental pollutants may impact youth's holistic well-being, they are not the only or final determinant in young people's ability to move toward well-being and thriving (Schüssler-Fiorenza et al., 2016). Schools, and educational leaders, can be important sites of intervention, offering pathways to well-being even when children and youth face significant, and unjust, racial and economic inequalities. The framework we offer here is an initial step toward better equipping educational leaders to support youth in the multifaceted ways they deserve.

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