

# How can schools better support adolescent wellbeing?

## Perspectives from Richmond, VA

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### Introduction

Adolescent wellbeing has been on the decline for the past decade, with more and more teens reporting loneliness and anxiety.<sup>1</sup> COVID-19 exacerbated these trends, especially among students with disabilities, BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) students, and students living in poverty or in immigrant households.<sup>2</sup>

In our work at Fig Education, we define wellbeing as the experience of contentment, along with a sense of meaning or purpose. Wellbeing is foundational to student success both in and out of school, as it is correlated with school engagement<sup>3</sup> and academic achievement,<sup>4</sup> as well as long-term health.<sup>5</sup> As the primary provider of structured activities for teens, schools have an opportunity, if not responsibility, to support adolescent wellbeing.

How, then, can schools consistently and effectively support student wellbeing, particularly in under-resourced communities? To address this question, we conducted focus groups with over twenty adolescents and adults in Richmond, Virginia between January and May of 2024.

While this is a limited sample, it does offer insight into adolescent perspectives in one southeastern city. Our conversations suggest that investment in youth wellbeing does not necessarily require new curriculum, programs, or even staff. What adolescents most want is a supportive and fair environment with opportunities to learn and provide input. They also want school to prepare them for the next steps in education and life.

We encourage schools and youth-serving organizations to continue to work to invest in a consistent, socially cohesive environment that supports adolescent wellbeing. Our interviews also suggest three specific actions organizational leaders can take:

1. Develop formal opportunities for adolescent input and collaboration in school practices
2. Incorporate access to information and skills that prepare students for their next level of education
3. Create opportunities for community connection within and outside of school

In the sections that follow, we elaborate on student and adult perspectives and explore what each of these approaches can look like in practice.

## Listening and Learning with Adolescents

Numerous studies explore student wellbeing, but most rely on quantitative measures developed by adults with little input from young people.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, broad definitions of wellbeing, useful for measurement and comparison, can't communicate the nuances in any given community's understanding of what it means to "feel well."<sup>7</sup>

For these reasons, Fig Education sought to learn what wellbeing means for adolescents in our shared city of Richmond, Virginia. While we anticipated that the experience of Richmond teens would be similar to that of other youth, we wanted to listen for and document their specific perspectives, as BIPOC adolescents living in a community impacted by poverty, yes, and also as individuals with unique stories and aspirations.

In the spring of 2024, we spoke with 18 students in the [East End](#), a Richmond neighborhood complexly impacted by the city's long history of de jure and de facto segregation and, most recently, gentrification. We also interviewed five educators living in the Richmond area. We asked both students and adults what wellbeing means to them and what can be done to improve wellbeing in school settings. Further information about our sample and a full list of our questions are in the [Appendix](#).

Across our conversations, students said they want supportive and consistent school environments that adequately prepare them for their future. Adults agreed that listening to and partnering with adolescents is important, and that adults should engage youth in understanding their community history and context.

### **Students want supportive, consistent school environments with opportunities for input and preparation for their future**

In focus groups, adolescents identified key factors in their school wellbeing: a supportive environment, clear and fair school policies, and engaging and accessible classes that also prepare them for their next level of education.

#### ***Social connection with peers and adults***

Interviewees frequently identified social connection as a contributor to adolescent wellbeing. It was the first thing students mentioned when asked about what promotes their sense of wellbeing in school. "I feel good when I'm around my classmates," said a representative student. Adolescents emphasized the impact that relationships with adults have on their wellbeing, due in part, they noted, to the often mercurial nature of their adolescent peer relationships. Middle school students explained that it is difficult to control their feelings and easy to be misunderstood by peers: "If you don't know that they're joking and you take them seriously then it's bullying. So it's kind of like bullying but not at the same time."

Students noted that adult relationships more consistently supported their wellbeing in school. Students described how their supportive and sympathetic teachers help them feel comfortable, and they look forward to classes with those teachers. Said one student: "I feel like I'm happy when I get with Ms. P because she's very understanding, and she likes to talk with you." Students also said it was helpful to have a staff person or administrator to speak with at school. One middle school student said of such a staff member, "If you have a problem, they know how to fix it, and they can help you." Again highlighting the importance of connection,

students who said they didn't experience wellbeing at school noted the absence of any adult with whom they could work through issues or concerns; when we asked what could better support their wellbeing, one of these students said, "Anyone you can talk to at school if things aren't OK."

### ***Safe and fair school environment open to student input***

Students agreed that an orderly school setting promotes wellbeing, and that unclear, unfair, or inconsistently-upheld policies have a negative impact. Many students named the unease they feel in a chaotic school environment, with deafening noise levels at lunch or teachers yelling and arguing with students. One student said that he wished his school had "teachers or counselors who can control the class."

Another school had a strict discipline policy in place, but students talked about the unsettling and demeaning effects of forcible components or inconsistent enforcement. To improve what can feel like unfair standards as well as application, students asked that adults maintain a sense of context and nuance in engaging about an issue. "You never know what somebody's going through ... and you catch the student on the wrong day and you're just like, 'What's wrong with them,' ... you have to read the room type of thing."

Students suggested that having more opportunities for input and dialogue with adults could promote fairness. They spoke about an administrator at one school who talked through choices with them:

***Sometimes when we wanna do things, [she] is like, "I'm giving y'all a choice." Do I want to do this or do I want to do that. And it's like okay, I have a say so. So, like, when I do pick this thing, I can say, "Oh, I don't like it," or this or that, because I picked it, you know, and it wasn't just a one-choice thing."***

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Students said that the administrator often responded in this way, and they felt not only respected but also more responsible for their choices and behavior.

Finally, students said they want their school environment to include more opportunities for them to explore interests and to decompress. Students said they would enjoy, for example, being able to choose clubs or classes, go outside at recess, or gather to relax in a designated place on-site.

### ***Classes that are engaging, supportive, and prepare students for the future***

Students said they prefer an interactive curriculum that engages their academic and creative interests. One student said wellbeing in school means, "being able to engage in classes and not just sitting there and falling asleep." Students said that such opportunities for engagement reduce their anxiety at school and help them feel more involved. At the same time, students want instruction and assignments that are structured, delivered, and supported in a way that not only engages them but also challenges them effectively. They feel overwhelmed when presented with tasks that appear unclear or overlarge and then receive no help in interpreting them. One student described in detail what feels to her like a no-win situation with a teacher who isn't engaging and also doesn't offer help:

*The amount of times that me and my friends laugh in class is outrageous, meaning that the teacher is just not teaching the class right. We wouldn't have to laugh in class if the class was more interesting. And the principal's always, like, "Well, why aren't you guys asking for help?" Because when you ask the teacher for help, she continues to teach it the way that you don't understand. No one can speak [to each other], 'cause she's like, "Don't ask for help unless you have your notes." And I'm like, "That's a bit unfair," 'cause the teacher's not understanding what I'm saying.*

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In every focus group, students said they want to feel that they are successful in their classes and prepared for the next level of education. Middle school students talked about the benefit of having a school that helps them understand and practice for what high school will be like; one student said her school began such preparation in the sixth grade, noting proudly, "It was normal to write a 500-word summary on a book." Middle school students also spoke about wanting more opportunities to explore high school and learn what it would be like, so they would feel more prepared. "I want to understand high school. I don't wanna just go to a high school 'cause everybody else is going there. I wanna get to know it and see how the students act."

Students at all grade levels said they wanted more opportunities to build practical life skills, like managing money.

### **Adults emphasize engaging students and recognizing community contexts**

Our five adult interviewees echoed student priorities of listening to and partnering with adolescents in their learning environment. A nonprofit leader advised engaging students directly in conversations about wellbeing: "They need a hearing adult. We need to invite them into the plan from the beginning. [Then] when we talk about their needs, they are at the table." He added that schools should be asking students questions like "What do you want?" and "How do you want to learn?"

Adults also underscored the importance of recognizing and honoring students' cultural backgrounds and surrounding community. A nonprofit director from the Chickahominy Indian Tribe said, "A lot of the school systems have native kids there, but the kids are not receiving cultural acknowledgement." Another nonprofit director talked about the impact of gentrification on students' day-to-day lives:

*I don't think our young people of color understand what is happening. They see sidewalks going in and think "why now?" They are still trying to keep a lot of our young people in housing communities. Their families are being displaced. A lot of couch surfing. Rents are going up. Houses are being torn down. It breaks up communities.*

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## Implications for Schools and Youth-Serving Organizations

Schools of all levels want to foster and support student wellbeing. It is both a factor in current and future academic success and an essential element in individual and community thriving.

There is substantial documentation of the corrosive effects of poverty<sup>8</sup>, racism<sup>9</sup>, and community disturbance<sup>10</sup> on youth wellbeing. This evidence can and does lead, however, to deficit-based framing and policies that fail to recognize community funds of knowledge, relationships, and resources. We attempted to interpret students' wellbeing from their own perspectives, in order to be responsive to community interpretations of what it means to "feel well."

Other research on school wellbeing aligns with what we heard from students in Richmond, Virginia: youth say they experience wellbeing in school when they have choice and voice within a supportive and connecting environment<sup>11</sup> and when they have a sense of security about their future.<sup>12</sup> Compared with other studies, the students we interviewed placed particular emphasis on wanting to be heard. They said they want connection with adults who "get them," who understand the broader context of their behaviors, and who respond to their requests for help. Adult interviewees agreed, speaking to the need to partner with youth in wellbeing conversations and schoolwork, and to engage students in connecting with their community and identity.

We encourage the steady, daily work of schools and nonprofit organizations to support adolescent wellbeing through building and sustaining learning environments that are fair and socially and academically engaging. From our interviews, we offer three specific recommendations within this important work:

- **Develop formal opportunities for adolescent input and collaboration:** This can look like student leadership committees and advisory boards, surveys, or opt-in feedback and strategy sessions.
- **Incorporate information and skills that prepare students for their next level of education:** Schools can provide student-requested mini-courses, like financial literacy, or dedicate middle school advisory time to talking about local high school options. Schools can also consider inviting "expert" adolescents or adults from community organizations to answer questions about high school, area colleges, and career options.
- **Create opportunities for community connection within and outside of school:** Schools can consider a [school-based mentoring](#) program with adults from the school or community to cultivate student connection. Mentoring builds both a protective relationship with an adult and helps students work toward academic and personal goals. Alternatively, schools can consider building connections with their broader community through classroom projects that explore local history or invited speakers from neighborhood organizations and businesses.

## ENDNOTES

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## Appendix: Data Collection

From January to March 2024, we conducted 30-minute interviews with five adults living and working in Richmond, VA. These included two teachers, a school counselor, and two nonprofit leaders. Four identify as Black and one identifies as a member of the Chickahominy Indian Tribe.

From April to May 2024, we conducted five focus groups with a total of 18 students between 6th and 10th grade. Each focus group lasted between 30 and 45 minutes each. Two focus groups were with middle school students who attend public schools in the East End of Richmond. Three focus groups were with East End students who attend area private schools through local scholarship programs. Among participating students, 83% are Black and 17% are white.

We developed themes for this report inductively by reading transcripts multiple times and memoing about common issues raised by adolescents and adults. Georgia Heyward and Thea Recalis conducted these interviews as part of Fig Education's development of the [VitalVoices](#) curriculum and [Wellbeing Audit](#).

### ADULT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- When you hear the term "wellbeing," what comes to mind?
- What are the biggest challenges to student wellbeing?
- What supports student wellbeing in school?
- What role can schools play in supporting student wellbeing? What role can't they play?
- If you had a magic wand, what would a school that prompts student and staff wellbeing look like?

### STUDENT FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

- What does wellbeing in school mean to you?  
*Sample conversation probes:*
  - Does school give you a sense of purpose or meaning?
  - Would you recommend this school to others?
- What promotes your wellbeing in school?  
*Sample conversation probes:*
  - What does it mean to feel happy at school?
  - What do you like most about being at school?
  - Do you feel like you can be yourself at school?
- What gets in the way of your wellbeing in school?  
*Sample conversation probes:*
  - What makes you feel stressed or worried about in school?
  - Why do you feel like you don't have [specific issues they bring up] at school?
- What suggestions do you have for school to better support student wellbeing?

### About Fig Education Lab

We are committed to a more equitable education system that embraces students' diverse backgrounds and closes learning and income gaps. Our mission is to reimagine education by collaboratively designing, implementing, and researching innovative programs that help all learners lead lives that are personally fulfilling, socially connected, and economically secure. We believe the best and most enduring ideas in education come from combining practitioner wisdom, rigorous research, and community assets.