



## White Paper

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# Effectiveness of RethinkEd's Wellness Curriculum for Students with Neurodiversity

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**RethinkEd**

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## Executive Summary

In recent years, there has been growing recognition of the significance of wellness skills in students' lives. Student wellness includes critical social and emotional life skills such as self-awareness, emotion regulation, stress management, conflict resolution, responsible decision making, problem solving, and healthy relationships. Cultivating mental well-being in students is essential for enabling academic engagement, social development, and overall success and happiness.

Equipping students with mental and emotional wellness competency allows students to navigate academic, personal, and interpersonal challenges more effectively. Mental wellness skills involve the development of strategies to manage stress, cultivate resilience, and foster a positive mindset. By honing these skills, students can better regulate their emotions, enhance their problem-solving abilities, and develop a sense of self-awareness that contributes to their personal and academic growth. By developing emotional wellness skills, students can improve their communication, build strong support networks, and cultivate a positive social environment. These skills also equip students with the tools to cope with stress, anxiety, and other mental health challenges, enabling them to navigate the complexities of academic and personal life more effectively.





Neurodiverse populations, encompassing individuals with conditions such as autism, ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder), and dyslexia, possess unique cognitive profiles that require special attention and support. There continues to be an increased recognition of the importance of wellness skills to promote the well-being and overall quality of life for individuals within these populations. By addressing the unique needs of neurodiverse individuals through mental and emotional wellness skills, we can enhance their physical health, cognitive function, emotional well-being, and social interactions.

This study evaluated the effectiveness of social and emotional wellness instruction and professional development for teachers. Student wellness competencies and subjective well-being were measured, as well as student behavior. Teacher well-being and social validity of the RethinkEd wellness curriculum for this population was also measured. Results indicate high potential for the inclusion of wellness curriculum for special education students.

### **Keywords:**

Wellness, Social, Emotional, Mental Health, Professional Development, Stress, Burnout, Neurodiversity, Special Education, Student Connectedness, Resilience, Family Connectedness, Student Behavior, Research, Neurodiversity

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## Why Student Wellness Matters

In recent years, there has been growing recognition of the significance of wellness skills in students' lives (Cook-Cottone et al., 2017; Valosek et al., 2019). As the demands and pressures of academic life increase, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic, students face various challenges that can impact their overall well-being (Gray et al., 2023; Schaffer et al., 2021). This paper examines the significance of wellness skills in promoting students' mental and emotional health. It also explores the potential academic, personal, and future benefits of equipping students with these skills.

The mental well-being of students is crucial for their overall success and happiness (Goodwin & Long, 2022). Wellness skills involve the development of strategies to manage stress, cultivate resilience, and foster a positive mindset.



Techniques such as mindfulness meditation, deep breathing exercises, and journaling can help students navigate academic pressures, cope with setbacks, and improve their emotional well-being. By honing these skills, students can better regulate their emotions, enhance their problem-solving abilities, and develop a sense of self-awareness that contributes to their personal and academic growth. In an interview with Lisa Nordlander, elementary school teacher at New

Horizon School, she states how important mental wellness is for her students. *"There have been several occasions where students have expressed that they simply couldn't handle being in the classroom," Nordlander says. "As a result, they would either go to the office and connect via Zoom or take breaks outside. The challenges posed by mental health have made learning very difficult. It's hard to focus on learning when you're unable to effectively manage your emotions or employ coping strategies."*

In conjunction with mental wellness, emotional wellness skills empower students to recognize, understand, and manage their emotions effectively (Frank et al., 2014; Sitzer & Stockwell, 2015). Emotional intelligence plays a pivotal role in building healthy relationships, resolving conflicts, and developing empathy toward others. By developing emotional wellness skills, students can improve their communication, build strong support networks, and cultivate a positive social environment. These skills also equip students with the tools to cope with stress, anxiety, and other mental health challenges, enabling them to navigate the complexities of academic and personal life more effectively.

*"There have been several occasions where students have expressed that they simply couldn't handle being in the classroom," Nordlander says.*



Furthermore, the acquisition of wellness skills goes hand in hand with academic performance and future success (Moya et al., 2022). By prioritizing their well-being, students can optimize their social skills, cognitive abilities, maintain focus, and enhance their learning capacities. When students are equipped with wellness skills, they experience reduced absenteeism, increased motivation, and improved



academic outcomes. Moreover, these skills provide a solid foundation for lifelong learning, professional development, and overall success in various domains of life. The importance of wellness skills for students cannot be overstated.

By integrating mental and emotional well-being practices into their lives, students can experience a multitude of benefits. These skills not only enhance their overall health and well-being, but also contribute to their academic performance, personal growth, and future success. As educational institutions and society at large recognize the significance of holistic development, it becomes imperative to incorporate wellness skills into student curricula and support systems to foster a generation of well-rounded individuals equipped to thrive in an increasingly demanding world.

## Educator Wellness Matters Too

Teacher burnout and stress can affect their well-being and sense of belonging in the workplace. This can lead to poor teacher attendance, attrition, and lower student outcomes. Wellness is not only important for student outcomes, but it is also essential for building social and emotional competencies in educators which can reduce emotional exhaustion and burnout and improve self-efficacy and job satisfaction (Kim, Crooks, Bax & Shokoohi, 2021). In fact, taking care of educators' well-being may be one of the best things that schools can do for students because it is important that the people who are spending the most time with students and taking care of them are also taking care of themselves and research supports that teachers who are less stressed make for better teachers and have better student outcomes (Fan, R., 2021). Marla Veliz, Administrator/CEO at New Horizon School, shared a story about the time stress overwhelmed her, and profoundly affected her students. *"When [my student] displayed*

*intense emotions, I felt an underlying anxiety due to the strong emotional investment my colleagues and I had in this student. Consequently, my response was more emotional than it should have been, making it difficult for him to handle both his emotions and mine. As the conversation drew to a close, I found myself perplexed by the situation. It was one of my teachers who later pointed out my skewed reaction to me. It suddenly clicked – I realized that I had allowed my emotions to cloud what was truly best for the student in that moment. I will always remember that incident; and that I always need to prioritize the student's needs over my emotions."*

Professional development in social and emotional wellness has been shown in multiple research studies to improve teachers' well-being and to reduce burnout and stress (Whalen, 2023) and improve student outcomes (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Teachers' comfort in implementation and their perceptions of student motivation and behavior have the most significant effect on their stress, perceived teaching efficacy, and job satisfaction (Collie, Shapka, & Perry, 2012). The most important skills in SEL for educators to learn to have positive relationships with their students, create and maintain a healthy learning environment, and manage student emotional and behavioral challenges are self-awareness, social awareness, cultural awareness, prosocial values, and self-management (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

Professional development in social and emotional wellness has been shown to improve teachers' well-being and to reduce burnout and stress.



Effective implementation of wellness training affects teachers' sense of well-being and burnout, as well as impacting the outcomes of students. The common features that predict the most success with implementation include: 1) Having a



supportive environment; 2) Building wellness competencies in adults; 3) Working with family and community members; 4) Targeting the key behaviors and skills; and 5) Setting reasonable short- and long-term goals (Jones, Bailey, Brush, & Kahn, 2018). Another important consideration for professional development is to help educators to promote equity and social justice (Jagers, Rivas-Drake, & Williams, 2019).

## Wellness Skills for Neurodiverse Populations

Neurodiverse populations with conditions including autism, ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder), and dyslexia have distinct cognitive profiles necessitating tailored support. In recent years, there has been a growing recognition



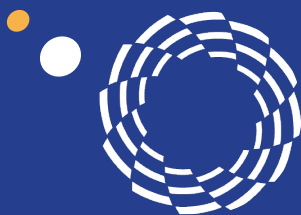
of the pivotal role wellness skills play in boosting well-being and quality of life for these individuals. This section explores the significance of wellness skills and their relevance for neurodiverse individuals. By understanding and addressing the specific needs of these populations, we can enhance their overall well-being, leading to improved overall outcomes and a greater sense of inclusion.

The mental well-being of neurodiverse individuals is equally important and can be supported through the development of specific wellness skills. Neurodiverse populations often face challenges related to attention, impulse control, and emotional regulation (O'Donnell, 2020). Mental wellness skills such as mindfulness techniques, cognitive-behavioral strategies, and self-calming exercises can provide individuals with tools to manage stress, reduce anxiety, and improve focus. These skills enable

neurodiverse individuals to develop greater self-awareness, emotional resilience, and the ability to navigate the demands of daily life more effectively. Veliz had this point to make about the importance of mental health. *"By prioritizing social and emotional learning, we can equip students with the necessary skills to navigate the complexities of life. This includes developing self-awareness, empathy, effective communication, and problem-solving abilities. By investing in these areas, we can support students in their overall growth and ensure they have the tools to succeed both academically and personally."*

Neurodiverse individuals may experience heightened emotional sensitivity and difficulty in expressing and understanding their own emotions and interpreting others' emotions. *"I've encountered a situation where two students came into class laughing about something, but then, all of a sudden, they began to overreact to each other, leading both of them to shut down emotionally,"* Norlander tells us. *"They ended up sitting with their heads down and backs turned to one another. These instances have had a significant impact on their mental health, which, in turn, has affected their academic performance."* Emotional wellness skills are vital in supporting their emotional well-being and social interactions. Techniques like social skills training, emotion recognition exercises, and communication strategies can empower neurodiverse individuals to build meaningful relationships, navigate social contexts, and express themselves effectively. By fostering emotional wellness skills, educators can enhance their sense of belonging, self-esteem, and overall emotional intelligence.

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The importance of wellness skills for neurodiverse populations extends beyond individual well-being. By prioritizing holistic well-being, we create inclusive environments that value neurodiversity and promote the overall quality of life for individuals within these populations. When individuals feel supported in their wellness journeys, it positively impacts their self-perception, self-advocacy, and overall life satisfaction. Furthermore, the integration of wellness skills into educational and support systems can contribute to improved academic outcomes, employment opportunities, and social integration for neurodiverse individuals.

Wellness skills play a vital role in supporting the well-being and overall quality of life for neurodiverse populations. By addressing the unique needs of neurodiverse individuals through mental and emotional wellness skills, we can enhance their physical health, cognitive function, emotional well-being, and social interactions. Recognizing the importance of wellness for neurodiverse individuals not only benefits them individually, but also fosters a more inclusive and supportive society. It is important that educational, healthcare, and community settings prioritize the development and implementation of wellness skills to promote the optimal well-being and success of neurodiverse populations.

## Research Study

This study looked at the effect of social and emotional wellness instruction for students in a special education school in Renton, Washington. New Horizon is a school that focuses on acceptance, opportunity, and achievement for students with learning disabilities, attention deficits, autism spectrum disorder, and other learning differences. Twenty-nine students participated in grades 4-12 with 5 teachers. A multiple baseline by classroom was used to account for pre-intervention problem

behaviors and social-emotional (prosocial) behaviors. Pre-post measures were used to assess wellness competencies and student subjective well-being.

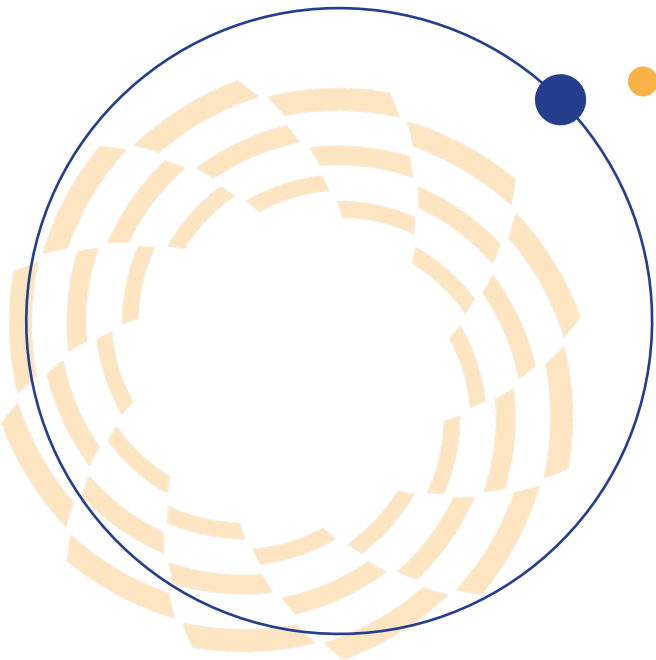
## Measures

Student wellness ratings by teachers were measured weekly throughout baseline and intervention. Behaviorally anchored ratings on pro-social behaviors and social and emotional skills were tracked using the *RethinkEd Classroom Rating Scale*. The rating scale assesses relationship skills, responsible decision making, self-confidence, emotional awareness, emotional regulation, self-regulated learning, perspective taking, and understanding norms. Student behavior by classroom was also rated on a weekly basis as was teacher feedback on the professional development modules and student lessons. Pre-post measures included student self-ratings of wellness using the *RethinkEd Wellness Assessment* (self-management, self-awareness, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making) as well as self-ratings of emotions using the *Positive and Negative Affect Schedule* (PANAS) (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988), stress using the *Perceived Stress Scale* (PSS) (Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983), and resilience using the *Brief Resilience Scale* (BRS) (Smith, et al., 2008). Teachers were also asked to track student behavior weekly and to rate their connection to students and families, their perceived stress/well-being, and student engagement in a brief *Teacher Engagement Survey*.



## RethinkEd Wellness Instruction

Five teachers completed 15 professional development (PD) modules in emotions, mental wellness, stress management, self-control, resilience, anxiety, depression, relationships, cooperation, conflict resolution, preventing violence, empathy, safe & ethical behavior, self-advocacy, and goal setting. The PD modules utilized behavioral skills training (BST) to instruct, model, rehearse, and provide feedback to learn skills in wellness and mental health. BST has been shown in numerous research studies to be effective in teaching skills to adults and children in a range of different situations (e.g., Campanaro, et al., 2022; Kirkpatrick, Akers, & Rivera, 2019).



## Instructional Model



The PD included a LEARN component with a professional video, including a content-area expert, and reflection/discussion questions (instruction and modeling); a PRACTICE component with activities to better understand the concept and apply it to their own lives and the classroom (modeling and rehearsal); and a DIVE DEEPER component where they had the opportunity to apply strategies and develop practical skills to use what they learned and reflected on how to improve (rehearsal and feedback).

Following completion of each PD module, teachers implemented the RethinkEd wellness curriculum using the same scope & sequence (with 15 student lessons) to engage students in the student lessons. The student lessons also followed the BST model and utilized a LEARN phase (video, discussion), PRACTICE phase (individual, small group, and large group activities), and DIVE DEEPER phase (research, reflection, journaling, etc.). Fidelity of implementation was evaluated by using the RethinkEd platform to view teacher and student activity in the modules and lessons. Eighty percent of the participating teachers completed all PD modules and student lessons.



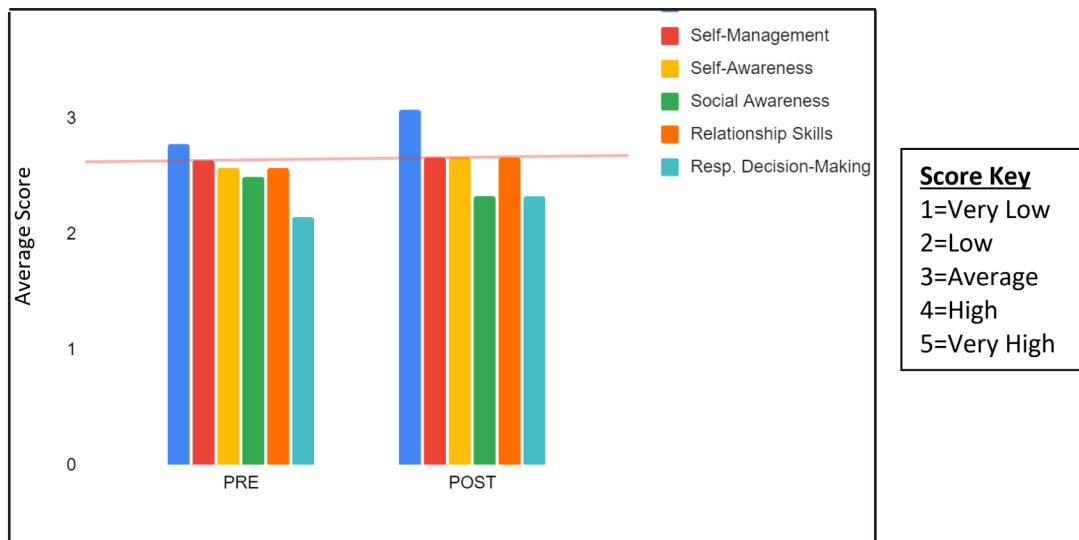


## Results

### *RethinkEd Student Wellness Self-Assessment*

Students rated themselves in 5 content areas in social-emotional wellness in the fall and spring on the *RethinkEd Student Wellness Self-Assessment*. In the spring, following the wellness intervention, students rated themselves significantly higher overall ( $p < .01$ ) (Total Score). Students also rated themselves higher in self-management, self-awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making. The only content area where students rated themselves lower was in social awareness.

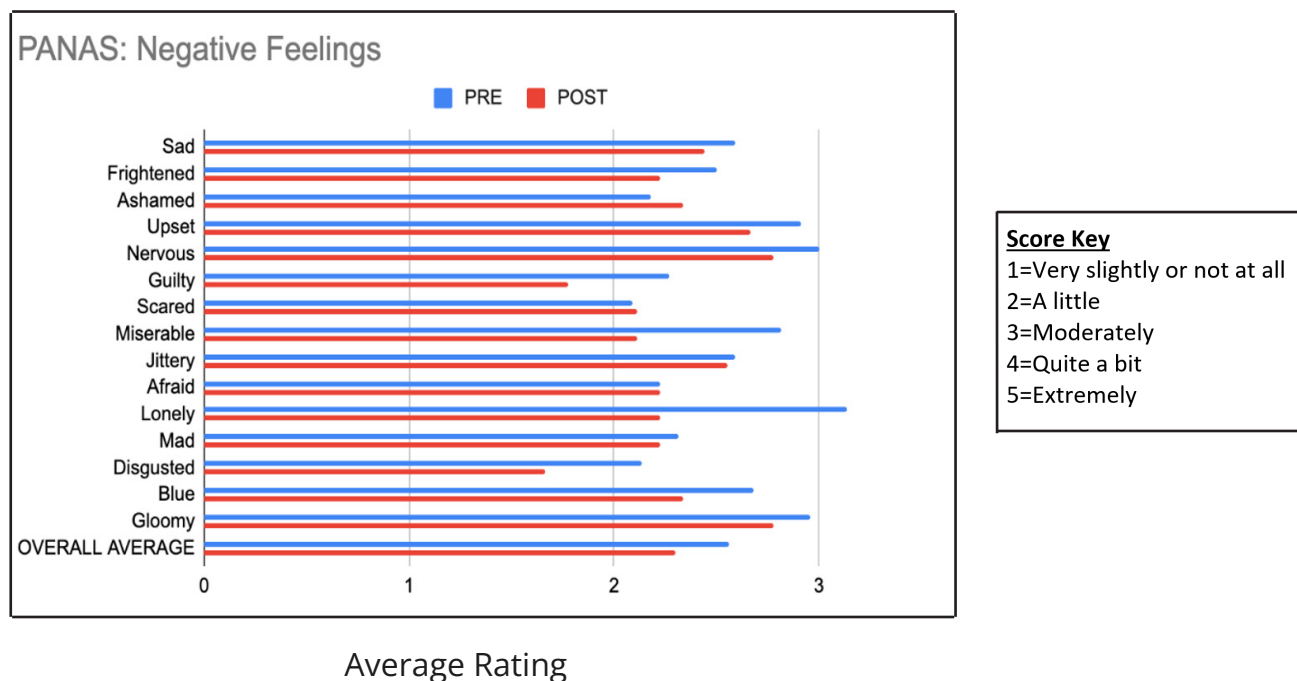
RethinkEd Student Wellness Assessment



### *Student Wellness Survey (PANAS, PSS, BRS)*

Students completed a wellness survey using the Qualtrics survey system in the fall and spring that included 3 surveys commonly used in wellness literature. The first set of survey questions were from the *Positive and Negative Affect Schedule* (PANAS) (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988).

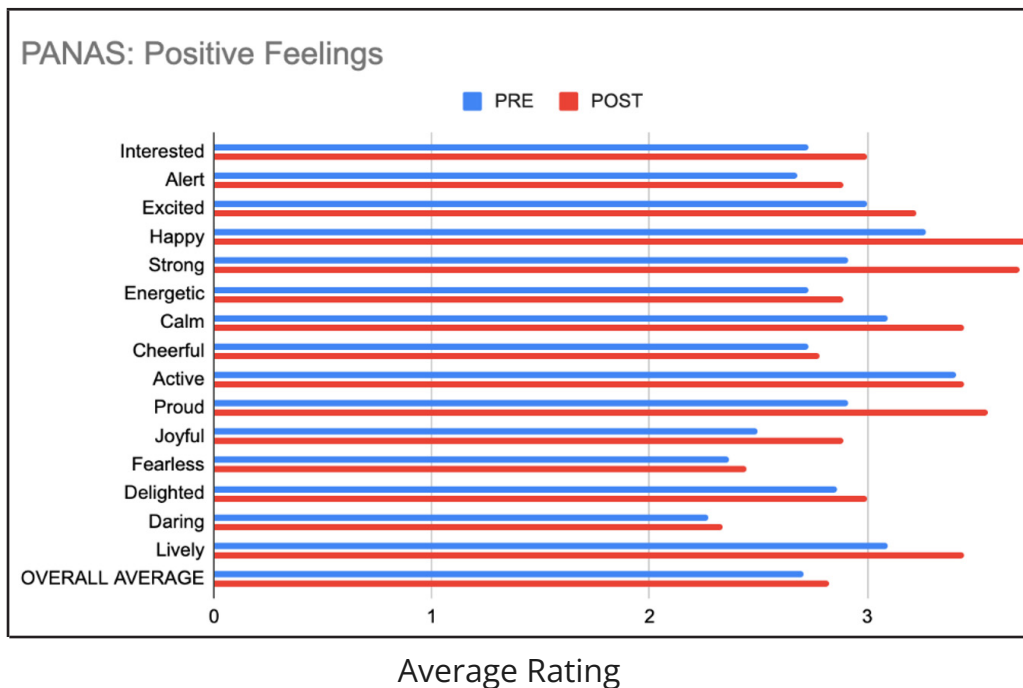
Students rated themselves significantly lower overall ( $p < .01$ ) in the spring compared to the fall for negative feelings. Students also rated themselves lower in most negative feelings (12): sad, frightened, upset, nervous, guilty, miserable, jittery, lonely, mad, disgusted, blue, gloomy. They rated themselves higher in 2 negative feelings, ashamed and scared. There was no change in ratings for feelings of afraid.







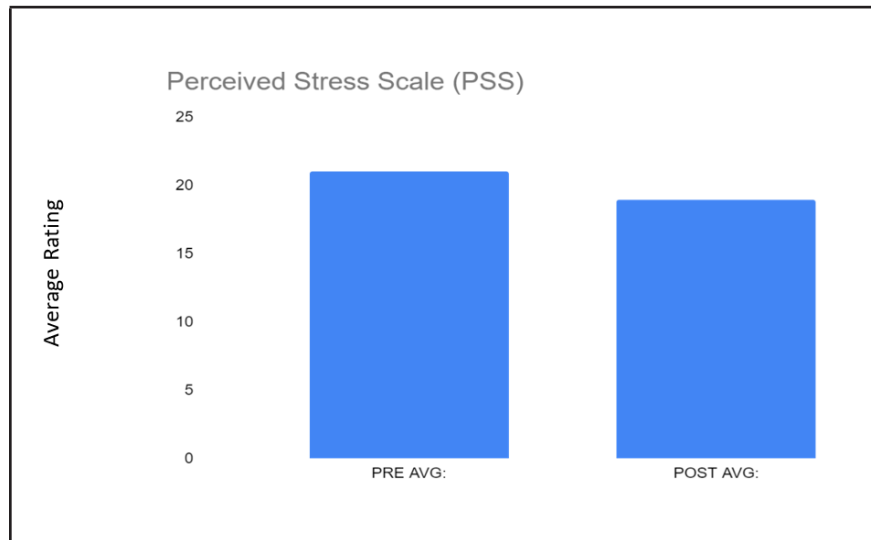
Similarly, on the PANAS, students rated themselves significantly higher overall ( $p < .01$ ) in all positive feelings: interested, alert, excited, happy, strong, energetic, calm, cheerful, active, proud, joyful, fearless, delighted, daring, lively. They did not rate themselves lower in any positive feelings.



**Score Key**

- 1=Very slightly or not at all
- 2=A little
- 3=Moderately
- 4=Quite a bit
- 5=Extremely





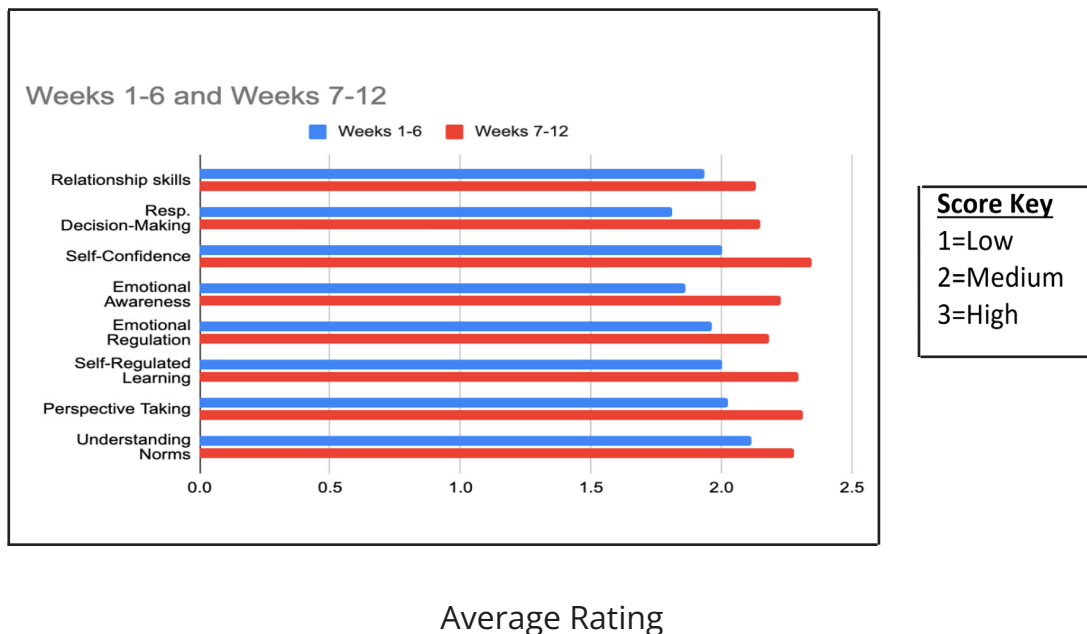
The second set of survey questions in the Qualtrics Student Wellness Survey were from the *Perceived Stress Scale* (PSS) (Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983). Students rated themselves significantly lower in stress ( $p < .01$ ) in the spring following the wellness intervention. Higher ratings indicate higher levels of perceived stress.



Students also rated themselves significantly higher in resilience ( $p < .01$ ) on the *Brief Resilience Scale* (BRS) (Smith, et al., 2008) in the spring compared to fall ratings. Higher ratings indicate higher perceptions of resilience.

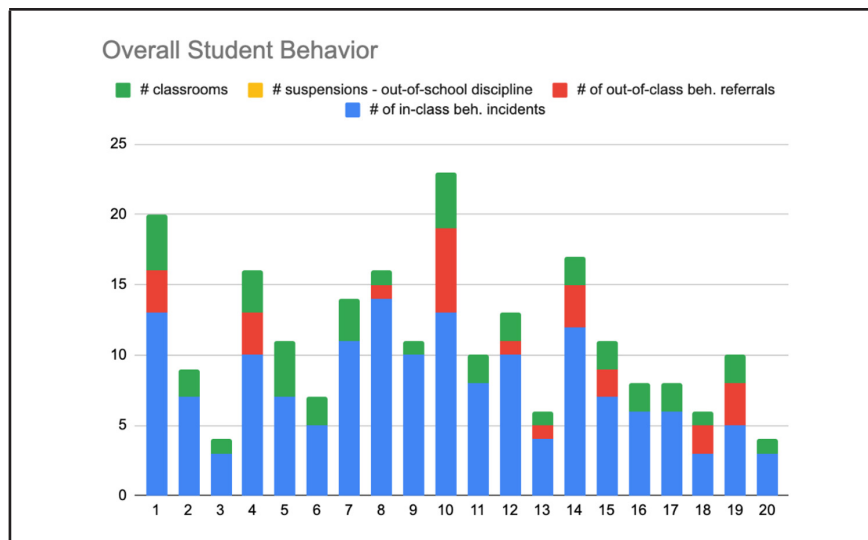
## ***Behaviorally-Anchored Teacher Ratings of Student Wellness – RethinkEd Classroom Rating Scale***

Educators were asked to rate students weekly on wellness behaviors using the *RethinkEd Classroom Rating Scale*. Ratings increased from fall (weeks 1-6) to spring (weeks 7-12) in all content areas: relationship skills, responsible decision making, self-confidence, emotional awareness, emotional regulation, self-regulated learning, perspective taking, understanding norms. Results were slightly higher than student self-ratings.



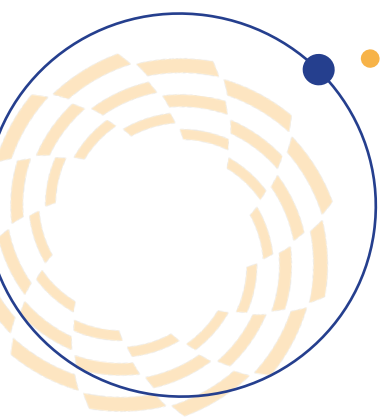
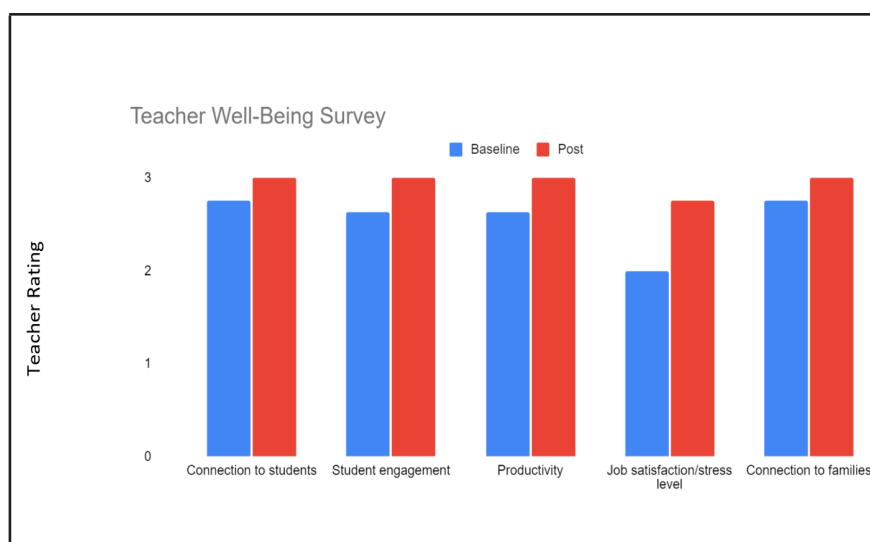
## ***Student Behavior***

Teachers were also asked to take weekly data on the overall behavioral challenges of students in their classroom. Suspensions and out-of-school discipline was low overall across all students and classrooms. Out-of-class behavior referrals and in-class behavior incidents decreased from fall to spring in all classrooms.



## *Teacher Engagement Survey*

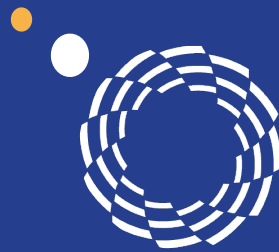
As a measure of social validity, teachers were asked to rate their connection to students, student engagement, productivity, job satisfaction/stress level, and connection to families. All teachers rated themselves higher in the spring (post) than in the fall (pre) in all areas.



## Wellness is Important for Students in Special Education

The staff at New Horizon all concurred that they and their students needed an effective wellness program. Ms. Nordlander explained *“while working with my second-grade students, I noticed challenging situations arising due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic had a profound effect on my students’ social-emotional learning, preventing them from grasping essential skills like conflict resolution, forming friendships, and behaving appropriately in school. After the students returned to school, I noticed they were still functioning, but their social awareness was noticeably low. It surprised me, considering my background in teaching kindergarten, where I had never encountered such behaviors. One day, during a classroom discussion, it became evident that they lacked crucial social skills - how to make and maintain friendships, resolve conflicts, take turns in conversations, and work together as a group. Even something as simple as having fun on the playground with a few peers was a challenge for them. Witnessing their struggles, I knew it was crucial to help them develop these essential life skills.”*

We worked together diligently, focusing on managing conflicts, building healthy friendships, and behaving appropriately in various situations.



The impact of the data from the wellness program shows a lot of potential and promise for improved well-being and interactions in the special education classroom. Ms. Nordlander praised the program and said, *“It became a learning experience for all of us. We worked together diligently, focusing on managing conflicts, building healthy friendships, and behaving appropriately in various situations. Over time, I saw remarkable growth in their social and emotional abilities. By addressing these challenges head-on,*



*we transformed their interactions, and they began to thrive in the classroom and beyond. Looking back, I realized how important it was to guide them through this period and teach them the skills they missed out on during the pandemic. It was truly a valuable lesson in how a little support and dedication can help individuals overcome significant hurdles in their personal development.”*

Ms. Veliz also describes how the program has helped her and her students: “In my role at the school, I’ve had the opportunity to work closely with students regarding their social and emotional learning. They’ve come a long way, and I’ve noticed how they’ve expanded their vocabulary, which allows us to have more meaningful conversations. Most of the time, I’m approached to help with problems such as social skills, anxiety, perseverative thinking, and emotional dysregulation. Many of our students view my office

*as a safe and quiet space, a place where they can come and unwind. We discuss how to identify problems and brainstorm possible solutions. I see my role as more of a coach, guiding and supporting the students as they navigate through their social and emotional challenges.”*

In general, the staff felt that there was a need for a wellness program both to build their own skills and to provide instructional activities to help students build their skills. Staff reported improved



confidence in their abilities to foster social and emotional wellness in their students, in connecting with students, and with family relationships. They reported that students have learned to better understand and manage their emotions more effectively, resolve conflicts, build peer relationships, and communicate their wants and needs. Improvements have been encouraging for the inclusion of a wellness program for special education students.

## **Conclusions**

In the first school year of implementation of the RethinkEd Wellness Program, students have shown important growth in: self-management, self-awareness, relationship skills, responsible decision making, emotional well-being, stress, resilience, self-confidence, emotional awareness, emotional regulation, self-regulated learning, perspective taking, understanding norms, and classroom behavior. In addition, educators report improved stress/well-being, student and family connectedness, and student engagement. Interviews with staff highlight the social significance of an effective wellness program.

This initial research report shows support for the inclusion of a wellness program in special education classrooms. Future research will continue to evaluate how this program nurtures and supports students and staff in special education.





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