



Health and well-being in focus at HKIS

Even before the Covid years focused extra attention on the importance of young people's health and well-being, Hong Kong International School (HKIS) had a comprehensive programme in place to promote the necessary awareness and give students the skills to have positive interactions with those around them.

With the aim of educating the whole child, there is time in the curriculum to teach each age group the essentials of social-emotional learning and physical fitness, so they understand who they are and can better deal with the changes and challenges that face kids growing up in Hong Kong.

In planning these classes and activities, the school is guided by the broad National Health Education Standards set out in the United States, which focus on areas such as communication, decision making, accessing information, analysing influences, and goal setting.

But the overall content and philosophy is also shaped by reference to Unesco and WHO recommendations. The latter, in particular, emphasise the need for a holistic approach bringing together the different domains of wellness - physical, mental, emotional and social - and adapting things to suit specifics in the local context.



Lower Primary Swimming Lesson.

"That's our approach, and it starts from a young age," says Amy Smith, high school health teacher at HKIS and the coordinator for other grades. "With international schools, health education is 'all over the map', but it is a big need, so we have had to figure out where the gaps are. It is now layered in and scaffolded and part of our strategic plan."

For the younger grades, direct instruction on social and emotional issues and health literacy are usually built into lessons, breaks and group activities during the school day. The key recurring themes include self-regulation, conflict resolution and building friendships, with teachers giving practical advice and examples of what to do and why. Behind this, there is also the concept of developing self-management and a growth mindset.

For older students, more formal sessions in the classroom tackle hot topics ranging from body image and mood changes to media literacy and "our relationship with our devices."

The lessons are based on research findings and surveys, anecdotal data from the school community, and simple observation of what the student population needs.

"For example we are seeing all this information from the US and around the world on the impact of being online," Smith says. "We already knew the impact of social media was quite detrimental, but the pandemic has magnified that. So, there is now a big focus on mental health, but the root of that is social skills and communication. In some classes, it may mean going back to the basics of how to talk to people, how to set out your boundaries."

Where necessary, different engagement strategies are used to get students - some of whom still prefer to hide behind their laptops - up and moving. They are asked to keep journals and reflect on changes, and to have short one-on-one conversations on suggested themes, perhaps about their favourite subject or sometimes feeling out of place, before rotating and talking to another classmate or in a small group. Besides breaking down barriers, these exercises also apply practices from positive psychology.

"We talk about different forms of communication, for example what it means to be assertive or aggressive," Smith says. "And for lessons on body image, students might watch a short video to get them thinking about how we see ourselves and media ideals. It requires a very thoughtful type of lesson plan because lectures don't work. You have to change things up every few minutes and ask 'What happened there?' or 'Why did you think that way?'"

Student work of the Emotion Thermometer Activity. Students are given a list of emotions that describe different dimensions, intensities, or temperatures of this emotion and asked to label the thermometer in order of intensity. Credit: Institute for Social and Emotional Learning (IFSEL) lesson plan.



High School Students in High School Plaza.

In the middle school, projects are a popular way of putting over key information about health and nutrition. For instance, students might be asked to create an advertising pitch for a food group or to promote a protein, thereby sparking interest, curiosity and involvement.

"Our health and PE programmes are taught as separate subjects, unlike other schools; I find that model works best," says Smith, noting that a newly-built Student Activities Centre (SAC) is set to open on the Tai Tam campus in August 2024. The sports complex will house two gymnasiums, tennis courts, and a swimming pool. The SAC aims to enhance the physical, emotional and mental health of the HKIS community. "In each programme, we explain how physical activity has an impact on mental health, and there is a vibrant sports and after-school programme."

She adds that health and well-being can be very personal, especially when it comes to discussing sex education, relationships, peer pressure, the relentlessness of the online world, and potential risks like binge drinking.

Therefore, HKIS has counsellors for each grade level to offer more specialist advice and support.

"We also do guided meditation for the first five minutes of class, with focused belly breathing and ways to calm down," Smith says. "It helps with sleep, mental health, happiness, and preparing for a sports event or a test. Kids and parents love it."

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