

Investigating school-based programs that support student mental health and psychosocial wellbeing in low- and middle-income countries

School closures and disruptions to mental health services linked to the COVID-19 pandemic have significantly impacted the lives of children, young people and their families. Now, more than ever, schools are expected to provide emotional and psychosocial support and stability to students, educators and other school staff. Education systems are therefore investing more resources into school-based mental health programs to ensure they can provide the required level of support, in addition to acknowledging the need for social-emotional skill development.

The ever-growing number of school-based mental health and wellbeing programs make it challenging to identify programs that are effective. It is even harder to identify school-based mental health programs that go on to demonstrate improved academic outcomes.

This policy brief provides recommendations for policymakers and development partners to implement effective school-based mental health and wellbeing programs that also provide evidence on improvements related to learning outcomes. The recommendations are derived from a rapid evidence assessment by the Global Education Monitoring (GEM) Centre, which collates evidence on school-based mental health programs linked to student academic outcomes.



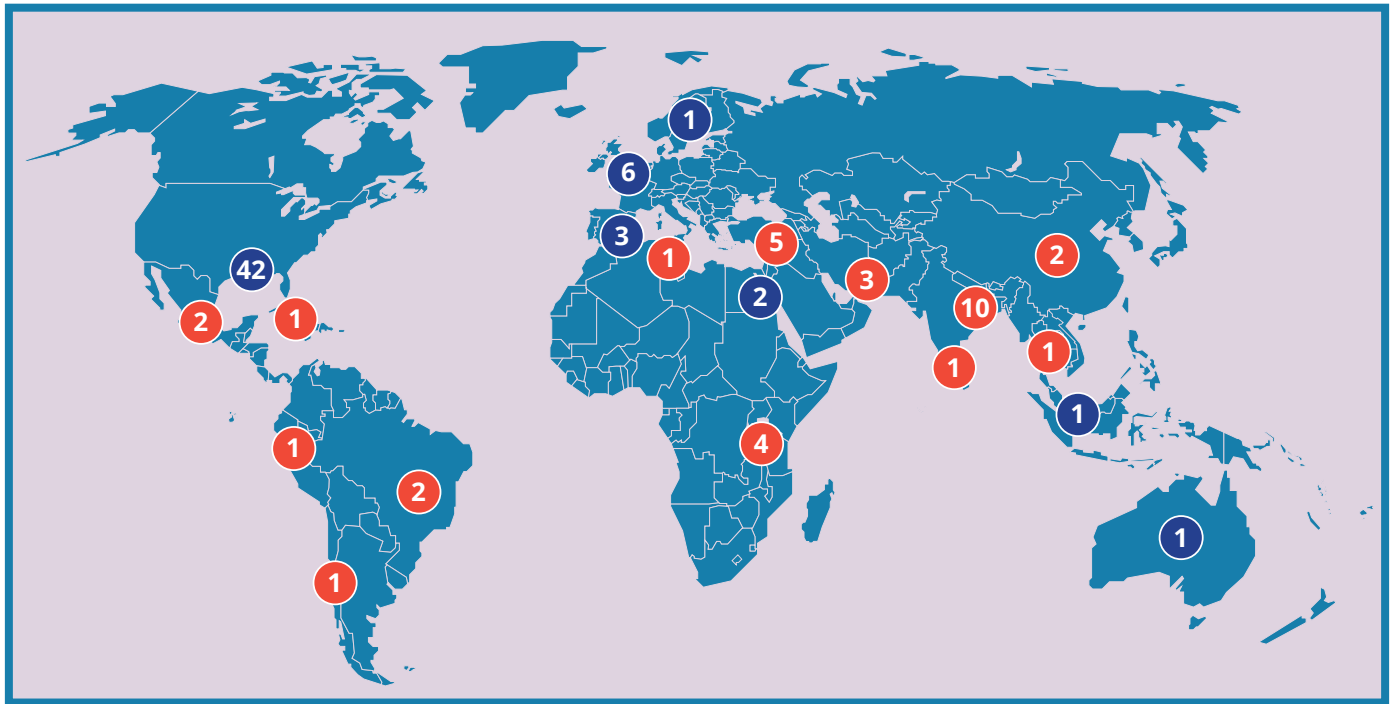
RAPID REVIEW METHODS

Identification of programs

34 school-based mental health programs from low- and middle-income countries were selected for inclusion in the rapid evidence assessment.

Comparison of programs

56 interventions from high-income countries were assessed to compare the differences in program aims and characteristics between their contexts.



● Interventions in low- and middle-income countries

● Interventions in high-income countries

Program focus

Of the 34 programs from low- and middle-income countries:

39% were early-intervention programs for at-risk students – those who are more likely to develop mental health conditions or who require specific support due to a disability.

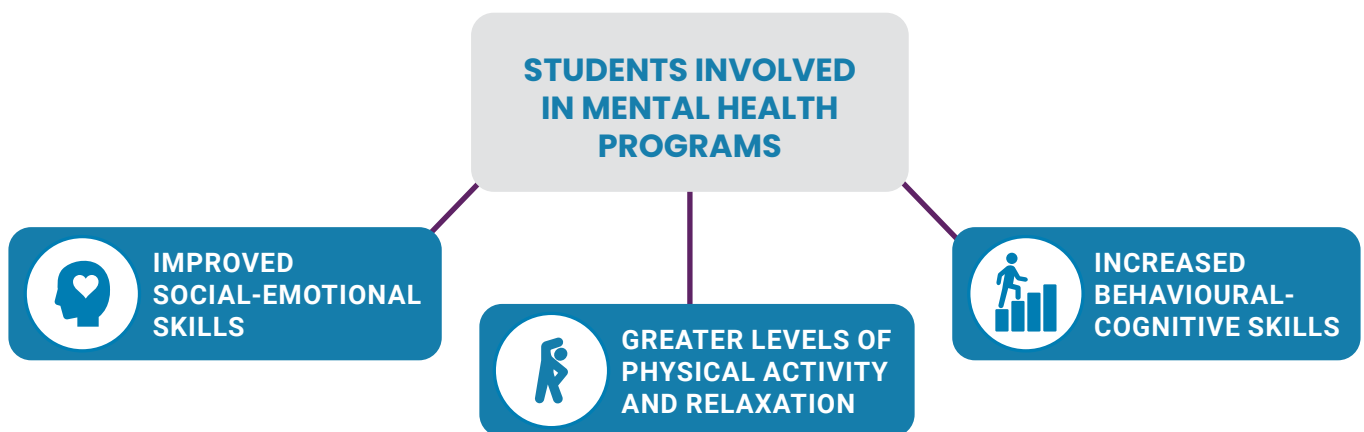
61% were whole-school preventative programs – that focus on improving social and emotional skills or developing protective factors within a broader population group who are not deemed to be at risk.

FINDINGS

School-based mental health and wellbeing programs have high potential to improve student wellbeing

Such improvements are also relevant for attaining better academic outcomes when implemented effectively in low- and middle-income countries. Some of these programs may have greater impact in low- and middle-income countries than high-income countries.

There are strong positive links between improvements in student mental health and wellbeing-related outcomes, and improvements in academic readiness and achievement. Academic achievement refers to the academic performance of a student, while academic readiness refers to their level of preparedness and capability to succeed in an educational setting.



While these findings are encouraging, the study also revealed several important gaps in current approaches to supporting mental health and wellbeing in low- and middle-income countries. Consideration of different student and community needs have been demonstrated to be effective in many other settings.

- There is limited evidence on programs that improve mental-health and wellbeing based on factors such as gender, socioeconomic status, disability, sexuality, migration, religious views, or cultural backgrounds.
- There was little evidence of programs in low- and middle-income countries that build collaborations, such as educator or peer mentoring opportunities to improve mental health.
- There were no programs included that educate school-aged children about drugs and alcohol, and teach them preventative skills against substance abuse.

RECOMMENDATIONS



Start early

Integrate a wellbeing focus in the early years to support student engagement and achievement, and build resilience into adulthood.



Reduce stigma and build readiness

Invest in programs that recognise and respond to different levels of whole-school readiness to engage in mental health promotion practices.



Support teachers

Provide training and integrate mental health support into daily practices to promote teacher commitment, involvement and acceptance of student mental health programs.



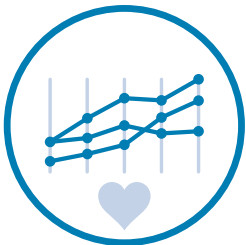
Involve family and community members

Implement whole-school approaches that include family and professional community members to ensure interventions have the desired impact and are culturally appropriate.



Contextualise programs

Develop targeted programs to support the individual needs and contexts of students to ensure mental health and wellbeing is integral to their learning.



Focus on evidence

Ground investment decisions about student mental health programs on evidence and insights from interventions carried out across similar contexts and communities. Ongoing monitoring of mental health and wellbeing programs, and sharing of lessons learnt, is key to sustainable practice, quality and impact.

The key to improving student wellbeing lies in designing and implementing mental health programs that are based on evidence and tailored to the needs of the individual contexts. To ensure that programs provide benefits across both wellbeing and academic outcomes, integrated approaches that involve students, staff and community members should be considered.

Read the full report, [School-based interventions that support mental health and psychosocial wellbeing in low- and middle-income countries](#).

Written by Syeda Kashfee Ahmed, Anna Dabrowski, Katherine Dix.

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