

Health and Wellness - The Whole Child Matters

During my visit earlier this school year to NCGS member school, [Frances Bardsley Academy for Girls \(FBA\)](#), located northeast of London, I was amazed by the ways in which Headteacher Julian Dutnall addressed mental health by developing innovative “getaway spaces” of respite and refuge on school grounds. These spaces were conceived and designed in direct response to increased anxiety among students due to excessive social media use, fewer opportunities for creative play, and increased pressure from an educational system driven by exams. FBA faculty and administrators actively sought out ways to counterbalance the increasing pressure on their students by forging opportunities for students to develop self-confidence, resiliency, and other mental coping skills that help them to combat anxiety. The result are school spaces that ignite the hearts and minds of FBA students one art show, farm animal, and fine gauge railway track at a time. Read to learn more about FBA’s innovative “getaway spaces.”

Megan Murphy, Executive Director, National Coalition of Girls’ Schools

Three huge issues loom in front of us as educators in the UK: academic accountability, mental health, and funding. At FBA, a 1,300 strong all-girls publically funded school in the London Borough of Havering, we have sought to find innovative ways to help our girls make great academic progress whilst developing holistically and all within a budget dependent upon state funding. We see a link between a growing obsession with academic accountability measures and declining student wellbeing, so have been on a journey to see how we could continue making academic strides with strong required state exam results whilst also supporting the development of the whole child.

It started with the art gallery. Back in 2006, the Governors of FBA had the vision to build a gallery open to students, staff, and the local community and that could showcase their work as well as international figures such as Matisse, Cornelia Parker and Jeanette Barnes, the London 2012 Olympics artist. True, this was expensive and was funded through selling land that we were fortunate to have at the time. But it was well spent. The gallery is a different environment, where students can work creatively, see outstanding works of art, and be captivated. A sense of awe and wonder is encouraged; a celebration of colour, diversity, and design is evident.

Then the animals came. We encouraged them. Two goats: Billy and Barry. Rabbits. Lots of them (they really do breed quickly, you know). Ducks. Guineas Pigs. Chickens. Before long, we had our beloved Farm, a 250 ft by 50ft area that includes Willow, Venus, Pecky and friends producing many eggs and receiving adoration from students. A perfect “getaway” for those students—and staff—who seek space to relax or reflect while tending to chores and nurturing the animals. Th Farm is a place to take a deep breath and enjoy nature.

We found students would run from lessons to spend time at The Farm during recess or lunchtime. During our school’s recent inspection (or accreditation process, as it’s called in North America), the UK inspectors, called The Farm, “an oasis of happiness” and “calm.” It became a community where students wore badges to show which of the animals was their favourite. And they mourned together when Oreo, the first rabbit, passed away.

And so, to a railway. Why not. We built it ourselves around the school grounds. Narrow gauge, of course. With 100 metres of track; a moving train and several carriages. And a station. And a platform. Great for teaching girls about engineering and design as well as welding and construction. Working with a local group of engineers, students had the chance to experience collaborative decision-making and something completely different. Students built self-confidence and resilience and were proud of building something unique to their school resulting in them feeling better about themselves and their community.

Due to our success and dedication with improving student well-being, Ofsted said, “you have found creative ways to reach out to all pupils”, it made perfect sense when FBA was asked to consider creating a nearby centre for students in the region who were experiencing mental health concerns and struggling to access a mainstream school. With the financial support of a [multi-academy trust](#), we developed The Bridge, a school that offers hope and a future to students whose education has been disrupted due to medical and/or mental health issues. Alongside mainstream subjects, we began to consider the language we used. How we managed and conducted ourselves as staff. How we demonstrated hope and courage. By having The Bridge affiliated with FBA, our students and staff are even more knowledgeable about mental health and increasingly aware of their daily interactions.

All of this is underpinned by strong psychology: positive psychology. We have embraced the work of Martin Seligman. Every student and member of staff knows that when challenging situations occur: It's not personal. It's not permanent. It's not pervasive. We try and help those in our community recognise that things change, that a positive attitude, a sense of gratitude, will bring results.

We also invited Lisa Damour to the UK and worked through the seven transitions in [Untangled: Guiding Teenage Girls Through the Seven Transitions into Adulthood](#) with staff and then students. Our community gained valuable insight into the developmental transitions of girls from adolescence through adulthood so we can best support their healthy growth.

As educators, we are concerned about all aspects of our students' cognitive, behavioural, and emotional wellbeing, and we need to be concerned about how we model our own mental health. At FBA, we have learnt that the greatest achievements are not always academic. Achieving mental health involves focusing on how we think, feel, and behave. It can be attained by learning and celebrating a new talent or overcoming a seemingly impossible obstacle. Girls together at FBA are finding their voice and learning to celebrate success in all its forms.

Julian Dutnall
Headteacher
Frances Bardsley Academy for Girls