



VIEWPOINT

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MANAGING SCHOOLS & CLASSROOMS TO PROMOTE STUDENT WELLNESS

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INTRODUCTION: Hi, and welcome to *Schools In Focus*, an 1105 Media podcast. I'm your host, Matt Jones, senior editor of *Spaces4Learning* and *Campus Security & Life Safety*. Our guest today is Bob Dillon, a school designer and consultant with STS Education. He's here to talk about the importance of student wellness during the learning day, from the time students arrive at the bus stop to the final bell. We'll cover all the different aspects of student wellness, as well as wellness rooms, the role of technology, staff wellness and professional development tracks, and the importance of choice in getting students to engage. This episode of *Schools In Focus* is sponsored by STS Education.

SPACES4LEARNING: Hi, everybody, and welcome to *Schools In Focus*. Our guest today is Bob Dillon, school designer and consultant for STS Education. Bob, thanks a lot for being here with us today.

BOB DILLON: Yeah, it's great to be here. And thanks for having me.

S4L: Of course, any time! First off, can you just tell us a little bit about yourself and your current job?

BOB: Yeah, sure. I've been a public-school educator for the last 25 years. I've had a lot of roles, which I think helps me now in my role as school designer. I've been a middle-school principal. I've been a high-school-English teacher, then a Chief Technology Officer. I've helped to coordinate other programs at the district-office level. But now, I'm really focused on school design, so—instructional design, how technology can be designed to support learning. And, in a lot of ways, my focus is about the learning environment and how you support students in a built environment.

S4L: So, you've been on both sides of the coin—you've been in the trenches, and then you've also been more on the

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corporate side?

BOB: Yeah, correct. Some of my clients are like STS, and some are schools, and some are interior-design companies. Kind of a wide breadth of different folks that I support. But, really, it's to help people continue to focus on what's good for teaching and learning, and not to just get caught up in products and services.

S4L: What do we mean by "student wellness"? Because that really could encompass a lot of things.

BOB: I think one of the things we noticed in the pandemic was that student wellness really got hammered. We're talking about mental health; we're talking about being primed to learn; we're talking about feeling good about being in school. Wellness goes well beyond pure, clinical, mental-health sort of things. And during the pandemic, it was really clear that where kids learned really impacted those sorts of things. A lot of my conversations with schools and districts are, "How do we make sure that where kids learn supports their wellness and mental health?"

S4L: And then, what about staff? Is there anybody looking out for them and keeping an eye on their wellness?

BOB: I think that that's an important piece of this, as well. Oftentimes, when we're talking about classrooms, or learning space design, or furnishings, there's a heavy focus on learning. There should be; that's our business, is to help



students to grow. But what we can't forget is that in most school districts, 80 percent of the budget is on people. So, teachers, staff, everyone else that helps to drive a school and make it happen—we have to make sure that all of those people are in a great position to be excellent in their role.

If someone walks into a building, and it's moldy; if they walk into a building, and they work in a room that has no natural light; if the air isn't the way it should be; we're really sucking the life out of the people that are serving our students. Now, more than ever, we really have to think about: How do we surround our teachers and support personnel with an environment that can really amplify their strengths, as opposed to them making it happen



despite the space? And so, lots of conversation about taking care of our staff, as well as our students, when it comes to the learning environment.

S4L: How can schools help students feel safe, welcome, and protected; and encourage better outcomes?

BOB: I think it comes from the very beginning. We don't often think about space design as full-building or full-campus design. From the moment a student pulls up—well, let's go all the way back to the bus stop, right? Are bus stops safe for kids? Do they make kids feel comfortable being at the bus stop? What about being on the bus? What about the very outside of the building? When kids see their school, that first impression, does it say, "Come inside, we can't wait for you to be here"? Or there are all kinds of signs outside that say, "No trespassing," "No loitering"? So many of our students see the word "no" ten or twelve times before they ever reach their classroom. I think we have to think bigger about how we create welcoming spaces for our students.

Do students see themselves in the halls, on the walls, in the way of pictures, in the way of how we represent the community, with posters and flyers and color? There's a lot of research out there about how to design really culturally responsive learning environments. And I think that's a really important piece, as well.

Then, I think we also make assumptions that when our families walk into our schools, that's a positive thing for them. So many of our families didn't have great school experiences. And I can't think of places where I'm like, "Oh, I remember a place that was painful and awful for me—I want to rush back to that place." So, we really do have to reorient spaces for our families and take care of our kids.

S4L: What about wellness rooms? Do you think a school needs a dedicated



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place for mental recuperation?

BOB: I certainly think that it's nice to have. I don't know that it needs to be there in order that a school exists. But, we are seeing some schools taking this on and getting good results. I'm in a lot of schools around the country. And when I'm working with those schools, many folks are saying, "We don't have space for anything. All of our classrooms are full. All of our storage is full. We don't have a place for a wellness room." I don't want to say, "Hey, unless you can create a space or build a space, it's not doable." Because I think it's really multifaceted. So yes, if you have a space and you want to build it out—if it's off of your library, if it's off of your clinic, or it's near your counselor—all those are ideal types of spaces to capture. They don't have to be huge. They can be 300 square feet, 400 square feet, or half a

classroom, if you would.

S4L: Is there a professional development track for wellness, and are there ways to incorporate technology into that?

BOB: I think there are pieces for both of those. When I'm thinking of teachers bringing wellness into their classroom, first, I'm thinking about: How are you thinking about the light in your room? How are you thinking about the clutter in your room? All of those are pieces of wellness. There's also pieces about, like, how often are your kids moving around? And how often do they have choice? When I think about professional learning, it's really bringing those big pieces of data science and learning space research to more teachers so that they recognize that these are big, research-based things



that they can bring to their classroom.

And there are ways to work with schools over time to make learning-space design, optimizing what do have, purchasing when you can, and really making an impact with those pieces. And I would say that none of this is separate. The instructional practices, the learning environment practice, and (like you mentioned) the technology piece really does play an important role. Because, now more than ever, kids are in digital environments. We want them to be healthy in those environments, just like the built environment. And so, we do need to continue to think about ways to make sure that kids can see a screen. Does that mean there needs to be three or four screens in a room? Two screens in a room? Do we need to make sure that our technology is robust enough that if we do open the blinds in a classroom to let natural light in, that kids can still see the technology? How do we help kids balance being active and being on a device? And so, lots of questions that I'm hoping that more schools and more districts continue to ask, so that the space isn't getting in the way of the learning.

S4L: It looks like there are a lot of

different types of wellness. There's social wellness. There's physical wellness. There's intellectual wellness. There's personal, environmental, occupational wellness. What are some ways that schools can help promote all of these different types of wellness, that might not be right at the tip of people's minds when they're thinking about student wellness in schools?

BOB: I think when you make that list, it sounds overwhelming. And if you brought that list to teachers, I bet you that they would have that same feeling of being overwhelmed. But when I work with teacher groups, we look at each one of those. We start to say, what does that mean to you? How are you optimizing that for yourself? How are you seeing other people optimize that? What does it feel like when that's optimized? How can we pursue that? Because I really do believe that if teachers want to bring these concepts of wellness to their students, they need to understand them; they need to have felt them; they need to have personally experienced them. And so, we really do go through each of those pieces of wellness as an exercise on how they can bring those to students.

When it comes to physical wellness,

movement and adding more movement into the classroom is super important. We're not talking about exercising—we're talking about letting kids stand up more often, letting kids have some choice about where they are in the classroom. We're in such a busy world that's so noisy. We're talking about giving kids some space for quiet, without words, for reflection, for purpose, and teaching kids how to use quiet time. Some call that mindfulness, call that meditation, call that just reflection. But both of those are really key for our students, if they have those types of wellness.

And then, just making sure that we're not in the same place all day long. And I think that as adults, we can get fixed in one place. And we need to help our students realize that the more they move around, the more they move to places that really support whatever they're doing. They can really get their brain charged up and doing some incredible learning. Get outside, move around, and just have an encouragement to be in dialogue and be in community with others. All of those things can be really helpful.

S4L: And then how do factors like time and scheduling impact wellness?

BOB: Yeah, those are the pieces that create some limits. I think whenever we're thinking about school, we're thinking about a lot of different pieces of time, whether that is the bell schedule, the weekly schedule, or the annual calendar. All of those things create stress on a system. And they're trade-offs, right? There's no way to create the perfect calendar that supports everything in the building. But when we're thinking about time, are we asking kids to walk to a cafeteria, stand in a line, get their food, finish their food, throw their food away, and be back in their classroom in 22 minutes? That's not a place where I see students in a—that's not a wellness practice. Are we asking



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students to only go to the bathroom, only get a drink of water when certain times of the day happen? Are we limiting when kids can see the counselor or when kids can go see the nurse? All of those things, whether they’re implicit or explicit, can really be limits. And if we’re creating those types of time restrictions on our kids, we’re just slowly eroding the wellness that’s possible for them.

S4L: What’s a positive role that technology can play in wellness?

BOB: Yeah, I don’t know if you’ve ever used—there’s certainly a number of different types of apps out there trying to help with wellness. Whether those are positive affirmations that you’re getting throughout the day, whether those are reminders to take moments of gratitude, whether it’s music that you’re piping into the classroom using technology, whether it’s the fireplace that you show on the screen, or some other pieces of nature—all of these can

be little pieces of micro-wellness that we can bring to our classrooms, and most of our teachers have control over those pieces. And then I also love a couple of the apps that remind me, “Hey, you’ve been sitting for ten minutes. Get up and move around.” So certainly, our smartwatches can do that. Applications can do that. And we should be using all kinds of technology in our classrooms and our displays to get kids up, moving, and going. All of that is now more possible than ever.

S4L: No, I like that. And I’ve used things like that. I’ve used some mindfulness meditation apps, even just breathing or relaxation exercises. I know one thing that we started doing is, there’s a bunch of YouTube videos that are just ten hours of an aquarium, or a fireplace, or ambient noise at a coffee shop, or something like that. And we’ve started putting those on either at night or even during the workday. And we

found that it really just does have that little unconscious wellness effect of making things feel a little bit calmer. And I had never thought that teachers might be able to do that in classrooms. You would think that it might be a little bit distracting to, especially, younger students. But that’s actually a really practical, immediate thing that teachers might be able to do to just have on in the background. But I hadn’t thought about little stuff like that.

BOB: Yeah. And I would say, Matt, the first time you do it, it might be distracting, right? But I think with all of these pieces, we have to be really explicit with kids about why we’re doing it, and then help them to learn how to do it on their own. It’s that “teach a man to fish” thing, right? All of these practices should be lifelong practices that we’re practicing in the classroom and giving kids a sense of why we’re doing it and how to do it. And I do love slow TV, like those eight-hour videos where you’re on a train to the North Pole. And so, certainly, the things that we want to put on our televisions aren’t there to entertain, but they are of comfort. We know a lot of the research about nature-inspired learning says to go outside, bring nature inside, or showcase nature—on our devices, and on our screens. All of those things can reduce stress, reduce anxiety, let people calm themselves, and have some of the quiet that they need to really optimize their brains for learning.

S4L: What does it look like to have spaces for the wraparound services that are needed for wellness?

BOB: This really came to the forefront during the pandemic, when we were asking school nurses to quarantine students. We realized that the space was barely big enough for themselves and one other student. We have to make sure that our clinics are robust enough to handle having multiple students in them. We have to



make sure that there are real spaces for our social-work professionals that are in our buildings. I can't tell you how many social workers around the country are huddled in the corner of a library, or the closet, or in the back of a conference room, trying to have really important mental-health supports for students. Many of our schools are looking to add third-party professionals from partners and community organizations, but they don't really have space for those people to be in the building.

So how do you create those spaces? It can be as simple as a couple of spaces that people can schedule time into. I've seen principals turn their offices over to support services. I've seen people look really closely at their schedules to make room half of the day where a classroom might not be used, and start to put support professionals in those types of spaces, as well. Schools really do have space. We just have to be thoughtful about, like, let's make sure wherever we're supporting our students, they're healthy spaces. They have the right amount of privacy, and the acoustics are good. Can you imagine if you're a counselor, and you're like, "Let's go in the gym during basketball practice and have a meaningful conversation"? It just doesn't work that well.

S4L: How can families set students up for wellness while the students are at school?

BOB: Schools do only get so many hours of the day with students. And so, it's so important that we really do find ways to take some of the things that we're doing at school, translate that to home, and hand those off to our parents. Our parents (when they can) and our families, you know, they need to practice some of these things about being quiet, having space to work, encouraging students that maybe laying in your bed and doing your homework isn't the right thing all the time. They can start building some of those types of habits about

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movement, and where you work, and when to listen to music, or when not to listen to music when you're working. We just need students to be practicing those sorts of best practices not only at school, but at home as well.

S4L: How can movement and choice play a role in overall wellness for students?

BOB: Well, we know this: Any time we give any human being the appropriate amount of choice, it's empowering. And in many of our schools, our students feel like school is done to them, not with them. And so, wherever we can get feedback from students about...how is the space working for you? How is the space not working for you? What can we do that will set you up for success? We don't ask students those questions

often enough. But when we do get the answers to those questions, we can provide students the appropriate amount of choice. And I'm not talking about choice about everything, every day, for every moment. But we can give our students a lot more choice. And that empowerment is going to have them more interested in being at school and more active in the learning that they're doing. And so, that's just my encouragement, that if kids need to be able to move, let them move. Let's give them as many choices as we can. Because we want our students to be engaged and have some level of satisfaction about being at school, because those are the two elements—engaged, satisfied—that set us up for the best academic success we can have.

S4L: Definitely, yeah. I think giving



them that little bit of agency and letting them engage on their terms is always huge in getting them to participate at school. This might be an overly crude or simple example, but my sister and her husband have a four-year-old and a two-year-old. And they said that they were having a lot of trouble getting them to eat their vegetables. And then they read that the trick was to give them a choice: Instead of saying, “Eat your vegetables,” it was, “Would you like green beans, or would you like carrots?” And that way, just giving her the choice, I think they discovered that she does prefer carrots over green beans. But it’s still just a way to make it her choice, which vegetable she eats, but she’s still eating the vegetables either way. And it became that much less of a nightly drama, just giving her that little bit of choice.

BOB: Yeah. And it really is these micro-choices, like, “Would you rather be at the standing desk, or would you rather be at your home desk today?” “While you’re reading, would you rather sit on the floor, or maybe out in the hall?” Like, you’re right—you don’t

want to give too many choices, because then it’s overwhelming. But if you can give a couple of choices: Today, should we do our math first, or should we do our language arts first? You can give those types of choices. Kids really do feel like they’re co-creating their design experience and their learning experience. And it really does go a long way from the smallest of learners all the way up through our seniors in high school.

S4L: I think that was just about everything that we had had prepared. I was wondering if there were any last words or last thoughts that you wanted to get in, that you didn’t have a chance to during the conversation.

BOB: I just think it’s probably worth noting that we are in a time and space where schools need partners around this work. This isn’t a natural element for school leaders. I didn’t go to school to learn how to be a learning-space designer. I didn’t go to a school to figure out how to integrate technology. So now more than ever, I think that various partners that can really think about all of these things together—instruction,

technology and learning spaces—are really, really valuable for schools and districts. So, I would just encourage any school that really wants to think about this to find some partners. They can be people that you purchase from, but make sure that there are people that really want to be in long-term partnership, talking through these essential things.

S4L: I really would like to thank you one more time for being here today. This has been really substantial. This has been a lot of great information. And I just wanted to thank you so much for sharing your time and your expertise with us this afternoon.

BOB: Thanks, Matt. Thanks for having me!

S4L: And one more time, for our listeners, this has been Bob Dillon, school designer and consultant for STS Education. I’d like to thank the sponsor of this episode, STS Education. And finally, thanks to all of you, all of our listeners, for spending some time with us today. We’ll see you next time on *Schools In Focus*.