

DISCUSSION SUMMARY

INVITATIONAL STRATEGY SESSION

Held Friday, May 21, 2021

CONTEXT

As part of the Policies for Better Life Conference, over 50 participants from policy, practice and research communities came together virtually for a two-hour invitational session exploring how policy-making can be different when focused on well-being. Professor Christopher Barrington-Leigh set the context for the discussions. Joanne Smithson, Local Government & Health Sector Lead with the UK What Works Centre for Wellbeing, presented on what they are learning about policy making that maximizes wellbeing.

Participants then divided into four facilitated groups, with each group looking at one policy topic. Each group was given a defined policy question and then asked to discuss it focusing on:

Q1: If we were to design and deliver policy in a way that maximizes wellbeing, what would need to be different in our approach?

Q2: If wellbeing policy were to move forward, what would be the key challenges and opportunities? What currently works well – how can we build on this?

A discussant in each group provided some closing reflections at the end of the deliberations. This report summarizes the highlights of the discussions for each policy topic and offers a synthesis of overall key points in the concluding section.

POLICY TOPIC: CHILDREN & PSYCHOSOCIAL SKILLS

Policy question: What would be needed to transform schooling and education towards wellbeing as a goal over performance, with life skills specialists in every school, psychosocial and life skills in every child's curriculum, more group work, more outside physical activity, and less homework?

Q1: If we were to design and deliver this policy in a way that maximizes wellbeing, what would need to be different in our approach?

Requires a complete shift in the education system away from the results focus that exists now

Reframe schools as places where we create good citizens, including social and emotional learning (SEL). Schools are not isolated spaces for educational outcomes. They are connected to community and the rest of society. This reframing would require clarity on what we are trying to achieve and the involvement of key partners including educators and parents so everyone will feel comfortable with the shift that needs to take place.

Needs to be a wellbeing case for wellbeing, not an economic case

The focus should be on proactive investment in people thriving, rather than fixing and being reactive in how we spend. Leverage spinoffs, e.g. evidence that children that learn SEL at school bring it back into their homes and teach their parents. More access to outdoor education and play could help.

Evidence-based decision-making

Encourage schools to use wellbeing data to make decisions about policies and practices, e.g. school start times. Any school policy could be examined through a child wellbeing impact lens. The use of child wellbeing impact assessments could help with this.

Top-down support and mandate

To make room for social and emotional learning, there needs to be both top down and bottom up approaches. Right now the approach is very bottom up. It really needs to be a mandate embedded and integrated into the purpose of education and curriculum if directives are to take hold.

Q2: If wellbeing policy were to move forward, what would be the key challenges, opportunities and critical next steps?

Size of required shift could be threatening

Investing in people thriving (rather than fixing problems) will require consultation, moving outside of silos, especially for government, and developing a theory of changes that is compelling and well communicated.

Pressure from family income inequalities

The role of wider income inequality is creating economic anxiety in families and a lot of pressure for good grades. Success and qualifications trump all else and is creating mental health issues for kids. SEL might end up being just a mechanism to cope with that. One proactive but challenging approach is to involve kids in co-designing the programs and see if schools can be connected hubs for services and community supports.

Using COVID as an opportunity

During the pandemic, there has been increased recognition of the need to balance the pressure for achievement with mental wellbeing. We need to remember this for the Fall. Critical next steps to reduce pressure on students could include an extra year at school and encouraging PHAC (Public Health Agency of Canada) to collaborate with Ministries of Education through the Council of Ministers and education groups to ensure teachers have minimal training to support students. This should include access to resources in “psychosocial first aid”. People for Education in Ontario has a lot of research and engagement with the Ontario education system around importance of SEL.

Closing Remarks: Nora Spinks, CEO and Team Lead, Vanier Institute of the Family

Our conversation this morning has focused on the culture of safety and security, of belonging and kindness that are important to wellbeing and where the centres of kindness reside – schools and early learning centres. This is part of changing the framing around education and what it means to create citizens of tomorrow, rather than just income generators. How do we frame wellbeing as an integral part of the outcome and output of our educational system? Some ideas are: focusing on strengths, not just grades; learning from an indigenous legacy lens (e.g. what do we want to leave our children in future generations); using co-design in a way that fosters autonomy and non-prescriptive definitions of wellbeing, success and accomplishment. All of these things require iterative advancement. There is a lot we can learn and unpack from the pandemic.

POLICY TOPIC: URBAN AND COMMUNITY LIFE

Policy question: How would one organize and deploy a new program of investment in "social infrastructure" to promote a sense of dignity, community and belonging?

Q1: If we were to design and deliver this policy in a way that maximizes wellbeing, what would need to be different in our approach?

Risk aversion is stifling a wellbeing approach

We need to build a risk-taking culture, compared to a risk/fear culture where things don't happen because something might go wrong.

Move from fixing to enabling

There needs to be a shift from fixing and problem solving, e.g. "curing the bad", to being an enabler, maximizing the good and publicizing the positive (quantitative and qualitative data).

Working at the lowest tier

Enable local areas to lead once there is agreement on outcomes to be met, based on a wellbeing framework.

Working across policy areas

Change the Silos model. These are complex challenges and an inter-sectoral approach is needed. Health in all policies – Wellbeing in all policies.

Voices

Put the diversity lens on – so all voices can be heard. This includes practical things like time of meetings, availability of childcare. This needs to be an intentional 'bringing outside in'.

Role of arts & culture

Have more involvement from Arts and Culture. We need a stronger lens on this area of policy, and dedicated funding to maximise wellbeing benefits

Q2: If wellbeing policy were to move forward, what would be the key challenges, opportunities and critical next steps?

Using the 'building back' agenda (from Covid) to maximise wellbeing

This is an opportune time to get traction in improving lives and wellbeing. We need a common language of what better looks like, and an evidence base that is robust and trusted.

Addressing loneliness and social isolation

There needs to be a shift/more investment in this area, including through public health. Solutions are needed across a range of settings: in the doctor's office/transportation/the park. Embrace a diversity of actors as the roles organisations can play are vast and varied – loneliness at work, as well as in our homes, and in recreation.

Partnerships with housing developers

Team up with Developers to do best practice, working and learning about what makes a difference in neighbourhoods together. Build capacity of planners/developers and bring community leaders into the process early. Balance between what areas want, and what might improve wellbeing – show them the art of the possible.

Data, intelligence & insight

Building a shared wellbeing data source that everyone can use is important. Proper data can help advocate for policy change and build the case for wellbeing. Challenges are getting data at the neighbourhood and community level and using data consistently.

Building social infrastructure

There is a commitment to social infrastructure in the federal budget. A key challenge is how to funnel that down to concrete change, e.g. bring into curriculum and to a local level. Opportunities include the use of networks, coming together as peers to share and co-create, while recognising the past in a spirit of reconciliation.

Authentic engagement

This should be a core value of our wellbeing approach – we need to reach out and go to people. Don't wait for the public meeting. This should be values based, including building empathy while recognising the past in a spirit of reconciliation.

Closing Remarks: Susan Holdsworth, RECOVER-Urban Wellbeing Initiative, City of Edmonton

We have to shift culture. Shifting hearts and minds are hard. We have to work to change the conversations that are taking place. We have to shift our focus in what we pay attention to – what's important. What matters? How do we make meaning? We need to build the story of why this is important.

POLICY TOPIC: LABOUR MARKET AND WORKPLACE

Policy question: Leveraging its role as employer, how could government undertake a concerted program to modernize work life across the country? For instance, with the goal to implement less annual work hours, inclusive parental leave from the workforce, and increased flexibility in work styles and trajectories?

Q1: If we were to design and deliver policy in a way that maximizes wellbeing, what would need to be different in our approach?

Identifying the problem

Make sure that problem exists and that we have it correctly identified. This requires speaking to a greater number and diversity of people in the workforce. Consider where needs are not being met.

Culture shift

Modernizing work life takes a major culture shift in government. Who can lead this work and what incentives might be needed, g. funding, to make it happen? The approach would need to consider what we are rewarding and recognizing within the workplace e.g. long-time service awards – is that what we want to recognize?

Engage with the community sector

This can't be done by government alone. The community sector can bring in the voices of more marginalized groups and provide a bigger social context for the types of changes that are needed.

Good evidence

Good and sufficient evidence needs to be collected to make the case for change but also to help guide that change. Quick wins and prototypes can help provide data on what works and what doesn't.

Q2: If wellbeing policy were to move forward, what would be the key challenges, opportunities and critical next steps?

Identify the internal opportunities and start small

Government is a collection of departments with different dynamics and connections to other sectors. Look for the places where there is a state of readiness and perhaps even experimentation already happening. Consider using and learning from prototypes.

Recognize that COVID provides both opportunities and challenges

COVID has made us rethink how we organize and prioritize work as well as enlarging the conversation about mental health and the contribution of work life to that. At the same time there is “change” fatigue and a desire to get back to normal, i.e. pre-COVID ways of working.

Broaden the engagement

This policy question needs to be informed by a broad range of voices and lived experiences. There needs to be “bottom-up” involvement (e.g. with community sector) to help ensure the policy is speaking to the work context beyond the parameters of government, including the contribution of volunteering (unpaid work).

Driven by data

Make sure we are mining, selecting and using the right data.

Closing Remarks: Danny Graham, Chief Engagement Officer, Engage Nova Scotia

Conscious that there is a flow between exploring specific solutions/ideas and doing the deeper dives to really understand the problem and who is experiencing it. What are the ways we can strategically move through this to find the kinds of solutions that can really impact those whose wellbeing is most challenged? Data is important in this. For example, at Engage NS we use a 230 question survey to get at a wide diversity of worker experience. This could be a source of rich data.

POLICY TOPIC: INCOME AND CONSUMPTION

Policy question: How would we take on a real reform of the incidence and content of our exposure to advertising, with a wellbeing objective?

Q1: If we were to design and deliver policy in a way that maximizes wellbeing, what would need to be different in our approach?

Enhance media literacy

Citizens need better tools and education to critically interpret information in ads so they are less susceptible to manipulation, e.g. presentation of false choices. Implement well-being impact labels, e.g. this ad is bad for your body image.

Centre on people and wellbeing, rather than corporate profits

Bring in a wellbeing lens to classify what is considered a “harmful” product (e.g. harmful for well-being). Decide what we want as outcome, get right people in room and develop evaluation to measure outcomes of policy. Encourage better advertising, using a well-being lens and screening tool. Support entrepreneurs that put out good ads.

Role of government and regulators

Government and regulators like the CRTC have a role to play in advertisement and we have successful examples of regulation (tobacco). Well-being could become part of the approach with regulations about frequency and repetitiveness of advertising for example. Need to consider how a regulatory approach maps onto the digital space.

Q2: If wellbeing policy were to move forward, what would be the key challenges, opportunities and critical next steps?

Focus on industry

A key challenge will be convincing companies to develop ads based on a well-being focus. Both incentives and disincentives will be needed, e.g. ISO ethical certification standard on multi-faceted view of wellbeing led by civil society, industry and government; use taxation to encourage companies to shift resources away from advertising; engage advertising companies to demonstrate the power of a wellbeing approach; educate companies about the harm they may do to their bottom-line if they cross social norms as these evolve (e.g. Black Lives Matter).

More evidence and action

There will need to be more research and evidence to assess the impacts of harmful ads and what wellbeing ads can achieve. This could include understanding what is good and bad advertising. But evidence alone is not enough. Society needs to act on the evidence as well. The approach needs to be incremental, focusing on what is most important, based on demonstrable impact.

Offer alternatives

Along with improving media literacy, citizens' susceptibility to harmful ads could be decreased by offering ad-free zones and reducing media paywalls that limit access to ad-free digital content. Ads about advertising could improve media literacy and public broadcasting could become a useful demonstration of well-being ads. The younger generation should be a key focus of these efforts both as heavy users of the digital space and as change-makers.

Closing Remarks: James Hughes, President and CEO, Old Brewery Mission

We agreed that advertising is a legitimate focus for well-being, especially in our digital age. There is a natural policy tension between using the carrot and the stick in regulating and encouraging positive ads. We need a public interest framework, maybe using a "traffic light" system, e.g. red if a harmful ad; tax more if red ad. We are at the stage of needing more evidence about impact of harmful ads, especially knowing that there will be legal challenges to any new controls on advertising.

CONCLUSION

Across the four policy dialogues, there were several common themes, including:

- Designing and delivering policy in a way that maximizes wellbeing will require a **shift in culture** of both government and society. The size of the needed shift could be threatening. Consultation and compelling theories of change will be important, including a deeper understanding of what quality of life is.
- Use the **'building back'** opportunity from the Covid pandemic to maximise wellbeing. Start small and advance iteratively. Utilize prototypes to try out new ideas at multiple scales, including government, community and individual.

- Have the **right data** to build the case and to know what works. Consider building a shared wellbeing data source that all can use.
- Build and enhance our **social infrastructure** to enable concrete change. Schools and education could be a key area of focus, helping achieve a shift from performance to wellbeing and becoming a good citizen.
- Focusing on **children and the younger generations** can have spinoffs as they influence their families and communities. In turn shifts in family, community, government and society will have impact on children, e.g. changes in advertising.
- **Community sector** is a critical component. There is lots that can be done at a local level. Many community groups have strong networks and are able to reach those who are more marginalized in today's society. Need to look to strengthening, bringing more resources to, and working closely in collaboration with community sector organizations.
- **Engage authentically** and widen the diversity of voices being heard, including those with different lived experiences. Go further than consultation to co-creation. Proactively reach out to new people/ groups.

Finally there was a call to action to take advantage of the momentum around well-being but also to take the long view, so that, in the words of one discussant, “when our children are telling their children about this time, they can look back and say what we learned in this pandemic and what changes we made to improve the wellbeing of Canadians”.