

# Birmingham Primary Schools Wellbeing Census 2023

## Lay Summary

### *Why a Wellbeing Census?*

The gap between levels of need and the availability of resources to support school-age young people with mental health and wellbeing issues has been rapidly increasing in recent years against a background where half of all mental health disorders are estimated to emerge by age 14. Wellbeing is positively associated with a range of educational outcomes and schools are an ideal environment to provide educational interventions to improve the social and emotional health of young people but need support to systematically measure and appraise the status of pupil's mental health in their schools.

Employing wellbeing metrics to annually gauge the emotional health of young people in school settings (Thapar, Stewart-Brown, & Harold, 2021) is a practical way to indicate the current and ongoing wellbeing and future mental health status of pupils, giving schools the opportunity to both monitor and support their young people.

### *The 2023 Breathe Education Secondary School Wellbeing Census*

Between Jan-July 2023 a "wellbeing census" was conducted in a sample of primary schools in the West Midlands. The two measures employed for the survey were:

The Stirling Children's Wellbeing Scale (Liddle & Carter, 2015). The 15-item scale SCWBS has 5 response categories across 3 scales, positive outlook, positive emotional state, and social desirability with 2 scales (positive outlook and positive emotional state) summed to provide a single score ranging between 12-60. The items are suitable for younger children and are all worded positively making the measure more suitable for use with primary schools.

The School Connectedness Scale (Resnick et al., 1997), assessed by 4 items across 5 response categories, summed to provide a single score ranging between 4-20. Questions are adapted from Resnick et al. (1997). School connectedness is protective against a range of risk behaviours and poor academic achievement.

Simple demographics for participating pupils were collated around ethnicity, sex, school year, SEND status, free school meals and persistent absence. For inter-school comparisons we matched overall averages to publicly available school level information for %SEN support, % Pupils with English as not first language and % FSM (average last 6 years) from Dfes (2021) and Local Super Output Area (LSOA) deprivation data from [www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk) (2019).

**Note:** we try to avoid overuse of statistics in this report to make it more accessible

Measures are included in the appendix i.

Digital delivery of the census was through [www.breathe-schools.co.uk](http://www.breathe-schools.co.uk), a platform that enables collaborative work to take place across a regional partnership of mental health professionals and individual schools. This is part of an ongoing programme creating resources and interventions for schools via our teacher focused website [www.breathe-edu.co.uk](http://www.breathe-edu.co.uk).

For more information regarding the census and this report please contact [c.palmer@warwick.ac.uk](mailto:c.palmer@warwick.ac.uk).

### Who were involved?

33 primary schools in the regional area of the UK known as the West Midlands took part. Participating schools consisted of 17 academies, 11 state-maintained, 3 voluntary-aided, and 2 foundation schools (including one school for deaf children). Birmingham LEA schools spanned across all 5 Birmingham constituencies North (8 schools), East (5 Schools), West (4 Schools), South (4 Schools), Central (4 Schools) with a further 7 schools' part of Staffordshire LEA and 1 school from Warwickshire LEA<sup>1</sup>. Primary Schools registered 5,657 pupils for the survey of whom 4,107 took part, providing a 73% response rate. All pupils from years 4-6 (8-10 years old) were able to take part in the survey.

Results were used to create bespoke wellbeing dashboards for each school to assist with interpretation of the data alongside this lay report.

### Representation

On average schools were generally representative of the broader picture of schools in Birmingham & Staffordshire LEAs in terms of percentage of pupils with special needs support: 13.7% vs 13.2% (Dfes, 2022); pupils with their first language other than English: 26% vs 25.1% (Dfes, 2022); and pupils in receipt of free school meals: 32.9% vs 31.1 (Dfes, 2022). The West Midlands has slightly higher levels of these groups nationally than in the rest of the England (ONS, 2021)

### Primary schools' constituency and school type analysis

Table 1 details the 2023 wellbeing census results categorised by constituency of school and school type. Wellbeing and school connectedness was found to be similar across Birmingham constituencies and outside of the Birmingham LEA. The foundation special school included this year averaged significantly higher levels of wellbeing and school connectedness than other school types, however, it should be noted this related to one school with a relatively small sample size. There were no significant differences between other school types.

Table 1. Bham Constituencies & Other LEA, School Type vs Wellbeing and School Connectedness

Primary School Variables	Frequency (2023)	Percentages (2023)	Avg SCWBS		Avg School Connectedness	
			2023	2022 Diff	2023	2022 Diff
North	1334.0	0.3	43.5	0.0	15.5	-0.2
East	821.0	0.2	43.6	1.3	16.0	0.1
West	232.0	0.1	43.3	2.0	15.3	0.0
South	298.0	0.1	41.9	0.6	14.8	-0.4
Central	769.0	0.2	42.4	-0.3	14.8	-0.5
Other LEA	653.0	0.2	43.0	N/A	15.3	N/A
Academy	1893.0	0.5	43.1	-0.4	15.4	-0.5
State funded	1415.0	0.3	42.7	0.9	15.0	-0.2
Foundation	281.0	0.1	44.0	N/A	16.0	N/A
Foundation special School	25.0	0.0	50.9	N/A	N/A	N/A
Voluntary aided	493.0	0.1	43.5	1.0	15.6	-0.1

<sup>1</sup> Taking part in the census was open to all schools in the Birmingham LEA however as one academy trust had schools operating in neighbouring LEAs they were permitted to take part

*Primary school's pupil level mental wellbeing and school connectedness*

Table 2 details the main findings of the 2023 wellbeing census. Overall average wellbeing score for primary school pupils was **43.1**, an overall increase of +0.8 compared to 2022 data (42.3) but still a drop of -3.2 compared to our initial 2021 data (46.6). Wellbeing is similar to levels reported by Liddle and Carter (2015) in 2015 pre-pandemic and overall suggests that wellbeing is stable over time but variable across schools. School connectedness for primary school pupils was calculated as **15.5**.

Female pupils reported similar average mental wellbeing, 42.8, to male pupils, 43.4. The difference is small but statistically significant overall. Pupils with SEMH needs reported slightly lower wellbeing on average, 40.6, than pupils reporting no SEND, 43.2, a difference of -2.6 approaching a meaningful finding. The SEMH group also reported lower wellbeing than any other category of SEND. Pupils with physical or sensory disabilities reported much higher on average wellbeing than any other SEND grouping this appears to have been heavily influenced by the school for children who are deaf (in which we know wellbeing is a key focus for the school). Pupils in later school years had both slightly lower wellbeing and school connectedness scores compared to those in earlier years, a trend that continues into secondary schools. **A strong positive relationship was found between wellbeing and school connectedness.**

Table 2. Demographic Grouping vs Wellbeing and School Connectedness

Primary School Variables	Frequency (2023)	Percentages (2023)	Avg SCWBS		Avg School Connectedness	
			2023	2022 Diff	2023	2022 Diff
Overall	4107	100	43.1	0.8	15.4	0
Male	1973	48%	43.4	0.7	15	-0.1
Female	1890	46%	42.8	0.6	15.8	-0.1
Sex not known	244	6%	43.4	N/A	15.6	N/A
Year 4	1474	36%	43.9	1.2	16	0.1
Year 5	1289	31%	42.8	-0.2	15	0.4
Year 6	1239	30%	42.7	0.8	15	0
School year unknown	105	3%	41.4	N/A	14.1	N/A
White	2132	52%	43	0.9	15.3	0.1
Asian	764	19%	43.6	0.2	15.8	-0.4
Black	149	4%	41.7	-0.8	14.6	-1
Mixed	242	6%	42.6	0.7	14.9	-0.1
Other	74	2%	41.9	N/A	14.3	N/A
Ethnicity not known	746	18%	43.3	N/A	15.5	N/A
No SEND	3717	91%	43.2	0.8	15.4	-0.1
All SEND combined	390	9%	42.5	0.9	15.2	0.3
Communication & Interaction	124	3%	41.4	-0.4	14.9	-0.3
Cognition & Learning	169	4%	42.1	-0.4	15.2	-0.2
SEMH	49	1%	40.6	1.0	14	0.6
Physical or Sensory	48	1%	48.8	6.5	17.3	1.6
Other Difficulty/Disability	0	0%	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
In Receipt of FSM	1159	28%	42.6	0.2	15	-0.5
Not in receipt of FSM	2610	64%	43.4	0.3	15.5	-0.3
FSM not known	338	8%	42.8	N/A	15.4	N/A
Persistent Absenter	503	12%	42.5	1.5	15	0
Below PA threshold	3319	81%	43.3	0.6	15.5	0.5
PA not known	285	7%	41.6	N/A	15.5	N/A

*Inter-primary school analysis and local norming*

Average wellbeing and school connectedness scores for individual schools are presented in Chart 1. Schools ranged between 39.7 and 50.9 for wellbeing, a meaningful difference of **-11.2** in average wellbeing scores between schools. Three schools reported a meaningfully higher level of wellbeing

than other schools and two schools reported meaningfully lower wellbeing compared to other schools. Comparing school-level data to DfE data no relationship was found between wellbeing and % FSM, or %SEN support. Average wellbeing did not seem to be related to DfE level proxy poverty measures or how many pupils a school had with a known SEND requirement.

Chart 1. Bar chart of average wellbeing and school connectedness for all participating schools with overall average line superimposed.

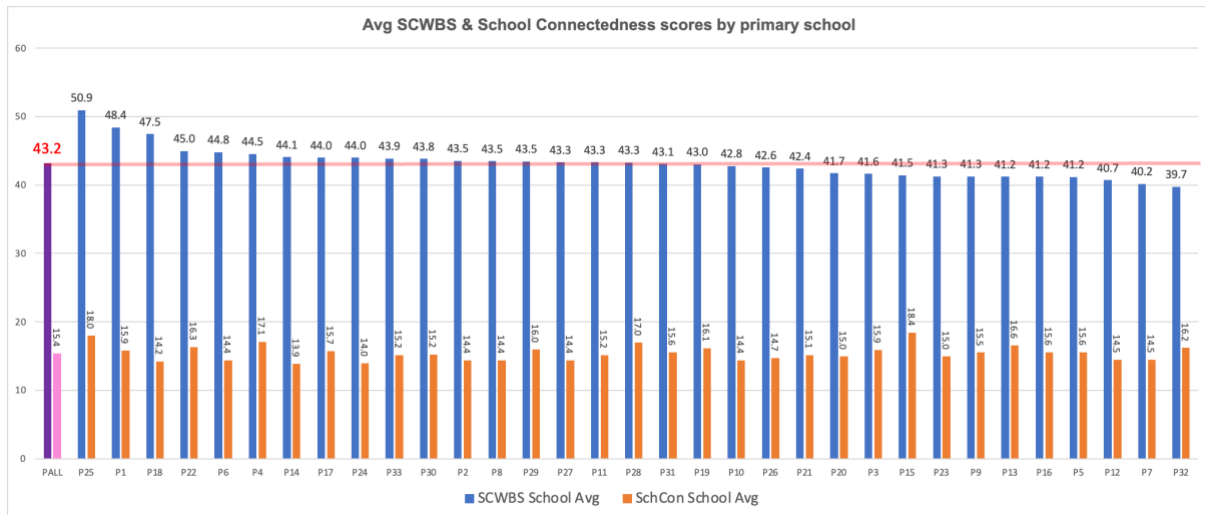


Fig 1 shows a common way to categorise this data by + or -1 standard deviation from the mean. This allows use to create norms for our data and define three categories of mental wellbeing “**Low**”, “**Medium**” and “**High**”. Using this method, 15% (622) pupils fell into the low category (<35), 69% fell into the medium category (36-50) and 16% (653) fell into the high category (51-60). (Note this is a relative comparison of wellbeing categories and should not be employed for any diagnostic purposes).

Fig 1. Overall categorical percentages for all 2023 schools

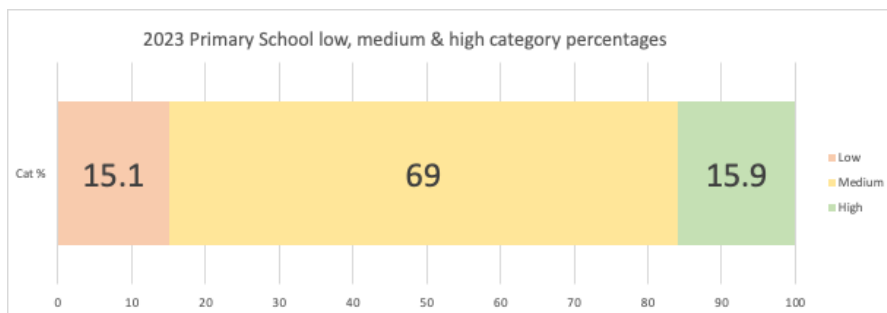
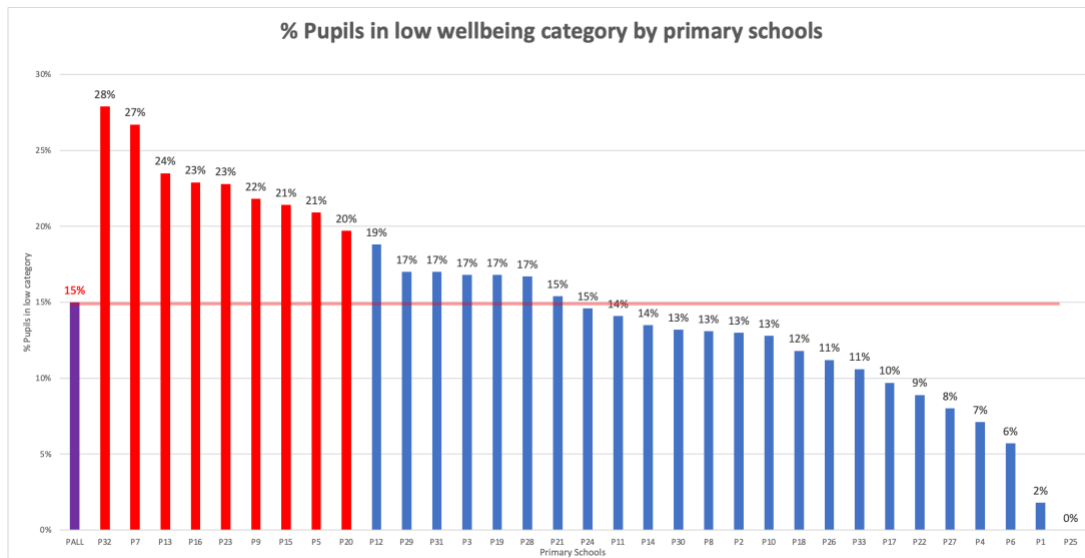


Chart 2. Bar chart displaying the % of pupils in the lower wellbeing category per school. with 15% cut-off line superimposed.

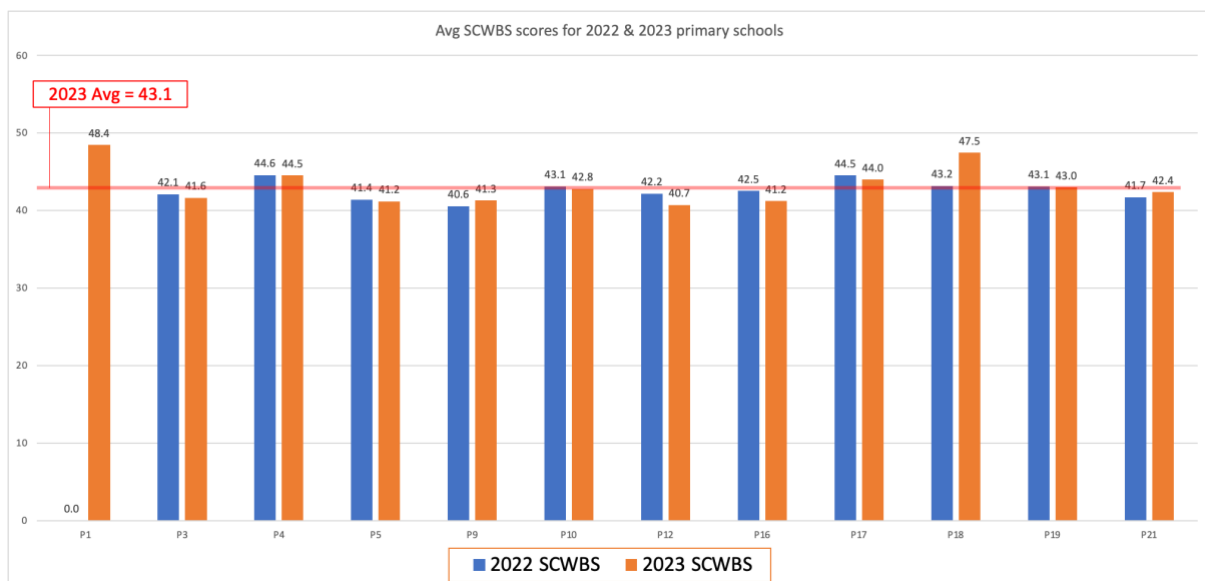


On average, primary schools reported 15% of pupils falling into the lower wellbeing category. We found that 9 schools had markedly higher (+5% more than average) percentages of pupils in this **lower wellbeing** category and these may benefit from a review of wellbeing practices and consideration of accessing targeted support from mental health support services.

*2022 and 2023 primary school comparison*

12 of this year's primary schools took part in 2022, allowing their average wellbeing scores to be compared in 2023. Chart 3 shows that most schools remained stable regarding their overall average wellbeing. One school had significantly improved their average wellbeing by +4.2.

Chart 3. Bar chart of participating school's average wellbeing in 2022 and 2023 with 2023 overall average line superimposed



## *What this tells us*

### *Overall findings*

Our findings indicate that on average primary school wellbeing was at a moderate level across all schools in 2023 and had slightly improved since the previous year (42.3). Our initial census conducted in 2021 during the latter stages of the pandemic found wellbeing to have markedly risen (46.6) before decreasing in 2022. This 2023 data perhaps then represents a more typical level of wellbeing that we would expect to see in primary populations and is supported by pre-covid measures of wellbeing such as the work of Liddle and Carter (2015) who reported an average wellbeing in primary schools of 43.5.

### *SEND*

As with previous years there were no large differences between most groups for wellbeing, however those having a SEMH SEN status reported an significantly average lower wellbeing. SEMH pupils also reported lower levels of school connectedness.

### *School Connectedness*

Wellbeing appears to have a positive relationship with school connectedness, and whilst without further data we cannot be sure whether increased wellbeing causes increased school connectedness or vice versa, our evidence over multiple surveys supports school connectedness as highly related to wellbeing (Waters & Cross, 2010). Attempts to support how connected pupils feel to their school is therefore likely to increase wellbeing. It is also of note that both wellbeing and school connectedness seem to slightly decrease with age, something our research has found to become more pronounced for pupils at secondary school. This finding supports previous research on the reduced wellbeing post transition between primary and secondary school (Lester & Cross, 2015), in this study positive school climate at primary school (for example pupils feeling safe at school) predicted wellbeing after transition to secondary school. This highlights the important role for primary schools in the prevention of possible declines in wellbeing in later adolescence. Longitudinal data from these surveys will be able to assess this more robustly in the future.

### *Comparisons across schools*

Over two years, primary schools involved in the census have been found to have what can be described as a moderate/average level of wellbeing overall. Our comparison schools from 2022 highlight that most schools were in a similar position to last year regarding wellbeing. This indicates that primary school wellbeing at an intra-school level is a relatively stable experience, although improvements are likely possible depending on school. The average wellbeing scores in all schools were above our local norming "low" cut-off. However, **between schools we observed a significant range in average wellbeing scores**, highlighting the variability at a school level for wellbeing.

Assessing percentages of pupils represented in our "low" wellbeing category we could identify nine schools with >20% of their pupils falling into this category suggesting lower wellbeing can pool in some schools. Low wellbeing is not a diagnostic category and how low wellbeing may translate to current or future mental illness is still being understood. However, pupils in this 'low' group would be considered as experiencing poor wellbeing and highlights the need for strategic focus of support for these schools with higher levels of need.

We found that most of the schools that took part in 2022 reported similar average wellbeing as they did in 2023. This relative consistency in wellbeing reported within schools from the previous year suggests, this is less a feature of pupil demographics of pupils and more related to the environment pupils are located. It is our opinion that this should be seen as positive that schools can shape wellbeing positively and that this data can identify schools in most need of support to help create these positive changes.

## Summary

The 2023 wellbeing census built on findings from previous years highlighting the importance of primary school wellbeing in later adolescence. We were able to replicate our evaluation of schools wellbeing in validated and standardise way which could be used to strategically direct resources to schools in most need of support.

## Recommendations

- Primary school wellbeing appears stable across demographic groups however varies between individual schools
- Late primary school and early secondary school years are key timepoints for considering the integration of preventative educational wellbeing interventions with schools curriculum.
- School connectedness appears a useful potential driver of wellbeing that if improved could enable higher levels of wellbeing.

## References

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## Appendix i

### Primary Demographic (reported by schools)

Demographic data will be collected by school administrators/school champions from existing data available to schools.

Ethnicity (2011 Census)

Sex (2021 Census)

School Year

Percentage of Pupil Absence

SEND Type

Free School Meals

### Primary School Pupils (reported by pupils)

The schedule for the Stirling Children's Wellbeing Scale (Liddle & Carter, 2015) (SCWBS) contain the following questions and an additional 4 questions on school connectedness (each coded by 1-5 Likert scale). Each survey is voluntary, pupils can digitally withdraw from the survey prior to beginning and submitting their answers.

		Never	Not that much of the time	Some of the time	Quite a lot of the time	All of the time
<b>Stirling Children's Wellbeing Scale -</b>						
1	I think good things will happen in my life	1	2	3	4	5
2	I have always told the truth	1	2	3	4	5
3	I've been able to make choices easily	1	2	3	4	5
4	I can find lots of fun things to do	1	2	3	4	5
5	I feel that I am good at some things	1	2	3	4	5
6	I think lots of people care about me	1	2	3	4	5

7	I like everyone I have met	1	2	3	4	5
8	I think there are many things I can be proud of	1	2	3	4	5
9	I've been feeling calm	1	2	3	4	5
10	I've been in a good mood	1	2	3	4	5
11	I enjoy what each new day brings	1	2	3	4	5
12	I've been getting on well with people	1	2	3	4	5
13	I always share my sweets	1	2	3	4	5
14	I've been cheerful about things	1	2	3	4	5
15	I've been feeling relaxed	1	2	3	4	5

### Primary School Pupils (reported by pupils)

School Connectedness question are adapted from Waters and Cross (2010) and contain the following questions and an additional 3 questions on school connectedness (each coded by 1-5 Likert scale)

<b>Additional questions of school connectedness (Adapted from Waters &amp; Cross 2010)</b>						
16	I feel proud to be a student at my school	1	2	3	4	5
17	I feel like I belong at my school	1	2	3	4	5
18	I enjoy coming to school	1	2	3	4	5
19	I have meaningful relationships with teachers from my school	1	2	3	4	5

**Stirling Children's Wellbeing Scale (SCWBS) (Liddle & Carter, 2015).**

The SCWBS is 15-item holistic, positively worded scaled used to measure emotional and psychological wellbeing in younger children aged 8 -15 years. It is a standardised tested measure that has been specifically made by educational psychologists. The scale covers areas of wellbeing such as: optimism, cheerfulness and relaxation, satisfying interpersonal relationships, clear thinking and competence. The questions are scored with a five-point response scale 1 to 5 and contains three sub-scales: Positive Outlook, Positive Emotional State and Social Desirability. A comprehensive report of the measure can be found here: [https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/sci/med/research/platform/wemwbs/using/faq/scwbs\\_children\\_report.pdf](https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/sci/med/research/platform/wemwbs/using/faq/scwbs_children_report.pdf)