

Behind the scenes of the Wellbeing Survey...

A glimpse of the Design Team of the secondary school wellbeing survey project.

It was in July 2018 as a new board member in the parent association, that I met Lea Andries together with my colleague Jeroen Janss. Jeroen had this vision to do a wellbeing survey and I made an appointment to meet Lea Andries whom I had met while working in the GSM-Smart phone task force of the Secondary school. We were still primary school parents with our children in P5 and we had no experience with the Secondary school. I remember how “cautious” we were and we were wondering if our proposal would be accepted. We were genuinely surprised by the open manner in which Lea Andries welcomed us and how she came up with the wellbeing survey idea before we launched the concept as she had been thinking along the same lines too. This was the beginning of a beautiful partnership where Lea Andries introduced gradually different partners. The students and the Educational Advisors became important stakeholders in this journey together with the parents. The survey was held in May 2019 with a successful participation of 65 % response rate.

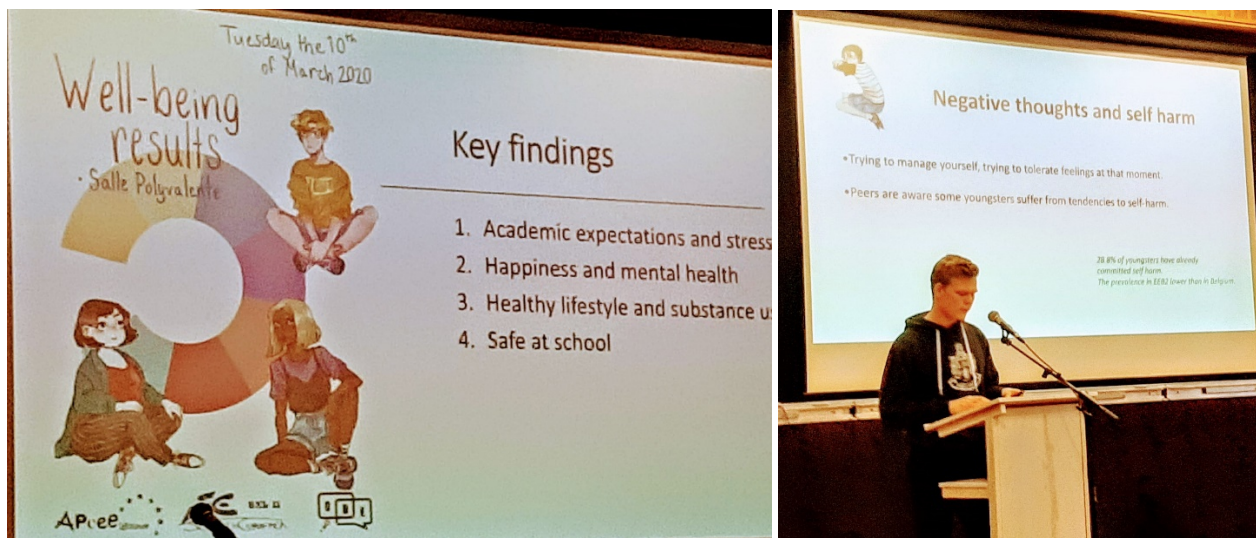


Caption:

From left to right: Experts from the Antwerp university in the company of some members of the Presentation team of the wellbeing assemblies on March 10, 2020

Following this outcome, between July 2019 and March 2020 a number of mile stones occurred in the secondary school. Around 800 comments made by the students were analyzed by the Educational Advisors and a number of steps have been taken. The results were analyzed by the parent expert and Apeee board member Szilvia Kalman. An expert from the Antwerp university was contracted to conclude the analysis with international data and to advise the Presentation team of the survey for the Wellbeing Assemblies which were held on March 10, 2020. The presentation teams comprised of students, teachers and the educational Advisors. There were 8

assemblies held on March 10 for all Grades per grade from S1-S7 and a separate assembly for the school staff.



Caption: 1.The powerpoint presentation done by the Presentation team comprised of teachers, students and Educational Advisors

2. Levin Meinke, S7 student and CDE Member presents the part on Negative thoughts and self harm

Unfortunately the parent event planned for the evening was cancelled due to the Covid 19 situation. The secondary parents have received several powerpoint presentations on the evening of March 10 created by the Educational Advisors and the expert psychologist with the content of the assemblies and also touching “sexual harassment” and “self-harm” topics with guidelines how to speak to the children. The Design Team comprised of Lea Andries (Principal Educational Advisor), Anne Raats (Educational Advisor who left last year), Sofie Van Lerberghe and Kirsten Meeus (Educational Advisors), Hugo Stanbury and Levin Meinke (Members of the Students Council/CDE), Jeroen Janss, Bengt Davidson, Szilvia Kalman, Mark Epps, Jan von Pfaler and myself (Apeee board members and parent experts). The project was concluded in May 2020 and a multi annual wellbeing plan is being prepared by the school management.

For me personally, working on this project has been the highlight of my APEEE career. This is where I learned exactly how the school works and in many ways I felt the pulse of the behind the scenes context to many challenges our children face on a day to day basis. The secondary school has an Educational Advisor per grade. It is when I visit the little office shared by several Educational Advisors in the secondary school preau that I realize what a challenging job an Educational Advisor has. Sofie and Kirsten showed me just before the lockdown, a tiny cozy corner they made with some books, some tea, a pot plant, some paintings for the stressed students to relax. There are even some chocolates and cookies to help themselves. A student who is crying from having being bullied, has stress issues with exams, feels like self-harm or suffering from other burdens from somewhere else reaches out to the Educational Advisor and is asked to sit there. The Educational Advisors normally move up each grade all the way from S1 to S6 with the same student. Sofie and Kirsten tell me that they know the name of literally almost 250 students of that grade. The students trust them and seem to drop in while I am there. There is no privacy in this small space but the EA try to create a corner to rest. This is a very different environment from the primary school where wellbeing issues are mainly dealt with by the class teacher. The Educational Advisors are in my view the most important persons in the secondary school for our children's wellbeing and they are overworked, with very little free time and often clocking countless hours after school.

During this project, I am aware of some of them working weekends and weekday nights as they barely had time to work on the power point presentations during the school hours.



**Caption: 1. The cosy corner created for the stressed students to relax in the office of the Educational advisors
2. The Educational Advisors Sofie Van Lerberghe and Kirsten Meeus posing from the cosy corner**

Through Hugo Stanbury (CDE President) and Levin Meinke, I had a glimpse to the world of secondary school students. I have been often surprised at how much we parents can learn from the students, in terms of writing skills, in public speaking skills and above all in the clear and conscious way they communicate always with respect, dignity, integrity and from the heart.

The journey from the beginning to the end has touched me in so many ways. Here is a glimpse of those moments for you to feel.



Caption: S7 students and student council members Levin Meinke and Hugo Stanbury after one of the many Design Team meetings in the secondary school corridor.

Interview with Lea Andries, Principal Educational Advisor, EEB2

1. What inspired you to do this wellbeing survey amongst the secondary school students?



The fact that time is flying by so quickly and that my departure was coming closer convinced me of the need for organization of a wellbeing survey.

All workshops and initiatives in the wellbeing so far have been organized because we as adults, felt the need of the students. The team of educational advisers witnessed the stress pupils were going through, we noticed significant skipping of lessons, drug related incidents,... all this in an overcrowded school with so much noise everywhere.

When I arrived in EEB2, I found a school where the focus was purely on academic performance. No attention was given at all to the emotional and mental condition of the pupils. This was the start of ad hoc initiatives to meet the most urgent needs of some pupils, even entire classes. Gradually a more structured offer was incorporated in the annual plan.

To have a point of reference for future surveys, school needed to identify the strengths and the weaknesses in the current plan. That's where parents and school found each other, in the interest of all secondary pupils.

2. Can you tell us an aspect of the wellbeing survey that affected you personally?

In my career I worked in several schools where pupils were living the same kind of mental health issues and the same issues with substance abuse. But I never expected to find that teenagers in a European school were struggling in the same way.

All experts in Europe can confirm that the outcome of EEB2's survey did not reveal unexpected elements. However I was deeply touched that in the school where I was working, where I thought things had changed for the better there was and still is so much hidden pain. I was also touched by the desire of the students who wanted to be heard.

3. What role do you see the CDE (pupils committee) playing in implementing this project and how has it been, your relationship with the students in this journey?

CDE has become a real stakeholder of the school. Over the past 8 years CDE gradually developed official representation skills. They gently shifted from an entertainment body with a touch of rebellion, to critical friends, discussing things to improve for the entire community, in a way they have become role models for their peers.

In the entire process of the wellbeing survey they have shown how powerful their commitment has been. CDE took the lead in encouraging all secondary pupils to complete the survey. And later on CDE contacted other students to join for the preparation of the presentation. It has been hard work, with in the end tight deadlines as also COVID 19 was coming closer when we were about to hold the student assemblies on the wellbeing survey on March 10. But they did it!

The CDE teambuilding weekend in Ostend in September '19 clearly lifted the pupil's representation to a remarkable outstanding student body. It is such a pity that the lockdown cancelled so many of their well-prepared initiatives.

4. What lessons have you learnt from this project and what is the legacy you leave behind? What are the future plans for wellbeing of EEB2?

What I learnt most is that where different stakeholders meet and cooperate in an atmosphere of trust and respect, the entire community benefits from it, especially the students themselves. The main focus has been on the pupils' wellbeing.

My legacy for EEB2 is that I made all stakeholders aware that only a warm welcoming school, where education is also focusing on the 8 life skills, where a pupil feels listened to and respected, is the condition for a successful education towards critical responsible and committed citizens.

The results of the survey provided a kind of evaluation of our current offer and at the same time identified other needs. The Design Team has come to conclusions and formulated some proposals. It is now up to my successor and the school management to carry onwards what has been reported. Action plans are being developed and EEB2 is ready for the next level in a multi-annual plan for wellbeing.

I am looking forward to see what will happen in the coming years.

Interview with Hugo Stanbury, CDE President

1. How did you get involved in the design team of the Wellbeing survey? How was this experience of two years for you?

I was first involved in the design team of the wellbeing survey in March of 2019 when Lea Andries, the Principal Educational Advisor, invited Levin Meinke and I as senior members of the CDE to a meeting with Sanjee Goonetilake and Jeroen Janss for us to contribute on key wellbeing points relevant to our school community. It was Levin and I's objective to make sure that the questions on the wellbeing survey would accurately pick up as many of the wellbeing issues present in our school community as possible. After this initial fruitful meeting in which we defined our fundamental values of trust and cooperation, we decided to create a design team composed of all three members of the school community: the management, the CDE and the APEEE. Levin and I joined as the CDE's side.



Caption:

You can watch a piece of Hugo's presentation on Marth 10th here (protected access):
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3ULcm8ktpol>

This experience was fantastic, and by far my most impactful contribution to the wellbeing of the students. We dealt with profound wellbeing issues and to be able to express issues which were previously not discussed in such a style on behalf of the students was an immense honour, pleasure, and responsibility. Another element of the experience which I very much enjoyed was the relationship and dynamic created in the Design Team. In previous years the relationship between the management, the APEEE, and the CDE often revolved around the notion of "constructive tension" as the APEEE and the CDE are independent stakeholders with differing

views. However, in the design team that notion was completely dismissed, and we all came together with one objective: to help the students. Never before had these opposing sides come together as a group with a “higher” objective, it was a beautiful example of cooperation and trust, and overall a deeply enriching experience.

2. Can you tell us an aspect of the wellbeing survey that affected you personally?

The aspect of the Wellbeing survey which affected me personally the most were the sections on mental health, self-harm, depression, and suicide. I have been lucky because these themes have not been detrimental to my own health, but have affected my generation and my environment deeply. Some of my closest friends have struggled throughout their teenage years with these issues and are still struggling. Suicide attempts and self-harm are issues so prevalent in our generation that it is something we are all faced with. As part of the Design Team, I was able to make sure the evidence of these problems would become apparent, and this was very liberating as the pupils who mostly thought that the management and school community were largely unaware of these problems, finally felt understood, and I think that that is the first step to take in addressing the problem.

3. What are your plans now that you are graduating? Where will you go?

These past two years have been extremely intensive not only academically but also with my involvement in BRUMUN, the climate academy lead by Matthew Pye, and serving firstly as Vice-President and then President of the Pupils Committee. I am therefore looking forwards to a restful summer holiday after which I plan on studying Biomedical Engineering (Meng) at Imperial College, London beginning in October, and who knows, perhaps I will join the Student Union there.

Interview with Levin Meinke, a representative of the CDE

What was the most interesting part about the well-being survey for you personally?



Caption:

You can watch a piece of Levin's presentation on March 10th here (protected access):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tebJFpnMB6U>

There were two main things which I really enjoyed about the project, the first being the collaborative environment in which it was held and developed. I believe the diverse environment of age groups, perspectives and expertise allowed* the project to be an all-round success. It allowed me to understand the importance of collaboration between different groups, and over the span of the project I also learned from a lot of different people.

The second part of the project which I found most interesting was the section on mental health. Already when the first drafting of the questions was made, it was the section I focused on the most, perhaps because as students Hugo and I had a unique insight into the situation of the students. Even more interesting was the analysis of the final results as well as the consultations and trainings with the external expert on the subject, giving a unique insight into the psychology in a school environment.

Interview with Sofie Van Lerberghe and Kirsten Meeus, Educational Advisors

How did you get involved in the design team of the wellbeing survey?

We were both asked by Mrs Andries and Mrs Raats (former S6 educational adviser) to join the Design team due to our personal and professional interest and background. We cope with all the students on a daily base and so we keep the finger on the pulse. Sofie has experience with substances abuses and mental health of teenagers. Kirsten is a teacher, the coordinator of the guidance team and a pastoral member.

How was this experience?

As advisors (and teachers) with a passion for the well-being of our students, we were very pleased to bring our concerns on a platform and start taking action. It was an intense process where much work needed to be done by ourselves on top of our daily job. There was (and still is) no taskforce behind us ;) Without the help of some parents, who each offered us their competences, the outcome would have been different. Although we already knew that the CDE has become a much respected platform in our school, we were very surprised on how well they could bring sensitive topics to the table in a very constructive way. Having these students involved was a good reminder of why and for whom we worked hard.

Why is this well-being survey so important for you?

Without being balanced mentally and physically, a person cannot learn. In order to guide a learning process of a student, we must take into account their capacities, their emotions, their state of mind and their social development, etc. Only then you are sure that a child or a teenager has enough space and 'oxygen' to develop within his or her full capacity. In relationship with a student and his context, we seek for the way towards efficient learning.

The survey showed us how and where we can coach our students even more. What are the needs of this generation? Several successful initiatives were organized in the past years, but we wanted to know: does the offer cover the current needs? Where can we improve? Did the school miss anything?



Caption: Sofie Van Lerberghe, Educational Advisor of S6

We were positively surprised on how open students replied and pointed out where the main issues lay. They gave us a lot of answers as well as new questions. Now, we are able to prioritize and come up with a multi-annual plan that (hopefully) involves all students as well as their context.

What is an average day for you as an educational advisor?

You can divide the tasks of EA in two parts: administration and well-being of students. We do not have much 'easy days at the office' as every day is different. We are the center of the communication loop in the school for students, parents, teachers, management, etc.

Kirsten: In S1/S2 our focus is to let the students feel welcome, to be reachable, to guide them, to encourage them. It's always very busy in the office with several questions-problems on different topics: from very small to sometimes very big issues. We have daily constructive conversations and guidance about attitude, behavior, mental problems. We do also some surveillance to maintain

order in corridors, schoolyard, and canteen. In the meantime, we do the follow up of our daily administration: registering of late arrivals and absences, answering e-mails from parents, teachers –organization of locker keys,...

Sofie: We have some fixed tasks every day: surveillance (canteen, workshops, etc.), absences, exit slips and other administration, etc. But the following tasks can come as well: go to the emergency with a pupil, solve conflicts with students, first line of help for well-being of students, sort out disciplinary events, etc. And then we have tasks that are more related to a certain period in the school year: organize the exam room, prepare the class councils, coordinate BAC day, arrange locker keys, student cards, etc.

Every week we try to have a team meeting with the colleagues. Every advisor tries to develop an expertise. This can be the administration of the BAC, substance use, academic stress, social/planning skills workshops, 8 life skills, Guidance team* etc.

Because learning does not stop at the door of a classroom, we are often involved in other school activities like Brumun, Footfest, CDE, etc. It gives us the opportunities to get to know students in a very different way.

What would you like to do/change in your work when this lockdown is over?

We searched for ways to reach our students through Teams. We created platform and started to chat and have videocalls. We think these tools will still be used in the future, even if we return completely in situ. For some students, online communication makes it a bit easier to communicate or to ask for help. It is also a more 'modern' way to reach out than an e-mail. ;) During the online education, we had more time to revive and update regulations, policies, school planner, etc.

We can only applaud our students for their efforts during this long period of online education. For some it was heaven (like not getting up early), for some a real struggle to get to the finish line. Online education demands different skills and so we noticed for example that we need to invest more in planning skills. Sometimes we saw big emotions and vulnerable students getting more isolated. Therefore we advise all students to really enjoy their summer holiday. Stop the screen time, get outside, have fun with friends and reconnect with their families. ☺

How did the students react at the wellbeing assemblies?

During the presentation, students were really listening. Although we had a lot of information to present, they were very attentive. They recognized themselves or classmates in our stories. Students felt heard: "You finally understand what's going on in this school." They said it was well presented and they were grateful that all was communicated to them first. Afterwards they asked a very valid question: "What are you going to do about it?" Together with our students, we are ready to take the next steps towards a solid wellbeing plan that raises awareness and launches initiatives in the school community.



Caption: Images created by talented secondary students who assisted with the powerpoint presentations for the wellbeing survey assemblies. The first three image show the diversity of the student population. The next images have been carefully thought out to represent the feelings expressed by the students in the survey results.

*Guidance team: a group of selected educational advisors and teachers with specific skills to listen, coach and guide certain students. Students are free to make an appointment or chat with a member. We have at least one person per language section so that children can speak in their mother tongue whenever they wish.