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Educators' Wellness and Beyond: Policy Insights and Recommendations for Future Teachers on Wellness Break

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The growing academic and emotional demands of preservice teachers have heightened concerns around mental health, prompting institutions such as the Philippine Normal University to adopt wellness breaks. This policy brief examines how preservice teachers experience these breaks, the barriers to their effectiveness, and the broader policy and institutional gaps in wellness provision. Drawing on survey data from preservice teachers, the study reveals that while many used the break for rest and social recovery, a substantial proportion remained burdened with academic responsibilities, limiting the intended benefits. Key barriers included workload spillover, limited access to mental health services, financial pressures, and low awareness of wellness-related policies and benefits. The findings reveal a disconnect between institutional intent and the student experience. This policy brief presents ten evidence-based policy recommendations, ranging from academic calendar restructuring to wellness program design, financial aid options, and faculty collaboration. Addressing these gaps is crucial to ensuring that wellness breaks make a meaningful contribution to the development and wellbeing of preservice teachers, ultimately benefiting future classrooms.

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Introduction

The mental wellbeing of students has become a growing concern in higher education, especially in teacher education programs where academic, emotional, and practicum-related demands are often intense. Among preservice teachers, the challenge of balancing coursework, field experiences, and professional preparation can lead to considerable stress, with studies noting a high prevalence of anxiety and burnout in this population (Fathi, Nayeri, & Sharifi, 2021).

To help address these challenges, institutions such as the Philippine Normal University have implemented wellness breaks, dedicated periods within the academic calendar that allow students to rest, reflect, and regain mental equilibrium. The World Health Organization [WHO] (2021) aligns these breaks with global trends that prioritize mental health promotion in schools and universities. However, their actual effectiveness remains mixed, as many preservice teachers report limited benefit when academic demands spill into breaks.

Existing literature highlights that wellness interventions are only effective when supported by structured programs, clear communication, and institutional policies that prioritize student wellbeing (Gao, Xu, & Zhou, 2022). Coulombe, Hardy, & Goldfarb (2021) added that the field of positive education offers promising intervention avenues to support wellbeing at school; however, future programs need to intentionally include a more comprehensive consideration of students' ecological contexts (including within and outside of the educational setting) and to support the agency of students to identify what is relevant for their wellbeing, according to their own socioecological contexts.

In line with this concern, education policy is increasingly prioritizing students' wellbeing in schools, in addition to the overarching educational goal of promoting students' cognitive abilities. International contexts have identified this shift (e.g., Alberta School Board Association, 2017; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014; Province of New Brunswick, 2014). Bhutan and Peru offer two examples of effective strategies for promoting student wellbeing. Bhutan was one of the first nations to develop and implement a school curriculum focused on educating for happiness, in line with its national policy of Gross National Happiness (Seligman, 2017). These successful policy changes suggest that there is a demand in educational settings for well-being-promoting interventions to enhance student functioning.

Similarly, local studies in the Philippines reflect this growing emphasis on holistic education. For instance, Orbeta et al. (2023) highlighted that Philippine education reforms are increasingly addressing students' psychosocial and emotional wellbeing, recognizing that mental health and academic success are deeply interconnected. Garcia and Reyes (2021) found that wellbeing programs in Philippine secondary schools, such as mindfulness sessions, values formation activities, and socio-emotional learning modules, significantly improved students' motivation and resilience. These findings align with international trends, indicating that educational systems, both

global and local, are gradually transitioning toward models that value both cognitive development and holistic wellbeing.

In practice, preservice teachers often report that academic deadlines surrounding wellness breaks limit their opportunity to disengage fully and that psychological services or support Systems are not always accessible during this time (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2020). Furthermore, while Republic Act No. 4670 (Magna Carta for Public School Teachers) provides a legal foundation for protecting the welfare of preservice teachers, they are not directly covered by these protections (Philippine Congress, 1966). The policy gap compels future teachers to prepare under pressure, without the guarantee of institutional or legislative support for their wellbeing.

In the past few years, there has been growing attention on student mental health in general, but the specific challenges faced by preservice teachers are often overlooked. These students find themselves in a challenging situation, balancing the academic demands with the emotional burden of transitioning into a teaching role. Due to the lack of tailored support systems, many preservice teachers find themselves in a state of uncertainty, lacking the necessary assistance. These experiences can have a profoundly positive impact on the mental wellbeing of students. Thus, without any support, they would begin their careers stressed.

This has implications not only for their immediate wellbeing but also for the long-term stability of the teaching force. Teachers who enter the profession already burdened by stress and poor wellbeing are more likely to experience burnout and leave early, exacerbating teacher shortages and compromising classroom quality. Conversely, preservice teachers who are supported to develop resilience and balance are more likely to stay, thrive, and contribute to sustained improvements in national education. Thus, wellness interventions for preservice teachers should be framed not only as a student support but as an investment in the quality and retention of the country's future teachers.

This policy brief examines how preservice teachers utilize wellness breaks, the barriers they face in accessing these breaks, and their perceptions and awareness of wellness break policies. By gathering insights from them, this policy brief aims to spark ideas for more effective and inclusive ways to support the emotional and mental wellbeing of future teachers.

Key Issues

The policy brief highlights a critical mismatch between the intent of wellness breaks and the lived experiences of preservice teachers. While wellness breaks are designed to provide students with time to rest and recover, evidence shows that many remain engaged in academic tasks, reducing their benefits. This highlights a broader issue in higher education, where academic structures often fail to fully integrate wellbeing initiatives. Recent studies emphasize that student wellbeing policies must be accompanied by clear implementation strategies, workload adjustments, and supportive institutional practices to be effective (Salvagioni et al., 2023; Lavy & Berkovich-Ohana, 2022).



Another central issue is the presence of barriers beyond academics, such as limited access to psychological services, financial pressures, and low awareness of wellness-related policies. Preservice teachers are in a transitional stage, preparing for demanding teaching roles while navigating their own mental health challenges, yet they often lack tailored institutional support. Research confirms that accessible counseling services, financial assistance, and structured wellness programs enhance students' ability to cope with stress. They should stress the importance of improving long-term resilience (Kim et al., 2023; Gao et al., 2024). Without these, wellness breaks risk becoming symbolic rather than impactful.

Ultimately, the policy brief emphasizes the significance of incorporating wellness into teacher education as a cultural and curricular priority. By involving faculty, offering peer-led initiatives, and systematically gathering student feedback, institutions can design wellness programs that reflect the actual needs of preservice teachers. This aligns with international best practices, which have shown that holistic wellbeing strategies foster sustainable engagement and professional preparedness among future educators (Verešová & Malá, 2022; García-Carmona et al., 2023). Addressing these gaps supports preservice teachers during their training and ensures they enter the profession better equipped to model and promote wellness in their future classrooms.

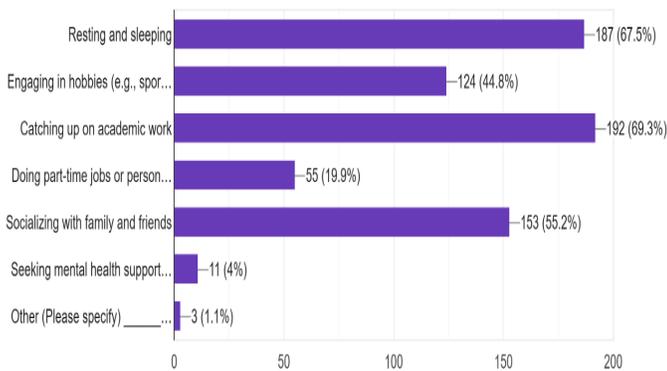
Key Findings and Policy Recommendations

Key Findings

This portion of the policy brief presents key findings that may shed light on how higher education institutions provide wellness breaks to preservice teachers as they pursue their aspiration for a better and higher-quality education.

Wellness Break Utilization

Figure 1. Activities Engaged in by Preservice Teachers During the Wellness Break Period

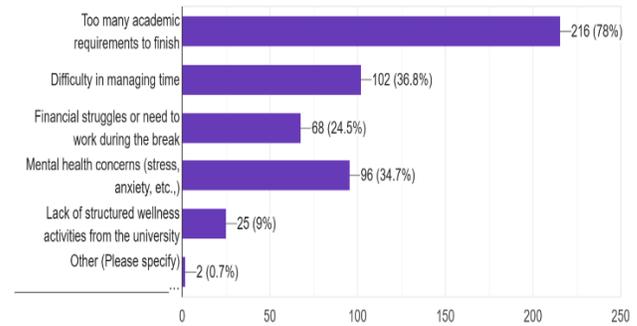


1. Many preservice teachers used wellness breaks to catch up on schoolwork instead of resting.

2. A large number took the opportunity to rest and sleep, which they rarely manage during regular academic weeks.
3. Some spent quality time with family and friends, finding social connections important for emotional recovery.
4. Few engaged in part-time jobs, as most prioritized rest, academics, or personal activities over income.
5. A noticeable number are engaging in habits and seeking mental support.

Barriers to Wellness During Breaks

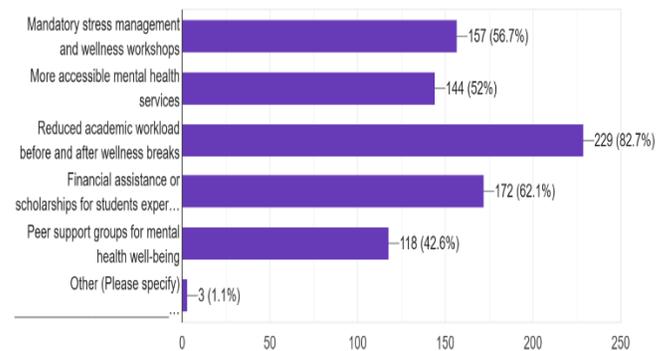
Figure 2. Reported Barriers to Achieving Wellness Among Preservice Teachers During the Break Period



1. Heavy academic workloads often continued into breaks, preventing students from fully resting.
2. Many struggled to balance rest with personal obligations, limiting the benefits of the break.
3. Stress and anxiety were common barriers to effective self-care and relaxation.
4. Financial pressures forced some students to work, reducing time for rest and wellness activities.
5. Lack of university wellness programs during breaks prevents preservice teachers from fully resting and recovering.

Policy Awareness and Perceptions

Figure 3. Preservice Teachers' Awareness and Understanding of Wellness-Related Policies



1. A large portion of preservice teachers had limited or no knowledge of formal wellness-related policies (e.g., RA 11713; RA 11036).
2. While wellness breaks were recognized in practice, many students were unclear whether these were officially mandated or supported by institutional guidelines.
3. Students expressed the need for more transparent communication about existing policies and wellness services, including financial aid, counseling, and stress management initiatives.
4. Several preservice teachers perceived wellness breaks as poorly implemented due to workload spillover and lack of structured support, reducing trust in the intent of the policy.
5. Many preservice teachers supported stronger policy integration of wellness into curricula and more student participation in wellness planning.

Key Recommendations of Policy and Practice

To address the issues highlighted by the findings, the following recommendations are proposed. These strategies aim to enhance student wellbeing by improving institutional procedures and policy engagement.

1. The institution, especially the office of the SASO, should issue derivatives limiting assignments, exams, and deadlines during and one week before and after wellness breaks to ensure preservice teachers can genuinely rest and recover.
2. Academic calendars should be reviewed, and the registrars and department chairs should be consulted to prevent the clustering of major deadlines around wellness breaks, reducing stress among students.
3. Universities should provide structured but optional wellness programs during breaks, such as mindfulness sessions, art therapy, or peer-support circles, to give students non-mandatory but accessible opportunities to recharge.
4. Access to mental health services should be expanded through drop-in counselling hours, online booking systems, and clear referral pathways, ensuring timely support for students.
5. Peer-led wellness support groups should be established, with trained preservice teachers facilitating discussions under faculty or counselor supervision, creating safe, accessible spaces for stress-sharing.
6. To reduce the financial burden that forces students to work during breaks, institutions should provide micro-grants or stipends, while CHED should expand scholarship or subsidy programs nationally.
7. Time-management and stress-management workshops should be conducted before each wellness break, equipping students with practical skills to maximize rest and recovery.
8. Wellness concepts such as self-care, resilience, and positive education should be embedded into teacher education curricula, ensuring preservice teachers develop lifelong habits of wellbeing.
9. Short survey of guided reflections should be routinely conducted after each wellness break to gather feedback and monitor effectiveness, with results used to refine programs.

10. Faculty should be actively engaged in wellness initiatives through annual roundtables and workshops that align course planning with student wellbeing goals.

Policy Alignment and Governance Responsibilities

These recommendations are grounded in existing laws and frameworks that mandate support for student and teacher wellbeing. At the National level, RA 11713 (Student Welfare and Support Services Act) emphasizes the responsibility of higher education institutions to promote holistic student development. At the same time, RA 11036 (Mental Health Act) requires accessible mental health services across educational settings.

Institutional responsibilities focus on implementation within universities, such as limiting academic workloads, revising calendars, strengthening counselling and peer support systems, embedding wellness in curricula, and ensuring a feedback mechanism. National responsibilities lie with CHED and DOH, which are tasked with setting policy, standards, monitoring compliance, and providing financial and structural support (e.g., subsidies, scholarship expansion, and mental health program funding).

In essence, institutions are the front-line implementers, while national agencies ensure alignment with policy mandates and provide the resources needed to sustain reforms. This dual accountability ensures that wellness breaks evolve from symbolic pauses into meaningful interventions for preservice teachers.

Conclusion

College students are navigating a complex landscape of academic, social, and personal challenges that can significantly impact their mental health and wellbeing. Therefore, higher education institutions in the country considered and gave crucial priority to programs enhancing students' wellbeing. However, the results of the study conducted revealed an observed discrepancy between the intended and actual effects of wellness breaks among preservice teachers. The observed discrepancy arises from ongoing academic demands during the breaks, unclear policies, limited access to psychological resources, and a lack of knowledge regarding wellness break policies. Preservice teachers also stated that they were unable to utilize the breaks for mental health.

These results illustrate the importance of revisiting the wellness break programs. The Philippine Normal University must reassess how it develops and implements support systems to address these issues and enhance the effectiveness of its wellness programs. Furthermore, student services should be accessible during wellness breaks. Integrating this concern into the teacher education curriculum should address the issues with students and their limited knowledge about wellness break policies.

As future teachers, their responses are reflections that will enable them to design healthier learning environments for their students and pupils. By prioritizing



wellness, they modeled habits that encourage balance and resilience within the classroom. Such practices support academic success and nurture emotional wellbeing among learners. Ultimately, a teacher's commitment to wellness is a powerful tool in fostering a more compassionate and sustainable community.

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Declaration

Key Recommendations of Policy and Practice No. 10

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Eliseo P. Marpa is an associate professor of the Faculty of Teacher Development of the Philippine Normal University, Visayas. He is teaching subjects such as mathematics, statistics, assessment and evaluation, and educational research. His current research interests include mathematics education and other related fields.



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2. Share research expertise and competence in teacher education research with other TEIs throughout the country;
3. Develop and disseminate the University research agenda
4. Design and implement the research capability program for faculty and staff;
5. Manage University's research production particularly the conduct of educational policy studies in education and teacher education; and
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