



CASE STUDY

The 2026 Well-Being by Design Fellows participated in a four-month professional development program for designers and producers of interactive kids' technology and media. They met online to workshop their current projects, network with other fellows, and gain insights from research and industry leaders as they worked to incorporate principles of well-being into their designs. We are delighted to share highlights from each fellow's experience.

Dr. Mariya Nikolayev



Dr. Mariya Nikolayev is a Senior User Researcher at Stride, Inc., where she helps shape digital learning experiences for K-12 students and families nationwide. With expertise in child development, educational technology, and digital media, she has spent more than a decade studying how children learn, connect, and grow. Through her work, she seeks to bridge research and practice to create products that make a positive difference in the lives of children and families.

Stride

PRODUCT: K12 Launch Pad
TARGET AGE: K-12

Stride's K12 Launch Pad is a centralized virtual school hub that helps students manage academics, schedules, and daily learning tasks.

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During the COVID-19 pandemic, schools had to abruptly transition to online learning, and it quickly became clear how difficult it is to translate important parts of the school experience, including personal connections with teachers and peers, informal everyday interactions, and a sense of belonging, into online environments.

Yet for a sizable population of students in the United States, virtual school remains a way of life. Whether due to individual needs, geographic constraints, family preferences, or other circumstances, many students choose to complete their schooling online. Classrooms, teachers, friendships, and daily interactions all exist online, making the digital environment their primary space for both learning and connection.

Unlike the emergency remote learning many experienced during the pandemic, virtual schools are intentionally designed to support learning in fully online environments. During the fellowship, I explored how to expand a purpose-built learning system to encompass well-being and support students in building relationships, feeling recognized by others, and developing a sense of belonging in spaces where informal social interaction is limited.

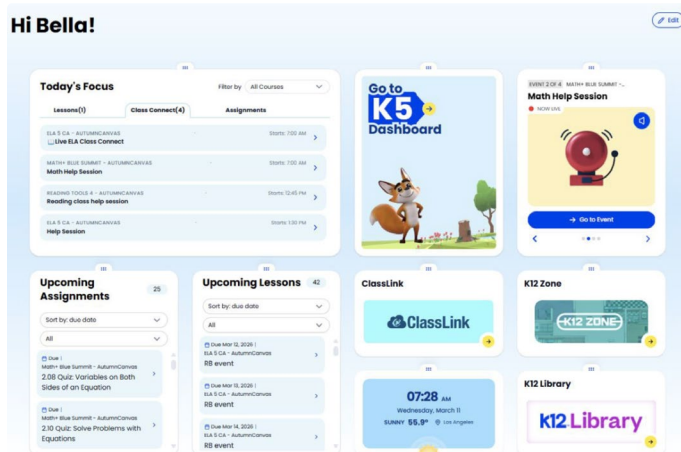
WHAT COMPONENTS OF WELL-BEING DOES MY PROJECT ADDRESS?

K12 Launch Pad currently supports the **safety & security**, **competence**, and **autonomy** dimensions of well-being in the RITEC framework. As a managed school platform with controlled access, it provides students with a secure and protected digital environment by design. The platform is centered around academic progress, course access, and task completion, helping students track their work, monitor progress, and build a sense of mastery and effectiveness. It also supports autonomy by giving students some flexibility in structuring their asynchronous school day and customizing their task-related widgets.

HOW CAN MY PRODUCT BETTER ADDRESS CHILDREN'S WELL-BEING?

As a result of the product audit, I found that Launch Pad can better support well-being through three RITEC domains: **identities**, **relationships**, and **creativity**. All three can be addressed through a thoughtfully designed avatar feature. In a virtual school where students rarely turn their cameras on, the avatar becomes their primary visible self, making it a uniquely high-leverage design element. Avatars are cross-dimensional and versatile, giving students opportunities to explore who they are, connect with peers, and see themselves represented within their learning environment.

- + **Identities:** Avatars should be highly customizable to support identity exploration, creative expression, and personality, including features that reflect different ages and abilities, forms of cultural or religious expression (such as headscarves and other coverings), and fantasy or non-human options. Youth Design Team panelists also emphasized that avatars should be context-aware, looking different across informal social spaces, live classes, and virtual lounges, or alternating with a live video image depending on the moment.
- + **Relationships:** Youth Design Team members recommended avatars to reflect special interests as a way to establish social connections and make them feel that they belong. Panelists also envisioned avatars displaying current moods and birthdays as small but meaningful bids for connection. They felt that signaling academic availability, both willingness to tutor classmates in specific subjects and openness to receiving help, would help build community.
- + **Creativity:** Avatar modifications will be treated as a creative outlet. Per Youth Design Team recommendations, students will be able to mix and match preset features, draw or design original avatar elements, express themselves through fantasy or non-human forms, and experiment with facial expression shifts and small props that signal mood or interest. Students will also be encouraged to exercise their creativity through avatar design competitions, with winning designs added to the platform's mix-and-match library for everyone to use.





REFLECTION

Among many useful contributions from the Youth Design Team, one was especially impactful. At the very beginning of our co-design session, the panelists made a powerful point: they all had experience with online learning as middle-schoolers during the pandemic, and now, six years later, their main recollection was that they did not like it. This feedback highlighted the lasting effects of the school experience and the importance of grounding virtual learning in well-being.

Another important takeaway was how deeply the Youth Design Team understood online socialization, and how fundamental the safety and security dimension of RITEC is to them as a foundation for socializing authentically. Panelists had strong opinions about what should and should not be shared through avatars, asked for guardrails around personal information and data privacy, and gave concrete examples of inappropriate or harmful forms of expression they wanted to keep out.



My experience of the fellowship will shape my work for years to come. The Cooney Center didn't just teach us well-being, they modeled it, and that is what I'll carry forward.



LOOKING AHEAD

The fellowship has expanded my thinking around how to intentionally design and evaluate student experiences through a well-being lens. I have begun applying the fellowship's learnings across my research practice at Stride, integrating well-being into research questions and metrics design, and using them to prompt product thinking that centers student well-being throughout the product development cycle. I plan to expand this work beyond middle school and explore how well-being-centered design can support younger and older learners, whose developmental needs, social experiences, and opportunities for self-expression differ in important ways.

The co-design training equipped me with skills to run online and in-person co-design sessions, and I have the support of my organization to bring them into regular practice. Beyond these immediate next steps, the fellowship's learnings are gifts that keep on giving. The speakers exposed me to topics ranging from co-design methodology to rewards in games for learning. I was also provided access to a body of best practices.

I hope my fellowship work contributes to a growing shift in expectations for educational technology: from viewing digital platforms primarily as tools for learning to recognizing them as environments that support children's holistic development. As virtual learning continues to serve hundreds of thousands of students, designers have both an opportunity and a responsibility to create experiences where students feel seen, connected, and able to thrive.



Joan Ganz Cooney Center

For more information about the Well-Being by Design Fellowship program, please visit joanganzcooneycenter.org/fellowship2026