



PROMOTING MENTAL HEALTH & WELLNESS IN SCHOOLS



How do we help our students thrive? What can we do to support their social-emotional health and help them develop their personal and social competencies?

The 2nd Annual School Community Mental Health Conference on February 4-5, 2019 was an opportunity to explore these questions and identify ways that educational and community-based teams can promote mental health and wellness in BC schools.

Over two days in Vancouver, 500 conference participants attended keynote sessions and shared ideas – talking about what’s working and finding areas for collaboration around the themes of systems leadership, Indigenous perspectives, student experience, and data and evidence. Recognizing that this work requires partnerships and an integrated, holistic perspective, those attending the conference included educators and school administrators, police officers, representatives of health authorities, and child and youth mental health workers.

According to Cindy Andrew, healthy schools lead for School District No. 62 (Sooke):

“[The conference provided] one of those rare opportunities for researchers, policy makers, school leaders and practitioners, and partner organizations to learn from one another, identify some shared joint priorities and, in many cases, affirm the collective efforts to address and promote mental health and well-being in school districts across BC.”



A Holistic, Evidence-Based Approach to Well-Being

It's worth emphasizing that this needs to be a collective endeavour: supporting student well-being isn't something an educator or organization can do on their own. And as School District No. 70 (Alberni) Superintendent Greg Smyth reminds us, it's also something that can't be addressed through a single initiative.

"Our district's well-being journey came out of an appreciation that there is no single program that can effectively address the social-emotional needs of students and promote well-being."

Instead, Smyth says, it's a matter of "being intentional about student well-being and systematically embedding practices, processes and programs into the fabric of our school district to improve outcomes for children and youth. Student well-being is one of our system goals, and each school is required to have a well-being goal as part of its annual school plan."

The Alberni school district, like many others in BC, uses the Middle Years Development Instrument (MDI) to survey students in grades four and seven – using the results, along with other student surveys and data, to guide its work and develop school plans.

The data is shared with community partners—including the RCMP, health authority, and parks and recreation departments—who then use it to develop community programming that supports students. "While school districts administer the MDI, they don't own the results or the responsibility to improve well-being outcomes," says Smyth. "Instead, it's a shared responsibility that requires a collective awareness and commitment from all stakeholders."

The district is several years into its intentional focus on promoting a culture of well-being and Smyth says results to date are very promising. To take just one example, the 2013/2014 survey of Grade 7s revealed that only 34 percent could identify two or more important adults at school. That number nearly doubled to 67 percent in the 2017/2018 survey, well above the provincial average of 54 percent.

"A feeling of school connectedness is a significant factor in student success, and we have seen a very positive shift by tending to that one element alone."



New investments in school-based initiatives

Each district will have its own priorities and take its own path on the journey in promoting student health and well-being. At the February School Community Mental Health Conference, the Ministry of Education announced an additional \$3 million of funding to support mental health initiatives in schools. This investment is meant to support prevention, wellness promotion and early intervention initiatives that address issues identified through Student Learning Survey data.

Those initiatives will vary from district to district. Yet the vision we are all working towards is the same – helping our students develop the tools to increase their resilience and providing those with mental health issues the targeted support and resources they need to overcome challenges and thrive.

Learn more:

- › [**erase**](#) is a provincial strategy for creating safe, inclusive and welcoming school cultures that support student learning and well-being.
- › [**Foundry**](#) offers health and wellness resources, online and through integrated service centres in Abbotsford, Campbell River, Kelowna, North & West Vancouver, Prince George, Vancouver and Victoria, with centres opening soon in Richmond, Ridge Meadows, Penticton and Terrace.
- › [**MDI School District and Community Reports**](#) provide a snapshot of students' feelings and experiences in school and the community.
- › [**Personal and social competency**](#) is woven throughout the curriculum.