



# Ontario's Well-Being Strategy for Education

## Discussion Document

As the proverb says: “It takes a village to raise a child”.

**Parents, educators, and community partners** collectively understand how true this statement is. Together, we understand that children and students who have strong relationships and a positive sense of self are best positioned to reach their full potential. And it is through expressions of happy and healthy childhood development and a positive sense of well-being that our learners are supported to become more resilient and better able to overcome challenges now and in the future.


**Well-being** is that positive sense of self, spirit and belonging that we feel when our cognitive, emotional, social and physical needs are being met. As our Indigenous partners have long affirmed, healthy development of the mind, body and spirit is contingent on balance and interconnectedness.

It is our job to work collectively to make sure that our children feel this way, all the time. When the well-being of children and students is supported – whether they are at home, in the community or at school – we are meeting the conditions needed to help them learn, grow, and develop a positive sense of self.

Promoting well-being is one of the four interconnected goals of *Achieving Excellence*, Ontario's renewed vision for education. This goal is based on the principle that our education system needs to help students build the knowledge and skills associated with positive well-being so that they can become healthy, active and engaged citizens. Ontario is committed to building on and deepening the solid foundation that has been created in early years centres, classrooms, schools and communities across the province, and this requires the ongoing commitment and collaboration of all our partners in education.

Fostering learning environments that contribute to our students overall sense of self, spirit, and belonging promotes well-being. Achieving success depends on the knowledge, wisdom, passion and dedication of the entire education community, including students and families, community organizations, service providers, and government ministries.

Over many years, we have seen growing evidence to demonstrate why well-being is fundamental to overall student success. Students cannot achieve academically if they don't feel safe or welcomed at school, if their mental health is at risk and if they don't have the tools or motivation to adopt



In an attempt to breakdown stereotypes and misconceptions about Indigenous music, the Grand Erie District School Board is in the process of developing a cross-curricular music program that features Indigenous artists from a variety of musical genres. The program helps students to understand and appreciate Indigenous music from various perspectives. In addition, the program focuses on student voice and well-being as students are encouraged to find their voice in the creative process when preparing musical works. The program has been piloted with students in Grades 6, 7 and 8 in two schools, with the help of Juno award winning Cree/Abenaki artist, Pakesso Mukash. The student response to the program has been overwhelmingly positive and they hope to continue with the program in upcoming years.

a healthy, active lifestyle, both inside and outside of school. This is because children who have a positive sense of well-being are more resilient and more successful as learners. We also know that children who have a positive sense of self are better equipped to meet the challenges of a fast-paced and globally-connected world and to be active engaged citizens now, and in years to come. Ontario is committed to helping students build the knowledge and skills associated with positive well-being so they can become confident, capable and caring citizens.

Promoting well-being is not only part of our renewed vision for education. It is also something that collectively we have been working on for many years, all across Ontario, particularly since 2009, when promoting well-being became a responsibility of every school board through amendments to the *Education Act*.

Going forward, we are committed to working together with all of our partners in education to build on and share in the established successes of the well-being efforts already in place. At the same time, we can work together to develop ways to measure our progress in promoting well-being, from the early years through to Grade 12, and for staff. To be successful we must engage with all of our education partners – including parents, educators, staff, leaders and students – across the province to ensure their insights, strengths and perspectives are reflected to inform our work to further promote well-being. And throughout this process we will ensure that we recognize the uniqueness of all of Ontario's diverse communities.

The engagement process will take the needs and realities of the French-language education system into account, and apply the perspectives of the francophone community. The uniqueness of French-language schools lies in the fact that their mission is not only to educate students, but also to protect, enhance, and transmit the language and culture of the community they serve – efforts that are essential to the well-being of the members of that community.

First Nation, Métis, and Inuit cultures and perspectives, which adopt a holistic view of well-being, are also a critical element that will shape the conversation. Respect for First Nation, Métis, and Inuit knowledge and traditions is fundamental to the well-being of all. With a holistic perspective, well-being is supported through the creation of safe spaces that promote and reflect cultural identity, and create a sense of belonging and connection for all.

Our goal is to work together on determining what well-being looks like, establishing what conditions and supports are required to create positive learning environments, and focusing on how it underpins everything we do.

# What Is Well-Being?

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Well-being is a positive sense of self, spirit and belonging that we feel when our cognitive, emotional, social and physical needs are being met. It is supported through equity and respect for our diverse identities and strengths. Well-being in early years and school settings is about helping children and students become resilient, so that they can make positive and healthy choices to support learning and achievement both now and in the future.

## The Four Domains of Well-Being

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- **Cognitive:**  
The development of abilities and skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, creativity, and the ability to be flexible and innovative.
- **Emotional:**  
This involves learning about experiencing emotions, and understanding how to recognize, manage and cope with them.
- **Social:**  
The development of self-awareness, including the sense of belonging, collaboration, relationships with others, and communication skills.
- **Physical:**  
The development of the body, impacted by physical activity, sleep patterns, healthy eating, and healthy life choices.





Highgate Public School, part of the York Region District School Board, makes a special effort to encourage students to make healthy food choices through their daily Blast Off with Breakfast program. They also have a whole school approach to support their students' level of physical activity by having students engage in daily vigorous activity every morning. Highgate PS also offers a wide range of clubs, teams, and committees that foster the growth and development of the whole child. As a school, they strive to build strong links with students, parents and the school staff, with a focus on creating a safe and supportive school environment that will improve student learning. The Highgate community tells all students that with the support of a strong home and strong school partnership, that all students can **S.O.A.R.**

- Safety
- Open-Mindedness
- Arts, Academics, and Athletics Excellence
- Respect

## What is Ontario's Well-Being Strategy for Education?

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Ontario's vision for the early years is to ensure that Ontario's children and families are well supported by a system of responsive, high-quality, accessible and increasingly integrated early years programs and services. A system that contributes to healthy child development today will help to ensure a strong future tomorrow.

We know the early years are critical for future health and well-being and we have introduced a range of transformational measures that put our youngest children on a solid foundation, including:

- Child Care modernization – Passing Ontario's *Child Care and Early Years Act, 2014*, focused on building a high-quality child care and early learning system;
- *How Does Learning Happen?* – A guide for teaching and learning for the early years, targeted towards educators, child care providers and leaders in early years settings, organized around four foundations that are critical for optimal learning and growth: belonging, well-being, engagement and expression; and
- The creation of Ontario Early Years Child and Family Centres (by 2018) to provide early years programs for children and families across Ontario.

Ontario's approach to well-being must be multifaceted, and its success requires working collaboratively with our education partners to promote well-being within our early years settings and schools. Our current focus is on the well-being of students from kindergarten to Grade 12, and in the future we will expand our focus to include staff and children in the early years programming.

There are **four key components** at the foundation of Ontario's well-being strategy:

- Positive Mental Health
- Safe and Accepting Schools
- Healthy Schools
- Equity and Inclusive Education



## Building on Current Initiatives


Well-being has been long been recognized as an important factor in overall student success. Across the province much work has already been done, and continues every day, in pursuit of the goal of promoting well-being. This includes:

- **Promoting positive mental health** is a key component of well-being. All school boards have a Mental Health Leader who develops and implements board-level mental health and addiction strategies and works with staff to build capacity to support positive mental health in the classroom for all learners and to support students with mental health needs or addictions.

Since 2011, **School Mental Health ASSIST** is helping Ontario's school boards build professional capacity to promote mental health for all students.

- **Fostering safe and accepting schools** sets out expectations for all school boards to provide safe, inclusive and accepting learning environments that support the achievement and well-being of every student, including addressing bullying, implementing progressive discipline and creating a positive school climate.

The *Accepting Schools Act* of 2012 was instrumental in requiring a positive school climate that is inclusive and accepting, regardless of race, ancestry, place of origin, colour, ethnic origin, citizenship, creed, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, age, marital status, family status or disability.



*iStudio* is an authentic French-language virtual community where French-language students across the province can meet, collaborate and create! The *iStudio* project gathers French-language students across the province to engage them by providing an avenue for building their self-confidence through learning how to be successful through creating visual art and songs. While linking to their linguistic, social and cultural identity, students have the opportunity to work with Franco-Ontarians artists and artists from the First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities. *iStudio* also aims to help students develop important knowledge and skills, such as collaboration, communication, creativity, and critical thinking.

- **Developing healthy schools** is key to establishing the learning conditions that are vital to help students reach their full potential by putting the conditions in place for students to adopt healthy active living practices and maintain them throughout their lives.

The newly revised **Health and Physical Education Curriculum** provides significant opportunities for students to learn about well-being. In addition, all educators are expected to create a learning environment that will support not only students' cognitive, emotional, social, and physical development but also their mental health, their resilience, and their overall state of well-being.

- **Supporting equity and inclusive education** helps the education community identify and remove discriminatory biases and systemic barriers in order to support student achievement and well-being. Research confirms that students who feel welcome and accepted in their schools are more likely to succeed academically. In fact, everyone in our publicly funded education system – regardless of background or personal circumstances – should feel engaged and included.

In addition, the government's youth strategy – **Stepping Up** – emphasizes the need to support all young people in becoming healthy, safe, hopeful, engaged, educated and contributing members of their communities. All of this work will help to inform us moving forward.

## Next Steps

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Promoting well-being requires attention and commitment at all levels and with all our partners.

In Ontario, we have already taken important steps to support the whole child. We want to continue to work together on what well-being looks like and to support the conditions required to recognize the uniqueness of different communities in order to reach our goal of supporting the well-being of all children, students and staff.

With the release of this paper, our work continues towards building consensus and sharing ideas about what is working. It is our responsibility to build on what we know and integrate existing work in a way that contributes to deepening this conversation.

Starting in the fall of 2016, we will be asking education partners to consider how their work connects to well-being and how what they are doing supports well-being for all. By drawing on the knowledge of those who have done incredible and important work over many years to foster

well-being for our children and students, we will strive to establish a common understanding of what promoting well-being means in schools. And by working together to define the measures that are important to us, we can ensure that all of our students and schools – all across Ontario – will benefit together.

We will begin discussing how to measure well-being in a more consistent way across our schools. The intent of creating measures is to inform our efforts, resources, practices, and approaches so that we can continue to improve. These measures will provide the system, boards, schools and educators with indicators of how our students are doing beyond literacy and numeracy results. This is not about distilling the complexities of something as intangible as well-being into a simplistic measure. We understand that well-being is an interconnection between social, emotional, cognitive and physical development, with a sense of self, or spirit at the core, all subject to the learning environment.

In other words, we want to find what we're doing well, and how we can do better.

Through our collective knowledge, wisdom, and research, our discussions will identify the key factors that promote and support well-being, and how to measure them. We want to make sure that all of our learning environments promote enhanced mental and physical health, a positive sense of self and belonging, and the skills needed to make positive choices. And we want this not only for our children and students of all ages, but also for our staff.

One of our goals is to ensure that from the early years, children, educators, and all staff feel that well-being for all is supported throughout Ontario's publicly funded education system.

Engagement on the strategy will be conducted in phases. We will start with discussing well-being among students in the publicly funded education system from kindergarten to Grade 12, and following that, we will engage our partners on well-being among children in the early years sector

Notre Dame High School, part of the Ottawa Catholic District School Board, was one of the recipients of the 2014-15 Premier's Awards for Accepting Schools for the excellent work they have done to increase the achievement and overall well-being of its students.

Based on results from their school climate survey, the safe and accepting school team decided to take action towards promoting a positive and inclusive school community. Their Helping Hands Team developed programs to increase education and awareness about student mental health and overall well-being. They organized a variety of student-led activities to help students manage anxiety during times of stress, including relaxation classes, administering student stress quizzes and providing an education program on mental health. Notre Dame has also organized an annual multicultural evening filled with traditional ethnic cuisines, a talent show, and a parent panel discussion on challenges faced by newcomers and how to improve their school experience. By giving students an opportunity to be part of the solution, improvements in student achievement, attendance and behaviour have been acknowledged and commended by school staff and students.

and staff. By taking a phased approach, we are better able to engage our partners in supporting the well-being of our young children and staff.

We will be listening to students, parents and our many partners in education. *Achieving Excellence* depends on the inclusion of all of their voices, and incorporating their perceptions.

## Conclusion

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Our well-being strategy is meant to provide an understanding of current and ongoing well-being in Ontario's education system. We will have in place the means to identify conditions that promote well-being, and a plan to improve well-being across the publicly funded education system. Our goal is that all students will develop enhanced mental and physical health, a positive sense of self and belonging, and the skills to make positive choices. We are also working to ensure that children, educators and all staff will feel that their well-being is supported.

It has been demonstrated that school and system leaders play a critical role in creating the conditions that support the healthy development of all students. It is vital that our education leaders feel supported as they work towards building learning environments that encourage healthy students, and engaged and dedicated teachers, parents, and staff. Educators and staff who are motivated and proud to come to work every day, are a prerequisite for enhanced student well-being and achievement.

Publicly funded schools are able to bring the focused efforts of an entire community – students, families, educators, and staff – to the promotion of well-being.

Our government is committed to supporting Ontario's publicly-funded school communities through this engagement process, where we will be speaking to everyone who is part of our school communities. Ontario schools are among the best in the world, and by working together we will continue on this positive path.

All children deserve the best possible start in life, and the right to be supported as they learn and grow. We look forward to our ongoing work with our partners as we strive to achieve excellence, ensure equity, promote well-being and enhance public confidence in our education system.

We have a collective responsibility to create healthy learning and work environments that contribute to life-long learning. Together, with the release of this paper, our work continues towards building consensus and sharing ideas about what works.

Learn more at [ontario.ca/eduvision](http://ontario.ca/eduvision).

**Organizational well-being:** There is a shared belief that organizational well-being is the foundation to support student well-being. 'We need to have a culture of wellness in the workplace and [promote] staff wellness in order to support student well-being.'

– Presenter at Durham District School Board.