

Vibrant communities and a prosperous society are built on the foundation of a strong education system. We heard examples of schools and systems with students who are privileged to work with educators who take this to heart each day. We heard about where there is more work to be done. You told us what you think. We've listened.

Listening to Ontarians

Beginning in November 2016, the Ministry of Education reached out across the province to learn more about student well-being and how it is being supported in schools. We heard directly from more than 4,500 parents,¹ educators, students, partners and community members.

This process of collecting feedback was far-reaching. We made sure we listened to a wide range of people who may not always have their voices heard. We heard from youth who have been homeless. We heard from transgender youth accessing shelter services and newcomers to Canada. We heard from community service providers. We heard from students, elders, educators, principals, board leaders, public health providers, parents and many others – all those who care about students and their experience in Ontario schools. This report demonstrates how we are listening to what we heard, as we move forward to understand and support well-being in our schools.

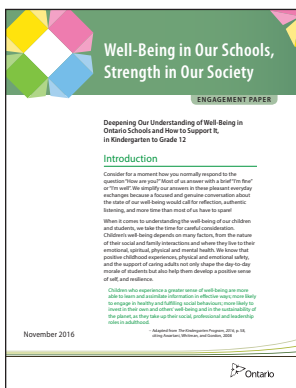
Research and lived experience tells us that children and youth with a greater sense of well-being have a solid foundation for living and learning. They're more likely to take part in healthy and fulfilling social activities, and contribute economically in the future. They're more inclined to support the well-being of others, and the sustainability of their communities and the world at large. These benefits of well-being stay with our children and youth as they progress into their social, professional and leadership roles in adulthood. It matters.

1. The word *parents* is used in this document to refer to parent(s) and guardian(s). It may also be taken to include caregivers or close family members who are responsible for raising the child.

Reaching out: How we listened

The goal of the engagement process was to cast a wide net to collect broad feedback about support for student well-being from educators, parents, students, community partners, and interested stakeholders with a strong effort to hear voices that are sometimes not heard. Building on a strong body of existing work across the province, we set out to listen and learn about people's understanding of student well-being, and the conditions that promote and support it. We also wanted to understand how, collectively, we would know our progress in promoting and supporting student well-being.

An engagement paper (*Well-Being in Our Schools, Strength in Our Society*), released November 2016, outlined the importance and benefits of well-being throughout life and was used to guide the discussions.



The well-being engagement paper identified questions related to three themes:

- **Understanding Well-Being:** What it means, and the factors that contribute to it.
- **Promoting and Supporting Student Well-Being:** The conditions that promote well-being and that support the healthy development of all students in our schools.
- **Knowing Our Impact:** What we will look for to determine if we've been successful in promoting and supporting student well-being.

There were multiple ways for people to join in the conversation, including in-person provincial and regional sessions, a downloadable “engagement kit” that supported partners and community groups in hosting their own discussions, and an online survey on the ministry’s website that invited educators, students, parents and community members to offer their views.

We specifically sought feedback from a wide variety of unique perspectives through diverse representation at in-person sessions and through targeted meetings and invitations. We reached out to invite input from First Nations, Métis, and Inuit participants, representatives from Catholic and public schools, Franco-Ontarians, community partners, those living in northern, rural, and urban communities, and those living in vulnerable situations.

1. Provincial event

We launched the process of collecting feedback with a two-day provincial event, *Partners in Dialogue*, on November 9 and 10, 2016. The provincial event drew 960 participants over two days. Over the next several months, we listened to feedback from people from across Ontario as outlined below.



Graphic adapted with permission from *A Rich Tapestry: Weaving Well-Being for Ontario Students*, a report for the Ministry of Education on the Regional Engagement Sessions for Student Well-Being by the I-Think Initiative, Rotman School of Management, University of Toronto.

2. Regional well-being engagement sessions

Nine regional sessions facilitated by staff from the Rotman School of Management's I-Think Initiative were held in locations across the province. Sessions were held in English and French and in satellite locations with online participation. Over 1,200 participants (students, parents, educators, staff and community members) from across Ontario participated in these sessions. School boards invited participation from community agencies and those who support student well-being both inside and outside the school. Students had a strong presence at every session and table groups were mixed so that student, community and educator voices contributed together to the conversation.

Design Thinking methodology was used to draw out creative and innovative approaches to supporting well-being, centred on the strengths and needs of the student.

Design Thinking is a methodology for problem-solving that is used world-wide by researchers, engineers and systems-thinkers. It is used to generate ideas that are tested with prototypes in order to imagine innovative, creative and doable approaches to complex issues.

Design Thinking is:

- solution-focused and action-oriented
- focused on a "preferred future"
- centred on the people for whom we are designing solutions

3. Online engagement portal with survey

An online survey with questions from the engagement paper was customized to each respondent group: students, parents, educators, community partners and engaged stakeholders. Approximately 38% of the contributions were from students. (~2,000 responses.)

4. Engagement kit

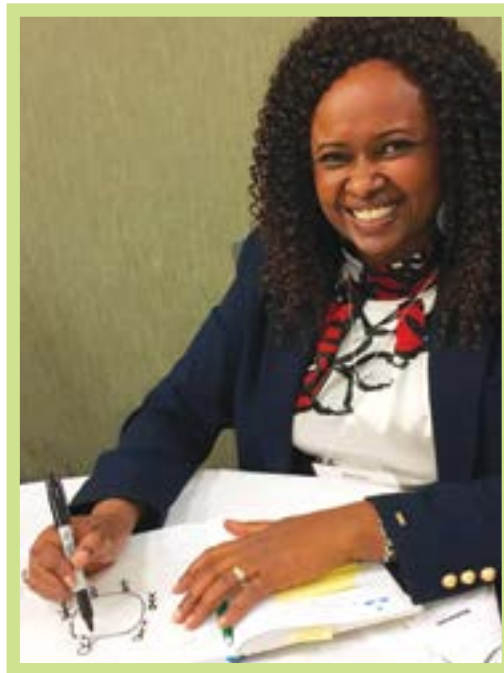
Community organizations and partners were encouraged to use the engagement kit to facilitate their own sessions in their communities, and submit their input to the Ministry. (55 submissions received.)

5. Targeted engagement sessions

Ministry of Education staff met with a wide range of community organizations (e.g., social service and settlement agencies, Premier's Council on Youth Opportunities, Kids Help Phone). (278 participants.)

6. Ongoing discussions

We continue to have ongoing discussions with Indigenous partners and communities to co-develop work to support the well-being of Indigenous students. We are working with our education partners to learn how we can best support the well-being of staff in our schools. We understand that while staff and student well-being are related, staff well-being is important in its own right. We also continue to have ongoing conversations with Early Years partners on a range of initiatives that support the well-being of children and families. We have been moving forward with *Ontario's Renewed Early Years and Child Care Policy Framework* (2017), which sets a vision for an Early Years system in which all children and families have access to a range of high-quality, inclusive and affordable supports that are child- and family-centred and contribute to children's learning, development and well-being. And to support the unique needs of Indigenous children and families, the ministry is working to expand access to culturally relevant early years supports, on and off reserve.



What you told us: Participant voices

This section summarizes the key learnings of the engagement process. All feedback was analysed using rigorous qualitative data analysis techniques. The findings are presented here according to the themes from the engagement paper.

Understanding well-being

“The definition of caring includes [being] understood, trusted, loved, accepted, safe/secure, supported, noticed.”

– Participant, Sudbury Region

Participants were asked:

1. What does “student well-being” mean to you/your organization – what does it look like, feel like, sound like?

Understanding the well-being of our children and youth demands careful consideration. Students’ well-being depends on many factors, including their social and family interactions, community and family supports, and their emotional, spiritual, physical and mental health. It is shaped by positive experiences, in-person and online, physical and emotional safety, and support from adults.



First and foremost, Ontarians told us that well-being is grounded in a positive **sense of self and spirit**. It is reflected in the students’ sense of personal identity and self-worth, and an optimistic and hopeful view of life. Students told us that being **connected, having a sense of belonging** at school, and feeling like a respected and valued member of the school community are critical.

We heard that students must feel **safe, physically and emotionally**, in an inclusive, accepting environment. In the school community, students must be able to engage in **meaningful learning**, have positive **relationships** and be supported to develop **healthy minds and bodies**.

“Well-being is feeling comfortable enough to be who you are, not feeling like you have to be afraid for the way you are.”

– Student, regional session

A positive sense of **self/spirit** refers to a positive sense of personal identity (e.g., cultural, linguistic, religious, racial, gender, or spiritual identity) and self-worth, and an optimistic and hopeful overall view of life. When describing sense of self, participants referred to having a positive image of themselves. This outcome was the most frequently referenced component of student well-being, based on the online survey data.



The concept of **safety** and security was frequently cited as being essential to promoting and supporting well-being. It was ranked as the second most referenced aspect of student well-being, based on the engagement survey data. The sense of psychological safety and security was identified as “*safety to be yourself*” without worry or anxiety, feeling safe and welcome in school, and feeling safe to learn in one’s own way.



We heard that students’ sense of **belonging** (feeling part of a group or community) supports the development of a positive sense of self. We also heard that providing opportunities for students to have their voice heard and take action on their thinking helps develop a sense of belonging.



When talking about their own well-being, students placed a heavy emphasis on friendships. Parents felt that their own interest and involvement in their child’s learning contributed positively to their child’s life.

“How can you be accepted and noticed without being labeled?”

– Participant, Thunder Bay Region

Participants told us that definitions of well-being are specific to context and culture. Individual well-being is a shared responsibility, nested in the collective well-being of the school and community.



There was widespread agreement that:

- **meaningful learning experiences** and how people learn, what they feel, their physical and mental health, social interactions, sense of identity and spirit, and the interaction of all of these things are all a part of well-being
- schools, families and communities are interconnected and together influence the well-being of students and school staff
- student engagement and student voice matter.

“Culture needs to be recognized in school, for them [Indigenous students] to feel safe in who they are. Culture and history are a huge part of who Aboriginal students are, they need to feel recognized and acknowledged.”

– First Nations representative, Ottawa Region

Opportunities to have the unique needs of individual students addressed, and the critical role of supportive **relationships** with peers and caring adults in the school and the community and with parents, were highlighted as key components of well-being.



We heard that students need opportunities to develop **healthy minds and bodies**, as well as to develop the skills they need to face challenges. They must be equipped to make healthy choices, be actively involved in school life, and have their voices heard.



Promoting and supporting well-being

Participants were asked:

2. In your current role, how do you promote and support student well-being?
3. Where might resources be better directed to promote and support student well-being in our education system more effectively?

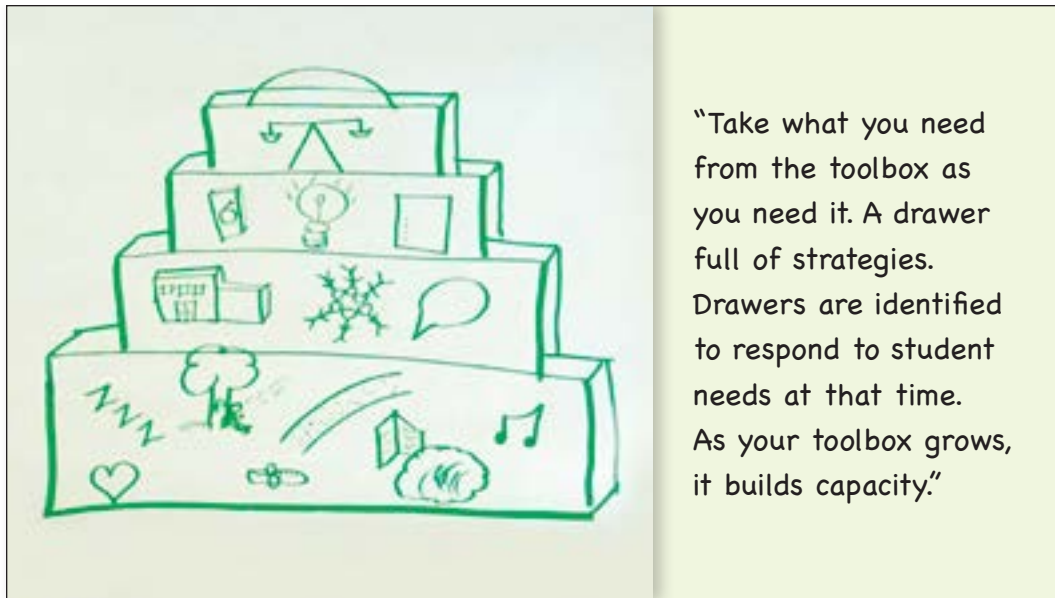
When asked how well-being is currently being supported and what more we could do, participants told us of many outstanding practices in place across Ontario. We heard clearly about the need to look at well-being together with a student's whole experience at school – not in isolation. Participants challenged us to look at the student experience as a whole and consider what we need to do to help all students succeed in the broadest sense of the word. We also heard of the need to support the well-being of the people working with our students every day as interconnected and distinct from student well-being.

In the regional sessions, participants shared experiences and used their insights to propose ideas for promoting and supporting the well-being of students. We used a Design Thinking process with the following steps to elicit creative ideas:

- Step 1:** Empathy and deep understanding – participants were guided to start by thinking about well-being needs from the student point-of-view
- Step 2:** Ideation and prototyping – participants brainstormed, sketched and described concrete ideas for promoting and supporting student well-being
- Step 3:** Strategy and testing – participants examined “what would need to be true” for their ideas to be realized

Across all of the sessions, over 140 different prototypes of proposed approaches for supporting and promoting well-being were created. Staff from the Rotman I-Think Facilitation Team grouped these prototypes into five categories based on similar features, as follows:

- **Teaching, learning and assessment practices** that are relevant and meaningful and take into account the strengths and needs of all aspects of the student (cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development and development of their sense of self/spirit)
- **Supportive spaces**, including dedicated spaces for students, parents and community – spaces that are physically and emotionally safe and inclusive and that promote a sense of belonging
- **Skill-building for well-being** that takes a developmental, strength-based approach, and is intentional in helping students develop skills for managing and improving their own well-being



- **Peer mentors and caring adults**, who can enable supportive and trusting relationships with peers and caring adults in the school community
- **Targeted programming** that addresses specific needs or barriers that might be preventing some students from reaching their full potential

In these prototypes, the importance of working collectively with community partners and parents was emphasized. The breadth of the ideas presented by the prototypes emphasizes the broad scope and opportunity for all those within the education system to impact student well-being. It was clear that one approach cannot meet the needs of every student. We heard that a collective response, where everyone involved considers how they can help children and youth become their “best selves”, can truly make a difference.

“Student well-being is very important. Collaboration across all levels...between boards of education, federations, community agencies, parents, schools, and teachers is necessary so no school or teacher feels like they are alone in their efforts to support students’ well-being.”

– Participant, Barrie Region

Three key approaches for support

Across all of the input, participants described three key areas that are important for promoting and supporting well-being. These approaches highlight the critical need to look at student well-being as part of the whole student experience, along with academic achievement and equity for all.

They are:

1. Access to social and health services

Participants talked about the various professional staff (e.g., child and youth workers, social workers, educational assistants) who provide direct services within the schools. Many noted the crucial role of schools and boards in connecting students and families to professional services inside and outside the school, through referrals and liaison with community partners. It was noted that improving access to these important services requires a **collaborative, coordinated effort** between education staff and all professionals who support students.

2. Supportive relationships and a sense of belonging

Participants told us about the many types of supportive relationships that foster healthy living. Students emphasized their friendships, and the value of surrounding themselves with a positive group of people. Parents described caring for their child in ways that included being engaged in their child's learning, school life, and/or extracurricular activities.

We heard about the value of **relationships** with peers, parents, educators and other adults in the school and community. These ties contribute to students' feeling of safety, and enable a sense of belonging within the school. Student participants said that extracurricular activities help meet their social needs and promote acceptance, inclusion and the sense of belonging to a group and community.

Participants told us about how providing opportunities for the student voice to be heard fosters a sense of **belonging** in school. Educators and stakeholders described various ways of fostering the student voice. These include "flexible classrooms" where students have a voice and a choice, surveys focused on student perceptions, and leadership opportunities such as school councils and student trustees.

We heard clearly that a sense of belonging is supported in learning environments where **students see themselves as a part of the curriculum and the system**. Students reported that they feel they belong when the diversity of the community is reflected in the learning environment, and diverse opinions and voices are

encouraged, respected and understood. They told us that they feel they belong when they see that a variety of skills and talents are valued, that there is an awareness of bias, discrimination is addressed and everyone is working towards helping them achieve their full potential.

Through ongoing engagement with Indigenous communities, we are hearing that at the centre of well-being for many Indigenous students is recognition of the legitimacy and value of First Nations, Métis and Inuit knowledge, cultures, languages, experiences, perspectives and pedagogies. Well-being is accomplished through positive relationships with Indigenous families and communities as well as members of the school and classroom community. Access to Indigenous culture, in relationship with Indigenous community members, needs to be available to students within the school by bringing the community into the school, and outside the school through participation in community-based learning opportunities that are acknowledged as legitimate and given value by the school system.

3. An education system that prioritizes student well-being, with a focus on mental health

People reported on the impact of significant local and province-wide efforts to support student mental health. They shared examples of current work related to system planning and coordination, capacity building, and programs and services. They also identified areas that would benefit from additional emphasis and focus.

Participants highlighted some examples of current practices, including professional learning on areas like mindfulness, self-awareness and stress-management that contribute to well-being. They also noted support for mental health through the integration of mental health considerations into board and school improvement planning. Participants valued the introduction of programs to help students and staff manage anxiety and reduce stress.

Participants told us about efforts in schools and boards to support **healthy living** by focusing on overall well-being, and on **mental health** in particular. Participants described efforts to ensure a mental health focus during professional development days and staff meetings, and board committees that support well-being.

We heard recommendations on how to better direct resources through a system-wide approach to student well-being, and through professional learning opportunities and training. Participants recommended a sustained system focus on the whole student experience, including day-to-day teaching, learning and assessment interactions in school.

Knowing our progress

“We cannot underestimate the role of a variety of caring adults, adults in the hallway, those who greet students every day. For example, caretakers in the building connecting with students, adults building relationships with students and contacting them when they are absent.”

– Participant, Barrie Region

Participants were asked:

4. What would tell you that progress is being made in promoting and supporting student well-being?
5. How can information that is currently collected by schools be used to promote and support student well-being?
6. What other information could be collected that would contribute to promoting and supporting student well-being?

Participants told us that we should consider a variety of data to understand our progress in supporting and promoting student well-being. They saw value in both qualitative and quantitative data, and noted a variety of data sources available from schools and boards (e.g., school climate surveys, tracking of bullying incidents), as well as other organizations and related government agencies (e.g., the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health).

Participants identified key areas we should monitor when looking for progress, such as:

- availability of and access to resources and supports
- school-based initiatives, policies and programs
- mental and physical health statistics
- academic achievement levels
- level of participation in extracurricular and volunteer programs
- referrals of students for cognitive, social, emotional or physical concerns.

“Don’t make assumptions around the students. Doing well academically doesn’t mean students are doing well overall, especially internally.”

– Student, regional session

They also provided examples of how information could be collected, such as:

- student self-reporting tools about engagement in class and school, sense of belonging and feelings of safety and security
- reporting from parents and families on their child’s experience at school
- reporting from educators on the school and classroom environment.

Students viewed the environment or school climate as central to their well-being. They emphasized the value of positive relationships with fellow students and with adults in the school.

Participants identified other positive outcomes arising from student well-being, such as students’ application of life and social skills in the areas of self-regulation, problem-solving, resilience, managing stress, flexibility, and independence – all skills needed to manage life’s challenges.

We heard that there is no singular or unique indicator of student well-being, and that no single factor should be considered as an indicator of well-being.

Conclusion: You told us – We're listening

With its far-reaching approach, this engagement process provided us with significant information to help us understand, encourage and support student well-being in Ontario. We heard what matters to Ontarians, by:

- building on our strong foundation of current work in Ontario schools
- using Design Thinking to generate new possibilities
- inviting feedback in large-group sessions and one-on-one conversations, and
- reaching out personally to listen to diverse voices.

We heard clearly that the development of the whole person – their cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development, and the development of their sense of self/spirit – is central to every student's school experience, inside and outside the classroom, including the time they spend online.

You told us strongly that achievement, equity and well-being must be closely interwoven in this development of the whole learner through day-to-day interactions.

We heard that well-being is grounded in a positive sense of self and spirit. It is reflected in the student's sense of personal identity and self-worth, and in an optimistic and hopeful view of life.

- Students told us that being connected, having a sense of belonging at school, and feeling like a respected and valued member of the school community are critical.

We heard that students must feel safe, physically and emotionally, in an inclusive, accepting environment.

- In the school community, students must be able to engage in meaningful learning, and have positive relationships with peers and caring adults.

We heard that students need opportunities to develop healthy minds and bodies, as well as to obtain the skills they need to face challenges.

- They must be equipped to make healthy choices, be actively involved in school life, and have their voices heard.

You told us. We're listening.

Ontario's future depends on today's students, the next generation of citizens and leaders. All students need to be supported to learn about themselves, collaborate with others, and develop the skills they need to contribute in their communities and thrive in the world. We also recognize the need to support staff well-being. We are working with our education partners to learn how we can best support the well-being of staff in our schools. By supporting our students now, we will ensure a bright future for them, and for all Ontarians.

More information

If you would like more information on Ontario's work to promote and support student well-being, visit ontario.ca/studentwellbeing.






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