



# Well-Being in Our Schools, Strength in Our Society

ENGAGEMENT PAPER

## Deepening Our Understanding of Well-Being in Ontario Schools and How to Support It, in Kindergarten to Grade 12

### Introduction

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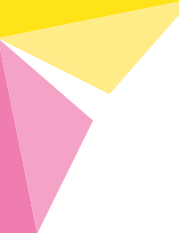
Consider for a moment how you normally respond to the question “How are you?” Most of us answer with a brief “I’m fine” or “I’m well”. We simplify our answers in these pleasant everyday exchanges because a focused and genuine conversation about the state of our well-being would call for reflection, authentic listening, and more time than most of us have to spare!

When it comes to understanding the well-being of our children and students, we take the time for careful consideration. Children’s well-being depends on many factors, from the nature of their social and family interactions and where they live to their emotional, spiritual, physical and mental health. We know that positive childhood experiences, physical and emotional safety, and the support of caring adults not only shape the day-to-day morale of students but also help them develop a positive sense of self, and resilience.

Children who experience a greater sense of well-being are more able to learn and assimilate information in effective ways; more likely to engage in healthy and fulfilling social behaviours; more likely to invest in their own and others’ well-being and in the sustainability of the planet, as they take up their social, professional and leadership roles in adulthood.

November 2016

– Adapted from *The Kindergarten Program*, 2016, p. 58,  
citing Awartani, Whitman, and Gordon, 2008



Positive childhood experiences can contribute to improved opportunities in the long term. Individuals who experience social and economic disadvantages early in life tend to have lower earnings, lower standards of health, and lower skill levels in adulthood. Such conditions can perpetuate a cycle of disadvantage across generations.<sup>1</sup> Children's experiences at school can have a significant impact. When students are physically and emotionally safe, when they can see themselves reflected in their school environment, when they are supported in their learning, and when they are given opportunities to realize their potential, they are better able to learn and they can feel hopeful about their future. Their well-being is key to their success.

In collaboration with students, parents<sup>2</sup> and families, educators, community partners and all those who work with schools or are connected to schools, we are seeking to develop a vision for well-being in Ontario's publicly funded schools. We are now embarking on the path that will lead us to a shared vision of how we can best support the well-being of all students, in order to help them reach their full potential.

## How are we doing?

Ontario's education system is considered one of the best in the world. Our students are recognized as achieving substantially above global averages in the critical areas of reading and creative problem solving.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, achievement gaps between high- and low-income students in Ontario, and between students whose first language is the language of instruction and students who are newcomers to Canada, are smaller than the gaps between such groups in many other countries.

Figure 1 shows a sampling of measures of student achievement and well-being. The high school graduation rate has improved significantly over the past decade; however, students' level of physical activity appears to drop after they leave elementary school. The number of reported incidents of bullying is down from 2003; however, there is some evidence of increasing concerns in the areas of emotional well-being and mental health. These measures of student well-being alert us to the need for continued support in a number of areas.

If our goal in Ontario is for all of our students to become active members of their communities, able to bring about positive change and to flourish in society, we must heighten our focus on well-being as a crucial prerequisite for long-term success. We must also acknowledge that the well-being of our children and youth is our priority as a society.<sup>4</sup>

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1. UNICEF Office of Research, "Fairness for Children: A League Table of Inequality in Child Well-Being in Rich Countries", *Innocenti Report Card 13* (Florence, Italy: UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti, 2016).

2. The word *parents* is used to refer to parents, guardians, and caregivers.

3. OECD, *How's Life in Canada?* OECD Better Life Initiative, May 2016.

4. UNICEF Canada, *UNICEF Report Card 13: Canadian Companion, Fairness for Children* (Toronto: UNICEF Canada, 2016).

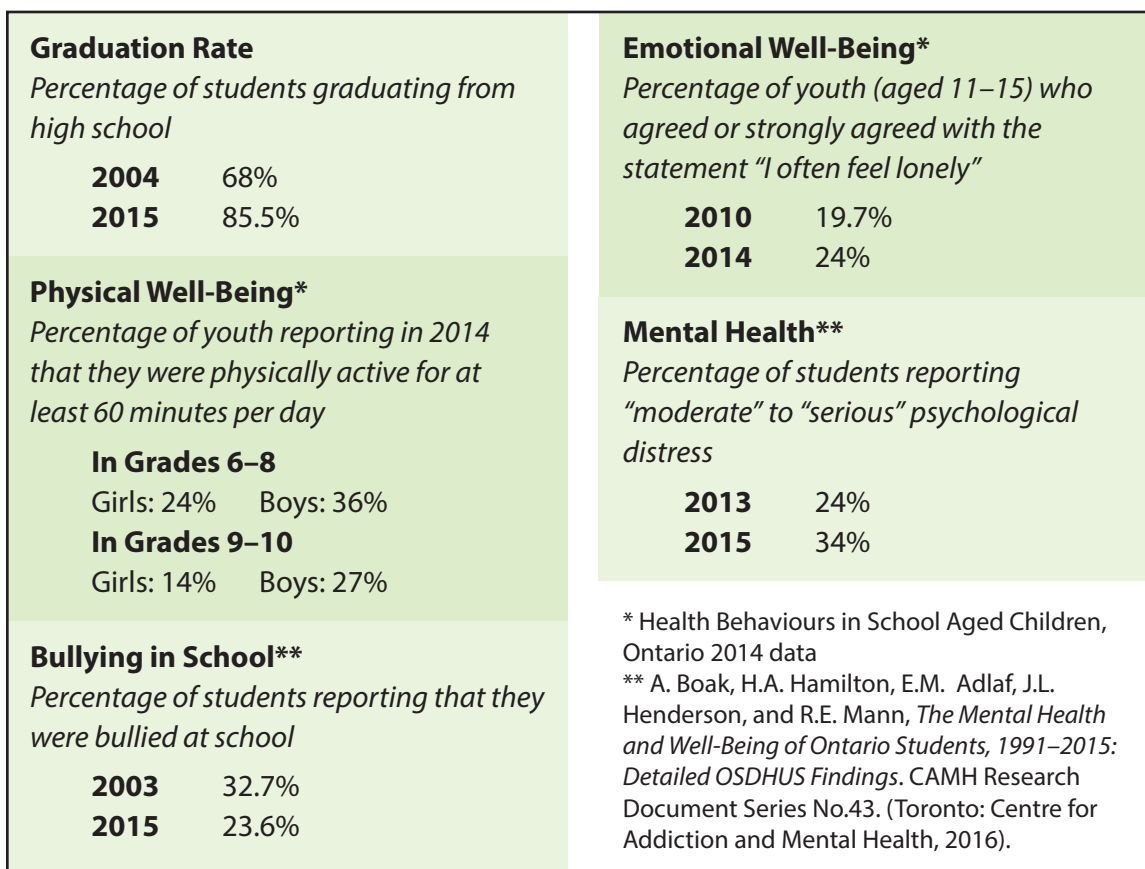


Figure 1. Looking at student outcomes beyond academic achievement

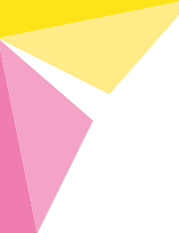
As we do so, we must take into account that a wide range of factors can affect the well-being of Ontario students and their ability to realize their full potential. Today, more than two million students are enrolled in Ontario’s roughly 4000 elementary schools and 900 secondary schools. They represent diverse communities, family structures, economic circumstances, life experiences, faiths, customs, languages, abilities, interests, talents, and skills. They need to be supported in diverse ways as well, with resources and learning opportunities that meet their particular needs.

As we continue to strive for excellence in our education system, we know it is essential to help all of our students develop a sense of well-being – the sense of self, identity, and belonging in the world that will give each of them their best chance to learn, grow and thrive.

## What we know is working

Promoting and supporting well-being is one of the four interconnected goals of *Achieving Excellence*, Ontario’s renewed vision for education. We are committed to building on the strong foundation that has already been established across the province.<sup>5</sup> Our schools

5. Ontario Ministry of Education, *Ontario’s Well-Being Strategy for Education: Discussion Document* (Toronto: Queen’s Printer for Ontario, 2016).



and communities continue to work together to help students gain the knowledge and skills associated with well-being, and to provide equitable opportunities for students of all backgrounds and abilities to learn and succeed.

Supporting the well-being of Ontario's children and youth is a priority shared by many – families, various government ministries, and a wide range of organizations in sectors such as health, social services, and community safety. However, the education system provides an important window through which to observe and address student well-being, and learn about the practices that serve it most effectively. The Ministry of Education has a unique role to play because students move through the continuum of learning and development, from their formative years into young adulthood, at school. School staff are able to observe and address students' needs over time, and to track the results of the support that is being provided. For example, when schools provide a safe environment that reflects and promotes cultural identity, students report a more positive view of their emotional and physical safety and well-being, and feel a greater sense of belonging.

Schools across Ontario have made significant progress in providing a positive school climate – a learning environment that is safe, inclusive and accepting. Research has shown<sup>6</sup> that positive school climate:

- has a powerful influence on students' motivation to learn;
- helps reduce the number of incidents of aggression, violence and harassment in schools;
- lessens the negative impact of socio-economic context on academic performance;
- acts as a "protective factor" for learning and positive life development; and
- contributes to improved academic outcomes, personal development and well-being.

In addition, since 2011, School Mental Health ASSIST has been working with Ontario school boards to promote mental health for all students. All school boards now have a Mental Health Leader who develops and implements strategies to support students with mental health needs and addictions.


## What we want to learn from you

The province wants to hear from a diverse range of partners in education, health care, youth justice, social services, business, arts and culture and the non-profit sector, as well as francophone partners and communities, to incorporate their unique identities, cultural backgrounds and perspectives. The ministry is also working with Indigenous partners to co-develop supports and indicators of well-being for Indigenous students that can help inform the larger well-being strategy for all students.

We hope to capture a wide range of perspectives. In addition to regional engagements hosted by the Ministry of Education, we encourage people to organize their own

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6. A. Thapa, J. Cohen, S. Guffey, and A. Higgins-D'Alessandro, "A Review of School Climate Research", *Review of Educational Research* 83, no. 3 (September 2013): 357–85



discussions on the topic. The ministry is providing an Engagement Kit on its website to support independent session organizers. In addition, a feedback form will be available on the website until January 15, 2017, for individuals who wish to provide feedback directly.

By drawing on the knowledge of those who have done important work over many years to foster well-being among our students, we will strive to establish a common understanding of what promoting well-being in schools means. We will also consider indicators of student well-being and discuss which ones might provide us with the information that will best guide our future efforts.

With your feedback, and with contributions from our partner ministries, we will be able to move forward in developing a provincial framework on student well-being, from Kindergarten to Grade 12, that will incorporate and reflect our collective knowledge and experience, and our shared commitments.

We will aim to deepen our understanding of the connection between student well-being and academic achievement, including the positive role that a focus on well-being can play in improving equity of opportunity and promoting success for *all* students.

Hand in hand with the need to support student well-being is the need to support the well-being of school staff. Staff well-being is key to creating optimal workplaces for staff and optimal teaching and learning environments for students. Over the coming months, additional engagement sessions will be conducted with a focus on staff well-being.

In the future, we will also consider well-being in the early years sector, with a view to building on the important work that has been done to date. One of our goals is to ensure that, from the early years to Grade 12, children, educators, and all staff will feel that well-being for all is supported in Ontario's publicly funded education system.

## How the discussion is structured

The discussion questions address three related themes, as follows:

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

# Theme 1: Understanding Well-Being

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Ontario's education system serves a diverse population, with diverse perspectives and needs. For example, our French-language schools have a mission not only to educate students but also to protect, enhance and transmit the language and culture of the francophone community – and thereby to support students' sense of identity and belonging. Our Indigenous communities take a wholistic approach to well-being, rooted in respect for First Nation, Métis and Inuit knowledge and traditions. From this perspective, well-being is fostered through the creation of "safe spaces" in which cultural identity is promoted and reflected and a sense of belonging and connection can be experienced by all students. Many schools have high enrolments of children and students who are newcomers to Canada from countries around the world and who require support informed by an understanding of their particular experiences and needs. Location also plays a part: Students living in rural and remote areas have different needs from students in urban centres. The well-being of all students is served by the accessibility of resources, programs and facilities. In Ontario schools, diversity is valued and all members of the school community – regardless of ancestry, culture, ethnicity, sex, physical or intellectual ability, race, religion, gender identity, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, or other factors – are welcomed, included, treated fairly and respected.

The nature of well-being is complex and means different things to different people. To facilitate the discussion across our diverse province, this engagement paper offers a working definition of "well-being". Treat it as a starting point for conversation about what well-being means to you.

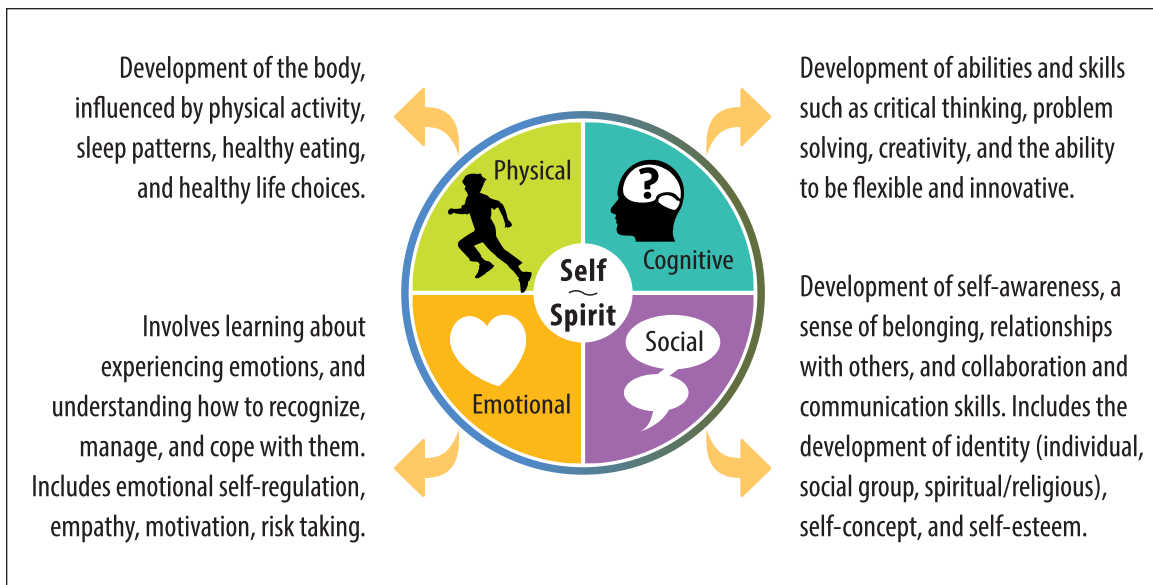
The working definition reflects the complex, holistic nature of well-being, taking into account four developmental domains – cognitive, social, emotional and physical.

## Well-Being: A Working Definition

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.

– Ontario's Well-Being Strategy for Education: Discussion Document, 2016, p. 3

In the following graphic, "Self/Spirit" is situated at the centre of the four interconnected domains. *Stepping Stones: A Resource for Educators Working with Youth Aged 12 to 25* refers to self or spirit as the "core" of a person that endures "despite all the rapid and significant changes that take place as a child becomes an adult ... It is this 'force of gravity' that connects aspects of development and experience together."



The concepts of self and spirit have different meanings for different people. For some, cultural heritage, language and community are central to identity. For many people, the self or spirit resides in their religion or faith, and for others, it is connected with a broader spirituality. According to Indigenous ways of knowing, well-being is based on the balance of the mental, physical, spiritual and emotional aspects of the individual, seen not as separate domains but as elements combined and centred within Spirituality and connected by community. This balance within individuals contributes to community growth, healing and wellness.

In discussions about the meaning of well-being, there will be opportunities to explore the various ways in which “self” and “spirit” are understood.

### Discussion Question

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

## Theme 2: Promoting and Supporting Student Well-Being


Investing in the well-being of our students continues to be a priority for the Ontario government. We need to know what has been working, and what was tried but failed to yield anticipated results. Are schools and school boards able to support student well-being effectively with the resources available to them? Let us know whether staffing is adequate to meet the needs of students, whether focused professional learning is required, whether schools are able to connect with the appropriate community agencies to support their work, and anything else you believe warrants consideration. We also want to know if schools and boards have the flexibility to make effective use of the resources available to them. Identifying areas of need will help us to determine where investments should be directed to continue to improve student well-being.

Boards and schools have set goals to continue to improve well-being and to address the unique needs of the students in their community. Through the engagement process, we hope to capture many of the practices that are being implemented in schools across the province. We want to know where the challenges lie and how we can facilitate the sharing of practices to address those challenges.

Ontario's well-being strategy identifies four policy areas that are foundational to student well-being in every school in Ontario: *equity and inclusive education, healthy schools, mental health, and safe and accepting schools*. We want to hear how Ontario schools have been implementing policies and programs that address these four areas, and whether they are able to implement them fully.







Schools strive to create learning environments in which students can feel included, accepted, engaged and connected with their school, and to provide them with safe spaces where they can seek help when they need it. Students develop knowledge and skills related to well-being through various parts of the curriculum. Student well-being is also promoted and supported through school improvement planning and by engaging parents, families and communities.

We are committed to nurturing an environment in which all voices are heard. In the spirit of collaborative professionalism, educators and education partners work together to improve student achievement by ensuring the well-being of all students. To further that end, we are looking for your feedback about the approaches and activities that you are using today to promote and support student well-being. We are also interested in learning about the ways in which schools align their approaches to address well-being. How are resources being allocated to provide the necessary supports to all students? Are schools making progress in giving student well-being the same priority that they give academic achievement? What does it mean for boards and schools to make well-being a priority in their planning (taking into account the need for professional learning, student supports, public communication, and so on)?

### **Discussion Questions**

- 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?



## Theme 3: Knowing Our Impact

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In Ontario, we have invested in building a foundation of supports in the areas of equity and inclusive education, healthy schools, mental health, and safe and accepting schools, all for the purpose of enhancing student well-being. We now have an opportunity to reflect on the work that has been done to date, to determine which of our strategies have been effective and where there might still be gaps and to have a dialogue about the outcomes that we want for all of our students. We have a chance to consider ways of gathering information on student well-being – in addition to the school climate surveys administered by schools at least once every two years – that can be incorporated into school and school board planning.

In view of the significant impact that student well-being has on quality of life, educational experiences, educational attainment and future success, *it is essential that we understand what is making a difference for our students.* We can do this by defining clear and meaningful indicators of well-being and ways of tracking our progress towards improved student well-being that protect the privacy, dignity, and individual and collective rights of all students.

Using measures of well-being is one way of finding out whether our work is having an impact. Well-being cannot be assessed using a single indicator, ranking or score. Only a variety of indicators of physical, cognitive, social and emotional well-being, taken together, can provide insight into the state of our students' well-being and help us identify their most pressing needs. Some indicators will tell us about students' well-being in general – for example, What is the impact of insufficient sleep or of hunger on a student's ability to learn? Do we know how much physical activity our students are getting? Are students experiencing racism? Others will speak specifically to the impact of the learning environment: Are students feeling safe at school, both physically and emotionally? What does absenteeism tell about student well-being? Figure 2 provides a small sample of the kinds of measures of well-being that are currently being used in surveys of Ontario students.

**Measures from the 2015 *Stepping Up* annual report, published by the Ministry of Children and Youth Services:**

- 68% of youth (ages 12–17) were physically active in 2014, down from 70.5% in 2013.
- 42.9% of youth (ages 12–17) consumed at least five servings of fruit or vegetables daily in 2013, compared with 41.3% in 2014.
- 10% of Ontario families experienced food insecurity in 2014 and 2015.

**Measures from the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health's 2015 *Ontario Student Drug Use and Health Survey (OSDUHS)*:**

- 25.4% of Ontario students rate their health as excellent, and 40.3% of Ontario students rate their health as good.
- 28% of Ontario students report that, in the past year, they wanted to talk to someone about a mental health problem, but did not know where to turn.
- 88.2% of students feel close to people at their school, compared with 86.9% in 2003.
- 86.2% of students feel like they are part of their school, compared to 82.7% in 2003.

**Figure 2. Measures of student well-being from current surveys**

By collecting quality information on our efforts, we have a better chance of identifying what is working well and what obstacles stand in the way of providing true equity of opportunity for our students. We want to be able to identify the supports that need to be enhanced and the kinds of investments that need to be made.

## **Discussion Questions**

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 well-being?
6. What other information could be collected that would contribute to promoting and supporting student well-being?



## Next Steps

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Thank you for taking the time to provide your insights and considerations on how best to promote and support student well-being throughout Ontario's education system. Your contribution will inform the development of a provincial framework that reflects our collective knowledge and experience.

Schools across the province may be at different stages of understanding, supporting, measuring, and reporting well-being. By listening to and learning from the successes and challenges experienced so far by our education partners, we can build our collective vision for student well-being in Ontario.

Additional responses to the discussion questions contained in this document, whether gathered through face-to-face engagement sessions or provided individually, may be submitted online, at [www.ontario.ca/studentwellbeing](http://www.ontario.ca/studentwellbeing). All feedback is welcome.

Une publication équivalente est disponible en français sous le titre suivant : *Le bien-être dans nos écoles fait la force de notre société : Mieux comprendre le bien-être pour le favoriser dans les écoles de l'Ontario, de la maternelle et du jardin d'enfants à la 12<sup>e</sup> année.*

This publication is available at [www.ontario.ca/studentwellbeing](http://www.ontario.ca/studentwellbeing).

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