

#HearNowON

Student Voices on Mental Health

Final Report

by Wisdom2Action &
School Mental Health Ontario

September 2019



School
Mental Health
Ontario

Santé mentale
en milieu scolaire
Ontario



LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Wisdom2Action is based in K'jipuk'tuk in Mi'kma'ki, the ancestral and unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq. We are all Treaty people and live in this territory under the Peace and Friendship Treaties of the mid-1700s.

School Mental Health Ontario is based in Hamilton, on ancestral Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee Confederacy land as determined by the Dish with One Spoon treaty. The intent of this agreement is for all nations sharing this territory to do so responsibly, respectfully and sustainably in perpetuity. We respect the longstanding relationships with the local Indigenous communities, the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation and the Six Nations of the Grand River.

This project took place in Ontario, Canada, across the traditional and ancestral territories of many indigenous nations. We are thankful to the indigenous peoples of this land for welcoming us as guests on their territories. We encourage all reading this document to reflect on the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission which calls us to reflect on our relationship to this land, and the historic and ongoing colonialism enacted upon the first peoples upon whose territories we reside. In reflection we are called upon to consistently work to become allies and uphold our treaty responsibilities as signors to the treaties of this land.

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#HearNowON

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

What We Heard

School Mental Health Ontario (SMH-ON) and Wisdom2Action (W2A) launched **#HearNowON: Student Voices on Mental Health** to connect with secondary school students in Ontario on their priorities regarding mental health. 1,028 students and young people across Ontario participated through an online survey and approximately 159 young people participated through regional forums or the data analysis process.

1187
PARTICIPANTS

THREE KEY OBJECTIVES WERE EXPLORED:

1

TO DETERMINE HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS' MENTAL HEALTH KNOWLEDGE NEEDS AND LEARNING PREFERENCES.

2

TO GATHER STUDENT IDEAS FOR BUILDING MENTAL HEALTH AWARENESS, REDUCING STIGMA, AND ENHANCING WELLNESS AT SCHOOL.

3

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT WAYS THAT STUDENTS WOULD LIKE TO GET INVOLVED IN PROVINCIAL, REGIONAL, SCHOOL BOARD, AND SCHOOL-LEVEL MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVES.

97%

WANT TO LEARN MORE ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH IN SCHOOLS

Mental Health Knowledge

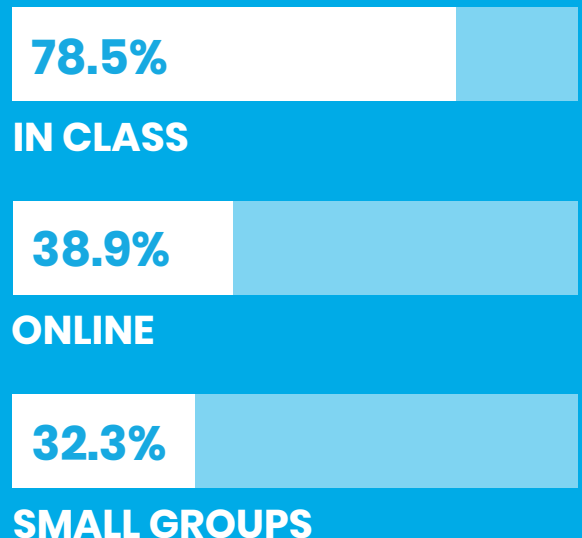
A resounding 97% of survey respondents indicated that they want to learn more about mental health at school. In particular, respondents highlighted that they want to learn most about:

- early warning signs of a mental health problem,
- ways to cope with their thoughts and emotions,
- how and where to ask for help, and
- how to help a friend.

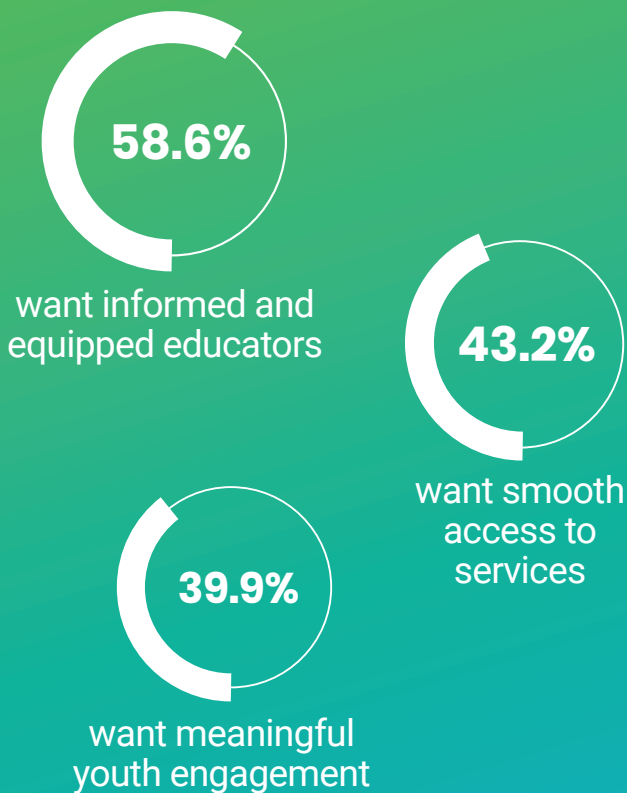
Students also noted the importance of developing social-emotional skills related to coping with transitions, stress, maintaining healthy relationships, staying optimistic and hopeful in the face of challenges, managing their emotions, and engaging in emotional self-care.

Student Learning Preferences

The majority of survey respondents, 78.5%, indicated they want to learn about mental health in the classroom as part of regular instruction. Other methods were endorsed much less frequently; 38.9% indicated that on-line learning could be useful and 32.3% were in favour of small group discussions during lunch or after school. Students would like to learn from mental health professionals, educators, and parents, but noted that educators and parents need support/resources to ensure that they have the most up-to-date, evidence-based knowledge in this area first.

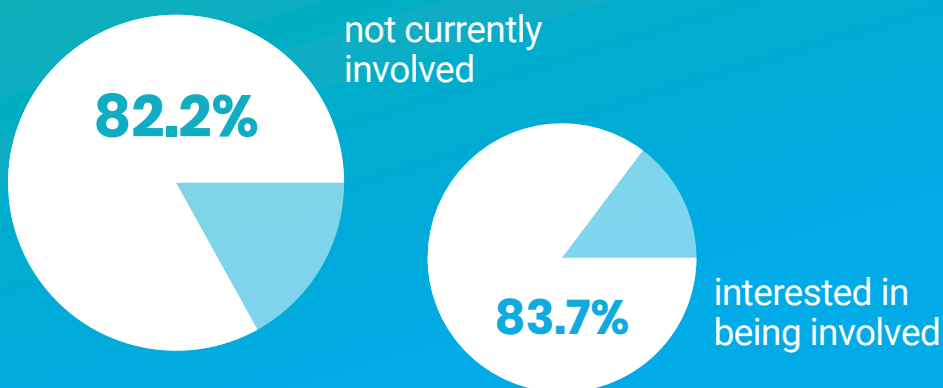


Priorities for School Mental Health



The most frequently endorsed priorities by survey respondents for school mental health more generally were: ensuring educators are informed and equipped (58.6%), providing smooth access to services and supports (43.2%), and offering a platform for meaningful youth engagement (39.9%). In addition, particularly through the regional forums, students highlighted the importance of bringing a lens of equity to this work, encouraging a broader understanding of the connection between discrimination and mental health problems, and stronger staff and student education on anti-discrimination, inclusion and anti-oppression.

Student Engagement and Leadership



82.2% of survey respondents indicated they are not currently involved in mental health leadership initiatives at their school. 83.7% indicated interest in being involved in mental health leadership.

Ideas for Student Engagement and Leadership

Students indicated that they have an important role to play in peer helping, and sharing of mental health information with other students, but that they need training and support in this area from adult allies who have expertise in this area. Students also suggested that students can help with promoting self-care practices at school and highlighted how important it was to set a tone where social and emotional wellness is prioritized. They noted that they need greater support for mental health clubs, events, and other initiatives, so that good ideas can spread and take hold.

Next Steps

Through this initiative, we heard from more than 1,000 students and identified five key recommendations to inform school mental health work moving forward.

We look forward to working alongside students to bring these recommendations to life as part of Ontario's School Mental Health Strategy.

- 1 STUDENTS WANT TO LEARN MORE ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH, AS PART OF THEIR REGULAR SCHOOL DAY**
- 2 STUDENTS WANT THEIR TEACHERS TO LEARN MORE ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH SO THEY CAN BE A STRONG RESOURCE IN THIS AREA**
- 3 STUDENTS WANT BETTER AND CLEARER ACCESS TO SUPPORTS AND SERVICES THROUGH SCHOOL**
- 4 STUDENTS WANT US TO HONOUR DIVERSITY AND PRIORITIZE INCLUSION AND BELONGING**
- 5 STUDENTS WANT TO BE BETTER INFORMED ABOUT, AND ENGAGED IN, MENTAL HEALTH PROMOTION AND STIGMA REDUCTION INITIATIVES**

Overview of the #HearNowON Student Engagement Initiative



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School Mental Health Ontario (SMH-ON) works together with Ontario school boards to promote student mental health. This implementation support team offers leadership, resources, and a provincial network to set the stage for student-centered, evidence-based approaches that can be scaled and sustained. To be truly student-centered, the voice of young people must be heard; in systematic, intentional, and inclusive ways.

In collaboration with Wisdom2Action (W2A), a national social enterprise with expertise in community engagement, knowledge mobilization and research, SMH-ON launched #HearNowON to engage students across Ontario with three key objectives:

Three Key Objectives

- To determine the mental health knowledge needs and learning preferences of secondary school students
- To gather student ideas for building mental health awareness, reducing stigma, and enhancing wellness at school
- To learn more about ways that students would like to get involved in provincial, regional, school board, and school-level mental health initiatives

#HearNowON included two mechanisms for engaging Ontario secondary school students, designed alongside youth. The two mechanisms were 1) a provincial-wide survey and 2) a series of regional forums held in London, Ottawa, Thunder Bay, and Toronto. In addition, Wisdom2Action consulted with over 100 youth mental health leaders at the *Disable the Label* event, a provincial gathering of youth mental health leaders, hosted by The New Mentality to consider, validate, and interpret the findings.

This initiative represents a ground-breaking consultation with secondary school students across Ontario to identify their priorities, their needs, and how they want to be involved in school mental health.

The findings gathered through this initiative will be used to inform SMH-ON's Student Mental Health Leadership Strategy. A student reference group with representatives from each region of the province will help to bring this strategy to life, helping to prioritize initiatives and provide a platform for enhanced student leadership in the area of mental health promotion. Findings and directions will be shared with school board mental health leadership teams, students, and the public to inform broader efforts to promote positive mental health, well-being and student engagement in Ontario's provincially-funded secondary schools.

Important Process Notes

Research Ethics Boards Approval

Ensuring the safety and overall well-being of students is at the heart of our work. To ensure the integrity of the methods used, and to facilitate the dissemination of findings, SMH-ON and W2A sought and received ethics approval from the Dalhousie University Research Ethics Board.

Informed Consent

Prior to participation in the online survey, students were asked to provide their assent to participate. The assent form used provided information on the goal of the survey, the voluntary nature of their participation, information on anonymity and how the data would be used, and contact information for the Dalhousie University Research Ethics Board.

Participants in the regional forums were asked to provide their assent in a similar fashion and were also required to submit a signed copy of an informed consent form completed by their legal guardian, which included similar information. Details about the survey and the forums were made available on-line on a public website, to help to inform decision-making about participation.

Inclusion of Francophone Student Voices

The online survey was accessible in both English and French, as were all public facing documents connected to the #HearNowON initiative. Each regional forum included a minimum of one bilingual facilitator. Bilingual knowledge keepers, Elders, and/or mental health support staff were made available on an as-needed basis.

Mental Health and Well-Being throughout this Student Engagement Initiative

Students' input on school mental health is crucial, but we know that conversations about mental health can be difficult and may bring up unexpected emotions. As such, SMH-ON and W2A developed a comprehensive strategy to mitigate risk and to ensure students participating in #HearNowON had access to mental health support, as needed. For example, students completing the online survey were directed to virtual resources for support, and students participating in the #HearNowON regional forums had access to clearly identified mental health professionals throughout each event. A high-risk protocol was developed in consultation with SMH-ON implementation coaches and clinicians to ensure a process was in place in the event of a mental health crisis.

Important Process Notes

Youth Engagement Approach

Student input and engagement ensures mental health initiatives are relevant and impactful. More specifically, students have an important role to play in addressing stigma, improving student wellness and help-seeking, and encouraging a positive and welcoming school culture. The #HearNowON initiative sought to engage students and young people meaningfully throughout our consultation, from project ideation, through to implementation and reporting.

- Engagement in the Provincial Survey: The survey was designed by SMH-ON and W2A with the support and input of the Ontario Student Trustees Association and the SMH-ON Student Reference Group to ensure that questions were clear, relatable, and informed by student perspectives.
- Engagement in Regional Forums: The regional forums leveraged W2A's Art of Hosting creative facilitation expertise to create safe spaces for deeper discussions with students about school mental health. The forum agenda was designed by youth within W2A, and community youth mental health leaders were involved in co-facilitation in each region.
- Engagement in Data Analysis: Acknowledging the importance of student voices and perspectives from project ideation to completion, #HearNowON partnered with The New Mentality, a provincial network of youth and allies working to amplify youth voice, to engage youth mental health leaders in the analysis of the #HearNowON findings. This consultation took place at a provincial gathering, *Disable the Label*, where more than 100 youth mental health leaders shared their perspectives on the key findings identified through our consultation, supported the interpretation of data, and the development of recommendations for this report.

#HearNowON Consultation Findings

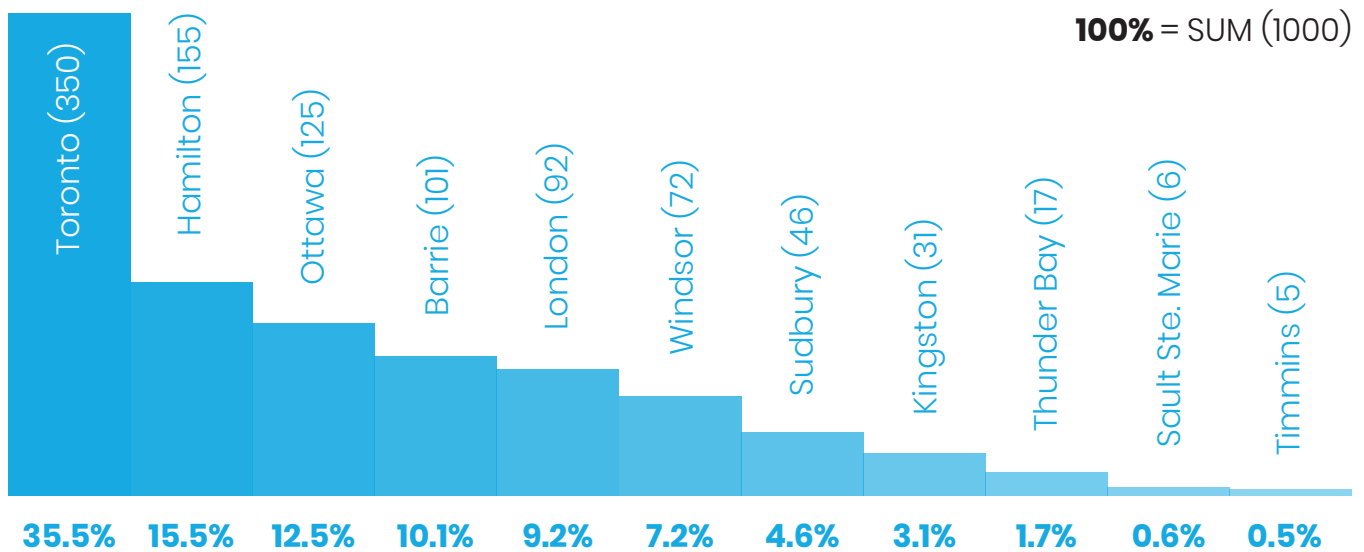
Demographic Overview

1,028 students and young people across Ontario participated in #HearNowON through the online survey. Approximately 159 young people participated in the #HearNowON regional forums or data analysis process through The New Mentality *Disable the Label* Forum.

The online survey was completed by 1,028 students across Ontario. Participants were not required to respond to every question; therefore responses to each question range from 642-1000 students.

Geographic Representation

There was strong representation of respondents from urban centres, including outside of the GTA. There was a lower representation of student responses from francophone, rural, remote and northern communities.

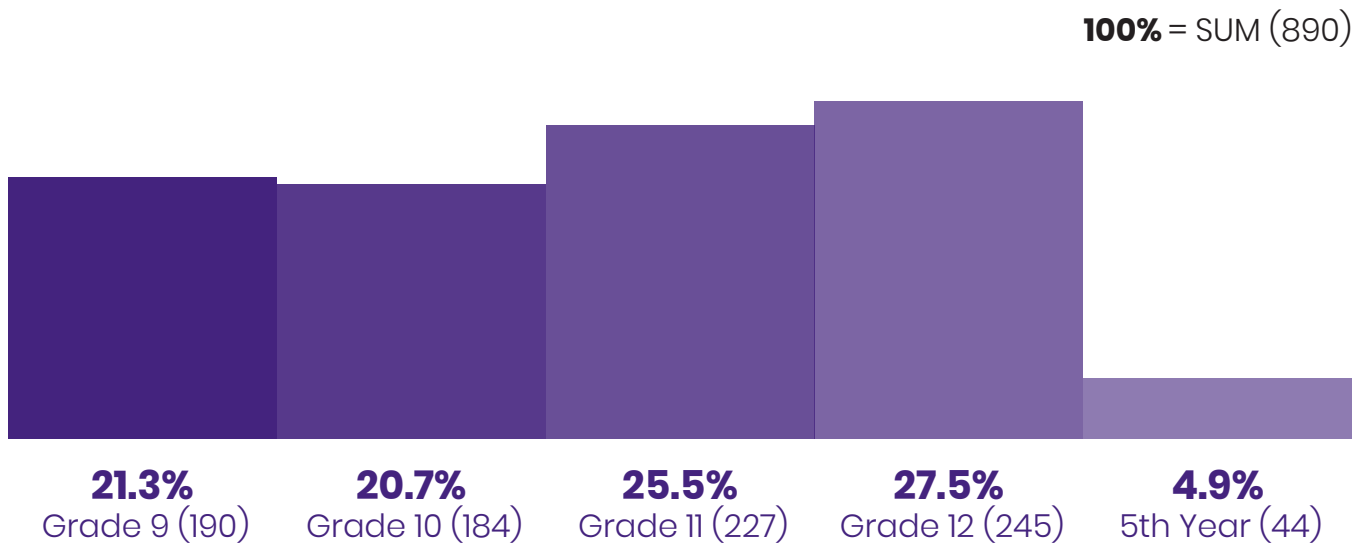


Participants were asked to identify the nearest city, based on a pre-set list, to their residence for the online survey.

Demographic Overview

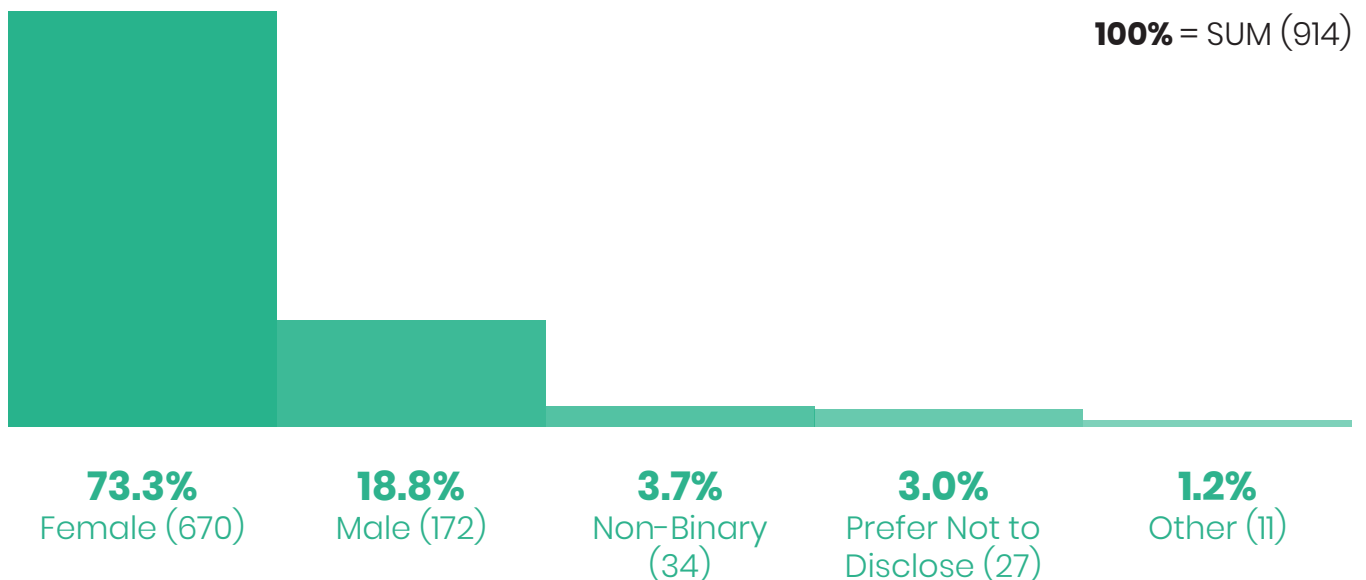
Current Grade of Survey Respondents

Representation was fairly even across grades, with the exception of the 5th year student.



Gender Identity of Survey Respondents

There was a significant overrepresentation of students who identified as female as compared to the students who identified as male in the online survey.

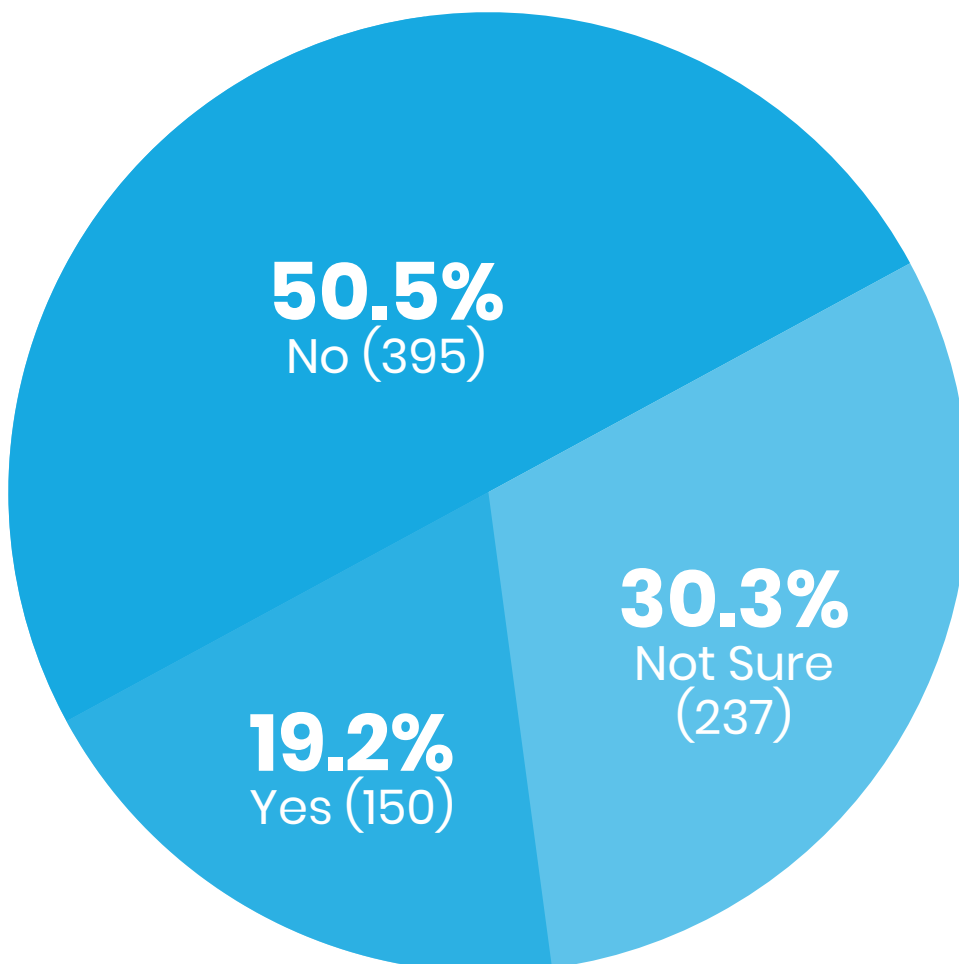


#HearNowON Consultation Findings

Student Voices on Mental Health Survey

The online survey was completed by 1,028 students across Ontario. Participants were not required to respond to every question; therefore responses to each question range from 642-1000 students.

1. Do you know what your school board is doing to support student mental health?



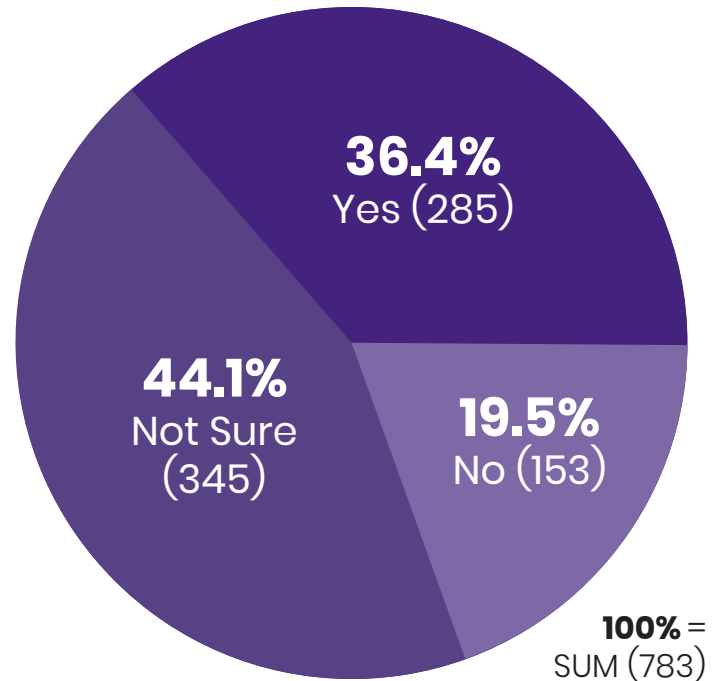
A significant majority of survey respondents (80.7%) were either not sure or unaware of the work of their school board to support student mental health, emphasizing the importance of stronger communication with students so they are aware of the work of their school boards in supporting student mental health and well-being.

100% = SUM (782)

Student Voices on Mental Health Survey

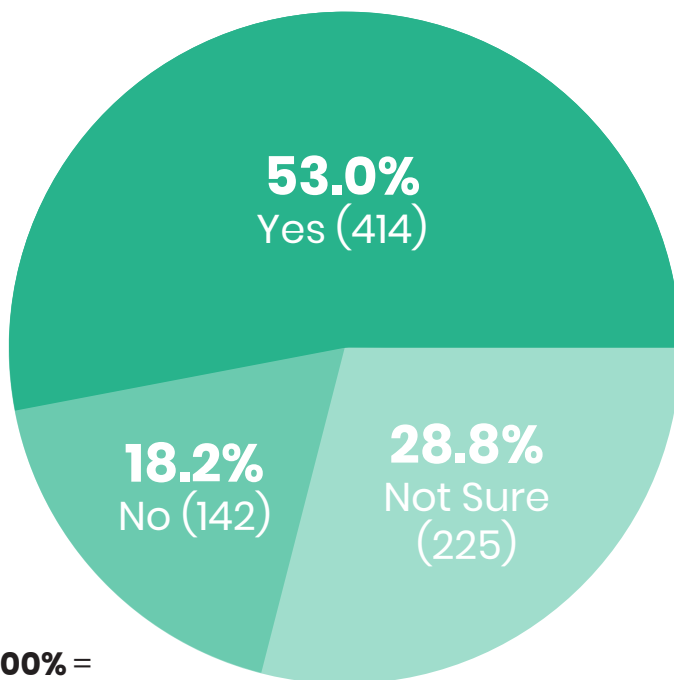
2. Are there ways that students can get involved in promoting mental health in your school board (clubs, events, campaigns)?

While more students were aware of opportunities for students to get involved in promoting mental health in their school boards, a majority remained unsure of existing opportunities for engagement, or were not aware of any opportunities for involvement at all.



3. Are there ways that students can get involved in promoting mental health in your school?

The majority of student respondents were aware of opportunities within their individual schools to get involved in promoting mental health, in contrast to opportunities to get involved at a school board level. This may indicate that while many schools have opportunities for engagement, broader opportunities at a school board level are less common, or communication about these opportunities reaches a smaller portion of the student population.



100% =
SUM (781)

4. These are things that School Mental Health Ontario is working on right now. Which three are most important to you?

Overall, the top three priorities reported by survey respondents were Informed Educators (58.6%), Smooth Access to Services and Support (43.2%), and Youth Engagement (39.9%). These responses suggest that students appreciate a focus on support within their immediate school-based circle of care, including educator training and access to support when help is needed. Initiatives that are slightly more removed from their daily experience (e.g., equipping school mental health professionals or building organizational conditions for effective practice) were included within the top three areas importance less often.

Areas of Priority / Importance	%	(n)
Informed Educators: Training to help teachers, principals, and guidance counselors to learn about mental health so they can support student wellness.	58.6%	452
Smooth Access to Services and Support: Working together to be sure that when students are struggling with a mental health problem they know where to get help.	43.2%	333
Youth Engagement: Engaging students, listening to their voices, and supporting their leadership with mental health awareness and wellness promotion in schools.	39.9%	308
Good Quality Mental Health Promotion Programming: Bringing proven mental health programming into schools and classrooms to improve student mental health.	38.8%	299
Good Quality Prevention and Early Support Services: Supporting school mental health professionals with training/resources so they can offer excellent services.	36.1%	278
Equity and Specific Populations: Offering special services for students with more or unique mental health needs (e.g., students with refugee backgrounds, from Indigenous communities, identifying as LGBTQ2S).	29.6%	228
Setting up for Success: Helping school boards to set up teams and processes that allow good programming to reach all students, and to stay strong over time.	29.1%	224
Family Engagement: Engaging parents/guardians and families, listening to their voices, and providing relevant mental health knowledge and support.	17.4%	134
Sum	100%	771

Student Voices on Mental Health Survey

5. Which of the following mental health topics are important for secondary school aged students to learn about?

Although all topics were endorsed by many students, students prioritized information/resources on how to ask for help, cope with common mental health problems, recognize warning signs for suicide, access support at school and in the community, early signs of common mental health problems and how to help a friend were identified as most important. Overall, the discrepancies between topics students want to learn more about were minor. Notably, all areas of education were identified as important by at least 50% of respondents.

Important Topics	%	(n)
How to ask for help	83.0%	563
Ways to cope with common mental health problems	79.9%	542
Warning signs for suicide	79.9%	542
Where to go for help at school and in the community	78.5%	532
Early signs of common mental health problems	77.7%	527
How to help a friend without taking on too much	76.0%	515
Common mental health problems that begin in adolescence	71.7%	486
The difference between mental health and mental illness	70.4%	477
Stigma and mental illness	63.9%	433
What to expect from a mental health professional / mental health treatment	59.4%	403
Understanding mental health, wellness, and resilience	58.1%	394
Normal changes in mood and emotions	58.1%	394
Sum	100%	678

6. Which of the following strategies/skills are important for secondary school aged students to learn about? Check all that apply.

Ways to cope with changes and stress, to build healthy relationships, and to stay hopeful were identified as the most important skills and strategies for secondary school aged students to learn about. Ways to figure out and express individual strengths, interests and identities was identified as the least important, but was still selected by 58% of respondents.

Important Strategies / Skills	%	(n)
Ways to cope with changes and major stress	86.9%	589
Ways to build healthy relationships, manage peer pressure, and deal with conflict	80.5%	546
Ways to stay optimistic and hopeful, even when things aren't going well in the moment	77.1%	523
Ways to identify and control emotions	75.1%	509
Ways to promote positive mental health / emotional self-care	74.3%	504
Ways to cope with daily hassles and minor stress	71.2%	483
Ways to set and achieve goals, be organized, and stay on track with school work	67.7%	459
Ways to figure out and express individual strengths, interests and identity	58.0%	393
Sum	100%	678

Student Voices on Mental Health Survey

7. How would you rate your own knowledge right now about these topics? Rate your current knowledge by clicking one circle for each skill area.

Students rated themselves as having good or strong knowledge related to:

- ways to build healthy relationships, manage peer pressure and deal with conflict,
- ways to set and achieve goals, be organized and stay on track with schoolwork, and
- ways to figure out and express individual strengths, interests and identity.

Students rated themselves as having little to no knowledge related to:

- ways to cope with transitions and major stress,
- ways to stay optimistic and hopeful even when things aren't going well in the moment, and
- ways to promote positive mental health / emotional self-care.

The areas with little to no knowledge identify gaps in student knowledge that require greater focus, particularly given that these topics were identified as important for secondary school students to learn about in questions #5 and #6.

Knowledge Areas	No Knowledge		A Little Knowledge		Some Knowledge		Good Knowledge		Strong Knowledge		Total
	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	#
Ways to set and achieve goals, be organized, and stay on track with school work	8.9%	59	22.3%	148	28.0%	186	25.9%	172	15.0%	100	665
Ways to figure out and express individual strengths, interests and identity	10.5%	70	24.0%	160	26.2%	175	24.7%	165	14.7%	98	668
Ways to build healthy relationships, manage peer pressure, and deal with conflict	4.0%	27	16.6%	112	31.8%	214	35.7%	240	11.9%	80	673
Ways to cope with daily hassles and minor stress	4.9%	33	24.2%	162	32.4%	217	28.3%	189	10.2%	68	669
Ways to identify and control emotions	12.3%	82	24.6%	164	31.2%	208	21.8%	145	10.1%	67	666
Ways to promote positive mental health / emotional self-care	13.4%	89	23.8%	158	28.6%	190	24.4%	162	9.9%	66	665
Ways to stay optimistic and hopeful, even when things aren't going well in the moment	19.1%	127	26.7%	177	26.1%	173	20.6%	137	7.5%	50	664
Ways to cope with transitions and major stress	16.3%	109	31.0%	208	28.5%	191	16.9%	113	7.3%	49	670

Student Voices on Mental Health Survey

8. How would you want to learn more about mental health? Check all that apply.

Students overwhelmingly emphasized their desire to learn about mental health as part of classroom instruction (78.5%).

Mode of Learning	%	(n)
As part of a class	78.5%	529
Through an on-line resource	38.9%	262
With a small group at lunch or afterschool	32.3%	218
Through a print resource	18.8%	127
I don't want to learn more about mental health	3.4%	23
Sum	100%	674

9. Who would you want to learn about mental health from? Check all that apply.

While students identified wanting to learn about mental health in the classroom, only 51.5% identified wanting to learn about mental health from a teacher, while 82.8% wanted to learn about mental health from a school mental health professional. Given that students emphasized Informed Educators as a top priority, it may be that insufficient education for educators on mental health factors into the identified preference for education to come from a school mental health professional, or the students perception of the educators' mental health knowledge factors into their preference for a mental health professional.

Role	%	(n)
A school mental health professional (e.g., psychologist, social worker)	82.8%	535
A mental health professional in the community	68.7%	444
A psychiatrist	52.2%	337
A teacher	51.5%	333
A guidance teacher	47.1%	304
A student success or learning resource teacher	32.2%	208
A public health nurse	31.6%	204
A friend	31.0%	200
A family doctor	26.6%	172
A parent or family member	17.3%	112
A faith leader	10.7%	69
An Elder	8.8%	57
A cultural leader	8.4%	54
Sum	100%	646

Student Voices on Mental Health Survey

10. Are you involved in a mental health leadership initiative at school? Check all that apply.

The overwhelming majority of respondents (82.2%) indicated they are not currently involved in mental health leadership initiatives at their school, although 53% of students are aware of mental health activities in their school. Of those who were, most (9.7%) were involved in student mental health workshops and activities, followed by 7.6% who were involved in a school mental health club.

Involvement - At School	%	(n)
I am not currently involved in a mental health leadership initiative at my school	82.2%	528
Student mental health workshops and activities (such as Wellness Week)	9.7%	62
School mental health club	7.6%	49
School mental health awareness campaign	7.3%	47
School peer support program	5.6%	36
School mental health advisory committee	2.6%	17
Sum	100%	642

11. Are you involved in mental health leadership through organizations like The New Mentality, Jack.org, Kids Help Phone, or other mental health organizations?

Most respondents were not involved in community mental health organizations (91.8%), while a small portion (8.2%) were.

Involvement - External	%	(n)
Yes	8.2%	54
No	91.8%	604
Sum	100%	658

12. Do you want to get involved in mental health leadership?

While the majority of students identified not being involved in either school (82.2%) or community (91.8%) mental health initiatives, a significant portion of students (83.7%) indicated a possible interest in being involved in mental health leadership.

Interest Mental Health Leadership	%	(n)
Yes	35.8%	236
Maybe	47.9%	316
No	16.4%	108
Sum	100%	660

Student Voices on Mental Health Survey

13. What level of involvement in mental health leadership would interest you? Check all that apply.

The majority of students identified school-level involvement in mental health leadership as the most interesting to them (77.1%), followed by community-level involvement (58.8%), school board involvement (42.9%) and lastly, province-level involvement (36.8%).

Level of Mental Health Leadership	%	(n)
In my school	77.1%	417
In my community	58.8%	318
In my school board	42.9%	232
In my province	36.8%	199
Sum	100%	541

14. What types of initiatives do you think students are best positioned to help with? Check all that apply.

Respondents identified that they believe students are best positioned to help with assisting friends to get help when they need it (80.1%) and noticing when someone is experiencing a mental health problem (70.9%). Respondents were less likely to believe students were best positioned to help with promoting wellness and self-care (61.1%) and helping with stress management at school (53.6%).

Types of Support	%	(n)
Assisting friends to get help when they need it	80.1%	514
Noticing when someone is experiencing a mental health problem	70.9%	455
Reducing stigma	69.9%	449
Raising awareness about mental health and mental illness	67.0%	430
Promoting wellness and self-care	61.1%	392
Helping with stress management at school	53.6%	344
Sum	100%	642

#HearNowON Consultation Findings

Regional Forum Findings

#HearNowON conducted four regional forums, in London, Ottawa, Thunder Bay, and Toronto. The regional forums were intended to gather more in-depth and nuanced perspectives from students to build on the findings of the Student Voices on Mental Health online survey.

The regional forums were facilitated through the Art of Hosting Creative Facilitation approach, which emphasizes shared power, lived experience, group discussions, group-guided data creation and participatory engagement. The themes identified below were determined through an analysis conducted by W2A and the youth participants at The New Mentality's *Disable the Label* mental health forum.

Improving and Integrating Student Self-Care at School

Students consistently identified the need for more education around self-care, and for self-care to be more deeply embedded within existing school practices and curriculum. Students emphasized the need for self-care to be integrated into student routines and normalized.

Recommended practices for improving student self-care included:

- School-wide self-care days.
- Breathing and mindfulness exercises.
- Access to fidget toys.
- Education on what self-care means, and how it looks different for each person.

Building Student Knowledge on Mental Health

Students expressed their desire for more classroom education focused on mental health literacy and the ways that mental health impacts people differently. Students emphasized the importance of building healthy relationships and establishing clear boundaries to maintain their mental health.

Participants highlighted the importance of education starting at the youngest age possible, to ensure that all students grow up with an understanding of their mental health and how to look out for themselves and their peers.

Students identified that mental health literacy should focus on ensuring students know that they can and should seek help when they are feeling unwell, that it is okay to struggle with their mental health and that it is very common to do so, that labels don't define them, and that everyone has mental health.

Identifying Sources for Mental Health Learning

Students identified a diversity of preferred sources of mental health education, including parents, peers, teachers and mental health professionals as key sources of education. Participants identified parents and family members as important sources of education, but emphasized the need for more education to ensure parents and family members have accurate, evidence-based information. Students identified the same priority with teachers and school staff.

Students emphasized the need for mental health education to be embedded in the classroom, and to have diverse opportunities to learn about mental health – from workshops to peer discussions to online resources. Students also emphasized the need for mental health education to be engaging, fun and safe.

In particular, students identified the importance of mental health education coming from trusted individuals in their lives – be they peers, family or mental health professionals or educators.

Finally, students emphasized the need for an effective approach to mental health education to be expanded and embedded in school culture – to leverage a diverse array of educational opportunities to ensure all students have access to evidence-based mental health information.

Regional Forum Findings

Building Educator Capacity for Mental Health Education

Students consistently identified the importance of more education for educators and school staff on mental health. Students in particular highlighted the need for more education to reduce stigma and address misconceptions.

Student identified the following issues as important areas for further educator training:

- Foundations of mental health.
- Reducing stigma and addressing misconceptions.
- Understanding that students are trying their best to succeed within their circumstances.
- Building relationships based in strong communication, shared humanity and trust.
- Local mental health services and resources.
- Diversity of ways that mental health challenges are experienced and expressed.
- Understanding mental health beyond anxiety and depression, with an emphasis on more stigmatized mental illnesses such as borderline personality disorder and bipolar disorder.

Finding a Place for Student-Led Mental Health Education

Participants consistently identified and emphasized the central role that students and peers can play in promoting positive mental health. They emphasized the need for students to be more actively involved in mental health promotion, citing the relationships of trust that students share amongst themselves and their familiarity with the realities of youth. Students emphasized that student-led education is key but needs to be founded in current research, and supported by adult allies, to ensure students distribute accurate and evidence-based information.

Enhancing Student Capacity for Peer Support

Many participants raised peer support as a meaningful opportunity for student involvement. A diverse array of peer support roles were recommended – including formalized support relationships between older students and younger students to help new secondary school students acclimatize to secondary school environments and foster stronger relationships across grades. Participants emphasized the need for peer support training for students, given that many students already provide informal peer support to their friends and peers. In particular, training should touch on setting healthy boundaries, warning signs of poor mental health and suicide, community youth mental health services, and maintaining confidentiality (and when it is unsafe to keep a secret).

Regional Forum Findings

Putting Equity into Action for Student Mental Health

Students emphasized the need for an equity lens on student mental health. In particular, students emphasized the need for broader understanding of the connection between discrimination and mental health problems, stronger staff and student education on anti-discrimination, inclusion and anti-oppression.

Students identified the following as important issues and opportunities for an equity lens on student mental health.

- Increased efforts to build understanding and acknowledgement of the violence impacting marginalized students in schools.
- In-depth anti-oppression education for educators and support staff.
- Greater emphasis on diverse representation within school staff.
- Greater emphasis on diverse representation among students placed in leadership roles.
- Reduce tokenism and ensure a multiplicity of students and staff from equity-seeking groups are engaged in leadership opportunities.
- Support for identity-based student clubs, like Gay-Straight Alliances.
- Targeted outreach to marginalized students and community organizations that work with marginalized communities to build stronger relationships and develop trust.
- Ensure a culturally-informed approach to student mental health, that acknowledges the ways distinct communities and cultures engage with and experience mental health.
- Actively engage with parents and broader communities both to improve mental health literacy
- Shift away from a one-size-fits-all approach towards a model that acknowledges each student as unique in terms of their needs and experiences.
- Work towards a trauma-informed approach in schools that recognizes the realities of intergenerational trauma, and how trauma impacts students.

Appreciating the Unique Needs of Rural and Northern Communities

**“Walk a mile in my snowshoes in the north.
My needs are different ... don't forget about us.”**

Participants in the Thunder Bay Regional Forum identified the particular needs of students in rural and northern communities. Participants identified the specific challenges of rural and northern communities as a significant barrier to both meaningful student engagement in mental health, the promotion of positive mental health among students, and ensuring students have access to mental health services when and where needed. Participants emphasized the need for greater consultation with northern and rural students and targeted efforts to address the particular barriers of northern and rural communities.

Recommendations included:

- Specific consultations with rural and northern communities to identify the particular needs of students in rural and northern communities.
- More services offered in schools and community hubs to ensure all students can access necessary services.
- Improved transportation services to ensure students can access services and engage in mental health leadership opportunities.
- Consistent services offered in community specific to the needs of Indigenous communities.

Regional Forum Findings

Strengthening Pathways Between Community-Based Mental Health Services and Schools

Students identified the need for stronger pathways to care between community-based mental health services and schools. Students expressed that many educators and staff are unaware of the mental health services offered in their communities and thus do not know where to go to access supports. Students also identified issues related to wait times, cost, accessibility and hours of operation of community-based services.

Students emphasized the need for community-based mental health agencies to have a visible presence in schools as an opportunity for agencies to share information about their services and build trust with students. Students also emphasized the difficulty of having to repeat their stories when shifting from school services to community-based mental health services.

Enhancing School-Based Student Leadership on Mental Health

Participants identified opportunities to enhance school-based student mental health leadership and student engagement in mental health promotion.

Opportunities for improving school-based student engagement include:

- Ensuring all schools have a student mental health club.
- Enhancing supports for student mental health clubs through training, partnerships with community organizations and funding for school mental health initiatives.
- Offering training and capacity building to students, in some cases through specific programs that have been developed and are offered by other organizations and peer support training.
- Identifying successful student-led initiatives and working to embed them deeper into school culture and spread successful ideas to neighboring schools.
- Create in-school mechanisms to ensure students have strong relationships with school leadership and ongoing opportunities to provide input to school leadership on improving student engagement and student mental health.
- Provide diverse engagement opportunities to bring in students with different interests and needs.

Regional Forum Findings

Enhancing School-Board Wide Student Leadership on Mental Health

Participants identified the need for stronger communication and enhanced collaboration across school boards with student groups engaged in mental health leadership. Students identified a lack of knowledge about school board efforts to improve student mental health, and a lack of inter-school collaboration or school board wide engagement opportunities.

Recommendations to improve school-board wide student leadership on mental health include:

- Creation of school-board mental health councils with strong student representation.
- Hosting ongoing school board forums for student mental health leaders to share, learn and enhance collaboration.
- Create virtual and traditional mechanisms for students to share insights and learn from their successes across schools within the same school board.
- Provide opportunities for schools to organize initiatives and events together.

Enhancing Community-Based Student Leadership on Mental Health

Acknowledging the expertise of community organizations in youth engagement, and in particular, the strong relationships that identity-based community organizations hold with the communities they serve, improving community-based student leadership in mental health was identified consistently by students.

Opportunities for improving community-based student leadership on mental health include:

- Bringing community organizations into schools to ensure students are aware of community mental health leadership opportunities.
- Work alongside community organizations to co-host events in schools and community venues.
- Reach out to organizations outside of the mental health sector, and particularly organizations working with underrepresented communities.
- Ensure stronger integration across schools and community organizations, with the goal of a one-stop-shop approach to accessing services.

Regional Forum Findings

Enhancing Provincial Student Leadership on Mental Health

Leveraging the wisdom and experience of students across the province to share their successes and work through challenges, learn from one another, and collaborate, was identified as a missed opportunity by many students.

Opportunities to enhance provincial student leadership on mental health include:

- Provincial forums and conferences for student mental health leaders to come together, share, learn and collaborate.
- Online forum for student mental health leaders to enhance collaboration and learning.
- Partner with provincial community organizations to bring in broader expertise and ensure youth leaders involved outside of school have opportunities to connect, learn and share alongside school mental health leaders.
- Support the broader implementation of mental health week to ensure school boards and schools across Ontario participate.

Building on Successful Student Initiatives

Students identified diverse programs and engagement initiatives that they deemed to be successful in their schools, school boards, communities and across the province. They recommended building on successful initiatives to bring innovative programs and initiatives into more schools.

Key opportunities to build on successful student initiatives include:

- Strengthen and expand existing initiatives focused on improving student resilience, confidence and self-care into more schools.
- Profiling successful initiatives and disseminating information about these initiatives to more schools.
- Ensuring successful initiatives have access to sustainable funding.
- Introducing more youth forums such as #HearNowON, or the Mental Health Commission of Canada Headstrong Youth Mental Health Forum.
- Share best practices for meaningful youth and student engagement.
- Support schools to create wellness rooms open to students in need of a space to de-stress, recuperate and manage their mental health.

Regional Forum Findings

Reducing Barriers for Meaningful Student Engagement

Students identified significant barriers preventing students from taking on leadership opportunities in school mental health. Intentionally identifying and mitigating existing barriers was emphasized as a key mechanism to build on student engagement.

Barriers included:

- Lack of access to bus systems or other transportation mechanisms
- Lack of diverse representation of youth in leadership roles.
- Power imbalances between students and educators.
- Fear of judgement and shame.
- Poor mental health as a barrier to engagement.
- Lack of ongoing support offered for students with poor mental health seeking to get involved in mental health leadership.

Optimizing Facilitators to Meaningful Student Engagement

Acknowledging that there are significant barriers to meaningful student engagement, students emphasized the need to ensure there are significant facilitators to encourage and enable students to get involved in student mental health.

Recommended catalysts to meaningful student engagement included:

- Offering honorarium to ensure students meaningfully compensated for their time, insights and expertise.
- Offer volunteer hours for students engage in mental health leadership opportunities.
- Ensure food and beverages are available at gatherings and events as much as possible.
- Build relationships with identity-based students clubs and community organizations.
- Build trust and ensure clarity of communication with students engaged in mental health leadership to improve sustainability.

OVERALL RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1) STUDENTS WANT TO LEARN MORE ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH, AS PART OF THEIR REGULAR SCHOOL DAY**
- 2) STUDENTS WANT THEIR TEACHERS TO LEARN MORE ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH SO THEY CAN BE A STRONG RESOURCE IN THIS AREA**
- 3) STUDENTS WANT BETTER AND CLEARER ACCESS TO SUPPORTS AND SERVICES THROUGH SCHOOL**
- 4) STUDENTS WANT US TO HONOUR DIVERSITY AND PRIORITIZE INCLUSION AND BELONGING**
- 5) STUDENTS WANT TO BE BETTER INFORMED ABOUT, AND ENGAGED IN, MENTAL HEALTH PROMOTION AND STIGMA REDUCTION INITIATIVES**

DETAILED RECOMMENDATIONS

1. STUDENTS WANT TO LEARN MORE ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH, AS PART OF THE REGULAR SCHOOL DAY

- 1.1 Develop mental health curriculum from the earliest years of provincially-funded education (K-12) through to graduation.
- 1.2 Explore mechanisms to improve existing mental health education opportunities to emphasize ways of coping with stress and transitions, strategies for staying hopeful in tough times, and building self-care.
- 1.3 Help students to recognize signs of mental health problems and how and where to seek help for oneself or a friend.
- 1.4 Create a tip sheet for students that offers realistic and relevant ideas, and permission, for prioritizing their own mental health and self-care.

2. STUDENTS WANT THEIR TEACHERS TO LEARN MORE ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH SO THEY CAN BE A STRONG RESOURCE IN THIS AREA

- 2.1 Enhance and improve existing training for educators on role-specific mental health awareness and literacy.
- 2.2 Provide opportunities for teachers to gain a more in-depth education on how best to support students with mental health concerns in the classroom.
- 2.3 Work with school boards to ensure all educators and school staff have access to up-to-date resources lists of locally available mental health services as part of the school circle of support process.
- 2.4 Create evidence-based resources, such as tip sheets for educators focused on introducing self-care into the classroom. Ensure educators are trained and competent in using these with students.

Recommendations

3. STUDENTS WANT BETTER AND CLEARER ACCESS TO SUPPORTS AND SERVICES THROUGH SCHOOL

- 3.1 Identify opportunities for stronger collaboration between community-based mental health agencies and school boards, highlighting the need for early identification and intervention within schools, and enhanced access to low barrier, student-friendly service offerings when more intensive intervention is needed.
- 3.2 Strengthen students' circle of support so that students who receive the services they need when they need them, and are adequately supported to, from and through school and community interventions.
- 3.3 Ensure that students understand how to activate their local circle of support.
- 3.4 Explore opportunities to enhance the availability of introductory peer support training for students focused on healthy relationships, boundaries and self-care.

4. STUDENTS WANT US TO HONOUR DIVERSITY AND PRIORITIZE INCLUSION AND BELONGING

- 4.1 Identify opportunities to strengthen and support identity-based student leadership opportunities through existing initiatives such as clubs and events.
- 4.2 Strengthen education and student engagement initiatives for students and educators on anti-oppression, inclusion and safer spaces. Create a toolkit and similar resources to support educators.
- 4.3 Continuously consult with northern and rural students to identify unique needs and barriers for meaningful student engagement and student mental health leadership.
- 4.4 Focus funding on schools in northern, rural and remote communities to address particular barriers to student engagement and mental health learning/support and explore opportunities to build on local strengths and Indigenous mental wellness approaches.
- 4.5 Identify opportunities to improve diverse representation within school staff and students supporting student-led mental health initiatives.

5. STUDENTS WANT TO BE BETTER INFORMED ABOUT, AND ENGAGED IN, MENTAL HEALTH PROMOTION AND STIGMA REDUCTION INITIATIVES

IN OUR SCHOOLS

- 5.1 Create and improve mechanisms for student mental health leaders to engage with and provide input to school and school board mental health leadership teams.
- 5.2 Identify opportunities to broaden the scope of student mental health leadership beyond mental health clubs through collaboration with sports, arts and other student clubs and initiatives.
- 5.3 Work with school boards to increase prevalence of mental health clubs and increase funding for student-led mental health initiatives, including honoraria.
- 5.4 Provide training and resources to educators and school staff supporting student mental health clubs to enhance meaningful student engagement, with an emphasis on clear communication, sharing power and building relationships.
- 5.5 Create a tip sheet for educators to support the identification and mitigation of barriers, and the intentional enhancement of facilitators to meaningful student engagement.
- 5.6 Provide all schools with a toolkit on creating and sustaining a student mental health club.

Recommendations

IN OUR SCHOOL BOARDS AND BEYOND

- 5.7 Explore opportunities for increased collaboration between community-based youth engagement groups and student mental health initiatives.
- 5.8 Create a virtual platform for student mental health leaders to learn and collaborate with fellow student mental health leaders across Ontario.
- 5.9 Invest in student mental health leadership forums at the school board, community and provincial levels to facilitate education, capacity-building and collaboration.
- 5.10 Explore opportunities for a provincial program to build student capacity to lead mental health education initiatives and enhance existing student-led initiatives through targeted supports and capacity building programs.
- 5.11 Explore a process to identify successful student initiatives, increase their sustainability and support the sharing of such initiatives across school and school boards.

Summary and Conclusion

The #HearNowON engagement initiative is the first wide-scale consultation ever conducted with Ontario secondary students on the topic of mental health. Through an on-line survey and regional forums, information was collected about student knowledge needs, learning preferences, engagement and leadership ideas and overall recommendations. Students not only participated in these opportunities for input, but also helped to shape, lead, and interpret the data collection. Findings from this engagement initiative will be shared with the School Mental Health Ontario student reference group, who will help in further prioritizing amongst these recommendations, with a view to informing the 2019-2020 student leadership action plan, and the wider Ontario School Mental Health Strategy.

The high-level findings, listed again below, are validating and inspiring in many ways. First, students have prioritized activities that are already underway within School Mental Health Ontario, like systematic learning and training for educators related to their role in supporting student mental health at school. This helps to underscore that key strategic directions for school mental health in Ontario are on track from student's perspective. Secondly, the findings confirm our hunch that students want greater opportunity for voice and leadership in this area. During regional forums, participants offered incredibly insightful perspectives on this topic, and provided a wide range of possible contributions that students could make in this area. The ideas generated provide an excellent starting place for a provincial student mental health leadership plan. Finally, there were unanticipated learnings that were perhaps most inspiring of all. For example, students used the survey to overwhelmingly call for more mental health education in school. They were very specific about what and how they want to learn about this topic. In addition, in the regional forums, students were extremely thoughtful about issues of equity and inclusion and through these conversations urged that strong priority be given to addressing discrimination, stigma and oppression, and working towards belonging for all at school.

There is much to be learned from this generation of students, and we are wise to listen and engage them in enhancing mental health for all at school. Nothing will move this work forward more quickly than responding to the clear and urgent direction students have provided through #HearNowON. And we intend to do just that.

Summary and Conclusion

- 1. Students want to learn more about mental health, as part of the regular school day**
- 2. Students want their teachers to learn more about mental health so they can be a strong resource in this area**
- 3. Students want better and clearer access to supports and services through school**
- 4. Students want us to honour diversity and prioritize inclusion and belonging**
- 5. Students want to be better informed about, and engaged in, mental health promotion and stigma reduction initiatives**

Acknowledgements and Gratitude

School Mental Health Ontario and Wisdom2Action would like to express our sincere gratitude to the students across Ontario who participated in the #HearNowON Student Engagement Initiative. We are honoured by your contributions, and for your leadership in informing and guiding our work. Your perspectives, experiences and expertise have been of tremendous value to us and our partners. We hope to do justice to your voices as we work to put these recommendations into action to improve school mental health in Ontario.

We would also like to thank the numerous partners, including the Ontario Student Trustees Association (OSTA-AECO) and The New Mentality in particular, as well as all of the schools, school boards, community-based mental health agencies and other organizations that helped inform this initiative, and helped us reach many students across Ontario. This initiative would not have been possible without their support, as well as the support of the Elders, Knowledge Keepers and clinicians across Ontario whose wisdom and expertise were integral to this initiative.

This initiative has been of immense value to us as an opportunity to connect with young people and students across Ontario and learn from their wisdom. This initiative has reinforced many of our current directions – such as our focus on equity and informed educators – but also introduced new areas of focus for our consideration – such as student mental health leadership, and student mental health knowledge needs.

As the Student Reference Group at School Mental Health Ontario plans for the future, the knowledge shared by young people in the #HearNowON initiative will help to focus our priorities.

This initiative is just the beginning – and one of many – as we strive to improve student leadership and engagement in school mental health. Moving forward, we will seek to do justice to your voices and perspectives and put this report into action as we work together with students and Ontario school boards to promote student mental health.

We still have a lot to do to improve student mental health, and students need to be engaged every step of the way.



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