

# Structures and Processes for Scalable and Sustainable Mental Health Promoting Practices in Schools and School Boards



“Coherence is a shared depth of understanding about the purpose and nature of the work in the minds and actions individually and especially collectively.”

- Michael Fullan

## Overview of Foundations

There are many evidence-informed initiatives, resources, services, and programs that can assist in promoting good mental health in schools. Selecting and introducing these approaches requires careful consideration, but this is only part of the necessary work involved in successfully supporting mental health in schools.

For resources, services, and programs to truly reach every student, and to yield positive outcomes over time, schools and school boards must have the necessary infrastructure, the **Foundation**, for scalable and sustainable mental health practice. This resource provides a summary of key Foundations that are common to boards and schools that have managed to introduce, scale and sustain mental health programming effectively. They are drawn from implementation science research, and a decade of SMH-ON implementation coaching practice in Ontario schools. The Foundations are relevant for system leaders, as directors of education and superintendents of education create the conditions at the board level that facilitate uptake and widespread use of high-yield mentally healthy practices. The same Foundations are equally pertinent for school leaders who establish the climate and setting upon which identity-affirming evidence-informed practices can thrive. School leaders and educators are uniquely positioned to inspire purpose, hope, belonging, and meaning, through teaching and learning and daily interactions with students.

1. **Leadership commitment**
2. **Vision and strategy**
3. **Infrastructure**
4. **Protocols and processes**
5. **Evidence and monitoring**
6. **Engagement and collaboration**
7. **Internal and external communication**



As an integral part of this work, system leadership matters in establishing foundations for consistency and equitable mental health practices and services. When system leaders attend to these seven foundations and supporting elements, the conditions for coherence and focused direction are in place for uptake of high-quality practices in support of student mental health and well-being.

## Foundations for effective school mental health practices

### 1. Leadership commitment

Leadership commitment is demonstrated when system and school leaders are active in modelling, communicating and supporting decisions and activities that provide a mentally healthy experience for every student. When system and school leaders show that they are committed to a focus on mental health and well-being – by what they say, and by what they do and prioritize - board and school staff echo this commitment and feel valued for their work in this area.

System and school leaders establish the conditions for quality, consistency and sustainability in school mental health by, for example, ensuring adequate school mental health professional staffing for this important area of work, visibly prioritizing well-being within the board plan and school plans, and supporting learning and training for all school staff so that they are knowledgeable and prepared to support student mental health in their role. Leadership commitment is a key factor that provides alignment with the core work of schools and a sustainable focus on mental health and well-being.

#### As system leaders we:

- Collaborate as a team to establish the conditions for effective school mental health and well-being practices across and within schools.
- Identify and take action to address disparities and disproportionalities in mental health outcomes for students who are Black, Indigenous, and marginalized.
- Bring coherence to department plans and work with families of schools by aligning with the Board's Mental Health and Addictions Strategy and action plan.
- Intentionally and explicitly engage in discussions and actions to move the mental health strategy forward.
- Have regular focused conversations to support the work taking place within departments and/or schools to align the board's mental health strategy and action plan.
- Engage in a process to bring the discussion from departments and/or schools to the system leadership team to support the systematic implementation and monitoring of the mental health plan as it aligns to the board strategic plan.



## 2. Vision and strategy

A clear and focused vision, that is created collaboratively and is aligned with board priorities and initiatives, is a key foundation for school mental health. The vision guides the Mental Health and Addictions Strategy and annual action plan, and mental health service delivery model within the board. System strategic goals align with the [provincial school mental health strategy](#) while also focusing on local mental health priorities. School leaders echo the provincial and board mental health strategy within their local plans and initiatives, prioritizing resources and supports that meet local needs and draw on community strengths. System and school leaders have a critical role in establishing and reinforcing the board vision for mental health and well-being and reflecting this within the wider strategy and daily work of the board or school.

### As system leaders we:

- Commit to an aspirational and realistic vision that is student-centred, contextualized and foundational to guide decision making around culturally responsive and identity-affirming mentally healthy schools.
- Ensure that the Board's Mental Health and Addictions Strategy and action plan are aligned with the board's strategic plan.
- Engage student, staff, and parent/caregiver and community voices in meaningful and authentic ways to honour and affirm lived experiences, diverse identities and cultural assets in supporting the development and review of the Mental Health and Addictions Strategy and annual plan.
- Review the annual mental health action plan on a regular basis, and actively participate in renewing the Mental Health and Addictions Strategy every three years, to ensure it remains relevant.

## 3. Infrastructure

Bringing effective mental health and well-being to life in schools requires a dedicated infrastructure and support from system and school leaders. In Ontario, this infrastructure has been supported by funding from the Ministry of Education, which allows for dedicated leadership roles within each school district. Every board has a mental health leader who is a regulated mental health professional that coordinates the development and implementation of the board mental health strategy and action plan. The superintendent with responsibility for mental health oversees and monitors strategy implementation and works with the mental health leader to facilitate the work of the board Mental Health Leadership Team. This team is comprised of the superintendent, the mental health leader, and clinical managers (psychology and social work services) who are active leaders within the Board Mental Health Leadership Team. The team meets regularly to select initiatives that support the mental health strategy and action plan, review related data, make key decisions, and monitor and communicate progress. A mental health advisory committee comprised of key stakeholders within the district and community is connected to the district leadership through the superintendent.



All system and school leaders understand their role in the infrastructure, and the shared responsibility to support mental health promotion, prevention and early intervention across the system.

**As system leaders we:**

- Engage with and understand the role of the Mental Health Leadership Team which is comprised of a superintendent with responsibility for mental health, a mental health leader, and in some districts, a manager of psychology and/or social work.
- Are aware of the role and shared responsibility for all system leaders to support promotion, prevention and early intervention across the system.
- Recognize that a mental health advisory team can provide perspective from board, school and community stakeholders, including students, parents/caregivers, to the Mental Health Leadership Team on the strategic plan, the action plan and other activities of the team.
- Contribute to the composition and representation of the mental health advisory team as appropriate (e.g., a member from the curriculum department, safe schools' representation, equity lead, etc.).

#### 4. Protocols and processes

Protocols provide documented guidance and system clarity in supporting student mental health promotion, prevention, and early intervention. Clearly described implementation processes to support the dissemination, implementation, use of, and monitoring of all mental health resources and practices are required for all protocols, resources, and services. In Ontario, every board is expected to have a number of clearly articulated protocols related to mental health practice. Clear protocols for collaboration with community mental health and hospital partners are needed to ensure role clarity and seamless service pathways within the local context. For example, a protocol for suicide prevention/life promotion, intervention and postvention that is communicated and understood by all school staff is an essential part of board and school practice. Processes for decision-support related to mental health initiatives ensure that safe and responsible choices are made for mental health awareness activities, such as lived experience speakers, mental health surveys, and peer support strategies. System and school leaders, with support of the Mental Health Leadership Team, share responsibility for the development, communication and support for all protocols and processes.

Bringing effective mental health and well-being practices to life in schools requires a team effort.

**As system leaders we:**

- Recognize and support the Mental Health Leadership Team's work to foster meaningful liaison with district-approved community partners to enhance access to services and supports for students.
- Share leadership alongside the Mental Health Leadership Team for effective implementation.
- Integrate implementation of the action plan and strategy into existing professional learning (e.g., NTIP, leadership, equity, etc.) and cross-departmental work (Safe Schools, curriculum, special education etc.)



- Understand the importance of standard processes and protocols and promote their use, including:
  - » clear pathways for students who are vulnerable to, from, and through care that are understood by staff, students, families and community partners
  - » up-to-date protocols for suicide prevention / life promotion, risk management and postvention
  - » decision support tools that provide guidance for the selection of mental health awareness, literacy, promotion and prevention programming in schools

## 5. Evidence and monitoring

Sound implementation and outcome indicators, and measurement tools that inform needs and monitor uptake and effectiveness, are essential for making decisions in supporting student mental health. Continuous quality improvement cycles with progress and process monitoring help in understanding the success of implementation, so that outcomes are achieved. Examining data, supports analysis of effectiveness and illuminates disproportionate impact for students who are Black, Indigenous, and marginalized. System and school leaders, with support of the Mental Health Leadership Team and equity partners, share a critical role in monitoring, evaluating, and responding to indicators that demonstrate progress in school mental health and well-being.

### As system leaders we:

- Identify the known conditions for implementation success:
  - » know and be clear about the desired outcomes or change
  - » identify how you will know if the desired change is happening
  - » articulate the strategies that will support getting to the desired outcome and share those across departments
  - » identify those with effective and influential links to support with activating the required professional learning
  - » communicate often and clearly about the commitment, strategies professional learning opportunities and desired outcomes
  - » monitor progress toward the desired change
- Engage in dialogue around findings of data related to mental health and well-being, including the Mental Health and Addictions Scan to assist with decision-making about priorities and goals in student mental health and well-being.
- Review and respond to progress indicators in the annual action plan so we know if we are on track to reach the goals of the Mental Health and Addictions Strategy.
- Use evidence-informed measurement strategies on a cyclical basis to monitor outcomes outlined in our strategy and action plan.
- Bring coherence to this iterative work through on-going communication, monitoring and celebration of success.



## 6. Engagement and collaboration

Promoting student mental health within a district, and within a school, truly takes a village. Early engagement of those who are most involved as initiatives are introduced, and in an ongoing way, helps to build shared ownership and leads to more impactful outcomes. Collaboration with students, parents/ caregivers, and community partners in the selection and shaping of an initiative is key to ensure that practises are identity-affirming, relevant, and culturally responsive. Students have much to offer and want to be involved in mental health promotion and stigma reduction initiatives (see [#HearNowON report](#)). Board and school staff also need to be included when mental health initiatives are being considered, enabling input from those most influential in implementation, which is essential for effective uptake and sustainable practice. Partnership with community mental health and health partners is also a critical point of collaboration. As noted in the [Right Time, Right Care](#) vision, to truly enact an effective system of care for child and youth mental health, we must work together to ensure clear roles and seamless service pathways across our sectors. Collaborative partnerships and influence from all stakeholders contribute to promoting mentally healthy learning environments.

System and school leaders share responsibility for engaging in community and school system partnerships that promote differentiated and identity-affirming student mental health and well-being, with explicit and caring attention to identity-affirming, anti-racist and anti-oppressive practices to build an equitable and inclusive system for every student.

### As system leaders we:

- Support the system with clear and consistent messaging.
- Foster respectful and trusting relationships with community members, families/caregivers, staff and students as foundational to addressing mental health inequities.
- Understand, communicate and model meaningful collaboration to establish relationships that foster shared responsibility for mentally healthy schools and classrooms.
- Recognize current and historical oppression, systemic racism and disparities and their impact on the mental health of students.
- Encourage schools and departments to activate student agency, participation and voice to the ongoing mental health work.
- Recognize the varied roles that support mentally healthy schools, learning environments/classrooms and services, and the connections to, through and from care.
- Understand the wider community mental health system and can articulate the role of the school board and board professionals within the system of care.



## 7. Internal and External Communication

Communication needs to be dynamic, multidirectional and accessible for all internal and external stakeholders. Shared language and understanding are foundational for effective communication within and across schools, and with home and community. Effective communication includes active listening, sharing information to find common ground, and to influence planning and decisions for mental health promotion, prevention and early intervention; engaging and informing stakeholders and partners of new initiatives; sharing resources for mental health promotion, prevention and early intervention. System and school leaders, with support of the Mental Health Leadership Team, share responsibility for all aspects of communication within their spheres of influence.

### As system leaders we:

- Establish a shared language about the board mental health strategy and action plan that is communicated clearly within and across schools and with home and community.
- Understand, communicate and activate shared responsibility for effective school mental health and well-being. Every leader actively plays a role in the mental health strategy and plan.
- Have regular focused conversations to support the work taking place within departments and/or schools to align the board's mental health strategy and action plan.
- Communicate to bring awareness and coherence through the implementation process while monitoring and celebrating successes.
- Bring coherence to this iterative work through ongoing communication, monitoring and celebration of success.

