

AMPLIFY

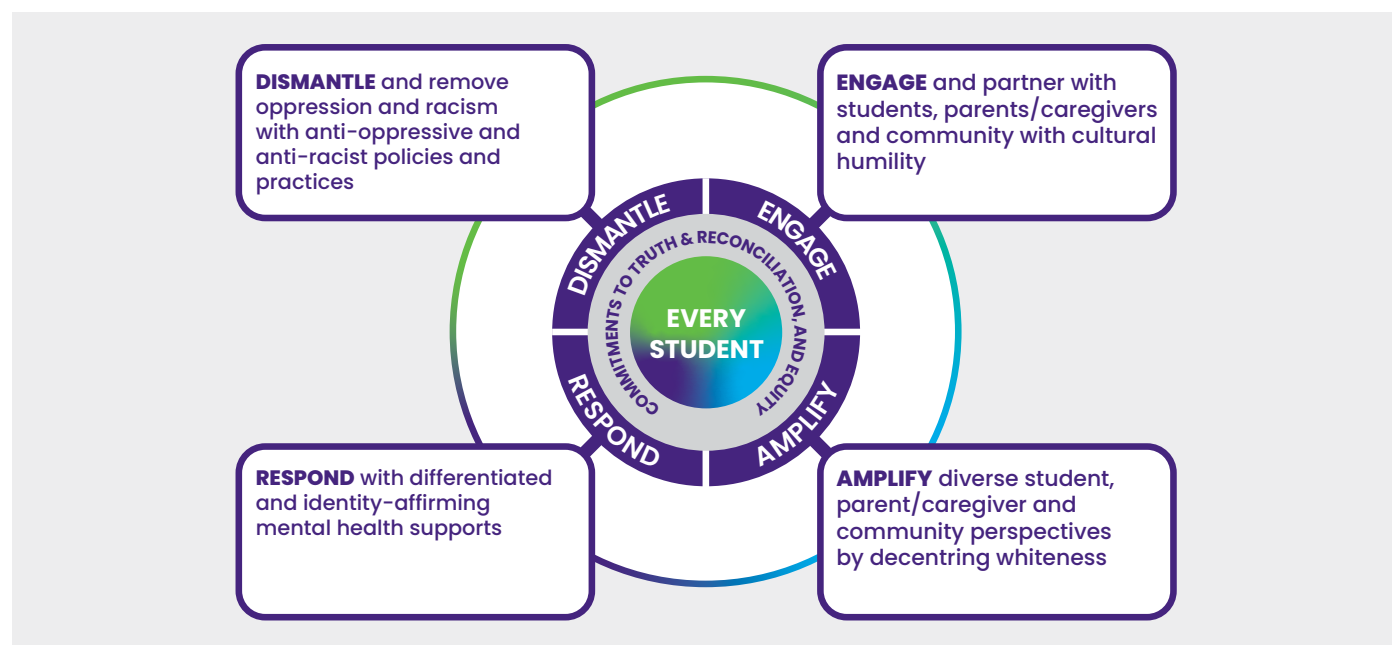
Amplification of marginalized perspectives and experiences in school mental health promotion to enhance wellness for every student

A strong sense of belonging is a key contributor to good mental health.

School staff are in an excellent position to promote student mental health and well-being each day. This includes creating a welcoming and supportive learning environment where every student feels known and valued at school. A student's sense of belonging at school is a key contributor to good mental health.

Belonging can be nurtured in many ways. For example, when students see their identities, experiences and perspectives meaningfully represented in classroom and school programming, feelings of connection can be enhanced. Similarly, creating space to listen and learn from and with students, their families and community can help students to feel comfortable and free to show up at school as their whole selves. When voices and perspectives not typically represented are **amplified**, we promote a culture of belonging and wellness in schools.

The [Identity-Affirming School Mental Health \(IA-SMH\) Frame](#) helps to guide thoughtful reflection and planning of mental health resources and supports. It helps school boards meet the unique needs of every student. The IA-SMH Frame outlines four domains for action - Engage, Dismantle, Amplify, and Respond. This resource emphasizes ways to **Amplify**.



What does it mean to AMPLIFY?

Amplifying voices and perspectives in mental health promotion is necessary to address the existence of policies, procedures and practices that centre the thinking, experiences and perspectives of some communities over others. This can occur on a systemic level (through research and resource creation) or on a personal level (through individual biases and resulting practices). Amplification is an effort to address these imbalances and the resulting harm they cause. When we create conditions that allow for the amplification of perspectives and experiences of those most marginalized, in particular Black and Indigenous peoples, we broaden thinking and frameworks. The result is differentiated and identity-affirming approaches to mental health promotion that become more meaningful and relevant for every student.

This resource aligns with the [Identity-Affirming School Mental Health Frame](#) and provides some practical guidance and strategies to identify and address barriers towards the creation of spaces that amplify marginalized perspectives and experiences in the everyday work that all school staff do to promote student mental health and well-being.

“By amplifying, we refer to practices that seek to turn up the volume of voices often sidelined or silenced.”

(Higgs et al 2021)

Understanding the practices that have led to devaluing perspectives and experiences of racialized and marginalized students and families

To best serve Ontario students, it is important to actively prioritize and centre the voices, experiences, strengths and needs of students in all aspects of mental health promotion at school. While this may seem like an obvious and straightforward approach, this has not been the way that mental health supports and services have typically been offered, in Canada or elsewhere. There exists a gap in integrating culturally responsive and identity-affirming approaches into school mental health practice so that every student's mental health and well-being is supported in ways that work for them.

This gap has its roots in intentional practices— namely **colonization** (“[the act of political, physical and intellectual occupation of space by the \(often forceful\) displacement of Indigenous populations. Colonialism can operate within political, sociological, cultural values and systems of a place even after occupation by colonizers has ended](#)” (University of Toronto, OISE)) and the **transatlantic slave trade** (“[the horrific trafficking of millions of women, men and children, mostly from West Africa to the Americas](#)” (un.org)), all of which were predicated on artificial and unjust beliefs that white European perspectives were superior to others. This viewpoint has permeated society, including educational and health institutions, for centuries, resulting in the oppression and **systemic racism** (discrimination and prejudice against people based on their race or ethnicity) that persists today.

As a result, white European cultural norms have held power and widespread influence and have come to impose standards in systems and practices. Specifically, they dictate what is ‘acceptable’, ‘appropriate’, ‘normal’, or ‘successful’. When white European ways of knowing and being are centred and remain unquestioned as the default, the perspectives of other communities are kept at the margins (this is what the term marginalized refers to). In schools, this may be evident in policies and procedures. Within mental health promotion specifically, this default to white European cultural norms can limit the breadth of ideas and practices schools make available to students.



In addition to race, the perspectives and experiences of students and families from other marginalized identities are often overlooked. For instance, students and families with disabilities, learning differences, chronic medical conditions and/or experiencing poverty often face systemic obstacles that limit their opportunities to share their views and preferences. Similarly, newcomers to Canada, especially those who are not fluent in English or French, may encounter institutional complexities and linguistic barriers that hinder their ability to navigate systems or meaningfully contribute to wellness promotion in schools. Those who identify as 2S/LGBTQIA+ routinely face systemic **homophobia** and **transphobia** (prejudice against individuals because of their sexual orientation or gender expression) which marginalize their needs and strengths, often leading to misinterpretation. These forms of oppression can create environments where young people and families at the margins may understandably be reluctant to engage with schools, mental health initiatives, or supports. This reluctance often stems from a history of exclusion, mistrust of institutions, or the absence of representation in approaches, activities, materials, and messaging intended to support mental health and well-being. Addressing these systemic inequities is essential to fostering inclusive and supportive environments for every student.

Further, when students have the opportunity to learn about and engage with perspectives and experiences that differ from their own in meaningful, respectful ways, this fosters conditions for belonging and inclusion. It also helps every student to consider and appreciate a range of strategies and supports for promoting mental health and wellness, rooted in authentic and respectful understanding of multiple ways of knowing and being.

A focus on Black and Indigenous perspectives

Placing an intentional focus on amplifying the perspectives and experiences of Black and Indigenous students acknowledges the history and legacies of oppression, racism and marginalization that continue to operate in society, and in schools. The **disproportionalities** (out of proportion rates of mental health disorders) and disparities (unequal access to culturally relevant supports and services) experienced by Black and Indigenous children and youth is evidenced by escalating rates of suicidal ideation and behaviour (Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction and the Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2022; Kumar & Tjepkema, 2019). Young people who face the intersection of marginalized identities may be particularly at risk, as evidenced by the dramatic increase in suicidal ideation and attempts among Two-Spirit/sexual minority First Nations youth (Polonijo et al., 2022). These trends are directly linked to systemic oppression and societal inequities (Chandler & Lalonde, 2008; Okoye, & Saewyc, 2021).

At the same time, there are many protective factors within communities and families that support mental health and wellness. In the face of the prolonged injustices experienced, Black and Indigenous communities have held on to ways of knowing and being that facilitate thriving, wise practices, and excellence. Centring the perspectives of Black and Indigenous communities in school mental health practice acknowledges and validates the historic and current importance of these deeply rooted practices and traditions in ways that are evidence-based and deeply rooted in many communities through generations of observation, practice, and implementation. They are often as, if not more, rigorous than today's standards. Identity-affirming mental health recognizes that this knowledge is powerful, important, and relevant to the experience of many students. Because these perspectives have not been traditionally centred in school mental health practice, space must be explicitly created to amplify these protective and supportive practices.



Amplifying Black and Indigenous perspectives and experiences in mental health promotion does not diminish other perspectives and experiences. Rather, it seeks to address systemic inequities and injustices that impact all students by examining policies, procedures, and practices through the lens of those most disproportionately impacted. This fosters school environments and cultures where a diversity of perspectives is valued and respected, enhancing the overall responsiveness and effectiveness of mental health promotion efforts. Broadening perspectives, ideas, and ways of knowing and being is beneficial for the learning of all students. Amplifying Black and Indigenous perspectives and experiences enriches the dialogue and promotes a more holistic approach to mental health promotion.

As we work to amplify experiences and perspectives, it is important to understand that race is a social construct, and that Black, Indigenous, and other racialized communities are made up of a multitude of identities, experiences, histories, strengths, and cultures, which create a collective wealth of knowledge and viewpoints. In the same way, students are not defined by one singular aspect of their identity but rather the complex ways in which the aspects of their identity (e.g., race, gender, spirituality) intersect and interact with one another.

Recognizing this diversity, and each student's unique strengths and needs, contributes to excellence in school mental health practice.

Ways to amplify marginalized perspectives and experiences in school mental health promotion to enhance wellness for every student

Mental health promotion is the everyday work that school staff do within and beyond the curriculum to:

- ▶ welcome, include and understand students,
- ▶ build on knowledge of mental health,
- ▶ promote mentally healthy habits,
- ▶ partner with families, students, and other staff to create a supportive environment for learning.

The following provides practical guidance and strategies to identify and address barriers towards the creation of spaces that amplify marginalized perspectives and experiences in the everyday work that all school staff do to promote student mental health and well-being.

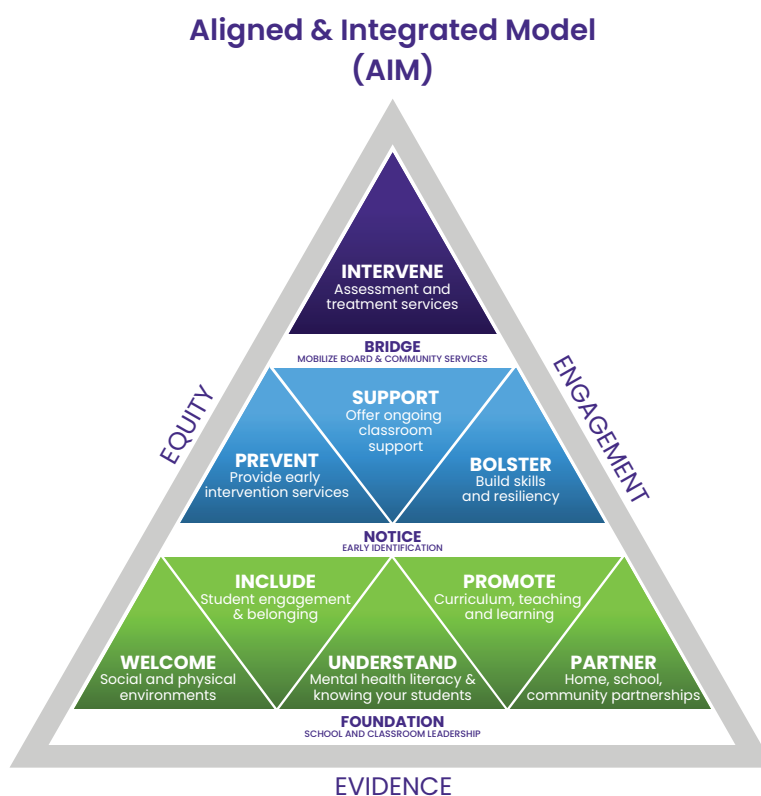


How does mental health promotion fit with other mental health services in schools?

Schools in Ontario use a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS), called the [Aligned and Integrated Model](#), to establish priorities, clarify roles, and ensure service coordination across levels of mental health programming.

This continuum of services includes:

- ▶ mental health promotion (tier 1),
- ▶ early identification (tier 1 and 2),
- ▶ prevention and early intervention (tier 2),
- ▶ service pathways to clinical support for more intensive mental health needs (tier 3).



Who is responsible for mental health promotion?

Everyone. Promoting mental health in schools is a shared responsibility. Every member of the school community contributes to the creation of supportive and nurturing school environments and cultures conducive to student mental health and well-being.

What do Ontario students say?

The intersection of equity and mental health continues to be one of the highest priorities identified by students across Ontario. During #HearNowON 2021 student forums, students noted that identity is closely linked with mental health and that a deeper focus on equity is needed. They highlighted the importance of strength-based, identity-affirming mental health learning and the need for accessible and culturally relevant promotion and prevention programming at school. More specifically, students highlighted the need for more supports and services for students who identify as Black, Indigenous, 2S/LGBTQIA+, immigrants, and newcomers with refugee backgrounds.

Further, students stated that a “one size fits all” approach to mental health is not feasible or helpful. Instead, they suggested that identity-affirming, student-centred programming can help address barriers and create more equitable and accessible support and learning.

Students want mental health programming that recognizes and values equity-based approaches, knowing that culture is a source of strength for many students. They highlighted the need for more mental health strategies, tools, and group spaces that centre on students impacted by inequities.

We have heard directly from students about the “importance of strength-based, identity-affirming mental health learning and the need for culturally-responsive promotion and prevention at school”.

(HearNowON 2021)



Considerations and approaches for centring identity-affirming perspectives in mental health promotion

Every staff member has an impact on the school environment and the students you collectively serve. Below are some actions you can take to amplify marginalized student experiences and perspectives to enhance mental health and wellness promotion in the school each day. While there is a particular focus below on centring Black and Indigenous perspectives and experiences, for the reasons explored above, these are ‘good for all’ considerations that would benefit other racialized and marginalized groups, and the entire school community.

What are some good starting places?

Foundational to this work is intentionally engaging in self-reflective practices to build capacity and knowledge. Start by asking:

- ▶ What personal learning and unlearning do I need to do to understand why it is important to amplify marginalized student perspectives in our school?
- ▶ What personal learning and unlearning do I need to do to understand why and how certain identities are marginalized, and what this means for explicitly seeking their engagement and voices in mental health initiatives?
- ▶ What personal learning and unlearning do I need to do to understand why centring Black and Indigenous student perspectives and experiences is particularly important?
- ▶ How can I create space to listen and respond to marginalized student and family voices within my practice?
- ▶ What skills and supports would help me to amplify marginalized student perspectives in mental health and wellness promotion activities in our school?
- ▶ What professional development opportunities have I taken advantage of to date?
- ▶ What more do I need to enhance my knowledge and skills (e.g., self-directed learning, connection with community)?

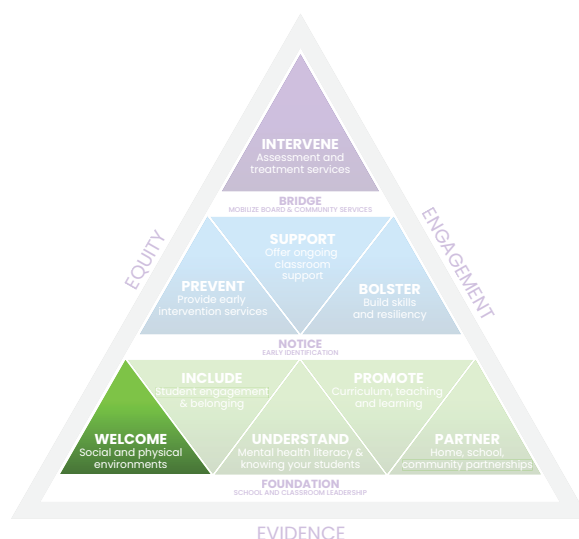
Change does not end with [self-reflection](#). Learning can be supported through ongoing collective learning and discussions.

What are some approaches for amplifying marginalized perspectives and experiences in mental health promotion practice in schools?

Across tier one within the Multi-Tiered System of Support (AIM triangle), there are several ways to amplify perspectives and experiences. You may wish to consider the following approaches, adapting them for your role:



SOCIAL AND PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENTS



The learning environment sets the tone for centring the identities and experiences of every student. All staff have a critical role in creating welcoming environments where every student feels cared for and valued, and experiences a sense of belonging. The ways that students, parents/caregivers and community members are greeted, the images they see, and the language used all contribute to a sense of belonging and wellness.

In my role, how can I:

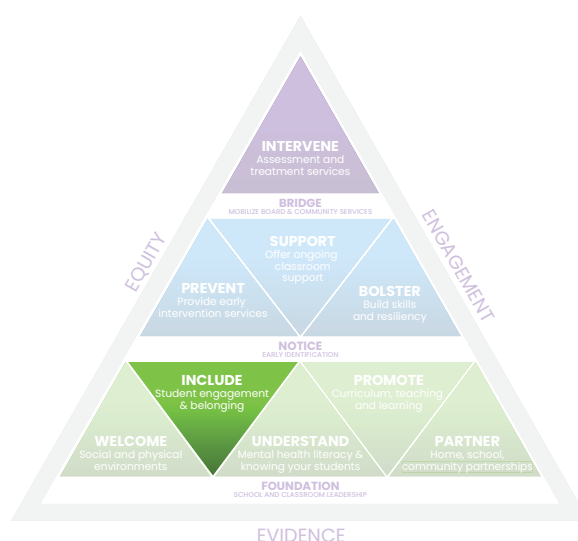
- ▶ be intentional and reflective in my actions so that students feel welcome and a strong sense of belonging (e.g., greet each student warmly, learn and pronounce their names correctly)
- ▶ strive to better understand students' lived realities to cultivate learning spaces that value and affirm every student (e.g., learn about each student's interests, cultures, and strengths; understand what changes they would like to see in the learning environment; and explicitly invite, feature, and amplify Black, Indigenous, racialized and marginalized student voices)
- ▶ notice and address processes and systems that don't work for every student in our learning environment, such as processes, practices and traditions that centre white European cultural norms and exclude or devalue particular student identities (e.g., take action to influence decisions on practices like dress codes, communication and the acknowledgement of cultural or religious observances to help to ensure that every student feels a sense of belonging within the school community)
- ▶ reflect on my identities and positionality within the school and how they might influence interactions with students and the work that I do

Read on:

- [Supporting mentally healthy conversations about anti-Black racism with students](#)
- [Mentally healthy classroom reflection tool](#)



STUDENT ENGAGEMENT & BELONGING



A sense of belonging comes from being engaged, celebrated, acknowledged, and supported. Inclusive learning environments invite students to bring their whole selves into the space and send affirming messages that their identities will be welcomed, celebrated, and supported. Addressing the systemic barriers that prevent marginalized groups from accessing opportunities and supports facilitates student agency. Identity-affirming mental health promotion within such environments inspires engagement that is authentic.

Let's take a moment to reflect on what inclusion means as it relates to identity-affirming practices. 'Inclusion' may suggest merely the representation of people with marginalized identities to existing systems. However, without the necessary shift in policy and practice to reflect and centre their perspectives and experiences, efforts related to 'inclusion' have the potential to foster tokenism (limited and/or symbolic efforts to give the impression of equitable processes), pressures to assimilate (adopt the behaviours, values, or norms of a dominant group, to fit in or gain access to opportunities) and a lack of real and effective systemic change.

Cultivating learning environments that foster identity-affirming mental health promotion ensures that inclusion is the result of efforts rooted in structural and systemic efforts for change.

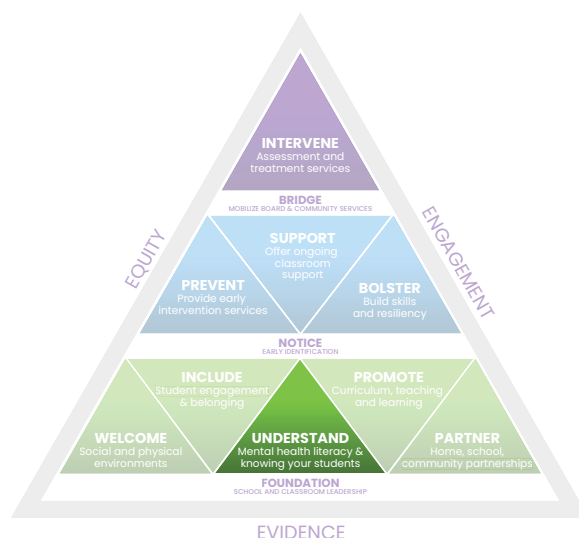
In my role, how can I:

- ▶ authentically involve students in the creation of mentally healthy school environments (e.g., work together with students and families to establish shared expectations that prioritize input from marginalized perspectives)
- ▶ meaningfully involve students in mental health-promoting activities (e.g., consider students' interests and experiences at all stages, including planning and delivery of wellness-promoting activities)
- ▶ hold space for perspectives that introduce marginalized ways of knowing and being when building and implementing mental health promotion programming (e.g., seek to engage students in a variety of ways, over time, to encourage as many voices as possible, allowing for a range of leadership styles)
- ▶ challenge my own biases and assumptions and stay open to other ways of knowing and being (e.g., consider how my own background and cultural perspectives may limit my approach to mental health and wellness promotion)



Read on:

- [Listen, Believe & Act: Support for students who have been disproportionately impacted in schools](#)
- [Tools for student groups: developing accountable and healthy group agreements](#)
- [Student Engagement Toolkit](#)

MENTAL HEALTH LITERACY AND KNOWING EACH STUDENT

In a mentally healthy school, all staff have knowledge of mental health related to their roles and responsibilities. For some, this requires a general **awareness** about mental health, mental illness, and available sources of support. Others who work more closely with students need a greater level of mental health **literacy**, so that they can notice possible signs of mental health concerns early and can support students in seeking help (e.g., educators, student support staff). Those who provide therapeutic mental health services require specific **expertise** level training (e.g., school social workers, psychological services staff). School staff also play a role in building mental health awareness and literacy for students and their families.

To best serve every student, this mental health learning must be contextualized to include, value and amplify cultural perspectives and strengths. When we strive to build reciprocal relationships to know and understand students, we cultivate healthy foundations for learning and growth.

In my role, how can I:

- ▶ learn more about mental health and my role in supporting student mental health literacy (e.g., consider participating in self-directed learning such as an [MH LIT: Mental Health in Action](#) course associated with my role or attending workshops offered by the board mental health leadership team) ([SMH-ON workshops and webinars](#))
- ▶ increase my understanding of how racism and systems of oppression operate in school systems and can negatively impact student mental health (e.g., learn about the history of education in Canada including the impact of colonialism, the Transatlantic Slave Trade, and residential schools, alongside a review of available data such as climate surveys, mental health statistics, etc.)

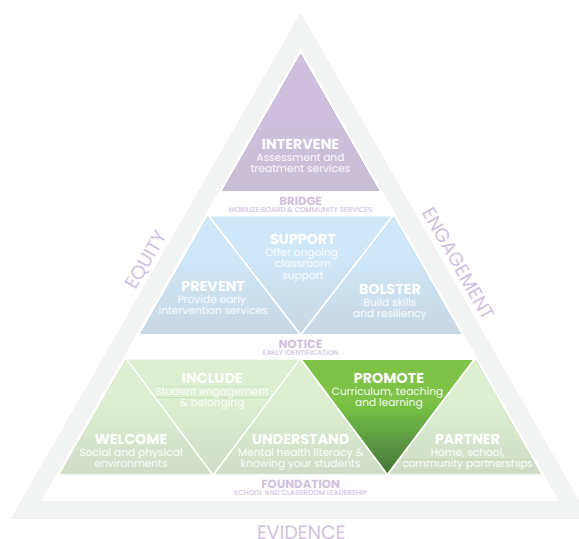


- ▶ recognize that students may be experiencing systemic and deeply personal issues that impact their mental health and classroom achievement, and respond appropriately
- ▶ build trusting relationships with racialized and marginalized students (e.g., co-create space to listen to interests, events, and relationships that are important to each student and demonstrate curiosity to learn more)?

Read on:

- [Actions of a Caring Adult in Student Engagement Activities Related to Mental Health](#)
- [Understanding Anti-Black Racism to Support Mental Health and Well-Being of Black and Racialized Students](#)

CURRICULUM, TEACHING & LEARNING



School staff are in an excellent position to promote student mental health and well-being each day. Mental health and wellness promotion occurs as part of the instructional day, in curriculum expectations (e.g., within the Health and Physical Education curriculum, Career Studies, etc.) and part of everyday interactions (e.g., supportive transitions like a moment of deep breathing or muscle relaxation before a test). It can also take place outside of the classroom through school-wide initiatives or small group meetings. Mental health promotion activities benefit from student engagement and leadership, along with caring adult allies.

There are many School Mental Health Ontario resources that can be used to promote student mental health each day. These materials have been co-created with educators, school mental health professionals, and students themselves. However, it is still necessary to exercise professional judgment to best differentiate and meet the needs of the students you serve. There is no 'one size fits all' approach to supporting mental health; students, family and community will have additional ideas to contribute that will best reflect their experiences and perspectives. When adapting these resources for the students you support, highlight the strength, joy, and power of Black, Indigenous, racialized and marginalized communities.



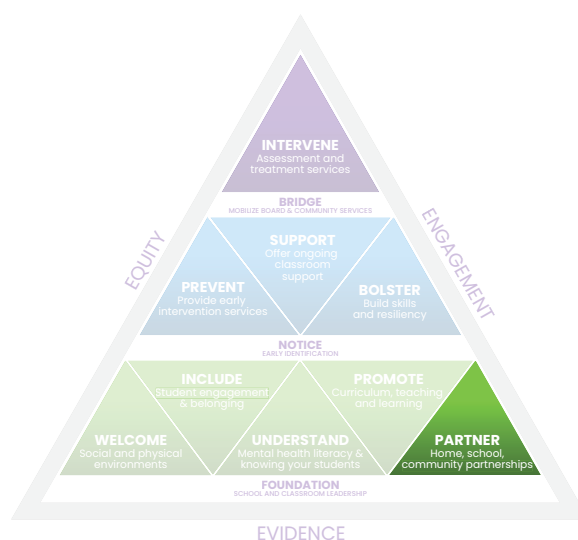
In my role, how can I:

- ▶ provide opportunities that nourish a sense of pride and identity for Black and Indigenous students (e.g., provide positive and affirming examples of Black and Indigenous peoples and communities in the learning environment)
- ▶ uplift, acknowledge and support individual experiences among Black, Indigenous, racialized and marginalized students (e.g., provide space for different perspectives from students, avoid stereotypes by acknowledging that experiences are not universal and that there are many differences within and across cultures and communities)
- ▶ adapt mental health literacy resources to honour that there are many ways of understanding mental health and wellness (e.g., build knowledge through consultation with community partners where possible and bring forward materials through a lens of cultural humility, provide space for students to draw on their own ideas and supports)
- ▶ amplify practices that students suggest help them to sustain good mental health and wellness (e.g. invite students to share practices they already do routinely to support their mental health and well-being, intentionally engage with and build relationships with community partners to understand a variety of perspectives)

Read on:

- [Cultural Humility Self-Reflection Tool for School Staff](#)
- [Self-Love Practices for Black Youth Social Media Shareables](#)

HOME, SCHOOL & COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS



Students, their families, and the community all have valuable perspectives and ideas for supporting mental health and well-being. Before introducing mental health learning, campaigns, or initiatives, it's important to engage with these stakeholders to ensure their voices are heard and their insights are included. Students can often provide keen insights into what will, and what will not, resonate. They can provide important



context, sensitivities, and examples that can make a strong difference in how the activities will be received. Similarly, it is important to recognize that mental health is still stigmatized in many parts of society, in subtle and overt ways. Consistent and ongoing communication regarding mental health promotion and programming at the school level can help to address and mitigate the impact of stigma and allows for an open dialogue through which family or community members can offer suggestions or ideas for enhancing activities to amplify practices that will be most meaningful for young people. In the best scenario, there are authentic mechanisms for family or community to share their expertise, experience and knowledge. Including marginalized perspectives with direct support of family and community members is a rich and authentic way to build connection between home and school. Partnering with parents, caregivers, families, other school staff and community/cultural/faith groups creates opportunities for shared dialogue and learning to support each student's wellness at home, at school and in the community.

In my role, how can I:

- ▶ build meaningful relationships with students so they feel comfortable sharing ideas related to mental health promotion and literacy (e.g., ensure regular communication and active listening)
- ▶ build supportive and meaningful relationships with parents/caregivers that acknowledge their central role in supporting students' mental health and well-being (e.g., take time to build rapport by connecting on good news items)
- ▶ signal to parents/caregivers that I value their expertise and knowledge (e.g., explore their child's strengths and interests, as well as supports that help them feel their best)
- ▶ optimize the expertise, experience, and strength of community partners in supporting student wellness (e.g., learn about existing partnerships with the school/board and consider additional connections that students and parents/caregivers might recommend for new and relevant learning in the classroom)

Read on:

- [Student Engagement Toolkit](#)
- [Talking with Parents and Families about Mental Health](#)

As caring adults, we seek to create spaces that promote the mental health and well-being of students in schools. The amplification of marginalized perspectives ensures that every student feels seen, heard, and represented in those efforts. For more information on identity-affirming approaches to mental health promotion, visit [Identity-Affirming School Mental Health Frame](#).

