Actions of a Caring Adult in Student Engagement Initiatives Related to Mental Health

Being a caring adult for students involved with mental health or other initiatives at school requires the active practice of consistent learning, unlearning, evaluating, and reflecting so that you can authentically create space for student perspectives and leadership.

This resource provides a set of actions and reflective exercises you can do to be a caring adult for the students you serve. In addition, because mental health initiatives carry special responsibilities, this resource includes some guidance in this area and links to other resources designed to enhance your own mental health literacy.

A **caring adult** is an adult who listens to, supports, advocates for, and works with young people. In the context of student engagement, they acknowledge their role as a partner with students, and actively work to:

- create supportive and collaborative spaces;
- put aside biases and assumptions; and
- ensure that the voices and perspectives of students are heard, validated, considered, and amplified.

Caring adults may not always be explicitly named as allies by the students, but their actions and attitudes show their commitment to meaningful student engagement and the growth and success of students. An **adult ally** is a caring adult who has been identified as a supportive person by the students themselves.

Reflect on your position and share power

Consider the power dynamic between staff and students in your setting and think about ways to minimize imbalances in your role as a caring adult. Shifting to working alongside students instead of leading them first requires you to reflect on your position and acknowledge the power differential that exists. Some questions to consider are:

- How does your role as a caring adult differ from some of your other roles as a school staff member? What are the similarities and differences?

- What actions or procedures reinforce the power dynamic between staff and students? What actions can you take to minimize this power dynamic in your role as a caring adult?

- Explore and examine your own identity, culture, beliefs, values, and attitudes. How do these elements of your social location influence and interact with that of the students you are working alongside?

- What strengths, talents, skills, and abilities do you and the students bring to the group? How do they complement each other? What can you learn from students?

- How can you be an agent of change in your school or board to promote the importance of student engagement in programming and planning? What role do you play in spreading this knowledge and your experiences with your peers?

Consider your own experiences as a young person. Reflect on an adult who had a positive impact on your life; what did they say or do to make a difference? Leaning into those experiences can help you relate to students and provide you with some common ground.

Practice cultural humility

It is important to understand how to support students with diverse intersectional identities that may differ from your own. Educating yourself as you work to become, and be, a caring adult is fundamental. It is important to take the initiative to seek out information that will help you better work alongside diverse student populations.

- Cultural sensitivity and anti-oppression training opportunities are helpful first steps to build equitable spaces, bring awareness to implicit bias, and to centre the perspectives of every student.

- Professionals, community leaders, key stakeholders, students, and parents/caregivers can be helpful resources to consult about specific identities, cultural norms, and traditional practices and protocols (e.g., considerations for teamwork).

- Educate yourself – it's not the responsibility of students from marginalized communities to do this for you; burdening them with this responsibility can unintentionally cause harm. There are other great resources to support your learning (e.g., courses, books, podcasts, reputable websites, etc.).

- Not all mistakes are bad; acknowledge them and use your learning as an opportunity to grow. This can help strengthen your relationship with the students that you work alongside.

Be mindful of who you consult with for your learning and when. It can require emotional labour from marginalized communities to educate others. Ask for consent and check in to see if the person has the time and resources to engage.

School Mental Health Ontario

Santé mentale en milieu scolaire Ontario

To support you in reflecting on your own personal values, beliefs and biases, check out:

- **Cultural Humility Self-Reflection Tool for School Staff**
- **Cultural Humility Self-Reflection Tool for School Mental Health Professionals**

Create supportive and inclusive spaces

Consider the physical and social environment when bringing students together to ensure that these spaces are welcoming, student-friendly, culturally appropriate, and supportive. The physical environment includes elements such as the room or the virtual platform you are using.

Consider the following when designing your physical environment:

- Is the space accessible to people with disabilities (in person and virtually)?
- Does the space represent the atmosphere that you are trying to create?
- Is the space conducive to group conversations (e.g., easy for everyone to be heard and seen)?
- Are students able to customize the space to make it unique to them (e.g., lay out the room, decorate the walls or virtual background)?
- For virtual spaces, consider:
  - How can students without adequate internet access participate?
  - Is the video conference software available to all students?
  - Will students require orientation to the virtual platform?
  - Can closed captioning or other needed accommodations be provided?

The **social environment** includes the behaviours and interactions among students. Strive to create spaces that are inclusive and affirming of students' identities. Each person brings unique perspectives, experiences, and ideas to the group; each of these contributions is valuable. Creating an inclusive social environment should be done in collaboration with students by developing group agreements and expectations.

School Mental Health Ontario
Santé mentale en milieu scolaire Ontario

Consider the following when designing your social environment:

- Does the environment you have created feel psychologically safe for each student (e.g., students feel comfortable being their whole selves and speaking honestly and thoughtfully without fear of judgement)?

- Have students weigh in on what a supportive space means for them. Beyond terms like "being respectful" and "listening," prompt students to provide examples of the behaviours and interactions that make them feel supported.

- Develop a set of group agreements, led by students, that outlines the expectations of each member, including adults (e.g., core values, team contract).

- Help students with ways to maintain their own well-being while mental health topics are being discussed.

> To help guide discussions around supportive group agreements, see **Tools for Student Groups: Developing Accountable and Healthy Group Agreements** and **How to Foster and Maintain Supportive Spaces for Black Youth**. The strategies listed in **Special Considerations for School-Based Mental Health Promotion and Literacy Initiatives** may also help to support your conversation.

Openly share information

Develop materials and openly share information that gives students the knowledge necessary to participate fully. Recognize that transparency is not a static state but a dynamic process that involves on-going efforts throughout the initiative. As a caring adult, you may need to differentiate the information provided to meet the needs of all students within the group.

- Openly share information with students (such as students', adults', and stakeholders' roles in the initiative; students' degree of engagement; and influence over outcomes).

- Use student-friendly language. Consider the developmental level of your students to ensure that they can understand all materials and information provided to them. Consider students requiring accommodations or modifications to participate fully.

- Provide young people with an orientation and offer basic mental health literacy so that all participants are using everyday language and students have good background knowledge on the topic.

- Help students critically appraise information about mental health that they access online or through other means. Point students towards evidence-informed, supportive information about mental health and mental illnesses.

> It is important to be transparent about limitations that exist in your school and board when planning mental health initiatives alongside students. When students provide suggestions that are not within these parameters, offer feedback about their ideas and suggest accommodations wherever necessary. This will show students that their contributions were heard and considered, and insight as to why they were not used.

Consider your Role in a Student's Mental Health Circle of Support

Underpinning all of this, is the responsibility you carry as a caring adult to support students' mental health. Consider the following as a caring adult in a student's circle of support:

- Have a good level of mental health literacy; see **School Mental Health Ontario's website** and the various pages for adults supporting student mental health.

- Consider taking the **free MH LIT online course** and receive a certificate for your portfolio. You can access MH LIT on the **Virtual Learning Environment**.

- Review the **Student MH LIT modules** for students so that you can weave this learning into mental health initiatives in your school.

- Know the pathways for mental health and cultural/faith-based support within your school, board, and community to connect a student to support if needed. See **Circle of Support Desk Reference**.

- Remind students to use their own **Circle of Support Pocket Guide** so they have resources handy.

- Know about relevant **helplines and crisis support resources**, in case a student discloses an urgent mental health concern. The **Prepare; Prevent; Respond** resource for parents/caregivers also includes helpful information about suicide prevention in a quick guide format.

> **Consider your role and the boundaries of this role (including when to seek help).** Set professional boundaries and expectations with students to prevent slipping into a role outside of your discipline. If you have concerns about a student's mental health, follow your school/board process for accessing professional mental health consultation and support.

This resource is part of our Student Engagement Toolkit.