

Virtual Student Mental Health Leadership Committee



Students as leaders

Students as partners

Students' grades	5-8
School board	Superior North Catholic District School Board
Staff contact	Tracy Bryson, tbryson@snedsb.on.ca
Initiative period	September 2022 onwards
Caring adults involved	Mental Health Leader, positive behaviour support workers, child and youth workers, educators, and education assistants

OVERVIEW

The Superior North Catholic District School Board started a board-wide virtual student mental health and well-being leadership committee to ensure they are working towards capturing student voices and supporting students in leading the way within the schools and system. They wanted to provide students with a platform to connect and find ways to promote mental health and well-being through the lens of students. The overall goal is not just to make sure student voice is captured but that students are provided with leadership opportunities that will have a direct and positive impact on them, their families, and the school communities. The committee was open all year for students to join and had student representation from five out of eight schools with approximately 30 students participating. With each meeting, the group grew.

The board Mental Health Leader alongside the board's positive behaviour support workers hosted the first four virtual meetings. During these meetings, staff were able to model to the students what an agenda, discussion, and planning next steps could look like, and focused on rapport building, team bonding, creating group agreements, and setting goals. At the fourth meeting, students were asked to take the lead at meetings moving forward. For the following meeting, a group of students planned an agenda and chaired and guided discussions. A new group of students will volunteer to lead the next meeting and so on, allowing this initiative to be sustained by students.



Meetings are held virtually, with each school group gathering at their school and joining the larger board-level group via Zoom. Being virtual made it difficult to see and hear everyone but having a staff member at each site helped with this. The staff members also engaged in pre- and post-meeting discussions with the students to ensure they were confident in sharing their voices and ideas. Staff members also supported the work between meetings, helping students tailor and carry out initiatives to their school community. Food, positive praise, and acknowledgement through various means (face-to-face compliments, radio shoutouts, or social media posts acknowledging students' efforts and initiatives) also helped with creating a sense of belonging and membership within the committee.

One of the projects this group took on was regarding bullying prevention week. Each school group took their own approach to the week, with one group creating posters about bullying and another leading an assembly presentation. One of the students expressed that they want to support and lead programming for younger students, so that will be explored in the upcoming school year.

Throughout this committee, students were engaged as leaders and as partners. As the group was initiated by caring adults and carried out in partnership with students, students were engaged as partners. Students also initiated and carried out their own projects, demonstrating engagement as leaders.

STUDENT PERSPECTIVE

"I really enjoyed being with my friends during lunch and getting to think more about mental health. I also enjoyed getting to know new people from other schools but also spending time with other grades in my school." – Grade 8 student

"One of my challenges was people in my group were arguing but I asked them to stop and we worked together to come to an agreement that made everyone happy." – Grade 5 student

"The bullying posters was my favourite part about the group this year because we got to do our part in anti-bullying and the pizza was pretty cool too." – Grade 7 student

STAFF PERSPECTIVE

"It was fun to have students with a common goal of "spreading positivity" around their school come together. Some of these students wouldn't typically socialize with one another in the regular school environment, so to have the diversity of meeting new friends, and seeing different grades spend time together was a really positive experience." – Positive Behavior Support Worker

"The benefits of this committee far outweigh the challenges. That being said, we experienced a variety of barriers or challenges, such as distance between schools (requiring this to be a virtual committee), staff vacancies, and of course the natural difficulties that come along with starting something new. It has been incredibly rewarding to get to a place where our students can lead this important work in our schools. To ensure all students have a voice, pre- and post-subcommittee meetings are required in person at our respective school sites. This creates an extra layer of work for the team but allows for stronger connections and relationships to be established that promote a sense of safety and community amongst the group. We are committed to listen, model, and support the students in sharing their ideas and achieving the goals they bring to the table." – Mental Health Leader

"The Student Mental Health and Leadership Committee was a great opportunity to build relationships with some of our students who have great ideas but aren't typically the first to raise their hand or speak their mind in a larger group setting. Last year, I only had one student from the school I was representing join our committee, and that allotted time gave us the opportunity to communicate and build a relationship. That opportunity last year has made a difference in our relationship this year!" – Child and Youth Worker

