

# Youth Participatory Action Research Project



Students as consultants

Students as partners

Students' grades	9-12
School board	Simcoe Muskoka Catholic District School Board
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Initiative period	October 2021 to May 2022
Caring adults involved	Mental Health Leader (primary), system leaders and staff on the board's Mental Health Leadership Team, system leaders and staff on the Research Advisory Committee

## OVERVIEW

Using convenience and snowball sampling methods, secondary students across the Board were recruited to participate in a youth participatory action research project aimed at addressing student priorities related to student mental health and well-being. Recruitment methods included the sharing of a poster (digital and hard copy) over social media, through student senate, through guidance departments, and posted in the halls of secondary schools.

Students self-nominated through a Google form application which was linked through a QR code or hyperlink in the recruitment poster. Out of 52 students who applied, 15 were randomly selected to join the project. Student researchers and the Mental Health Leader met virtually on a weekly or bi-weekly basis depending on the stage of the initiative and the actions needed.

During phase 1 of the project, students analyzed [HearNowON](#) and Board data, such as the most recent climate survey results. Together, the student researcher group developed skills for understanding and conducting research. The group also explored youth mental health and student mental health by exploring foundational information about mental health (e.g., [School Mental Health Ontario lessons](#)) and local/provincial/national research on mental health-related topics that the student researchers identified as important. Staff facilitated and supported conversations with students regarding representation in research (who is the population), whose experiences were being reflected, and if the students felt the data reflected their own experiences or the experiences of their peers.



During phase 2, the student researcher group collaboratively decided on their focus for the year based on the discussions and reflections from phase 1. The research group determined the priority for the project would be to identify how classroom educators could support a mentally healthy learning environment in demanding classes. This was a student-led decision. Student researchers worked together with staff allies to obtain the required approvals from the Board's Research Advisory Committee. Staff supported students in identifying and planning their specific research question, method, recruitment plan, outcomes dissemination, and action plan. This plan culminated into the student researchers facilitating focus group conversations among secondary students across the board, analyzing that qualitative data, and presenting their findings to the mental health advisory committee. The student research group was also invited to present at a provincial conference and led professional development presentations for secondary educators. Students received volunteer hours for their work in the project. Due to the constraints associated with research within education, the student researchers held the role as partners in this project, although there were elements within the project that were student led. The students who participated in the focus group discussions facilitated by the student researchers are considered consultants.

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## STUDENT PERSPECTIVE

The project created a sense of community where youth from various backgrounds, perspectives, and schools came together to work on a common goal. It was flexible. Time management was challenging and the fact that the project maintained a laid-back approach was beneficial. It was beneficial that student researchers could engage in aspects of the project aligned with their interests and contribute in diverse ways. The project felt meaningful in that it was student-led and action-oriented. We developed a variety of skills that we can use in the future. Speaking directly with system leaders and decision-makers was impactful. This helped us feel heard and our recommendations valued.

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## STAFF PERSPECTIVE

Staff on the Board level committees felt that the direct communication between students and system leaders was important in terms of increasing the impact of the outcomes and recommendations from the student researchers. They recognized the importance of staff being open to hearing directly from students in this way. Staff also reflected on the representation of voice within this project and acknowledged the desire for more diverse representation while also acknowledging the constraints. Through this project, staff felt a shared responsibility to take ownership of the recommendations presented by students and action them. This resulted in the request and support for students to present the outcomes to secondary educators during a professional activity day as one step towards action.

