# Degrees of Student Engagement in School Mental Health Initiatives

Differing degrees of participation offer students different skills, commitment requirements, and influence over the outcomes. In #HearNowON 2021, students shared that leadership opportunities should be broadened to include and celebrate many different leadership styles. As such, diversity in opportunities for students to engage is crucial in a school and system. It enables students to contribute to the initiatives that excite them and best meet their interests and capacities.

Students may wish to get involved deeply in mental health or other initiatives at school, or they may want to participate more peripherally or less frequently because of other priorities in their lives. When we create room for flexible participation, more students can contribute.

Student engagement can take many forms, with different degrees of participation possible, depending on the initiative and its stage of implementation. Four broad ways of engaging students, to varying degrees, are described below (i.e., students as leaders, partners, contributors, or consultants).
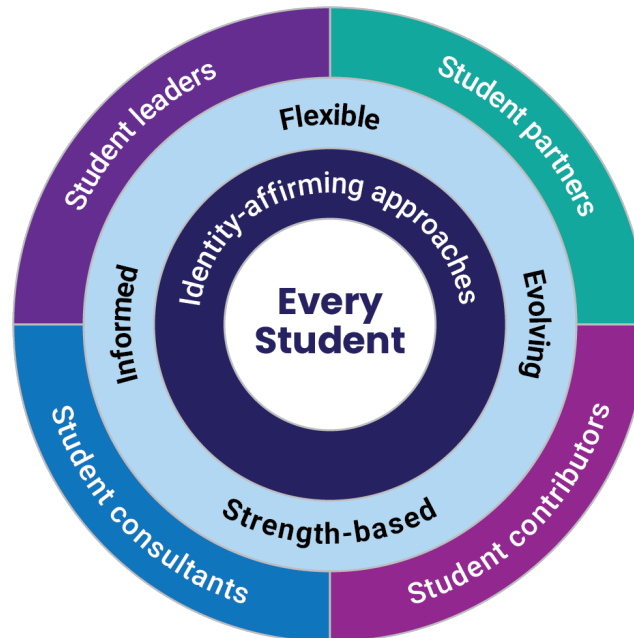
Students as leaders

- **Initiation**: Initiated by students.

- **Engagement**: Students are responsible for all phases of a project or program (e.g., planning, implementation, evaluation). Note: caring adults can be facilitators to support students in achieving their goals and set parameters within which students can work.

- **Control over outcome**: Students identify the issues of concern and control the process and outcome.

- **Caring adult role**: Caring adults assist students in carrying out all phases of a project or program and ensure student support and safety. Caring adults may also help students secure support from school administration before proceeding.

- **Examples**: Students lead a project on mental health stigma reduction.

Students as partners

- **Initiation**: Initiated by students, caring adults, or both.

- **Engagement**: Students are engaged in an active partnership and open dialogue throughout all stages (e.g., decision-making, planning, implementation, and evaluation).

- **Control over outcome**: Students influence, challenge, and engage with both the process and outcome.

- **Caring adult role**: Caring adults partner with students to carry out all phases of the project or program.

- **Examples**: Students partner with caring adults to carry out a project designed to help their peers manage stress related to tests and exams using the **Student MH LIT** module on this topic.

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Students as contributors

- **Initiation**: Initiated and managed by caring adults.
- **Engagement**: Students are invited to offer their ideas and perspectives at key points in the project (e.g., decision-making, planning, implementation, evaluation).
- **Control over outcome**: Students influence processes and outcomes without having direct control.
- **Caring adult role**: Caring adults carry out all phases of a project or program, facilitating student participation and voice in particular phases of the project or program.
- **Examples**: Students participate in a project working group designed to help welcome newcomers to the school community.

Students as consultants

- **Initiation**: Initiated and managed by caring adults.
- **Engagement**: Students are consulted for their ideas and perspectives in a specific or limited way.
- **Control over outcome**: Students influence outcomes without having direct control.
- **Caring adult role**: Caring adults carry out all phases of a project or program and include student voices in particular aspects of the project or program.
- **Examples**: Students complete surveys or participate in student forums or focus groups related to creating mentally healthy school environments for every student.

Model adapted from: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. (2019). **Meaningfully engaging with youth: Guidance and training for UN staff**.

This resource is part of our Student Engagement Toolkit (Winter 2025).