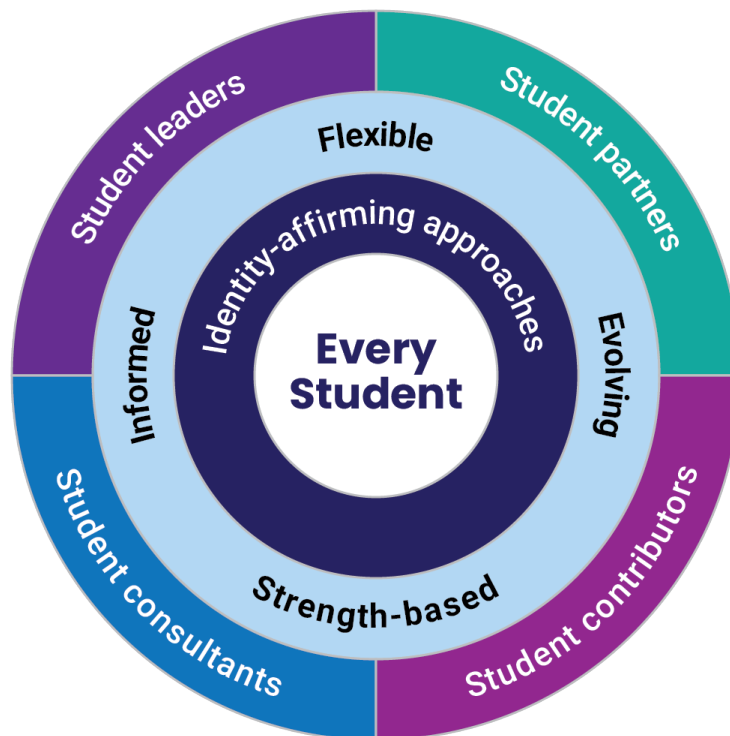




Foundations of Effective Student Engagement

The foundations of student engagement outlined below are the cornerstones for activities designed to foster and support meaningful and authentic participation, leadership, and agency amongst students. These foundations can help caring adults create and maintain environments and opportunities that lead to authentic student engagement and are especially important when considering activities related to mental health and wellness promotion at school.





Surrounding every student

Identity-affirming approaches are foundational to effective student engagement

Identity-affirming student engagement recognizes, validates, and respects students' intersecting identities, backgrounds, and experiences. It involves dismantling systemic barriers to engagement, adapting initiatives to best meet students' wants and needs, and creating an environment where students feel they can show up as their whole selves. This work is necessary to promote equity in student engagement opportunities and to support students' sense of belonging, purpose, and well-being. In the graphic above, identity-affirming approaches are shown to be wrapped around every student to provide a visual reminder that high-quality and effective student engagement begins with each unique student in mind, centering especially those who experience marginalization and/or oppression so that space is intentionally created for their voices to be heard.

This is particularly important for student engagement initiatives that promote mental health at school because understandings and ideas for supporting wellness can be enhanced when diverse perspectives and ways of knowing and being are included in the planning and delivery of initiatives. Students can bring ideas that support strengths found in culture, faith, and community to help ensure a breadth of offerings. When students see others like them involved in mental health leadership, they may be more open to getting involved personally, and taking time to nurture their mental health.

- Recognize the interconnected nature of students' identities and the presence of social barriers that often intersect and intertwine in their lives and may impact their sense of wellness.
- Understand that stigma related to mental health, such as cultural understandings of mental health, fear of judgement, or lack of trust, may prevent young people from stepping forward to get involved in wellness promoting activities at school.
- Note the systems of oppression that impact many students and how those impacts can be barriers to engagement at school. Work to disrupt and remove barriers to engagement.
- Understand that individual students cannot be representatives for a group of students, but they can bring strengths and ideas that may also resonate with others.
- Critically reflect on your practice, explore, and understand your identities and how who you are impacts the work you do and the relationships you have.

Reflect:

- What systemic or institutional forms of oppression or stigma might impact students, and how can you actively work to disrupt and remove these barriers to engagement?
- How can you better acknowledge and celebrate the strength and diversity of identities and experiences that students bring?
- How have you critically reflected on your own identities and how they might influence your interactions with students and the work that you do?





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](#)

To learn more about identity-affirming school mental health, check out:

- [Identity Affirming School Mental Health: a frame for reflection and action](#)

Underscoring every engagement initiative

Effective student engagement is:

Flexible

Flexibility is necessary to support students' agency over their participation in various engagement activities. The degree of engagement a student chooses, and any changes in their level of involvement, can depend on many factors, such as interests, experiences, time commitments, and the demands of everyday life.

- Provide a variety of opportunities that enable students to choose their level of involvement and responsibility.
- Offer engagement opportunities at different times of the day, week, or year to accommodate students' varying schedules and commitments.
- Encourage open and ongoing dialogue with students to understand their evolving wants and needs.
- Understand that some students who volunteer to help with wellness promotion and stigma reduction at school may themselves be struggling with a mental health problem or may live closely with someone who is. Encourage healthy boundaries and self-care so they can be at their best while participating at a level that is right for them.

Reflect:

- How well are you accommodating students' interests, experiences, and everyday commitments?
- How effectively are you providing various engagement opportunities across degrees of engagement?
- How are you supporting students to adjust their level of engagement as needed?

Strength-based

Strength-based student engagement recognizes that every student possesses unique strengths, skills, and abilities. These can be nurtured and applied to support students' skill development, self-confidence, and engagement.

- Recognize and respect that students are experts about themselves.





- Offer opportunities for students to showcase their strengths and abilities, develop new skills, and build their confidence.
- Normalize mistakes and offer students support as they exercise their strengths, skills, and abilities.
- Keep the focus on mental health and wellness promotion, rather than on topics that are beyond the scope of student knowledge and skills (e.g., avoid initiatives related to mental illnesses or suicide prevention, or those requiring students to take on a peer support / counseling role).

Reflect:

- How can you build in time and opportunities to learn about students' skills and things they want to practice? How can you leave space for students to try?
- What strengths, skills, and abilities do you and the students bring to the group? How do they complement each other? How can you learn from each other?
- What opportunities can you provide students to showcase their strengths, skills, and abilities?

Informed

Informed student engagement refers to selecting relevant activities and evaluating initiatives alongside students. Having initiatives that are informed by students and accountable and transparent to students helps to ensure that they are responsive, impactful, and meaningful.

- Recognize that students know what students need. Listen to what is important to them.
- Involve students in developing monitoring, evaluation, and feedback processes to support their skill development and sense of ownership.
- Evaluate outcomes to celebrate successes and identify areas for improvement to enhance the impact of student engagement initiatives.

Reflect:

- In what ways are you fostering student-driven initiatives and ideas? How comfortable are you with outcomes that might differ from your initial expectations?
- How are you supporting student ideas in ways that are supportive for all participants?
- How are you actively involving students in the development of your monitoring, evaluation, and feedback processes?

Evolving

Evolving in the context of student engagement refers to the continuous process of adapting and changing strategies, approaches, and initiatives. Being informed provides the necessary knowledge and insight, and evolving is the practice of translating that information into meaningful change. This process ensures that student engagement initiatives remain responsive and tailored to students, fostering more inclusive and impactful experiences.

- Recognize that the student audience and their wants, needs, ideas, and strengths continue to change and evolve.





- Lead with students' desires and give room for student-driven initiatives and ideas; these outcomes might not be exactly as you had imagined at the beginning and that's okay!

Reflect:

- How have the wants, needs, ideas, and strengths of your student audience changed since the inception of your engagement initiatives? How are you staying attuned to these changes?
- What realities or changes in the local or global context may be impacting student participation in student engagement initiatives?
- How are you growing the initiative as some students join the work and others move on?



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

