Fostering Supportive and Responsive Spaces for Student Engagement and Leadership

Building mentally healthy spaces through co-created agreements

In identity-affirming school environments, students should feel a sense of connectedness, which bolsters mental health and well-being. Connectedness is a powerful protective factor in mental health and is essential in creating mentally healthy schools.

Students have so much to contribute when it comes to activities that promote mental health at school. Student engagement and leadership help to create school environments that reduce mental health stigma and encourage a sense of wellness for all. Peers have a way of supporting one another in student-friendly ways and use language that can advance accurate information about mental health, promote strategies for maintaining wellness and reinforce the importance of timely help-seeking for mental health problems.

Uplifting student leadership requires strong adult connection and allyship. Whether it be part of a student-led mental health campaign, activity, affinity group, or wellness club, the adults who support student engagement have a significant role to play to help ensure that these student spaces are welcoming, inclusive and supportive.

One way to build connection to support engagement and leadership is for students and staff to create agreements together. These agreements set shared expectations and help to foster supportive, inclusive and affirming environments. Building agreements together with staff signals to students that their voices matter, and that they have shared agency and responsibility for creating a supportive space for every participant.

Co-creating group agreements

The intention of co-creating group agreements is to support student agency, advocacy and engagement. However, it is important to note and to explain to students that these group agreements do not operate independently from classroom or school expectations. Begin by having a conversation about non-negotiable expectations, why they're important in the space, and how they can be incorporated into the group agreements (e.g., confidentiality and/or privacy, bullying, harassment or discrimination).

Agreements are best served when the language is accessible, affirming and resonates with all involved.

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Before co-creating agreements, consider reviewing Actions of a Caring Adult to support your conversation with students.

CO-CREATING GROUP AGREEMENTS		
1	**Centre student voice and perspectives.**	Students have an important role in shaping and influencing spaces that feel supportive and identity-affirming. • Encourage students to weigh in on what a supportive space means for them. Beyond terms like "being respectful" and "listening," prompt students to provide examples of the actions and interactions that make them feel supported.
2	**Amplify perspectives of students that are marginalized due to systemic oppression.**	As caring adults, it is important to understand the impact that systems of oppression have on the way that institutions are perceived. Various forms of oppression have and continue to minimize and/or erase the ideas, ways of being and knowing and opinions of racialized and marginalized communities. Students want student mental health programming that recognizes and values equity-based approaches, knowing that culture is a source of strength for many students. They highlighted the need for more mental health strategies, tools and group spaces that centre on students impacted by inequities (HearNowON, 2021). Adult allies have an opportunity to centre the voices of these students, to signal that the mental health leadership space needs and prioritizes their perspectives and values the contributions they make to creating a supportive space for everyone. • Ensure that any suggested aspects of the agreement do not further reinforce bias and/or forms of oppression (e.g., use inclusive language).
3	**Consider alternative ways to collect student voices and ideas that honour different learning styles and ways to participate.**	• Ask students how they would like to share their voices and ideas (e.g., polls, problem solving box, etc.).
4	**Ensure the agreements are written and communicated in accessible, student-friendly language.**	• Agreements can include language, symbols or images brought forth by students to increase student ownership and understanding. • Post the agreements in a location and format that ensures they are easily accessible to students and staff.
5	**Establish a shared understanding of what will occur when the agreements are not upheld (see more below).**	This may be an opportunity to explain that the pathway to accountability will vary by incident, and in some cases may require a response determined by board/school protocols. • Discuss and co-create, if possible, concrete examples of shared language to uphold the agreements and how to respond when harm occurs.
6	**Establish a process to revisit agreements in the future to ensure ongoing alignment and agreement among students and staff.**	• Agreements can change over time. Continue to check in with students to ensure that the agreements in place embody or reflect the expectations that you have for each other.

Co-created agreements centre the perspectives of students and can act to disrupt unnecessary power dynamics in spaces. They are not a set of rules – they are mutually-agreed-upon expectations that may change over time. These agreements are more impactful when staff are also accountable to them.

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When harm happens in the student mental health engagement and leadership space

Sometimes, even with agreements in place, things are said or done, intentionally or unintentionally, that cause harm. When this occurs, it presents an opportunity to learn and respond in a way that centres the dignity of the person affected. Having clear co-created agreements and processes for addressing harm can help ensure that harms are acknowledged, addressed, repaired and prevented in future. This is especially important when bringing young people together to talk about and plan for mental health promotion activities. Students often gravitate to such initiatives with a particular interest in learning more about mental health and/or a desire for advocacy and making change. Some might join because of lived/living experiences of mental health problems, which can be personal or related to the experiences of family and/or close friends. Agreements require careful facilitation to ensure they:

- are strength-based

- are supportive for students' mental health across the tiers

- are identity-affirming; and

- support community-building, reduce stigma and foster mentally healthy environments.

> Agreements are the expectations we have for each other and how we can hold ourselves and each other accountable.

Harm lives with the person who has experienced it. The way people navigate harm is informed by their lived experience, identities and knowledge (e.g., skills to respond or address conflict).

Acknowledging harm can be a highly complex aspect of navigating relationships, but in order to maintain supportive, responsive spaces in school, it's essential to acknowledge harm when it occurs. It is also essential to discern **how** that acknowledgement should occur (e.g., in the moment, with the group, or offering the space for a conversation after an incident). How to Call Attention to a Harmful Situation.

The following provides guidance for addressing various forms of harm in student spaces:

GUIDE	

Listen	• Ensure there is time and space for the student to express themselves.
	• Actively listen with the intention to understand.
	  • Confirm with the student that you understand their message by re-stating what they said.
	• Acknowledge that harm has occurred.
	  • Use language like "I hear you" and avoid using vague reassurances like, "It's going to be okay."

Believe	• Be careful not to inadvertently negate or diminish the student's experience or emotions (e.g., "It's really not that bad"). • As the student shares, believe their experience and the impact of harm from their perspective. • Let the student know that their experience is valid and that it is okay to feel however they are feeling. • "It makes sense that you would feel…"
Respond	• Check in with the student(s) and discuss possible next steps. • Ensure students' wishes are respected (e.g., who does the student prefer to connect with regarding the incident? Does the student feel the situation warrants an apology?).

Respond (cont'd)	• Support the student in naming and addressing harmful practices (e.g., facilitate conversations following an incident, in an individual or group context).
	• Know your school board's pathways to support, and link the student(s) to help if needed.
	• Revisit the group agreements together to ensure that harms have been acknowledged, addressed, repaired and can be prevented in future.

Consider reviewing Listen, Believe & Act for more information.

When we cause harm as adults

The guidance in the table above can be applied to various forms of harm. As adults in a student space, we have the responsibility to mitigate harm that may occur. **The reality, however, is that adults can also be the cause of that harm.** Calling attention to harm caused by adults may feel difficult and uncomfortable, especially if we have caused the harm.

These situations offer adults powerful opportunities to:

• demonstrate what listening, believing and responding might look and sound like,

• reflect on our role and positionality in the space, and

• show a willingness to learn from experiences and students.

Mistakes may occur; however, we can take them as learning opportunities.

How to keep the learning going

After harm occurs, applying the learning is important to maintain an environment that aligns with the purpose of the agreements. Addressing harm reinforces the commitment to the expectations that we have for each other.

Build knowledge

• Have conversations with the group about what will continue to make the space feel supportive (e.g., revisit group agreements).

• Facilitate access to resources and learning opportunities that aid in upholding the agreements (e.g., books, speakers, discussions).

• Remain curious and open to learning from students.

Supportive resources

• Student Engagement Toolkit

• Cultural Humility Self-Reflection Tool for School Staff

• Identity-Affirming School Mental Health Frame

While the strategies in this document are suggested for co-creating agreements with students in student mental health engagement and leadership space, they may be applied in multiple settings and situations.