

Executive summary

Purpose

#HearNowON 2024 is an Ontario student engagement initiative that explores the learning needs and priorities of students from grades 7-12 in the area of mental health and well-being. The data gathered from the online survey and related focus groups informs the work of School Mental Health Ontario and can also be used by school districts to support their school mental health action plans.

#HearNowON 2024 had three main objectives:

1. To gather insights and ideas from middle and secondary school students on how schools and districts can build and sustain mental health knowledge with and among their peers.
2. To explore, from student perspectives, district and school efforts to deliver mental health services and resources using identity-affirming and culturally responsive approaches.
3. To understand student perspectives on authentic engagement related to provincial, district and school-based initiatives in support of student mental health and well-being.

Approach

The #HearNowON initiative drew on principles of Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR), which centres the experiences and expertise of participants. Students played a key role in shaping the focus groups and survey questions, analyzing themes, and illustrating findings. For a detailed description of the process, see the [methodology](#) section.

Participants

Survey

A total of 365 students completed the HNO 2024 online survey. Most of the student respondents were cisgender girl/woman (50.4%) or cisgender boy/man (38.0%), were white (68.9%), did not have an individualized educational program (IEP) (61.5%) and did not identify with having a disability (70.7%).

Focus groups

14 focus groups were facilitated, with a total of 47 student participants. The focus groups included both identity-specific spaces and broader, open groups. The groups included:

- 2S/LGBTQIA+ (3 student participants)
- African, Afro-Caribbean and Black (3 student participants)
- Deaf and/or hard of hearing (ASL and LSQ) (11 student participants)
- Indigenous (First Nation, Métis and Inuit) (3 student participants)
- Newcomer and refugees (2 student participants)
- Open student groups (21 student participants)
- Special education learning profiles (French and English) (4 student participants)

Key Findings from #HearNowON 2024

1. Students want mental health to be meaningfully incorporated into their education.
2. Students want their parents and caregivers to be equipped to support their mental health.
3. Most students expressed at least some interest in participating in mental health leadership initiatives at school, and just over half are aware of opportunities to get involved.
4. Students recognize the connection between identity and mental health, and value opportunities to celebrate their own identities and learn about others as a way to bolster connectedness at school.
5. Many students know where to find mental health support at school and have at least one trusted adult they can turn to.

Discussion

The sample size within HNO 2024 was smaller than similar student engagement initiatives in prior years. This makes interpretation challenging, in terms of representativeness across the province, and also for year-over-year comparisons. However, we do appreciate the student perspectives offered through surveys and focus groups and want to reflect what we heard from them in this report. Further, the identity specific focus group offerings provided an opportunity for students to engage in deeper dialogue, bringing aspects of their identity to the fore in conversations, which was a unique element of the approach this year. School districts are encouraged to consider the HNO 2024 findings in the context of their own student engagement and student voice initiatives, as a data source that can contribute to mental health action planning.