

SERVICE DELIVERY PROJECT

ATTENDANCE SUPPORT & STAFF WELLNESS INITIATIVE
FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

JUNE 2016



Ministry of
Education

Frequently Asked Questions

1. What is the “Service Delivery Project”?

The Service Delivery Project is an effort to find savings and efficiencies through shared delivery of services across BC school districts. The Ministry of Education, school districts and partners are working collaboratively, identifying opportunities in employment and labour matters, attendance support and staff wellness, HR/payroll, facilities management, transportation and procurement.

2. Why focus on attendance support and staff wellness in the K-12 sector?

In response to the [2012 Deloitte Report](#), a Phase 1 Attendance Support, Wellness and Occupational Safety Working Group was established in the K-12 sector to provide advice on the feasibility of the attendance support and staff wellness-related opportunities listed in the 2012 Deloitte report.

The Working Group reviewed best practice models and met with numerous organizations (e.g., WorkSafeBC, Joint Early Intervention Service (JEIS), BCTF Health and Wellness Program, BC Public Service Agency, School District #23 WorkSafe Claims Management and BCPSEA). Members of the group also surveyed school districts and reviewed school district policies and collective agreements.

3. Have attendance support programs in other public sector organizations been successful?

There are a number of positive examples of attendance support programs within the public sector in BC. These programs were reviewed by the Phase 1 Working Group and BCPSEA prior to developing the common procedures with the pilot districts, including the BC Public Service Agency and City of Coquitlam programs. The provincial Attendance Support and Wellness Initiative (the “Initiative”) is modelled on the same supportive framework as other successful, positive examples of attendance support which already exist in the public service

4. What are the overall goals of the Attendance Support and Staff Wellness Initiative?

The overall goals are to create a culture in the K-12 sector where an attendance support and staff wellness initiative is part of the regular operations of schools and school districts, and:

- employees are supported in ways that improve their ability to attend work and perform their job role to the best of their ability,
- employee representatives are involved and believe their members are appropriately and fairly supported, and
- the initiative is recognized throughout the system that the work with and for students is improved by regular and consistent attendance and employee wellness.



5. What does attendance support and staff wellness entail?

A successful attendance support and staff wellness program will seek to keep the above goals in mind and include attendance support, disability management and wellness initiatives. These three areas are interrelated and may overlap at times. The attendance support part of the program is data driven to ensure all employees are treated in a fair and consistent manner. It allows school districts to identify and provide support while addressing any potential disability and/or accommodation obligations. A relationship and conversation-led approach is used as a means to identify risks to employee health and wellbeing and assist in helping employees improve their health, wellness and ability to attend work.

- **Attendance support** is the promotion and monitoring of regular attendance at work and identifying and offering support where there may be non-culpable reasons for irregular attendance.
- **Wellness support** encompasses programs for employees that increase awareness of various wellness options and the creation of a culture that ensures employees have the resources and assistance they need to be successful and engaged at work.
- **Disability management** is the management of sick leave usage, short- and long-term disability and Workers' Compensation claims.

6. What did the Phase 1 Working Group recommend?

The Phase 1 Working Group released a [final report](#) in April 2014. The general and specific recommendations are outlined on pages 22 and 23 of the report. The Phase 1 recommendations will be implemented by the Phase 2 Working Group.

Specific recommendations and implementation steps included:

- school districts adopt common policies and procedures with best practice guidelines to support employee attendance
- school districts have access to shared specialized expertise such as medical advisors and occupational therapists, through either a central agency or regional service, and
- the Employment Data and Analysis System (EDAS) be enhanced to include the retrieval of leave data from school districts and school district software be updated to provide the additional data.

7. Who is on the Phase 2 Working Group?

- Working Group Co-leads
- Representative(s) from:
 - each of the seven pilot school districts
 - each of the three advisory school districts
 - the British Columbia Public School Employers' Association (BCPSEA)
 - the Ministry of Education, Service Delivery Branch
 - the British Columbia Principals' and Vice-Principals' Association (BCPVPA)
- Additional specialized support as required



8. What is BCPSEA's role in relation to the pilot?

BCPSEA will perform the project manager role and will be responsible for the overall delivery of the attendance support and staff wellness pilot, including:

- development of a project plan with the Ministry of Education and Working Group that includes deliverables such as policies, procedures and guiding principles, communication and training plans and materials, absence data collection guidelines and an evaluation plan
- monitoring project progress and schedule
- leading consultation with union representatives on a provincial basis, and
- providing training and information for pilot school districts to support local consultation.

BCPSEA will also be enhancing the EDAS system to include the collection of additional attendance data from school districts. This may include working with pilot school districts and vendors around school district software.

9. What are the Phase 2 Working Group's deliverables?

The Phase 2 Working Group's advice has been used to finalize an Attendance Awareness and Support Program [Toolkit](#) which includes attendance support and staff wellness policies, procedures and guiding principles for use by the pilot school districts over the 2015/16 school year. A Phase 2 [pilot evaluation report](#) has also been developed and is available on BCPSEA's website. The report includes pilot districts' experience and recommendations to the Service Delivery Project Steering Committee on provincial implementation. Evaluation of, and recommendations related to, centralized or regionalized shared specialist services will follow in 2016/17.

10. When will the pilot take place?

The Phase 2 pilots have taken place over the 2015/16 school year in the seven pilot school districts. The pilot school districts, in conjunction with the Working Group which includes the three advisory districts, have worked throughout the 2015/16 school year to carefully develop attendance support and wellness programs based on best practices. The size, demographics and culture of each school district are unique. The Initiative recognizes that an attendance support program needs to consider these factors. The common policies and procedures have been developed in compliance with the most recent court and arbitration decisions, and have been reviewed by legal counsel (see FAQ #28 for legal basis of program).

Phase 3 is currently being planned and will involve approximately twenty school districts. The majority of the districts that made their decision to begin attendance support and wellness program implementation during Phase 3 attended an orientation session on June 9. Further details will be communicated in the Fall of 2016.

11. Are all school districts eventually expected to align their local attendance support and staff wellness programs with the recommendations arising from the pilots?



The Phase 2 [pilot evaluation report](#) on implementation and initial operation of the pilot program includes recommendations to the Service Delivery Project Steering Committee and Ministry of Education on provincial implementation of the policies, procedures and guiding principles. Recommendations related to centralized or regionalized shared specialist services will follow in the 2016/17 school year. It is anticipated that all school districts will realize the benefits of supporting employees and workplace wellness by aligning their local attendance support and staff wellness programs with the common policies, procedures and guiding principles and utilizing coordinated provincial resources. The pilot school districts will continue to deliver and refine their programs.

12. Are there any ideas for what school districts can do in the area of attendance support and staff wellness that can be sustained?

Sustainable staff wellness initiatives tend to be closely tailored to the specific health and wellness needs and challenges within employee groups of the district. For example, under the current Pacific Blue Cross plan, online health assessments and wellness services are accessible through CARESnet. This service is available for all members and is entirely confidential. The member creates an online profile, and receives an individual assessment of his/her health risks and how to take action to improve his/her health. The program also provides relevant links to community resources and supports available within the individual's municipality or region. Pacific Blue Cross also offers more comprehensive analysis for districts to use in developing and evaluating wellness initiatives. Further details can be obtained from BCPSEA. School districts may also want to use the readiness audit and needs assessment tool (see FAQ #13 below) to review their wellness programs and ensure they are getting full benefit out of them.

13. When will the readiness audit tool be available for school districts to use?

The Readiness Audit and Needs Assessment Tool is available for school districts to use. The tool can be used before a school district embarks on a specific attendance support and wellness initiative. The assessment builds awareness about the elements that support employee attendance in a school district. It will also help to identify workplace initiatives that positively influence employee health, as well as organizational opportunities that should be in place to support an integrated attendance support and wellness model.

14. Our school district would like to move forward with ensuring attendance data is in place to objectively identify potential attendance issues. When will further details be provided about what attendance codes are being used and for what absences (e.g., sick leave for illness, sick leave for family matters)?

The attendance support and wellness program must accurately identify employees who may need additional support to attend work regularly. This must be done objectively and consistently based on accurate data. The four steps in the Data Review Phase are described in the toolkit.



15. The Working Group will be providing advice and recommendations around centralized and/or regionalized specialist support services (e.g., nurse, occupational health, disability management). Should school districts delay implementing individual programs in these areas until further information is available about possible centralized or regionalized services?

BCPSEA, in conjunction with the Working Group, has selected a Homewood Health which will provide pilot districts with specialized medical support and disability management services for a one-year trial period, starting this spring 2016. BCPSEA and the pilot districts will evaluate the service provider and model to determine the feasibility for expanding services to all school districts after the 2016/2017 trial period.

School districts are asked to not make long term commitments to service providers to allow for BCPSEA to pursue preferred rates in regions or centrally. Further information will be available during the 2016/2017 school year. BCPSEA can also work with school districts to address temporary supports.

16. What is the special purpose grant that was provided to school districts in March 2015 intended to support?

School districts will incur costs when they implement their attendance support and staff wellness programs. The purpose of the grant funding is to cover some of these costs. Based on the Working Group's advice and experience, school districts interested in moving forward with their attendance support and staff wellness programs prior to the pilot completion should focus the grant funding on the following areas:

- Completing a readiness audit and needs assessment to assess their current state of data collection and analysis, staff wellness, disability management and attendance support initiatives within the school district (see FAQ #13 for further details).
- Making and implementing a plan to address gaps identified through the readiness audit and needs assessment:
 - staff wellness initiatives (e.g., reviewing data from benefit plan providers and tailoring staff wellness initiatives to some of the specific health difficulties experienced within the school district)
 - disability management (e.g., reviewing data, examining programs and processes that are in place, making recommendations for improvements)
 - attendance support (e.g., improving data collection and organization systems and processes to consistently and/or effectively identify attendance issues, developing and implementing a consultation plan to ensure key stakeholders and employee group input is sought and obtained, training supervisors on the program and conducting supportive conversations and developing and implementing a communication strategy for all employees), and
 - hiring and training staff for initial implementation and/or to ensure sustainability of the attendance support and staff wellness program.

School districts may want to wait until the pilot year is complete before they move forward with changes and utilize the grant funding. They should also consider consulting with BCPSEA to ensure their plan to spend the funding is in accordance with the provincial criteria.



17. What is the timeline for spending the special purpose grant?

The funding is intended to be used between the time of disbursement (March 2015) and the end of the 2017/18 school year.

18. What method was used to determine the grant funding amounts that school districts received?

A total of \$3.7 million was distributed to school districts on a funded school-age full-time equivalent (FTE) basis (total of 521,745 FTE provincially), with a minimum grant amount of \$25,000. For example School District A had 3,052 funded school age FTE as of September 2014 and received \$25,000 in grant funding; School District B had 15,080 FTE and received \$97,213 in funding.

The minimum grant amount of \$25,000 was designed to help assist smaller school districts. The differences in funding are not related to school districts having an advisory or pilot role in the Attendance Support and Wellness Initiative.

19. What employee groups will the Initiative focus on?

The Initiative is intended to support all persons employed by school districts who may need additional support, whether they are executives, administrators, support staff, or teachers. All employee groups have an impact on students and the workplace when they are regularly absent from work. All employee groups should be offered the same opportunities for support and connection in the workplace.

20. Are the unions being consulted about the Initiative?

Yes. BCPSEA is actively engaged in provincial consultations with the BCTF and support staff unions about the Initiative. Discussions about the Initiative began in April 2015 with CUPE and in May 2015 with the BCTF. Formal consultations with the BCTF, CUPE and the K-12 Presidents' Council continued throughout the fall 2015. The feedback from all unions has helped clarify and improve the program being developed by the Initiative. BCPSEA will continue these consultations throughout the pilot year and beyond.

In addition to consultations, the Working Group will share aggregate attendance data with the unions as it is available. Union representatives will also be invited to attend the supervisor training delivered as part of the Initiative.

Pilot districts also commenced local consultations with their unions during the pilot. The Working Group recommends that school districts engage in early consultations with their local unions and local JEIS Committees as they proceed with attendance support and wellness programming.

21. Is the attendance support and staff wellness initiative all about cost savings?

No. The Initiative recognizes that:

- school districts depend on the contributions of employees to create positive student learning environments



- employee continuity has a direct impact on positive student learning and the functioning of the workplace
- employment involves a commitment to attend work regularly, and
- employees will have legitimate illness and injuries that may prevent them from attending work.

While the school districts that have already implemented attendance support programs have seen significant cost savings as a result, the Initiative is not driven by specific cost savings estimates in either the Deloitte or Service Delivery Phase 1 reports, or by seeking to reach a specific provincial average attendance rate.

Both employees and the school environment will benefit if employees who may be struggling with their health, wellness, and attendance and are not otherwise supported in an existing program are provided with the available supports they need. One of the ways to find out whether employees may benefit from additional support is to reach out to employees who are struggling to attend regularly compared with their peers in the same job. The Initiative aims to provide districts with a clear, consistent, and supportive approach to determine whether there are additional supports which may help the employee improve his/her health and wellness and attend more regularly.

22. Aren't Attendance Support and Staff Wellness Programs costly?

Supporting individual employees who are experiencing difficulty with attendance will come with some costs. Ignoring employees in need of support will have greater costs in terms of:

- a compromised learning environment for students
- the need for replacement staffing
- decreases in productivity due to increased workload on team, demands of supporting new or replacement staff, and lower staff morale
- overtime for replacement workers
- increases in premiums for insured plans and higher costs for self-insured income protection plans, and
- increases in administrative time to secure replacement employees or re-assign work.

23. How will employees be identified to be part of an attendance support program?

In the program currently being developed, school districts will collect and analyze their own district-level data to determine average attendance rates by employee group. These data will provide information on average attendance rates that will be used, as a first step, to determine which employees may need support. Before having a supportive conversation with any employee, the district will further analyze the data and each employee's individual circumstances to determine if the employee would benefit from participating in the program. At the provincial level, the Employment Data and Analysis System (EDAS) will be upgraded to ensure that provincial attendance data are readily and consistently available.



24. Will the work of this pilot interfere or overlap with the PEBT Joint Early Intervention Service (JEIS), BCTF Health and Wellness Program or other attendance support and staff wellness programs available at the school district level?

No. The work is meant to complement and not replace the existing programs at the provincial and school district level. BCPSEA is continuing consultations with the PEBT and union representatives at the provincial and local levels to ensure alignment with JEIS and the BCTF Health and Wellness Program.

25. We have been told by our local union that an attendance support and staff wellness program is not necessary because the Joint Early Intervention Service (JEIS) through the PEBT and the BCTF Health and Wellness Program (HWP) already support employees.

The Initiative will fill gaps in support not currently provided by existing programs, and is not intended to duplicate or interfere with the HWP or JEIS.

BCPSEA and school districts recognize how well the JEIS program functions to support employees' healthy and recovery, and the support that the voluntary HWP provides to teachers. But, despite the value and good work of these programs, there are employees who may not be covered by them and may be "falling through the cracks." For example:

- Employees who experience frequent medical absences but are not currently absent from work may not be involved in JEIS.
- The HWP is voluntary and not all teachers who may need additional support in health and wellness will seek a referral. Further, there are eligibility criteria which must be met by a teacher before he/she may participate in the HWP.
- Neither of these programs is available to support exempt employees.

The program being developed will apply only to employees who suffer from frequent, brief absences, and who are not experiencing short-term or long-term disability claims already covered by JEIS, the HWP or other disability management programs. The Initiative is intended to provide a consistent approach for districts to support employees who are **not** covered by existing programs and would otherwise "fall through the cracks."

BCPSEA is continuing consultations with CUPE and the BCTF at the provincial level, to ensure that the Initiative does not interfere or duplicate the existing programs and to explore if these programs can be further enhanced to support employees.

26. We have been told by our local union that school districts should focus on improving employee health through working conditions and wellness initiatives, not an attendance support program.

The Working Group recognizes that attendance support must be complemented by wellness initiatives and supportive disability management. The readiness audit and needs assessment tool (see FAQ #13) provides guidance to districts on how to improve all aspects of the workplace which affect employee health, safety and wellness. Before starting attendance support programming, school districts will need to have in place:



- wellness initiatives available to employees;
- well-functioning occupational health and safety programs; and
- procedures to legally and fairly accommodate employees with disabilities.

The Working Group will continue to explore and evaluate effective, sustainable wellness initiatives, including through ongoing consultations and dialogue with provincial unions and other stakeholders.

Finally, as discussed further in FAQ #31, the attendance support and staff wellness program will provide an additional opportunity for employees to inform their supervisor or human resources (as appropriate) about issues affecting their wellness and attendance, including workload or work management issues, workplace conflict, need for additional training, safety issue, family or personal issues or other non-medical issues, so that the issue(s) can be effectively resolved.

27. Our local union has said that conversations with employees about their attendance are disciplinary or punitive.

This is not true. The attendance support procedures developed by the Initiative involve supportive conversations with employees to facilitate a dialogue and offer support to improve employees' health, wellness, and ability to attend work. If an employee is absent at a rate significantly greater than his/her peers in the same job, it is assumed that the person would wish to, and may need additional support to, improve his/her health and wellness or address other issues impacting his/her ability to attend work. Improved employee health and wellness improve outcomes not only for the individual employees, but also students and others in the workplace. These conversations do not result in any discipline or punishment of an employee.

Further, to ensure that attendance support conversations are supportive and effective, comprehensive training will be provided to supervisors on best practices in attendance support and how to have supportive conversations. The provincial unions will be invited to attend and provide feedback on the training.

28. What about related court and arbitration decisions?

The Initiative follows decades of court and arbitration decisions which have upheld the reasonableness, fairness and effectiveness of attendance support programs. For example, numerous arbitrations have recognized that meetings with employees to talk about attendance are not disciplinary, including, most recently, *Canadian Union of Public Employees, Local 391 v. Vancouver Public Library (Bardos Grievance)*, [2015] B.C.C.A.A. No. 88 (Jackson), and *Vancouver Coastal Health Authority v. British Columbia Government and Service Employees' Union (Attendance and Wellness Promotion Program Grievance)* (2013), 229 L.A.C. (4th) 317 (Ready) at paras. 5-6. Note that the aspects of Vancouver Coastal Health Authority's attendance program which were found to be unreasonable — including unilateral overtime bans and/or reductions in FTE status for employees with high absenteeism — are **not** part of the provincial Attendance Support and Wellness Initiative.

The law also recognizes that there is nothing intimidating about monitoring employee attendance or communicating the expectation that employees attend work regularly. The Supreme Court of Canada, in *Honda Canada Inc. v. Keays (2008)*, 294 D.L.R. (4th) 577, held (at para. 71) that “the need to monitor the absences of employees who are regularly absent from work is a bona fide



work requirement in light of the very nature of the employment contract and responsibility of the employer for the management of its workforce.”

29. Our local union has told us that an attendance support program means every employee who has an illness will be called at home, or will be spoken to if he/she suffers a serious illness.

This is also not true. Employees will not be called at home while they are ill or injured as part of the attendance support and staff wellness program. The program involves a series of supportive conversations between supervisors, human resources, and employees who have much higher rates of brief, frequent medical absences than their peers over a 12-month period. Employees whose absenteeism is already supported through a workers' compensation, short-term disability or long-term disability claim, or a recognized disability accommodation will not be included in the program. Further, an employee's individual circumstances will be taken into account at each stage of the program to ensure the program is applied fairly and reasonably.

30. Our local union has said that the program will pressure employees into sharing personal or medical information with their supervisors.

This is not accurate. Confidentiality is a critical part of an effective attendance support and wellness program. Supervisors, human resources, and union representatives (if present) who attend an attendance support conversation will be reminded of the necessity of maintaining confidentiality. Supervisors will not pressure employees to share personal or medical matters in an attendance support conversation. If an employee requires accommodation or wishes to discuss matters of a personal nature, he/she may share the information confidentially with human resources. Finally, supervisors will be provided with training on the best practices and legal obligations to protect employees' personal information.

31. How will this program help employees who may be absent because of a non-medical workplace issue?

An employee may be absent for reasons outside of his or her control which are not related to a medical condition, such as stress arising from a family or personal issue, workload or work management, or a workplace conflict. An attendance support program provides an additional opportunity for employees to inform their supervisor or human resources (as appropriate) about issues affecting their attendance so that the issue(s) can be effectively resolved. For example, if an employee is facing a family or personal issue which is starting to affect his/her attendance, the district may be able to offer access to counselling, other resources through a district wellness program or other specific supports. Similarly, if an employee is experiencing a workplace conflict, school districts have policies and processes in place for employees to report and seek to resolve such conflicts, such as bullying and harassment policies. Finally, the program will provide supervisors with consistent, comprehensive training to help support their ability to connect with and resolve the issues faced by their employees.



32. How will this program support employees who are experiencing mental health issues or consider the relationship between absenteeism and gender or age?

The program is focused on understanding the unique circumstances faced by each employee that inform their attendance history. Wellness initiatives, disability management, and attendance support are critical components of the program. The program is designed to make employees aware that they are valued in the workplace and that there may be some resources or support they can draw on. Employees on approved leaves or already involved in a disability management process with the employer will not be included in the program.

The relationship between the manager and the employee is important in addressing mental health issues. At its 4th Annual Summit on Workplace Mental Health in January 2015, Morneau Shepell reported on a national survey of employees, employers, and physicians done by their research group. The physicians identified better workplace communication and social support as their number one recommendation to foster psychological health in the workplace. This was identified as more important than providing employees with time off or reduced workload. Both employees and physicians agreed that support and communication in the workplace is critical. Ninety per cent (90%) of employees indicated that managing employee mental wellness is important for employee productivity.

Consistent with this research, an attendance support approach which involves supportive conversations between an employee and his/her direct supervisor (or facilitated by HR) to seek to identify what the district can do to support an employee provides an effective way to respond to mental health issues in the workplace. No one will be pressured to disclose personal information, but if there are actions which can be taken by a school district to support an employee who needs it, then the conversations under the attendance support program will facilitate this dialogue.

33. Won't an attendance support program encourage people to go to work sick?

No. School districts recognize that employees may have legitimate illness and injury that prevents them from attending work from time to time. The program does not prevent employees from using their sick leave or other entitlements to cover these periods of absence. However, if an employee is experiencing significantly more absenteeism than his/her peers in the same job, then there is a reasonable chance that he/she may benefit from additional support to improve his/her health, wellness and ability to attend work. An attendance support program provides districts with a consistent approach to see if there is anything the district can do to support employees.

34. How will this program address “presenteeism”?

“Presenteeism” includes more than employees coming to work when they are ill. It also includes individuals who lack a sense of engagement with their work or who feel that no one in the work environment cares about them. Wellness initiatives, which are a critical component of the Initiative, will help address “presenteeism” and other health and wellness issues faced by employees in the workplace.

Pilot districts have been actively engaged throughout the pilot year in researching, developing and implementing wellness initiatives to address the physical and mental health challenges faced by their



employees, often with the involvement of their local unions. We cannot assume that “presenteeism” may be effectively addressed by leaving employees to sort through issues on their own without support from others in the workplace. To the contrary, the Initiative is designed to proactively engage employees and address presenteeism by:

- encouraging school districts to develop and implement effective wellness initiatives to help improve employee health, wellness and engagement
- engaging employees in conversations with their supervisors who will listen and offer support, and
- providing managers with comprehensive, interactive training to have supportive conversations to support their employees.

35. I have questions or concerns about the Initiative which are not addressed above.

The Working Group would appreciate hearing all feedback, concerns and questions from districts and other stakeholders as it works to develop and implement the pilot. If you have questions that have not been addressed above, please contact Sue Ferguson at suef@bcpsea.bc.ca or Caroline Ponsford at SectorResourcingandServiceDeliveryBranch@gov.bc.ca.

