



MENTAL HEALTH IN SCHOOLS STRATEGY

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MESSAGE FROM THE MINISTER OF EDUCATION ROB FLEMING



Every student in British Columbia deserves a safe, caring and healthy environment that helps them to learn, grow and thrive. We know that students are better prepared for success when they have positive, healthy relationships along with appropriate supports, resources and tools. We want to create a school environment that supports student well-being and positive mental health.

That is why we are committed to the Mental Health in Schools Strategy, a new approach that embeds positive mental health in all aspects of the education system, including culture, leadership, curriculum and learning environments. The strategy's creation was guided by two provincial strategies: ERASE (Expect Respect and a Safe Education) and A Pathway to Hope: A roadmap for making mental health and addictions care better for people in British Columbia.

The Mental Health in Schools (MHIS) Strategy is the result of extensive research and a collaborative approach that includes the voices of education and community partners across our province. It relies on a decade of social emotional learning and aims to weave compassion throughout the school system.

Beyond positive mental health promotion, this strategy will actively help every student and create opportunities to focus on our most vulnerable. Anti-racism, sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI), substance use, student hunger, and the immigrant and refugee student experience — all of these play a part in mental health and wellness and are addressed in this strategy in a meaningful way.

For far too long, there was a lack of investment in the mental health of students across BC. When we formed government, I made addressing those inadequacies a priority. Our education system must lift up all students, and I want to build and strengthen this critical role our schools play in the lives of all British Columbians. I want our education partners — teachers, families, school districts, independent schools, Indigenous educators, community and researchers — to work closely together, so students know they are seen, heard, valued and supported. So students know they aren't alone, and they have a school community that will support them if they are struggling. So students know their school is actively committed to helping them develop resilience to supporting their brightest future.

Strengthening mental health and wellness activities in schools will require a collective effort — now more than ever. The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that teachers, school staff, families and students are resilient and have capacity to thrive in challenging times. We want the Mental Health in Schools Strategy action items to leverage this strength and to continue to create opportunities for greater mental well-being throughout our K-12 system.

The Mental Health in Schools Strategy builds on the work already underway in our schools, and it reaffirms our commitment to giving every student the tools to flourish in school, and for the rest of their life. By working together, we can make schools vital and compassionate communities of care where students are supported to reach their goals now and well into the future.

VISION

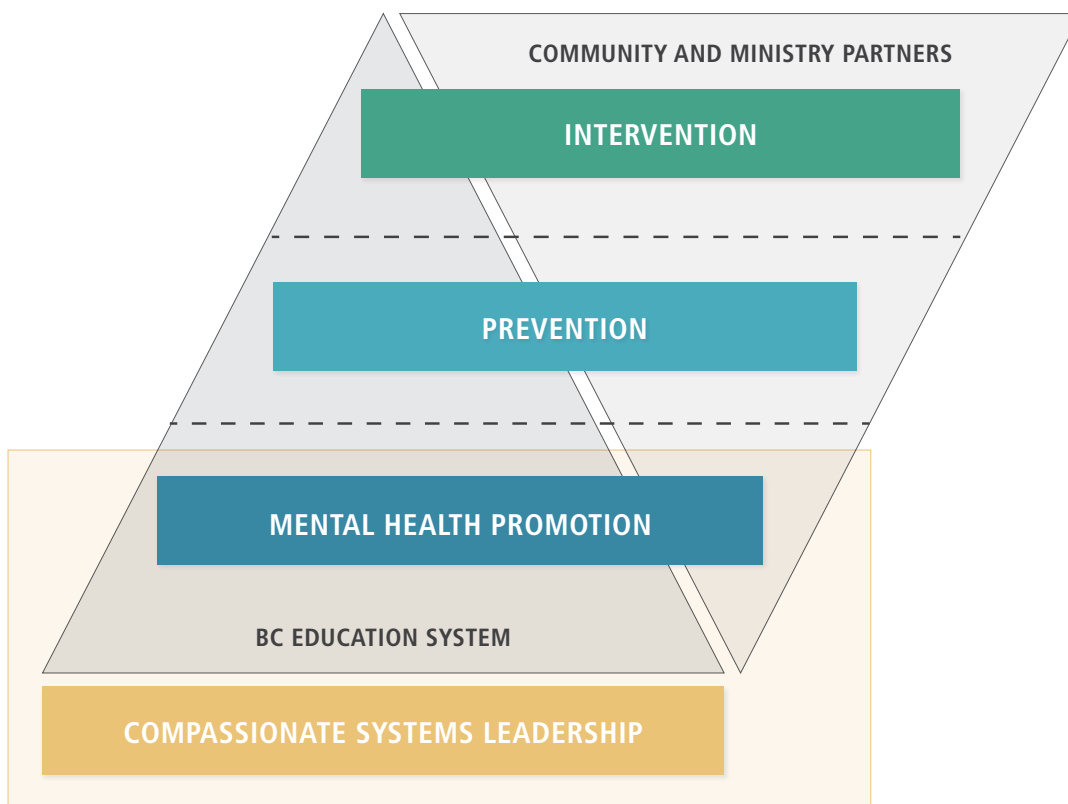
A whole-school system that promotes positive mental health, where mental health promotion is embedded in all aspects of the education system, including culture, leadership, curriculum and learning environments.

INTRODUCTION

We know that giving children the best possible start is key to better long-term mental health outcomes. Wellness promotion and prevention needs to be the focus, starting in the early years and spanning throughout a child’s life. Previous efforts have focussed on services oriented to those in acute crisis who require intervention; these services will always be needed. However, the intentional shift towards building resiliency early will reduce the pressure on acute care services, decrease costs and provide better experiences for children and families.

The Province of BC is committed to transforming BC’s system of care for mental health and addictions through a whole of government approach outlined in [A Pathway to Hope: A roadmap for making mental health and addictions care better for people in British Columbia](#). The Ministry of Education plays a lead role in supporting the mental health of children and youth in schools through mental health promotion.

Mental well-being, or positive mental health, involves the capacity to think, feel and act in ways that improve our ability to enjoy life and deal with its challenges. Schools play an important role in supporting students to build the skills and knowledge that contribute to their overall well-being.



BC utilizes a co-governance model for K-12 education, within which the Ministry of Education makes high-level decisions and sets policies for the overall system. This model emphasizes the importance of working across the education system with other ministries, school districts, independent schools, educational partners, Indigenous Rightsholders and partners, educators, parents and students to deliver services and supports to students and families.

Though there is no clear and consistent definition of “**system-wide**,” we have used the term in the MHIS strategy to refer to the innovations and approaches used in the school system that reach multiple people (*students, teachers, administrators, parents etc.*) at multiple levels. System-wide approaches can be used at the provincial, district and school levels.

There is an emerging consensus in BC that, given the complexity of addressing this issue, making substantive progress on mental health in schools will require a system-wide approach.

Mental health promotion is a key driver for the Mental Health in Schools Strategy. In addition to the benefits for student outcomes and academic achievement, the Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC) estimates that mental health challenges cost the Canadian economy approximately \$50 billion annually. The MHCC estimates that if the number of people experiencing a new mental illness in a given year was reduced by 10%, after 10 years we could be directing more than \$4 billion a year into other services and supports for British Columbians.

The Mental Health in Schools Strategy is an emergent strategy, allowing the Ministry of Education to adapt and respond to the complex, ever-changing mental health care system. The MHIS Strategy provides a vision and pathway for mental health promotion in the BC K-12 education system and will help guide the Ministry of Education’s actions and investments in mental health promotion over the coming years.

The MHIS Strategy is based on a significant amount of research and engagement. It is the result of a collaborative approach that includes the voices of education and community partners across the mental health sector who are already successfully doing the work in the field.

A Note on Adult Well-Being

The importance of addressing the well-being of adults in the system has never been more apparent than during the COVID-19 pandemic. Throughout the pandemic, teachers and school staff remain focused on supporting their students, while trying to maintain their own mental health and establish balance in new ways of living and teaching.

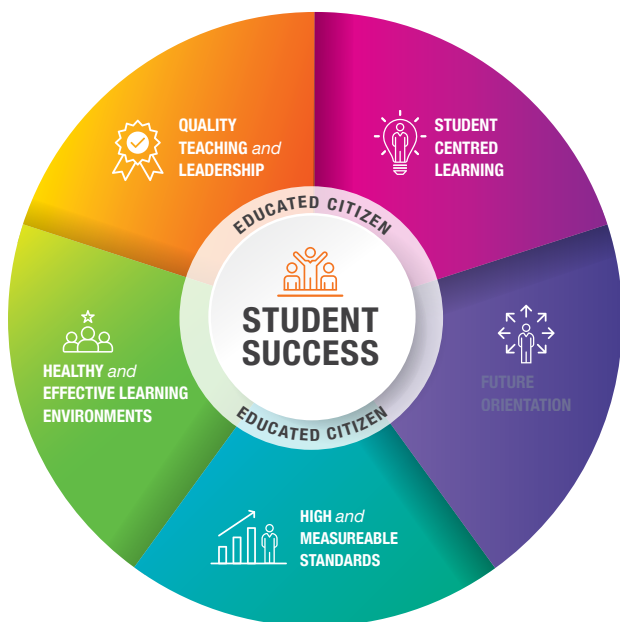
Although the focus of the MHIS Strategy is mental health promotion for students, we also know that the well-being of the adults in the system is just as important. Research confirms stress experienced by school administrators can negatively impact school staff. Teacher stress has been directly linked to increased student stress levels, spilling over from the teacher to the student and impacting social adjustment and student performance.

Not only does adult stress impact students directly, it can also lead to increased sick days taken by staff, increased disability claims and challenges with retention and recruitment, all of which cost the school system as a whole. Using a systems awareness lens, and in particular focusing on compassionate systems leadership, acknowledges that adult well-being is a critical element towards alignment and improved system-wide mental health outcomes. Through a system-wide approach to mental health promotion, the Ministry aims to improve mental health outcomes for students, as well as impact the overall long-term social and economic returns on investment.

Mental Health in Schools

The Mental Health in Schools Strategy is the Ministry of Education’s commitment to moving forward with a coherent system-wide approach to mental health promotion in schools. The Mental Health in Schools Strategy focuses on three main elements – **Compassionate Systems Leadership, Capacity Building, and Mental Health in the Classroom** – which build upon a foundation of social emotional learning that has developed in BC over the past decade. The MHIS Strategy is layering mental health promotion as our next step in system transformation.

Building on these three elements, there are key principles that guide how we work collaboratively to achieve our goals. The Ministry is committed to taking an equitable, culturally safe and strengths-based approach that is informed by evidence and built through a collaborative and co-constructed practice.



The Ministry of Education’s Policy for Student Success

The Ministry of Education’s mandate is to enable all learners to maximize their potential. This mandate is reflected in the [Policy for Student Success](#) and is what fuels our passion to work toward an ideal future state where all citizens are educated, engaged and thriving in a rapidly changing world. By focusing on the system as a whole, which centers on students and supports teachers and school leadership, we will continue to foster safe, healthy and caring learning environments, which in turn will support continued and measurable student success.

ELEMENT 01

COMPASSIONATE SYSTEMS LEADERSHIP

Cultivating system-wide well-being through compassionate leadership.

To support student well-being and resiliency, adults must have the tools and practices to support their own well-being. Compassionate systems leadership has three core elements to support systems change.

- 1| **Internal work** - includes self-reflection and practice
- 2| **Relationship work** - authentic connections where space is created to be truly present
- 3| **System work** - connections between self, others and the broader system

Compassionate systems leadership in education is an approach that inspires transformation and instructional best practices that lead to student success. It is anchored in self-awareness, social awareness, responsible decision-making, self management and relationship skills. Building on the strong foundation of leadership development that already exists, we need to engage new system awareness tools and embed compassion into the work.

Key Actions for Compassionate Systems Leadership

We will:

- Partner with education leaders to explore and foster adult well-being in the school system.
- Develop compassionate systems leadership training and infrastructure to support education leaders in both English and French.
- Embed compassionate systems leadership into early learning to support Kindergarten transitions.
- Support the implementation of the Integrated Service Delivery (ISD) Model to collaboratively address the needs of children, youth and their families through an integrated and aligned system-wide approach to mental health care.



ELEMENT 02

CAPACITY BUILDING

Providing the school system with the tools and supports to build capacity for mental health in schools

While the Mental Health in Schools Strategy focusses on mental health promotion, the Ministry of Education recognizes that mental health exists on a spectrum and there are students who need more assistance. In these cases, we rely on cross-government and community resources to provide more intensive supports. Schools are an important first step on a pathway of care. This means the school system must work to build meaningful relationships with community partners and service providers to ensure students will receive services and more intensive support, as needed.

There is a resounding consensus among researchers, educators, parents and students that a focus on social emotional learning, mental health literacy and trauma-informed practice is an effective way to promote students' positive mental health.

It is important that we have meaningful engagement with Indigenous communities to ensure that mental health promotion efforts are culturally relevant, equitable and safe for all students.

SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING is a set of specific skills that help individuals set goals, manage behaviour, build relationships, and process and remember information.

MENTAL HEALTH LITERACY is the knowledge and understanding of how to develop and maintain mental well-being; identify risk factors and signs of mental health challenges; access help when needed; and reduce stigma around the topic of mental health.

TRAUMA-INFORMED PRACTICE promotes inclusive and compassionate learning environments; understanding coping strategies; supporting independence; and addressing students' need to minimize additional stress or trauma.



BC is recognized worldwide for its robust mental health evidence, tools and approaches; this data and research forms a foundation to support the process of continuous learning, development and improvement.

In addition to building capacity in mental health promotion, there is a need to further build capacity in interpreting data. The Ministry continues to enhance data collection and research to strengthen the foundation for inquiry-based conversation.

A “**whole child**” approach recognizes that academic and life success are intertwined with social emotional learning, mental health literacy and trauma-informed practice, three key elements that support a system-wide mental health promotion strategy.

Key Actions for Capacity Building

We will:

- Create opportunities for school communities to learn about emerging trends and practices and to understand the latest data and research.
- Support a Mental Health Leadership Network of mental health leads from each school district.
- Work with students and families to inform mental health priorities.
- Promote evidence-based approaches to mental health for educators, families and students.
- Enhance mental health data to build capacity to better understand, evaluate and measure system improvements, student mental health outcomes and inform priorities.



ELEMENT 03

MENTAL HEALTH IN THE CLASSROOM

Embedding mental well-being and Indigenous Knowledge and Perspectives throughout all learning environments

We know that the best learning is rooted in relationships, and the redesigned K-12 curriculum was developed to honour this by creating safe, nurturing and caring learning environments.

The Core Competencies and Indigenous Knowledge and Perspectives are foundational to the redesigned curriculum and are applied across all grades and subject areas. In addition to these curricular foundations, the Physical and Health Education (PHE) curriculum focuses on well-being and the connections between physical, intellectual, mental, and social health.

Core Competencies

The K-12 curriculum identifies three core competencies: Communication, Thinking, and Personal and Social. Each of the competencies support social emotional learning and allow concepts related to mental wellness to be embedded in all subjects, at each grade level. The Personal and Social competencies include skills that students need to thrive as individuals, as well as to understand and care about themselves and others. Because the core competencies are cross-curricular, teachers in all subject areas can pursue emergent learning opportunities and connect them back to the core competencies. By linking their teaching to the core competencies, teachers can address mental wellness topics in any class.

The Role of Educators and Mental Health

Educators are not mental health professionals, nor should they be. Their role is to have open conversations with students about mental well-being, provide information about mental health and connect students to resources when they need them.

Indigenous Knowledge and Perspectives

The redesigned K-12 curriculum embeds Indigenous knowledge and worldviews in every area of learning for all students. This includes incorporating the [First Peoples Principles of Learning](#) into the classroom environments where all learners feel represented, as well as culturally and emotionally safe.

[The First Peoples Principles of Learning](#) focus on learning as a holistic, reflective and relational experience that supports the well-being of the self, the family, the community, the land, the spirit and the ancestors.

Physical and Health Education

The Physical and Health Education (PHE) curriculum focuses on well-being and the connections between physical, intellectual, mental and social health. By combining physical education and health education, the PHE curriculum highlights the interconnections between physical and mental health, positive interpersonal relationships, substance use education, and how interactions with the community affect overall well-being.

Key Actions for Mental Health in Classrooms

We will:

- Work with educators, to strengthen the tools and resources needed to embed mental health and well-being into each classroom.
- Work with early learning educators to improve social emotional learning outcomes for children through the Early Learning Framework.
- Develop a common language and understanding of mental health terms to improve mental health literacy and reduce stigma.
- Develop strategies to support educators to address substance use through the curriculum.

Alignment with Early Learning

The quality of children’s experiences in the years before they start school sets the stage for learning and health outcomes both at school and into adulthood.

The Ministry developed the [Early Learning Framework](#) to support those working in early years settings. The Framework explicitly links to the Core Competencies in B.C.’s redesigned K-12 curriculum and ensures smoother transitions between the early learning and K-12 sectors.

The Framework also addresses mental health promotion in the early years, through social emotional learning.



CONCLUSION

The Mental Health in Schools Strategy was developed based on a significant amount of research and engagement. It is the result of a collaborative approach that includes the voices of education and community partners across the sector who are successfully doing work in the field. The MHIS Strategy is the guiding document for the BC school system to provide students a strong foundation for their future.

The promotion of student mental health is our collective responsibility. We know that learning is best rooted in relationships that are built in safe, caring and nurturing environments. The MHIS Strategy lays the foundation on which we can continue to build on the work that is happening in our schools. By working together as partners – educators, Indigenous Rightsholders and partners, researchers, government, students and parents – we can create healthy and effective environments that will contribute to the success of all learners.



