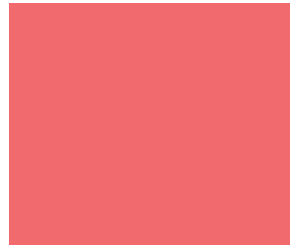


Supporting student-led mental health initiatives

A TOOLKIT FOR BC EDUCATORS AND SCHOOL STAFF

CO-CREATED BY BC STUDENTS

RELEASED SEPTEMBER 2026



Supporting student-led mental health initiatives

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The BC Ministry of Education and Child Care offices are situated on the Ləḵʷəŋən territory of the X̱səpsəm (Xwsepsum) and Songhees Nations, and on the territories of the x̱m̱əθḵʷə́əm (Musqueam), Sḵw̱x̱w̱ú7mesh (Squamish), and sə́lilwə́taʔ (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations.

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NOTES:

'Initiative' and 'project' are used interchangeably to refer to student-led mental health initiatives.

A glossary of terms used in this report is on [page 43](#).

Quotes from the BC STAT members and other BC students who contributed input into this toolkit are included throughout the report.

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Welcome!

WHO WE ARE

The BC Student Toolkit Admin Team (BC STAT) is a group of 18 diverse Grade 8–12 students from across the province who co-developed this toolkit.

If you're reading this, it means you already understand the value of student voice and want to help students lead mental health initiatives in their schools. As students who helped create it, we wanted to share our reflections about why your support matters and what we hope you get out of this toolkit:

1

YOUR ACTIONS MATTER

Even small things, like taking a few minutes to chat with a student, can have big impacts. For many students, knowing that an adult at school cares and is willing to listen can make a huge difference in their lives.

2

IT STARTS WITH INTEREST

Students want to improve the health and well-being of their peers, but we often need support to make those ideas a reality. When school staff show an interest in our ideas and want to help us implement them, it makes us feel like our voices matter.

3

APPROACH WITH CURIOSITY

There are points in this toolkit where you'll reflect on what you believe and feel about student voice, and the things you might do (or not do) that support meaningful student engagement. We hope this toolkit helps you see all the ways you already support students, and learn new approaches to empower them.

Thank you for taking the time to use this toolkit and for your interest in supporting student-led mental health initiatives. When school staff work alongside students, listen to our perspectives, and help us turn ideas into action, it can create real and meaningful change in our schools.

"Teachers at my school are hesitant to support these sorts of projects due to either not having the time needed for it, or not feeling comfortable with the content, even if mental health is such an important issue."

"Mental health is often vaguely talked about at school (e.g., a one-off workshop done by teachers), but there's not usually an opportunity for youth to get involved."

"I strongly believe the toolkit is going to help teachers guide kids in the right direction."

FROM THE BC STAT

About this toolkit

This toolkit is intended to help school staff in British Columbia (BC) support Grade 7–12 students to lead mental health initiatives in their schools. It includes practical strategies and step-by-step instructions for meaningfully engaging students through every step of the process—from planning through launching and evaluating a mental health initiative.

A STUDENT-LED MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVE IS:

Any project, resource, activity, club, or other effort led by students to address, discuss, or raise awareness of topics related to mental health and well-being.

This toolkit provides information on:

- ✓ Different types of initiatives and roles students could take in leading them.
- ✓ How to support students to plan and lead initiatives.
- ✓ Initiative ideas and examples of projects successfully led by students in BC.

We hope the toolkit complements other mental health information and resources that exist for students and school staff in BC. Some of these are detailed in the **Additional materials** section on **page 47**. Here is a summary of what this toolkit is and is not:

THIS TOOLKIT IS...

- ✓ Co-developed by BC students.
- ✓ Informed by students and education partners from across BC.
- ✓ Designed for school staff to use with Grade 7–12 students.
- ✓ Focused on strategies which can meaningfully engage students who are interested in leading school-based mental health initiatives.
- ✓ Intended to be a starting point and provide guidance, ideas, and suggestions for school staff to adapt for their context and the unique strengths and abilities of their students.

THIS TOOLKIT IS NOT...

- ✗ A guide to understanding mental health and mental illness.
- ✗ A resource or curriculum to teach mental health literacy in the classroom.
- ✗ A tool to diagnose or treat mental health conditions.
- ✗ A one-size-fits-all guide to supporting student-led mental health initiatives.

WHO CREATED IT AND HOW WAS IT DEVELOPED?

This toolkit was co-developed by the **BC Student Toolkit Admin Team (BC STAT)**, a group of 18 diverse Grade 8–12 students from rural and urban communities across BC, with support from the McCreary Centre Society (McCreary).

McCreary is a non-government, non-profit organization that aims to improve BC youth health through research, evaluation, and youth-engaged projects. To learn more, visit mcs.bc.ca.



THE DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

1 PEER-LED STUDENT ENGAGEMENTS

BC STAT members facilitated conversations with 82 Grade 7–12 students to gather their perspectives on the supports they might need to lead mental health initiatives in their schools.

2 EDUCATION PARTNER CONSULTATIONS

McCreary staff consulted with 18 education partners from across BC, including school and district leadership, specialized staff, and teachers, to inform the content, format, and design.

3 ONGOING PROJECT WORK & COLLABORATION

Through the project, the BC STAT and McCreary staff met biweekly to share and discuss consultation findings, review evidence and existing resources, and draft toolkit content.

4 MINISTRY & PARTNER REVIEW

A draft of this toolkit was reviewed by the BC Ministry of Education and Child Care and the First Nations Education Steering Committee before it was finalized by the BC STAT.

WHY SUPPORT STUDENT-LED INITIATIVES?

Student-led mental health projects can be part of a whole-school approach. The *Mental Health in Schools Strategy* encourages a system-wide approach to promoting student mental well-being, including through:

- Working with students and families to inform mental health priorities. (*ELEMENT 2: CAPACITY BUILDING*)
- Embedding mental health and well-being in the classroom. (*ELEMENT 3: MENTAL HEALTH IN THE CLASSROOM*)
- Developing a common language and understanding of mental health terms to improve mental health literacy and reduce stigma. (*ELEMENT 3: MENTAL HEALTH IN THE CLASSROOM*)

(BC Ministry of Education and Child Care, 2020)

Supporting students to lead mental health initiatives embeds shared learning, exploration, and capacity building on these topics. It also provides a clear and active role for students as part of a whole-school strategy, and can complement and reinforce other elements of the strategy.

Supporting student-led initiatives aligns with the *BC Curriculum* and *Core Competencies*.

Examples of curricular competencies that could be met through a student-led mental health initiative include:

PHYSICAL HEALTH EDUCATION 9

Curricular competency:

Create strategies for promoting the health and well-being of the school and community.

APPLIED DESIGN, SKILLS, AND TECHNOLOGIES

FAMILY AND SOCIETY 10

Development, implementation, and evaluation of a student-led service design strategy.

Curricular competency:

Define, ideate, prototype, test, share, and evaluate a service design strategy.

Engaging students can have positive impacts on health literacy and school culture. The meaningful involvement of students in health promotion activities can:

- Increase self-esteem, skill development, and sense of competence (Griebler et al., 2017).
- Improve health behaviours and health literacy (Wade et al., 2022).
- Strengthen connections with peers, adults, and health providers (Wade et al., 2022).
- Increase a sense of belonging and connectedness at school (Kontac et al., 2025).
- Increase attendance and improve academic outcomes (Wexler et al., 2017).
- Create a healthier, more supportive school environment, and more student-centred school policies (Kontac et al., 2025).

IT IS ALSO A STUDENT'S RIGHT. Article 12 of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* states that:

Children and youth have the right to express their opinions, and to be heard, on all decisions that affect them.

In large systems like education, students may feel deeply affected by decisions but detached from the processes that shape them. Upholding their rights means ensuring they have a voice in those decisions, as well as the opportunity to lead and influence positive change in their schools.

Whether approaching student engagement through an educational, health-promotion, or rights-based lens, creating opportunities for students to have a say in decisions that affect them can positively impact students and the broader school environment.

“By having a say, students are automatically required to think about those topics, sparking ideas, collaboration with others, etc.”

“[Planning and leading school projects] teaches kids independence, and makes them feel their thoughts and opinions are valued.”

SCOPE & LIMITATIONS OF STUDENT-LED MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVES

There are many different projects students might want to lead with different goals and activities (discussed further in *Types of mental health initiatives* on [page 10](#)). Projects may aim to promote positive mental health, address mental health challenges, or bring awareness to specific conditions. With any mental health-related initiative, it is important to consider whether the objectives and activities are appropriate and within the scope of expertise of the students and school staff involved and, where needed, to include other relevant and trained supports. For example, student-led initiatives may seek to bring awareness and share resources on eating disorders, but students should not diagnose or provide direct support to peers, and should seek guidance from trained health care providers.

Additionally, students may experience varying states of mental health during initiative planning, which may be related or unrelated to leading the initiative. It may be necessary to encourage students to reduce or end their involvement in an initiative if it may be contributing to increased mental distress, is negatively affecting an existing mental illness, and/or where they do not have the needed supports.

Having a basic understanding of mental health can be useful for any staff looking to support a student-led initiative. However, school staff should provide support appropriate to their training and expertise, follow all related school policies, and seek guidance from specialized school staff where needed, to ensure all students have the help they need.

A NOTE ON SUBSTANCE USE...

This toolkit focuses specifically on engaging students to lead initiatives about mental health. However, we know that substance use can be closely linked to mental health. Some youth may use substances as a way to cope with mental health challenges. For example, findings from the 2023 BC Adolescent Health Survey (BC AHS) showed that, among Grade 7–12 students who had used substances, 22% had last done so because of stress and 20% because they felt down (Smith et al., 2024).

Youth substance use may also reach a point where it affects their day-to-day responsibilities, and where they feel or are told they need help for their use. This may be indicative of a substance use disorder, which is a diagnosable condition and considered a mental illness.

In leading mental health initiatives, students may also wish to address substance use. While it is not the specific focus of this toolkit, information and resources about substance use have been included to acknowledge the interconnectedness of substance use and mental health and to support evidence-based approaches.

i WANT TO LEARN MORE? *The BC Ministry of Education and Child Care has developed language guides on understanding mental health and substance use **for educators and school communities**, as well as for **families**. These and other resources are included on [page 48](#).*

How to use this toolkit

The six sections of this toolkit cover all stages of supporting student-led mental health initiatives:

- 1 ABOUT MEANINGFUL STUDENT ENGAGEMENT:** Explores what it means to *meaningfully* engage students, as well as different levels of leadership students can take in a mental health initiative.
- 2 SAFE AND INCLUSIVE ENGAGEMENT IN MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVES:** Discusses different types of mental health initiatives, considerations for students' safety and well-being, and recommendations for accessible and inclusive engagement of students.
- 3 GETTING READY:** Provides activities for school staff and students to reflect on their readiness to support or lead a mental health initiative, and to prepare to take on project planning.
- 4 STEPS TO SUPPORT STUDENT-LED PROJECT PLANNING:** Offers activities to help students plan projects, as well as suggestions for navigating challenges and supporting students who reach out for help.
- 5 MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVE IDEAS AND INSPIRATION:** Shares project ideas from students, and examples of successful student-led mental health-related initiatives from across BC.
- 6 ADDITIONAL MATERIALS:** Contains additional resources, tools, and activities to help students plan their initiative, build mental health literacy, and seek and find needed support.

WHERE TO START

IF YOU...

GO TO...

Have never supported a student-led initiative → *What is meaningful student engagement? (page 7)*

Have supported a student-led initiative, but not about mental health → *Types of mental health initiatives (page 10)*

Have been approached by a student and are wondering if you are ready to support them → *School staff readiness self-reflection (page 20)*

Have experience, capacity, and are ready to help students plan an initiative → *Step-by-step guide to supporting students to plan an initiative (page 25)*

Are looking for mental health project ideas → *Spotlight on BC student-led mental health-related initiatives (page 38)*

Want to learn about mental health → *What is mental health? (page 45)*

Are looking for mental health resources and student engagement activities → *Additional materials (page 47)*

What is meaningful student engagement?

McCREARY DEFINES MEANINGFUL YOUTH ENGAGEMENT AS:

"The meaningful participation and sustainable involvement of young people in shared decisions in matters which affect their lives and those of their community, including planning, decision making, and program delivery."

(McCreary Centre Society, 2009).

In a school setting, this involves ensuring that the environment, resources, and opportunities are available for students to be involved in school life and in the decisions that affect them:

ENVIRONMENT

Students feel their school is safe, inclusive, and respectful. This includes positive relationships with school staff and peers, and a school culture that values student voice and participation.

RESOURCES

School staff help students build their skills and confidence, access the supports or resources they need, and reduce barriers they face to their full participation.

OPPORTUNITIES

Students are provided meaningful opportunities to participate in decisions that affect them in ways that are affirming, accessible, and age appropriate.

Engagement in school-based mental health initiatives is **meaningful** when students:

- Feel their perspectives are appreciated, affirmed, and encouraged.
- Feel safe to show up and to be honest when sharing their perspectives.
- Can see how their contributions are included.

"Student engagement is meaningful when you know that your participation is going to actually do something!"

BUILDING BLOCKS OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

The following principles support meaningful engagement of students in mental health initiatives:

**GROUNDING IN
FIRST NATIONS
VALUES AND
PERSPECTIVES**

**TRAUMA
AWARE AND
INFORMED**

**STRENGTHS-
BASED**

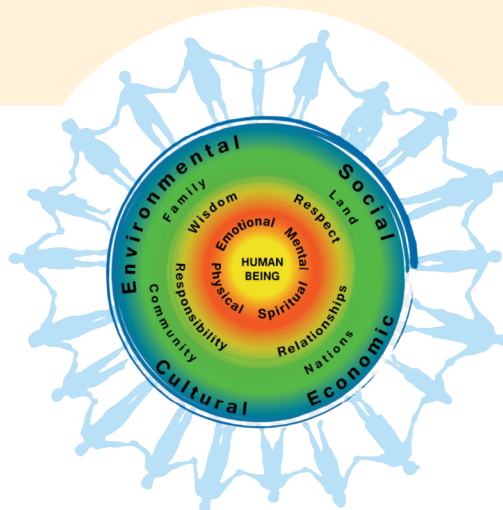
**IDENTITY-
AFFIRMING**



GROUNDING IN FIRST NATION VALUES AND PERSPECTIVES

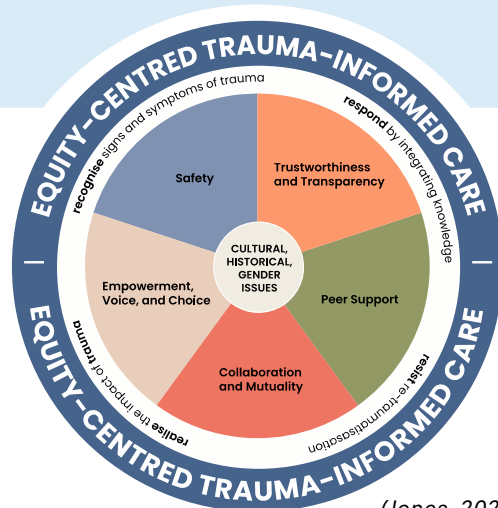
Supporting students around their mental health is rooted in supporting all aspects of a student's well-being, including the relationships and connections with the people, ancestors, community, culture, and land around them.

This is visualized in the First Nations Perspective on Health and Wellness, created by the First Nations Health Authority alongside the knowledge and wisdom of BC First Nations, Elders, and traditional healers.



TRAUMA-AWARE AND INFORMED

A trauma-informed approach centres safety; trust and transparency; peer support; collaboration; voice and choice; and the experiences of diverse identities (Purkey et al., 2018). Supporting student-led mental health initiatives in a trauma-informed way includes recognizing the potential impacts of trauma on students, including on their behaviour, beliefs, decision-making, and connections to others. It also includes the language you use to talk about mental health, and making sure it is respectful and destigmatizing.



(Jones, 2023)

STRENGTHS-BASED

Students are supported and encouraged to contribute to mental health initiatives in ways that highlight their skills, capabilities, and interests. Students can also be supported to identify skills they may not realize they have.

“Students are good at a lot of things outside of school. Giving them a chance to do something that they care about, that they’re passionate about, that they’re good at...that’s a good education, that’s a gift.”

IDENTITY-AFFIRMING

Educators respect and validate that students have unique and intersecting identities that shape their experiences, values, and perspectives about mental health. They also support all students to plan projects that reflect on, acknowledge, and/or address their unique experiences, barriers, and strengths.

“I’m the only one who’s lived my life. I’m the only one who can see what I see and feel what I feel.”

Levels of student engagement

There are different levels of student engagement based on the power students have to choose the initiative they want to lead, plan and carry out tasks, and make decisions. BC students identified three roles students could play in mental health initiatives: **Student Advisors**, **Student Collaborators**, and **Student Leaders**. Different roles may be appropriate at different points in an initiative or within different school contexts, but they can all be meaningful for students.

	STUDENT ADVISORS	STUDENT COLLABORATORS	STUDENT LEADERS
STUDENT ROLE	Share their opinions on topics or questions picked by adults, and contribute their ideas and help make decisions throughout an initiative.	Work together with school staff to identify the mental health-related topic they want to focus on and the project they want to see, and help carry out tasks.	Decide they want to lead a project, pick the focus and goals of the project, create a plan, and are responsible for seeing it through. Mostly self-directed.
ADULT ROLE	Pick initiative focus, create parameters for student involvement, make most decisions, and carry out most project tasks.	Provide consistent and hands-on support, like facilitating planning, following up on tasks, and getting resources.	Provide ongoing support, guidance, and supervision, as needed, to ensure students have what they need.
BENEFITS	- Students have a say with less commitment than other levels. - Helps students build confidence, as well as leadership and interpersonal skills. - Entry point for students or schools newer to student-led initiatives.	- Students get wisdom from adults, but can share their own expertise and ideas. - Students feel a sense of ownership through shared decision-making. - Can build trust and understanding between students and school staff. - Working as a team can build social connections.	- Initiatives are student-centred and could lead to increased buy-in from peers. - Sets positive example for other students and shows value of student voice. - Provides greatest opportunity for hands-on skill building.
CHALLENGES	- Students may lose interest if they don't see change, or don't feel their voices or ideas are heard. - Topics picked by adults may not be what students think are important.	- Needs more staff time and resources than supporting Student Advisors. - Students may need training and support to build skills as they take on leadership roles. - Students could lose interest without a clear role or if initiative is too adult-led.	- Could be overwhelming for students, depending on amount of work involved. - Too little staff support may lead to major challenges (e.g., project setbacks or interpersonal conflicts). - Needs strong and trusting relationships between school staff and students.
EXAMPLES	- Student reps in School Board meeting who consult on student mental health issues. - Students share ideas, help set up school-led mental health fair.	- Students, along with a teacher sponsor, form a student mental health club. - Mental health fair co-planned and co-led by staff and students.	- Well-established student club that operates mostly independently, with some staff support. - Students propose, plan, and carry out a school-wide mental health fair.

Types of mental health initiatives

Students across BC identified many different kinds of mental health initiatives students could lead. These fall into three broad categories, each with different goals: **education and skill building**, **awareness and advocacy**, and **health promotion**. Student-led initiatives can focus on one area or include aspects of them all. Supporting students to think about what they hope to achieve can help them decide what kind of project to lead.

1

EDUCATION & SKILL BUILDING

These projects help students learn about mental health-related topics or resources, and/or build skills in those areas.

Project examples from BC students:

- Workshops created and led by older students to help younger students manage test anxiety.
- Student-designed posters or zines to bust myths and share facts about vaping.
- A mental health club hosting a school-wide mental health fair to share community resources.

2

AWARENESS & ADVOCACY

These initiatives raise awareness to the experiences of those with mental health-related challenges, and/or advocate for positive change for those affected by such challenges.

Project examples from BC students:

- Student-created film following a fictional character and the mental health challenges they face.
- Student bake sale to raise money and awareness of the substance-free services provided at a local youth centre.
- Student-led assembly to raise awareness about living with Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD).

3

HEALTH PROMOTION

Projects promoting overall well-being can also provide positive experiences for those facing mental health challenges. Such projects centre an Indigenous perspective on health, recognizing the relationship between mental health and overall well-being. This could include building connections with peers, community, land, and culture; supporting school safety and belonging; or providing opportunities for students to engage in fun and inclusive activities.

Project examples from BC students:

- Connecting with Elders to plan a nature walk to learn about traditional medicines.
- Creating a Kindness Club to promote a positive and caring school environment.
- Designing a calming school space that is welcoming, comfortable, and inclusive for students.

i WANT MORE PROJECT IDEAS?

Find examples of successful student-led projects from across BC on [page 38](#) and more of BC students' suggestions for mental health initiatives on [page 39](#).

Considerations for student safety and well-being

BC students recognize that mental health-related topics can be sensitive, and that school staff play an important role in creating conditions where students feel safe and supported to engage in initiatives on these topics. Here are some things school staff could think about to help students feel ready to lead mental health initiatives:

PRIORITIZE STUDENTS' PSYCHOLOGICAL AND EMOTIONAL SAFETY.

An emotionally and psychologically safe environment is one in which students feel comfortable, respected, and able to contribute their ideas when and how they prefer.

Examples of what BC students have found useful include:

- Establish a group agreement to outline what students need to feel safe (see [page 24](#) for more on creating a group agreement). For example, this could include agreeing on the language and terms to be used to ensure it is inclusive and welcoming for everyone, and strategies for addressing challenges or unintended harm (e.g., listening and learning with an open mind, being respectful of different experiences, agreeing to ask and not assume).
- ***“Start meetings off in a good way”***, such as with a group check-in, grounding activity, or mindfulness practice (see [page 59](#) for examples). This could include a smudging, if led by a First Nations Elder, knowledge keeper, or someone who holds traditional teachings in this practice.
- Ensure students do not feel pressured to share their personal experiences. Check in with students regularly to discuss how they are feeling and any challenges they may be experiencing.

BE AWARE OF UNINTENDED IMPACTS ON THOSE WITH LIVED AND LIVING EXPERIENCE.

Lived or living experience is when someone has first-hand experience of an issue (past or present), through which they have gained personal knowledge or expertise. Students may or may not wish to share their lived experience of mental health challenges.

Examples of what BC students have found useful include:

- Support students with lived or living experience to set boundaries, recognize when they may need support, and know where they can go for help.
- Provide opportunities for all students to learn about the topics. This ensures the responsibility does not fall solely on the student(s) with lived or living experience.
- Do not expect students with lived or living experience to be experts or spokespersons, as this may contribute to feelings of overwhelm or pressure to share more of their personal experiences than they feel comfortable sharing.
- Acknowledge if you realize (or it is brought to your attention) that you have said something or used language that may be upsetting to someone with lived or living experience.

CONSIDER THE IMPACT OF LANGUAGE.

Any conversations about mental health should be approached through a non-judgmental and non-stigmatizing lens. The language used to talk about mental health-related challenges is often reflective of one's personal beliefs and can either encourage or discourage students from seeking, or continuing to seek, support.

BC students identified that talking about mental health in a trauma-informed, non-judgmental, and non-stigmatizing way includes:

- Not assigning blame or morality to experiences of mental health or substance use (e.g., those who use drugs are “bad” and those who don’t are “good”).
→ **Instead:** Recognize that mental health challenges may be the result of circumstances in a person's life that affect the choices, resources, and opportunities available to them.
- Avoiding fear-based messaging, such as scare tactics or emphasizing the harms of using substances.
→ **Instead:** Use language that is neutral and informative in tone and messaging that is factual, evidence based, and that can encourage healthy decision-making and behaviours.
- Using language that is respectful, non-stigmatizing, and person-centred when discussing those with mental health or substance use challenges.
→ **For example:** “neurotic” can be a stigmatizing term used to refer to someone who is struggling with anxiety, depression, or OCD. **Instead,** using terms such as, “a person experiencing mental health challenges” or “a person living with an anxiety disorder” acknowledges the challenges someone may be experiencing in a respectful, non-stigmatizing way.

i **WANT TO LEARN MORE ABOUT WHY LANGUAGE MATTERS?** Find resources about using trauma-informed language when talking about mental health and substance use on **page 50**.

MAKE SURE STUDENTS KNOW HOW TO PROVIDE AND SEEK SUPPORT.

Examples of what BC students have found useful include:

- Invite students to identify helpful strategies or supports for them, and consider signs that they may need to step back from a project and/or seek help. Identifying self care or support strategies may be challenging if students are actively feeling distressed, so these could be considered early in the process. For example, school staff could facilitate a reflection activity at the start of the project to help each student come up with a list of what they might need or who they can reach out to if they are experiencing challenges.
- Students may be the first to notice their peers' struggles, or may first seek help from others in the group if they are struggling. Share information on supporting peers, including when and how to involve a trusted adult, and how to establish and maintain boundaries to support their own well-being.
- Ensure students know where and how to access school and community supports, if needed.

i **LOOKING FOR SUPPORT?** Find mental health and substance use services available for BC students on **page 48**, and resources to help students support their peers on **page 51**.

ENSURE SCHOOL STAFF HAVE SUPPORT, TOO.

- Staff without specialized mental health training should consult with appropriate school professionals (e.g., school counsellors) to clarify the limits of their role, and when and where they should refer students needing additional support.
- School staff should clearly communicate their roles and limitations of those roles to students at the start of, and throughout, the initiative-planning process.
- Staff should be aware of any policies or protocols at their school for supporting student-led initiatives, and any limits on the types of student-led projects they can support.

i **LOOKING FOR RESOURCES AND SUPPORT?** *There are limits to the support school staff can provide, but it can be helpful to build your mental health literacy and awareness of mental health supports available for youth in BC. Learn more on [page 48](#).*

ENCOURAGE HEALTH-PROMOTING AND EVIDENCE-BASED APPROACHES.

Students should be supported to learn about and apply health-promoting, evidence-based approaches when talking about or leading mental health initiatives. Doing so could build their capacity, foster deepened engagement in their project, and ensure initiatives do not promote ineffective or harmful messaging or activities.

To lead health-promoting and evidence-based initiatives, students could be supported to:

- Learn about and incorporate trauma-informed and harm reduction principles into their initiative planning. For example, if students are looking to lead a project sharing abstinence-based messaging about substance use in order to reduce peers' substance use and improve mental health, they could be encouraged to look for data on the relationship between mental health and substance use, research effective substance use messaging, and explore how principles of harm reduction could be incorporated.
- Explore factors and evidence-based strategies to prevent or reduce substance use, or to promote positive mental well-being. Students could then be encouraged to find ways to incorporate these into their initiatives.
- Find health-promoting activities for themselves, as well. Encourage students to identify and incorporate evidence-based health-promoting behaviours which may support their own mental well-being, like going offline before bed, spending time in nature, and connecting with their community.



MAKE TIME FOR REGULAR CHECK-INS AND REFLECTION.

Building time for reflection is important not only to celebrate successes and identify challenges, but also to give students dedicated time to think about how they are feeling and what they need. Below are suggested questions for checking in with students about their initiatives and their own well-being. It may also be helpful for school staff who are supporting students in leading a project to reflect on these questions for themselves.

PROJECT CHECK-IN QUESTIONS

- What is currently going well?
- What is feeling challenging or difficult?
- Do you have the support you need? If not, what else is needed?
- What are you most proud of so far?
- What is something you've learned as part of the project planning so far?

STUDENT REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- How is working on this project affecting your own well-being?
- Does any part of this project feel overwhelming or challenging?
- Are there any boundaries or responsibilities that should be revisited for your well-being?
- Do you have the support you need? If not, what supports would be helpful?



WONDERING WHAT KIND OF SUPPORT STUDENTS MIGHT NEED FROM SCHOOL STAFF? See what BC students shared in their conversations with the BC STAT on [page 40](#).

Recognizing and engaging the diversity of students

Student-led mental health-related initiatives are most effective when they are accessible, inclusive, and engaging for all students. There may be many different reasons why students face barriers to leading mental health initiatives, and different types of barriers they experience. This includes students living with a disability or health condition, as well as students with diverse abilities.

Throughout the BC STAT members' conversations, their peers who identified as having a disability, disabilities, and/or diverse abilities emphasized the importance of students' agency in identifying their support needs. They strongly recommended that school staff ask students what they may need to fully participate, rather than making assumptions.

"Students know what they need most."

Education partners added that some students may require additional support to be able to articulate their needs and wants when planning and leading an initiative.

Recommendations from both BC students and educators closely align with the *Universal Design for Learning* framework, which encourages:

MULTIPLE MEANS OF REPRESENTATION:

providing multiple ways to access information and content.

MULTIPLE MEANS OF ACTION AND EXPRESSION:

allowing learners to demonstrate what they know in different ways.

MULTIPLE MEANS OF ENGAGEMENT:

providing learners with multiple ways to engage with content, activities, and assessments.

BC students with lived and living experience shared the following tangible strategies that have helped them and may help other students in leading mental health-related initiatives. These could be used as a starting point for school staff, and applied or adapted based on their specific school context and the unique strengths and needs of the involved students.

NOTE:

This is not a definitive list of strategies to reduce barriers students may face and support needs students may have to meaningfully engage in student-led mental health initiatives. It is important to reflect on and support the diverse strengths, abilities, and needs of each student, such as by consulting with and actively involving appropriate school support staff and/or community partners as well as the student themselves.

PROVIDE DIFFERENT WAYS STUDENTS CAN PARTICIPATE.

WHY IT'S IMPORTANT: Helps all students feel able to follow the conversation, contribute their ideas, and feel they have a role in planning and leading an initiative.

SUGGESTIONS FROM BC STUDENTS AND EDUCATION PARTNERS:

- If students with disabilities, diverse abilities, or other needs (e.g., language barriers) have dedicated school supports (e.g., education assistant, settlement worker), with students' permission, ensure these adults are involved in your preparation to support an initiative, as well as in the project planning. They may be able to identify strategies to support the students' full participation, and can provide consistent and individualized support throughout the process.
- Provide a range of methods of participation, such as written (e.g., sticky notes) and digital tools (e.g., Miro boards: miro.com), as well as small and large group discussions. Using images, art, or other creative activities could also be used to generate ideas and plan project components, and may reduce language-related barriers to participation.
- Provide worksheets for group discussion to allow students to follow the discussion and write their responses instead of/in addition to sharing them aloud.
- Explore different roles students could have in an initiative, and help them find one that best suits their skills, interests, and comfort level (e.g., designing posters, tracking budgets and project tasks, public speaking).
- Remind students that participation is voluntary and that they do not have to participate in activities or discussions if they do not wish to.

SHARE INFORMATION IN ACCESSIBLE, CLEAR & YOUTH-FRIENDLY WAYS

WHY IT'S IMPORTANT: Makes sure information and materials are shared in a way that supports all students to understand and engage with them.

SUGGESTIONS FROM BC STUDENTS AND EDUCATION PARTNERS:

- Share information in different ways to support diverse abilities and different learning styles, including in verbal and written formats.
 - Use clear, specific, concrete, and accessible language that all students understand.
 - Explain key terms and provide definitions for words that students may not be familiar with, especially those related to mental health and the initiative students may wish to lead. This could include a co-created glossary that involves students in identifying terms to include, finding out what they mean, and adding their definitions.
 - If appropriate for and inclusive of the students in your project group, create visual materials (e.g., calendars, checklists, tracking sheets) that break down project activities into small, manageable actions and include deadlines with who is responsible for each task. These visual reminders can support executive functioning, and marking off tasks as they are completed can bring students a sense of accomplishment.
- ➔ **Additional suggestions:** Incorporating colour coding, labels, icons, and other visual cues can help some students identify important information.

SUPPORT EMOTIONAL AND SENSORY WELL-BEING

WHY IT'S IMPORTANT: Mental health-related topics may be deeply personal or emotionally activating for some students, and the meeting space and structure may additionally affect their well-being. Creating an environment where all students feel comfortable and supported will allow everyone in the group to participate fully.

SUGGESTIONS FROM BC STUDENTS AND EDUCATION PARTNERS:

- Start each planning session with a check-in, mindfulness, or grounding activity to help students identify how they are feeling, regulate and calm their emotions, and shift their focus to the purpose of the session. Find examples of grounding activities on [page 59](#).
- Invite students to take meditation or movement breaks, especially during long periods of group discussion or focus, or when students may be showing signs of disengagement or dysregulation.
- During planning sessions, provide opportunities for students to break up tasks that require deep thinking, focus, or attention to detail with those that are physical, hands-on, and/or engaging in different ways.
- Rearrange the meeting space to make it accessible, comfortable, and appropriate for students' needs (e.g., moving furniture, switching to softer lighting).
- Provide fidget toys or other activities for students to engage with (e.g., colouring, pipe cleaners), or encourage students to bring items or engage in activities that may support their participation (e.g., knitting).
- Encourage and provide opportunities for students to ask for what they need to participate fully and comfortably and support them where possible. If students cannot identify their support needs, they could be asked to identify how they are feeling, such as through a check-in activity, and asked what they think might feel good or comfortable for them based on how they are feeling. If students are unsure, suggestions for strategies or tools could be provided, and students should have agency in deciding what they need. For example, if a student identifies as feeling "tired," they could be supported to identify what kind of tired they may be feeling (e.g., physically, mentally) and invited to think about what support they might need. Suggestions could include a movement or meditation break, switching to another kind of activity, or ending/leaving a meeting early.

Engaging students in different grades

Student leadership and engagement can look different across grades and developmental stages, as can their understanding and experiences of mental health. For example, 2023 BC Adolescent Health Survey (BC AHS) results showed that students in higher grades were more likely to report various mental health conditions (e.g., 6% of Grade 12 students reported experiencing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder vs. 3% of Grade 7 students), and students in lower grades were more likely to have self-harmed (e.g., 26% of Grade 7 students had self-harmed in the past year vs. 21% of Grade 12 students; Smith et al., 2024).

Below are suggestions for engaging students in different grades based on a general understanding of stages of adolescent development and the perspectives and experiences of the BC STAT. It is important to consider that each student's development and maturity level will be different, and to adapt these suggestions and your approach based on the unique strengths and needs of the students involved.

SUGGESTIONS FOR ENGAGING GRADE 7–8 STUDENTS

- Co-create a plain language group agreement to help students contribute to and understand group norms and expectations, and to build social acceptance within the group.
- Provide opportunities for students to build their social-emotional skills as well as project-specific ones. This could include self-regulation, respectful communication, and conflict resolution; as well as time management, budgeting, and organizing and initiating tasks.
- Keep projects shorter in duration (more present- than future-focused) and focused on concrete and interactive activities.
- Initiatives should be developmentally appropriate, with a particular focus on health promotion.
- Take an active role in facilitating planning, while also allowing students room to explore and assert their autonomy. Grade 7 and 8 students may have the capacity to lead projects, but are more likely to be involved as **Student Advisors** and **Collaborators** than students in higher grades. Where possible, provide opportunities for them to take on independent roles and responsibilities.

SUGGESTIONS FOR ENGAGING GRADE 9–10 STUDENTS

- Provide opportunities for student autonomy, such as allowing students to choose how they contribute to an initiative and expanding students' roles in decision-making.
- Provide opportunities for students to build skills and be involved in more complex tasks, like creating a budget and timeline, identifying needed resources, and planning other logistics.
- Be visible and available to support students, without pressuring them to share. Fostering a trusting relationship with students will help them feel comfortable and safe to seek support if and when they need it.
- Initiatives may focus on specific or sensitive mental health or substance use topics, and include a critical analysis of related social beliefs, stigma, and systems.

SUGGESTIONS FOR ENGAGING GRADE 11–12 STUDENTS

- Offer opportunities for student autonomy and leadership, while still providing some shared decision-making and adult oversight.
- Check in with students about their availability over the course of the initiative, and if there are times when they may not be able to participate due to other commitments.
- Students may want to build skills specific to their plans after high school. Provide meaningful opportunities for students to identify, develop, and practice these skills.
- If appropriate to the group and context (and you feel equipped to do so), explore and engage in discussions of complex topics, like stigma and harm reduction.

CROSS-GRADE CONSIDERATIONS

While there may be grade-specific considerations, here are some ways to meaningfully engage students, regardless of grade:

- Age and development should be considered, but avoid making assumptions about readiness or capacity based solely on age. Invite students to assess their own readiness, the skills they have and want to build, and what and how they want to contribute to a project.
- Establish clear roles and boundaries in order to build safety and certainty for students of all grade levels. This can include clarity on the project-specific roles of students and staff, the emotional support that school staff can (and cannot) provide, and where and how students can access other needed supports.
- If possible, provide opportunities for peer mentoring, support, and collaboration, especially for students across grades. Cross-grade connections can support social-emotional learning, students' sense of belonging, and a safe and caring school environment.

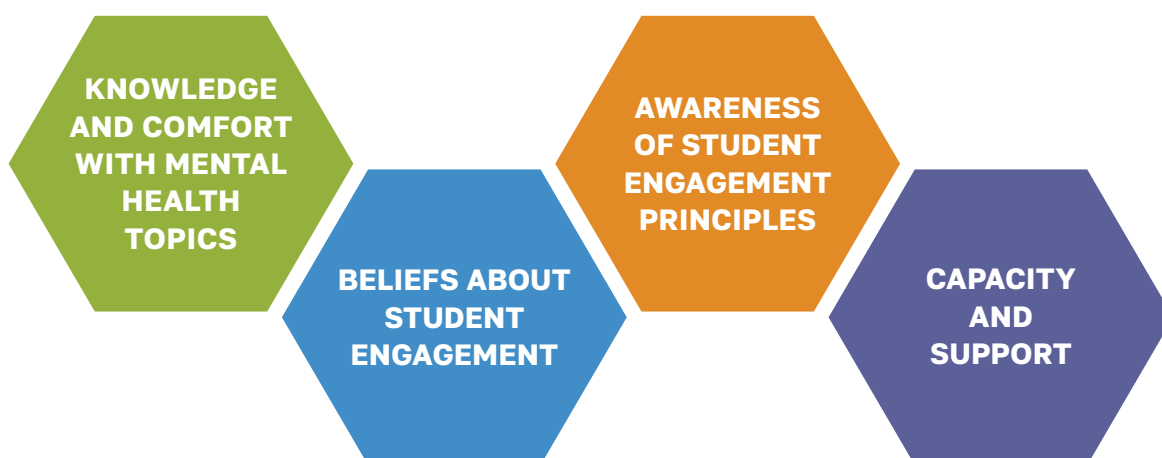


WONDERING WHAT KIND OF SUPPORT STUDENTS MIGHT NEED FROM SCHOOL STAFF? See what BC students shared in their conversations with the BC STAT on [page 40](#).

School staff readiness self-reflection

“To lead a project, I would need a teacher or school staff member that has the time to help with planning and acts as a supportive and wise consultant.”

This self-reflection exercise can help school staff decide if they are ready to support student-led mental health-related initiatives. These statements reflect the beliefs, knowledge, and skills that BC students and education partners felt were important for school staff supporting student-led mental health projects. Reflection questions cover the following areas:



TO COMPLETE THE SELF-REFLECTION:

Please read and reflect on each statement (starting on [page 21](#)) and rate how true you feel it is for you, from **1: “NOT AT ALL TRUE”** to **5: “VERY TRUE.”**

You do not have to score a 5 in every area to support a student-led initiative, but it may help to reflect on the areas in which you score yourself lower. For example, if you indicated that being comfortable sharing decision making with students was not at all true for you, then you may want to work on a project with **Student Advisors** rather than one with **Student Collaborators** or **Leaders**.

There are no right or wrong answers, and this is not an assessment of your skills as an educator. It is a chance to reflect on what you are already doing well to meaningfully engage students, your capacity to support a student-led project at this time, as well as areas where you may wish to seek additional support or education.

Statements are broad and may not include details or context that could affect your responses. Please answer the best you can based on how you generally approach student engagement and support.

NOTE: A printable/fillable version of this self-reflection is available on [page 52](#).

1. KNOWLEDGE AND COMFORT WITH MENTAL HEALTH TOPICS

	1 NOT AT ALL TRUE	2 A LITTLE TRUE	3 SOMEWHAT TRUE	4 QUITE TRUE	5 VERY TRUE	N/A
I have a basic understanding of mental health topics.						
I am aware of my beliefs about mental health, and if/how they affect my ability to support students in a non-judgmental way.						
I know where to find reliable, youth-friendly mental health information and resources.						
I feel comfortable responding to students' questions about mental health, including if they are seeking support.						
I know when and how to refer students to appropriate supports.						

2. BELIEFS ABOUT STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

	1 NOT AT ALL TRUE	2 A LITTLE TRUE	3 SOMEWHAT TRUE	4 QUITE TRUE	5 VERY TRUE	N/A
I listen to and respect students' ideas.						
I believe students are capable of leading mental health projects.						
I am comfortable sharing decision making with students, where appropriate.						
I see mistakes as part of student learning and growth.						
I value students' lived and living experience as a form of expertise.						
I am comfortable stepping back when students are in a leadership role.						
I am able to provide input or re-direction, if needed, without taking over.						

3. AWARENESS OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT PRINCIPLES

	1 NOT AT ALL TRUE	2 A LITTLE TRUE	3 SOMEWHAT TRUE	4 QUITE TRUE	5 VERY TRUE	N/A
I actively work to integrate First Nations Ways of Knowing and approaches to learning when supporting student-led initiatives.						
I consider how a student's identity shapes their experiences and perspectives.						
I actively work to ensure projects and resources reflect the cultural diversity of students.						
I understand how trauma and other adverse experiences may impact student behaviours and participation.						
I provide different participation options for different skills, strengths, and comfort levels.						
I know where to seek additional education, guidance, and support on any of these principles.						

4. CAPACITY AND SUPPORT

	1 NOT AT ALL TRUE	2 A LITTLE TRUE	3 SOMEWHAT TRUE	4 QUITE TRUE	5 VERY TRUE	N/A
I have the time within my role to support a student-led initiative.						
I know school staff and/or community partners I could reach out to for help or to ask questions about mental health.						
I know of resources, school staff, and/or community partners I could reach out to if I need help to support students with disabilities or diverse abilities to participate.						
I am aware of school and/or school district policy regarding approvals for student-led initiatives, and any limits that may be set on these initiatives.						
I have administrative support to supervise a student-led mental health initiative.*						

*Make sure to follow all school and school district policies on supporting student-led initiatives, and to seek and receive all necessary approvals from school administration before the start of the project, and throughout planning.

i **WANT TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THESE TOPICS?** This exercise may have pointed out topics you feel less comfortable with or want to explore further. Resources to learn more about mental health, as well as supporting diverse students, are available in **Additional materials (page 47)**.

Student readiness self-reflection

FOR STUDENTS WHO WANT TO LEAD A MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVE:

Here are some things BC STAT members feel are important to think about before diving in. Even if you are passionate about the topic, thinking through these statements before you start a project can help make sure you are in a good place with the right support to see it through.

Please read each statement and reflect on how you feel about it. You do not have to be a **“YES”** for all statements in order to lead a project. However, for any statement you check **“NOT SURE”** or **“NOT YET”**, think about what you might need to feel supported in that area. If most of your responses are **“NOT SURE”** or **“NOT YET”** on these statements, you may also prefer to be a **Student Advisor** or **Student Collaborator** on a project, rather than a **Student Leader**.

NOTE: A printable/fillable worksheet with additional reflection questions is on **page 54**.

MOTIVATION AND PURPOSE*

	YES	NOT SURE	NOT YET
I care about this topic and know why it matters to me.			
I can describe what impact I hope this project will have on others and myself.			
I think this is a project that other students care about and would participate in.			
I am motivated to lead this project, even if plans change or challenges come up.			

TIME, ENERGY, AND WELL-BEING

	YES	NOT SURE	NOT YET
I have time in my schedule to work on this project.			
I have the energy to take on this commitment.			
My own mental health is in a place where I feel I can lead this project.			
I have thought of ways I can take care of my well-being, and minimize or manage feeling overwhelmed or stressed out.			
I know where I can go or who I can talk to if I need support.			

PROJECT SUPPORT

	YES	NOT SURE	NOT YET
I have at least one school staff member who can support this project.			
I know friends or other students who might want to help.			
I feel comfortable asking for help, sharing responsibilities, and delegating tasks related to the project, including with school staff and peers.			
I have thought of ways I can take care of my well-being, and minimize or manage feeling overwhelmed or stressed out.			

**Not sure what your project focus or goal will be yet? That's okay! You can start with a big idea and ask the school staff member supporting you to help you figure out what you want to focus on during the project planning process.*

Establishing a safe and supportive space

Before you support students to plan a mental health initiative, it is important to first think about the space where they will meet and whether it feels welcoming to everyone.

Whether students are meeting as part of a class, school club, or in another way, here are some suggestions for creating a safe, supported, and inclusive space for students:

CREATING AN EMOTIONALLY SAFE SPACE

- Support students to create a group agreement (see below).
- Offer choice and flexibility whenever possible, such as providing various ways for students to contribute.
- Where possible, be transparent about decisions, activities, and outcomes, especially where students have limited involvement.
- Validate students' experiences without asking or requiring them to disclose personal information.
- Ensure information about school and community resources is readily available.

CREATING A PHYSICALLY SAFE AND ACCESSIBLE SPACE

Thinking about the meeting space, consider:

- Is the space accessible to students with disabilities or diverse abilities?
- Is the space suitable for different learning and participation needs?
- Do students feel comfortable and welcome in this space?
- Is the space set up to encourage participation, collaboration, and group discussion?
- Do students feel a sense of ownership of the space while they meet?
- Do students see themselves and their identities reflected and celebrated in the space?

GROUP AGREEMENTS

A group agreement is a set of shared guidelines created by students to outline what they need to feel safe and included, the ways they agree to work together, and how they wish to support each other. It should be created at the start of the project, and can be changed and added to over time.

It can be helpful to create a group agreement on a large poster paper, which can then be displayed during meetings as a reminder of the group's shared expectations.

GROUP AGREEMENTS SHOULD AIM TO BE:

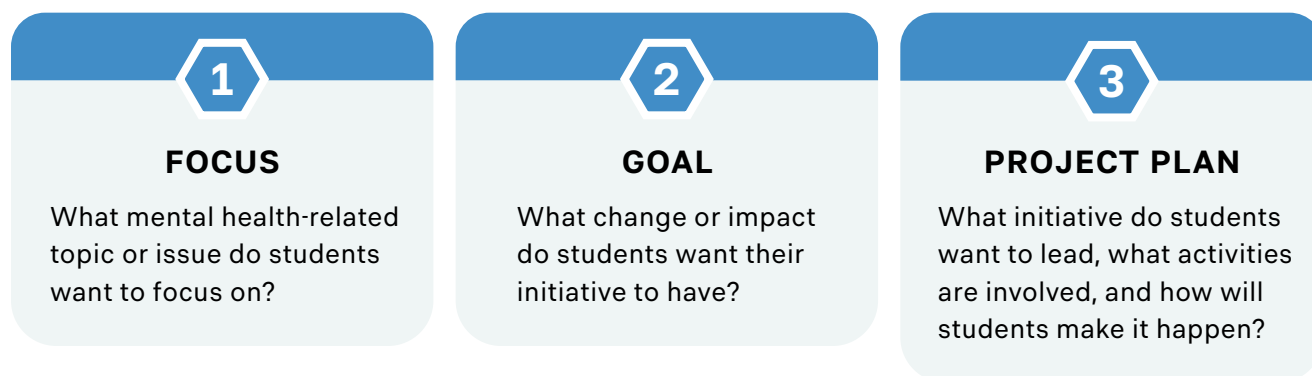
CO-CREATED: Ensure all students have a chance to share and discuss what they need to participate.

STRENGTHS-BASED: Instead of statements that say what **not** to do (e.g., *"Do not interrupt"*), try to use language that **encourages** behaviours students wish to see (e.g., *"Let others finish speaking"*).

UNDERSTOOD AND AGREED ON BY ALL: Each student may need different things, but everyone should have a clear understanding of the intent of each statement and agree to its inclusion in the group agreement.

Step-by-step guide to supporting students to plan an initiative

IT'S TIME FOR STUDENTS TO TURN THEIR IDEAS INTO ACTION. Any student-led initiative should start with a clear plan that outlines:



Supporting students through each step can help them to develop a clear and detailed plan for their mental health-related initiative, and help them towards the fourth step—putting it all into action.

! BEFORE PROJECT PLANNING: Make sure to follow your school and school district's policies on supporting student-led initiatives, and seek all necessary approvals from your school administration throughout the planning process.



STEP 1: IDENTIFY A FOCUS

→ WHAT TOPIC DO STUDENTS WANT TO FOCUS ON?

Having a clear idea about what students want to focus on and why they think it is important can help you to support project planning and help students stay motivated and on track.

Guiding students through the reflection questions on [page 26](#) can help them to identify a mental health-related topic (e.g., substance use, anxiety) they want to address through their initiative. Students may have a broad topic they want to focus on, but should aim to be as specific as possible. Asking clarifying questions can help to narrow their focus.

IDENTIFYING A FOCUS: Reflection questions

Ask students:

- What mental health-related topic do you want to address?
- Why is this important for students at our school?
- What would make a project on this topic feel like a success?

If students already know *what* they want to do, but don't have a clear idea of what it aims to address or why it is important, you could ask:

- Why does this project feel important to you?
- How do you think it will promote mental health or address mental health-related challenges?
- Why do you feel this would be meaningful for other students?

i **WANT SOMETHING MORE HANDS-ON?** Find interactive activities to help students pick a project focus on **page 55**.



STEP 2: SET A GOAL

→ WHAT IMPACT DO STUDENTS WANT THEIR INITIATIVE TO HAVE?

Thinking about the impact students hope their initiative will have can help them decide what kinds of activities to lead. Guide students through the below reflection questions to help them set clear and specific project goals and to prevent projects from becoming too broad, overwhelming, or out of scope.

SETTING PROJECT GOALS: Reflection questions

** Remind students to think specifically about goals related to mental health.*

Ask students:

- What do you hope other students will take away from this initiative?
- What do you hope school staff will take away from this initiative?
- What change do you hope this project will have now and in the future?
- What is within our power to change?

For example: students may wish to improve mental health supports at school. Hiring more school counsellors is a goal that is out of students' control, opening a school-based wellness centre would be a long-term goal that students could co-lead with school staff and community partners, and providing peer support training for students could be implemented this year.

Keeping a record of the goals can be helpful for students to refer back to and help them stay focused on what they are aiming to achieve. This record could be displayed visually during meetings, regularly shared verbally, or shared in another way, depending on the needs of the students in the group.

When students are making decisions throughout project planning, it can be helpful for you and the students to refer to the project goal and ask: ***Does this decision support what we set out to do?***



STEP 3: DEVELOP A PROJECT PLAN

→ WHAT DO STUDENTS WANT TO DO, AND HOW WILL IT HAPPEN?

To support students to figure out what they want to do and how they'll make it happen, they can work through the prompts in each of the sections below. Students can draft their project plan outline in a notebook, on flip chart paper, or in another way, or you can print out the ***Project planning worksheet*** on ***page 60***. BC STAT members have also shared some tips and reflection questions to help students plan engaging and accessible projects.

PROJECT PLANNING PROMPTS FOR STUDENTS	
AREA OF FOCUS	• What topic or issue are we focusing on? • Why is this topic important in our school? • Who is this project for (e.g., specific grades, a class)?
PROJECT GOAL	• What impact or change are we hoping our project will have? • What are we hoping others will get out of this project?
TYPE OF PROJECT	• What type of project do we want to lead (circle all that apply): EDUCATION & SKILL BUILDING ADVOCACY & AWARENESS HEALTH PROMOTION
ACTIVITIES	• What do we want to do (e.g., workshop, fair, create posters)? • What tasks are involved in planning for this project? <i>From the BC STAT: A few things to think about...</i> ➤ Do these activities support our goal(s)? ➤ Is this project idea realistic with the time, energy, and resources we have? ➤ Is what we're planning inclusive of students with disabilities or diverse abilities? If not, how could be it changed or adapted so all students can participate? ➤ Is what we're planning likely to be engaging and interesting for students? ➤ What could motivate students to participate? ➤ Are project activities accessible and easy for students to participate in? (<i>Tip: Students may not participate if it is unclear what the project is; what it entails; and how, where, and when they can get involved. To encourage participation, think about how to make activities easy and low barrier to join.</i>)

TIMELINE	• When do we want the project to be complete (e.g., an event date)? • When will the project tasks need to happen? From the BC STAT: A few things to think about... ★ <i>Tip: Things can take a lot longer than you think. Try to be realistic about how long things might take and, if you can, build in extra time to complete project tasks.</i> ■ Are there other factors that could affect the timeline (e.g., school breaks, exam week)? ■ Are there tasks that have to happen by a certain date? These are called 'hard' deadlines, and you could mark them with a star on your project plan to show they are important. ■ Are there tasks that do not have to happen by a certain date? These are called 'soft' deadlines. They can be flexible depending on other tasks, but should still have a deadline. ■ What will we do if the timeline doesn't go to plan?
ROLES & RESPONSIBILITIES	• Who can help with which project tasks? • Which tasks will a school staff have to help with? • Are there tasks or project activities that we don't have someone to help with? Who could we ask to help? From the BC STAT: A few things to think about... ★ <i>Tip: Think of the skills you bring to the project, the ones you want to build, and anything that might affect your involvement (e.g., time, your own well-being) to determine what your role and responsibilities could be. Most importantly, be realistic and don't be afraid to ask for help!</i> ■ How will we decide who is responsible for which tasks? ■ How will we hold each other accountable for our responsibilities, and how will we support each other in meeting them?
RESOURCES	• What do we need to make this project happen? Think about: space, equipment, school approvals. From the BC STAT: A few things to think about... ★ <i>Tip: Think about everything you need to turn your idea into action. That includes the physical resources you might need (e.g., space, craft supplies, printing), as well as the digital (e.g., Canva), and everything else (e.g., school approvals, practice public speaking).</i> ■ Where can we get the resources we need for this project?

BUDGET	• Are there projects we can do without funding? • What will we need to buy or rent for this project? • How much will every item cost? • Could we ask our school or community networks for any donations? • Are there things we could do without if we don't have enough funding? → Find more information about grants you could apply for on page 64. From the BC STAT: A few things to think about... ■ Where can we get the money we need for the project? ■ Does the school have money we can use towards our project? ■ Do we have to apply for a grant? (<i>Tip: If so, make sure to plan for how long it could take to apply and get the money in your timeline.</i>) ■ What will we do if we don't get (or don't get enough) funding?
RISKS & CHALLENGES	• Are there any challenges that might come up in planning this project? • Are there potential risks to the broader school community that might come up due to this event or initiative? • Is there anything we can do to prepare for those challenges or lessen the risks?
SUPPORT NEEDS	• Project: What, if any, supports might we need to help students who participate to feel safe and supported? • Group: Do we have the staff support we need to lead this project? • Individual: Do I have the support I need to take care of my well-being during this project?
MEASURING IMPACT	• How will we know this project has been successful/met our goal? • How will we measure that it has gone well (e.g., feedback forms, attendance record)? → Find more information about evaluating an initiative on page 30.

i WANT SOME INSPIRATION? Find examples of successful student-led mental health-related initiatives on [page 38](#), and a list of project ideas suggested by BC students on [page 39](#).

MEASURING IMPACT

Once students know what they want to do and have a plan to make it happen, they can think about how they want to measure the impact of their initiative.

Evaluation is not about labelling an initiative as a “success” (i.e., it met all its goals) or “failure” (i.e., it did not meet its goals). Evaluation is the process of seeing what worked well and what could be improved, what impact an initiative had, and whether it was valuable and meaningful to students and the school community.

Outcomes of an initiative may be:

TANGIBLE

Things you can **count or measure** (e.g., students’ responses on a feedback form, such as how satisfied they were with an event they attended, or how many skills they gained through taking part).

INTANGIBLE

Things that **can’t be easily counted or measured** (e.g., reduced stigma about mental health or substance use, stronger relationships between students and school staff).

Some ways students could measure or evaluate the impact of their initiative:

- Creating and distributing a feedback form for participants to share their experiences.
- Creating and completing a questionnaire at the start and end of the initiative to share their experiences and identify the skills they gained.
- Reflection activities, like **Give, Get, Got** or **Head-Heart-Hands** (page 57).

Students may also want to keep track of the outputs from their project, such as how many people attended an event, or the number of posters they created and distributed on a specific topic.

Find an introduction to evaluation at mcs.bc.ca/pdf/asking_questions_that_matter.pdf, including different ways to evaluate your initiative (on page 18 of “**Asking questions that matter**”), asking the right questions (page 30), interactive activities (pages 34–35, page 41), and creating a feedback form (page 58).



STEP 3.5: SCHOOL APPROVAL

You should have already received the necessary approval to supervise a student-led mental health initiative. After students have developed a comprehensive plan for the project they are seeking to implement, make sure to get any needed school and/or district approval before students launch the project. Depending on their role, the students could be involved in presenting their proposal to the school and/or district leadership.



STEP 4: PUTTING THE PLAN INTO ACTION

Once students have:

- ✓ A project plan
- ✓ Clear roles, responsibilities, and tasks to accomplish (with deadlines to accomplish them)
- ✓ The support they need, including from school staff, peers, and/or community services
- ✓ A budget to make their initiative happen

...it's time to get started!

Leading a mental health-related initiative can be exciting and empowering for students. It can also be stressful, especially if things do not go exactly to plan.

IF CHALLENGES COME UP, HERE ARE TIPS TO KEEP THINGS RUNNING SMOOTHLY:

- **COMMUNICATE!** Make sure everyone is clear on what they are doing, who can support them, and when they need to complete it. Encourage the initiative team (including school staff) to communicate progress, changes, and challenges clearly, regularly, and as early as possible. This includes regular communication with school administration to ensure they are aware of and approve each stage of the project. They may also be able to offer support or guidance.
- **GO WITH THE FLOW.** Plans may have to change or adapt along the way, and that's okay! Support students to recognize when and how plans may need to change, brainstorm creative solutions, and develop a revised project plan.
- **CHECK IN REGULARLY.** As the initiative progresses, make sure to check in with students regularly as a group and individually to make sure they have the support they need for the project and their own well-being. The check-in and reflection questions on [page 14](#) may be helpful.
- **CELEBRATE PROGRESS AND SUCCESSES BIG AND SMALL.** Taking time to acknowledge students' progress, reflect on what is going well, and celebrate the early successes and impacts of students' initiative can keep up motivation and momentum.

Navigating potential challenges

Even the most well-planned and supported student-led initiatives can include challenges. Here are some practical strategies to address common challenges without compromising the meaningful engagement of students.

CHALLENGE: STUDENTS' PLANS ARE NOT REALISTIC OR FEASIBLE

Students may propose ambitious projects that are not feasible given limited resources, capacity, or other constraints.

STRATEGIES TO ADDRESS THIS:

- **BE AFFIRMING.** Students may be very passionate and excited about their project ideas, and may not realize what is or is not feasible. The right response is affirming without setting unrealistic expectations. Here is an example from the BC STAT of an affirming response:

I love your creativity! That project idea could make a big impact, but I'm worried we don't have what we might need to make it happen this year. Is there something we could plan for right now that would still make an impact, and could help us work up to that?

- **ENCOURAGE CREATIVE PROBLEM SOLVING.** Work with students to reflect on their initial project idea and determine where, if, and how it could be scaled or adapted. Encourage students to generate as many ideas for project activities as possible that can still make a positive impact while respecting resource limitations.

CHALLENGE: LACK OF ADMINISTRATIVE APPROVAL

School administration may see the value of student-led initiatives, but must also consider safety, school and district policies, resource constraints, and current political and social contexts when determining approval of student-led initiatives that address mental health-related topics. As a result, aspects or the entirety of a project may not be approved, which may feel upsetting or discouraging for students.

STRATEGIES TO ADDRESS THIS:

- **ENGAGE ADMINISTRATION EARLY.** Proposing students' ideas and involving school leadership early on in the planning of an initiative can help identify concerns that may arise, and allow time for students to adapt and adjust their plan.
- **ALIGN WITH SCHOOL AND DISTRICT PRIORITIES.** Connecting the goals and activities of an initiative to school and district strategic plans, curriculum requirements, or other student health literacy or promotion frameworks may strengthen its value and relevance to school leadership.

- **PRESENT A CLEAR AND COMPREHENSIVE PROPOSAL.** Work with students to think through potential concerns or unintended consequences of the initiative, and identify needed supports and safeguards. It could also be beneficial to review the project plan with other school supports, like a school counsellor, to discuss concerns and come up with strategies to address them. Presenting a clear proposal that addresses potential concerns and support needs may be helpful when seeking administrative approval. It can also help students anticipate and plan for challenges that may come up when leading their initiative.
- **BE FLEXIBLE AND ADAPTIVE.** If the initiative is not approved, allow space for students to feel discouraged or upset. This could include a meeting to share frustrations and feelings. However, if students are open to adapting their idea, this is an opportunity to facilitate a creative, solutions-focused session to generate other project ideas that address any school or district concerns and still contribute to students' goals.

CHALLENGE: STUDENT GROUP CONFLICT

Conflict can be a normal part of any group work, and can happen for many reasons. The sensitive and potentially personal connections to mental health-related topics may also evoke strong reactions or responses to disagreements.

STRATEGIES TO ADDRESS CONFLICT:

- **ESTABLISH A GROUP AGREEMENT.** This should be co-created early in the project and be displayed during meetings. A group agreement may include expectations for respect, understanding, and managing conflict, so having it displayed makes it easy to reference when situations arise (see [page 24](#) for more details about developing a group agreement).
- **CLARIFY ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES.** This reduces uncertainty, helps students see and understand the role everyone (staff and students) plays in leading the initiative, and may help to identify gaps, overlaps, or uneven responsibilities.
- **HELP STUDENTS DEVELOP CONFLICT RESOLUTION SKILLS EARLY ON.** Conflict may not come up during student engagement. However, building students' conflict resolution skills early may prevent minor conflicts from escalating and ensure students have the skills to address and manage conflict if it comes up.

i For more information and techniques to manage and resolve conflict in the classroom: <https://www.waterford.org/blog/classroom-conflict-resolution-techniques/>



CHALLENGE: DISENGAGEMENT OR LOSS OF MOMENTUM

There can be many reasons for a student's declining engagement. They may have started with enthusiasm and a passion for the topic but, in planning, they realize they do not have the capacity needed to lead an initiative. Students also may lose energy if project timelines stretch too long, progress feels slow or unrewarding, or if their involvement is negatively impacting their mental health.

STRATEGIES TO ADDRESS DISENGAGEMENT:

- **THINK AND START SMALL.** From the start, support students in identifying an initiative that is feasible to implement based on their capacity and the school's resources. During the planning process, encourage students to identify all tasks needed to make the initiative happen. This can highlight if and where they need extra help, and lay out concrete and manageable steps to take.
- **CELEBRATE BIG AND SMALL WINS.** Finding ways to acknowledge progress and successes throughout the project can help sustain momentum and morale. This includes "big" successes, like completing a project, as well as "small" ones, like students developing skills or overcoming challenges. Ideas include:
 - A personal reflection sheet for students to track skills they have gained.
 - Displaying a poster-sized "to-do" list where students can check off completed tasks.
 - Dedicating time throughout the initiative to celebrate successes, not just at project completion.
- **BRING IN EXTRA SUPPORT.** If students are feeling overwhelmed or tasks are not being completed, return to the project plan to determine which tasks could be delegated and to whom. If needed, recruit additional students to join the initiative planning, or delegate tasks to additional school staff willing to support.
- **PROVIDE REGULAR CHECK-INS.** Especially if you notice students' engagement begins to change, regular and informal check-ins can help identify how students are feeling about the project and their involvement, and what they may be struggling with.

Supporting students who reach out for help

In the process of leading a mental health-related initiative, students may experience challenges and approach an adult at school for support. Students could be struggling with something related to the project, but they may also be experiencing challenges unrelated to the project and see you as a safe adult to discuss these with.

The following are BC students' recommendations for supporting students who may reach out to you for help, as well as examples shared by these students of responses that school staff have (or could have) given that they felt were helpful:

IF A STUDENT REACHES OUT FOR HELP, REASSURE THEM. Students want to feel reassured that they have done the right thing by asking an adult for support. They appreciate an acknowledgement that it is difficult to open up about their mental health or substance use challenges. BC students felt it was reassuring when school staff said:

Thank you for sharing this with me.

You're always welcome to chat with me.

I'm glad you came to me.

RESPECT AND VALIDATE STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES. It is impactful when students are acknowledged as experts in their own lives, they feel heard, and their experiences are validated as real and true for them. If students feel school staff dismiss or diminish their struggles, they may be less likely to confide in them in the future. If school staff don't have time to talk with a student in the moment, they can reassure the student and suggest a specific time to revisit the conversation. BC students shared the following suggestions for school staff:

"Please take us seriously. It might seem small to you, but it really affects us."

"Listen to students without interrupting. Take their concerns seriously. Be patient and supportive. Encourage students to ask for help."

"It is unhelpful if educators are clearly not listening or they're checking their phone or the clock."

ASK STUDENTS WHAT THEY NEED. Students appreciate when school staff ask what they need from a conversation. Sometimes students simply want to vent, and other times they want a solution. If a student wants a solution, adults should work with students to identify the problem and what is needed to address it, rather than telling them what they need. BC students found it helpful when school staff said:

How can I best support? Do you want a listening ear, strategies to help cope, or resources for more help?

Is there anything else that would be helpful (extra time, smaller steps, a quieter space, more check-ins)?

Would you like to talk now or later? Would you prefer to talk to a counsellor?

BE CLEAR ABOUT CONFIDENTIALITY. School staff **must** follow all school policies and provincial guidelines on disclosures of harm or risk of harm to self or others, or neglect or abuse of those under 19.

However, BC students felt their peers might avoid seeking help for fear that their conversation would not stay private and did not clearly understand the limits of confidentiality or what an adult might have to report or when. School staff should ensure students understand specifically what they might say that could require reporting, including specific words. This could be discussed in a group setting so all students receive this information. If a school staff is required to report harm or risk of harm, the student should be given clear notice and talked through the process to maintain trust. Students' information should also stay private from other school staff when there is no disclosure of harm.

BC students' recommendations highlight the importance of maintaining confidentiality (where appropriate); clear communication about limits of confidentiality and step-by-step actions in case of a disclosure; and supporting students through the reporting process:

"Reassure students that the information will remain confidential (i.e., parents won't be involved) [as long as safety is not a concern]."

"If safety is a concern, explain clearly what you have to share and why, and help the student connect to the right support instead of leaving them to figure it out alone."

"Educators shouldn't tell other teachers [as long as safety is not a concern]."

"Educators shouldn't threaten to break confidentiality without having a supportive conversation beforehand."

BE CONSISTENT AND CHECK IN AFTERWARDS. If a student does go to a teacher for help, that teacher should follow up on any support needs identified by the student. The teacher should also check in on the student in the days that follow, in case the student is still struggling or feels embarrassed about asking for help. BC students shared the following suggestions:

"Provide support and follow through consistently so the student knows you mean it."

"Teachers should check in on you from time to time after you shared something hard."

"Continue to check up on students even after you may think everything has been resolved."

KNOW THE LIMITS OF THE SUPPORT YOU CAN PROVIDE. School staff can provide meaningful emotional support, and may be the first adult a student feels comfortable going to for help. However, educators or other staff cannot be expected to provide support beyond their expertise and should know about appropriate school or community support they can refer the student to.

"Sometimes we just don't feel better, and it's not your fault."

"Teachers shouldn't try to diagnose you."

BUILD TRUST AND SAFETY THROUGH REGULAR CONNECTIONS. School staff can help students by clearly signalling that they are open to a conversation and available to support. This could include incorporating group check-ins at the start of class or through brief, informal, and welcoming interactions, like saying hello. These moments of connection help students feel acknowledged and valued, and can contribute to a caring school culture. When teachers have built these trusting relationships, it can also make it easier for students to reach out for help, or for an educator to check in with a student if they have noticed a change in behaviour.

“Say hi and say goodbye every class.”

“When students feel that an adult cares for them, they are more likely to go to them if they need help.”

“Build trust and connections with students since students open up more when they feel safe and not judged by others.”

“Notice patterns and gently check in: ‘I’ve seen you seem stressed lately—want to talk after class?’”

CONSIDER WHAT ‘STRUGGLING’ MAY LOOK LIKE. Mental health challenges may show up in school disengagement or non-attendance, or in disruptive or challenging behaviour. They can also look like perfectionism, overcommitting, or overachieving. Taking a trauma-informed approach means being curious and non-judgmental about a student’s behaviour, and opening up a conversation with them.

“Just because I have good grades or I look put together, that doesn’t mean I’m doing well.”

“Avoid comparing us to ourselves. I hate, ‘but you were such a good student,’ or ‘what happened’ or ‘this isn’t like you.’”

“[A] lot of students don’t avoid help because they ‘don’t care,’ but because they’re scared of being judged, getting in trouble, or having their privacy taken away. Stress, anxiety, and substance use can also look like laziness, attitude, or skipping class, when it’s actually someone feeling overwhelmed and trying to cope. If adults approach students calmly, listen first, and focus on support instead of punishment, students are much more likely to be honest and get help early.”

“Students often use substances or shut down mentally because they’re trying to cope with stress, pressure, or pain—not because they’re ‘bad kids’ or don’t understand the consequences. A lot of us feel like we have to look fine all the time, so we hide what’s going on until it gets serious, especially if we think we’ll be punished or labelled. When adults create a safe, respectful space and focus on support first, students are more likely to open up early and actually accept help.”

Spotlight on BC student-led mental health-related initiatives

There are many examples of student-led mental health-related initiatives that have been successfully implemented across the province. A few BC students who have led their own initiative, and school staff who have supported them, have shared their experiences, successes, and lessons learned.

MOVEMENT AND PHYSICAL

WHERE North Vancouver School District
PLANNED BY Grade 7 students

Creating movement paths through the school using stickers in English and Skwxwú7mesh sníchim to support self-regulation and activity.

[LEARN MORE • PAGE 65](#)

STITÓ:S MENTAL HEALTH WEEK

WHERE Chilliwack School District
PLANNED BY Grade 6–8 students

A week-long event including activities to help students learn about mental health and build skills to support mental well-being.

[LEARN MORE • PAGE 66](#)

YOUTH SUBSTANCE USE CAMPAIGN

WHERE qathet School District
PLANNED BY Grade 8–12 students

Students co-led a substance use survey for Grade 8–10 students, then analyzed and shared results and resources with students.

[LEARN MORE • PAGE 67](#)

PAY IT FORWARD

WHERE Saanich School District
PLANNED BY Grade 9–12 students

Campaign to encourage students to perform acts of kindness in their schools and communities, and to share and celebrate those acts.

[LEARN MORE • PAGE 68](#)

VAPING EDUCATION CAMPAIGN

WHERE Campbell River School District
PLANNED BY Grade 9–12 students

An event where students raced through an inflatable obstacle course while learning about vaping and tobacco use and engaging with local substance use supports.

[LEARN MORE • PAGE 69](#)

WANT MORE STUDENT-LED MENTAL HEALTH PROJECT IDEAS?

Find more suggestions from BC students on [page 39](#).

Suggestions for mental health initiatives

In their conversations, BC STAT members asked their peers what mental health-related initiative they would want to plan in their schools. Here were some of the suggestions from BC students:

"Students making art about mental health or substance use challenges and having an art exhibit."

"Scavenger hunt with questions about mental health and substance use (and prizes)."

"Creating a mental health podcast."

"A group project about mental health or substance use that DOESN'T count for grades, as a way to have fun and interact with people in your class."

"Have an anonymous question submission so people can ask questions they're too afraid to ask. Then hold an assembly or talk to discuss them."

"A small group discussion, maybe during class, where students can talk openly about stress and school pressure. It should be a safe space without judgment."

"An anonymous school student survey on these topics, and then posting the findings around the school for reflection and awareness."

"A 'Mind & Choices Week' that focuses on mental health and substance use in a supportive, non-judgmental way. It would include short daily workshops that teach practical coping skills for stress, anxiety, sleep, burnout, and peer pressure, plus an anonymous QR code posted around the school that links students to self-check tools and trusted support resources. There would also be a calm drop-in space during lunch for students who need a break, and a session on how to support a friend safely by knowing what to say and when to involve an adult. To finish the week, we would host a small resource fair with school staff and community supports and give students simple take-home information so it's easier to reach out for help when they need it."

"Students leading an 'unwinding time' or a 5-minute meditation at the start of class."

"A week in the school year (like spirit weeks) that is all about mental health."

"A 'Real Talk + Real Tools' lunch series where each week students can drop in for a short, interactive session on one topic like anxiety, burnout, sleep, or substance use pressure. Instead of long presentations, it would teach quick strategies students can actually use (stress resets, planning when you're overwhelmed, how to say no, how to help a friend), and it would include an anonymous question box so people can ask what they're actually dealing with."

"Peer support/buddy program, pairing older students with younger ones."

"Weekly 'Wellness Wednesday' that classes can participate in."

"A camping trip/wellness retreat for Grades 10–12. Students are device-free and do hiking, swimming, etc."

Support BC students felt they would need from school staff

BC STAT members also asked their peers to think about what kind of support they would need from school staff in order to lead mental health or substance use initiatives. Here is what they said:

PROJECT GUIDANCE

Providing suggestions and feedback on students' initiatives.

"Giving helpful and relevant feedback."

"Getting some ideas from them."

ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT

Liaising with school staff and leadership, managing permissions and bookings, obtaining funding, purchasing resources, and supporting promotion.

"Be the communication point between the students who plan the event and the staff that should join."

"A teacher to go and be a representative at administration meetings to vouch/announce these events."

"Manage all of the permission forms they make students sign to plan events."

"Staff that is willing to set up a space for meetings, or dedicate their classroom."

"Event logistics, like help if I need to book a room?"

"Help with applying for grants."

"Promoting these events in their classes."

COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

Helping students identify and connect with external partners.

"Help connecting with guest speakers."

"Approval for counselling spokesperson and psychiatrist to come speak."

"I would need help to find someone who has gone through substance use and has recovered to be willing to talk about their experience."

EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

Sharing encouragement, fostering a safe space, managing difficult conversations, and providing support if needed.

"Just showing up and being supportive."

"Emotional support...organizing events is stressful."

"Guidance – what topics are okay, how to respond if someone brings up something serious."

"Knowing how to handle controversial and opinionated and personal topics/ideas and how to be there for someone when these sorts of topics really affect/trigger them."

Lessons learned from BC students who have led school-based initiatives

Students from across BC who have led mental health-related initiatives in their schools reflected on what they learned and what they would do differently the next time they led a project. Most of the students' reflections focused on timing (of the planning and of the event), budget, and other project considerations.

1

TIMING

"Next year, we want to start planning the event a lot earlier!"

"I would give longer between the grant application and the hopeful start dates of the events."

"We would love to have a longer planning process and expand on the wins we had this year."

"We would pick a different date for the event. The date we picked was during finals, which inhibited a lot of Grade 12 and Grade 11 participants from coming to the event."

"We would allow for more time for each class to attend the 'fair.' It felt rushed to get all the divisions through in one day."

"We would spend more time promoting the event. It would also be great if we could have a longer event so we could spend even more time hanging out with each other."

2

BUDGET

"The largest difference between my budget and actual costs was the shipping cost."

"We definitely went over our imagined budget – part of this was it being our first year organizing and needing to have estimates before our actual quoted amounts."

"We were unable to meet our original goals due to the cost we projected versus the actual cost of the expenses needed to run the program."

3

OTHER LESSONS LEARNED

"The students were not involved in the menu planning and food prep which made us not aware of what was brought, not getting input on menu and portioning."

"We tried to think of having a low impact on the environment and not just buying a bunch of stuff that we could only use once, or that would come in a bunch of plastic."

"I got lots of positive feedback on how the snacks were inclusive of various dietary restrictions."

"We will definitely have a coat check next year, as well as 'emotional first aid' on hand with a counsellor."

"All delegation landed on one adult, so we are hoping to have more volunteer leaders next year and into the future."

Final reflections

Thank you so much for reading through this toolkit. We hope it can not only help students feel more supported when leading projects in their schools, but also help you feel more confident to support them.

Being part of co-creating this toolkit was a meaningful experience for us. It gave us the chance to work on something we care deeply about and to contribute to positive change for other students. For some of us, it was the first time we had the opportunity to be involved in a project focused on mental health, even though it's something we see affecting students every day.

Through this experience, we were able to share our ideas, reflect on our own experiences, and think about how schools can better support student well-being. We were also part of something that will help students be actively involved in leading mental health-related initiatives, rather than just being passive participants.

Thanks for being dedicated to putting students at the centre of mental health-related initiatives at their schools. We hope this toolkit helps create more opportunities for students to be part of the conversation and lead positive change.

"This is my first time being involved in a project based around mental health, and I feel like mental health isn't talked about too much, even though everyone has it and a lot of people have issues with it, especially teenagers and kids, so I wanted to join so I could make an impact on changing that."

"I thought I can make a difference so that I can help other people with mental health issues. I felt like that was a huge opportunity to show my thoughts and what I can give."

"I super duper appreciate this opportunity for me to fulfill my passion of working towards something I actually care about."

"We thank you for helping the younger generation as they embark to be leaders in the future."

FROM THE BC STAT

GLOSSARY

Capacity: the ability of someone (e.g., a teacher) or something (e.g., a school) to support or participate, considering various and intersecting factors like time, energy, priorities, money, skills, well-being, or other commitments. It can fluctuate over time and/or depending on different contexts or activities.

Lived (or living) experience: knowledge and understanding gained through one's personal experiences and circumstances.

Mental distress: the common, short-term response to the stresses of everyday life, such as nervousness about an upcoming exam.

Mental health: a state of well-being in which a person lives and works meaningfully, their relationships are healthy, and they can adapt to and cope with the normal stresses of life. An individual's state of mental health can fluctuate day-to-day, and is influenced by complex interactions between their brain and the surrounding environment. See also [page 45](#).

Mental health challenge/problem: when a person's ability to adapt is challenged by a serious environmental stressor, such as difficulty coping with the death of a friend.

Mental health promotion: seeks to build protective factors in students and school communities that contribute to good mental health and wellness, protect against mental illness, and reduce the risk of harms from substance use.

Mental illness (or disorder): a range of diagnosable mental disorders that involves changes in behaviour, emotion regulation, mood, and thinking. Mental illness can occur due to the complex interplay of factors, including biological (e.g., genetics, illness), environmental (e.g., community, family), and experiential (e.g., substance use, traumatic events). See also [page 45](#).

Stigma: negative attitudes attached to a characteristic of an individual that can lead to thinking about and treating a person differently (e.g., discrimination, exclusion).

Strength-based approach: an approach that focuses on a person's strengths, interests, abilities, knowledge, and goals rather than on their weaknesses and problems.

Substances: chemicals or plants that can change the way a person thinks, feels, acts, and perceives the world around them (e.g., alcohol, cannabis, tobacco).

Substance use disorder: a treatable medical condition that affects the brain and involves compulsive and continuous use of substances despite negative impacts to a person, their family, friends, and others.

Trauma-informed approach: a systemic approach that acknowledges the short- and long-term effects of trauma, and helps build awareness and understanding of how trauma responses affect behaviour and learning. Part of a trauma-informed approach is the principle of harm reduction, which seeks to reduce the harmful effects related to any behaviour that brings risk (e.g., using substances).

Well-being: a positive state of being characterized by good overall, holistic health. It does not mean a person is without challenges, but that they have the skills, supports, and connections to contribute to positive health and life satisfaction.

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APPENDIX: What is mental health?

Mental health is defined as *“a state of well-being in which we live and work meaningfully, our relationships are healthy, and we can adapt to and cope with normal stresses of life”* (BC Ministry of Education and Child Care, 2025). It is a fundamental part of our overall health and affects how we think, feel, connect with others, and navigate everyday life. It is also personal and may be understood, experienced, and talked about in different ways by different people, communities, and cultures (BC Ministry of Education and Child Care, 2025).

Our mental health can be affected by many different internal and external factors, including our physical health, relationships with others, life experiences (e.g., bereavement, poverty, discrimination), access to opportunities and supports, and the community we live in (e.g., safe vs. unsafe; Public Health Agency of Canada, 2020).

WHAT IS MENTAL ILLNESS?

Mental illness refers to a range of diagnosable disorders that are characterized by changes in a person's thinking, moods, or behaviours that affect their ability to function in different parts of their life (World Health Organization, 2025). Mental illness can be experienced by anyone, but various factors may contribute to its occurrence, including a family history of mental illness, adverse childhood experiences, stressful life events, and other external factors (e.g., socioeconomic status; Public Health Agency of Canada, 2017).

STATES OF MENTAL HEALTH AND MENTAL ILLNESS

Similar to other aspects of our health, mental health exists on a continuum. Positive mental health may be different for different people, but can include:

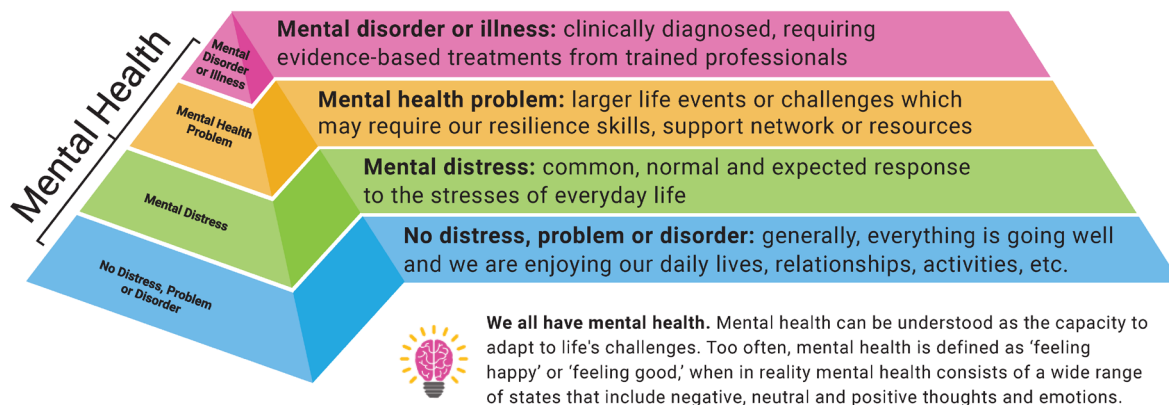
- Having the skills and support to cope with life's challenges and stressors;
- Feeling hopeful about the future; and
- Feeling connected to school, workplace, community, and/or culture.

(Public Health Agency of Canada, 2020)

While they can be interconnected, mental health and mental illness are separate. Positive mental health does not mean an absence of challenges, negative emotions, or mental illness. Similarly, experiencing poor mental health does not mean a mental illness is present, though certain experiences of negative mental health could develop into or be indicative of a mental illness (BC Ministry of Education and Child Care, 2025).

Mental health can be improved through behavioural changes (e.g., physical activity, sleep), positive relationships and connections (e.g., with friends, family, community), and accessing needed supports (e.g., counselling). Mental illness can be treated through more intensive supports and interventions (e.g., psychiatry, social work; Public Health Agency of Canada, 2025).

The following pyramid shows various states of mental health which can exist separately or simultaneously. This continuum is not intended to show a linear progression of mental challenges or illness, but to indicate the increasing distress and intensity of supports needed for each mental health state.



(Mental Health Literacy, 2023)

This appendix offers a brief introduction to mental health and mental illness. Whether supporting students day-to-day or in leading a school-based mental health-related initiative, it can be helpful to have a basic understanding of these topics. However, school staff should follow school policies and professional guidelines on providing support appropriate to their training and expertise. Where needed, guidance should be sought from specialized school staff to ensure all students have access to the help they need.

ADDITIONAL MATERIALS



MENTAL HEALTH, SUBSTANCE USE, AND STUDENT SUPPORT RESOURCES

The following resources provide additional learning, information, and support on topics related to mental health, substance use, and supporting student well-being. Most have been recommended by K-12 education partners in BC as helpful in their own learning and classrooms.



MENTAL HEALTH LITERACY RESOURCES

Everyday Anxiety Strategies for Educators (EASE)

BC MINISTRY OF CHILDREN AND FAMILY DEVELOPMENT

Evidence-based resources to help educators teach students strategies to manage anxiety. Available in English and French.

LEARN MORE >

<https://healthymindsbc.gov.bc.ca/course/educators/>

Language Matters! An Introductory Guide for Understanding Mental Health and Substance Use

BC MINISTRY OF EDUCATION AND CHILD CARE

Supports mental health literacy in the K-12 system by helping schools, educators, and families engage in meaningful conversations, develop shared understanding, and apply key concepts and terminology related to mental health and substance use.

FOR SCHOOLS >

<https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/erase/documents/mental-health-wellness/mhsu-language-guide.pdf>

FOR FAMILIES >

<https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/erase/documents/mental-health-wellness/mhsu-language-guide-for-families.pdf>

Mental Health Literacy

RECOVERY ALBERTA MENTAL HEALTH & ADDICTIONS SERVICES

Information and resources for K-12 educators and adult supports to learn about mental health and substance use, and ways to help students build their mental health literacy.

LEARN MORE >

<https://mentalhealthliteracy.org/>

TEACH Mental Health Literacy

UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

Self-paced, evidence-based course to build educators' mental health literacy, and deliver a classroom-ready curriculum.

LEARN MORE >

<https://opl.educ.ubc.ca/teach-mental-health-literacy/>

Well-being BC

FEDERATION OF INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS ASSOCIATION OF BC

Resources for school-wide well-being and social-emotional learning. Includes videos from topic experts, print materials, and toolkits for staff.

LEARN MORE >

<https://wellbeingbc.ca/>



SUBSTANCE USE LITERACY RESOURCES

erase (Expect Respect & A Safe Education)

BC MINISTRY OF EDUCATION AND CHILD CARE

Information and resources on mental health, substance use, and school safety.

LEARN MORE >

<https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/erase>

Safety First: Real Drug Education for Teens

INTERIOR HEALTH AUTHORITY

Classroom-ready lesson plans on substance use and trauma-informed approaches, with connections to BC curricular competencies.

LEARN MORE >

<https://www.interiorhealth.ca/sites/default/files/PDFS/safety-first-educators-guide.pdf>

Tobacco, Vaping & Cannabis

BC LUNG FOUNDATION

Classroom-ready information and resources to teach students about tobacco, vaping, and cannabis.

LEARN MORE >

<https://bclung.ca/lung-health/tobacco-vaping-cannabis/>

Understanding Substance Use: Educator's Guide

CANADIAN CENTRE ON SUBSTANCE USE AND ADDICTION

Guide and video modules for educators to learn about substance use and how to talk about it with students.

LEARN MORE >

<https://www.ccsa.ca/en/guidance-tools-and-resources/people-and-communities/youth-and-emerging-adults/adverse-childhood-experiences/educators>



MENTAL HEALTH & SUBSTANCE USE SUPPORT

Compass Mental Health

BC CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL

Free BC-wide service offering consultation and education on mental health, substance use, and other concerns for schools and community services.

LEARN MORE >

<https://compassbc.ca/compass@cw.bc.ca>
1-855-702-7272
(9am–9pm, Monday–Sunday)

Foundry BC

In-person and virtual mental health and wellness services for youth; information and resources on mental health and substance use.

LEARN MORE >

<https://foundrybc.ca/>

Help Starts Here

BC MINISTRY OF HEALTH

Website of information, resources, and free and low-cost services to support mental health and substance use in BC. Resources and services are searchable by location, topic, and type of care needed.

LEARN MORE >

<https://helpstartshere.gov.bc.ca/>



MENTAL HEALTH & SUBSTANCE USE SUPPORT: *CONTINUED*

Here to Help BC

BC PARTNERS FOR MENTAL HEALTH AND SUBSTANCE USE INFORMATION

Strategies to manage mental health or substance use challenges, and information about seeking support.

LEARN MORE >

<https://www.heretohelp.bc.ca/>

Integrated Child & Youth (ICY) Teams

BC GOVERNMENT

Some BC communities have ICY teams, which provide integrated mental health and substance use support for children and youth up to age 19.

LEARN MORE >

<https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/governments/about-the-bc-government/mental-health-and-addictions-strategy/integrated-child-youth-teams>

Kids Help Phone

Free, Canada-wide, multilingual, and confidential e-mental health services; information and resources on mental health, substance use, and other youth-related topics.

LEARN MORE >

<https://kidshelpphone.ca/>

Supporting Youth Who Use Cannabis

FIRST NATIONS HEALTH AUTHORITY

Guidance for supporting and connecting with Indigenous youth who use cannabis.

LEARN MORE >

<https://www.fnha.ca/what-we-do/mental-wellness-and-substance-use/non-medical-cannabis/supporting-youth>



TRAUMA-INFORMED LANGUAGE

Language Matters

MENTAL HEALTH COMMISSION OF CANADA

Cheat sheet on using respectful language when talking about mental health or substance use.

LEARN MORE >

https://mentalhealthcommission.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/language_matters_cheat_sheet_eng.pdf

Words Matter

MENTAL HEALTH FIRST AID INTERNATIONAL

Introduction to inclusive language about mental health.

LEARN MORE >

<https://www.mhfa.com.au/resources-support/articles/words-matter-compassionate-language-for-mental-health>



SUPPORTING THE WELL-BEING OF INDIGENOUS STUDENTS

Soaring Together

THUNDERBIRD PARTNERSHIP FOUNDATION

Stories, reflections, and guides to promote well-being for First Nations youth.

LEARN MORE >

<https://soaringtogether.ca/>

Strengthening Our Connections to Promote Life: A Life Promotion Toolkit by Indigenous Youth

THUNDERBIRD PARTNERSHIP FOUNDATION

Toolkit created by and for Indigenous youth to support well-being through connections to land, self, community, and spirituality.

LEARN MORE >

https://wisepractices.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Life-Promotion-Toolkit_EN_WEB.pdf



FOSTERING SAFE AND INCLUSIVE CLASSROOMS

Instruction for Diverse Learners

INCLUSIVE SCHOOLS NETWORK

Resources and strategies to support inclusive learning and classrooms for all students.

LEARN MORE >

<https://inclusiveschools.org/resources/instruction-for-diverse-learners/>

Teacher Resources: Supporting children with learning, mental health, and behavioural challenges

CHILD MIND INSTITUTE

Tools to inform and empower educators to support students who may be experiencing learning, mental health, or behavioural challenges in the classroom.

LEARN MORE >

<https://childmind.org/topics/resources-for-teachers/>



PEER-TO-PEER SUPPORT RESOURCES

Be There Certificate

JACK.ORG & THE BORN THIS WAY FOUNDATION

Free online course to help youth learn how to support others struggling with their mental health.

LEARN MORE >

<https://www.betherecertificate.org/>

Seize the Awkward

AMERICAN FOUNDATION FOR SUICIDE PREVENTION & NATIONAL ALLIANCE ON MENTAL ILLNESS

Tips for how to speak to a friend that may be struggling, and knowing when extra help is needed.

LEARN MORE >

<https://seizetheawkward.org/>

READINESS SELF-REFLECTION: SCHOOL STAFF WORKSHEET

Please read and reflect on each statement and rate how true you feel it is for you, from **1: "NOT AT ALL TRUE"** to **5: "VERY TRUE."**

1. KNOWLEDGE AND COMFORT WITH MENTAL HEALTH TOPICS

	1 NOT AT ALL TRUE	2 A LITTLE TRUE	3 SOMEWHAT TRUE	4 QUITE TRUE	5 VERY TRUE	N/A
I have a basic understanding of mental health topics.						
I am aware of my beliefs about mental health, and if/how they affect my ability to support students in a non-judgmental way.						
I know where to find reliable, youth-friendly mental health information and resources.						
I feel comfortable responding to students' questions about mental health, including if they are seeking support.						
I know when and how to refer students to appropriate supports.						

2. BELIEFS ABOUT STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

	1 NOT AT ALL TRUE	2 A LITTLE TRUE	3 SOMEWHAT TRUE	4 QUITE TRUE	5 VERY TRUE	N/A
I listen to and respect students' ideas.						
I believe students are capable of leading mental health projects.						
I am comfortable sharing decision making with students, where appropriate.						
I see mistakes as part of student learning and growth.						
I value students' lived and living experience as a form of expertise.						
I am comfortable stepping back when students are in a leadership role.						
I am able to provide input or re-direction, if needed, without taking over.						

3. AWARENESS OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT PRINCIPLES

	1 NOT AT ALL TRUE	2 A LITTLE TRUE	3 SOMEWHAT TRUE	4 QUITE TRUE	5 VERY TRUE	N/A
I actively work to integrate First Nations Ways of Knowing and approaches to learning when supporting student-led initiatives.						
I consider how a student's identity shapes their experiences and perspectives.						
I actively work to ensure projects and resources reflect the cultural diversity of students.						
I understand how trauma and other adverse experiences may impact student behaviours and participation.						
I provide different participation options for different skills, strengths, and comfort levels.						
I know where to seek additional education, guidance, and support on any of these principles.						

4. CAPACITY AND SUPPORT

	1 NOT AT ALL TRUE	2 A LITTLE TRUE	3 SOMEWHAT TRUE	4 QUITE TRUE	5 VERY TRUE	N/A
I have the time within my role to support a student-led initiative.						
I know school staff and/or community partners I could reach out to for help or to ask questions about mental health.						
I know of resources, school staff, and/or community partners I could reach out to if I need help to support students with disabilities or diverse abilities to participate.						
I am aware of school and/or school district policy regarding approvals for student-led initiatives, and any limits that may be set on these initiatives.						
I have administrative support to supervise a student-led mental health initiative.*						

**Make sure to follow all school and school district policies on supporting student-led initiatives, and to seek and receive all needed approvals from school administration before the start of the project, and throughout planning.*

READINESS SELF-REFLECTION: STUDENT WORKSHEET

Please read each statement and reflect on how you feel about it.

MOTIVATION AND PURPOSE

	YES	NOT SURE	NOT YET
I care about this topic and know why it matters to me.			
I can describe what impact I hope this project will have on others and myself.			
I think this is a project that other students care about and would participate in.			
I am motivated to lead this project, even if plans change or challenges come up.			

TIME, ENERGY, AND WELL-BEING

	YES	NOT SURE	NOT YET
I have time in my schedule to work on this project.			
I have the energy to take on this commitment.			
My own mental health is in a place where I feel I can lead this project.			
I have thought of ways I can take care of my well-being, and minimize or manage feeling overwhelmed or stressed out.			
I know where I can go or who I can talk to if I need support.			

PROJECT SUPPORT

	YES	NOT SURE	NOT YET
I have at least one school staff member who can support this project.			
I know friends or other students who might want to help.			
I feel comfortable asking for help, sharing responsibilities, and delegating tasks related to the project, including with school staff and peers.			
I have thought of ways I can take care of my well-being, and minimize or manage feeling overwhelmed or stressed out.			

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

What can I do to take care of myself while I lead this project?

What are some signs that I might need to reach out for help?

Who do I feel comfortable talking to if I need help? Where can I go if I need more support?

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

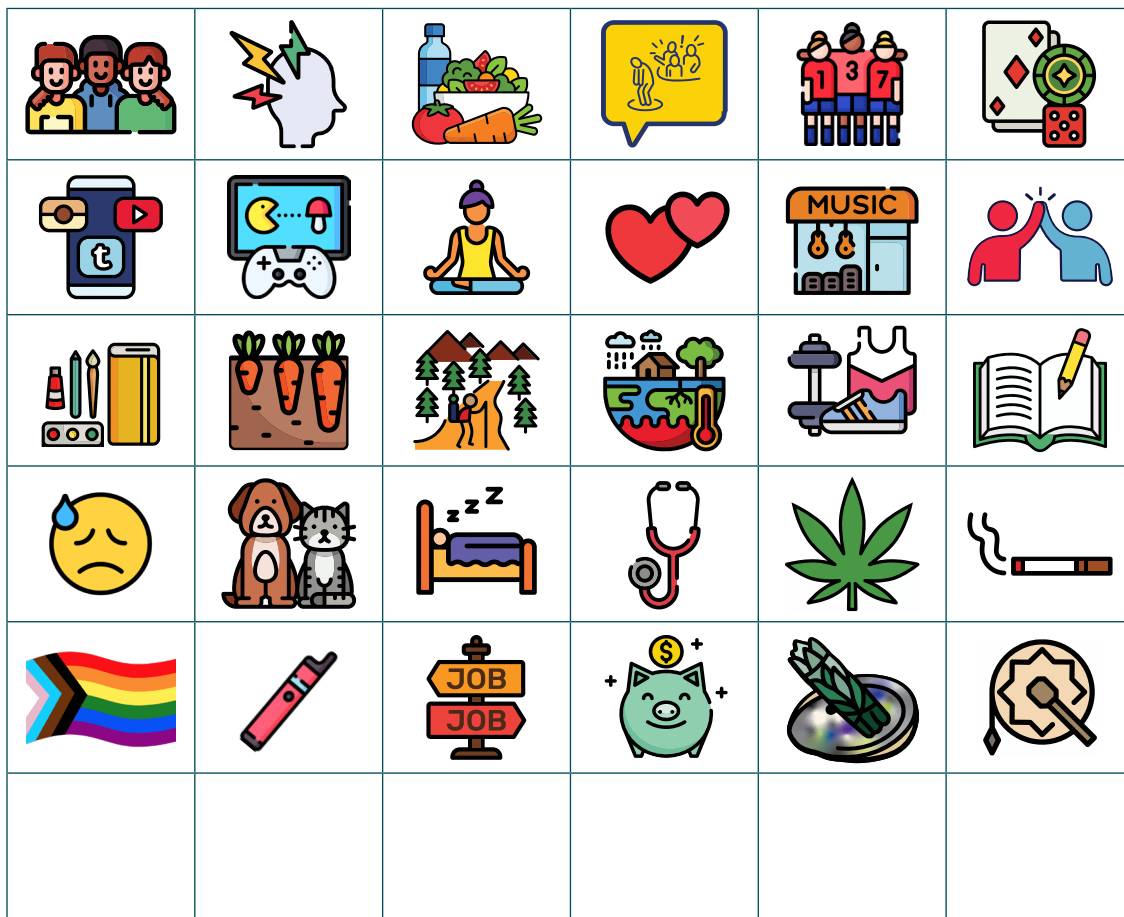
These activities can be used to spark discussion, explore topics related to mental health and substance use, and help students identify a topic they wish to address through an initiative.

PYRAMID ACTIVITY

MATERIALS: Pyramid icons (below), printed and cut out; 1 per student/group of 2-3 students

DIRECTIONS:

1. Provide a set of icons to each student OR small group. Each icon represents factors that can affect students' well-being (specifically related to mental health and substance use). There are also blank squares for students to add their own items. Use the icons you feel are more appropriate for the students you are supporting, or create your own to reflect your local context.
2. Ask them to pick 10 icons they feel have the greatest impact on students (positive or negative), and place them in a pyramid with the icon of greatest impact at the top. Students may be unsure of the meaning of certain pyramid icons. This is intentional, and students should be encouraged to apply their own interpretation.
3. After completing their pyramids, invite students to share what they included and why.
4. Create a list of the factors students placed in their pyramids, then facilitate a discussion about which of those factors could be addressed or supported through a student-led initiative.



DATA DISCOVERY

MATERIALS: Flip chart paper, sticky notes, pens/pencils, digital copies of any of the following (for a physical copy, please email mccreary@mcs.bc.ca):

- *The Big Picture: An overview of the 2023 BC Adolescent Health Survey provincial results*
- *Raven's Children VI: Indigenous youth health in BC*
- *Blunt Talk III: Cannabis use among BC youth aged 12–18*
- *BC youth's experiences with vaping and nicotine pouches: Findings from a youth-led study*
- *Beyond the likes: Social media use among BC youth*
- *Youth mental health: What youth think school staff need to know*

DIRECTIONS:

1. Provide students with a copy of the report or poster you want to explore, as well as a pen/pencil and 3–4 sticky notes.
2. Give students about 10–15 minutes to look through the material and ask them to write on their sticky notes any findings that surprise them, feel important to them, and/or that they would want to address through a project.
3. When finished, ask them to share their findings and place their sticky notes on the flip chart paper.
4. Facilitate discussion on if and how these could be addressed through a school-based, student-led initiative.

DOTMOCRACY

***Note:** This activity helps students pick a priority topic/project idea from an existing list. Start by brainstorming ideas and generating a list, such as through the pyramid or data discovery activities.

MATERIALS: Stickers (3 per student), list of topics/project ideas (already generated by students)

DIRECTIONS:

1. Using a list of topics of interest or project ideas already generated by students (such as through the pyramid activity, data discovery, or other brainstorming activity), give each student 3 stickers.
2. Ask them to place their stickers ('vote') on up to 3 items on that list that they would most want to plan or focus their initiative on. Students can choose to place multiple stickers on one item. The list item with the most stickers is the 'winner' (i.e., the topic/project they will focus on).

STUDENT REFLECTION ACTIVITIES

GIVE, GET, GOT

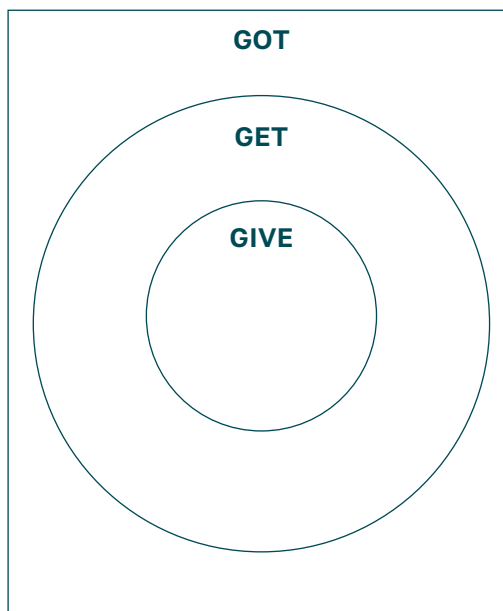
***Note:** This activity should be facilitated at the start of initiative planning ("Give" and "Get"), and revisited at the end ("Got").

MATERIALS: Flip chart paper, sticky notes, pens/pencils

DIRECTIONS:

On the flip chart paper, draw a circle in the middle and write "Give." Outside that circle, draw a larger one and write "Get." Outside that circle, write "Got." At the beginning of the initiative, give each student 2 sticky notes and ask them to write on 1 sticky note at least one thing they are bringing to the experience (give), and on the other sticky note at least one thing they are hoping to get out of it. Invite students to place their sticky notes in the appropriate circle.

At the end of the initiative, give students another sticky note and ask them to write at least one thing they got out of their experience. Invite them to place this sticky note in the "Got" space, and facilitate discussion and reflection on whether students got what they were hoping and expecting out of leading their initiative.



HEAD-HEART-HANDS

MATERIALS: Pens/pencils and copies of the *Head-Heart-Hands worksheet* (page 58, 1 per student)

DIRECTIONS:

At the end of an initiative, give each student a copy of the *Head-Heart-Hands worksheet*. Ask them to reflect on their experience through planning their initiative, and complete the worksheet to identify:

Head: What they have learned through their experience leading an initiative.

Heart: What they felt about their experience, or about the impact of their initiative.

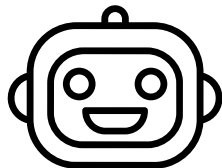
Hands: What skills they have gained, and what they will do with those skills moving forward.

Invite students to share what they wrote, if they feel comfortable to do so.

HEAD-HEART-HANDS worksheet

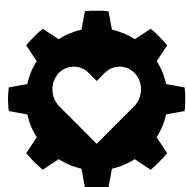
HEAD:

What did you learn?



HEART:

How do you feel about this experience
and the initiative you led?



HANDS:

What skills did you gain?

What will you do with these skills moving forward?



STUDENT GROUNDING ACTIVITIES

GROUP CHECK-IN ROUND

Start meetings by inviting students to check in about how they're feeling that day. Check-in questions do not have to ask specifically about students' emotions or feelings. Here are some suggestions:

- If how you're feeling today was the weather, what weather would it be?
- If your mood right now was a colour, what colour would it be?
- What song best reflects how you're feeling today?
- What emoji represents how you're feeling today?
- Rank your energy today on a scale of 1 to 10, 1 being no energy and 10 being the most.

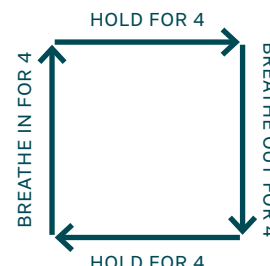
BOX BREATHING

Box breathing is a technique that can help to slow down your breathing. It works by distracting your mind as you count to four, calming your nervous system, and decreasing stress in your body.

Invite students to close their eyes and guide them through three slow, deep breaths together. Ask them to imagine breathing around a box—breathing in as you go up one side of the box, holding your 'in' breath across the top of the box, breathing out down the other side of the box, and holding your 'out' breath along the bottom of the box (see right).

Follow this script to guide students:

1. Take a deep breath in through your nose for four counts: 1...2...3...4.
2. Hold your breath in for four counts: 1...2...3...4.
3. Now slowly exhale through your nose for four counts: 1...2...3...4.
4. And hold for four counts: 1...2...3...4.



STOMP IT OUT

Stomping can be energizing, and can also act as a stress reliever by releasing tension.

With students sitting in chairs, ask them to place both their feet firmly on the ground. Then, ask them to start stomping their feet on the ground, slowly at first and then more quickly. Invite them to notice the feel of the ground under their feet, how it feels throughout their body, and the sound they're making together.

***Note:** This activity may not be accessible or appropriate for all students, such as students with certain disabilities or health conditions.

GUIDED MEDITATION EXERCISE

On a computer or projector, play a short, guided meditation video to watch or listen to as a group. Invite students to close their eyes, place both feet firmly on the ground, and settle into a comfortable position. Here are some suggested videos:

- **Grounding Exercise for Racing Minds** (3 minutes)
- **3 Minutes to Calm Your Mind** (3 minutes)
- **Mini-meditation** (1 minute)

PROJECT PLANNING WORKSHEET

Prompts and reflection questions to help students complete this worksheet are provided on [page 27](#).

FOCUS: What topic or issue are we focusing on?	
GOAL: What impact do we hope our project will have and for whom?	
TYPE OF PROJECT: Circle all that apply	EDUCATION & SKILL BUILDING ADVOCACY & AWARENESS HEALTH PROMOTION
ACTIVITIES: What do we want to do?	

TIMELINE: When do we want our project to happen/ be completed? When do tasks need to happen?	TASK / ACTIVITY		DEADLINE	
	ROLES & RESPONSIBILITIES: Who can help with which project tasks?	NAME	RESPONSIBLE FOR...	

RESOURCES: What do we need to make this project happen?			
BUDGET: What do we need to spend money on? How much will they cost? Where will we get the money from?	ITEM / EXPENSE	COST	FUNDING SOURCE
		TOTAL	
RISKS & CHALLENGES: Are there challenges that may come up?			

SUPPORT NEEDS: What do we need to feel supported as a group?	
MEASURING IMPACT: How will we know this project has been successful?	
ANYTHING ELSE?	

YOUTH AND STUDENT GRANTS IN BC

GRANT NAME	AMOUNT	WHAT IT FUNDS
BC First Nations K–12 Education Grant (New Relationship Trust) https://newrelationshiptrust.ca/k-12-education-grant/	Up to \$8,000	- Projects that enhance learning experiences and student growth for K–12 BC First Nations students. - For BC First Nations Schools or BC schools with classes with majority First Nations students.
Canada Post Community Foundation Grants https://www.canadapost-postescanada.ca/cpc/en/our-company/community-foundation/community-foundation-application.page	Up to \$5,000	Project that supports community building, education, or health for children and youth.
Neighbourhood Small Grants https://neighbourhoodsmallgrants.ca/	Up to \$500	- Projects that build community connection. - Youth-specific grants available in Metro Vancouver; youth can also apply for Neighbourhood Small Grants in other participating communities.
Trevor Coburn Memorial Grants (McCreary Centre Society) https://mcs.bc.ca/trevor_coburn_memorial_grants	Up to \$500	Youth-led projects that focus on peer mentorship, youth homelessness, youth substance use, or youth in and from government care.
Youth Action Grants (McCreary Centre Society) https://mcs.bc.ca/youth_action_grants	Up to \$750	- Student-led projects that supports student health and well-being, and addresses one or more findings from the BC Adolescent Health Survey. - For Grade 7–12 students in BC.
Youth Empowerment Stream grants (Indigenous Youth Roots) https://indigenouslyouthroots.ca/grant/youth-empowerment-stream	\$2,500–\$5,000	- Projects that promote youth resilience, engagement, and wellness. - Projects must be led by two or more Indigenous youth ages 15–29.

Updated as of September 2026.

OTHER PLACES TO LOOK FOR GRANTS:

The following places sometimes have grants available:

- **Physical Health Education Canada:** <https://phecanada.ca/community/funding>
- **United Way BC:** <https://uwbc.ca/program/grants/>
- Your local community foundation, like the **Alberni Valley Community Foundation**, **Central Okanagan Foundation**, **Vancouver Foundation**, and **Kitimat Community Foundation**.

INITIATIVE SPOTLIGHTS:

STUDENT-ENGAGED PROJECTS IN BC

School staff who supported student-engaged and student-led mental health-related initiatives in BC, and the students who led them, were invited to share their activities, lessons learned, and the impacts these initiatives had in their schools.

SPOTLIGHT: Movement and Physical

SCHOOL DISTRICT
North Vancouver School District

SCHOOL STAFF SUPPORT
Myriam Dumont:
mdumont@sd44.ca

TIMELINE
About 6–8 weeks

OVERVIEW: Grade 6 and 7 students and staff co-created stickers to guide movement paths through the hallways of a K–7 school, promoting self-regulation by helping students release energy, improve their focus, and build healthy movement habits. The stickers were installed in both English and Skwxwú7mesh sníchim (the Squamish language) to foster a sense of cultural inclusion and visibility within the learning environment.

ROLE OF STUDENTS: Students applied for the grant and decided where to place the stickers.

ROLE OF SCHOOL STAFF: School staff helped the students apply for the grant and find a supplier who had the ability to print stickers in both English and Skwxwú7mesh sníchim.

LESSONS LEARNED:

- The project was very smooth and successful – no lessons to share!

IMPACTS:

- Movement paths are a well-loved feature at school, helping students to regulate and refocus.
- Staff have noticed increased student independence in seeking movement when needed, as well as fewer behaviour escalations.
- The use of English and Skwxwú7mesh sníchim has helped the school build a stronger sense of cultural visibility and belonging.
- Reflections from students:

"I love how the path reminds me that I need to move my body sometimes when I am having a hard time focusing. It's easy to take a quick break and do a few movements, and then it's easier for me to focus."

"I like how colourful it has made our [space], and I've also learned a lot of words I didn't know before in Squamish."

LEVEL OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT:

STUDENT ADVISORS

TYPES OF INITIATIVES:

EDUCATION & SKILL BUILDING

HEALTH PROMOTION

SPOTLIGHT: Stitó:s Mental Health Week

SCHOOL DISTRICT
Chilliwack School District

SCHOOL STAFF SUPPORT
Cathy Preibisch: cathy_preibisch@sd33.bc.ca

OVERVIEW: Stitó:s Lá:lém Totí:lt Elementary/Middle School proudly hosts an annual Mental Health Week, featuring activities to promote positive mental health and connection. Activities include:

- Daily announcements about mental health topics.
- Grade-specific assemblies on mental health awareness, connection, and encouragement.
- Wearing red to honour Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two-Spirit People, in partnership with the school's Indigenous Support Team.
- Wearing green for mental health awareness.
- District-wide music event to raise awareness about mental health, share resources, and fundraise for the Chilliwack Youth Health Centre.
- Author visits, including former Stitó:s teacher, Navnish Khera, reading *Being Calm*, about emotional regulation and mindfulness, and Angela Murphy reading her *Wonder Pup* books.
- Activity stations for Grade 6 students, hosted by community partners. Stations included mindfulness activities, Métis dot art, peace circles, forest bathing, and making grounding kits.
- Optional recess and lunchtime activities, such as rock painting and yoga sessions.

ROLE OF STUDENTS: The Stitó:s Green Crew is a group of 10–12 Grade 6–8 students who work to increase awareness of mental health-related topics. The Green Crew plan the week's activities, help set up events, and run recess/lunchtime activities.

ROLE OF SCHOOL STAFF: School counsellors collaborate with community partners, support teaching staff to plan lessons on social-emotional learning, and work with school administration to coordinate activities and purchase supplies.

LESSONS LEARNED:

- Plan early, especially if inviting community partners to participate (e.g., to run activity stations).
- Collaborate with the local high school (e.g., to train students to lead assemblies).
- Students enjoy having a variety of sessions and the option to participate in lunchtime activities.

IMPACTS:

- It is a busy week, but it's worth it!
- Has built a school culture that celebrates and promotes positive mental health and well-being.
- *"We think we improved mental health by teaching strategies to all students for dealing with stress."*

LEVELS OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT:

STUDENT ADVISORS

STUDENT COLLABORATORS

TYPES OF INITIATIVES:

EDUCATION & SKILL BUILDING

AWARENESS & ADVOCACY

HEALTH PROMOTION

SPOTLIGHT: Youth Substance Use Campaign

SCHOOL DISTRICT
qathet School District

SCHOOL STAFF SUPPORT
Elaine Maxwell:
elaine.maxwell@sd47.bc.ca

TIMELINE
4 months (January–April)

OVERVIEW: The Youth Substance Use Campaign project involved students creating and leading an anonymous survey to understand the behaviours and reasons for using substances among students in Grades 8–10. Survey findings and substance use resources were shared with students, along with a contest to encourage engagement with the project.

ROLE OF STUDENTS: The Mental Health Advocacy Group is a school club of approximately 18 students. The group co-created survey questions; administered the survey to classes; created a bulletin board to share information; brainstormed contest ideas and prizes; and collected information and resources to share with their peers.

ROLE OF SCHOOL STAFF: School staff were involved in supporting weekly club meetings, overseeing survey development and administration, emailing staff to schedule in-class survey time, and coordinating with student leaders.

LESSONS LEARNED:

- Timing was difficult, especially with interruptions to the project schedule (e.g., Pro D days).
- The project spanned the semester change, which was difficult for students trying to manage school schedules, course stressors, and group meetings.
- Student attendance at the group's weekly meetings was inconsistent, affecting continuity. To address this, time was spent with student leaders outside weekly meetings to work on tasks.

IMPACTS:

- Teachers have been very interested in survey data and how they can best support students.
- Student leaders learned organizational and professional communication skills, which are important for post-secondary and other future endeavours.
- Led to many valuable conversations about substance use and its impacts on our school and lives.

LEVELS OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT:

STUDENT ADVISORS

STUDENT COLLABORATORS

TYPES OF INITIATIVES:

EDUCATION & SKILL BUILDING

AWARENESS & ADVOCACY

SPOTLIGHT: Pay It Forward

SCHOOL DISTRICT
Saanich School District

SCHOOL STAFF SUPPORT
Raquel Pacheco McKinnon:
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TIMELINE
5 months
(January–May)

OVERVIEW: A secondary school's student-led Book Club read the novel *Pay It Forward* by Catherine Ryan Hyde, and were inspired to bring the messages of positivity into the school. The Book Club purchased bracelets with encouraging messages and placed the bracelets in a common area for students to take. Students who took a bracelet were asked to perform three acts of kindness, then give the bracelet to a peer and ask them to do the same. Students were invited to anonymously submit their acts to be posted in the school's Learning Commons.

ROLE OF STUDENTS: With teacher support, the Book Club came up with the idea and applied for a grant to fund the project. They made posters that shared words of kindness, encouragement, and positive messaging, and were available to answer students' questions. They also restocked bracelets when they were running low, and posted the notes about students' acts of kindness.

ROLE OF SCHOOL STAFF: The sponsor teacher helped the Book Club president with writing the grant proposal, as well as purchasing supplies and food for a final club celebration. The teacher also provided guidance on deadlines, organization, and rolling out the project, as this was what students needed most support with.

LESSONS LEARNED:

- Start earlier in the school year so the project can run throughout the school year.

IMPACTS:

- Reflection from the Book Club Student President:

"No matter how big or small the gesture is, we see how these acts of kindness can change a person's life. Reading this book, trying to apply it to our lives, and opening a new perspective made a huge difference. I am so glad I could be part of this wonderful project."

- Reflection from the teacher sponsor:

"I was thinking about creating cross-curricular lessons with the themes of acts of kindness that teachers could use in classrooms. This message is so profound and much needed in our society, so having it not only in an event in school but woven throughout the school culture and in classrooms would allow for an even larger impact. I thought that our students at the secondary level could visit middle and elementary schools to initiate this project in other schools. Also, perhaps visiting a senior care home and having students perform acts of kindness to help with their mental health and well-being."

LEVELS OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT:

STUDENT COLLABORATORS

TYPE OF INITIATIVE:

HEALTH PROMOTION

SPOTLIGHT: Vaping Education Initiative

SCHOOL DISTRICT
Campbell River School District

SCHOOL STAFF SUPPORT
Michelle Merkel:
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TIMELINE
About 4–6 weeks

OVERVIEW: This project aimed to educate students in Grades 9–12 about the effects of vaping and tobacco in a fun and engaging way. Students planned a day-long event that shared information and resources about on vaping with a giant (80 ft!) inflatable obstacle course. The Island Health Tobacco & Vapour Enforcement Officer and Reduction Coordinator provided information about vaping to students, a substance use counsellor from the local Foundry centre connected with students in a low-barrier way, and school counsellors were available to talk with students interested in reducing their substance use.

ROLE OF STUDENTS: The project was mostly led by two students from the Student Leadership Group. They planned the day's activities, prepared the grant application, got quotes for the inflatable obstacle course, and promoted the event to other students. They also set up the event and ran activities throughout the day.

ROLE OF SCHOOL STAFF: The main role of the school staff was to provide administrative support (*"the boring stuff!"*), including paying invoices and contacting the other adults involved (school, Foundry, and Island Health staff). School staff also liaised with school administration to coordinate gym use for the event.

LESSONS LEARNED:

- Minor logistical challenge: the inflatable obstacle course required two compressors to run, which was initially incompatible with the gym's electrical system.
- The Public Health Nurse should be invited next time to support connections with students.

IMPACTS:

- Students had a great day and are still talking about it. Even those who insisted on just watching eventually joined in the activities. The mood in the building was light and fun (which is difficult to accomplish in any school in January!).
- Students who planned the event felt very proud, and were personally thanked by both students and school staff. Their involvement showed them what they are capable of.
- Reflection from the school staff support:

"I was worried the substance use counsellor and anti-vaping officer would feel awkward. But it felt like they fit, and students naturally went to see the Island Health officer. Many students also already knew the substance use counsellor, and it was amazing to see them interact with him in such a playful way. I had always wanted to do something like this, but it would never have happened without the students' enthusiastic involvement. I do think that anything student-initiated – if it can be well supported – will be successful. If it had just been me trying to hype people up, they would have ignored me!"

LEVEL OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT:

STUDENT LEADERS

TYPES OF INITIATIVES:

EDUCATION & SKILL BUILDING

HEALTH PROMOTION





