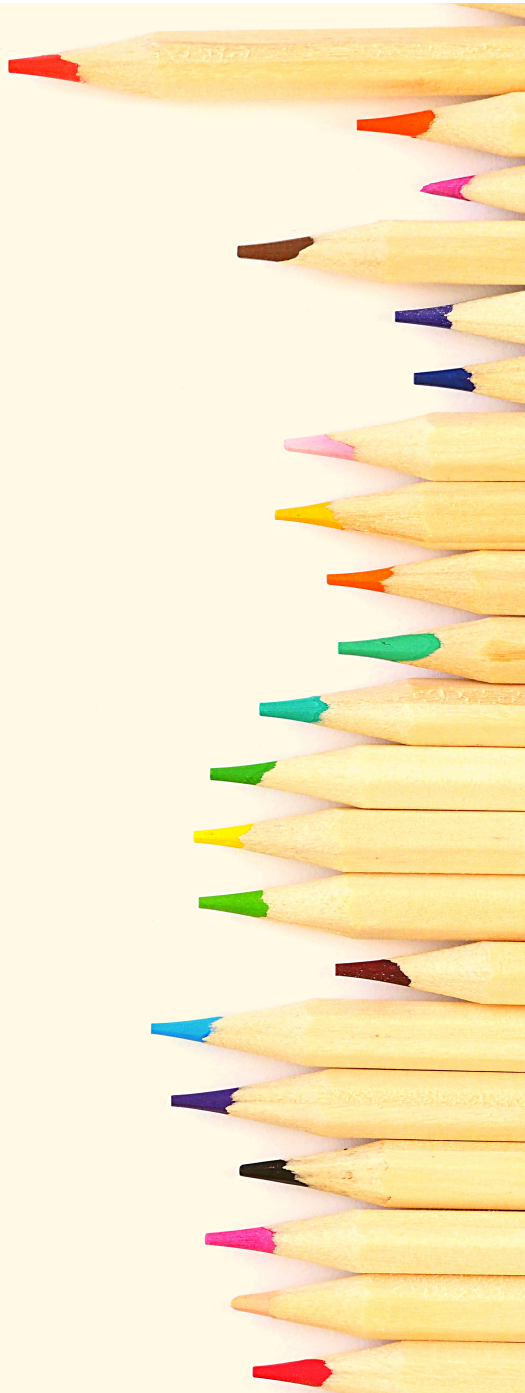


# BULKLEY VALLEY SCHOOL DISTRICT



**2021**

**CASE REPORT**



THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA  
Okanagan School of Education



## CASE STUDY RESEARCH

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In 2020, we conducted research with six school districts in western Canada to answer the question: **how and why are school districts able to prioritize well-being and shift school culture?**

We answered this question using a multiple case study approach, grounded in participatory research principles. We interviewed school community members and reviewed local documents and data. This process allowed us to examine commonalities and differences through the lens of school community members. Ultimately, we identified six factors that school districts might attend to in planning for and supporting well-being. This report presents a summary of these factors, with specific insights related to well-being prioritization within the Bulkley Valley School District. To hear from participants directly on this topic, click [here](#) to watch the video. For more information on the project visit [katestorey.com](https://katestorey.com)

## WHY WELL-BEING IN K-12 EDUCATION?

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Focusing on well-being in K-12 education is proven to support positive mental health, improve academic performance, and contribute to favourable outcomes for students and staff. Such investments benefit the educational system and society as a whole by increasing educational attainment, increasing graduation and employment rates, reducing staff turnover and illness leave, and reducing healthcare costs (1-5).

Across Canada, many school system leaders are looking for insights on how to establish and embed effective, systemic and sustainable approaches to well-being into district priorities and practices (6-7). Supporting the social, emotional and physical well-being of teachers and staff in K-12 education is necessary to foster personal and collective well-being and improve learning environments for both students and teachers (9-11). When teachers are less stressed and experience a stronger sense of engagement with their work, relationships between teachers and students flourish and students become more engaged in their learning (12). Examples of successful district initiatives include those that integrate well-being into strategic planning, identify and address teacher stressors, provide meaningful professional development/learning opportunities specific to well-being, and create a culture that values and enables collaborative work to support well-being (6, 8).

District and school system leaders play an integral role in establishing and encouraging a culture of well-being for teachers and staff (10, 8, 13, 14, 15). These leaders create a foundation of wellness through trusting, relational, and collaborative work environments. Leaders understand the unique needs of district and school communities and as such are able to ensure well-being priorities align with local context (6,16).

## **BULKLEY VALLEY SCHOOL DISTRICT #54 (BVSD)**

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Bulkley Valley School District is surrounded by mountains and trees in the Witsuwit'en territory and serves the five communities of Moricetown, Smithers, Telkwa, Quick, and Houston. It is located in the heart of British Columbia on the Trans-Canada Highway, 370 km west of Prince George and 350 km from the Port of Prince Rupert on the Pacific Ocean. Approximately 25% of BVSD students identify as Indigenous. BVSD serves seven K-12 schools with a population of 2080 students and is governed by a board of seven elected trustees.

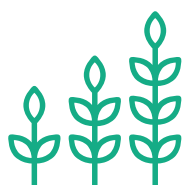
For this research, five individuals from BVSD participated in one-on-one semi-structured qualitative interviews. Participants included senior leaders, district office leaders, district office staff and teachers. Interviews were conducted throughout the 2020-2021 school year and data were supported with local program and policy documents.

## **WELL-BEING WORK IN BULKLEY VALLEY SCHOOL DISTRICT**

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Bulkley Valley School District has put time, energy, and resources into developing an understanding of how to create self-regulated learning environments. They have done this through the development of a unique position, a Social Emotional Helping Teacher (SEHT). The SEHT supports both students and teachers in their mental well-being. The role of the SEHT facilitates the implementation of the social-emotional core competencies found in British Columbia's new curriculum, building well-being across the district. The SEHT collaborates, plans and co-teaches integrated lessons highlighting these competencies with teachers in all five elementary schools in the district. The SEHT also provides workshops on topics relevant to teacher well-being, offers district-wide professional development on mental health literacy, and has conversations with parents on mental health, stress, anxiety and how to support mental well-being during parent information nights. With the role of the SEHT grounded in collaboration, teachers are taught how to scaffold their learning and teaching of the social-emotional components of the new curriculum and integrate them into their overall planning.

This district also has an Indigenous "Walking Together Agreement", a collaborative effort between Bulkley Valley Indigenous communities, School District 54, and the Ministry of Education, which identifies school and district goals/directions under headings of success, culture, sense of belonging and health/wellness. At times, the SEHT and Indigenous Education teacher are in classrooms together, which adds a richness to the work being done.



## KEY FINDINGS

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Across all districts that participated in this case study research (including Bulkley Valley School District), six common factors were identified relating to how and why school districts prioritize well-being and shift school culture. For this report, specific examples and quotes from BVSD are included:



### WELLNESS IS WHOLISTIC & REQUIRES BALANCE

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Well-being was understood as encompassing many aspects and domains (e.g., social, spiritual, environmental, financial, healthy identity) which required nurturing to find balance. Both individual and collective well-being were emphasized as necessary to build resilience and support overall flourishing.

Participants from the Bulkley Valley School District conceptualized wellness most often as physical and mental well-being that is broad and all-encompassing, capable of impacting day to day life. BVSD staff identified an ongoing need to pay attention to well-being as balance at work and between work and home life. Participants shared that they sometimes need to “draw this hard line between school and home life.”

**“[Well-being is] more than just being able to cope and get by and do what you have to do. It's actually having that vitality and engagement in your life and in your work.”**



### STUDENT & STAFF WELL-BEING ARE INTERCONNECTED

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District prioritization of well-being was driven by increasing mental health and well-being needs of school communities, including administrators, teachers, staff, and students. In some cases, this was accompanied by a sense of urgency, in others, a slow mounting recognition that a shift was needed.

BVSD participants identified that well-being became a priority in their district as a result of increased emphasis and recognition for student and staff needs. This included a need to proactively support student social and emotional needs, address staff burn out, and the challenge of retaining teachers. District leaders recognized teachers were actively looking for skills and ways to address heightened anxiety in their classrooms. This inspired a district-level approach to developing the Social Emotional Helping Teacher (SEHT), which provides student and teacher well-being supports.



**“There was a gap that was developing between the expectation of educators having to respond to social emotional needs of students and the educators themselves not having been intensely taught around SEL practices themselves. They weren’t equipped to address the social and emotional needs of students in the classroom...”**

## ORGANIZATIONAL LEADERSHIP SUSTAINS IMPLEMENTATION

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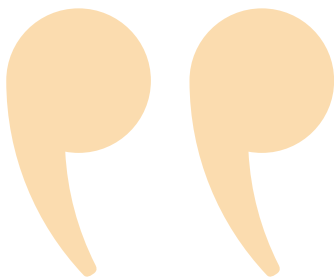
Strong organizational leadership and coordinated action were paramount in supporting and sustaining well-being efforts. Multiple organizational factors were cited as essential to support action. These included senior leaders with a vision for well-being that was openly communicated and role modeled, dedication of time and resources to support action – including allocation of funding for well-being related staffing, and distributed leadership through school champions (staff and students).

**"[Well-being] is something our superintendent is conscious of and something that he's making an effort to promote within the district."**



Bulkley Valley School District's approach included the creation of new positions in the district to support well-being goals, engagement with multiple stakeholders (individuals or groups) from the community to create action teams, collective collaborations within the district, and professional development opportunities for staff. Organizing for well-being involves a complex network of interrelationships.

Participants noted that the funding of new wellness positions was a sign that their district valued and was committed to supporting well-being. Prioritizing and organizing financial resources to implement district-wide well-being initiatives, such as the SEHT position, was a way for the district leaders to pledge their commitment to sustaining well-being practices in their schools for staff and students.



**"The full time (elementary) social emotional helping teacher – it's a significant financial commitment. It's saying that we think this is important for students and adults and the system."**

## CONNECTION AND VOICE AS A CATALYST TO WELL-BEING



Informal and formal opportunities for connection fostered a sense of belonging and created space for well-being dialogue across districts. These opportunities supported the creation of positive collaborative working and learning environments, increasing social cohesion and promoting the engagement of students and staff in well-being decision-making.

Participants identified that professional relationships and organizational activities that promote social connectedness play an integral role in perpetuating both personal and organizational wellness and resilience. To support well-being growth, connections between and across individuals at different levels and across different roles within the system need to be attended to. School culture within BVSD was shown to have a measurable impact on well-being, and is reflected in the level of trust, relationships and connectedness between students, teachers and staff. The “connectedness-belonging project” at two schools within the district, has a goal of “relationships first”, a concept that speaks directly to the efforts that Bulkley Valley has made to increase connection and support well-being.



**“For the most part, everybody is really cohesive and we all really support each other...we do a lot of things that bring us together outside of just our classroom environment which is nice too.”**



## BUILDING CAPACITY TO SUPPORT WELL-BEING

Ongoing professional development, learning, and coaching opportunities were required to support well-being prioritization. These opportunities helped build capacity through coordinated action and also promoted shared goals and well-being language across districts. Partners with well-being knowledge and resources were often helpful allies in building well-being capacity.

With the establishment of the Social Emotional Helping Teacher (SEHT), the role was to help support and build capacities of teachers, staff and students in learning how they can take steps to contribute to their mental well-being. District staff have also sought out connections to provincial networks and partnered with other community groups involved with mental health and well-being practices such as Healthy Schools BC, DASH, WellAhead, Northern Health and a local wellness action team.



## CHARTING AND RE-CHARTING A COURSE

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Strategic well-being planning helped give direction to well-being initiatives and promote alignment between district priorities and implementation in schools. Often this involved engaging members of the school community and leveraging existing processes and knowledge (e.g., committees or groups, data sources), continually asking ‘what next’ and taking risks to respond to shifting contexts and emerging needs. When done well, engagement promoted transparency and accountability in district-wide well-being initiatives.

At Bulkley Valley School District, well-being visions are brought to reality through carefully planned initiatives. One example of strategic wellness planning is the district-level approach used to developing the SEHT framework. This approach has evolved over time and continues to adapt as needed. Like other districts, time, money, availability of expertise, and lack of communication were mentioned by participants as obstacles in implementing and sustaining initiatives. When considering strategic planning for wellness, participants at BVSD reiterated the need for staff members to understand the “really big picture” to feel “in the loop” with the changes being made.



**The strategic aim of the SEHT framework is sustainability, "by building the capacity of teachers and students to do the work without the SEHT."**



## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DISTRICT-WIDE WELL-BEING

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To support and bolster district-wide well-being, we recommend that district leaders and allies in K-12 education consider how they can address the key factors described in this report, in their own school communities.

Recommendations for action are based on insights provided by school community members in the six districts that participated in this case study research. Suggestions provide potential avenues for well-being prioritization and starting points for implementation success.



### **Well-Being is Wholistic and Requires Balance:**

- Create opportunities for school- and district-level conversations about well-being and how it is understood and valued
- Use frameworks such as comprehensive school health that acknowledge and describe multiple well-being domains to raise awareness and create a shared understanding



### **Student & Staff Well-Being are Interconnected:**

- Recognize challenges as an opportunity for growth. Acknowledging that a change is needed can be the first step to gathering support and shifting practice
- Take a strengths-based approach to change – build on what is working, with a focus to make it better



### **Organizational Leadership Sustains Implementation:**

- Make your personal vision and value for well-being a part of your leadership approach, whatever your role. This helps normalize and encourage it as a district and school priority
- Communicate an intention to support collective and individual well-being, with transparency that change is a process, not an end-result. Provide support to sustain this work (e.g., staffing & funds)



### **Connection and Voice as a Catalyst to Well-Being:**

- Create space for social connection in the workday. This practice helps to build trust, promotes collaboration and group cohesion, and enhances well-being
- Provide opportunities for meaningful engagement within well-being initiatives, including input in early development and adaptation



## RECOMMENDATIONS (CONTINUED)

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### **Building Capacity to Support Well-Being:**

- Identify allies within and outside your organization who bring knowledge, expertise and resources to support your well-being goals (e.g., professional development, evaluation)
- Integrate a well-being focus into existing professional development, with mechanisms to help share and apply knowledge more broadly, and promote shared leadership



### **Charting and Re-Charting a Course:**

- Create and use a common language for well-being to help frame strategic district priorities plans, with clear goals and opportunities for input from school community members
- Convening a group with diverse perspectives helps to guide district implementation. Build a strong foundation, and be prepared to adapt plans where needed

While these recommendations provide starting points for success, each district and school has unique opportunities and partnerships that can enhance well-being prioritization. We recommend that district leaders continue engaging with their school communities and networks to identify their strengths and needs as they envision and implement well-being change. Collaboration supports engagement across districts and promotes alignment and mobilization of well-being initiatives (15).

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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We thank the many students, teachers, staff, leaders and partners for their participation in this project. Wellness initiatives highlighted throughout this report are the result of ongoing commitment and investment by numerous partners including the Governments of Alberta and British Columbia, health services, and provincial and national organizations. This case study research was funded through the generous support of the J.W. McConnell Foundation WellAhead initiative.

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