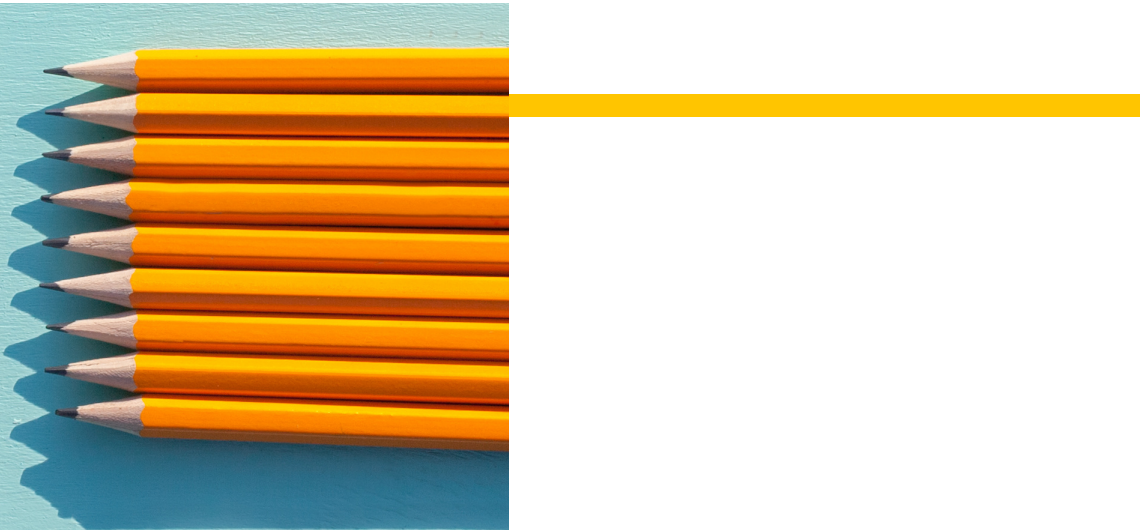


CHINOOK'S EDGE SCHOOL DIVISION



2021

CASE REPORT



THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
Okanagan School of Education

CASE STUDY RESEARCH

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 Chinook's Edge School Division. To hear from participants directly on this topic, click [here](#) to watch the video. For more information on the project visit katestorey.com

WHY WELL-BEING IN K-12 EDUCATION?

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).

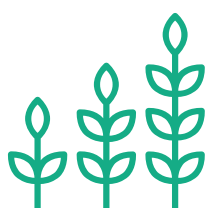
CHINOOK'S EDGE SCHOOL DIVISION (CESD)

Chinook's Edge School Division (CESD) is located between the municipalities of Calgary and Red Deer in Central Alberta in the Treaty 7 region and Métis Nation of Alberta, Region 3. Covering over 11,000 square kilometers, the division comprises thirteen small communities (rural and urban). It serves a student population of 11,000 across 43 schools (K-12) and a staff of over 1700 employees. It is governed by a board of nine elected trustees. Throughout the school year in 2020, thirteen individuals from CESD participated in one-on-one semi-structured interviews on the topic of well-being prioritization within their school district. Participants included senior leadership, district office staff, school administrators, teachers, partners, and clinical team staff. Interview data was supported with local program and policy documents, as well as local data (e.g., division summaries of survey data).

WELL-BEING WORK IN CHINOOK'S EDGE SCHOOL DIVISION

Over the past decade, CESD has established a strong base in student social-emotional learning and adopted a 'culture of listening' with a goal to create connections among students, staff, and families. In 2017, CESD undertook a division-wide survey of staff which identified a clear need to support the well-being of all staff across the division, including the workplace environment. This survey led to the designation of a wellness champion at each school, the creation of a wellness steering committee, and a division wellness leader to coordinate wellness action. These committees support well-being needs in CESD and promote transparency and accountability. Further, these committees provide a formal opportunity for students, teachers, support staff, and administrators to ask questions of senior leaders and receive answers and action on issues.

In response to feedback from these committees and growing mental health and occupational stress, CESD recently turned their attention to addressing staff well-being. Staff were experiencing burnout, in part due to the demands of teaching and the complex needs of their students. The systems CESD created to support well-being are guided by leaders (superintendents, administrators) who value wellness. School-level administrators are also given regular opportunities to meet and learn from each other, and receive support from division leaders through frequent school visits.



“Wellness is not a DIY
[do it yourself] project”

KEY FINDINGS

Across all districts that participated in this case study research (including Chinook's Edge School Division), 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 CESD are also included:



WELL-BEING IS WHOLISTIC & REQUIRES BALANCE

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

In CESD, many participants spoke to the importance of well-being dimensions that focused on the individual, but acknowledged how supportive working and learning environments were necessary for individuals to reach their full potential.

"[Wellness] means honoring the whole person. We really understand the fullness of the term wellness in this division, that that's all aspects that make you feel healthy and well – all the elements that combine to make you a happy person."



STUDENT & STAFF WELL-BEING ARE INTERCONNECTED

District prioritization of well-being was driven by increased 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.

In CESD, division-wide action to support well-being was in part spurred by the willingness of district and school leaders to listen and act on input from staff who shared that they were experiencing high levels of stress and burnout. This included feedback from the Matters Committees that had been established to give staff and students a direct mechanism to voice their concerns to district leadership. While work supporting student social-emotional learning had been occurring for a number of years, teacher and staff well-being had not yet been fully integrated as a priority.



"Our slogan is 'Chinook's Edge, where students come first'. We've talked a lot about how if we want to put our students first, we have to think about ourselves as well. I think with the increased learning around emotional health that we've done with students, it's become more obvious that they were really needing to look at our health as well."

ORGANIZATIONAL LEADERSHIP SUSTAINS IMPLEMENTATION

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).

"When you have a superintendent who makes it a priority – It's a whole lot easier to start doing that work."



Within CESD, superintendent vision and value for well-being promoted an organizational culture that helped propel and sustain a well-being focus. Specific supports included the designation of a wellness champion at each school, the creation of a wellness steering committee, and hiring a division wellness leader to coordinate strategic action and liaise with schools. Division leaders (superintendents, past and present) and school leaders (administrators) who valued the wholistic health of their school communities supported this shift in division culture.

Leadership growth is a key focus at CESD; school-level administrators are given regular formal opportunities to meet and learn from each other, and direct mentorship from superintendents through school visits. An ongoing goal of CESD is communicating well-being as a priority and role modeling healthy habits, including work-life balance. In 2018 a district-wide approach entitled “weekdays ‘til 6” was put in place to formally encourage staff and families to prioritize personal non-work hours. This initiative recommends that all non-urgent emails and texts be sent prior to 6 p.m. on weekdays and, over time, has received positive uptake within CESD and among other districts across Canada. “Weekdays ‘til 6” exemplifies how a system-level shift in practice can have a broad impact for all families, schools and communities across a division.



"So not only are we saying the words, we're putting into action and putting positions - staff positions, in place, to actually guide some of the work that we know is important, and that we have identified is important."

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. 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.

CESD adopted a 'culture of listening' and a goal to create connection among students, staff, and families. This is most evident in the establishment of specific mechanisms for engagement like the Matters Committees (Teachers Matter, Support Staff Matter, Parents Matter, and Students Matter). They provide a forum for connection and conversation with district leaders and peers. Superintendents are responsive and accountable to these committees, increasing decision-making transparency. CESD also espouses a 'culture of caring' where individual and collective well-being are supported through cultural norms around empathy, relationship building and social connection, and through the direct individual support of a staff wellness worker.

"Our staff members do a really good job of looking out for each other...and I think with that, with the wellness initiatives that have been put forward by the division, I see more and more of it creeping into our school."



BUILDING CAPACITY TO SUPPORT WELL-BEING ACTION

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 helpful allies in building well-being capacity.



"I think our committee and the division has been very careful about making sure people don't feel like this is something extra on their plate."

Social emotional well-being for all is an ongoing priority at CESD. The Staff Wellness Worker provides valuable coordination, resources, and learning to promote alignment across the division. This includes direct support to champions and a wellness steering committee, as well as professional learning sessions. Many external partners support CESD including the Alberta School Employee Benefit Plan, Alberta Health Services, Ever Active Schools, and other jurisdictions.

CHARTING AND RE-CHARTING A COURSE

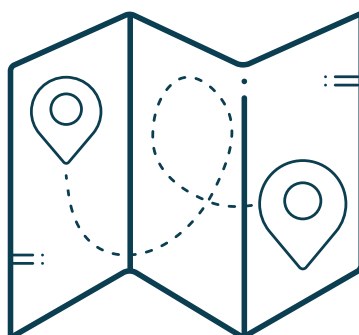
Strategic planning focused on well-being helped give direction to initiatives and promote alignment between district priorities and school-level implementation. This often involved engaging members of the school community and leveraging existing processes and knowledge (e.g., committees or groups, data 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.



"One of the first things was bringing in representatives from the school and just listening to them, and hearing from them - finding out what their thoughts were on wellness and what their needs were and how we could respond to that."

The Steering Committee for CESD Staff Health and Wellness guides strategic wellness planning for the division and helps to identify emergent needs. This committee is made up of representatives from across the district (administrators, teachers, school staff, district staff) as well as partner organizations, with a goal to develop strategies to improve staff health and wellness. This promotes alignment and uptake. Formal and informal evidence gathering (e.g., surveys, aggregate data from Homewood Health, CESD wellness meetings, question box) is used to identify new wellness avenues and opportunities, and adapt things that aren't working as planned.

"We really are trying to set the direction and – and be responsive to what we heard a couple years ago in a division wide survey that went out, regarding people's wishes and challenges around staff health and wellness."



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DISTRICT-WIDE WELL-BEING ACTION

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 conversation 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 shared understanding



Student & Staff Well-being are Interconnected:

- Recognize challenges as an opportunity for growth. Acknowledging that a change is needed can be a 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)



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 and 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

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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