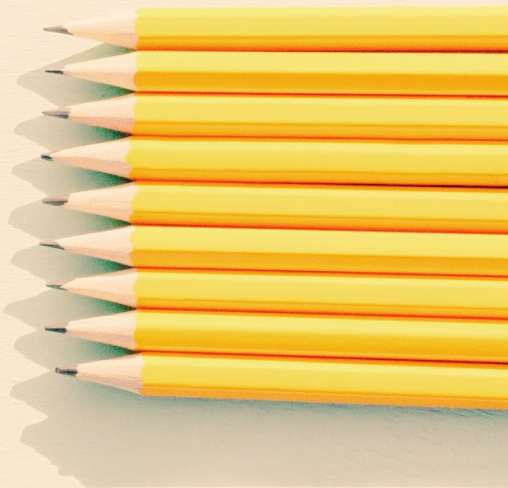


# EDMONTON CATHOLIC SCHOOL DIVISION



**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 Edmonton Catholic 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](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.

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).

## EDMONTON CATHOLIC SCHOOL DIVISION (ECSD)

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Edmonton Catholic School Division (ECSD) is located in the urban municipality of Edmonton, in north-central Alberta, covering an area of 684 square kilometers. It serves a student population of 44,000 across 96 schools (pre-K to 12) and a staff of over 4252 employees. It is governed by a board of seven elected trustees and is the fourth largest school district in the province of Alberta.

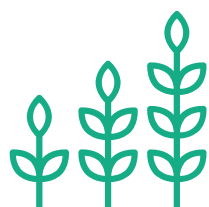
For this research, thirteen individuals from ECSD participated in one-on-one semi-structured interviews. Participants included students, parents, division office leaders, school administrators, teachers, staff, and community partners. Interviews were conducted during the 2020-2021 school year and data were supported with local program and policy documents, as well as publicly available data (e.g., website content, media features).

## WELL-BEING WORK IN ECSD

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Edmonton Catholic School Division (ECSD) is a large metropolitan district in the provincial capital of Edmonton, Alberta, located on the traditional land of Treaty 6 and home of the Métis nation of Alberta Region 4. ECSD espouses a commitment to offer a “Christ-centred, competency-based learning experience for all learners”. The division takes a Comprehensive School Health (CSH) approach to guide its well-being work, which has been evolving over the past 10+ years. The first district well-being project, Wellness Works, marked the beginning of ECSD’s commitment to well-being prioritization and the development of the coordinated approach that is in place today. This evolution led to the development of a comprehensive Mental Health Strategic Plan for the division, which provides a common understanding of the division’s well-being vision and goals, with direct links to implementation.

The Mental Health Strategic Plan is supported through strong division leadership, including central coordination for program development and delivery. Learning opportunities take place throughout the entire school year and aim to reach a diverse range of staff, students, and families. Strong partnerships bring expertise and resources to support implementation. These include health services (speech, occupational and mental health therapists, social workers, psychologists), provincial and local organizations, community partners, families, and donors.



"It's multilayered...district roles, schools roles, students roles, partnership roles, senior admin roles - I think all of those are important pieces. They all come together and I don't think one can exist without the other."

## KEY FINDINGS

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Across all districts that participated in this case study research (including Edmonton Catholic School Division), six common themes were identified relating to how and why school districts prioritize well-being and shift school culture. For this report, specific examples and quotes from ECSD are included.

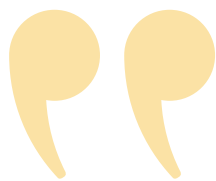


### WELLNESS IS WHOLISTIC & REQUIRES BALANCE

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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 ECSD, participants acknowledged wellness had various dimensions and that district prioritization must consider the diverse needs of students and staff within their large division. Creating a shared understanding of mental health and well-being was understood to support implementation. Catholicity was identified by many as a unique element that helped to support well-being through shared values and language.



**"Trying to discover self-identity is a focus of students. We're trying to make sense of who we are and what we want to do. Being in a community and an environment where we're safe to address all aspects of that, I think definitely helps. There's a lot more room for conversation on aspects of wellness that are more personal."**

### STUDENT & STAFF WELL-BEING ARE INTERCONNECTED

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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 ECSD, well-being prioritization had been occurring for many years with various district well-being projects. Over time, prioritization evolved into development of a coordinated and comprehensive Mental Health Strategic Plan, which provides a common understanding of the division wellness vision and goals, with direct links to implementation. The impetus for this plan came out of a need for coordination of the many individual wellness-related initiatives happening across district schools, all of which were responding to the increasing needs of students and staff.

**"It was really, I would say it was a need coming from our schools, as teachers and staff saying you know we, we're not trained in mental health. We want to support our students but we don't know how."**



## ORGANIZATIONAL LEADERSHIP SUSTAINS IMPLEMENTATION

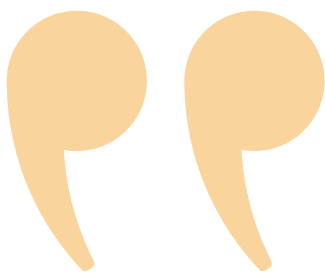
Strong organizational leadership and coordinated action were paramount in supporting and sustaining well-being efforts. Multiple organizational factors were cited as essential to support action. These included senior leaders with a vision for well-being that was openly communicated and role modeled, 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).

**"Mental Health Champions, there are teachers, administrators, counsellors - its just a variety of people. It's somebody that is going to advocate for the school, is going to come back and share, maybe do some PD [professional development] so they can be a voice for it - so it can be anyone that's passionate about it."**



Within ECSD, senior leaders and district managers with a vision and passion for well-being created a strong and supportive organizational culture. Well-being is cohesively integrated across division priorities, plans, and programs. Supportive funding and ongoing learning for staff and students helped to sustain this work. Specific supports include the designation of school mental health champions, school wellness teams, student leadership opportunities, multidisciplinary support teams (e.g., occupational therapists, counsellors), and a dedicated division manager who supports projects across schools. ECSD schools are numerous with diverse wellness needs. A proactive focus on health promotion and prevention, with implementation supports, has been key to supporting well-being.

Increasing knowledge and confidence to address mental health and well-being, alongside strategic action to reduce stigma, was cited by many in ECSD as a key focus. The Go-to-Educator model was frequently mentioned as a valued resource to build a collective understanding. Promoting alignment across schools through the mental health strategic plan and the comprehensive school health framework supported implementation in such a large jurisdiction. Regular opportunities for learning and connection throughout the year helped to bolster implementation. Champions in schools help facilitate implementation through a distributed leadership model, engaging colleagues and sharing knowledge.



**"[Our superintendent] works incredibly hard, and at the same time one of the things I really have grown to respect about her is she also really prioritizes family time and vacation...she is always saying to us, 'make sure you're taking vacation, make sure you're taking that time' and I think that greatly impacts wellness."**



## 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.

Building stronger connections between schools, students and families to support individual and collective well-being is an ongoing priority for ECSD. The division regularly provides Parent Nights on topics of interest to parents, including health and wellness. Student leaders lead and host wellness events and activities in their schools, connecting peers and cultivating positive relationships. Opportunities for connection also occur in division committees. These have helped to identify avenues for wellness initiatives at an organizational level and among schools.



**"You have to have a healthy staff, because if you have a healthy staff, then you have a healthy school community."**



## 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 helpful allies in building well-being capacity.

**"Our mentor, our leader, has been huge in promoting it [wellness] and encouraging it, providing the professional development and the supports. "**



Professional development and learning are central to the division well-being approach. Wellness champions (administrators, staff, and students) are engaged regularly throughout the school year to participate in formal wellness-related learning. They are encouraged to act as knowledge brokers within their schools, sharing learning and resources with their peers – with a goal to promote grassroots well-being initiatives in individual schools. Established partnerships with provincial and local organizations and individuals (e.g., health services, donors, programs, community partners, families) help support implementation through resources and learning opportunities.

## 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.



**"We created the Mental Health Strategic Plan to give our school district a framework under the comprehensive school health framework, to work towards that every school knows what we're trying to achieve in student wellness - every school, every teacher, working with every student."**

Within ECSD the Mental Health Strategic Plan (MHSP) provides a foundational “road map” to align and coordinate division well-being implementation. Renewed yearly, the MHSP brings together a comprehensive plan to support mental health and well-being across division schools with links to key resources, rationale, and support. This plan supports ongoing well-being program development and delivery, including updates and additions to the MHSP to respond to emergent needs.

**"So although some of the sails may change, and what have you, with the foundation we are able to be flexible and responsive in dealing with the change. Yet the – the key pieces of this plan, they're not changing at all."**



## 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 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)

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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 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

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