

POWELL RIVER SCHOOL DISTRICT

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 Powell River School District. For more information on the project visit katestorey.com

WHY WELLBEING 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).

POWELL RIVER SCHOOL DISTRICT (PRSD)

Powell River School District (PRSD) covers the communities of Powell River and Texada Island and stretches along the coastal shores of the Pacific Ocean on the Sunshine Coast of British Columbia. It is located on the traditional territory of the Coast Salish peoples, specifically the Tla'amin Nation. PRSD is two ferries away and 140 km Northwest of Vancouver in an area known for its breathtaking scenery and natural environment. The district boasts numerous outdoor and eco-sustainability programs. PRSD serves 2200 students and 283 staff across seven K-12 schools. It is governed by a board of five elected trustees.

For this research, nine members of the PRSD communities participated in one-on-one semi-structured interviews. Participants included district office leaders, district office staff, counsellors, administrators, school 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 POWELL RIVER SCHOOL DISTRICT

One of PRSD's major goals is to support the mental health and well-being of students and staff. Throughout the 2020-2021 school year, PRSD was in the process of implementing initiatives that targeted two of the district's objectives: increasing mental health literacy for students, parents, and staff; and improving the culture of acceptance, tolerance, mindfulness and respect. These initiatives included increasing counselling services at all schools within the district, hiring a family support liaison, improving the employee and family assistance program (EFAP), creating a district professional learning group called 'Wellness 47,' implementing everyday anxiety strategies for educators (EASE), and using programs such as Roots of Empathy, Mind Up and Zones of Regulation.

In recent years, district employees set out to gather data, analyze and prioritize results, and build engagement, working towards their wellness objectives with support from a wellness coach with the WellAhead team from the McConnell Foundation. A district well-being team was created to lead this work with an overall focus to support PRSD in their approach to promoting mental well-being for students and staff. One key finding was the overwhelming need to improve professional relationships within the district. As a result of identifying that communications and dialogue needed improvement, further initiatives were planned, and efforts have been made to try and sustain well-being momentum. Other areas of focus that emerged were improving resilience, addressing seasonal challenges, and improving work-life balance.



KEY FINDINGS

Across all six districts (including Powell River School District), six common factors were identified relating to how and why school districts prioritize well-being and shift school culture. Specific examples and quotes from PRSD are presented below:



WELLNESS IS WHOLISTIC & REQUIRES BALANCE

Well-being was understood as wholistic and that it 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.

PRSD participants conceptualized well-being as physical, mental, and emotional well-being. They also emphasized a need to find balance between the broad and encompassing nature of different types of well-being. Participants identified an ongoing need to pay attention to well-being as balance at work and between work and home because “work-life harmony in schools ebbs and wanes”.

“Wellness isn’t just about the individual, it’s also about the organization, the system... where I have more time at certain times of the year to focus on wellness.”



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 PRSD, participants described feeling a noticeable “opening up” of a district dialogue about the culture of well-being. Prioritization of well-being goals and initiatives often stemmed from a need to overcome identified challenges, including an increasing awareness of mental health and well-being challenges within individual school communities, and overall student needs.



“I couldn’t change the culture and processes above me easily... so, I resolved to try to change what I could change myself. Which was to improve my building’s culture, my building’s dialogue, communication, understanding that I have to work on wellness on a number of fronts.”

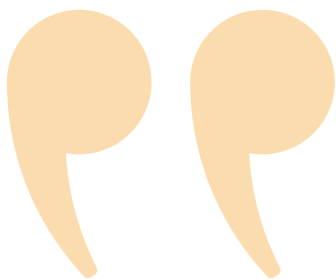
ORGANIZATIONAL LEADERSHIP SUSTAINS IMPLEMENTATION

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).

Staff from Powell River School District described organizational leadership for well-being as taking multiple forms. These forms included engagement with a wellness coach, convening a district team to support system-wide wellness planning, and the provision of professional development opportunities on Social Emotional Learning (SEL) to staff. In addition, administrators also accessed university sessions to learn how to “change the culture around communication and dialogue.”

Participants also shared that strong organizational leadership included each school organizing separate well-being activities based on individual teacher and staff needs. For example, one administrator described intentionality in bringing wellness conversation to staff meetings in order to provide staff members voice and agency to “describe what you think we’re doing well, and describe what you think we need to work on.” In another school, “Joyous January” provided a fun and “contagious” opportunity for staff to work on wellness. While one staff member organized the month-long event, all staff were part of the planning, resulting in an estimated 80% participation rate and plans to continue in the future.

Senior staff in the district were aware of the impact that leading by example, having open communication, and meaningful support can have on district-wide well-being capacity.



[I am conscious of] trying to lead by example... just kind of dropping in this idea of wellness where we can, where it feels appreciated, where it’s going to be received.

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.

PRSD participants described district well-being and resilience as being encouraged when district leaders were intentional in creating opportunities for social connection between district leaders, teachers, and staff. Participants described well-being as collaborative. One participant felt that speaking with others about wellness in small groups was more personable, and others believed that opportunities to engage with other staff during special events increased positive connections and built respect, as openness in talking in respectful ways generated a sense of “good camaraderie”. When connection and communication is lacking, this can lead to staff feeling less supported in their well-being. Some participants expressed how a disconnection created a feeling like there was “an invisible divide” between different positions in the system. Bridging this divide could help school staff feel more supported and aid with a more cohesive integration of wellness within the district.

“In the building, in this particular workplace, relationships are one of the things that really contribute to feeling well or feeling part of a culture... that’s what’s dictating whether or not we’re feeling well.”



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.

Many PRSD participants described how visions of wellness were beginning to be supported within the district. One PRSD administrator noted that wellness conversations needed to be followed up with practice and action, as well as embedding those ideals into the workplace. By giving staff the tools to get familiarized with those conversations and apply them, it opened the door to seeing wellness being prioritized within the school culture. Provision of staff SEL coaching was appreciated by district participants who saw it as integral to overall education. Specific actions to support wellness-related professional development and learning were a helpful starting point in building capacity in PRSD (e.g., rebranding the professional development committee to include well-being, creating ‘Wellness 47’). To continue to build on prior well-being initiatives and enhance capacity, a team of district leaders continue to work together under the umbrella of ‘Wellness 47’.

CHARTING AND RE-CHARTING A COURSE

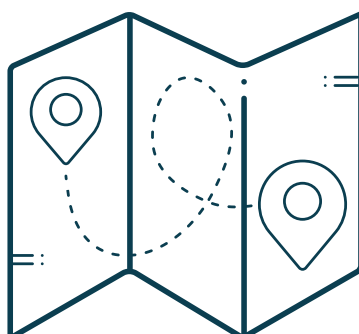
Strategic planning focused on well-being helped give direction. This charting and re-charting of initiatives promoted alignment between district priorities and school-level implementation. This often involved engaging members of the school community and leveraging existing processes and knowledge (e.g.,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



“If you’ve got good culture, you’ve got good organizational wellness.”

Participants noted that willingness to chart innovative courses for ongoing district well-being was crucial in shifting school cultures toward wellness. Embedding wellness formally into strategic planning was important as it provided clear direction to influence the school culture and organization-wide understanding of wellness. Participants also noted the important balance required in charting a course, whereby individual wellness needs are recognized alongside district needs. While district and school-led initiatives supporting staff socials and reduced cost for physical wellness activities were highlighted as helpful in engaging some aspects of wellness, participants also noted a desire for broader initiatives that attend to conversations about whole district culture, to more deeply pinpoint future district wellness goals.

“[You need a] coherent plan to bridge wellness with the organizational wellness, the culture, the communication, [and] the dialogue.”



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DISTRICT-WIDE WELL-BEING

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)



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).

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