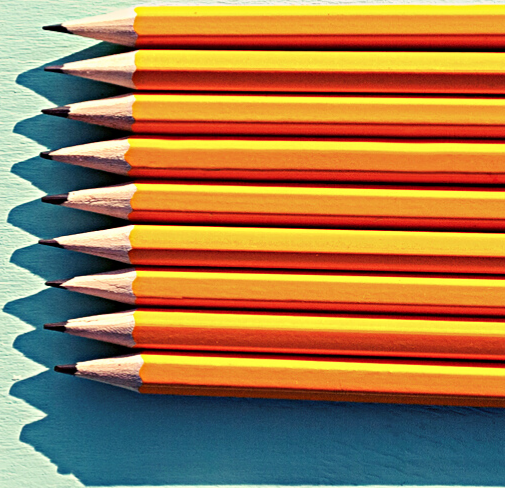


# NORTHLAND SCHOOL DIVISION



**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 authorities in western Canada to answer the question: **how and why are school authorities able to prioritize well-being and shift culture?**

We used a multiple case study approach, grounded in participatory research principles. By examining commonalities and differences through the lens of school community members and local documents and data, 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 Northland 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 WELLNESS 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, embed, and encourage effective, systemic and sustainable approaches to well-being into their existing district priorities and practices. (6-7) Successful district initiatives include those that integrate well-being into strategic planning, identify and address teacher stressors, organize meaningful professional development and learning opportunities specific to well-being, and create cultures that value and enable collaborative work to support well-being (6,8) 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)

District and school leaders play an integral role in creating and encouraging cultures of well-being for teachers and staff (10,8,13,14) as they inspire shared well-being objectives, (15) recognize the impacts that diverse school environments have on well-being (6) and cultivate trusting, relational, connected and enabling work environments that build teacher efficacy. (16)

## **NORTHLAND SCHOOL DIVISION (NSD)**

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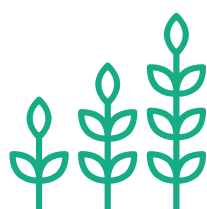
Northland School Division (NSD) is located in Northern Alberta, covering over 288,000 square kilometers. Schools are located near mountains, lakes, rivers, forests, and wetlands on Treaty 6 and 8 territories in municipalities, First Nation reserves, and Métis Settlements. It serves a student population of 2,000 students across 20 schools (K-12). It is governed by a board of eleven elected trustees. Ninety-five percent of the student population identifies as First Nations, Métis or Inuit descent. Throughout the school year in 2020, eight individuals from NSD participated in one-on-one semi structured interviews on the topic of well-being prioritization within their school division. Participants included board trustees, division office staff, school administrators, and community partners. Interview data was supported with local program and policy documents, as well as local publicly available data.

## **WELL-BEING WORK IN NSD**

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Northland School Division has recognized an ongoing need to rebuild and build trusting relationships between school and families, to support the educational success of students and the well-being of the communities. They acknowledge and recognize the history of colonization, residential schools, and the negative effects of intergenerational trauma in their communities. This is central to their well-being prioritization approach. A focus on well-being has become more prominent within the past five years, catalyzed by senior leaders who were passionate about well-being, and a sense of urgency to address student mental health following a series of deaths by suicide. Supporting student mental health and well-being through a connection to identity and culture is paramount to their approach. This is exemplified by the division outcome statement “NSD students are strong in identity, healthy, and successful.” They understand that before students can learn and succeed academically, they must be healthy and well, both physically and emotionally, and having a strong sense of self. As such, the district has committed to provide holistic educational opportunities for students, with the support of community members and partners. The district supports families directly and has hired family wellness workers who bridge conversations between school and home, and advocate on behalf of parents.

Land-based learning is one way in which the district is supporting students and families to learn traditional teachings on the land, integrating curricular outcomes with Indigenous history. This is being delivered with the support of community members, including Elders. All schools incorporate land-based learning in some way with per-capita funding from the division, but the approach is unique across schools.



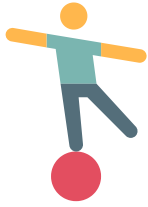
“To have that connection, not only with your past, but with generations that came before you and the ones that are yet to come.”



## KEY FINDINGS

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Across all six districts, including Northland School Division, six common factors were identified relating to how and why school districts can make well-being a priority and shift school culture. Specific examples and quotes from NSD are presented below:



### 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.

In NSD, many participants spoke to the importance of different well-being dimensions, and acknowledged how crucially important it was to meet the basic needs of their students within their division. Supportive working environments were also recognized as necessary to support teacher and staff well-being and self-care.

**"[Wellness] is something that you're always building towards, because it can change, right? I think it's pretty fluid, especially as you age, what your perspective is on wellness, and what pieces of wellness are important to you. Depending on your life situation, it's always kind of evolving and changing."**

### TIPPING POINTS FOR WELL-BEING ACTION

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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. As well, there was an identified need to coordinate actions or initiatives related to well-being across schools. In some cases, this was accompanied by a sense of urgency, in others, a slow mounting recognition that a shift was needed.

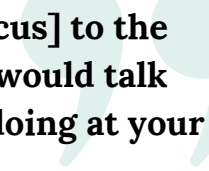
In NSD, division-wide well-being prioritization was catalyzed by a recognized need for the division to better support and address mental health and well-being among students. A mental health crisis, including deaths by suicide in the community resulted in senior leadership forming a committee to seek funding to address growing well-being needs in the division, and link with partners and community members to plan and take action.

**"The superintendent started a committee to address that [mental health] issue, and that was kind of the starting point of some of those conversations happening...and starting to figure out how we can really start the conversation about wellness."**

## ORGANIZATIONAL LEADERSHIP SUSTAINS IMPLEMENTATION

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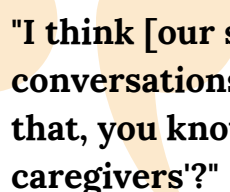
Strong organizational leadership and coordinated action were paramount in supporting and sustaining well-being efforts. Multiple organizational factors were cited as essential to support action. These included senior leaders with a vision for well-being that was openly communicated and role modeled,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



**"Our superintendent brought a lot of that [wellness focus] to the table. When we would have our principal meetings he would talk about staff wellness, student wellness - what are you doing at your schools? He was bringing that conversation forward."**

Within NSD, superintendent vision and value for well-being at a critical time led to the development of an organizational culture that integrates a well-being lens. Ongoing prioritization and funding for well-being has helped to sustain this work. Specific supports include the designation of wellness champions within school, the creation of a division wellness committee, family wellness workers, and dedicated time for a division wellness liaison to support strategic well-being initiatives across schools. Division schools experience significant geographic spread, high staff turnover, variable access to resources, and diverse needs. Building strong relationships with community partners has supported community-specific well-being initiatives.

Role-modelling wellness and decreasing stigma related to mental health is a key focus at NSD. This is a focus for students, families and staff. Communicating well-being as a division priority has been promoted both internally and publicly through the active involvement of communications staff in the division wellness committee, and through website and newsletter communication. Linking staff, students, and families to well-being supports (e.g., wellness workers, benefits providers, community services) helps to encourage personal health and well-being. Family wellness workers help to assist families where gaps exist, and support them to access resources in their communities when they need them.




**"I think [our superintendent] really made it okay to have those conversations, that, 'hey, I'm not doing well today'...It was making that, you know, they would always say, 'who's taking care of the caregivers'?"**

## CONNECTION AND VOICE AS A CATALYST TO WELLNESS



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

Within NSD a key goal has been to build stronger connections between schools, students and families to support individual and collective well-being. Engagement of school principals in group conversations, as well as division wellness committees, has helped to identify avenues for action that supports well-being and initiatives at an organizational level and among schools. Connecting staff across the large geography of the division has become more challenging in recent years due in part to high costs and logistics of face-to-face gathering. Creating opportunities for connection and joint professional development among clusters of schools in similar areas, using online platforms, and supporting connections between individuals, are all strategies that NSD has employed to promote cohesion and connection.




**"It's thinking outside the box - like the second level service staff, who provide services to all of the schools, we're pretty good at making connections and saying 'hey, why don't you call or email this teacher'?"**



## BUILDING CAPACITY TO SUPPORT WELLNESS 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 often helpful allies in building well-being capacity.



**"We changed the way we did things. Modeling healthier choices at principal meetings, you know the regular agenda had APPLE Schools or Ever Active Schools - there was always a wellness focus. "**

Within NSD, partnerships are a valuable resource to support well-being initiatives across schools and in directly supporting students and families. The Director of Student Services provides coordination, linking to resources, and supporting staff and student well-being with direct support to schools and the wellness committee, as well as professional learning opportunities and health services support. Partnerships within the division are strong and help support the education and well-being of students. These include formal partnership agreements with Tribal Council education authorities, industry partnerships, and partnerships with Ever Active Schools, APPLE Schools, Alberta Health Services, and the Alberta School Employee Benefit Plan.

## CHARTING AND RE-CHARTING A COURSE

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.

**"We have a wellness champion committee that includes senior administration, district staff, principals, some teachers. [The committee] helps reviewing what we are doing as an organization in relation to wellness and makes sure that we have priorities that are realistic and work for all our school."**

The Wellness Committee for NSD helps support strategic planning for the division and helps to identify emergent needs. This committee includes diverse representation of school and district staff as well as different agencies and partners who support well-being work. The many partnerships within the division provide knowledge, resources and connections to support well-being initiatives within schools and bring key division priorities and initiatives to life. Large geographic distances between schools and varying levels of resources and capacity exist, especially in more remote communities. Division staff and partners help to identify, tailor, and adapt well-being initiatives and activities, to build on unique strengths and opportunities across the division.

Land-based learning (LBL) is one approach to well-being that occurs differently across communities, but is a key priority at NSD. All schools in NSD incorporate LBL, which meets curricular goals through outdoor education. It supports healthy self-identity, intergenerational learning, and provides students with opportunities to learn traditional ways on the land and outside a typical classroom environment.

**"I think that has even changed the willingness for teachers to say 'hey, I think I'm going to do this outside' and just embrace that wellness [idea] that it's okay to be outside and in the fresh air, and that you can still learn."**



## RECOMMENDATIONS

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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. These recommendations for action are based on insights provided by school community members in our six participating case districts. These 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



### **Tipping Points for Well-Being Action**

- 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 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).

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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