

DATE: November 5, 2024

TO: Board of Trustees

FROM: Darrel Robertson, Superintendent of Schools

SUBJECT: Strategic Plan Update Report: Well-being and Mental Health

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ISSUE

This Strategic Plan Update report highlights the ongoing work and intentional efforts made by the Division in the 2023–24 school year to support Priority 3 of the [2022–26 Division Strategic Plan](#), “Promote a comprehensive approach to student and staff well-being and mental health”.

BACKGROUND

In 2022, Edmonton Public Schools launched the new Division Strategic Plan for the 2022–26 term. The Division Strategic Plan has three priority areas with supporting goals and outcomes. The plan provides common direction and alignment between the work of the Board of Trustees, the Superintendent of Schools and Division staff. The plan serves as the foundation for a Division culture of evidence-based decision making, assurance and accountability.

To demonstrate the Division’s commitment to transparency and accountability, Strategic Plan Update reports were introduced in 2016–17 as an extension of the Annual Education Results Report (AERR). The reports are intended to provide the Board of Trustees with detailed progress towards the goals and outcomes of our Division Strategic Plan.

CURRENT SITUATION

The 2022–26 Division Strategic Plan prioritizes mental health with an emphasis on relationships and building learning environments that support a sense of belonging. This Strategic Plan Update Report provides the Board of Trustees with an overview of the collective efforts made within the Division in partnership with families and the community during the 2023–24 school year to:

- Support student well-being and mental health through an emphasis on active engagement with students to build and maintain a welcoming school culture.
- Co-create expectations and nurture relationships between students, staff, families and the surrounding community to enhance feelings of safety and increase a feeling of citizenship in the school community.
- Build staff capacity to support student and staff well-being through the provision of professional learning and training focused on supporting resilience and engagement as key contributors to mental health and well-being.

The report references data from the Youth Resilience Survey as one indicator of students’ sense of belonging. To provide further context around the Division’s work in the area of resilience, there is a link within the Strategic Plan to a document that highlights the journey of this work and provides a summary of Division results for the Youth Resilience Survey.

The report concludes with a confirmation of the Division's ongoing commitment to supporting student and staff well-being over the coming years

ATTACHMENTS and APPENDICES

ATTACHMENT I Well-being and Mental Health: Priority 3 Update

NP:ef

Well-being and **Mental Health**

Priority 3 Update

November 5, 2024

Advancing our Strategic Plan

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Introduction

The [Education Act](#) sets out the Division’s responsibility to provide “welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environments that respect diversity and nurture a sense of belonging and a positive sense of self.” By prioritizing mental health and well-being, the Division strives to support students to achieve learning outcomes and to navigate life’s challenges with confidence. Additionally, this commitment empowers our Division staff to better address the evolving needs within our classrooms while deepening the connection within school communities. These efforts are essential to our mission of delivering high-quality public education.

Recognizing the importance of mental health and well-being, EPSB’s Board of Trustees established Priority 3 of the [2022–26 Division Strategic Plan](#) to “Promote a comprehensive approach to student and staff well-being and mental health” and its subsequent goals:

- **Goal 1**—“Support students and staff in building skills, strategies and relationships that contribute to positive mental health.”
- **Goal 2**—“Support students and staff so they experience a greater sense of belonging and social, emotional and physical well-being.”

Mental health and well-being are complex and deeply individual experiences that are influenced by a wide range of factors both within and outside of the school environment. In its approach to ensuring the mandate and priorities outlined above are achieved, the Division is seeking to understand what contributors to mental health and well-being can be influenced within an educational setting. Central to welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environments as well as mental health and well-being are the two interrelated concepts of belonging and safety. By maintaining an atmosphere where belonging and safety intersect, schools can support students’ academic performance, mental health and overall engagement in high quality learning (Allen et al., 2019; St-Amand et al., 2017; Ungar et al., 2019). Recent research makes clear that when students feel a stronger sense of belonging, their academic outcomes not only improve, but can outpace expectations for each school year (TNTP, 2024).

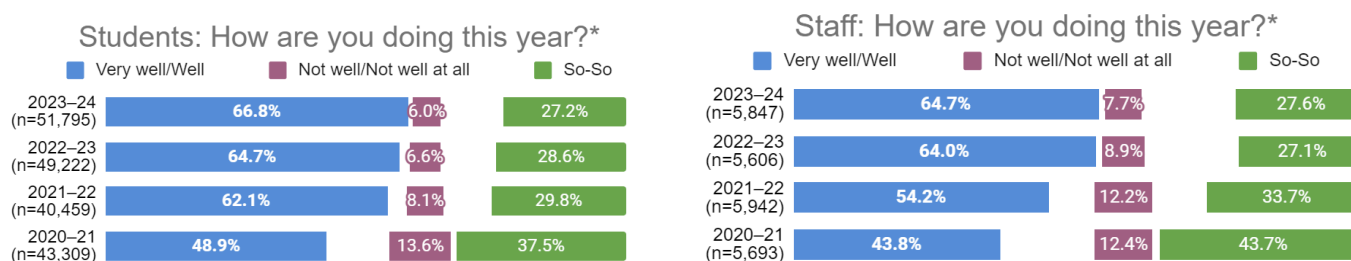
Sections in this report about belonging, safety, resilience and engagement are comprised of three key components:

- Descriptions of actions that are key parts of school culture that uphold mental health and well-being.
- An overview of the Division’s philosophical and evidence-based approach to mental health and well-being.
- Highlights of quantitative results from Division collected data for contextual understanding.

Background

Through the Division Feedback Survey (DFS), the Division has been monitoring the overall well-being of students and staff. Figure 1 illustrates a steady increase in well-being among students and staff over time.¹ In the past three years, the percentage of students feeling very well or well increased from 62.1 per cent to 66.8 per cent and for staff it increased from 54.2 per cent to 64.7 per cent. This question, in concept, was introduced to the DFS during 2020 to check in on people during the pandemic, and since then Division students and staff have been feeling more well over time.

Figure 1. 66.8 per cent of students and 64.7² per cent of Division staff reported feeling very well or well during the 2023–24 school year.



* 2020–21 DFS student and staff question: How are you doing during the pandemic?

A return to stable in-person learning and work settings following pandemic measures is a likely contributor to the steady increase in well-being for both students and staff over the time observed above. Being a part of a school community offers opportunities for growth and support beyond just curriculum-based learning. Schools provide the opportunity for students to form supportive, meaningful relations with school staff and build support networks with peers and community members (Ungar et al., 2019). Additionally, students have the opportunity to form a positive sense of self, experience agency over their lives, cultivate their personal identity, and build a sense of belonging through supportive experiences at school (Ungar et al., 2019). Bringing the school community physically back together has provided the foundation for these opportunities to flourish.

Overall results from the 2023–24 [Division Feedback Survey Report](#) show that students' perceived mental health and well-being related to school has remained consistent in recent years. This suggests that the return to in-person learning may be stabilizing and there are now further opportunities to support mental health and well-being beyond post-pandemic adjustments. It is important to be clear about which factors schools can directly influence. Considering mental health and well-being as a Division priority as well as the *Education Act's* mandate to ensure welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environments, the following interrelated factors stand out as key areas of focus (see Figure 2):

- **Belonging:** in educational settings encompasses the emotional and psychological safety that students experience when they feel valued, included and supported by their peers and school staff.

¹ Please note that the wording of the check-in question for 2020–21 was slightly different from following versions, which does not allow for a direct comparison.

² Aggregate agreement and disagreement percentages were calculated from the original response counts resulting in slight differences due to rounding at the 10th decimal place when compared to summing up the disaggregate percentages in the chart.

- **Safety:** consists of a supportive space where students feel valued and secure. It supports respectful relationships, promotes positive mental health and embraces diversity as a strength. Clear expectations are communicated, and responses to behaviour are fair and age-appropriate. Support is provided to all, while empathy, compassion and positive social-emotional skills are modeled and encouraged (Government of Alberta, 2024).
- **Resilience:** is the ability to overcome adversity and experience well-being, both individually and with help from others. This includes ways that students can navigate their way to resources that support their well-being and negotiate for these resources to be provided in meaningful ways (Ungar 2011; Ungar et al, 2019).
- **Engagement:** describes the level of participation and commitment that contributes to a sense of belonging in school.

Figure 2. *The interconnectedness of mental health and well-being: belonging, safety, engagement and resilience*



These factors are highlighted consistently in the evidence base as both key components of mental health and well-being and critical factors that can be influenced through school culture (Allen et al., 2018; OECD, 2017; Ungar et al., 2019). They also represent an essential foundation for students to be able to engage with learning opportunities. Given this, the Division has aimed to focus on these concepts as critical pillars of mental health and well-being.

Belonging

Schools support a sense of belonging through the development of a welcoming school culture. The everyday actions of members of the school community establish an environment where students feel cared for and have the opportunity to succeed. These can include:

- Using common language and co-creating school values to bring the school community together.
- Opportunities for students to feel valued as members of a school community through respectful and empowering engagement.
- Establishing shared expectations, common language and accountability for behaviour within the school community.
- Co-creating consistent classroom routines and expectations.

- Encouraging empathetic interactions and active listening.
- Recognizing the individual contributions of each student and celebrating student growth through assemblies and other recognition events.
- Learning about their school’s namesake, as well as the land and community that they are a part of (i.e., interconnectivity).
- Creating opportunities for engagement and connection through clubs or student activities.
- Intentionally using resources and materials where students see themselves (i.e., identity, culture, etc.).

According to Allen et al. (2021), belonging incorporates a dynamic set of emotions and experiences including individual competencies, motivations and perceptions, along with the opportunities or barriers that encourage or hinder connection with others. Belonging in educational settings arises from being accepted, valued and supported within the school community, a sentiment that is created through close relationships with peers and teachers (Allen et al., 2018). These relationships contribute to students’ feelings of security and acceptance. The everyday interactions and intentional facilitation of spaces that celebrate students and build connections all provide opportunities to build a school culture that centres on belonging.

Respecting Students’ Agency in Support of a Welcoming School Culture: A Spotlight on Lillian Osborne School

“Inspiring our students through meaningful learning opportunities that nurture passion, resilience, community and character.” —Lillian Osborne School Mission Statement

Under the four pillars of passion, resilience, community and character, Lillian Osborne School, through student voice, identified an opportunity in the 2023–24 school year to create a new position on their staff. The Department Head of Student Life oversees all aspects of student life, including developing cultural capacity and coordinating student engagement and agency. The role has been critical in supporting the important work of active student engagement and building school culture relative to promoting students' sense of belonging. A small cross-section of the initiatives that have stemmed from this work based on students aspirations are highlighted below:

- **Lillian Osborne Student Association Advisory Board (LOSAAB):** The LOSAAB is a monthly meeting that brings together representatives from student clubs, associations, the Department of Student Life and the Student Solidarity Committee. These student leaders collaborate with administration and department heads to discuss key issues and provide feedback on school matters. By encouraging open dialogue between students and school leadership, LOSAAB ensures that student voices contribute meaningfully to decision-making, promoting a more inclusive and engaged school community.
- **Student Action Summit:** At the Lillian Osborne Student Action Summit, students are brought together at the start of the year with a common goal: to collaboratively explore how to enhance the school community. Participants engage in discussions to address the challenges the school faces, identify obstacles that need to be overcome and reflect on their individual roles in the collective effort. The school also supports the initiation and development of student-led clubs, providing strategies for students to become effective leaders and create a positive impact.

- **Student Solidarity Committee (SSC):** This Committee is focused on initiatives and actions to develop a more inclusive school community through social action, awareness education, anti-racism and equity at Lillian Osborne High School. The SSC works to advocate for the needs of students to feel a sense of connection and global mindedness.

Results from the DFS suggest that Lillian Osborne’s philosophical alignment towards respect for student agency and the creation of collaborative spaces between them, their families, staff and community members has a meaningful impact on their sense of belonging. In the 2023–24 school year, the school saw a six per cent increase in students agreeing that ‘My school is a place where all students feel like they belong’ and a nine per cent increase in families’ perceptions that their child feels like they belong at school. Though the specific initiatives that emerge from centering student agency may look different depending on school context, the philosophical approach to putting students first and centre has tangible benefits for creating a culture of belonging.

The DFS offers the opportunity to understand perceptions of students’ sense of belonging at school from the perspective of students, staff and families. It’s notable that there is a significant discrepancy between both staff members’ and families’ perceptions of students’ sense of belonging at school and students’ reported sense of belonging at school. This evidence emphasizes how critically important it is to elicit students’ voices directly about their experiences.

70.7 per cent of Grades 4 to 12 students who responded are in agreement with the statement:
I feel like I belong at my school.

2023–24 Division Feedback Survey

90.2 per cent of staff who responded are in agreement with the statement:
My school is a place where all students feel like they belong.

2023–24 Division Feedback Survey

86.0 per cent of families who responded are in agreement with the statement:
My child feels like they belong at school.

2023–24 Division Feedback Survey

Clubs and Student Activities

Clubs and student organizations offer students opportunities to engage in activities that support a sense of belonging. Many of these clubs are student-driven, created by and for students who share common interests and passions. With the support of school staff, who act as sponsors or mentors, students can take the lead in organizing, managing and growing these spaces as fitting for their grade level. This collaboration allows students to express their individuality, connect with peers and feel seen and valued in their school community. By participating in these clubs, students take ownership of their school experience and contribute to an inclusive environment where everyone has a place. Clubs are responsive to student interest. Further, schools support clubs through working with community agencies and volunteers. All student organizations or activities are reviewed and approved by the school principal.

Depending on the school, some activities are student-driven, while others are staff-driven. In addition to student-driven activities, Division schools offer a wide range of staff-facilitated extracurricular activities that further enhance students' sense of belonging. Whether through athletic teams, cultural organizations or academic clubs, these opportunities allow students to explore their interests.

In Division school communities, efforts to create a sense of belonging and inclusion for all are reflected in the wide variety of clubs available. The following non-exhaustive list , highlights just a few of the many ways that students can get involved, grow and build meaningful connections.

- Alberta Youth Theatre Collective
- Anime Club
- Anybody Can Dance (ABCD) Club
- Black Students Alliance (BSA)
- Board Game Club
- Bollywood Club
- Brain Care Awareness Club
- Cheer Club
- Chinese Dance Club
- Christian Students Association
- Community Helpers
- Culinary Arts Club
- Debate Club
- Disc Golf Club
- Dungeons and Dragons Club
- Esports Club
- Fitness Club
- Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA)
- Green Humane Group (GHG)
- Improv
- Japanese Culture Club
- Joy Club
- Knitting/Crocheting Club
- Maker Space Club
- Mock Trial Club
- Muslim Students Association (MSA)
- Robotics Club
- Science Olympics
- Spoken Word Poetry Club
- Super Smash Bros. Club

By connecting with peers who share similar values and passions, students actively experience and contribute to a supportive community that empowers each member to live a life of dignity, fulfillment, empathy and possibility. By engaging in activities, students can build friendships, develop leadership skills and create memories all while contributing to a positive and caring school culture.

79.9 per cent of Grades 4 to 12 students who responded are in agreement with the statement:
At my school, I have opportunities to be involved in activities that support my sense of belonging.

2023–24 Division Feedback Survey

94.4 per cent of school staff who responded are in agreement with the statement:
My school takes steps to support a sense of belonging and inclusion for everyone.

2023–24 Division Feedback Survey

Emphasizing Relationships in Support of a Safe and Welcoming School Community: A Spotlight on Dickinsfield School

“We can’t see improvement in reading and math until we see improvement in students’ sense of connection to the school community. Until they feel seen as a human.”—Chelsea Erdmann, Principal

At Dickinsfield School staff noticed that students were feeling disconnected to the school community, particularly following the years spent outside of the building during the pandemic. They also noticed that when given the opportunity to lend their voice, students often had the answers to the problems staff were looking to solve. By focusing on student voice, staff empowered students to have agency to advocate for what they needed to build greater connection with their school community, including students who wouldn’t normally participate in youth leadership. This equitable and inclusive approach supported the deeper cultivation of trustful and respectful relationships between staff and students.

Dickinsfield’s emphasis on empowering students to advocate for and lead the changes they wanted to see resulted in many positive outcomes. Students led the development of an open campus during lunch hour policy and were central in the establishment of new course options that otherwise may not have been considered, including Social Innovation, Leadership and Community Connections. Students initiated the development of a new student recognition program that honors and is built around the Seven Sacred Teachings. Students also co-created expectations and appropriate consequences for their actions in the school community, creating a sense of collective accountability. Principal Chelsea Erdmann emphasizes that the outcomes, while important, are not as critical as the process of engaging students. The process of ensuring students experienced a greater sense of trust, autonomy, accountability and ownership was essential to strengthening the relationships between students and staff, and building students’ connection to the school community.

The impact of this work was transformative. Results from the most recent DFS highlighted an increase of five per cent in students reporting that they felt seen by staff as a person. Anecdotally, staff are noticing an increase in student self-referrals — rather than trying to solve problems on their own, students are asking for help from adults in the school. Notably, there was a 30 per cent improvement in staff reporting a sense of belonging and inclusion in their school and all responding staff reporting that they feel safe in their workplace. School leadership credits these improvements to increasing the accountability of staff members, ensuring that all staff are clear on the common goals and values of the school, and creating the expectation that staff will have courageous conversations to challenge and support each other. These approaches support staff to no longer feel alone in the work they’re doing and that collective capacity is being built.

The work at Dickinsfield also included intentionality around engaging and communicating with families throughout the process, resulting in notable changes in the perceptions of families. There was a 28 per cent increase in families reporting that they felt their child was safe at school. Student-led initiatives are also focused on building connections with surrounding and feeder schools in the community, leading to more positive community connections. For example, students initiated a Read-Out week where they went to read in elementary schools that feed into Dickinsfield. Through anecdotal conversations with businesses that students frequent around the school, business owners described a notable improvement in respectful behaviour from students.

The example set by Dickinsfield School highlights that emphasizing an increased sense of belonging and safety among students and staff lays a critical foundation for students to find meaning as members of a school community and ultimately, as learners.

Safety

Sense of belonging in educational settings intertwines with students' sense of safety—where students feel safe to express their identities and opinions within their learning space, knowing these contributions are welcomed—and physical safety, where students feel protected from physical harm within the school environment. Every day, teachers and school staff work together to make students feel protected and valued. Examples of practices that support safe learning environments include:

- Greeting students and families as they arrive.
- Coordinating and supervising pick up and drop off.
- Structuring breaks and transitions to reduce congestion in hallways.
- Supervising recess/lunch.
- Procedures and processes to support emergency response (e.g., evacuation, lockdown).
- Communication protocols to support transparency and awareness around emergency situations.
- Communicating expectations and responsibilities for acceptable behaviour, as outlined in Board Policy [HG.BP—Student Behaviour and Conduct](#), and Administrative Regulation [HG.AR—Student Behaviour and Conduct](#) and supported by the *Education Act*.

The Division's commitment goes beyond physical security, as staff understand the deep connection between feeling safe and a sense of belonging. When students feel secure, they are able to develop strong relationships with their peers and trust in their school community. When they see themselves as valued members of a school community, they are more likely to act in a way that contributes positively to the overall culture. Research supports a connection between students' sense of belonging with prosocial behaviour and the prevention of behavioural problems (Stojanović et al., 2022).

The broader school environment encompasses the physical setting, policies and culture that together create a safe and inclusive space conducive to learning. Schools have direct control over these elements and can design environments that support both physical and psychological safety, thereby promoting better mental health and engagement (Ungar et al., 2019). Physical safety in schools involves creating environments free from violence and threats, with robust security measures and comprehensive safety protocols directly within the control of school divisions (Richard et al., 2012). Psychological safety refers to students feeling secure enough to express their identities and opinions without fear of judgment or retaliation, created by a supportive school culture that promotes open communication and mental health awareness. The broader school environment also impacts student mental health. This includes the physical setting and the cultural climate of the school, which should be welcoming and inclusive (Ungar et al., 2019). A safe and engaging physical environment can decrease stress and alienation among students, promoting better mental health outcomes. School divisions can manage these aspects by designing spaces conducive to learning and psychological well-being. Staff support this in classrooms by:

- Having multiple adults available to support students through formal and informal check-ins.
- Classroom community circles to build trusting relationships with peers.
- Direct teaching of positive social-emotional skills, safe play and communication skills.
- Providing multiple pathways for students to access supports through key staff like student self-referral forms, student services, designated staff, etc.
- Setting up learning spaces that support various learning styles and coregulation (e.g., differentiated seating)
- Using restorative practices to support positive conflict resolution with students.

74.0 per cent of
Grades 4 to 12 students
who responded are in
agreement with the
statement:
I feel safe at school.

2023–24 Division Feedback Survey

90.4 per cent of staff
who responded are in
agreement with the
statement:
**I feel safe at my
workplace.**

2023–24 Division Feedback Survey

86.1 per cent of
families who responded
are in agreement with the
statement:
**I feel my child is safe at
school.**

2023–24 Division Feedback Survey

The DFS again offers insights into the perceptions of students, staff and families about safety in workplaces and schools. As with belonging, there is a discrepancy between the reported experiences of students than those of staff and families. This further emphasizes the critical importance of elevating student voice in decisions about school safety.

Student Rights and Responsibilities: Honouring a Restorative Approach to Safety

The Student Rights and Responsibilities framework is designed to support schools in promoting a culture of collective expectations for positive behavior while emphasizing a shared commitment to each student's success and sense of belonging. At the start of each school year, school administrators are encouraged to tailor this document to reflect their school's unique culture before sharing it with their community. This document articulates the school's commitment to creating a safe and welcoming environment, where every student feels valued and connected. Recognizing that safety is a multi-faceted experience, the framework is designed to support individual circumstances and developmentally appropriate responses.

Division Support Services, in partnership with schools, has led the work to shift toward restorative practices, outlined in the Rights and Responsibilities framework as *School Responses to Unacceptable Behaviour*. When a student exhibits concerning behavior, every effort is made to understand the full context and work toward a constructive solution. This collaborative process, often involving the student's family and/or community partners. By making these processes transparent, students are reminded that their school and the Division are dedicated to providing an inclusive space where they experience a sense of belonging, are welcomed, respected, and cared for, and where they have opportunities to learn, practice, and develop positive personal and interpersonal skills.

“Edmonton Public Schools is helping to shape the future in every one of our classrooms. We’re focused on ensuring each student learns to their full potential and develops the ability, passion and imagination to pursue their dreams and contribute to their community.”

—Student Rights and Responsibilities 2024–25

Resilience and Engagement

Schools play a crucial role in helping students grow into confident, capable adults. One of the key ways they do this is by supporting both resilience and engagement. Resilience helps students manage challenges and access the resources they need to stay healthy and thrive, while engagement makes them feel connected and committed to their school community. Schools care about building resilience and engagement in students because it affects everything from their academic success to their emotional well-being. By creating an environment where students can connect with others, demonstrate leadership and seek help when needed, schools provide the conditions necessary for students to grow into adults who are ready for fulfilling lives beyond the classroom. The Youth Resilience Survey is one way in which schools learn about the resilience and engagement factors that impact the sense of belonging of their students (*see the [Appendix](#) of this report for more information*).

To unpack this further, below are some everyday ways that schools support student resilience and engagement through classroom activities and interactions:

- Relationship building so that students have a trusted adult at the school that they feel comfortable going to if they need help
- Celebrations of learning that include the wider school community
- Peer support groups across the school community
- Cross grade groups
- Check-ins and sharing with families
- Empowering students as leaders
- Clubs and associations
- Student council
- Events that celebrate the diverse school community and utilize community involvement and support
- Facilitating connections to internal school and external community supports

Beyond how resilience unfolds in the classroom, schools can further support resilience by providing resources such as counseling services and resilience training workshops, which help students develop coping strategies and overcome obstacles. Strengths-based interventions, such as Dr. Martin Brokenleg's Circle of Courage model, emphasizes viewing challenges as opportunities for growth rather than deficits

67.2 per cent of Grades 4 to 12 students who responded are in agreement with the statement:

When I'm really struggling, there are people who want to help me.

2023–24 Youth Resilience Survey

75.4 per cent of Grades 4 to 12 students who responded are in agreement with the statement:

I have chances to show others that I am growing up and can do things by myself.

2023–24 Youth Resilience Survey

74.8 per cent of Grades 4 to 12 students who responded are in agreement with the statement:

I know where to get help.

2023–24 Youth Resilience Survey

70.8 per cent of Grades 4 to 12 students who responded are in agreement with the statement:

I share/cooperate with people around me.

2023–24 Youth Resilience Survey

(Brendtro et al., 2013). This approach empowers students to build on their existing strengths and develop new capacities as they take risks.

Supportive relationships and empowering environments are key to developing resilience in students. By promoting a school culture of trust and mutual respect, schools can create an environment where students feel confident in their ability to face and overcome challenges. Engagement, both academic and social, thrives in environments where students feel safe, valued and connected. Schools can enhance engagement by creating an inclusive school culture and offering diverse curricular and extracurricular opportunities that resonate with students' interests and aspirations.

Student engagement is crucial for academic and emotional well-being, encompassing cognitive, psychological, physical, social and material aspects (OECD, 2017). Emotionally engaged students are interested and value their schoolwork, created through positive relationships and a supportive school climate. Behaviourally, engagement is reflected in students' active participation in school activities and adherence to school norms.

Cognitive engagement involves a deep investment in learning, supported by teaching practices that challenge students and stimulate critical thinking (Ungar et al., 2019). Schools enhance cognitive engagement by incorporating interactive and hands-on learning experiences that make education relevant and engaging. The school environment plays a pivotal role in supporting students' engagement by aligning with their personal interests and aspirations (Allen & Kern, 2019). For example, providing a variety of curricular and extracurricular options allows students to explore different fields and discover what they are passionate about, thereby increasing their overall engagement in school.

The foundational work with Dr. Michael Ungar has enhanced staff knowledge and led to the creation of learning resources that help teachers use effective, research-based strategies. Resources are designed to build a shared understanding of resilience research and resilience-enhancing practices across the Division. By equipping staff with these tools, the Division has strengthened its ability to enhance resilience, engagement, safety and belonging in school communities. A commitment to continuous improvement boosts staff confidence in supporting thriving communities and meeting the needs of students.

Professional Learning

To build the professional capacity of staff in facilitating environments that promote resilience and engagement, the Division is working in collaboration with Dr. Ungar and his team around foundational professional learning for staff in the area of resilience and well-being, and the development of teaching resources to support teaching and learning long term. The goal of this professional learning is to build a common understanding of resilience research, support the analysis and use of Division data and identify and extend practices to nurture student resilience.

Professional learning topics

- Building resilient school communities (school leaders)
- Working with Youth Resilience Survey data
- Supporting student resilience post-pandemic
- Risk-taking and resilience
- Supporting better student conduct using a resilience lens
- Staff resilience
- Nurturing resilient children (parents)

Moreover, this professional learning aims to raise awareness among educators about their influential role in shaping student well-being and resilience. By unpacking the dynamics of resilience in educational settings, this initiative empowers educators to recognize their unique position to positively impact student outcomes in a data-informed manner. It emphasizes the importance of building on the inherent strengths of students, reinforcing the role that teachers play in nurturing these capabilities. Providing school staff with access to expertise,

exemplified by Dr. Ungar, aids in devising strategies to support students' mental health and well-being comprehensively, spanning universal and targeted supports. Ensuring alignment with various school practices and processes facilitates the integration of survey reporting into the everyday work of schools, while ongoing engagement with schools supports continuous improvement.

Principals also have access to a collection of resources designed to support engagement with staff and the formulation of both targeted interventions and universal school strategies. While not prescriptive or sequential, these resources provide schools with opportunities for continued reflection and professional learning and include:

- Videos of Dr. Ungar discussing relevant concepts and approaches.
- Videos of school principals discussing how they use data to work with staff to address the mental health needs of students.
- Activities to support discussions with staff.
- Resources designed to assist in understanding and interpreting Division data to support evidence-based decision making.
- Links to other relevant resources.

Youth Resilience Survey

The Youth Resilience Survey (YRS) serves as a catalyst for meaningful change both in supporting individual students and in school culture by providing insights that are rooted in resilience research. Rather than viewing the survey results as a final assessment of a student's profile, schools use them as a starting point for evidence-based conversations tailored to a specific student or their school. This approach allows for ongoing adaptation and refinement of school practices, supporting a responsive approach to the unique needs of their school community. By leveraging the YRS findings, schools have regular opportunities to equip students with the tools and strategies necessary to navigate the complexities of everyday life, maintaining a supportive and resilient school environment. For further details, please see the [Youth Resilience Survey Summary Report](#) (EPSB, 2024).

R2 Program

The Division also continues to offer the [R2 Program](#), a workshop series offered by Dr. Ungar's Resilience Research Centre. The evidence-based program emphasizes the development of rugged qualities³ and the utilization of external resources that provide support needed to thrive when under stress. Participation in the program is voluntary,

³ **Rugged qualities** are adaptable internal characteristics that enhance an individual's resilience. These qualities include self-esteem, optimism, mindfulness, goal-setting abilities and critical thinking skills (Resilience Research Centre, 2020).

intended for schools seeking to encourage a school culture and programming centered on resilience-building practices. The program involves the creation of resources aligned with the Alberta curriculum aimed at facilitating discussions about the rugged and resourced elements crucial for student success. R2 schools review the modules and Division teacher background documents available and select those that best meet the needs of their school community. R2 lead teams participate in a two-day “train the trainer” workshop that supports schools in creating nurturing environments, as well as championing the power of youth voice within a school community. Additionally, a Community of Practice (CoP) meets three times a year, providing educators with opportunities to engage directly with Dr. Ungar and further enhance their understanding and implementation of resilience-focused approaches.

Conclusion

The strategic initiatives outlined in this report underscore the Division’s commitment to supporting the mental health, well-being, belonging and safety of students and staff. The data from the DFS and the YRS provide insights into these areas, enabling us to tailor both school- and Division-level supports to address the unique needs of our school communities.

As we move forward, the Division remains dedicated to creating an environment where mental health, well-being, belonging and safety are integral to the educational experience. Our continued partnerships with community organizations, along with the data-driven insights, will enable us to maintain and enhance our supportive actions and strategies. By leveraging community networks and focusing on resilience and engagement, we are better positioned to support the academic and personal growth of all students, ensuring they are well-prepared to meet future challenges.

The strides we have made in promoting mental health, well-being, belonging and safety reflect the collective efforts of Division staff, community partners and stakeholders, and together, we will continue to build on this foundation to provide high-quality public education that prioritizes the well-being of every student.

References

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Appendix: Data Sources

The **Division Feedback Survey (DFS)** is conducted every year with students and their families (Grades 4 to 12) and staff to measure how the Division is meeting its strategic priorities and goals. It also gathers valuable qualitative and quantitative feedback to help schools and the Division identify areas of success and areas for growth. This past year, the Division received over 65,000 responses to the DFS. The DFS summary reports are available on the [EPSB website](#) for in-depth reporting.

The **Youth Resilience Survey (YRS)** is conducted annually and provides schools with information about the well-being of students in Grades 4 to 12. It highlights the strengths students possess in resilience (our ability, on our own and with help from others, to overcome adversity and experience well-being) or engagement (our level of participation and commitment that contributes to a sense of belonging). In 2023–24, over 59,000 students took part in the YRS, helping schools recognize and build on these strengths to support all students. For more information about the survey's history, methods and results, please refer to the [Summary Report](#) for the 2023–24 YRS.