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School experiences include learning opportunities, support in the school environment and experiences in the broader school community. Feeling connected to school promotes academic achievement and protects against health risks, such as mental health, sexual health, substance use, and violence (Rose et al., 2022). It also serves as a protective factor for mental health in young people with adverse childhood experiences (Yang et al., 2022). Having a sense of belonging to one's school reduces negative impacts of bullying (Arslan & Allen, 2021). The learning environment represents a target area to enact positive changes in youth well-being through supportive adult-student relationships, social and emotional learning initiatives, and mental health literacy.

On the 2022 YDI, 47% of participating students reported that people cared about one another at their school. Whereas 56% of youth reported there was an adult at school who cares about them, only 44% reported having an adult at school they could talk to about their problems. 6% of youth reported that they experienced bullying at least once a week. 83% reported participating in one or more organized extracurricular activities at least one day per week.

What the YDI Measures

- Opportunity for Skill Development
- Extracurricular Activities
- School Programs & Well-being
- School Safety
- School Environment
- Bullying & Victimization
- School Belonging
- Supportive Adults at School
- School Start Time & Sleep
- Perceptions of Mental Health in Schools
- Mental Health Literacy & Attitudes

A **whole school approach** to mental health and well-being involves students, parents/guardians, educators, administrators, and community partners. Whole-school approaches enlist student and parent/guardian perspectives, prioritize positive school environments, and promote well-being through evidence-based universal and targeted programs. A whole-school approach that includes a **community component** is significantly more effective at promoting well-being than those without a community component (Goldberg et al., 2019).

Action Idea: Team up with local community organizations working to promote youth well-being to offer programs and services to your school community, such as community centres, YMCA, BGC, Foundry, or Friendship Centres.

When students have the **opportunity to contribute to their school and community**, there is an increase in their sociopolitical awareness, motivation, well-being, and sense of belonging (Fuligni, 2019; Martinez et al., 2020). Meaningful participation can develop coping, resilience, and self-regulation skills (UNICEF Canada, 2019) and an enhanced sense of self-worth (Coates & Howe, 2014). Adults at school play an important role in supporting youth participation initiatives (Martinez et al., 2020).

Action Ideas:
- Assume a **strengths-based approach**, affirming youth's resources and competencies to be active and responsible citizens (Lerner et al., 2021). Check out these materials to support youth participation at Greater Good in Education.
- Check out the **discussion questions in your school or district's YDI report** for ideas to support youth participation in mobilizing YDI findings into action.

Participation in **extracurricular activities** contributes to student self-esteem, well-being, school engagement, peer belonging, and academic performance (Bang et al., 2020; Guilmette et al., 2019; Oberle et al., 2019). Students who continued to participate in extracurricular activities throughout the COVID-19 pandemic reported lower depressive symptoms than those that did not (Larforge-MacKenzie, 2022). Participating in extracurricular activities may also prevent school dropout (Thouin et al., 2020).

Action Ideas: The YDI 2023 survey asked students what extracurricular activities they are participating in and which activities they *wish* they could participate in. It also asks students which school programs contribute to their well-being. Use this information to engage with students, families, and community members to understand where extracurricular programming can be expanded and identify barriers to participation. Teaming up with community organizations by offering them no-cost space at schools for programming may be one way to expand extracurricular activity participation and whole school approaches to promoting well-being.

Physical changes to circadian rhythms in adolescents lead to delays in falling asleep and early **school start times** for secondary schools have been shown to lead to chronic sleep deprivation in adolescents (Alfonsi et al., 2020). The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that secondary school start time should be *no earlier* than 8:30 am (Nahmod et al., 2019).

Delaying school start time by one hour has been shown to significantly increase sleep time for adolescents and reduce symptoms of depression (Berger et al., 2018; Windome et al., 2020). Delaying school start time has also resulted in better mental well-being, school engagement, academic performance, and school attendance (Minges & Redeker, 2016). Later school start times have been linked to reduced caffeine consumption and fewer vehicle accidents among adolescents (Morgenthaler et al., 2016). Students attending schools with a later start time have better health and school outcomes than those with earlier start times (Morgenthaler et al., 2016).

Action Idea: Create your own experiment! Delay school start time and compare attendance and student outcomes to previous years. Invite student feedback about their experiences with delayed start times, and how they perceive it impacting their health and well-being and school experiences. Seek staff feedback as to whether they also notice changes to their own sleep and/or well-being.

Cultivating **supportive relationships between students and adults at school** is foundational for harmonious school environments and academic performance (Sauve & Schonert-Reichl, 2019). Taking the time to greet students as they enter the classroom, demonstrating empathy for student experiences, and creating opportunities for autonomy and choice in the classroom boost student motivation and well-being (Kincade et al., 2020).

Action Idea: Identify students who may be struggling, for example those with inconsistent or low attendance. Ensure there is at least one teacher or adult at school who is regularly checking in with each student. Encourage them to get to know the student's interests and goals, demonstrate care and concern for the student, and foster a genuine interest in the student's success.

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Website Resources

YMCA website: https://www.ymca.ca

BGC South Coast website: https://www.bgcbc.ca

Foundry website: https://foundrybc.ca

National Association of Friendship Centres website: https://nafc.ca/?lang=en

Greater Good in Education youth participation resources: https://ggie.berkeley.edu/collection/honoring-our-community-and-world-for-secondary-students/