

#HearNowON 2021:

Ontario Student Perspectives on School Mental Health

Executive Summary

Purpose

School Mental Health Ontario (SMH-ON) and Wisdom2Action (W2A) launched #HearNowON 2021 to hear from secondary school students across Ontario about their priorities for mental health learning and programming in their schools and communities.

This is the second #HearNowON student voice initiative, the first being conducted in 2019 prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and other societal events that have impacted student mental health.

Read more: [#HearNowON Report and Executive Summary for 2019 \(smho-smso.ca\)](#)



#HearNowON

#HearNowON provides students with a platform to share their needs, perspectives and preferences regarding school mental health supports and services. In 2021, the initiative included an online survey (open from September 2021 to November 2021) and opportunities to come together for dialogue during five facilitated online forums on topics of interest identified by students (conducted from October 2021 to January 2022).

SMH-ON uses inputs from #HearNowON to inform provincial directions in school mental health, placing high value on authentic and meaningful student engagement, leadership and agency in an area within which students have much to contribute.



Participants

Recruitment for participation followed approved research ethics protocols through Dalhousie University. It included announcements through social media, board mental health leadership teams, and network partners. Almost 2,500 students contributed their voices to #HearNowON 2021. A total of 2,427 secondary students attending publicly funded school boards in Ontario completed the bilingual online survey. Attendance varied for each forum, with approximately 40 students present at the majority of the forums.

Guiding Questions

#HearNowON 2021 was guided by **three overarching questions**:

1. What insights and ideas do secondary school students have for building and sustaining mental health knowledge and supports with and amongst their peers?
2. How can school communities adopt an equity-based approach to mental health to support students impacted by racism, marginalization and/or oppression?
3. What can inspire secondary students to get involved in provincial, board, and school-level initiatives that support student mental health and wellness?

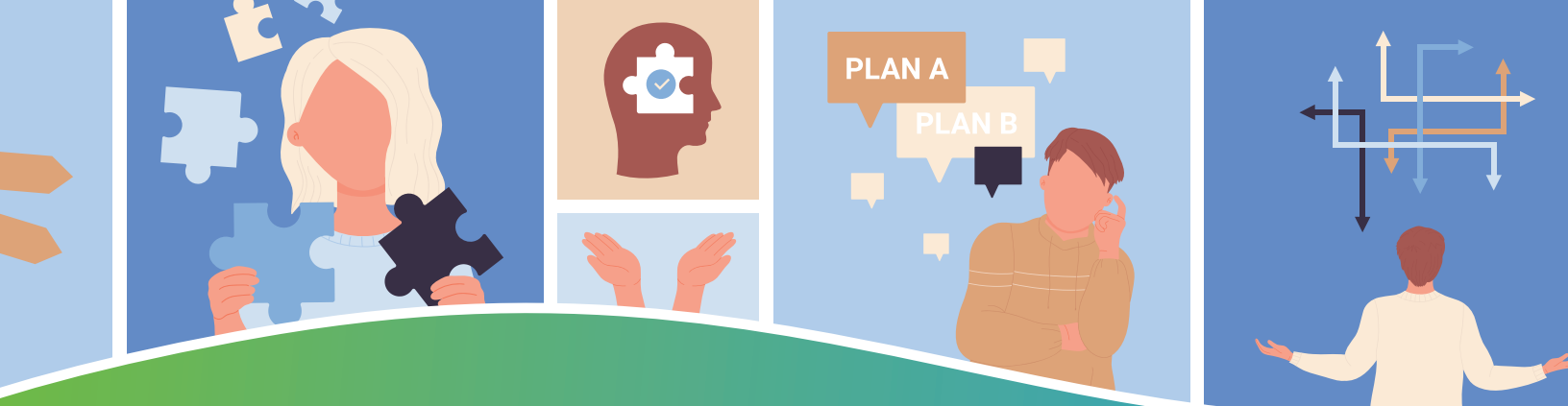
Themes

The **online survey** included several closed-ended questions, many of which were also asked in 2019 allowing for comparison over time. The survey focused on:

- Student knowledge related to mental health topics and existing supports and services
- Student priorities and preferences related to school mental health learning, programming, and services
- Student priorities related to understanding mental health
- Student priorities related to learning specific wellness strategies
- Student interest in participating in mental health leadership at school
- Student perceptions of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their engagement opportunities and their interest in mental health learning

The virtual forums sought to further explore the guiding questions and survey priorities by focusing on four broad themes informed by student priorities and in-person forum discussions from 2019:

- Mental health literacy
- Equity and school mental health
- Leadership opportunities in school mental health
- Supporting friends and accessing support



Findings

Student Knowledge about Existing Mental Health Initiatives and Supports

67% of students who participated in the survey indicated that they knew at least a little about the mental health supports and initiatives in place at their school. 16% said that they were very familiar with these efforts. Only 4% reported that they were directly involved in leading mental health initiatives at school. Slightly fewer students were aware of board-level mental health supports and initiatives (63%), but this is an increase in awareness over the 2019 survey where only 50% of participants said that they were familiar with elements of the board-level mental health strategy. About 12% reported familiarity with provincial student-facing resources from SMH-ON.

Mental Health Literacy Preferences

Forum discussions revealed that Ontario secondary students value variety and choice in learning about mental health. They would like to gain knowledge related to a range of mental health topics and appreciate a differentiated and flexible approach to learning.

Survey respondents ranked the following three skill areas as most important for students to learn about at school:

- 1. Ways to cope with transitions and major stress**
- 2. Ways to identify and manage emotions**
- 3. Ways to set and achieve goals, be organized and stay on track with school work**

Students indicated that the areas that they feel least knowledgeable in were:

- 1. Ways to cope with transitions and major stress**
- 2. Ways to stay optimistic and hopeful, even when things are not going well in the moment**
- 3. Ways to promote positive mental health and emotional self-care**

Students were asked how, and from whom, they would like to learn about mental health. They could select more than one vehicle for learning. Overall, students suggested that school is the best place to learn about mental health, and that they would value having sustained learning about mental health over the school year. During the forums, students noted that this education ought to begin in elementary school, in early grades, to better prepare young people for life stressors they may encounter. Interestingly, in 2019, students reported wanting to learn about mental health from their teacher; however, in 2021, many indicated that they would like to learn from school mental health professionals and educators with specialized knowledge (e.g., guidance teachers). The number one priority area identified by survey respondents for SMH-ON provincial focus in 2021 was to enhance mental health literacy amongst Ontario educators.

Equity and School Mental Health

The intersection of equity and mental health was the second-highest priority endorsed on the #HearNowON 2021 survey. During forums, students suggested that identity is inextricably linked with mental health and that a deeper focus on equity is needed. They highlighted the importance of strength-based, identity-affirming mental health learning and the need for accessible and culturally-responsive promotion and prevention programming at school.

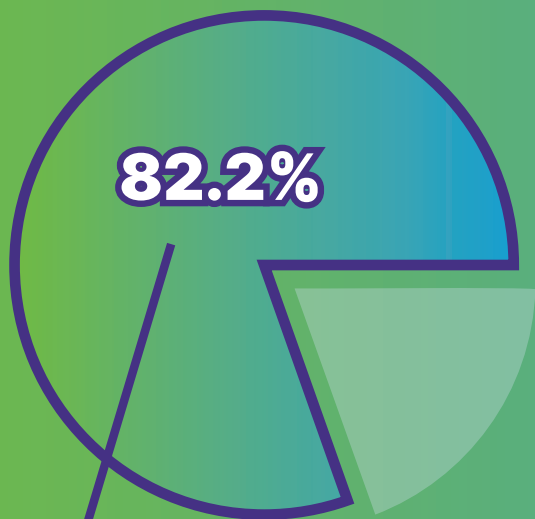
More specifically, students highlighted the need for more supports and services for students who identify as Black, Indigenous, 2SLGBTQIA+, immigrants and newcomers with refugee backgrounds. This theme follows from similar recommendations from students in HearNowON 2019 that noted the importance of honouring diversity and prioritizing inclusion and belonging in school mental health.

Students reported that mental health stigma, financial barriers, and experiences of oppression (e.g., racism, homophobia, and transphobia) impact Ontario students' access to mental health learning, support, and participation. During

forums, students stated that a “one size fits all” approach to mental health is not feasible or helpful. Instead, they suggested that identity-affirming, student-centred programming can help address barriers and create more equitable and accessible support and learning. In addition, students identified a need to bring mental health learning home to the caring adults in their lives (e.g., parents, caregivers, and family members). Students noted that this would encourage understanding and could help to tackle cultural stigma related to mental health.

Leadership Opportunities in School Mental Health

Student engagement in mental health programming was the third-highest priority that students identified for school mental health in the #HearNowON 2021 survey. In forum conversations, students noted that it can be challenging to participate in school mental health leadership opportunities, for many reasons.



82% of survey respondents were not involved in a mental health leadership initiative at school.



70% of respondents indicated an interest in getting involved in mental health leadership.

43% of students stated they were aware of ways to get involved in promoting mental health in their school.



For example, some students called attention to financial barriers that make involvement in engagement activities difficult. Others described a lack of meaningful opportunities, particularly for “shy” leadership styles. Some students noted a lack of skills, confidence, or preparation as barriers to their engagement in leadership opportunities in school mental health. In response to these obstacles, students suggested broadening definitions of leadership to include and celebrate different leadership styles. They also emphasized the importance of diverse representation in leadership positions, amongst both staff and students, so that those with a range of identities can see themselves and feel included in mental health initiatives and opportunities. In addition, forum participants suggested that providing tools and training to prepare students for leadership positions would be valuable.

Supporting Friends and Accessing Support

Students noted their important role in early identification and peer-helping throughout the survey and the forums. In 2019, students identified supporting their peers as a priority in their learning. This priority continued in 2021 as students want to be better equipped to help their friends safely, without taking on the burden of care a peer’s distress.

Students identified the mental health topics most important for them to learn about:

- 1. When to seek help / when mental health needs are more than “a bad day”**
- 2. Ways to cope with common mental health problems**
- 3. How to ask for help**
- 4. Warning signs for suicide**
- 5. The difference between mental health and mental illness**
- 6. How to help a friend without taking on too much**

In the virtual forums, secondary students expressed great interest in learning more about ways to take care of their mental health, and to support wellness amongst their friends. Many students noted concerns about privacy and respecting boundaries when supporting their peers and were seeking guidance on this topic. Students also suggested the need for more culturally-responsive resources for their parents, caregivers and other family members around mental health literacy, stigma and support so that other adults can be better resources when they have questions or concerns about their mental health.

Students highlighted the following priorities for school mental health:

- 1. Educator mental health literacy**
- 2. Equity and school mental health**
- 3. Student engagement**

Recommendations

Based on the consultations, survey responses and suggestions gathered from students through #HearNowON 2021, the following five recommendations were identified as the next steps in school mental health work across Ontario. SMH-ON will be using these recommendations with the help of students and other key audiences to guide strategic directions, plans, and projects.

Student Recommendation #1:

Students want their teachers, and their parents/caregivers and families to learn more about mental health.

Student Recommendation #2:

Students want to learn about mental health at school and prefer that this learning be frequent, early, and varied.

Student Recommendation #3:

Students want greater access to tools & resources to support their mental health, cope with stress and navigate peer support safely.

Student Recommendation #4:

Students want strong equity-based & culturally-responsive mental health resources and support.

Student Recommendation #5:

Students want leadership opportunities to be more accessible to every student and to create space for different leadership styles.



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