



Introduction

This Student Engagement Toolkit has been created alongside a working group of educators, administrators, support staff, board mental health leaders, and students with experience in student engagement initiatives within school and system settings.

In [#HearNowON 2021](#), a provincial student voice research initiative by School Mental Health Ontario (SMH-ON), students shared that they want opportunities to learn and practice new skills to support their leadership and participation. More specifically, 70% of respondents were interested in getting involved in mental health leadership. Eighty-seven percent of students indicated they were interested in getting involved at their school, 46% in their community, 36% at their school board or school authority, and 24% in the province. Students emphasized the importance of diverse representation in student leadership positions and the inclusion of diverse leadership styles, such as “shy leaders.”

This toolkit shares practices for school/board staff that are applicable to various student engagement initiatives, including those focused on mental health and wellness. The topic of mental health and well-being and leadership opportunities can occur in many student spaces, including those not initially focused on mental health. As you move through this toolkit, consider your role in engaging students, meeting them where they are, and creating supportive environments for students to engage in school and system mental health promotion, planning, and programming.

What is student engagement?

Student engagement is an ongoing process committed to co-creating conditions and opportunities with students to meaningfully participate and influence outcomes that may affect them. True engagement centres on valuing and amplifying the perspectives and experiences of every student. This requires a practice of critical reflection by school and system staff on personal and positional biases, and systemic barriers that impact engagement.

The student role

For this resource, the terms “student engagement” and “student” are used rather than “youth engagement” or “youth,” respectively. As this resource has been developed for use within schools, children and youth are invited to share their lived experience, expertise, and voice related to their role as a student. It is important to remember that





the student role reflects only a general age group, and among students, there is great diversity (e.g., developmental stage, socioeconomic status, culture, abilities and disabilities, gender, sexuality, ethnic origin, and many more). Outside their role as students, children and youth live vibrant lives and carry many other roles and experiences that can influence their perspectives and self-expression.

Why engage students in mental health promoting school initiatives?

Meaningful student engagement at school is a primary protective factor for students' overall well-being. Outcomes for **students** include:

- Increased social connectedness and sense of belonging
- Feeling heard, listened to, and validated by caring adults; more positive relationships with adults
- Increased self-esteem and self-confidence
- Increased sense of agency
- Experiential learning opportunities and skill development

(Dworkin et al., 2023 ; Griebler et al., 2017; McCabe et al., 2023 ; Mitra, 2004 ; Sprague Martinez et al., 2016)

Outcomes of student engagement initiatives related to mental health promotion and literacy for **students**:

- Reduced stigma of mental health problems and mental illnesses
- Reduced stigma towards accessing services and supports
- Increased mental health literacy

(Griebler et al., 2017)

Outcomes of student engagement in mental health and well-being initiatives for **caring adults, schools, and systems**:

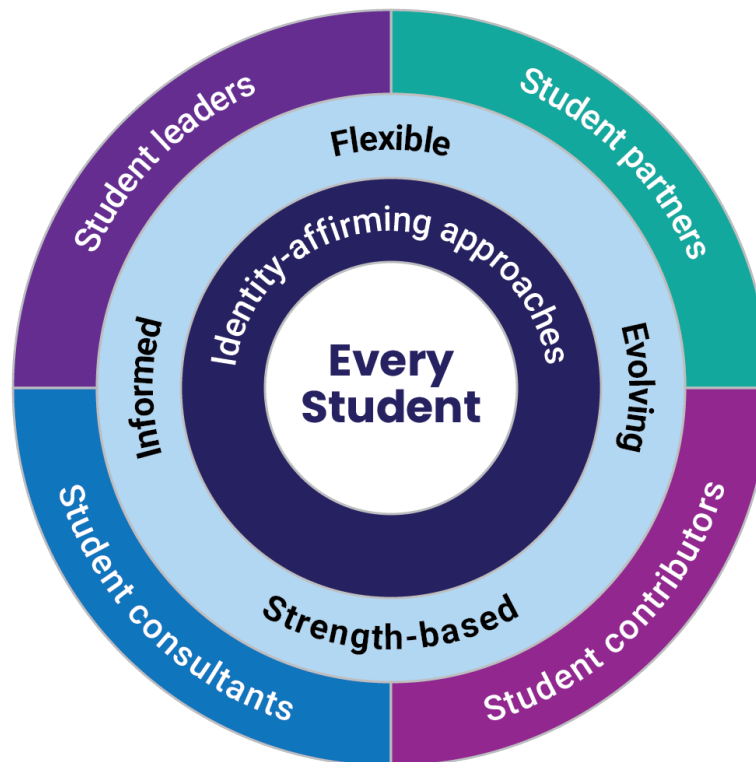
- Enhanced information and understanding of students' needs and wants to allow for better identification and support of mental health challenges and barriers to accessing support.
- New perspectives in decision making and creative solutions to address mental health issues.
- Improved accuracy and relevancy of mental health initiatives.
- Increased use of mental health programs/services and more effective dissemination of information related to mental health and well-being.
- Strengthened relationships with students contributing to a more supportive school environment.

(Khanna & McCart, 2007; Sprague Martinez et al., 2016; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2017; Griebler et al., 2017; McCabe et al., 2023; Ramey et al., 2017)





Our model of student engagement



Every student

Aligned with School Mental Health Ontario's School Mental Health Strategy, every student is at the centre of this model. Every student is an agent in defining their engagement in school initiatives.

[Our approach](#)

Identity-affirming approaches

Surrounding every student are identity-affirming approaches as a foundation for meaningful student engagement. Identity-affirming student engagement recognizes, validates, and respects every student's intersecting identities, backgrounds, and experiences.

[Identity-affirming school mental health](#)





Flexible, strength-based, informed, and evolving

The foundations of student engagement are those concepts that underscore every engagement initiative. These foundations highlight the importance of flexibility, recognizing and nurturing students' strengths, making decisions informed by them, and adapting strategies to meet their ever-evolving needs, ultimately fostering more inclusive and impactful student engagement experiences.

[See the Foundations section](#)

Student leaders, partners, contributors, and consultants

In this conceptualization, student engagement encompasses various *degrees* of engagement offering students diverse skill development, commitment levels, and influence over outcomes. Students have multiple entry points, enabling them to engage in initiatives that align with their interests and abilities.

[See the Degrees section](#)



This resource is part of our [Student Engagement Toolkit](#).

