OTTAWA-CARLETON DISTRICT SCHOOL BOARD

Learning Well-being Social Responsibility

COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE (PUBLIC)   **7 May 2024**
Report No. 24-059

Update on Student Learning: Student Engagement and Well-Being

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PURPOSE:

1. To provide the third update on student learning, focused on attendance, suspensions, and perceptual data, as aligned with direction provided from the Ministry of Education to monitor student engagement and well-being. This report is the third and the final report from this series of reports, following learning reports on Core Academics Skills and Preparation of Students for Future Success.

STRATEGIC LINKS:

2. The District's overall efforts towards enhancing student success by setting the conditions for learning are guided by the goals and objectives set forth in the 2023-2027 strategic plan. The strategic plan articulates the importance of student well-being as one of the three key pillars, and identifies desired outcomes such as improved mental health supports/resources and enhanced safety. The data in this report includes measures indicative of student engagement and well-being, and how they relate to academic achievement, demonstrating the interconnectedness of learning and well-being pillars within the strategic plan.

CONTEXT:

3. Regular reporting on student outcomes provides evidence of progress and informs next steps towards achieving OCDSB's short and long-term goals. It also ensures accountability to our community and fulfils our commitments to the Ministry of Education. The Ministry's Student Achievement Plan (SAP) provides a common structure for school boards, for a 3-year period, outlining the priority areas of focus. Using this structure, reporting to the Board is being presented in three parts to facilitate focused discussions, as follows:

Table 1. Outline of Report Timing.

Report Timing	Priority Area
December 2023	Achievement of Learning Outcomes in Core Academic Skills
February 2024	Preparation of Students for Future Success
May 2024	**Student Engagement and Well-Being**

This report shares rich information consisting of quantitative data and qualitative evidence of impact. It is organized into the following sections:
- Letter of Transmittal: An overview of key data and contextual information regarding the datasets used, as well highlights of work being engaged in across the District to support student learning and well-being;
- Appendix A: Board Improvement Plan for Student Achievement and Wellbeing;
- Appendix B: Infographic highlighting key findings from the analysis of indicators in this priority area;
- Appendix C: Supplemental tables with data disaggregated by identity;

KEY CONSIDERATIONS:

4. **Indicators for Student Engagement and Well-Being**
    This report is part of our reporting responsibility to the Board, its strategic plan, and the Ministry of Education. The Ministry has provided a framework that includes goals for each priority area and specific and measurable indicators for each goal. For engagement and well-being, the SAP focuses on three main metrics: student attendance and suspension (as indicators of student participation in class time and learning), and awareness of mental health supports (as an indicator of student well-being). This report outlines this relevant data, and makes links to student achievement.

5. **Attendance Data**
    Data on student attendance is complex and multi-faceted. There are many factors which can impact student attendance, not all of which are related to student engagement and well-being. This issue is topical; a recent article[1] in the New York Times described a shift in the culture of school, which suggests that attendance at school is not valued the same as it was pre-pandemic. The article cites a variety of factors, including travel/vacations, access to transportation, students staying home with more routine colds/viruses, and an increase in students struggling with their mental health. Another article[2] cited data which demonstrates that although the reasons for absenteeism can vary across schools and Districts, the rates are up across the country. While the exact reasons for the increase needs further investigation, it is clear that attendance impacts learning.

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[1] Mervosh, S. & Paris, F. 2024. "Why School Absences Have 'Exploded' Almost Everywhere." *New York Times.* March 29. https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2024/03/29/us/chronic-absences.html.

[2] Carman, T. & Wesley, A. 2024. "Kids missing more school since pandemic, CBC analysis finds." *CBC News.* March 27. https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/school-absence-data-1.7156254.

This affirms the District's recent efforts to collaborate with community partners on attendance strategies.

It is also important to acknowledge school-level differences in attendance rates, which can often be impacted by characteristics of the school. Where attendance data is most meaningful is in conversations with principals at the school and student level, to identify patterns and address areas of need. That said, District-level attendance data gives us insight into overall trends and the relationship with student achievement.

In 2022-2023, 41% of students in grades 1-8 and 49% of students in grade 9-12 were absent for 10% or more instructional days (i.e., absent for 19 or 18 days, respectively). These rates are based on year-end cumulative attendance for students with available June report card marks who were enrolled in October of the same academic year. These absences do not include "excused" absences (which include but are not limited to: holy days; inclement weather; school closures; medical reasons with supporting documentation; field trips or school-orchestrated sports trips). Attendance data is also made available through the Ministry of Education and although this data is not replicable due to differences in methodology and the access to the records of students who enter/exit the District, the provincial data offers a valuable reference point for comparison. According to the most recent Ministry calculations: 54% of OCDSB elementary students were absent for 10% or more days, compared to the provincial rate of 47%; and 40% of OCDSB secondary students were absent for 10% or more of classes for a course, compared to the provincial rate of 47%.

Disaggregation by Identity-Based Data
The disaggregation of attendance data allows us to calculate disproportionalities and identify underserved groups of students. Reporting of disaggregated data is done using two datasets. One is district-level reporting based on information available for the full population of students in the student information system. The other is for the subset of students who participated in the Valuing Voices - Identity Matters! Student Survey in 2019-2020. Demographic characteristics for which we have population data include: multilingual learners, students with special education needs, students reporting self-identified gender or gender not disclosed, students who identify as Indigenous, and students residing in low-income neighbourhoods.

Based on this data, the largest disproportionalities in attendance data tends to be for students who identify as transgender, non-binary and gender diverse, and students who identify as Indigenous. Disproportionalities were also evident for students with special education needs and students residing in lower-income neighbourhoods. For full disaggregation of attendance data, see Appendix C, Tables 1A and 1B.

Relation to Achievement
Grade 1-8 students who attended school for 90% or more instructional days had higher achievement outcomes in Reading, Writing and Mathematics (based on

2022-2023 report card data), in comparison to those who were absent for 10% or more. This difference holds when disaggregating based on identity (i.e., for students with special education needs, students who identify as Indigenous, multilingual learners, students across the gender variables, and students residing in low-income neighbourhoods).

Grade 9-12 student achievement was measured based on credit accumulation, and whether students were identified as being 'on track' to graduate based on the number of credits accumulated by a given grade (e.g., 8 credits by the end of grade 9, 16 credits by the end of grade 10, etc). These calculations were based on full-time students who were enrolled in October of the same academic year. Overall, those that were present 90% or more were more likely to be on track to graduate. The achievement gap (i.e., difference in % on track to graduate based on attendance) was largest for students who identify as Indigenous and students who identify as transgender, non-binary, and gender diverse.

6. **Suspension Data**
Report 24-032 Student Suspensions for the 2022-2023 provided a summary of recent suspension data and looked at change over time. The data showed an increase in suspensions compared to the previous year, but a decrease compared to pre-pandemic rates. There are many important contextual factors to consider when interpreting these trends, such as changes in legislation and enrolment in virtual school. Disaggregation of data by identity showed that some of our identified groups of students continue to be suspended at a higher rate than all students.

Relation to Achievement
In this report we have the opportunity to go beyond isolated suspension data and look at the relation to student achievement. Similar to attendance, suspension rates were related to academic achievement. Elementary students with at least one suspension were less likely to meet the provincial standard, and secondary students with at least one suspension were less likely to be on track to graduation, in comparison to those who had not been suspended in 2022-2023. This observation is true across groups based on identity (see Tables 3A and 3B in Appendix C).

7. **School Climate Data**
As part of our ongoing efforts to create and maintain safe, inclusive and accepting schools, the OCDSB undertakes a School Climate Survey every two years to gather input from students, staff, and parents in each of our schools. The survey is required by the Ministry of Education as part of the Safe Schools initiative, and provides feedback to each school about the extent to which parents, students and staff feel their school supports learning and positive behaviour and promotes a safe and inclusive environment. The School Climate survey assesses topics across four domains: Engagement, Environment, Safety, and Well-Being. The most recent surveys include the 2022 Student Survey and 2023 Parent/Caregiver and Educator Surveys. This report provides an

opportunity to look at patterns and consistencies (or lack thereof) across perspectives.

A comparison across divisions shows how student experiences at school may vary depending on their grade. Results from students and parents/caregivers demonstrate that elementary students tend to report more positive experiences than their intermediate and secondary peers. Consistent with findings in the literature, intermediate students tended to have the least favourable responses.

Parents/caregivers tended to report higher rates of favourability across many topics compared to students. It is important to note the context of timing for the administration of these surveys, and the impact that may have had on responses. With that in mind, this trend shows higher ratings of student experiences from parents/caregivers in 2023 as compared to the students themselves in 2022. This could indicate improvement in these areas from one year to the next and/or misalignment between parent/caregiver and student perspectives. It is important to also note the difference in participation groups when comparing these respondents. With those caveats in mind, results show that parents and caregivers reported more favourability in their child's general well-being and school environment compared to students' self-reported responses. When looking at the responses of caregivers of students in grades 4-12 only (to improve comparability with student responses), we see that these differences remain, in particular for well-being.

Table 3. Differences in School Climate Survey Domains

Topic	Domain	Student (2022) Favourability (N = 39,320)	Caregiver (2023) Favourability (N = 8751)	Difference
General Well-being*	Well-being	68% (22,798)	96% (5696)	28%
School Environment	Environment	56% (20,167)	76% (4615)	20%

Although this survey item differed for students (i.e., a composite score) and parents/caregivers (i.e., overall survey item), both metrics capture overall well-being and therefore the large difference in favourability scores is worthy of consideration.

There were also domains in which parents'/caregivers' and students' favourability were aligned. For example, both parents/caregivers and students reported similar favourability for coping, school discipline and opportunities for involvement.

Table 4. Similarities in School Climate Survey Domains

Topic	Domain	Student (2022) Favourability (N = 39,320)	Caregiver (2023) Favourability (N = 8751)	Difference
Coping skills	Well-being	60% (19,662)	60% (3525)	0%
School Discipline	Environment	55% (19,777)	54% (3642)	1%

Opportunities for Involvement	Engagement	56% (20,386)	58% (3579)	2%

Disaggregation by Identity-Based Data
According to students in 2022 and parents/caregivers in 2023, students who self-identified their gender in another way (i.e., other than man or woman), students in the LGBTQ2S+ community, students with a disability, and Indigenous students reported a less favourable sense of belonging and social connectedness, relationships with adults, sense of safety, and well-being compared to other groups of students. In addition, these students reported a lower rating of their ability to express and learn about their own identity and the identities of others (See Appendix C, Table 4A-4E). Note that the School Climate Survey data was collected anonymously, and therefore identity-based disaggregation is based exclusively on responses to questions within the survey and not integration with identity-based datasets.

A Closer Look at Indigenous Identity
When looking at parent/caregiver responses by identity-data, the responses of those who identified as Indigenous differed most notably from parents/caregivers overall. For example, only 64% of Indigenous parents/caregivers indicated their relationship with the teacher was favourable, a rate 11% less than the overall District response. As well, only 65% of Indigenous parents/caregivers rated their school environment (i.e., the extent to which they believe their child feels the school is a friendly and supportive place to learn, whether they enjoy being at school, and whether they feel respected at school) as favourable, a rate 11% less than the overall District response. Similarly when looking at student responses, students who identified as Indigenous also reported high disproportionalities compared to other student identity groups. For example, only 58% of Indigenous students reported their sense of belonging and social connectedness as favourable, a rate 8% less than the overall District response. To better support Indigenous students and families, the OCDSB has invested in a social worker on the Indigenous Education team and an increase in the number of Indigenous Student Support Workers, among many other initiatives led by the Indigenous education team.

8. **Using the Data to Support Schools and Students**
    Data on student outcomes inform our planning at multiple levels: for the district, for schools, and for students. To equip school administrators and their teams with the knowledge and tools needed to better understand their school data, we continue to use a Data Support Model wherein research staff work directly with school principals. This partnership supports principals in their work understanding their student population, achievement trends, and school climate, and supports the research team by putting faces on the data and adding important contextual factors to the data conversations. Together, this facilitates data-driven decision-making and evidence-informed practice.

In support of student engagement and well-being, the research team produces School Climate Dashboards (following each survey administration) which help school administrators understand the perceptual data from their students, parents/caregivers, and educators. In addition, the research team creates Suspension Dashboards, which allow administrators to filter and disaggregate suspension data down to the student level to better understand school-level patterns in student suspensions. Together, these dashboards serve as key tools for superintendents and administrators to collaboratively explore data and develop strategies to support student learning and address areas of need.

An important component of this work is ensuring intentional focus on the students in each school who are in the greatest need. The interactive nature of this data exploration is leading to greater precision and more timely interventions as administrators regularly monitor school and student level data. This includes a consideration of the school demographics. At the school level, the data can be explored in meaningful ways, such as single vs consecutive absences, single vs repeat suspension, and/or reasons for absences and absences. This allows for school-level strategies to support the students in need.

9. **What Continues to Guide our Work?**
The new OCDSB Mental Health and Well-Being Strategy (2023-2027) aims to support students by ensuring that schools and classrooms foster connections rooted in authentic and reciprocal relationships, engage in active collaboration with students, staff, and families and pursue meaningful coordination with service providers. The Strategy has three pillars that reflect a commitment to ensure that every student feels they **belong** in their schools and classrooms, where we **build** and bolster skills when necessary and where we **bridge** students and families to more intensive services as required.

In this third and final report on Student Learning, the interconnectedness of engagement, well-being, equity, and achievement is clear. This continues to guide our work and reinforce the importance of coordinated and responsive supports for students. This includes much of the work presented in parts one and two of this series, such as setting the conditions for learning, diversifying student learning experiences, and promoting student voice. Taken together, we are working to ensure that all students have what they need to engage, belong, and learn.

The following list provides a sampling of the work and initiatives that have been actioned this year as part of the student engagement and well-being pillar of the SAP (recognizing extensive overlap within subheadings):
Mental Health and Well-Being:
- Implementing the grade 7 and 8 Mental Health Curriculum;
- Educating students, staff, and parents/caregivers on available mental health supports and services;
- Collaborating with community partners to strengthen a coherent system of care for child and youth mental health;
- Hiring a social worker on the Indigenous Education team;

- Increasing the number of Indigenous Student Support Workers to respond to the needs of Indigenous students;
- Coaching and training key system class staff members on trauma informed practices;
- Building mentally healthy literacy and coping strategies through programs such as Wellness Matters and Kids have Stress Too;

Equity, Inclusion, and Diversity:
- Learning about inclusion work and inclusive approaches centrally, at Superintendency learning sessions, at P/VP mentoring sessions, etc.,
- Engaging in a renewal of the Indigenous, Human Rights, and Equity Roadmap;
- Increasing educator capacity in identifying and implementing the resources and strategies that create mentally healthy, culturally responsive, and identity-affirming classroom environments;
- Implementing our newly developed Anti-Hate Toolkit;
- Training identity-specific staff in AFFIRM to begin groups for students who are part of the 2SLGBTQ+ community;

Student Engagement and Support:
- Training and implementing learning on restorative practices, including using circles, to strengthen belonging and community in schools and classrooms;
- Designing a summer project to create an Ableism module to increase staff understanding of the impact on those students with learning disabilities;
- Implementing the [Safe Schools Action Plan](#);
- Implementing Ministry modules that focus on coping strategies for students;
- Engaging cross-departmentally, with community partners, and with other Districts to explore best practices around student attendance and re-engagement;

Data Management and Improvement:
- Implementing a Human Rights incident tracking system;
- Working with the Business and Learning Technology department to improve the form used for recording suspensions to reduce confusion and improve accuracy;
- Implementing Safe Arrivals: an automated student absence management system that makes it easier and faster to track student absences;
- Monitoring the ongoing implementation of Aspen (i.e., the student information system) and potential impacts on how data is recorded and retrieved;
- Getting social workers direct access to attendance data through Aspen, so that they can intervene quicker;
- Formalizing an Attendance Sub-Committee of school social workers to improve consistency of practice and guidance around addressing attendance concerns; and
- Ongoing collection of identity-based data and perceptual data to better understand disproportionalities in student sense of belonging and well-being.

RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS:

10.   The OCDSB Board Improvement Plan for Student Achievement and Well-Being (BIPSAW) implementation are supported through the 2023-2024 board budget and additional funding provided by the Ministry of Education, targeting specific SAP priorities.

COMMUNICATION/CONSULTATION ISSUES:

11.   The information presented in this report is an important component of District level monitoring and accountability to the community. The data also provides important context for schools, as administrators work with central departments such as Research, Evaluation and Analytics and Program and Learning Innovation to have more in depth and tailored conversations about their school-level data.

GUIDING QUESTIONS:

12.   The following questions are provided to support the discussion of this item by the Committee:
● What questions arise from the data?
● How does this data contribute to our understanding of the intersections between well-being, engagement, and achievement?
● How can we ensure that the needs of underserved students are clearly articulated in our ongoing work?
● What are our next steps to improve student attendance?

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APPENDICES
Appendix A   OCDSB BIPSAW
Appendix B   Student Learning Update Part III: Student Engagement and Well-Being
Appendix C   Supplementary Tables (Disaggregation of Data)