OTTAWA-CARLETON
DISTRICT SCHOOL BOARD

OCDSB Mental Health Strategy

2019 – 2022

INTRODUCTION

At the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board (OCDSB), we understand that mental health and well-being are fundamental to student success and affect academic achievement as well as social and emotional development.

The OCDSB Mental Health Strategy (2019–2022) builds on the previous strategy. It is informed by provincial and local data and OCDSB staff, student and parent voices. The Mental Health Strategy continues to focus on building and sustaining mentally healthy schools through capacity building for staff, meaningful youth and parent engagement, and collaboration with community partners following an evidence-based, tiered approach to intervention to support students. The Strategy aligns with the OCDSB 2019–2023 Strategic Plan in its commitment to building and sustaining safe, caring, inclusive classrooms where diversity is recognized, respected and celebrated, and where every student knows they matter and feels they belong.

UNDERSTANDING MENTAL HEALTH

The concept of mental health is perceived and understood differently across cultures. In some cultures, mental health is considered living a good life. In others, it is linked with physical health, while in others there is no equivalent language for mental health. For the purpose of this Strategy, we will use the World Health Organization's definition, where mental health is described as: "A state of well-being in which every individual realizes their potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully and is able to make a contribution to their community". The Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) adds that: "Mental health is a positive sense of emotional and spiritual well-being that respects the importance of culture, equity social justice, interconnections, and personal dignity" (PHAC 2006). In other words, mental health is about being able to enjoy life in a meaningful way, to flourish and thrive, and to cope with challenges when they arise. Mental health is a **positive** concept.

It is also important to understand the relationship between mental health and mental illness, because these terms are sometimes mistakenly used interchangeably. Although they are separate concepts, mental health and mental illness are interconnected. For example, people diagnosed with a mental illness (e.g., depression, schizophrenia, anxiety) can enjoy good mental health by managing their symptoms, leading a meaningful and productive life including forming positive relationships with others. Similarly, people without a diagnosed mental illness may be dealing with poor mental health if they are struggling to manage their emotions, feeling isolated or disengaged and have limited coping strategies.

Mental health is therefore influenced by a combination of biological factors and life experiences. Biological factors could include genetic predisposition. Life experiences can influence mental health in positive and negative ways. For example social inclusion, trauma, (including intergenerational and current trauma), poverty, disability, unemployment, historic and systemic marginalization or discrimination can have a negative impact on mental health and may lead to higher rates of mental health problems. However, connection to

culture, sense of belonging, academic success/achievement, opportunities for meaningful engagement, supportive relationships and healthy coping skills contribute to support and foster student mental health and well-being.

APPROACH TO MENTAL HEALTH & WELL-BEING AT SCHOOL

Schools are ideal settings to promote mental health & well-being. Not only can educators provide an engaging, caring and inclusive classroom environment to foster a sense of belonging, support the development of social emotional skills, but educators can also notice when students are experiencing difficulty and facilitate access to care.

What students need to build and sustain mental health is reflected in the model developed for the School Mental Health Ontario (formerly School Mental Health ASSIST) 2019: Action Plan. The model below illustrates the importance of setting caring conditions for learning. This is achieved by creating welcoming classrooms where diversity is recognized and respected. Students see themselves reflected in their environment and in the curriculum. Through this, students know they matter and have a sense of belonging. Educators support students to develop social emotional learning skills (e.g. self-awareness, self-regulation, positive relationships (social skills), problem solving, resilience) and to learn about mental health). The model also illustrates that students need educators who have the knowledge and skills to notice signs of emotional difficulty and to access appropriate MH Supports and Services. Clear, strong culturally appropriate pathways to, from and through care in the community need to be understood and information needs to be available to parents/caregivers. This work is done with a focus on equity, as we continue to deepen our understanding of identity in supporting mental health.

**Student-centred approach to mental health through an Equity Lens**
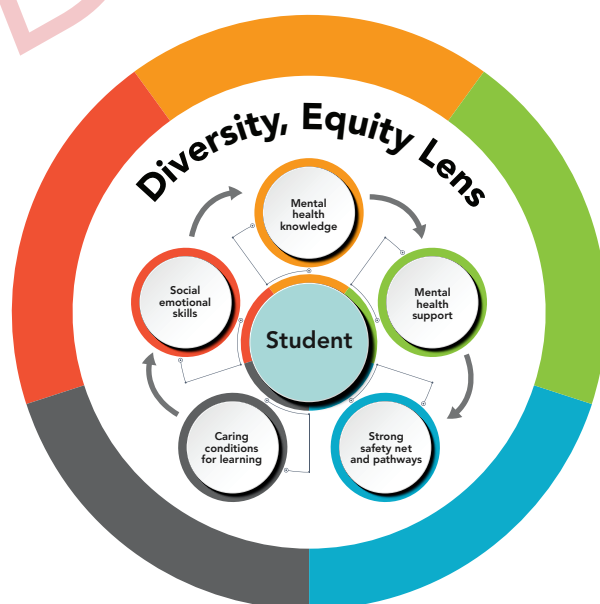
* Adapted from School Mental Health Ontario Model (2019)

At the OCDSB, we provide a continuum of supports and services, following a tiered approach to intervention. This aligned and integrated model (AIM), developed by School Mental Health Ontario, ensures that students have access to the right level of support at the right time from the right service provider. The foundation focuses on universal mental health promotion that is good for all students. When educators **create** a welcoming environment, **include** student voice and leadership in the classroom, **promote** mental health and wellbeing, **understand** the factors that impact mental health, **know** their students and their students' needs, and **partner** with families and communities, students will feel safe, cared for, and included.

Some students will need additional, more targeted support to be successful in their learning and their social relationships. Educators can play an important role in early identification by recognizing signs of emotional difficulty. Skill building in areas such as resiliency, self-regulation, social relationships, and self-esteem, as well as accommodations (as needed) help to prevent further challenges.

A few students will require intensive mental health or crisis intervention and supports. In addition to school-based supports, such as psychologists and social workers, access to community resources may be important for these students.
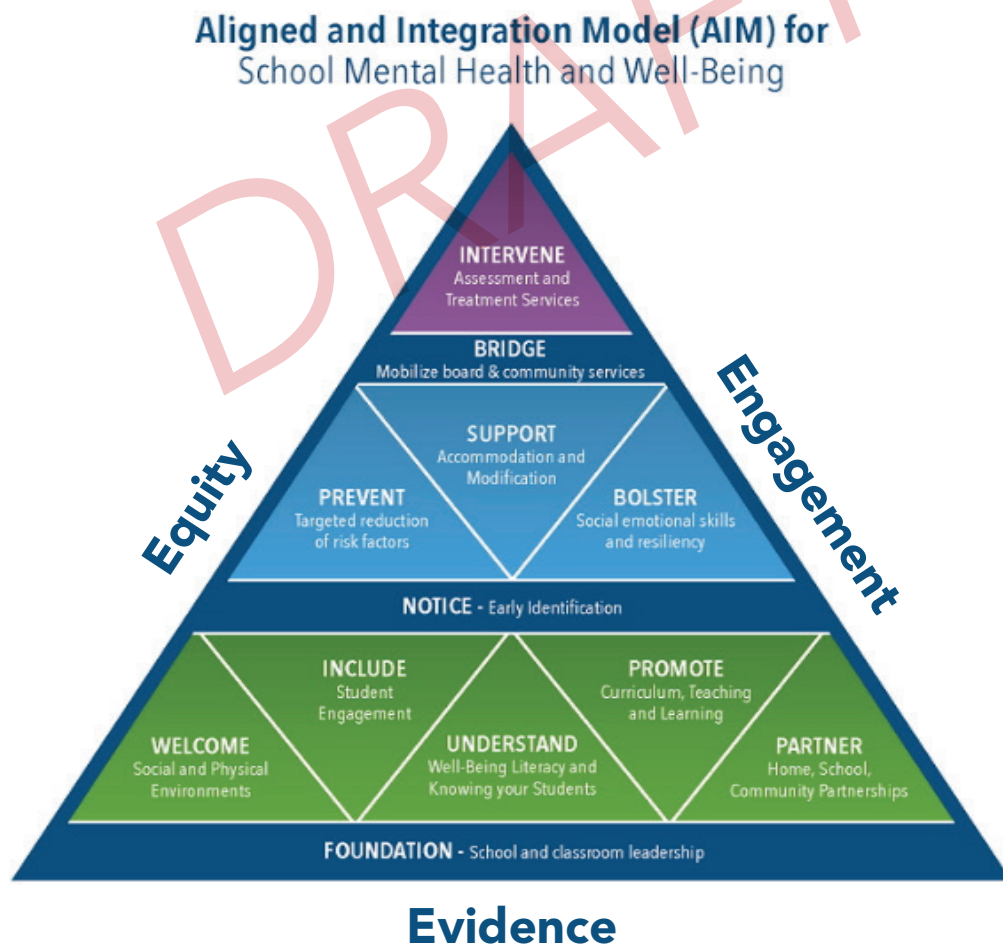
*Source: *School Mental Health Ontario*

VISION

Engaging, educating and empowering our students, staff and communities, and providing a safe, caring and inclusive learning environment promotes student mental health, well-being and achievement.

VALUES:

At the OCDSB we value:

- Equitable and inclusive education to foster a sense of belonging
- Student voice to inform and guide our work
- Collaboration with our families in support of their children's mental health
- Our community partnerships
- Evidence-based and evidence-informed approaches
- The vital role our staff play in promoting and supporting student mental health, and we are committed to deepening their knowledge, understanding and capacity to support all students while also recognizing and supporting staff well-being

STRATEGIC PRIORITIES 2019–2022:

CULTURE OF INNOVATION

Organizational conditions set the foundation to foster innovative approaches for evidence-based/informed, culturally relevant, and sustainable mental health practices in our classrooms and our schools.

STRATEGIES

- **Communication:**
  - » Develop a shared understanding of cultural, social, economic factors, that influence mental health and the relationship between mental health, well-being and achievement
  - » Reinforce the use of inclusive language that reflects respect
  - » Communicate information related to mental health promotion in culturally responsive ways to engage our diverse communities
- **Standard Processes:**
  - » Ensure clear descriptions of mental health workers roles and the range of services available in schools
  - » Create and/or revise protocols related to identifying and supporting student mental health needs that include culturally responsive approaches
  - » Ensure that all staff know and follow the Board's suicide prevention, intervention and post-intervention procedure
- **Continuous Quality Improvement:**
  - » Identify success indicators to monitor progress and measure impact
  - » Use data to inform school improvement plans (well-being) and mental health action plans

DESIRED OUTCOMES

Students:

- Increased understanding of the difference between mental health and mental illness, and reduced stigma;
- Increased use of language that reflects inclusivity; and
- Clear understanding of the process to access support.

Staff:

- Enhanced sense of belonging, mental health and well-being through the use and reinforcement of inclusive language;
- Embraced responsibility in supporting student mental health and well-being; and
- Understand and access the process to provide differentiated levels of support.

System:

- Increased understanding of all staff roles and responsibilities, processes and procedures in supporting student mental health & well-being in a culturally responsive manner;
- Clear understanding of protocols and pathways to care across all schools; and
- Evidence-informed quality improvements in mental health and well-being.

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CULTURE OF CARING

To support a culture of caring, systematic and focused training is needed to help ensure that our staff, families and students have the knowledge they need to understand the factors that impact mental health and the resources to access a range of services to support the needs of students. This is achieved using evidence-based/informed, culturally responsive approaches that acknowledge the diversity and lived experience of our students and their families.

STRATEGIES

Staff:

- Build capacity across all OCDSB staff in equity and inclusive practice;
- Expand learning with administrators on creating and sustaining mentally healthy, inclusive schools;
- Provide mental health literacy through professional development for all educator groups using <u>Supporting Minds: An Educator's Guide to Promoting Students' Mental Health and Well-Being</u>, and other School Mental Health Ontario (SMHO) resources;
- Know students in the classroom to ensure their self identified identities are reflected in the classroom environment and in the curriculum;
- Provide opportunities for professional staff training (Psychology & Social Work staff) on:
  » Topics related to supporting the mental health of students with specific lived experience
  » Culturally responsive, evidence-based intervention approaches
- Continue to implement evidence-based programs including: Mindmasters2, Zones of Regulation, Collaborative Problem Solving, Kids Have Stress Too;
- Continue suicide and violence prevention training (aligned with crisis prevention, intervention, postvention procedure) using safeTALK and Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training (ASIST), Violence/ThreatRisk Assesment (VTRA) models; and
- Seek opportunities to pilot and evaluate promising new practices and programs in collaboration with our community partners.

Parents:

- Provide presentations on mental health awareness (promoting mental health & well-being) and specific topics (e.g., stress, attachment and anxiety) for parents; and
- Explore authentic and meaningful engagement with our parent community to better understand our communities and reduce barriers to accessing mental health services with particular consideration for specific populations.

Students:

- Together with the Program & Learning Department, support student learning in mental health through the Health & Physical Education curriculum including the impact of substance use on mental health;

- Establish a youth advisory on mental health to help identify areas of focus, and co-create mental health awareness activities and programs for youth;

- Together with Ottawa Public Health, implement Youth Connections Ottawa, a peer to peer wellness program in secondary schools; and

- Explore ways to engage elementary students in mental health awareness and promotion initiatives.

DESIRED OUTCOMES

Students

- Increased sense of belonging, positive relationships, and overall well-being;

- Improved social emotional skills and increased use of positive coping strategies; and

- Increased capacity to act with compassion, empathy and kindness towards others.

Staff

- Increased awareness and understanding of the factors that impact mental health of our diverse populations;

- Increased capacity to promote mental health and well-being through caring and inclusive practices and evidence based programming; and

- Improved staff well-being.

System

- Increased knowledge and skill in supporting mental health, identifying and facilitating access to care across all schools; and

- Increased parental voice, knowledge and family engagement.

CULTURE OF SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Student mental health & well-being is a shared responsibility between home, school and community. Working with families and community partners to enhance supports to all students and facilitate pathways to culturally responsive community resources will help reduce barriers to accessing services, and ensure students are provided with the right service at the right time.

STRATEGIES

- Expand opportunities to collaborate with community partners to support mental health needs of students from specific populations. For example:
  » Indigenous students
  » LGBTQ2S+ students
  » Newcomers, immigrant students
  » Racialized students
  » Students experiencing income insecurity;
- Explore and expand best practices in supporting the mental health needs concurrent with student special education needs;
- Together with the Children's Aid Society (CAS), support students in care through the Joint Protocol for Student Achievement (JPSA);
- Explore best practices, together with community partners, in engaging chronically non-attending students;
- Collaborate with Rideauwood Addiction and Family Services and Ottawa Public Health to ensure quality prevention and intervention related to substance use/abuse;
- Continue collaboration with Ottawa's Lead Mental Health Agency (Youth Services Bureau) to identify and address service gaps in the community;
- Expand school-based community partnerships through central partnership process; and
- Explore opportunities to engage in authentic and meaningful family engagement.

DESIRED OUTCOMES

Students

- Increased student engagement;
- Improved access to culturally responsive mental health services; and
- Improved mental health and well-being for vulnerable students.

Staff

- Increased understanding of the range of services available to support the needs of our diverse student population; and
- Increased understanding of service gaps in the community.

System

- Increased community partnerships;
- Increased effective collaboration with community partners to ensure a seamless circle of care; and
- Improved capacity to meet the mental health needs of students.

KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS (KPIS) TO MONITOR PROGRESS AND IMPACT

Performance indicators for the OCDSB Mental Health Strategy will be monitored regularly through:

- The annual reporting process for the District's Strategic Plan 2019-2023 (System);
- Annual action plans developed from the Mental Health Strategy (System);
- Work with other Departments (i.e. Program and Learning Department and/ or Human Resources) to gather data related to student and staff mental health (Student/Staff), for example:
  - » School learning plans (well-being) (Student/Staff);
  - » Staff professional development (Staff);
  - » Student survey (Student);
- Learning Support Services will also continue to engage in ongoing evaluation of various mental health programs and services offered to staff and students across the District.

KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS — ALIGNED WITH THE BOARD STRATEGIC PLAN — INCLUDE:

- School climate;
- Student engagement;
- Staff engagement;
- Parent engagement;
- Social emotional skills (e.g., self-awareness, self-regulation, social awareness, positive social relationships, and responsible decision-making); and
- Academic achievement.

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