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Fostering *Connections and Support* in Schools



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A Multiyear Process: Student and Staff Wellness

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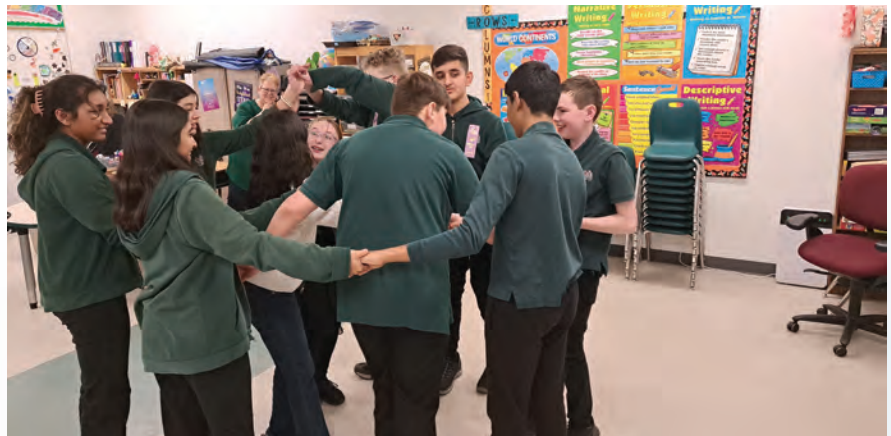
Diversity has been a constant element of educational environments. Yet, since 2020, diversity has come to mean much more.

School personnel instinctually knew that as students returned to school sites in the fall of 2020, they would be facing a multiplicity of needs that were much more complex and deep than they had experienced in the past.

While our community was addressing the pandemic as best it could, students were trying to navigate their way through amplified existing issues: mental health and anxieties, family strain and financial stress, learning challenges and unending shifts in learning environments, relationships, and pressures. For many students, strong connections with an adult, who was both physically and emotionally present, were lacking. Students turned to peers for support. Not surprisingly, children supporting children during this global crisis yielded few positive outcomes. A strong, multi-faceted, sustained focus on mental health needed to occur.



Students participating in a team and trust building activity. Photos courtesy of Teresa Di Ninno.



Students participating in a team building activity.



For the 2020/2021 and 2021/2022 academic years, Alberta Education, much like the ministries of other provinces, offered increased funding for mental health supports. In 2022, Alberta saw the implementation of its new Physical Education and Wellness curriculum for Kindergarten to Grade 6. The outcomes within character development, safety and healthy relationships offered schools more opportunities to develop students' social emotional skills and to practice these daily. CAPE increased the mental health contracted time. Reducing screen time and increasing small group work were our attempts at strengthening the social skills drastically affected during the pandemic. These efforts were not enough to shift the tides of poor self image, negative self-talk, toxic complaining, lack of interpersonal skills, anxiety, etc.

During the 2022/2023 school year, CAPE chose to redesign its student wellness program by shifting from an administrative model to a classroom-based model. It became clear that the redesigned supports needed to include adult as well as student components. Dedicated time within the daily schedule offered opportunities for learning about and practice of social skills. During this time, lessons tangibly promoted relationship building between adults, adults and students, and students themselves. Classroom learning purposely targeted the diverse needs of each student in each homeroom from grades two to nine. Flexibility was of crucial importance. School staff, not just teachers, were provided with professional development opportunities in support of individual personal and professional development. Administrative structures changed so that the strategies could filter into classrooms.

CAPE increased its administrative team to include a 0.5 full time equivalent (FTE) vice-principal charged with student and staff wellness. This individual needed to model calm supportive relationships, be empathetic and responsive, accessible, and a good listener. The safety net needed to be as wide as possible, with potential for growth.

Staff and student wellness was part of everyone's job, and we now have dedicated time to accommodate learning. In preparation for working with staff and students, each of the three site-based administrators focused on an area of relationship building and led a book study. One group addressed building relationships before asking for compliance. A second group delved into emotional intelligence.

The third studied how high-yield, predictable teaching provides stability and opportunities for connection. The book study sessions were scheduled once every six to eight weeks with the expectation that teacher professional growth plans tied theory to classroom practice. Group members, including support staff, were encouraged to bring samples of student work, anecdotal information, and situations to review for feedback and discussion.

Site administration and two lead teachers also engaged in professional development with Judy Riege, a vital and impactful training that assisted them in supporting colleagues and students. One key question emerged: "What does 'better' look like?" Administrators prioritized visibility by being outside to greet families when they arrived and to wish them a good evening as they left. Right place, right time has effectively engaged parents who are more reluctant to come into the school, has supported students who struggled to get out of the car, and encouraged the sharing of information about student thoughts and experiences outside of school.

Student-teacher time in the classroom was increased and enhanced, yet we also added a 0.5 FTE student wellness coach to engage in individual and small group work in support of students who need more one-on-one time. Recognizing that several students arrive at school with baggage, making good connections at the start the day allowed our staff to shift the trajectory in a more positive direction. Focusing on social-emotional strategies at the beginning of the day enabled classroom teachers to set the tone for the day and provide a time and place to problem-solve before the business of the day started.

Before students returned to school in September 2024, the complexity of student needs within each homeroom class was

analyzed and a vetted resource was provided. This strategy ensured that each resource was the best suited to support each group and would also support the teacher in providing daily awareness and skills practice. In addition, each teacher and student resource were sectioned and numbered to ensure flexible pacing and ample time for role-playing and discussion. Classroom meetings supported advocacy and problem-solving and allowed students to collectively identify strategies that promote wellness. The classes were intentionally not graded and there are no assignments. Reflective journaling, role playing, overt discussion, art therapy, and cross-grade collaborations were common. Originally, each homeroom teacher worked with their own class. However, complexities around anxiety and gender issues became apparent. In response, the student wellness vice-principal worked with specific groups, with support from our mental health worker.

The current year saw a shift in the focus and in the conversations. What does school community and student wellness look like? It is collegial teams that make time to communicate and plan. It is adults being visible, present, and available. It is administration supporting growth and relationship-building. It is every individual feeling safe and empowered. It is open conversation and dialogue. It is everyone being engaged. ○

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