

# Research Briefs

## Title

# Student Mental Wellness

## Background

Teachers working in schools and classrooms know that student mental wellness is an important factor in a student's success in the education system. The issue of student mental health has gained a great deal of attention, in part because of the prevalence of poor student mental health. For example, the Ontario Ministry of Education (2013, 11) reported, "most estimates suggest that 15 to 20 per cent of children and youth struggle with a mental health problem." In addition, Alberta Education (2017, 9) wrote "only one in five children and youth who need mental health services receives them. Seventy-five per cent of mental illnesses have their origin in childhood."

It is important to define mental wellness or good mental health. The Alberta Teachers' Association's *Compassionate Classrooms: Understanding Student Mental Health* (2009, 6) states, "good mental health is more than just the absence of mental illness. It can be seen as a state of mental health that allows one to flourish and fully enjoy life." This recognizes that students who are mentally healthy may or may not have mental illness and that mental health is something that can fluctuate over the course of a person's lifetime.

School-aged children spend significant time in classroom settings; therefore, there are efforts to address mental wellness through the education system. The work of schools in this area is supported by academic research. McEwan, Waddell and Barker (2007, 471) write, "Mounting research evidence suggests that childhood is the optimal time to influence determinants of social and emotional well-being." This gives rise to the question, what can teachers and school leaders do to enhance mental well-being in their schools?

First, it is crucial to point out that the responsibility for student mental health is shared between many partners, including the medical profession, families, teachers, and education and health ministries. Teachers may be able to identify when a student is in need of specialized assistance, but they should not try to diagnose or treat a student they think may be suffering from symptoms of mental illness or distress. Rather, teachers and school leaders can adopt schoolwide approaches that help reduce the stigma around mental health and embrace a strength-based approach to mental wellness that fosters resiliency in students (Alberta Education 2017).

## Keywords

mental health in children and youth; resilience; socio-emotional development

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## Key strategic considerations

- Through a school-based approach to mental health, teachers and school leaders can develop knowledge and skills that focus on inclusion and equity to help all students understand how to be mentally healthy and how to identify when they may need further support. An enabling factor allowing this to be realized is the highly relational nature of learning fostered through supportive school environments.
- Student mental health is a shared responsibility between the education system, the health system, communities and families. The partnerships formed to address student mental health create enduring alliances, building public engagement for public education.

## Sources and further reading

Alberta Education. 2017. *Working Together to Support Mental Health in Alberta Schools*. Alberta Education website. [www.alberta.ca/assets/documents/edu-working-together-to-support-mental-health-alberta-schools.pdf](http://www.alberta.ca/assets/documents/edu-working-together-to-support-mental-health-alberta-schools.pdf) (accessed May 1, 2019).

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Whitley, J. 2010. "The Role of Educational Leaders in Supporting the Mental Health of All Students." *Exceptionality Education International* 20, no 2: 55–69.

### Websites

Alberta Mentoring Partnership, [www.albertamentors.ca](http://www.albertamentors.ca)

Alberta Health Services Addiction and Mental Health, [www.albertahealthservices.ca/amh/amh.aspx](http://www.albertahealthservices.ca/amh/amh.aspx)

Canadian Mental Health Commission, [www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/English](http://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/English)

Center for the Developing Child, Harvard University, <https://developingchild.harvard.edu>

Children's Mental Health Ontario, [www.cmho.org/](http://www.cmho.org/)

School Mental Health Assist (Ontario), <https://smh-assist.ca/>

## Networks

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