

WE HELP: MENTAL HEALTH AND ADDICTION STRATEGY 2024-2027



We Help.

HWDSB
BE YOU. BE EXCELLENT.

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Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board (HWDSB) is committed to supporting positive mental health for every student. The **We Help: Mental Health and Addiction Strategy** is a comprehensive three-year strategy that organizes and guides the multi-tiered approach to support every student to feel safe and secure in their classrooms and school communities. It meets the expectations outlined from the Ministry of Education: Policy/Program Memorandum 169 (PPM169).

HWDSB's Mission Statement

"Every student experiences a sense of belonging and engages in dynamic learning to reach their potential and build their own future." ([HWDSB 2023-2028 Multi-Year Strategic Plan](#)).

HWDSB's Mission is underpinned by our guiding Values:

Compassion: Leading with peace, friendship and love creates space for compassionate accountability, where we are responsible to one another in creating a culture of care.

Dignity: Reciprocity, anti-racism and anti-oppression lead to a just and equitable learning community, where every person is included, respected and valued.

Trust: Humility and transparency build the trusted relationships, connections and education system necessary for growth, change and evolution.

Joy: Curiosity, play and fun are catalysts for meaningful student learning outcomes and support joyful and enriching experiences.

Outcomes Achieved When We Embody our Values

- School communities are engaged in regular rhythms and practices of exploring what it looks, feels and sounds like to set conditions for safer, equitable, identity affirming and inclusive schools and classrooms.
- Perspectives of young people and communities historically and currently discriminated against are amplified when we are engaging in collaborative strategies and gathering student/staff/family/community voice.
- Students have an opportunity to learn and explore who they are so they can experience a profound sense of **belonging**. Feeling honoured and accepted by oneself for who they are deep inside, allows them to be their authentic self.

- Students experience **connectedness** from responsive adults within their school communities where the staff/student and student/student relationships are nurtured and considered a meaningful part of the learning process.
- Students experience that they **matter**. Mattering is relational; students need to feel that others depend upon them, are interested in them, and are concerned with their wellbeing in a way that shows care. When someone feels like they matter, they believe that they are relevant to others and that others notice them and pay attention to them. When a person feels they matter to others, it has a positive effect on their health and wellness.
- Conversations and issues about mental health are de-stigmatized when mental health specific and positive culture and well-being promotion and prevention curriculum are woven into day-to-day classroom instruction.
- Students are aware of, have access too and are encouraged to access barrier-free mental health supports as well as substance misuse resources (i.e. promotion, prevention and intervention support) that are available through the school and wider system of care within Hamilton.
- System leaders, school staff and mental health professionals engage and adopt processes, mechanisms and modalities that work towards dismantling the structures inherent within a colonialized system so students experience equitable access and good outcomes receiving mental health services.
- Every student's mental health and well-being needs are responded to by system and school staff as well as school mental health professionals who have role specific skills and knowledge to provide differentiated, identity-affirming, nation-specific, locally relevant and evidence-based approaches to care that honours self determination.

Goals of the 2024-2027 We Help: Mental Health and Addiction Strategy

- We will provide intentional and culturally relevant teaching and supports on mental health so that K-12 students can recognize their own mental health needs and seek supports. ([HWDSB Board Improvement Plan](#)).
- We will support students and families to navigate external mental health resources, care and support that provide culturally responsive and relevant care and collaborate with communities. ([HWDSB Board Improvement Plan](#)).

Indigenous Educational Wellness

Through Indigenous Educational Wellness, we untangle education from trauma and understand that education can now be part of total wellness and that Indigenous Knowledges will be celebrated. It requires an acknowledgement of the intergenerational and current trauma caused by the public education system. The Two Row Wampum, which signifies peace, friendship and respect between Treaty Partners will be a guide to protect Indigenous educational wellness and honour ancestral agreements anticipated when education was negotiated as a treaty right. Restorative steps toward Intergenerational Healing & Intergenerational Survival can occur through celebrating Indigenous Knowledges that are accurate, authentic and accountable to the local urban Indigenous community, Three Fires Confederacy and Haudenosaunee Confederacy nations, and to all representative communities and individuals. ([HWDSB Indigenous Education Circle Strategic Action Plan, IECSAP, 2021](#)).

What is Mental Health

Mental health encompasses many parts of our lives; it is an aspect of our well-being that is fluid and is comprised of a variety of shifting components. It is how we feel, think, and act; how we interact with the world around us, and how it interacts with us. This is influenced by multiple factors, such as how systemic barriers impact us, our ability to meet our basic needs, our sense of self-efficacy, and our sense of belonging to a community. Our experience of mental health may differ based on our social location and the identities we hold (age, sex, race, socioeconomic status, gender identity, sexual orientation, disability etc.). Mental health is more than the presence or absence of a mental illness. People who live with a mental illness can and do thrive, just as people without a mental illness may experience poor mental health.

Substance Use

Young people aged 15-24 are more likely to experience mental illness and/or substance use disorders than any other age group. Substance use in adolescence can dysregulate important brain function, increase vulnerability to mental health concerns and school disengagement. Comprehensive substance use education and support is critical for youth during this transitional period as it increases protective factors and reduces risk factors for problematic substance use, including addiction.

What Students Have Told Us

Under the leadership of the 2021-22 Student Trustees and Student Senate, HWDSB students had a platform “to share their voice on the issues that matter to us.” The topics included: Student Well-Being, Equity, and Communication and [brought forth the voices of 4,500 HWDSB students in grades 7 to 12](#). Students identified:

- Academics as the greatest contributor to student stress followed by the social aspects of school.
- That most students are not familiar or slightly familiar with mental health resources at their school and wanting more support with fewer barriers to access support.

- The importance of having an adult they can trust, who will listen, who can relate to their lived experiences, and who won't judge them.
- Having a variety of supports (e.g., peer & adult; basic & intensive) was important.
- Normalizing conversations about mental health in the classroom and school to de-stigmatize asking for help.

How We Will Carry Out the Work of the Strategy

- a. We honour local Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing because we know that cultural deprivation has had a negative impact on intergenerational wellness and healing.
- b. We prioritize safety and care because we value the well-being of every person.
- c. We strive for ethical consultation and collaboration with students, families, staff and community.
- d. We purposefully seek out voice from people and communities who are currently and historically underserved by the education system because we are accountable to our community, and we have much to learn.
- e. We share information about the process of engagement with students, families, staff and community because we believe in building trusting relationships grounded in transparency.
- f. We take a consensus building approach to decision making because we believe all voices should be valued and honoured.
- g. The work is done to benefit students, families, staff and community and honours self-determination.
- h. We aim to use accessible language and universal design to ensure that all members of the community can participate and are valued.

The We Help: Mental Health and Addiction Strategy Starts with:

Every Student

The strategy centers every student, including future students, recognizing their unique set of life events, histories and environments that shape their opportunities, challenges and choices. A student's identity is influenced by intersecting aspects like race, culture, sexual orientation, gender identity, language, geography, connection to nature and land, socioeconomic status, family, histories (pre- and post-colonization), school environment, community, nation, ancestors, safety, time, space and many more. By understanding the uniqueness of each student, we are best able to plan relevant mental health supports and services.

Differentiated and Identity-Affirming Support

When students feel a sense of belonging, are connected to school through caring and supportive relationships and feel they matter to others, they are more likely to feel a strong sense of positive mental health and less likely to struggle with substance use concerns.

Identity affirming ([adapted from School Mental Health Ontario](#)) is the process of building positive connections to identities someone has and prioritizes anti-racist, anti-oppressive work and requires a commitment to Truth and Reconciliation. It is important to understand that the historical and ongoing colonialism faced by Indigenous Peoples is unique and separate as distinct nation-to-nation relationship. As Elder Jim Dumont (2014)

“Indigenous approaches to health and wellness focus on a strengths-based approach that recognizes... a whole and healthy person expressed through a sense of balance of spirit, emotion, mind and body. Central to wellness is belief in one’s connection to language, land, beings of creation, and ancestry, supported by a caring family and environment.”

A key reflective practice in identity-affirming school mental health is centred around the concept of [cultural humility](#). When each individual supporting students knows themselves well, engages in a lifelong learning stance and a sense of respectful curiosity, there is greater opportunity to build meaningful connections with students.

To ensure equity of access and outcomes for those who experience disproportionalities and disparities related to intergenerational trauma, seen as not a single event but a “culmination of cascading trials, burdens and sufferings” ([Sherwood, 2015](#)) as well as the wider social determinants of health (e.g., race, ability, sexual orientation, income, etc.).

We will do this by:

- Dismantling the structures inherent within a colonized system that create barriers to equitable access to, and outcomes for, mental health services.
- Engaging with culture/faith/community leaders and groups to learn more about available and needed identity-affirming mental health supports.
- Amplifying perspectives of young people and communities, especially those that have historically and currently experienced discrimination.
- Respond to student mental health needs through identity-affirming, culturally responsive, nation-specific and locally relevant approaches.

Annual Action Plan

Each year, HWDSB will create and post an annual action plan that outlines the key initiatives for the upcoming year to support the goals and outcomes identified in the We Help: Mental Health Strategy.

Multi-Tier System of Support

A tiered approach to support helps to establish priorities, clarify roles, and ensure service coordination and quality within a complex and evolving field. It includes a continuum of services ranging from: mental health promotion, early identification, prevention and early intervention, and service pathways/clinical support for more intensive mental health needs.

Tier One

Tier One support is universally offered across all HWDSB communities. Mental health and well-being should be understood and addressed through initiatives embedded within Indigenous Education, Human Rights, Safe Schools, Healthy Schools, Equitable Quality Education, Student Success, and Special Education.

A. System Wide Mental Health Promotion

- Student Leadership
 - Student voice and lived experiences are honoured to ensure that practices are identity-affirming, nation-specific and culturally relevant and responsive to meet the holistic (physical, mental, emotional and spiritual) needs of the student.
- Caregiver Connection and Support
 - This aspect of the strategy focuses on explicit and intentional parent, caregiver, and community connections and support, with a view to strengthen relationships, build mental health literacy, codevelop collaborative mental health promotion initiatives, and reinforce common understandings and messaging for young people.
- Establishment of Pathway to, through and from community supports protocols and procedures
 - Promoting student mental health and well-being requires a community approach. Community mental health organizations take a lead role in more intensive service delivery when young people are experiencing more severe, complex, or acute mental health.
- Communication across the community of the annual mental health strategy action plan
 - Each year the Board will develop, implement and measure its annual action plan that identifies the key initiatives that will be undertaken during the year.
- Population-based outcome measurement
 - Data will be collected through various means including a system wide self-reporting questionnaires that asks children and youth about their thoughts, feelings and experiences in school and their community. This will be enhanced through more targeted approaches including focus groups, interviews and observations.

B. School Wide Positive Culture and Well-Being

- Student Leadership and Engagement in strength based positive culture and well-being promotion. Students have a unique perspective and powerful voice in wellness promotion. Collaborating with and supported by educators, schools play an important role in reducing stigma and promoting positive well-being.

C. Educator Role: Mental Health and Well-Being Promotion

- Educators play a role in creating inclusive, caring and safer classrooms that support students to know themselves, and the world around them. Learning flourishes when the lessons are connected to the learner's life.
- Daily classroom practices centered on co-created classroom norms and agreement create a strong sense of belonging at school, reinforce a sense of wellness and a range of culturally responsive ways of coping with stress, and reminders about individual gifts, strengths and the power of pride in one's identity.
- Mental health literacy and stigma reduction provide students with accurate information about mental health, giving them agency for their own well-being and better equipping them to help themselves, or a peer, when mental health problems arise.
- Normalizing mental health distress in addition to encouraging and promoting help-seeking behaviour is important for stigma reduction.

Tier Two

When a student is showing signs of an emerging or escalating mental health problem, school-based support is important for early identification and intervention.

A. Educator Role: Mental Health and Wellbeing Response

Through safe and caring relationships, classroom staff can promote positive mental health, destigmatize help seeking, and help to identify and support students at risk. Given that classroom staff have daily contact with students, they are well positioned to recognize changes in a student's emotions, behaviour and overall well-being. Knowing the signs of when a student's mental health may be a concern, how you can support the student and how the student can access more specialized services and support are critical components of a caring relationship. We all have a role to play in supporting a student's mental health and well-being.

B. School Level Support Team

Students often do not require professional mental health support when experiencing heightened emotions and high levels of stress that can occur due to the pressures related to academic achievement, social and other age/situational stressors. Some roles within the school are well positioned to provide timely, effective support that allows the student to feel heard and connected and receive effective problem-solving skills and strategies. If the student requires more intensive support, these roles are also well positioned to

provide information to the student as to what help is available and what it involves. Connecting students to the most effective services is an important step in ensuring mental health needs are met.

C. School Mental Health Professional Support

School Based Mental Health Professionals (SMH), typically Social Work Services within HWDSB, provide brief, evidence-informed interventions and standardized measurement tools to help students with mild to-moderate mental health concerns. Students requiring this level of support can access it directly or be referred through trusted adults within the school. Students who access school-based mental health support still require caring and responsive support within the classroom and school.

Parents and caregivers play an important role in supporting their child/young person's mental health and well-being. School mental health professionals work closely with parents and caregivers to enhance their knowledge and skills to effectively support their child/young person. This can be done through individualized discussions as well as through organized groupwork.

Tier Three

Some students with significant, acute, or complex mental health needs require more intensive or urgent mental health services.

A. Pathway to Community Supports

When students require more intensive support, schools can assist students in accessing community services, agencies and hospitals. In collaboration with the child/young person/family and school team, provides triage, referral and bridging support to, from and through community services with consent from the child/young person. A system of care approach, [Right Time, Right Care](#), is needed to meet the unique needs of each child and young person.

Students accessing this level of support still require caring and responsive schools and classrooms. Access to education is a key component of student well-being. School staff collaborating with the student, their family and their mental health service providers allows for the best possible outcome for the student.

B. Crisis Support

All suicidal and self-harm gestures/comments must be taken seriously and responded to immediately. Anyone can be at risk of suicide at some point in life regardless of culture, religion, education, age, gender, sexual orientation, social or economic circumstances. HWDSB staff are well-positioned to observe, and report concerns about a student's emotional or mental well-being. All staff have a role to play in ensuring students are safe and supported. The [HWDSB Suicide Prevention, Intervention and Postvention Protocol](#) outlines the roles and responsibilities for all staff.

To learn more about the **HWDSB We Help: Mental Health and Addiction Strategy** please contact us at wehelp@hwdsb.on.ca with comments, questions, and suggestions.

We Help.

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