



# STRATEGIC PLAN

2014-2019

BRITISH COLUMBIA SCHOOL-CENTRED MENTAL HEALTH COALITION

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The British Columbia School Centred Mental Health Coalition (the Coalition) is made up of over 70 members from more than 40 organizations representing government ministries and nongovernment organizations, service providers, research agencies and institutions, advocacy groups, professional associations and the public education system. The Coalition exists to advance the concept of “school connectedness” and the body of research and strategies that support the concept.

When students feel more connected to their school, they are more likely to experience positive mental health and wellbeing<sup>1</sup>, to engage in healthy behaviours<sup>2</sup> and to succeed academically.<sup>3</sup> In turn, students who do well academically are less likely to engage in risky behaviours such as smoking tobacco or cannabis, drinking alcohol and engaging in sexual activity at a young age.<sup>4</sup>

There is rich data available on child and youth mental health in BC through sources such as the McCreary Centre’s Adolescent Health Survey, the Early Development Instrument and Middle Development Instrument through the Human Early Learning Partnership at UBC and the Heart-Mind Index from the Dalai Lama Center. Common themes emerging from the research include: the importance of healthy social and emotional development; the importance of school connectedness in reducing vulnerability; the importance of families within the school context; and, the importance of the school as a conduit for optimal engagement.

School connectedness is a critical component to improving health and learning outcomes. Central to school connectedness, schools are a key hub for all related efforts.

On April 11, 2014, the Coalition met to develop a strategic plan to guide its own and its members’ efforts to advance school connectedness through their individual organizations. The intent is to provide a strategic framework to promote, support and reinforce collective action on school connectedness while recognizing that each organization has its own unique mandate. The strategic plan envisions building on member organizations’ strengths to advance school connectedness at all levels and through all systems.

## WHAT IS SCHOOL CONNECTEDNESS?

School Connectedness is about creating a school community where there is a sense of belonging and everyone feels safe, seen, heard, supported, significant and cared about.

## WHAT IS MENTAL WELLNESS?

“A state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community”

From the World Health Organization’s definition of mental health

<sup>1</sup> Smith, A., Poon, C., Stewart, D., Hoogveen, C., & Saewyc, E. (2011). Making the Right Connections: Promoting Positive Mental Health among BC Youth. Vancouver, BC: McCreary Centre Society.

<sup>2</sup> Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (2009). School Connectedness: Strategies for Increasing Protective Factors Among Youth. Atlanta, GA: US Department of Health and Human Services.

<sup>3</sup> Morrison, W. & Peterson, P. (2010). Schools as a Setting for Promoting Positive Mental Health: Better Practices and Perspectives. Summerside, PE: Joint Consortium for School Health.

<sup>4</sup> Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (2009). School Connectedness: Strategies for Increasing Protective Factors Among Youth. Atlanta, GA: US Department of Health and Human Services.

## VISION

BC schools are safe and caring learning environments that foster the mental wellness of their community's children, youth and families.

## MISSION

To support the awareness and understanding of school connectedness and build capacity of school communities to create environments that foster mental wellness.

## SCOPE

Child and youth mental wellness in school communities.

## VALUES AND OPERATING PRINCIPLES

The Coalition is guided by specific values and operating principles in carrying out this work. *Values* describe the concepts that underpin the Coalition's work. *Operating principles* describe a standard of behaviour that the Coalition adheres to.

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### VALUES

**Shared responsibility:** The mental wellness of children and youth is everyone's responsibility. The joint efforts of families, schools and districts, government agencies, community organizations, the academic community and advocacy groups contribute to the mental wellbeing of our children and youth. Achieving mental wellness also depends on the inclusion of and support for child, youth, and parent voices in informing and promoting school-based mental wellness.

**A 'whole child' philosophy<sup>5</sup>:** The Coalition embraces a 'whole child' philosophy which emphasizes: a healthy lifestyle; a physically and emotionally safe learning environment; active engagement of students in learning; emphasizing connection to family, school and the broader community and access to learning and individual support to meet diverse needs.

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### OPERATING PRINCIPLES

**Purposeful and realistic:** The Coalition is developing a shared, realistic understanding of what it wants to accomplish, how it will accomplish it and how it can begin to effect cultural and system change.

**Inclusive approach:** The strength of the Coalition is in its breadth of membership. It brings together people from different sectors as well as a range of knowledge, skills and infrastructure that can be leveraged to enhance school connectedness.

**Comprehensive perspective:** Coalition members understand that improving school connectedness will depend on taking action across the continuum from health promotion and prevention through to intervention.

**Informed by "collective impact"<sup>6</sup>:** The Coalition's work in advancing school connectedness will benefit from collective impact approaches: having a common agenda, shared measures of success, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication and partnership with its members, their organizations, other stakeholders and communities. Coalition members are comfortable with a degree of uncertainty and informal structure and with allowing the process to emerge.

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<sup>5</sup> From the ASCD website [www.ascd.org](http://www.ascd.org)

<sup>6</sup> Hanleybrown, Fay et al. "Channeling Change: Making Collective Impact Work". Stanford, CT: Stanford Social Innovation Review, 2012.

## OVERARCHING OUTCOMES

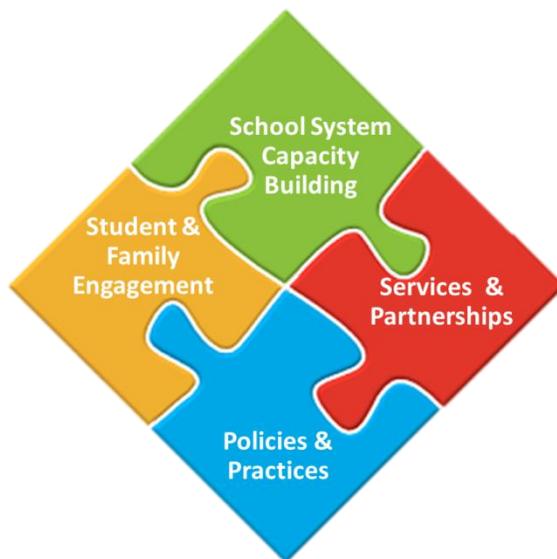
Five broad outcomes will be achieved through the efforts of the Coalition and its members:

1. Children, youth and families thrive in connected school communities where they feel a sense of belonging.
2. All organizations working with children, youth and families work collaboratively to promote school connectedness and positive mental health outcomes.
3. Schools, parents and caregivers, children and youth, and those professionals working with them have a high degree of mental health literacy and understand the importance of school connectedness in enhancing mental wellness.
4. Children, youth and parents will have a strong voice and role in improving mental health outcomes in schools.
5. Children, youth and families will benefit from quality and accessible services that promote their mental wellness.

## THE STRATEGY

To achieve the overarching outcomes, the Coalition has identified four strategic priorities, each with related goals, objectives and specific outcomes. The priorities areas are:

1. student and family engagement
2. school system capacity building
3. services and partnerships and
4. policies and practices .



### WHAT IS POSITIVE MENTAL HEALTH?

Positive mental health is the capacity of each and all of us to feel, think, act in ways that enhance our ability to enjoy life and deal with the challenges we face. It is a positive sense of emotional and spiritual well-being that respects the importance of culture, equity, social justice, interconnections and personal dignity.

Public Health Agency of  
Canada, 2014.

### WHAT IS MENTAL HEALTH LITERACY?

Mental health literacy is the knowledge and skills that enable people to access, understand and apply information for mental health. It places more of an emphasis on empowerment for health, a key concept in health promotion and health literacy.

Canadian Alliance on Mental  
Illness and Mental Health,  
2008.

## STRATEGIC PRIORITY 1: STUDENT AND FAMILY ENGAGEMENT IN SCHOOL COMMUNITIES

### CONTEXT:

Students and families are essential partners in building school connectedness. Actively engaging students in their learning and their school community strengthens school connectedness and supports:

- personal growth, self-esteem and identity development;
- skill, knowledge and capacity building;
- improved learning and school completion;
- increased civic engagement and efficacy, higher quality relationships, interpersonal skills and broadened social networks; and
- positive health benefits such as such as decreased substance use and lower rates of depression and anti-social behaviours.<sup>7</sup>

Providing opportunities for all families to be actively involved in their children's academic and school life has been identified as an important strategy for building school connectedness<sup>8</sup>.

While engaging all families is important, it is particularly crucial when students and their families are experiencing problems. The following description of the important role that children, youth and family members can play in achieving and supporting mental wellness is taken from *Families Matter: a Framework for Family Mental Health in British Columbia*<sup>9</sup>.

A child and youth focus means we listen to and engage with young people in addressing their mental health needs. The balance between a child and youth focus and a family-centred approach to mental health respects and supports the rights of young people, as well as the essential care-giving role that families play in their lives. When young people and families are provided with access to sufficient support, resources, education and opportunities, they are empowered to be actively and meaningfully involved in decisions that affect their mental health (Kutcher & McLuckie, 2010).

A family-centred philosophy starts from the premise that families have a critical role to play in promoting mental health and supporting people with mental illness. It recognizes the centrality of the family in the lives of individuals. Family-centred practice recognizes that families are fully capable of making informed choices and acting on them. It focuses on the inherent strengths, capabilities and interconnectedness of families. Professionals view themselves as family agents and help families strengthen existing skills or acquire new ones. Interventions that strengthen the family as a whole are viewed as helping individual members (Wells & Fuller, 2000).

Family engagement is any role or activity that enables families to have direct and meaningful input into and influence on systems, policies or practices that affect services for children and families (New York State Council on Children and Families, 2008). On a philosophical level, family engagement is about motivating and empowering families to recognize their own needs, strengths, and resources, and to take an active role in changing things for the better. On a practical level, it is about directly involving families in the design, delivery, management and evaluation of services and supports for individual family members and the family as a whole. Family engagement is what keeps families working in the long and sometimes slow process of positive change (Steib, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> Joint Consortium for School Health. (2014). Youth Engagement Toolkit. Retrieved February 19, 2015, from Joint Consortium for School Health: <http://www.jcsh-cces.ca/ye-book/>

<sup>8</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, School Connectedness: Strategies for Increasing Protective Factors for Youth, 2009.

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.forcesociety.org/sites/default/files/23154\\_FAM\\_Framework-3.6-LR.pdf](http://www.forcesociety.org/sites/default/files/23154_FAM_Framework-3.6-LR.pdf)

## GOALS AND OBJECTIVES:

1. To champion parents'/caregivers' connection with the child's schools as active, knowledgeable partners in supporting school connectedness, enhancing mental wellness and achieving improved mental health outcomes.
  - a. Empower parents as partners in addressing mental wellness in school communities.
2. To promote an understanding of the range of practices and policies that result in high levels of child, youth and family engagement across the school system from the perspectives of children, youth, and families.
  - a. Evidence-supported best practices in child, youth and family engagement are identified across the school system.
  - b. Students are engaged to identify best practices and build capacity to promote mental wellness.

## OUTCOMES:

- All children, youth, parents/caregivers and families have opportunities to learn about and contribute to the development of best practices in school connectedness.

## STRATEGIC PRIORITY 2: SCHOOL SYSTEM CAPACITY BUILDING

### CONTEXT:

Research indicates that a sense of school connectedness, in addition to reducing student vulnerability and supporting mental health, is critical to achieving overall educational outcomes such as language and cognitive development, physical, social, emotional and communication development. The school setting provides an important environment to influence positive learning, physical and emotional outcomes.

Schools have '...embraced a new way of seeing, learning and doing that marries emergent solutions with intentional outcomes.'<sup>10</sup> Through an '...inspiring, innovative and inclusive mission'<sup>11</sup> for 21<sup>st</sup> century learning, schools promote a culture of school connectedness and inclusion.

While many educators and other school staff have started to incorporate strategies for increasing school connectedness into their practice/role, the adoption of such practices is not universal. Increased uptake would expand the number of schools and student with high levels of connectedness.

School staff respond to a variety of student needs on a daily basis. Sometimes student's needs go beyond what school staff are able to provide. It is critical that school staff, students and their families have access to a range of supports that will enhance students' ability to learn and ultimately result in improved health outcomes and reduced vulnerability. Providing this comprehensive approach means that other sectors and disciplines are onboard with educators in their commitment to school connectedness and working together as a team to provide the most effective environment for learning and health.

<sup>10</sup> Embracing Emergence: How Collective Impact Addresses Complexity, p.2

<sup>11</sup> The Fourth Way p.110

## BENEFITS OF SCHOOL CONNECTEDNESS

Research has found correlations between school connectedness and:

### Learning

- attendance;
- dropout rates;
- self-reported grades;
- perceived academic competence and expectations of continuing education beyond high school.

### Wellness

- reporting good or excellent health & higher self-esteem;
- fewer depressive systems and a
- reduced likelihood to have considered suicide.

[Healthy SchoolsBC School Connectedness: What Does the Evidence Say?](#)

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## GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

1. To promote a “whole child” approach in which school staff considers the physical, cognitive, emotional, social, and communicative development of the child.
2. To encourage an environment in which school staff:
  - a. understand the importance of school connectedness and its relationship to health and educational outcomes;
  - b. know how they can contribute to school connectedness; and
  - c. actively support a culture of connectedness.
3. To promote mental health literacy among school staff, allowing them to identify and respond appropriately to students’ emerging mental health issues by:
  - a. building on the role of school counsellors as champions, providing support and professional development on mental health wellness and disorders for all school staff (teaching, administration and support staff);
  - b. increasing awareness of existing resources and tools and how best to access them; and
  - c. participating in school-to-school networks and professional learning communities<sup>12</sup>
4. To support school staff understanding and use of professional and support groups, and the role each party plays in effective public partnerships that support the physical and mental wellness of students and families.

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## OUTCOMES:

- All school staff have opportunities to learn about and contribute to the development of a range of practices and policies that result in high levels of school connectedness and child, youth and family engagement.
- Practices in school connectedness and child, youth and family engagement are identified and shared throughout the school system.
- Students are actively engaged in guiding school connectedness in their school community.

## STRATEGIC PRIORITY 3: SERVICE INTEGRATION AND PARTNERSHIPS

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## CONTEXT:

In addition to being the location where our children are educated, schools can be the setting for connecting children, youth and their families with the services and supports they need to achieve optimum health and learning outcomes. Working towards the integration and/or co-location of the various organizations, partners and systems that interact to support children and youth could lead to streamlined processes and support quick and appropriate action to support healthy outcomes. When mental health or other problems arise, access to timely, effective, coordinated services is critical. Just as we provide public health services within some school settings, many other services could/should also be provided.

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## GOALS AND OBJECTIVES:

1. To articulate a foundational model for enhanced school, community, family and cultural connectedness that focuses on strengths, self-care, and systems navigation supports to encourage the use of appropriate resources, and draws on the wealth of knowledge in schools that is essential to service integration.
2. To promote a proactive, collaborative, systems-wide approach to respond to child and youth mental health needs.
3. To position the role of school counsellor to include mental health and substance use services navigator for young people and their families with in the school setting.

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## OUTCOMES:

- A commitment among all partners to integrate child and youth mental health services in school communities.

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<sup>12</sup> The Fourth Way p. 110

## STRATEGIC PRIORITY 4: SUPPORTIVE POLICIES AND PRACTICES

### CONTEXT

Policies can act as a tool to encourage a sense of belonging and school connectedness. They can also have unintended consequences and create barriers to school connectedness. For instance, policies that suspend or expel students push them away from schools and reduce their connection to it. Instead “alternatives to suspension” strategies, such as restorative approaches, focus on strengthening the connections with affected students. Understanding how to develop effective policies and how policies can affect outcomes is a form of literacy to be encouraged in all systems and settings. Policies also interact across settings and systems; designing policies to enhance school connectedness requires understanding the effect of policies in various settings and systems.

The Coalition strongly supports comprehensive concepts such as the ‘whole child’ philosophy and approaches that encourage the engagement of families, children and youth as critical components in achieving a high level of school connectedness. Parents and students can be tremendous assets in developing effective policies.

Ensuring everyone has a voice in policy development – students, families, staff and members of the school community – helps to build trust within a school community and it makes people feel safe, valued and more motivated to contribute. The Coalition emphasizes the importance of working collaboratively with all parties to develop and implement wise policies that support all children and youth, including those experiencing mental health challenges. Supportive environments related to mental health must reflect connectedness and emphasize inclusion of all sectors (parties) that may be able to contribute to creating positive outcomes.

### GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

1. To enhance the capacity of all organizations working with children, youth and families to create effective school connectedness policies and procedures and practices. Encourage all stakeholders to:
  - a. understand the role policy plays, how it is developed and how it affects outcomes (policy literacy),
  - b. understand how policy impacts connectedness and to identify and
  - c. promote policy that promotes connectedness.
2. To promote a broad understanding and articulation of a ‘whole child’ philosophy (i.e., moving beyond the academic child and using EDI data to support this) using data on school connectedness as the basis for setting priorities, objectives and outcomes.
3. To focus, as a priority, on three policy issues:
  - a. Promote the creation of a positive mental health policy lens through which existing policies can be examined.
  - b. Building on the work of Child and Youth Mental Health and Substance Use (CYMHSU) Collaborative and others, encourage all parties to work across systems and disciplines to reduce barriers to accessing mental health assessments<sup>13</sup>.

<sup>13</sup>There are two types of mental health assessments: those used to access supports in schools and those used to access external mental health services.

#### POLICIES AT ALL LEVELS

While we often think of policies as something government does, policies and practices exist at all levels from government through to school staff. A classroom educator, an administrator, a school custodian and a school trustee all adopt policies or practices that can support connectedness — or reduce it.

#### RESTORATIVE PRACTICES

Restorative practices have been found to result in enhanced learning, better relationships within the school setting and significant reductions in disruptive behaviour.

- c. Encourage the implementation of a policy requiring parties to communicate collaboratively and share information to support children and youth experiencing mental health challenges.

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OUTCOMES:

- All parties understand the importance of school connectedness and how to achieve it.
- All parties subscribe to a 'whole child' philosophy.  
Existing policies and procedures support school connectedness and a sense of belonging.