

2021-2022 School Year

A Mental Health and Well-being Continuum of Supports and Services

COVID-19 impacts the mental health and well-being of Albertans. This resource is intended to support school authorities in their development of a mental health and well-being continuum of supports and services to recognize the fact that students need to feel physically and psychologically safe in order to fully engage in learning. Establishing a sense of safety may take weeks, months or years, depending on the unique needs and situations of individuals, their families and communities.¹

Within a school community, individual students, staff and others may have different experiences of COVID-19 and other stressors that may affect their personal sense of safety and well-being. The series of emotions people may experience, and for the length of time, may vary. Becoming familiar with what people typically experience during and following a disaster can be important. These emotions can be grouped into phases as seen in figure 1.² Raising awareness of the phases, and what to expect during each phase, is important for schools to consider in determining what supports and services may be needed. Emotional responses to a natural disaster can be found in [The Heart of Recovery: Creating supportive school environments following a natural disaster](#), page 11.

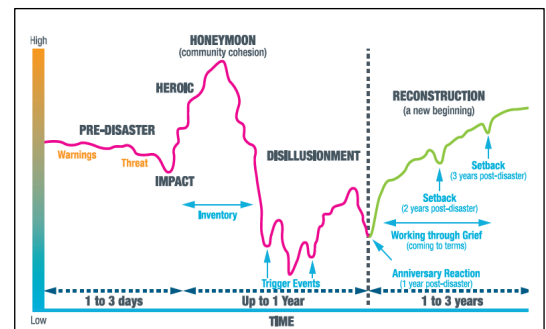


Figure 1: Phases of Disasters and Collective Reactions

Schools and school authorities have always had an important role in supporting the mental health and well-being of children and youth. This role has become even more critical as students and staff are dealing with the uncertainty created by the pandemic and continue engaging in the process of currently coping with and eventual recovery from the impact of the pandemic, which, depending on the individual, may take weeks, months or years.

A Mental Health and Well-being Continuum of Supports and Services

A mental health and well-being continuum of supports and services focused on simultaneously promoting positive mental health for all students, preventing social-emotional and mental health difficulties for students at risk and supporting interventions for those experiencing significant mental health distress have been identified as the most promising model for school-based mental health services.³ By increasing the protective factors and reducing risk factors through this continuum of supports and services, students can heal and thrive.

Schools and school authorities in Alberta currently have a robust continuum of mental health and well-being supports and services, reflective of their context, and the strengths and needs of their school community. While intensifying the visibility and accessibility of these supports and services, a psychosocial recovery approach works best to anticipate, reduce the impact of, cope with, and ultimately plan for the recovery from the pandemic. Psychosocial is a term developed to describe the psychological and social impacts of disasters and emergencies. A psychosocial recovery approach focuses on human needs and considers the whole person.⁴

The [Comprehensive School Health Framework](#), an internationally recognized framework, can be used in supporting improvements in students' educational outcomes while addressing the mental health and wellness of students in a planned, integrated and holistic way.

¹ National Association of School Psychologists. (2021). School Re-entry Considerations: Supporting Student Social and Emotional Learning and Mental and Behavioral Health. <https://www.nasponline.org/x55825.xml>. Retrieved from [COVID-19 Resource Center \(nasponline.org\)](https://www.nasponline.org/).

² Alberta Education. (2018). *The Heart of Recovery: Creating supportive school environments following a natural disaster*. Retrieved from <https://open.alberta.ca/dataset/2182f1b8-eb92-491f-968e-c1662e3591a5/resource/faed9a3f-63f6-4264-bcdb-98e99292505f/download/edu-heart-of-recovery-english.pdf>.

³ Stephan, S., Sugai, G., Lever, N. and Connors, E. (2015). Strategies for integrating mental health into schools via a multitiered system of support. *Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Clinics of North America*, 24(2), 211-231. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chc.2014.12.002>.

⁴ Alberta Education. (2018). Op. cit.

Comprehensive School Health

Comprehensive School Health (CSH) is an evidence-based approach to support positive mental health in students, resulting in better well-being for students and staff.

The CSH Framework's four components are: Social and Physical Environment, Teaching and Learning, Partnerships and Services and Healthy School Policy. The CSH Framework supports assessing a school or school authority's current efforts, assets and gaps in a school-based mental health and well-being continuum of supports and services through four areas of focus, in order to guide future actions. The four areas of focus are known as the four components of CSH.



Comprehensive School Health Framework⁵

As each school and school authority's mental health and well-being continuum of supports and services is unique to their context, reflection through these four components can result in continued improvement.⁵

CSH Framework Component	Strengths/Areas of Need
<p>Social and Physical Environment: The social environment is the quality of relationships among and between staff and students in the school, and includes their emotional well-being. The physical environment refers to the buildings, grounds and equipment, which surround the school.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do we already have in our current social and physical environment that supports our mental health and well-being continuum of supports and services? • To what extent do our practices foster connection and belonging? How do we know? • Does our physical environment support safety, accessibility and connectedness? • What do we need to put in place?
<p>Teaching and Learning: This includes both formal and informal provincial curriculum, resources, assessment and associated pedagogy required for student learning. This also includes the knowledge, skills and understandings required for staff and families.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do students, staff and families need to learn? How do we best support this? • To what extent does our school provide opportunities for students to gain an understanding and appreciation of diversity during both instructional and non-instructional times? • What do we need to develop, teach or learn to be successful?
<p>Partnerships and Services: Includes the engagement, connection and coordination of services, expertise and resources between the school, students, families and the community. Supporting the mental health of students requires the shared commitment and active engagement of the full school community.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What partnerships and services do we have between the school, students, families and the community that can support our mental health and well-being continuum of supports and services? • What supportive relationships do we have in place between schools and/or school authorities? • Do school and community partnership initiatives provide opportunities for active student engagement and participation? • What partnerships and services do we need to strengthen or establish?
<p>Policy: This includes managing resources, decision-making processes, engagement, procedures and policies that promote mental health and well-being.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What policies do we have in place that we can leverage in ensuring a welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environment? • Are our policies trauma-informed? • What policy do we have/need specifically to implement a mental health and well-being continuum of supports and services?

Further resources can be found on [The comprehensive school health framework](#).

⁵ JCSH Pan-Canadian Joint Consortium for School Health. (2021). *Comprehensive School Health Framework*. Retrieved from <http://www.jcsh-cces.ca/about-us/comprehensive-school-health-framework/>.

Enriching a Mental Health and Well-Being Continuum of Supports and Service through Comprehensive School Health

The following considerations may be incorporated into an iterative approach supporting continued improvement of a school or school authority's mental health and well-being continuum of supports and services as we move into the 2021-2022 school year. The [evidence-informed principles](#), found on page 6 in *The Heart of Recovery: Creating supportive school environments following a natural disaster*, can guide and inform school and school authorities in this work.

SOCIAL AND PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENTS

Positive Relationships: Relationships contribute to all individuals' capabilities to cope and thrive in challenging times. Human connection and belonging are protective factors over which schools have control. These protective factors buffer against symptoms of anxiety, depression and isolation while bolstering the mental health of students and staff. This may include:

- Being unconditionally welcoming. It is giving the message every day to each student/staff, "Welcome. You belong here and I'm so glad you came today," regardless of the individual's circumstances.
- Creating regular and predictable opportunities to interact with students/staff contributes to their sense of safety and belonging and is foundational to recovery.
- Being present. Providing supported and safe opportunities and time for staff and students to process their experiences helps them move forward.
- Developing structures that promote supportive adult-student relationships. Consider [relationship mapping](#) to ensure each student has at least one caring adult at the school who checks in regularly.
- Matching up peer-buddies or [mentors](#), particularly for students who may be at risk of a challenging transition (click [here](#) for resources for mentoring Indigenous children and youth).
- Empowering student voice. Being empowered to tackle the issues a community faces, or advocating for change to better support social inclusion and belonging. Consider [Jack.org Chapters](#), [Canadian Mental Health Association's YouthSMART Toolkit](#) or [Mental Health Commission of Canada's HEADSTRONG](#) in empowering youth.

Respect for Diversity: Recognize that each student and staff member will be responding to their experience in individual and unique ways, depending on their experience, family circumstance, support and personality. This may include:

- Acknowledging and respecting that everyone has/had a different COVID-19 experience, and not everyone in each school will be in the same place or experience the same series of emotions.
- Demonstrating and modeling universal acceptance for decisions made specifically in response to COVID-19 such as vaccination, wearing masks, etc.
- Recognizing and addressing mental health inequities with populations that were already vulnerable due to experiences of marginalization or inequities in social determinants of health. For a list of social determinants of health, see Center for Addiction and Mental Health's [Best practice guidelines for mental health promotion programs: Children \(7–12\) & youth \(13–19\)](#), page 36.
- Acknowledging that, for some, transitioning to school will be incredibly challenging requiring more time than usual, whereas, the transition may not be as difficult for others.⁶
- Planning and preparing for significant events throughout the year, recognizing some may find these times more challenging than others (e.g., holidays, exam weeks). Develop plans to support students, including what might be designed to build student success and resiliency.⁷

⁶ American School Counselor Association and National Association of School Psychologists. (2021). Op. cit.

⁷ Alberta Education. (2018). Op. cit.

Supporting Positive Behaviour: Positive behaviour supports provide a welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environment and are critical to supporting students' well-being.

- Students may have had inconsistent expectations during the pandemic. Create clear and consistent expectations, routines and procedures that are explicit and regularly taught. This promotes a sense of safety that helps students, especially those who have experienced trauma or struggle behaviorally.
- Give students choice. Often traumatic events, such as pandemics, involve loss of control. Staff can help students feel safe by providing them with some choices or voice over their learning and activities.⁸
- Consider [positive behavior supports](#) with a trauma-informed lens as a universal support for all students.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Assessment: A clear and continual process should be developed and communicated for the early identification of individuals or groups of students experiencing challenges. This may include:

- Early recognition of signs of distress and/or psychosocial factors that may be influencing student well-being. This may include regular, informal check-ins and seeking student voice, not just through observation but also through asking the right questions on risk and protective factors, including social determinants of health. For a list of protective and risk factors see Center for Addiction and Mental Health's [Best practice guidelines for mental health promotion programs: Children \(7–12\) & youth \(13–19\)](#), pages 33-36.
- Universal social and emotional screenings. Screening assessments are intended to “flag” learners who may require interventions. This can include establishing a process to identify students or staff perhaps at higher risk for significant stress or trauma. See [Best Practices in Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Screening: An Implementation Guide](#) for guidance on implementing universal social and emotional screening.



Social-Emotional Learning (SEL): Within a welcoming, caring, respectful and safe environment, comprehensive social-emotional learning instruction is imperative to supporting mental health. SEL may be supported by:

- Facilitating evidence-based social-emotional classroom lessons, utilizing a systemic approach as suggested by [CASEL](#).
- Dedicating time and commitment to the teaching of Health and CALM curriculum throughout the year and considering [competency-focused](#) approaches to learning.
- Providing school-based targeted behavioural and cognitive-behavioural programs. Consider a theory of change that identifies intervention targets (skills and behaviors to target), underlying cognitive processes and outcomes for the student (an example is found in Module 19, Video 6 of the [Brain Story](#)).⁹
- Mentorship provided by educational assistant(s). Although most children or youth often find it difficult to remain engaged in self-administered technology-delivered interventions on their own, when paired with support from educational assistants, their engagement deepens. This shifts the role of educational assistants from delivering interventions to supporting and practicing the targeted, evidence-based interventions by providing opportunities to practice and receive feedback on the skills and behaviours they are learning from the professionals.¹⁰

⁸ Alberta Education. (2018). Op. cit.

⁹ Berry, M. (2021). Brain Story Certification, Module 19, Video 6 – Developing an Effective Theory of Change. Alberta family wellness initiative. Palix Foundation. <https://www.albertafamilywellness.org/training>. Note: Individuals need to enroll in the Brain Story to get access to video.

¹⁰ Rhodes, J. (2021, January 20). *Giving psychology away: The promise of paraprofessional mentors*. The Chronicle of Evidence Based Mentoring [Blog post]. Retrieved from <https://www.evidencebasedmentoring.org/giving-psychology-away-the-promise-of-paraprofessional-mentors/>.

Mental Health Literacy: Mental health literacy increases the understanding of mental health and mental disorders, decreases the stigma of mental illness and enhances help-seeking efficacy among both students and staff. This can be supported by:

- Helping students understand the range of normal stress reactions and learn specific ways of coping. [Mental Health Literacy](#), [Mental Health First Aid](#) and [Alberta Health Services' Provincial Teacher Resource List](#) can support the teaching of mental health literacy.
- Supporting teachers in [facilitating conversations](#) around mental health and reducing stigma.
- Providing training for all staff including [Psychological First Aid](#) and [trauma-informed practice](#).
- Providing training for some staff on [Skills for Psychological Recovery](#) and [cognitive behaviour approaches](#).
- Promoting cross-sectoral training. The science of trauma and early brain development is foundational to policies and services that support children and families. A shared understanding of how brains develop, what derails that development and how to build resiliency can help connect sectors, spur innovations in policy and practice and strengthen the continuum of supports and services that assist children and families across the lifespan.¹¹ The [Brain Story Certification](#) builds an understanding of how our earliest experiences can affect our long-term mental and physical health.

PARTNERSHIPS AND SERVICES

Collaboration: A psychosocial approach to recovery is collaborative. It is about trusting the people and the communities that have been affected to use their own resourcefulness and creativity to heal.¹² Building these relationships may include:

- Establishing a multidisciplinary team dedicated to planning for mental health and well-being. Engaging and empowering all stakeholders in the creation of a trauma-informed culture may be enabled by the practice of partnering as well as the levelling of power differences between leaders, staff, students, parents and the community.
- Clearly communicating and making visible to students, parents and community partners the school authority's mental health and well-being continuum of supports and services, how it will be delivered and how students, staff and parents can seek supports and services.
- Considering expertise or skills required within the school authority from individuals such as counselors and psychologists.
- Considering expertise or skill sets from individuals such as students, parents, community members, Elders, Knowledge Keepers or specialists in the community. Children's and youth's social contexts provide important resources that have the capacity to contribute to and enhance their psychological well-being. The [Mental Health Capacity Building \(MHCB\) in Schools Initiative](#) works to promote positive mental health in children, youth and families and supports individuals in the community who interact with children and youth. The MHCB in Schools Initiative is based on research and best practice literature that demonstrates that mental and emotional well-being can be developed, nurtured and supported through promotion and prevention efforts.

Pathways to, through and from services: A strong pathway to, through and from service provides a seamless link between students and families and the supports and services they may need. In creating barrier-free pathways one may consider:

- Clarifying roles and responsibilities.¹³ The role of schools focuses primarily on promotion, prevention and brief intervention services. Working closely alongside community and health care organizations ensures support for students who need more intensive clinical services.
- Developing a referral system for students who need targeted support as well as access to school/school authority based supports and community mental health professionals. The [Circle of Support and System Pathways Flowchart](#) may serve as a guide for staff when they perceive that additional mental health support might be required for a student.
- Engaging in resource mapping to identify available resources and needs for students, staff and families. Identify barriers to access and work with partners to develop strategies to address or eliminate these barriers.¹⁴
- Making information available for families. Schools, in collaboration with community partners, can serve as community hubs for families that are looking for basic information about how they can support their children during challenging times and where to seek help.¹⁵ Pages 10-12 of the [2021-2022 School Year Plan](#) may support school authorities in making supports and services visible.

¹¹ Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University (2017). *Three Principles to Improve Outcomes for Children and Families*. Retrieved from <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/three-early-childhood-development-principles-improve-child-family-outcomes/>.

¹² Anda, R. (2021). Brain Story Certification, Video 7 – Building Self-Healing Communities. Alberta family wellness initiative. Palix Foundation. <https://www.albertafamilywellness.org/training-2>. Note: Individuals need to enroll in the Brain Story to get access to video.

¹³ Alberta Education. (2017). *Working Together to Support Mental Health in Alberta Schools*. Retrieved from <https://open.alberta.ca/dataset/9781460132999>.

¹⁴ Alberta Education. (2018). Op. cit.

¹⁵ Alberta Education. (2018). Op. cit.

POLICY

Policy, procedures and protocols: Policy, procedures and protocols build the confidence, capacity and efficacy of school staff in knowing what to look for and how to respond. This is particularly true in situations where specialized knowledge is required or in circumstances that might be unfamiliar. Examples of procedures and protocols that support both an appropriate and timely response may include:

- Supporting positive attendance. For students who have not regularly attended classes, develop a plan that addresses the root causes of their absences and leverages family and community partners. Supports for this can be found at [Attendance supports](#).
- [Suicide risk](#) and [non-suicidal self-injury protocol](#). [Honouring Life](#), an Indigenous youth suicide prevention program, supports Indigenous communities by building capacity in mental wellness, resiliency and healthy lifestyle promotion.
- Violent threat risk protocol.
- [Reporting suspected child abuse](#) protocol.
- Providing a [welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environment](#) and encouraging completion of [Respect in School](#) training (please talk to your school administrator for login information).
- Using a trauma-lens to inform discipline policies and practices. For example, balance accountability with an understanding of how trauma and stress affects behaviour. Avoid punitive discipline such as suspension or expulsion when possible. Instead, implement culturally responsive, restorative practices.
- Consider three design principles to reshape policy or practice, including: supporting responsive relationships, strengthening core life skills and reducing sources of stress as a subject of inquiry and designing policies, procedures and protocols.¹⁶

Additional Mental Health and Well-Being Resources for Children, Youth and Families

- The [2021-2022 School Year Plan](#) includes universal, targeted and intensive mental health psychosocial supports for students and staff.
- The expanded [Kids Help Phone](#) provides free, confidential 24/7 services for children, youth and young adults. Services include professional counselling by phone and volunteer-led information and crisis support via phone, text or chat.
- Youth in Alberta can sign up for a daily text messaging service focused on mental health and well-being called [MoreGoodDays](#), developed by Kickstand, which aims to provide support and build coping skills. Text “MoreGoodDays” to 393939 to subscribe to this service. The [Kickstand](#) website has information on tools, resources and articles to navigate various aspects of wellness.
- The expanded [Mental Health Helpline](#) (1-877-303-2642) provides confidential, anonymous service, including crisis intervention, information on mental health programs and referrals to other agencies if needed.
- [Alberta 211](#) provides information, referrals and crisis support via phone, text, chat and website including addiction and mental health referrals and resources. Professionally trained specialists are available by texting INFO to 211, live chat through the website, [ab.211.ca](#), or calling 2-1-1.
- The [Hope for Wellness Help Line](#) (1-855-242-3310) provides crisis intervention counselling support for Indigenous people.
- The [Crisis Text Line Alberta](#) is a service available 24-7 that offers information, referrals and volunteer-led, text-based support for Albertans of all ages, by texting HOME to 686868.
- Alberta Health Services provides addiction and mental health clinics across the province. For service locations, please visit the [Alberta Health Services webpage](#).
- The Government of Canada’s [COVID-19 resources for parents and children](#) provides a number of resources to support families across Canada.
- [Wellness Together Canada](#) provides free online resources, tools, apps and connections to trained volunteers and qualified mental health professionals when needed.

¹⁶ Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University. (2017). Op. cit.