

# PEERING DEEPER: STUDENT PERSPECTIVES ON SCHOOL WELL-BEING AND YOUTH ENGAGEMENT



## INTRODUCTION



- Almost all children and youth in Nova Scotia attend school. This makes schools a great place to promote well-being.
- Well-being is hard to define, and includes a person's physical, mental, and social health.
- We don't know much about how schools do or don't promote well-being from the perspective of youth.
- It's important to know more about well-being in Nova Scotian schools because each school now has a well-being goal.

## PURPOSE

The purpose of this paper was to describe Nova Scotia student's views about how their schools promote well-being and how students are engaged in well-being activities.



## METHODS



- We used a method called "Youth Participatory Action Research" (YPAR) where youth are included as part of the research team and process.
- We recruited and trained 11 students to be co-researchers. These "peer researchers" were from across Nova Scotia, grades 7-10, ages 12-16. They learned interview methods and research methods in a 2 day workshop with 3 stages.
  - 1** Connecting and communicating with peer and adult researchers
  - 2** Learning about school health promotion content
  - 3** Research training and interview guide development
- Peer researchers recruited, conducted and audio-recorded interviews with 1-2 of their peers related to school well-being and youth engagement.
- Audio-recordings were sent back to the adult researchers and data were transcribed, de-identified and analyzed using a method called thematic analysis.
  - This means the findings were developed into themes based on similar information across the interviews.
- Some peer researchers attended a data interpretation workshop where they learned about the findings of the study and shared their feedback.

# RESULTS



In total, 21 peers (Grades 7 - 11) were interviewed for the study. Six themes related to school well-being and youth engagement were developed, and are shared here with examples of quotes from interviewee participants.

## Desire versus Reality of a Supportive School Environment

Well-being is connected to a safe school, but schools don't always feel safe. Physical and verbal acts of violence are present.

"It would look very positive and welcoming. And it would make you feel very positive and excited...everyone would be very caring, and everyone is including everybody. So, you're not nervous or being left out."

## Innovative Strategies needed to Promote Well-being and Mitigate Harm

New strategies to stop bullying, and violence are needed for real change. Strategies like suspensions or educational posters may not be effective.

"I had a bad teacher in grade six. I made several complaints, but nothing was done about it. I wish they would take their complaints better because she was really mean, like yelling at me. like making me cry during class because it was scary".

## Listening to and actioning students' unique opinions and ideas

Sometimes adults don't take action when students share their opinions.

"Things that they do to promote well-being would be... surveys that they do asking all the students questions like, do you feel welcome in the school? do you have anyone to talk to? If certain people put "no", they don't actually do anything to help with that."

## Diverse and non-traditional opportunities for student engagement

To be involved in well-being at school, students need to experience new, exciting and inclusive approaches that go beyond sports and involve decision making.

"What makes it hard? There's not enough opportunities to get involved. If you want to do something, like, you can't find a way to help."

## Importance of a support role

Adults and peers who support students ideas are important for youth engagement. This is specifically true when it comes to mental health support.

"I think if students were in charge, it would be more like I don't know how to say it, but like...it's like your peers doing it, so it's not like as an adult, sometimes students feel...less pressured or whatever around their peers."

## Pre-conceived ideas of the capability of students

Students are often underestimated by adults due to age, power dynamics and procedures. Student experiences are not always viewed as a resource.

"It's important that a school knows what the young people think. Because then the changes can actually be what needs to change instead of what the adults think needs to change."



## DISCUSSION



Schools are becoming more focused on student well-being.

Student well-being and youth engagement are interconnected.

Students want supportive environments, positive relationships, and decision-making opportunities.

### KEY POINTS

Involving youth as peer researchers gives the study a lot of credibility!

Students know the importance of their own voice, yet feel that it is not always listened to by adults.

The findings from this study can help schools with their well-being goals.

## STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS



- The peer researchers were diverse and provided thoughts and opinions from their different backgrounds.
- Using the words health and well-being together provides a more complete view of school health promotion.



- Short-timelines may have impacted the research training process.
- Getting guardian consent makes it hard for some youth to participate.

## CONCLUSION

- This study provides new information about how students see and feel about well-being in their schools.
- This paper explores student perspectives deeper by engaging youth throughout the entire research process.
- The findings show the connection between youth engagement and well-being in schools.
- The findings can be used to improve school health promotion initiatives in Nova Scotia, Canada and beyond.

The project was approved by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics Board at Dalhousie University. Guardian consent was obtained for both peer researchers and interviewees.

Thank you to the peer researchers and interview participants involved in this project. Your commitment to the project and willingness to share your perspectives have made a significant impact! This infographic was developed by Caitlyn MacRae, MA Health Promotion Student, and Julia Kontak, PhD in Health Candidate, Dalhousie University.



Reference: Kontak, J., Caldwell, H., Kulczycki R., Hancock Friesen, C. & Kirk, S. (2024). Peering Deeper: Student Perspectives on School Well-being and Youth Engagement. *The Canadian Journal of Action Research*, 24(3), 29–53. <https://doi.org/10.33524/cjar.v24i3.703>