

System Education Leaders' Role in Building Mental Health Capacity for Students

April 17, 2024

Featuring Stories of Practice from Elk Island Public Schools, Wolf Creek Public Schools, and Lethbridge School Division

The intent of a CASS Learning Guide is to apply research, deepen understanding and enhance professional practice within the Alberta context. With a focus on optimum learning for all students, a Learning Guide provides an opportunity to grow system leader knowledge, resulting in quality school leadership and quality teaching throughout Alberta.

Summary

During the 2023-2024 and 2024-2025 school years, Alberta Education funded nearly 80 Mental Health in Schools Pilot Projects. This [webinar](#), the second in a series of four webinars, highlights stories of practice from three Alberta school authorities who are building student mental health capacity as part of their Mental Health in Schools Pilot Projects.



Danica Martin, Leadership Consultant,
[CASS \(4:35\)](#)

Danica set the stage for this webinar by highlighting some of the foundational legislation and research guiding the work of school authorities in building student mental health capacity. Section 33(1)(e) of the Education Act (Alberta Government, 2023) requires that school boards “provide a continuum of supports and services to students that are consistent with the principles of inclusive education” (p.47). Alberta Education (n.d.) emphasizes the importance of schools building student mental health capacity to ensure that students are resilient and ready for learning.

The early findings from research by the [Centre for Wellbeing in Education](#) (2023) at the University of Calgary’s Werklund School of Education indicate that “universal mental health supports result in positive impacts on student performance and the school environment”. They also emphasize the important role that senior leadership plays in the effective implementation of mental health supports.

In [Working Together to Support Mental Health in Alberta Schools](#), Alberta Education (2017) defines resiliency as the “capacity of individuals to cope successfully with stress-related situations, overcome adversity and adapt positively to change” (p.17). The universal strategy of embedding social-emotional learning into instruction is foundational to the work of building student mental health capacity.

Clearly the research and legislation guiding the work of system education leaders compels them to allocate resources and embed strategies within their school authorities that support and build student mental health capacity.

Acknowledgements

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**Sandra Stoddard, Superintendent and
Mardi Hardt, Mental Health Advisor**
[Elk Island Public Schools \(11:49\)](#)

Sandra and Mardi shared the story of Elk Island Public Schools’ Mental Health in Schools Pilot Project which has incorporated the implementation of Reset Rooms at 12 of their junior high schools (grades 7-9). The foundational philosophy behind these Reset Rooms has been to offer mental health supports and interventions through student self-referral. This change in practice and thinking has been a significant paradigm shift for the adults in the system.

Certificated teaching staff work in each Reset Room, and the programming and supports provided are grounded in research and neuroscience which can include the four-step reset process outlined in *The Reset Process* by Dyane Carrere and Wynne Kinder (2021). These staff come together regularly for centralized training and professional learning which ensures consistency of philosophy and programming throughout the Reset Rooms, while still recognizing and responding to each school’s unique context.

Data indicates that this work is having a positive impact on students, staff and families. Some of the reasons for this success include the purposeful use of data to design and refine the plan, the importance of invitation into the process, and the professional learning done with staff around change theory and the science behind mental health. The next steps in their work are to continue to gather data to measure success, create a shared understanding and vocabulary throughout the division, and begin to embed reset practices more universally.

This story of practice highlights key system education leader practices that support student mental health including a robust identification of the issue, high expectations through strategic planning, the building of a common purpose and understanding, the development of expertise during implementation, and the maintenance of a culture of continuous learning.

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Kevin Newman, Assistant Superintendent of Education Services, and Barb Reaney, Director of Education Services
[Wolf Creek Public Schools \(41:32\)](#)

Kevin and Barb shared the story of how Wolf Creek Public Schools have developed and implemented universal social-emotional learning supports and programmings throughout their school authority. Their work is grounded in the pillars of their Education Plan, which are quality teaching, supporting all students, and collective responsibility.

The rationale for this project was the realization that, coming out of the pandemic, students were struggling to manage their emotions and social interactions. From the outset, the project was a collaborative effort involving senior leadership, an advisory working group of stakeholders, and community partnerships. The goal of the project is to build student mental health capacity through the implementation of universal strategies, recognizing that the gains from universal strategies are long term in nature.

Social-emotional facilitators were hired to design and deliver programming based on the CASEL (2024) framework. Programming ‘menus’ were offered so that schools could choose and schedule programs that met the needs of their particular contexts. This programming is having a positive impact on students as shown by decreased School Social Worker caseloads, increased awareness of mental health supports available, and increased student attendance and academic performance. Student, staff, and parent survey data also show that stakeholders recognize and appreciate the value of this social-emotional learning programming.

The next steps in this journey for Wolf Creek Public Schools will be to build a bank of resources, including recordings, presentations, information, and resources that will be readily and easily accessible to staff, so that this universal programming can continue regardless of funding uncertainties.

This story of practice highlights the importance of belief and trust from senior leadership and the recognition of the true value of these programs.



Morag Asquith Associate Superintendent Instructional Services
[Lethbridge School Division \(57:56\)](#)

Morag shared the story of practice outlining how Lethbridge School Division has addressed Digital Wellness throughout their school authority. This project is grounded in a new way of thinking about wellness in a digital world. Today’s students have grown up and built their values and social norms in a digital environment rather than in a face-to-face environment, which requires adults to shift their approach when building social and emotional skills with students.

A Digital Wellness Team has been hired, which includes a Digital Wellness Teacher and Family School Liaison Counselor. This team supports staff and students to develop healthy and socially appropriate ways of interacting in a digital environment. Using the Digital Flourishing Wheel from the Digital Wellness Institute (n.d.), team members have created lessons, resources, events, games, activities, events, communication messages, and programs to support efforts to build students digital wellness capacity.



The success of this initiative has stemmed from a variety of elements, including system wellness mapping, data and observations, research, coherence and alignment, understanding of the local context, and efforts to build capacity and expertise. Students’ voices gathered through surveys and a student forum have also played an important role in the success of this project. Throughout the project, team members have prioritized staff engagement and relationships as staff are key in the implementation of the programming.

Some of the next steps for the team at Lethbridge School Division are to connect this digital wellness work with the Health curriculum and continue to build capacity with staff.

This story of practice highlights the importance of sincere investment from senior leaders, a commitment to long-term improvement rather than short-term fixes, efforts to garner the support of all stakeholders, and effective communication.

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Research to Practice

Questions for reflection and dialogue within your local context:

- What successes have you seen in your efforts to improve mental health and well-being in your schools?
- What challenges have you experienced? How have you addressed these?
- What strategies have you used in your school authority to build continuity and sustainability beyond the grant?
- How have you integrated those stakeholders who may be resistant to the supports provided as part of your Mental Health in Schools Pilot Project?
- What strategies have you leveraged to shift staff away from intensive individualized mental health supports and move them toward greater targeted and universal mental health supports?
- What are the three most important lessons you have learned about leadership work related to supporting student mental health since the pandemic?
- From your perspective, what is important to consider when developing a mental health initiative and building the capacity of a system?
- What system education leaders practices or behaviours are necessary to ensure that student mental health capacity is being built throughout your school authority?

Additional Supports for System Education Leader Capacity

- Alberta Education. (n.d.). *Mental health in schools*. Alberta.ca. <https://www.alberta.ca/mental-health-in-schools>
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Building Effective Relationships

Modeling Commitment to Professional Learning

Visionary Leadership

Leading Learning

Ensuring First Nations, Métis and Inuit Education for All Students

School Authority Operations and Resources

Supporting Effective Governance

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