



# **PBC Student Voice Series:** ***Understanding Wellness Perspectives***

**June 2021**

# Introduction

Throughout this year the Public Board Council (PBC) has been actively and diligently working on the PBC Wellness Report. In a year where student mental health has seen a greater decline due to a pandemic, the PBC started this initiative with the aim of having a better understanding of students’ health and wellbeing in an accessible, easy-to-read and detailed wellness report. We would like to thank all of the Student Trustees from the PBC who have provided valuable feedback on this report throughout many sessions. Your observations have strengthened the character of our project in which we found that the needs of marginalized voices must be enhanced, specifically highlighting the experiences from the BIPOC<sup>1</sup> community and the 2SLGBTQ+<sup>2</sup> community.

Unfortunately, the remaining term of the 2020-2021 PBC does not have enough time to adequately consult all necessary parties in order for this report to be of high quality based on the inputs provided. The PBC does not want to rush such a meaningful project, so as a result, we would love to hand this project to the incoming PBC President and Vice-President to continue and strengthen this report. In order to ensure that the concerns of all students are equitably addressed, we do not wish for this project to be rushed, and thus we entrust the next term’s PBC to take the time to appropriately complete this report.

We once again would like to thank all students who have participated in the making of this report, and we would invite you to message us if you have any questions or concerns.

Best,

Mahek Dhaliwal    Zachary Garbaty  
PBC President    PBC Vice-President

<sup>1</sup> BIPOC is an acronym for Black, Indigenous, and/or People Of Colour  
<sup>2</sup> 2SLGBTQ+ is an acronym for Two-Spirited, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and more

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# The Impact of COVID-19

**The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the way students live their day-to-day lives.**

In March 2020 following March Break, Ontario students were informed that they would be learning virtually for the indefinite future. The rapid switch to e-learning posed challenges for students across the province, putting many of them at a disadvantage. Families did not have adequate time to prepare for the impacts. This resulted in a lack of resources, youth without childcare, electronic inequities, and the physical and emotional tolls of staying at home. Students were isolated from their peers and society while adapting to the new mode of learning, amplifying the difficulty of the transition.

COVID-19 is still playing a significant role in students' lives as outbreaks and restrictions continue to change and cause school closures. Students have adjusted in and out of different modes of learning, and accordingly, the transition back to a 'normal' learning environment may be equally as difficult. Repeatedly being taxed with adaptability is draining students' wellbeing.

**It is crucial to acknowledge the abnormal circumstances that students must overcome and offer support and resources to ensure positive health and wellbeing is attainable for all students.**



## Student Input

As schools aim to provide high quality education and enhance the well-being of students in various sectors through clubs and volunteering activities, in the past couple of years, students found that COVID-19 took a toll on students' mental well-being. Although staying at home was for the best for everyone's safety, the expectations that students had entering this new learning environment were not as they anticipated. When technical problems arose, a major factor that drained students from learning new material in class was communication gaps. A student provided a specific technical situation within their school which reduced the amount of learning that could cause students who need extra support. A certain school's Wi-Fi pods are only active from 9:00 am - 3:10 pm every day. This doesn't give students adequate time to complete their work, and it also doesn't allow them to further their academics. They cannot complete work offline because they are only offered Chromebooks. In addition, this limits their ability to apply for scholarships and prepare for post-graduate studies, as well as seek external help. Students were exhausted because they were constantly being asked to submit many forms of assessments. This resulted in a lack of interest in other life activities. While many students expressed dissatisfaction with their educational shift online. For example, numerous students

in Northern Boards live in areas without cell reception. This means even though boards were mandated to provide an electronic device with Wi-Fi connectivity, this solution would not work for everyone. With some students having to rely on weekly paper packages for their learning, this has proven to be another inequity students have experienced. Students were also concerned and more stressed than ever to maintain high grades, as post-secondary education was on the horizon, especially for senior students.

When talking about physical wellness, it varies student-to-student regarding what they have access to at home. Being in the school environment allowed students to receive daily physical activity whether they had equipment or space to do so at home. Some students expressed their physical wellness to be draining when based on the time students receive to eat throughout the school day. Many do not have the energy to continue and instead give up rather than pushing through the day. Students look for the synchronous/school day to end to grab a snack to eat as they do not want to miss course content. Many students also opinionated the stress levels they experience due to missing schoolwork, which takes a toll on their physical well-being.



# Mental Wellness

## What is Mental Wellness?

The concept of mental wellness is not a difficult one to understand. Simply, it is how well your mind is functioning for your best interests. It does not mean always being happy, it means being able to manage well in your daily life, through good times and bad. When a person is mentally well, this usually means that they are making healthy decisions for themselves and those around them. Oftentimes, people tend to put others' mental wellness ahead of their own, and thus, their own mental wellness deteriorates as a result of being neglected. This is not ideal, and can lead to more mental health issues, and other difficulties in the person's life. Another misconception is that a person's mental wellness is independent of their physical and emotional health. This is simply not true. How much sleep a person gets, how regularly they are active, and what they are eating have huge implications on their mental wellness. For example, caffeinated beverages may provide a temporary energy boost, but they also cause stress and anxiety, negatively affecting a person's mental wellness. Other aspects of life that can impact mental wellness are big life changes, such as moving homes or schools, traumatic events, and our relationships with others. Making sure that you are able to handle these changes and transitions is crucial. This is because having positive mental health and wellness can lead to more productivity, less stress, and more impact on your community. It allows you to realize your full potential, which is something that everyone wants.

## How Does Mental Wellness Connect to Schools?

For most children and youth, school is the place where they spend the majority of their time, therefore their experiences at school have a large impact on their mental wellness and their mental wellness affects their performance in school. There is a direct correlation between academic performance and mental wellbeing. Students who are struggling with their mental wellness are more likely to display behavioral problems and a drop in grades within the classroom. Many of the institutions and routines that we use in schools on the daily inadvertently contribute to struggles with mental wellness. These institutions and routines like deadlines, frequent transitions and inflexibility of routine are not easily adaptable for students who may be struggling. This cycle of mental wellness and schools becomes very detrimental for students' wellbeing. If a student is struggling with their mental wellness it will be difficult for them to assimilate to a school structure and thrive in their classes. Unfortunately, at the same time if a student is struggling in school, socially or academically, it is difficult for them to maintain a reasonable level of wellbeing. On the bright side experiences in the classroom and with peers at school can also have a positive impact on a student's mental wellbeing, providing a space for them to collaborate and be themselves. Due to the amount of time students spend within our schools it is vital that boards, schools and educators are keeping mental wellbeing at the forefront of our goals to ensure that students are feeling supported.

# Student Input

This past year, students have been faced with many experiences given the shift towards online educational learning, overall affecting students negatively in terms of mental wellness. Of the 11 school boards who had respondents, 90% of these students said that school correlated with negative mental impacts; specific reasons including high stress levels from heavy schoolwork, less engagement of student-driven initiatives, imbalance of various life activities such as work life, social life, and much more. A logistical factor many students expressed was that for full remote learning, numerous instructional and assessment accommodations these students would access in a traditional school year were not available (i.e., additional time or use of a printer). Overall, stress and anxiety levels were found to be high, affecting their overall mental well-being. Extracurricular activities that would typically keep student's active outside of the classroom were not actively presented – which highlighted low levels of motivation for students to look forward to on a typical, in-person school day before COVID-19.

Through various insights collected by the student body, there were many different approaches that could be carried out to improve mental wellness for all students. The pandemic has emphasized the need for teachers and staff to recognize the shift in everyone's education. Specifically, students asked for teachers to be more understanding in students' lives through more flexibility in deadlines when necessary for appropriate student reasons, implementing extra study hall hours for stronger academic support, and regularly checking in on students to promote healthy relationships between students and teachers for increased academic performance. A popular response suggested was to keep all mental health related resources in one place, whether that be to create a social media page or include an additional tab as part of the student portal. These would potentially include more engaging online activities that can be used amongst students as a form of relaxation from school assessments. With such practices suggested popularly amongst students, these would potentially showcase positive mental wellness levels and higher levels of engagement, thus increased motivation in digital learning platforms.



# Physical Wellness

## What is Physical Wellness?

When thinking about wellness many would focus solely on their physical well-being, and less on their mental and emotional wellbeing. Physical well-being can be defined as a lifestyle of behavior choices that ensures quality health, avoids preventable diseases and conditions, and to live in a balanced state of mind, body, and spirit. It is often the case that people tend to forget about the “mind and spirit” portion of their physical health. However, the fact remains that a person’s current mental and emotional state directly impacts their physical health. Though, some look over these aspects of their health, they are the most contributable to a physically healthy person. It is the seek for this balance of mind, body and spirit that ensures satisfactory physical well-being.

## Student Input

In general, when schools were open to students that opted in for in-person classes, students reported that their schools had activities to keep students physically active for when they needed a refreshing break from academics and other stresses. For example, dance clubs, open gyms, and weight rooms were available for students who were interested in keeping physical wellness a priority. Where few schools took the initiative to provide physical wellbeing activities ongoing, other schools did not display the same effort which affected students that would typically rely on such resources to help with their physical wellbeing. Usually, going to school was a reason for students to get out of the house; walking to the bus stop, playing with friends in the gym during lunch breaks and promote general physical wellbeing in part of daily lives before the shift of online learning. Even though school was designed to provide all students with a fresh learning experience away from home, many students are more out of routine because of the mandatory online change, therefore decreasing basic physical wellness practices in their everyday lives. Although students each have their own individual desires to enhance their physical wellbeing’s, some individuals took this flexible routine as a chance to implement more

physical practices into their lives than before, while some found it more difficult to implement any with the increased stress levels of academics.

Given COVID-19 has presented several regulations to protect one another from catching this virus, there are still simple suggestions that students suggested to take on for next steps in improving physical well-being for all individuals. Starting from the classroom, where possible, teachers can try to make classes more interactive rather than using the traditional note-taking method, such as learning content through more kinesthetic teaching methods, and visual learning techniques to get students more involved. For those students that were involved in in-person classes this past year, they recommended displaying healthier cafeteria foods, and build a friendly community for non-competitive athletes who want to get active for fun and create a safe space for all to relax and enjoy. On the other hand, for those students that have been in online learning throughout the pandemic, students should be focused on getting physical activity breaks by genuinely practicing it, through scheduled breaks or even learning in new environments as a mandatory action to adapt to learning settings, where made available.

## How does Physical Wellness connect to Schools?

For most teens, school plays a significant role in their physical health, both positively and negatively. Schools not only provide physical education courses for their students, but they also provide students with the opportunity to participate in many different sports and activities that allow students to remain fit and get active. School also provides the opportunity for students to learn about proper nutrition and healthy habits through the compulsory Healthy Active Living course in grade 9. The most important contribution to an adolescent’s physical wellness that school provides is the fact that school provide students with a daily routine. It is key to not only schedule in exercise, but to also make sure that you receive quality sleep and three full meals a day. Though that may seem obvious, having a proper sleep cycle and eating schedule are beneficial to stay at your peak wellness. Sticking to a routine can prevent you from unnecessary stress and anxiety as when you stray from a routine, our brains misinterpret this and believes that something is wrong and that we should be worried and anxious.

Though going to school clearly benefits one’s physical wellness, school also provides many circumstances in which a person’s physical health can be affected. Students struggling with their mental well-being, be it from academic related stress or social anxiety, can experience a decline in their physical well-being. A person’s mental state is always shifting, and it is important that if one’s mental state begins to shift towards the less positive side of things, that they do not stray from their routine. Students who experience a struggle with their mental state tend to deviate from their normal routine and adapt new habits that may in turn be damaging to their physical health.

Academic stress and social anxiety may induce changes in a student’s eating patterns. Students may not only begin eating more unhealthy foods throughout the day, but they may also begin to eat less of any food throughout the day. If either of these unhealthy habits become a normalcy for these students, they may develop severe eating disorders.

A students sleep cycle can also be affected by school induced stress and anxiety. The biggest aspect of physical health that students and teenagers tend to ignore is achieving proper quality sleep. Whether it be staying up late to study, for a social activity, or just for watching television, the lack of proper sleep is a habit that students should avoid. Proper sleep is crucial for teenagers as the brain and the body of an adolescent demands more sleep than an adult as the body is still developing. If the student takes part in physical activity, their body even demands more sleep as it needs the proper time to recover and recuperate. Lack of sleep can cause the body to have less energy, another factor causing students to stray from their routines which could lead to the development of unhealthy habits.

Many students agree that school has made a substantial impact on their physical health and wish staff would continue to encourage students be active in varsity and intra-mural sports and activities, whether it be at school, or in the community. However, it is also important that our school continue to focus on the mental wellbeing of their staff and students as to avoid any damaging changes to their physical health.





# Emotional Wellness

## What is Emotional Wellness?

Emotional wellness is defined by the ability to handle life's changes and surprises effectively. It can be challenging, especially during these uncertain times, to adapt to change and constantly adjust one's emotional well-being.

We must be mindful of the student's emotional well-being. Being mindful assists us to become exceedingly aware of how people experience adapting to change and adapt to challenging times. It is urgent and crucial that people speak of this topic. People can share their experiences through stories, podcasts, letters, whichever way they feel is more proper. It is crucially important to speak of emotional wellness's positive and negative aspects, especially given how sensitive many, even all, these topics are to address.

Emotional wellness, especially during the hardships of COVID-19, is playing a significant role in students' lives. For students during these times, they may be facing the difficulties of adapting to the educational changes made by their respective area: experiencing these changes can affect the student while they try to manage their emotional reactions, such as anxiety, stress, depression, and many more.

## How Does Emotional Wellness Connect to Schools?

It can be an issue at times where schools lack the support to help and teach the students about emotional well-being. As a result, we see student voices recommending various ideas in many roles. A student suggested running conferences/seminars on the topic of emotional wellness. Often, we see schools run mental wellness conferences to educate students and adding emotional wellness will only help. The students also appreciated that pursuing spirit days in the school environment can help. But, since school is virtual, students would even like to see more socializing (breakout rooms) to the best of the teacher's ability. Schools should promote resources for emotional wellbeing to students where offers of support can be broadcasted to all students. While schools lack the accountability to supply effective resources, as an outcome, students can often lead themselves to an unhealthier lifestyle, and have a lack of wanting to enjoy an enhanced quality of life. We recognize that this suggests that emotional wellness is always urgent by far and foremost. Great emotional wellness can promote healthier lifestyles, have one become proactive about health, and can give the individuals values to enjoy an enhanced quality of life.

# Student Input

Students have had a share of positive and negative feedback on their emotional wellness this past year. It was noted that emotional wellbeing comes down to how individuals take care of themselves despite external events, and how well they can cope with such events – whether positive or negative. Distant learning created a struggle for many students learning to balance keep their emotional wellbeing positively and differentiated for many individuals in ways how students react to this pandemic. When faced with a reduced support system of close friends or support of guidance counsellors, teachers and staff, students may get lost in losing the main support of themselves emotionally, amidst many life stressors. Few individuals helped their emotions positively by regular journaling or talking every day to people to help such their emotional needs, while others felt they had lost many parts of themselves strongly.

When considering the next steps in enhancing students' emotional wellbeing, there were several suggestions from the student body to implement and take on. A suggestion that commonly arose was having teachers being more flexible and deliver more one-on-one support with students to strengthen academic gaps where present. Additionally, enhancing guidance counsellors through new training for such individuals to understand students core emotional well-being and being approachable when needed and requiring necessary resources to guide students' emotional needs. Through increased socialization outside of online breakout rooms and focusing on what the students want, such as talent shows, bake sales, digital movie nights – online or not, students should look forward to what is in the best of their interested. Overall, emphasizing the importance and value of emotional wellbeing to support students in times that require care.



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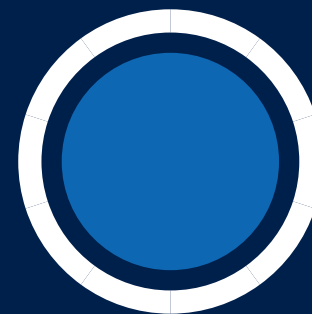
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