



School
Mental Health
Ontario

Santé mentale
en milieu scolaire
Ontario

#HearNowON: Ontario Student Perspectives on School Mental Health

2021



Land Acknowledgement

Wisdom2Action is based in K'jipuk'tuk in Mi'kma'ki, the ancestral and unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq. We are all Treaty people and live in this territory under the Peace and Friendship Treaties of the mid-1700s.

School Mental Health Ontario is based in the City of Hamilton, which is situated upon the traditional territories of the Erie, Neutral, Huron-Wendat, Haudenosaunee and Mississaugas. This land is covered by the Dish With One Spoon Wampum Belt Covenant, which was an agreement between the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabek to share and care for the resources around the Great Lakes. We further acknowledge that this land is covered by the Between the Lakes Purchase, 1792, between the Crown and the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation.

This initiative took place in Ontario, Canada, across the traditional and ancestral territories of many Indigenous nations. We recognize that we each must do more to learn about the rich history of this land so that we can better understand our roles as residents, neighbours, partners and caretakers. We encourage all reading this document to review the [Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission](#), and to reflect on the truth of our colonial history and legacies, and commit to needed actions in the full spirit of reconciliation.

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#HearNowON 2021:

Ontario Student Perspectives on School Mental Health

Executive Summary

Purpose

School Mental Health Ontario (SMH-ON) and Wisdom2Action (W2A) launched #HearNowON 2021 to hear from secondary school students across Ontario about their priorities for mental health learning and programming in their schools and communities.

This is the second #HearNowON student voice initiative, the first being conducted in 2019 prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and other societal events that have impacted student mental health.

Read more: [#HearNowON Report and Executive Summary for 2019 \(smho-smsso.ca\)](https://smho-smsso.ca)



#HearNowON

#HearNowON provides students with a platform to share their needs, perspectives and preferences regarding school mental health supports and services. In 2021, the initiative included an online survey (open from September 2021 to November 2021) and opportunities to come together for dialogue during five facilitated online forums on topics of interest identified by students (conducted from October 2021 - January 2021).

SMH-ON uses inputs from #HearNowON to inform provincial directions in school mental health, placing high value on authentic and meaningful student engagement, leadership and agency in an area within which students have much to contribute.



Participants

Recruitment for participation followed approved research ethics protocols through Dalhousie University. It included announcements through social media, board mental health leadership teams, and network partners. Almost 2,500 students contributed their voices to #HearNowON 2021. A total of 2,427 secondary students attending publicly funded school boards in Ontario completed the bilingual online survey. Attendance varied for each forum, with approximately 40 students present at the majority of the forums.

Guiding Questions

#HearNowON 2021 was guided by **three overarching questions**:

1. What insights and ideas do secondary school students have for building and sustaining mental health knowledge and supports with and amongst their peers?
2. How can school communities adopt an equity-based approach to mental health to support students impacted by racism, marginalization and/or oppression?
3. What can inspire secondary students to get involved in provincial, board, and school-level initiatives that support student mental health and wellness?

Themes

The **online survey** included several closed-ended questions, many of which were also asked in 2019 allowing for comparison over time. The survey focused on:

- Student knowledge related to mental health topics and existing supports and services
- Student priorities and preferences related to school mental health learning, programming, and services
- Student priorities related to understanding mental health
- Student priorities related to learning specific wellness strategies
- Student interest in participating in mental health leadership at school
- Student perceptions of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their engagement opportunities and their interest in mental health learning

The virtual forums sought to further explore the guiding questions and survey priorities by focusing on four broad themes informed by student priorities and in-person forum discussions from 2019:

- Mental health literacy
- Equity and school mental health
- Leadership opportunities in school mental health
- Supporting friends and accessing support



Findings

Student Knowledge about Existing Mental Health Initiatives and Supports

67% of students who participated in the survey indicated that they knew at least a little about the mental health supports and initiatives in place at their school. 16% said that they were very familiar with these efforts. Only 4% reported that they were directly involved in leading mental health initiatives at school. Slightly fewer students were aware of board-level mental health supports and initiatives (63%), but this is an increase in awareness over the 2019 survey where only 50% of participants said that they were familiar with elements of the board-level mental health strategy. About 12% reported familiarity with provincial student-facing resources from SMH-ON.

Mental Health Literacy Preferences

Forum discussions revealed that Ontario secondary students value variety and choice in learning about mental health. They would like to gain knowledge related to a range of mental health topics and appreciate a differentiated and flexible approach to learning.

Survey respondents ranked the following three skill areas as most important for students to learn about at school:

- 1. Ways to cope with transitions and major stress**
- 2. Ways to identify and manage emotions**
- 3. Ways to set and achieve goals, be organized and stay on track with school work**

Students indicated that the areas that they feel least knowledgeable in were:

- 1. Ways to cope with transitions and major stress**
- 2. Ways to stay optimistic and hopeful, even when things are not going well in the moment**
- 3. Ways to promote positive mental health and emotional self-care**

Students were asked how, and from whom, they would like to learn about mental health. They could select more than one vehicle for learning. Overall, students suggested that school is the best place to learn about mental health, and that they would value having sustained learning about mental health over the school year. During the forums, students noted that this education ought to begin in elementary school, in early grades, to better prepare young people for life stressors they may encounter. Interestingly, in 2019, students reported wanting to learn about mental health from their teacher; however, in 2021, many indicated that they would like to learn from school mental health professionals and educators with specialized knowledge (e.g., guidance teachers). The number one priority area identified by survey respondents for SMH-ON provincial focus in 2021 was to enhance mental health literacy amongst Ontario educators.

Equity and School Mental Health

The intersection of equity and mental health was the second-highest priority endorsed on the #HearNowON 2021 survey. During forums, students suggested that identity is inextricably linked with mental health and that a deeper focus on equity is needed. They highlighted the importance of strength-based, identity-affirming mental health learning and the need for accessible and culturally-responsive promotion and prevention programming at school.

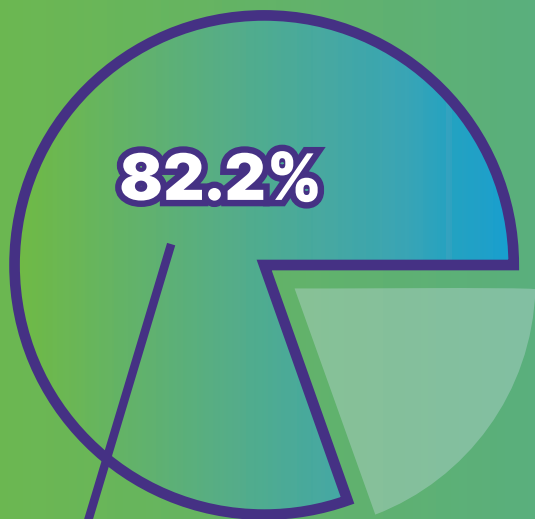
More specifically, students highlighted the need for more supports and services for students who identify as Black, Indigenous, 2S & LGBTQIA+, immigrants and newcomers with refugee backgrounds. This theme follows from similar recommendations from students in HearNowON 2019 that noted the importance of honouring diversity and prioritizing inclusion and belonging in school mental health.

Students reported that mental health stigma, financial barriers, and experiences of oppression (e.g., racism, homophobia, and transphobia) impact Ontario students' access to mental health learning, support, and participation. During

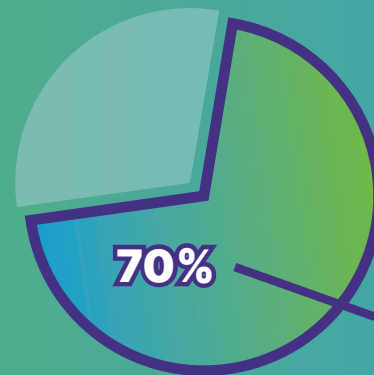
forums, students stated that a “one size fits all” approach to mental health is not feasible or helpful. Instead, they suggested that identity-affirming, student-centred programming can help address barriers and create more equitable and accessible support and learning. In addition, students identified a need to bring mental health learning home to the caring adults in their lives (e.g., parents, caregivers, and family members). Students noted that this would encourage understanding and could help to tackle cultural stigma related to mental health.

Leadership Opportunities in School Mental Health

Student engagement in mental health programming was the third-highest priority that students identified for school mental health in the #HearNowON 2021 survey. In forum conversations, students noted that it can be challenging to participate in school mental health leadership opportunities, for many reasons.

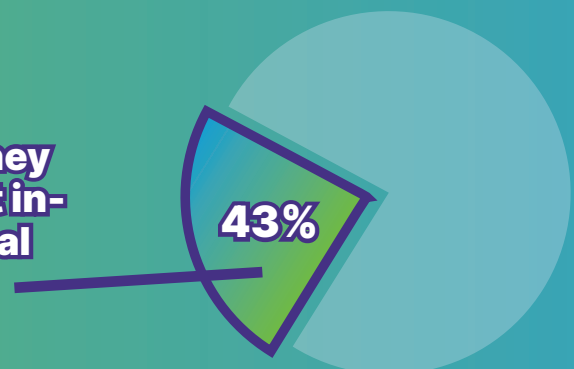


82% of survey respondents were not involved in a mental health leadership initiative at school.



70% of respondents indicated an interest in getting involved in mental health leadership.

43% of students stated they were aware of ways to get involved in promoting mental health in their school.



For example, some students called attention to financial barriers that make involvement in engagement activities difficult. Others described a lack of meaningful opportunities, particularly for “shy” leadership styles. Some students noted a lack of skills, confidence, or preparation as barriers to their engagement in leadership opportunities in school mental health. In response to these obstacles, students suggested broadening definitions of leadership to include and celebrate different leadership styles. They also emphasized the importance of diverse representation in leadership positions, amongst both staff and students, so that those with a range of identities can see themselves and feel included in mental health initiatives and opportunities. In addition, forum participants suggested that providing tools and training to prepare students for leadership positions would be valuable.

Supporting Friends and Accessing Support

Students noted their important role in early identification and peer-helping throughout the survey and the forums. In 2019, students identified supporting their peers as a priority in their learning. This priority continued in 2021 as students want to be better equipped to help their friends safely, without taking on the burden of care a peer’s distress.

Students identified the mental health topics most important for them to learn about:

- 1. When to seek help / when mental health needs are more than “a bad day”**
- 2. Ways to cope with common mental health problems**
- 3. How to ask for help**
- 4. Warning signs for suicide**
- 5. The difference between mental health and mental illness**
- 6. How to help a friend without taking on too much**

In the virtual forums, secondary students expressed great interest in learning more about ways to take care of their mental health, and to support wellness amongst their friends. Many students noted concerns about privacy and respecting boundaries when supporting their peers and were seeking guidance on this topic. Students also suggested the need for more culturally-responsive resources for their parents, caregivers and other family members around mental health literacy, stigma and support so that other adults can be better resources when they have questions or concerns about their mental health.

Students highlighted the following priorities for school mental health:

- 1. Educator mental health literacy**
- 2. Equity and school mental health**
- 3. Student engagement**

Recommendations

Based on the consultations, survey responses and suggestions gathered from students through #HearNowON 2021, the following five recommendations were identified as the next steps in school mental health work across Ontario. SMH-ON will be using these recommendations with the help of students and other key audiences to guide strategic directions, plans, and projects.

Student Recommendation #1:

Students want their teachers, and their parents/caregivers and families to learn more about mental health.

Student Recommendation #2:

Students want to learn about mental health at school and prefer that this learning be frequent, early, and varied.

Student Recommendation #3:

Students want greater access to tools & resources to support their mental health, cope with stress and navigate peer support safely.

Student Recommendation #4:

Students want strong equity-based & culturally-responsive mental health resources and support.

Student Recommendation #5:

Students want leadership opportunities to be more accessible to every student and to create space for different leadership styles.



Overview

School Mental Health Ontario (SMH-ON) is a provincial implementation support team that supports Ontario school boards to promote student mental health. Since 2011, SMH-ON has worked alongside the Ministry of Education, English and French school districts and school authorities, and several provincial education and mental health organizations to develop a comprehensive and systematic approach to advancing student mental health in scalable and sustainable ways.

Wisdom2Action (W2A) is a social enterprise and consulting firm specializing in community engagement, creative facilitation, research and evaluation, knowledge mobilization and equity, diversity and inclusion. With a team of passionate and talented people, W2A works alongside clients and partners to help them facilitate change and strengthen communities.

In 2019, SMH-ON and W2A conducted the first #HearNowON initiative, which consisted of a province-wide survey and four in-person regional forums across Ontario. Findings from #HearNowON in 2019 have informed several of SMH-ON's plans and activities in the intervening years, including [tools and resources for students](#) about caring for their mental health, equity and allyship, and mental health literacy. As well, many of the findings from 2019 were found to closely align with ongoing SMH-ON projects such as enhancing educator mental health knowledge.

This iteration of the initiative was built on the experiences of #HearNowON 2019 and enhanced to capture a greater range of student perspectives while adapting the format in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

#HearNowON 2021 was guided by three overarching questions:

1. What insights and ideas do secondary school students have for building and sustaining mental health knowledge and supports with and amongst their peers?
2. How can school communities adopt an equity-based approach to mental health to support students impacted by racism, marginalization and/or oppression?
3. What can inspire secondary students to get involved in provincial, board, and school-level initiatives that support student mental health and wellness?

Similar to 2019, the 2021 initiative consisted of an online survey and a series of

student forums. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, these forums were conducted virtually using secure web meeting technology. There were four forums in English, each on a different theme, and one French forum combining all four themes:

- Mental health literacy
- Equity and school mental health
- Leadership opportunities in school mental health
- Supporting friends and accessing support

Findings from #HearNowON 2021 will help to guide SMH-ON's strategic directions, ensuring that student perspectives are meaningfully woven into provincial school-based mental health initiatives, tools, and planning.

Important Process Notes

Changes from 2019

The most significant methodological change made to the #HearNowON initiative in 2021 was to move the student forums to an online format due to the constraints of the COVID-19 pandemic. In some ways, this allowed for greater participation from regions across the province as students were not limited by proximity to forum venues. However, to participate, students needed access to technology and to the internet in order to join the web forums.

Information was gathered in the forums through verbal conversations, messaging via on-line chat and the use of a digital interactive whiteboard. These methods may have been more accessible for some students than an in-person meeting and less accessible for others. However, there was a high and consistent turnout and enthusiasm for the virtual forums. Both the 2019 and 2021 surveys were conducted online. The 2021 survey was updated to include new questions arising from SMH-ON's work since 2019. Several questions were repeated to allow for some comparison of student opinions and priorities in key student-informed goal areas over time.

Research ethics board approval

#HearNowON 2021 received ethics approval from the Dalhousie Research Ethics Board (REB) in September 2021.

Informed consent

The survey was hosted on Qualtrics, an online survey software. Before participating in the online survey student consent was gathered. Students were asked to provide their consent to participate by reading the consent page and checking a box on the survey introduction page. The consent page provided students with information on the goal of the survey, the voluntary and anonymous nature of participation, how the research team would use the data, and contact information for the Dalhousie University REB.

Similarly, researchers asked participants in the regional forums to provide their assent using an assent script read at the beginning of each forum. The parent/caregiver for each student was also required to complete a digital consent form on their behalf before the forum events. This online consent form included similar information to the survey consent form, such as information on the goal of the forums, the voluntary and anonymous nature of their participation, how the research team would use the data, and contact information for the Dalhousie University Research Ethics Board. Participants aged 18 and older completed the consent form themselves.

Details about the survey, forums, and the #HearNowON initiative were made available online on a public website to help to inform decision-making about participation.

Student well-being throughout #HearNowON

Students' input on school mental health is crucial. While the focus of the initiative was on wellness and learning, conversations about mental health can be difficult and may bring up unexpected emotions. SMH-ON and W2A developed a comprehensive strategy to help mitigate risk to participants and ensure students participating in #HearNowON had access to mental health support as needed. Mental health resources were listed at the beginning and the end of the survey (e.g., contact information for Kids' Help Phone). Survey questions were closed-ended, to prevent disclosures that would be impossible to address in an anonymous on-line survey. During the forums, students had access to clearly identified mental health professionals who introduced themselves on camera and displayed their contact information onscreen and in the chat. A safety protocol was also developed in consultation with mental health clinicians to ensure a process was in place in the event of a mental health crisis during the virtual forums.

Each event began with an opening message from an Indigenous Knowledge Keeper to make the forums more welcoming and conducive to discussion. Each forum also included multiple breaks and opportunities to participate in breathing or mindfulness exercises.

Student engagement approach

Student engagement is central to the work of SMH-ON and W2A. The research team engaged students through several stages of the initiative by convening a Student Working Group ahead of the forums. These students received training to facilitate forum activities and support small group discussions. Members of the Student Working Group received honoraria for their participation. Once the forums were complete, Student Working Group members were also included in a debrief to discuss key findings from their time facilitating the conversations at the forums.

Once the #HearNowON forums and survey closed, forum participants and student facilitators were invited back to a virtual “Circle Back” event. They received an opportunity to provide feedback on the preliminary findings to ensure the results reflected their thoughts and sentiments. More importantly, participants at the Circle Back were offered virtual workshops led by SMH-ON team members and student leaders on a number of topics identified as relevant by students. The Circle Back functioned as both a feedback loop to forum participants, and as a way to express gratitude for the time and engagement of forum participants.

Findings

Demographic overview

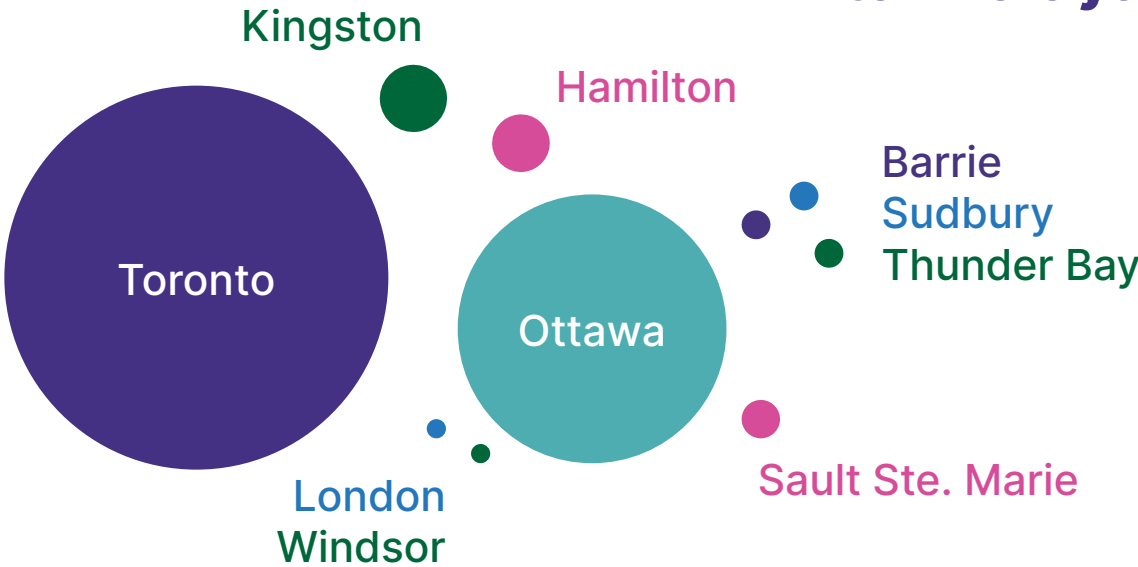
Five virtual forums were conducted throughout October 2021 to January 2022, four facilitated in English and one facilitated in French. Attendance varied for each forum, with approximately 40 students present at the majority of the forums. The bilingual survey received 2,740 total responses, of which 2,427 fit the eligibility criteria (i.e., being a current student at a publicly funded school board in Ontario). This number of responses reflected an increase in engagement over #HearNowON 2019, which received 1,187 eligible responses.

The 2021 survey featured an expanded set of demographic questions compared to 2019. Below is a snapshot of the demographic statistics collected from the survey.

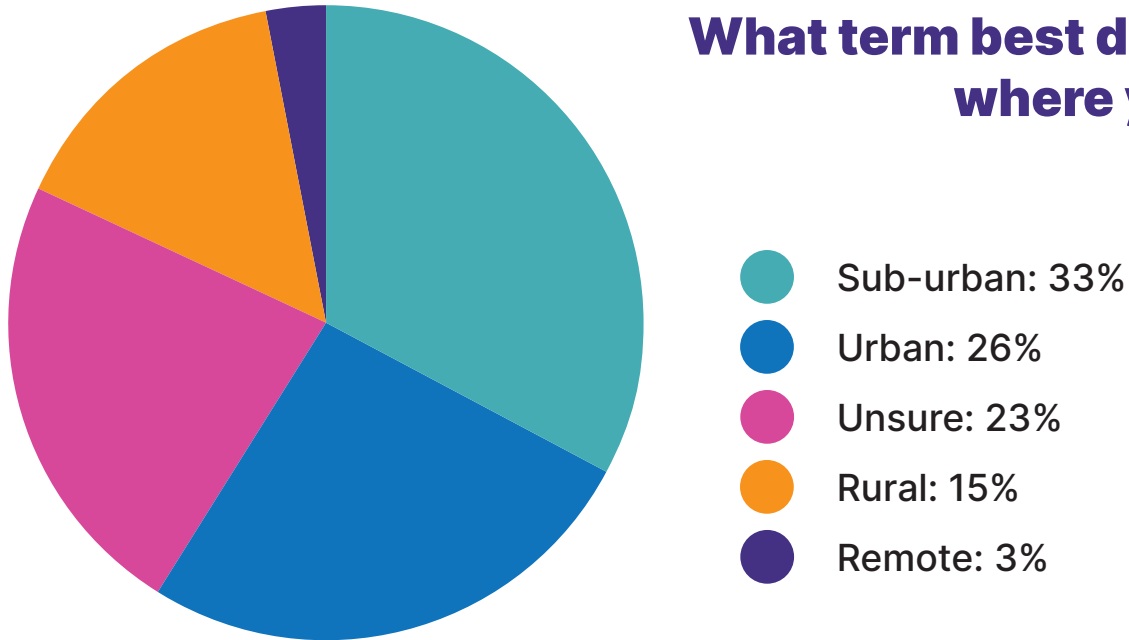
Most students reported attending an English Public or Catholic school board, and 92% of student respondents completed the survey in English. There was a fairly equal distribution of respondents across grades 9-12 (20-28% per grade), with a small minority of respondents indicating that they are currently in their fifth year (5%). Most students indicated that they did not have an Individual Education Plan, but 18% reported that they did, and 22% were unsure or preferred not to respond. There was some geographic representation across the province, but most respondents reported proximity to Toronto or Ottawa so this must be considered when interpreting the findings. The majority of students indicated that they currently live in a suburban setting.

More than half of the student respondents identified as White or Euro-American. A smaller percentage of respondents identified as South Asian (13%) and/or Black/African (10%), or other cultural/racial identities (less than 10% each). When asked about gender identity the majority of respondents selected girl/woman (57%), boy/man (25%), or non-binary (9%). Overall, majority of students respondents identified as white or Euro-American, girl/woman and reside in the Greater Toronto Area. Students were able to select all options that apply to them with these questions, so there may overlap in the answers provided ([see Appendix A for complete demographic statistics](#)).

What city is closest to where you live?



What term best describes where you live?



Impacts of COVID-19

The online survey included questions that focused on COVID-19, and the virtual forum created space for discussions related to pandemic impacts, such as social isolation and virtual school experiences.

Mental health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic

In virtual forums, students spoke often about the increased feelings of isolation and loneliness that they and their peers have experienced throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. They noted the importance of having conversations about coping strategies and ways to address the sense of isolation associated with the pandemic.

Mental health learning related to coping with the pandemic

Almost half of students surveyed (47%) indicated that the pandemic has made them want to learn more about mental health. 22% of students reported that learning ways to cope with feelings of worry, sadness, and loneliness related to the pandemic was amongst their top five priorities for mental health learning. During the forums in the fall of 2021, students elaborated to say that learning strategies to cope with the pandemic would be helpful because the experience was very unique and had an impact on them. However, as the pandemic is evolving this may be less of a priority going forward.

“The pandemic has increased [mental health] awareness but not really learning in classrooms.”

- *Virtual forum participant*

As with mental health learning generally (see below), there were diverse opinions as to whether this mental health learning should occur online or in-person. Forum participants emphasized the value of choice in learning format.

Help-seeking related to the pandemic

Following from their pandemic experience, students expressed a strong desire and need for genuine connection with peers and caring adults. They said that when it came to help-seeking, they preferred in-person opportunities to connect and seek support from adult allies.

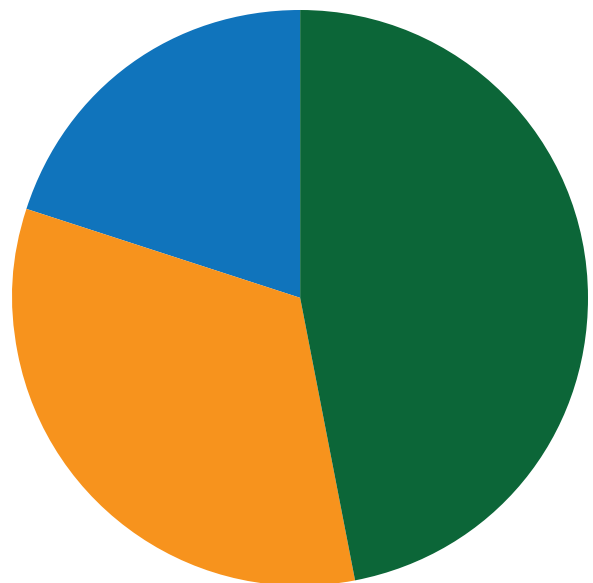
Student engagement and mental health leadership during the pandemic

Students were also asked about how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted their mental health leadership opportunities. More students said the pandemic had a negative impact (18%) than a positive impact (10%) and when asked more specifically about what the negative impacts were, over half (58%) said the pandemic had led to a lack of opportunities available for mental health leadership ([see Appendix B for complete list of survey findings about the impact of COVID-19](#)).

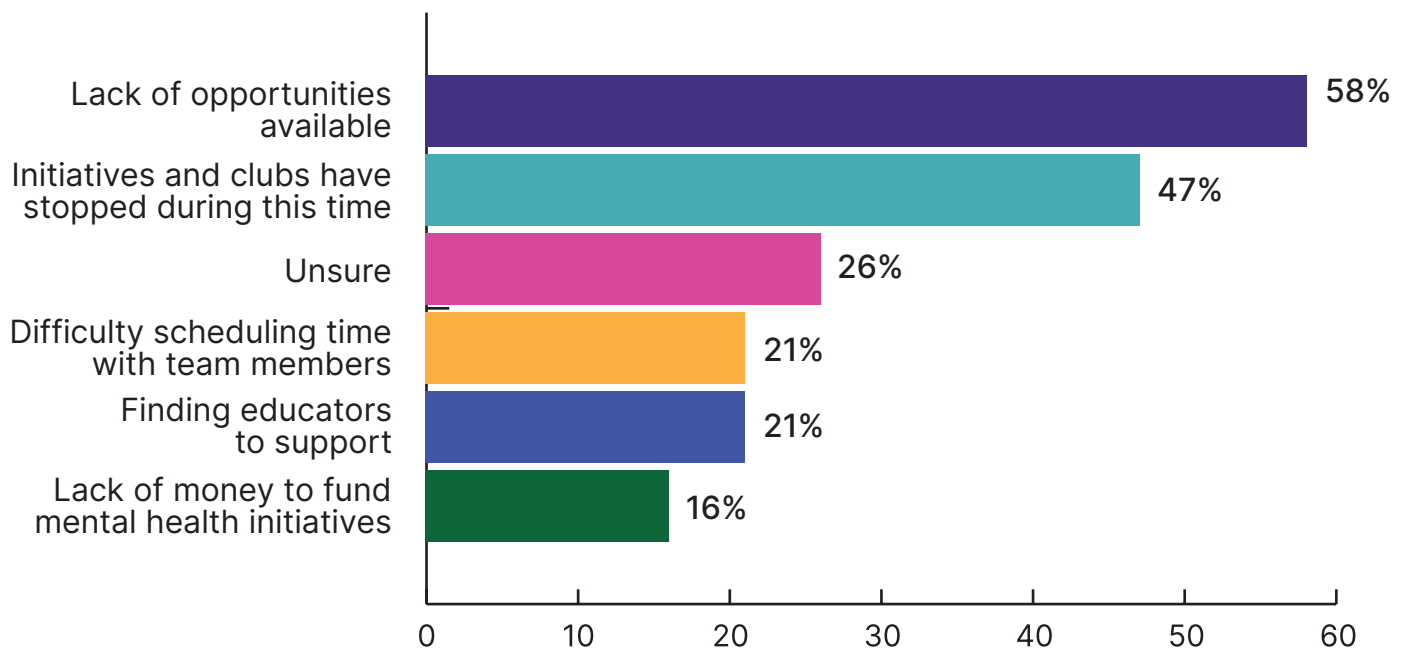
Survey findings:

Overall, has COVID-19 made you curious to learn more about mental health?

- Yes: 47%
- No: 33%
- Unsure: 20%



What type of impact has the COVID-19 pandemic had on your opportunities for mental health leadership?



Student knowledge about existing mental health supports and initiatives

School and board supports and initiatives

67% of students who participated in the survey indicated that they knew at least a little about the mental health supports and initiatives in place at their school. 16% said that they were very familiar with these efforts. Only 4% reported that they were directly involved in leading mental health initiatives at school. Slightly fewer students were aware of board-level mental health supports and initiatives (63%), but this is an increase in awareness over the 2019 survey where only 50% of participants said that they were familiar with elements of the board-level mental health strategy.

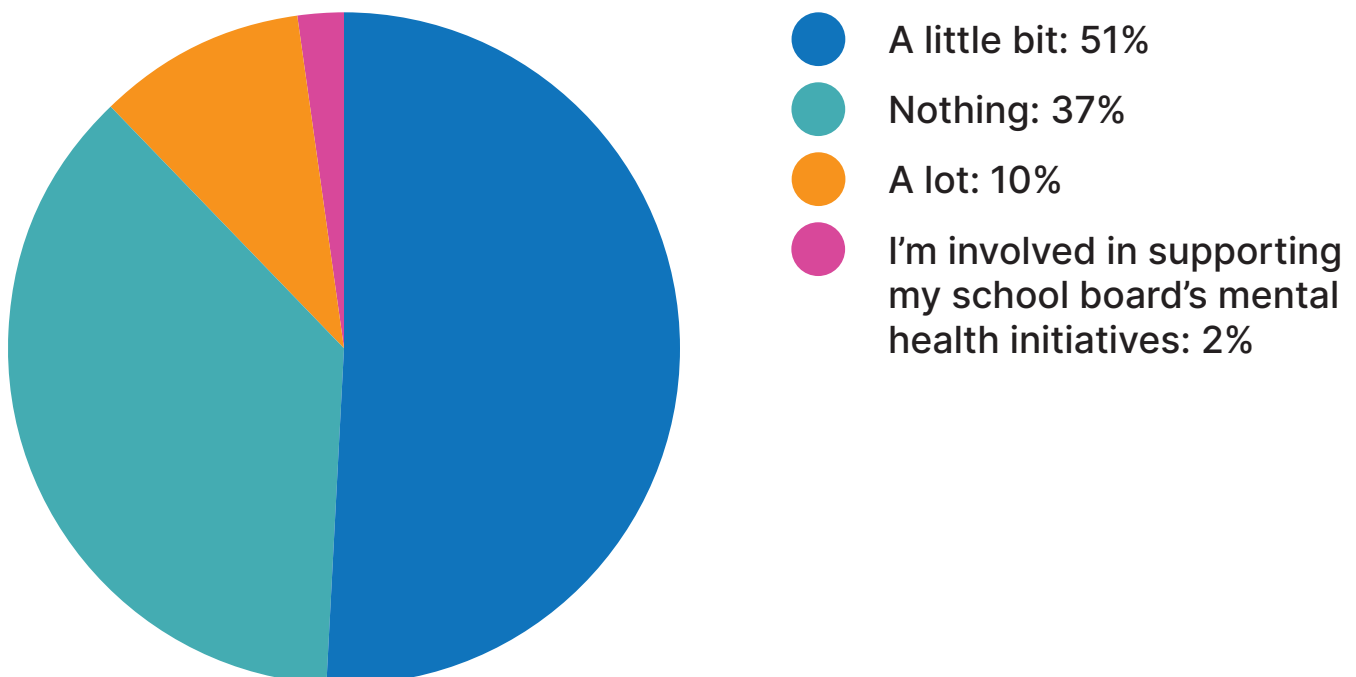
It is important to note that awareness of supports and services does not necessarily translate into engagement with mental health initiatives or service use. During forum discussions, students noted how a sense of not being validated by school staff or other adults in their lives could present a barrier to seeking support, as could a lack of privacy or confidential support options. Another barrier identified by forum participants was a lack of attention paid to cultural diversity and cultural safety within mental health supports and initiatives, and a need for resources speaking to diverse cultural conceptions of well-being.

Provincial supports and initiatives

Only about 12% of survey respondents reported familiarity with provincial student-facing resources from SMH-ON. At the same time, when asked about priorities and preferences for provincial work related to school mental health, many of the areas that students identified are, in fact, already available in many forms (e.g., classroom-based student mental health literacy programming, resources about help-seeking and help-giving). Provincial resources and supports that would be valuable to students do not appear to be making their way to them in an accessible manner.

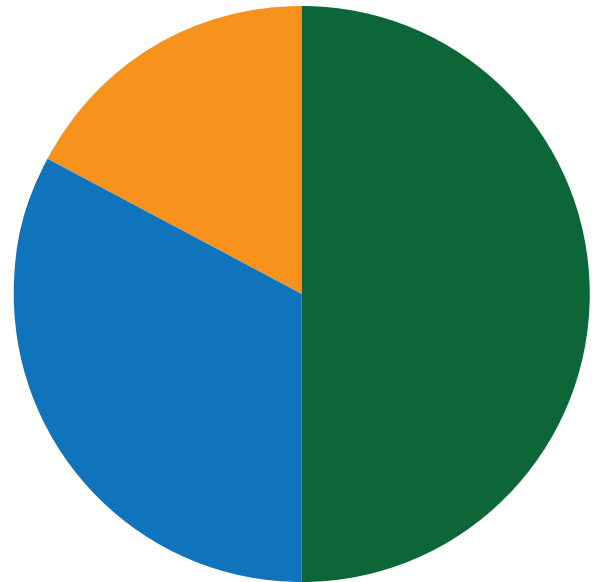
With that in mind, when asked about the kind of media platform through which they would like to receive information about school mental health resources, 50% indicated that they would visit a student-centred website about mental health. While most SMH-ON resources are cascaded to students through board mental health leadership teams and schools, this finding suggests a new possibility, with a fairly large number of respondents indicating that they would value accessing resources directly, via a student-facing website that was co-created by Ontario students and mental health professionals ([see Appendix C for complete list of survey findings about student awareness of mental health supports](#)).

How much do you know about what your school board is doing to support student mental health?



Would you visit a student-centred website about mental health co-created by Ontario students with mental health professionals?

- Yes: 50%
- Not sure: 33%
- No: 17%



Mental health literacy preferences

Students are very clear about their desire to learn more about mental health at school and starting at younger ages.

“[We] need to talk about mental health earlier—we didn’t talk about mental health until grade 10.”

- Virtual forum participant

Preferred settings for mental health learning

Several options were presented to students related to settings for mental health learnings and respondents could select as many as they wished. Most students reported that they would like to learn about mental health at school, in the classroom as part of their school day (55% endorsed this option) or individually alongside a school mental health professional or in a small group (37%). Fewer students endorsed options for learning outside of school (e.g., 18% endorsed the

option of learning with a small group in a community setting). However, almost 40% of students indicated that they like to learn on their own in a self-directed manner.

Preferred instructors for mental health learning

Interestingly, whereas in 2019 students reported wanting to learn about mental health from their teachers, in 2021, they were primarily interested in learning from a school mental health professional (65% endorsed this option) or other expert in this area like a community mental health professional (48% endorsed this option). At the same time, almost 40% of students did indicate that they would like to learn from a guidance teacher or other educator, and it is important to highlight that students' strongest recommendation for directions in school mental health relates to building strong mental health literacy amongst Ontario educators so that they can better support student wellness.

Mental health learning content

Regarding the content of their own learning, over 2/3 of students indicated that the following topics were the most important for all Ontario secondary students to learn about:

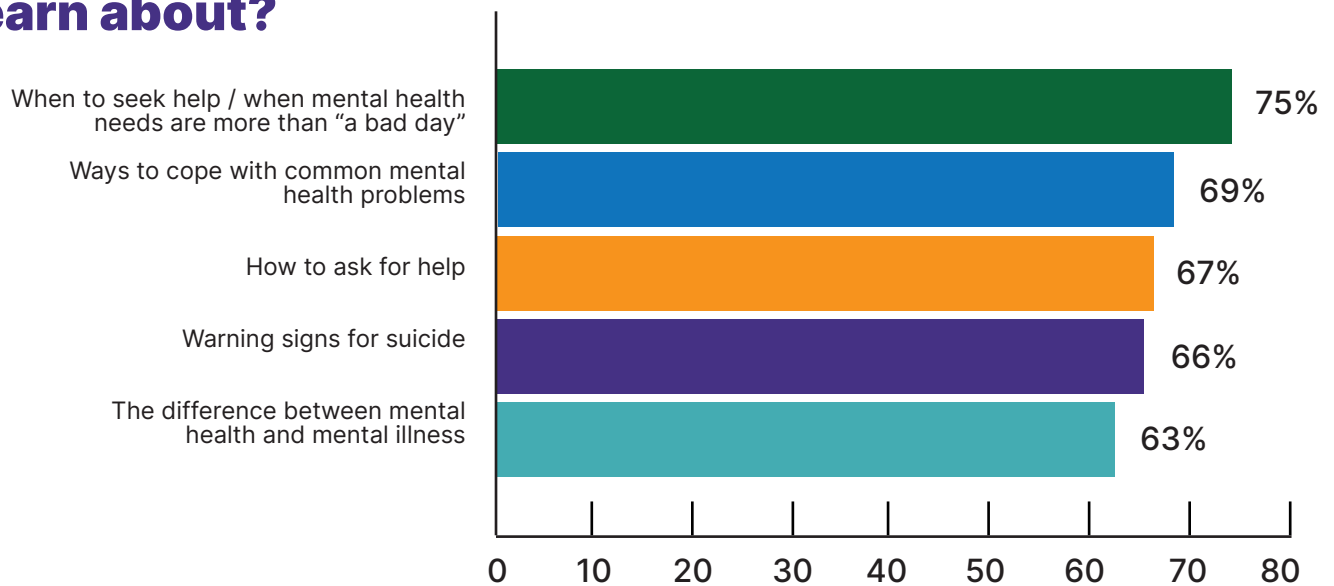
- when and how to seek help when mental health needs are more than “a bad day”
- ways to cope with common mental health problems
- warning signs for suicide

In addition, students prioritized the following as the most important mental health related skills to learn at school:

- ways to cope with changes and major stress
- how to identify and control emotions
- strategies to achieve goals, be organized, and stay on track academically
- ways to build healthy relationships, manage peer pressure, and deal with conflict
- ways to promote positive mental health and self-care

Students reported that they felt least knowledgeable about managing major stressors and transitions, ways to stay optimistic and hopeful even when things are not going so well in the moment, and ways to promote positive mental health and emotional self-care ([see Appendix D for complete list of survey findings about student mental health literacy preferences](#)). In forum discussions, students spoke insightfully about respecting boundaries, neurodiversity, and intersectionality. Many discussed the importance of learning about equity related to mental health and how they wished this was a more significant part of the mental health conversation at school.

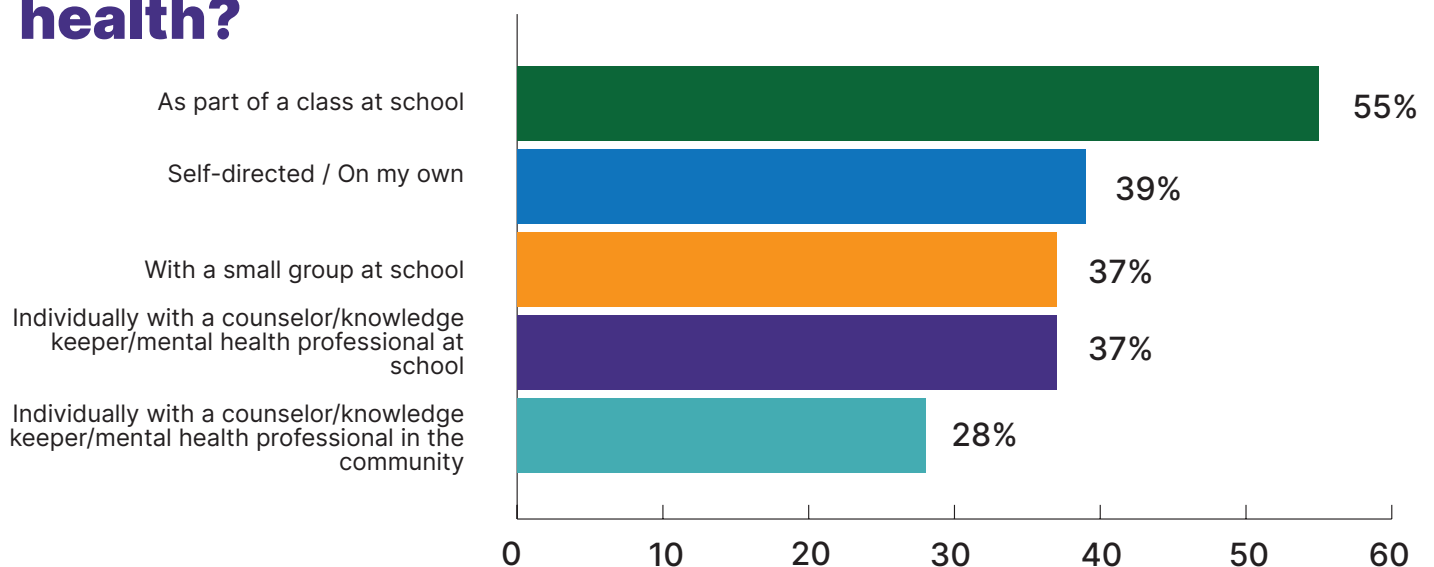
Which of the following mental health topics are important for secondary school-aged students to learn about?



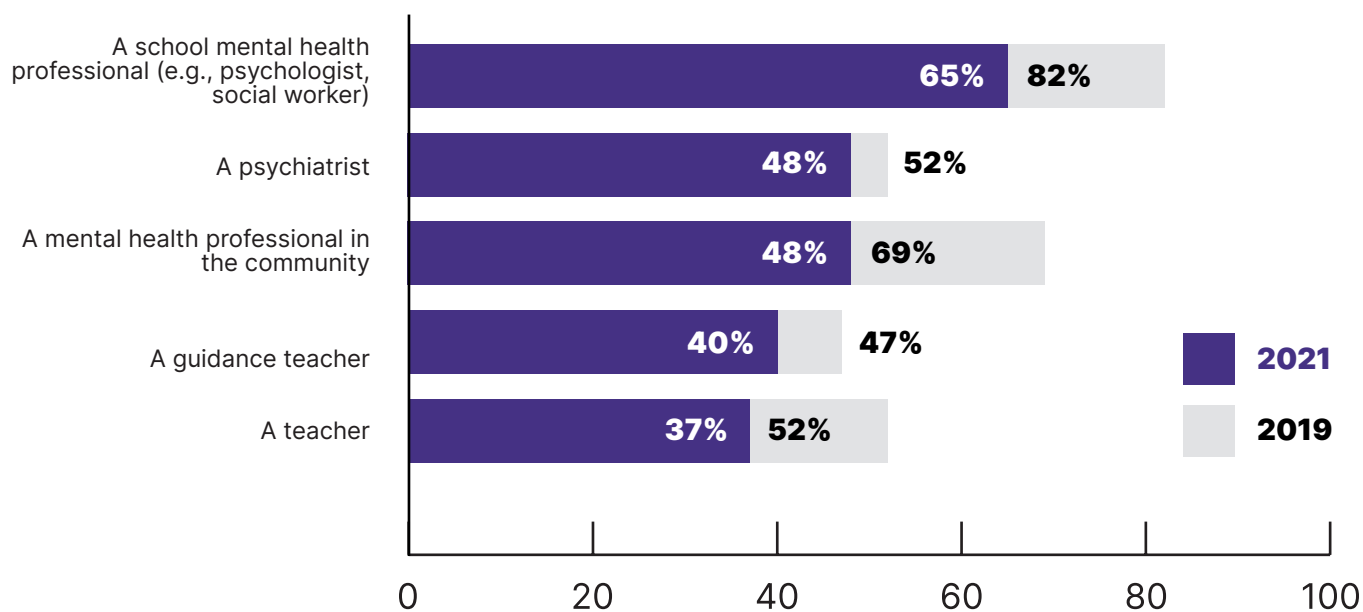
Which of the following strategies/skills are important for secondary school aged students to learn about? Select a maximum of five strategies or skills:

1. Ways to cope with transitions and major stress (56%)
2. Ways to identify and control emotions (51%)
3. Ways to set and achieve goals, be organized and stay on track with school work (49%)
4. Ways to build healthy relationships, manage peer pressure, and deal with conflict (47%)
5. Ways to promote positive mental health and self-care (45%)

How would you want to learn more about mental health?



Who would you want to learn about mental health from?



Note:

For the questions presented on pages 24-25, students were able to select multiple options, which is why the sum of all percentages is greater than 100. Only the five most selected options are displayed in these graphics.

Preferred mental health learning delivery

As a final note, forum discussions reinforced that Ontario secondary students would like their mental health learning to be differentiated. Students value choice and flexibility, and prefer to have options with respect to the topics explored, and the ways that learning is approached. They highlighted the importance of cultural relevance and appreciation of different views and perspectives on this topic. They also discussed wanting to learn more about mental health early in their education career and have sustained learning over the school year, rather than focused in a single class or special week.

Equity and school mental health

The intersection of equity and mental health was the second-highest school mental health priority endorsed. Students suggested that schools put a deeper focus on equity for both mental health learning and promotion and prevention programming at school. Students called for more supports and services for students who identify as Black, Indigenous, 2S & LGBTQIA+, immigrants and newcomers with refugee backgrounds. This theme follows from similar recommendations from students in HearNowON 2019 to honour diversity and to prioritize inclusion and belonging in school mental health.

Students reported that mental health stigma, financial barriers, and experiences of oppression (e.g., racism, homophobia, and transphobia) impact Ontario students' access to mental health learning, support, and participation. They shared their desire for more opportunities that connect with their identities, for schools to encourage affinity groups (e.g., Gay-Straight Alliances), and to reflect diverse students in their school and learning.

To address barriers and create more support and resources, students suggested that it is essential to recognize that there is no "one size fits all" approach to mental health support. Identity-affirming, student-centred programming is needed and appreciated.

This focus reflects similar discussions in the regional forums conducted as part of #HearNowON 2019, indicating that equity continues to be a priority for school mental health for Ontario students.

“Everyone getting the help they need [is] not everyone getting the same amount of help because everyone has different situations and experiences.”

- Virtual forum participant

Experiences of inequity and discrimination impact student mental health

Across all forums, students reported a connection between poor mental health and experiences of discrimination and inequity in schools. Participants noted that better addressing school-based instances of discrimination and marginalization is vital to improving the mental health of Ontario students.

Mental health stigma impacts learning and help-seeking

Forum participants spoke eloquently about the effects of stigma on mental health learning and help-seeking. Many students described feeling as though, in many cases, mental health was not a topic that their peers or the adults in their lives felt comfortable discussing. While many noted progress in destigmatizing mental health, there was a prevailing sense that more could and needed to be done to make mental health a topic that everyone felt comfortable speaking to, addressing, and accessing support for in their lives. Some participants also noted that mental health stigma surfaces in different ways in different communities (e.g., cultural, religious) and discussed the importance of recognizing this when creating mental health learning materials for diverse students and families.

No one size fits all approach

Another theme that emerged in forums was creating mental health resources that resonate for every Ontario secondary student. Students underscored that to accomplish this means rejecting a “one size fits all” approach to mental health programming in favour of identity-affirming differentiated approaches and resources that speak to diverse contexts. Many forum participants specifically expressed a desire for culturally responsive mental health resources for themselves and their parents/caregivers. Many also discussed the unique mental health challenges faced by members of groups that are marginalized, such as racialized and 2SLGBTQIA+ students.

The students who participated in the forums emphasized that access to resources and supports that acknowledge intersectional identities and experiences is essential for them. They also identified that equitable access requires that these resources and supports are community-specific, prioritized and sustained. Participants also noted that offering different ways to engage with mental health learning and support is an equity consideration.

Equity and barriers to support seeking

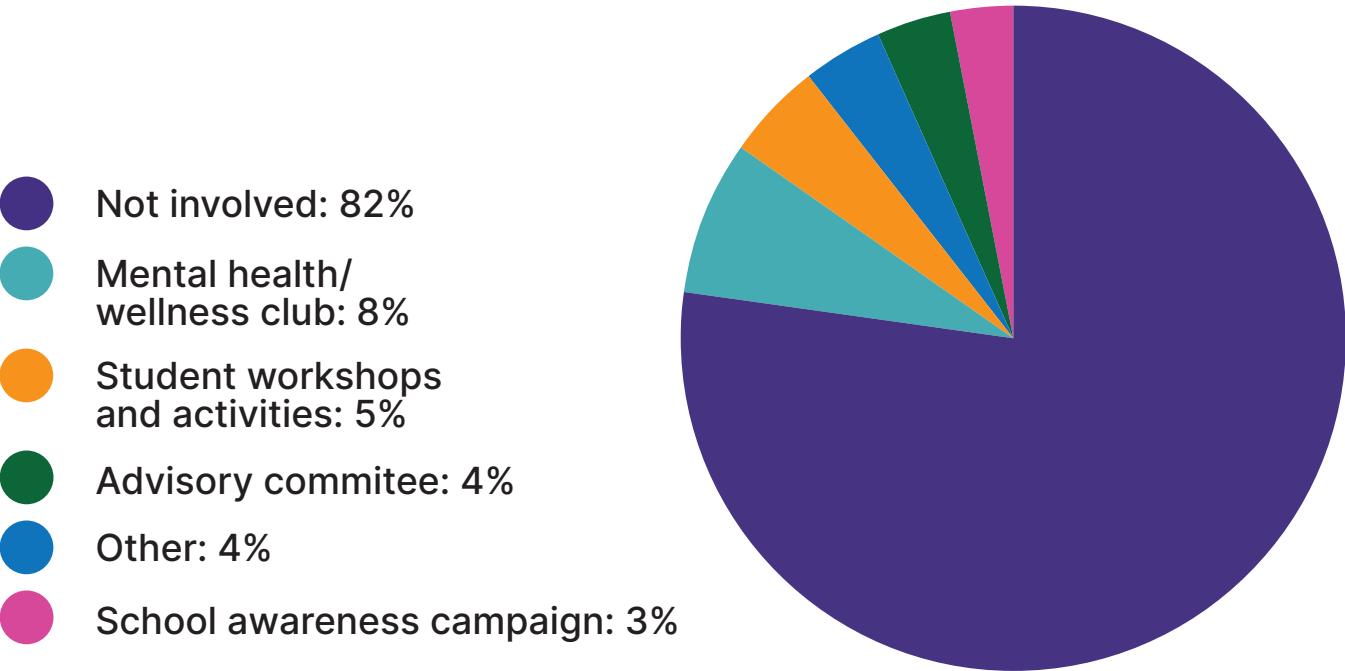
Forum participants identified many different barriers students might face to seeking mental health support, and that many obstacles are exacerbated by experiences of marginalization, oppression, and inequity. Stigma, discussed above, was a commonly-mentioned barrier. Students also highlighted financial

barriers several times across multiple forums. These included the cost of therapy or other mental health supports and pressures such as after-school jobs or scholarship applications. They stated that understanding how to access supports that suit their lives and recognize time and financial restraints is crucial for encouraging help-seeking and making help more accessible to students. Given that there are many free mental health services available at school and in the community, there appears to be a need for better communication and navigation support for students and their parents/caregivers.

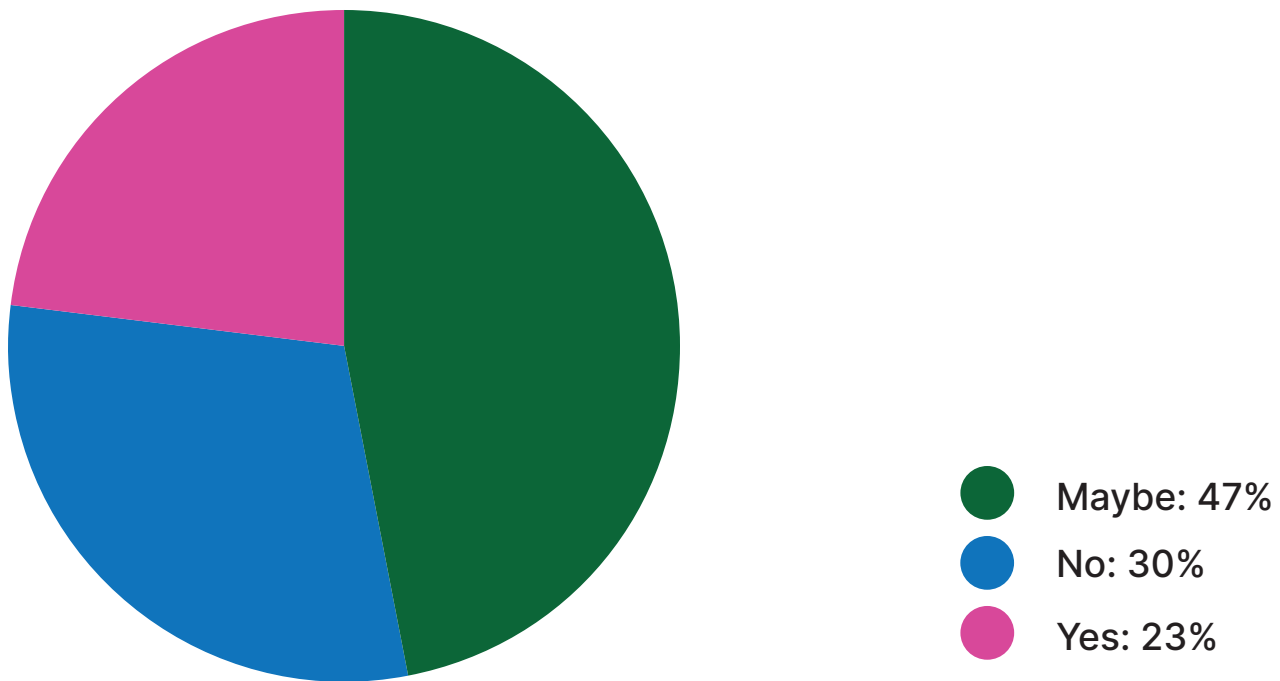
Leadership opportunities in school mental health

Student engagement in mental health programming at school was the third highest priority listed on the #HearNowON survey. However, most survey respondents were not currently involved in mental health leadership initiatives at their school. Overall, there was a decline in interest in engagement in student mental health initiatives, compared to findings from #HearNowON 2019. In 2021, 70% showed an interest in getting involved, while 2019 survey results found that about 84% were interested. Furthermore, almost 80% of those interested reported that they would want to get involved at the school level, as opposed to board or community opportunities (see Appendix E for complete list of survey findings about student preferences for leadership in school mental health).

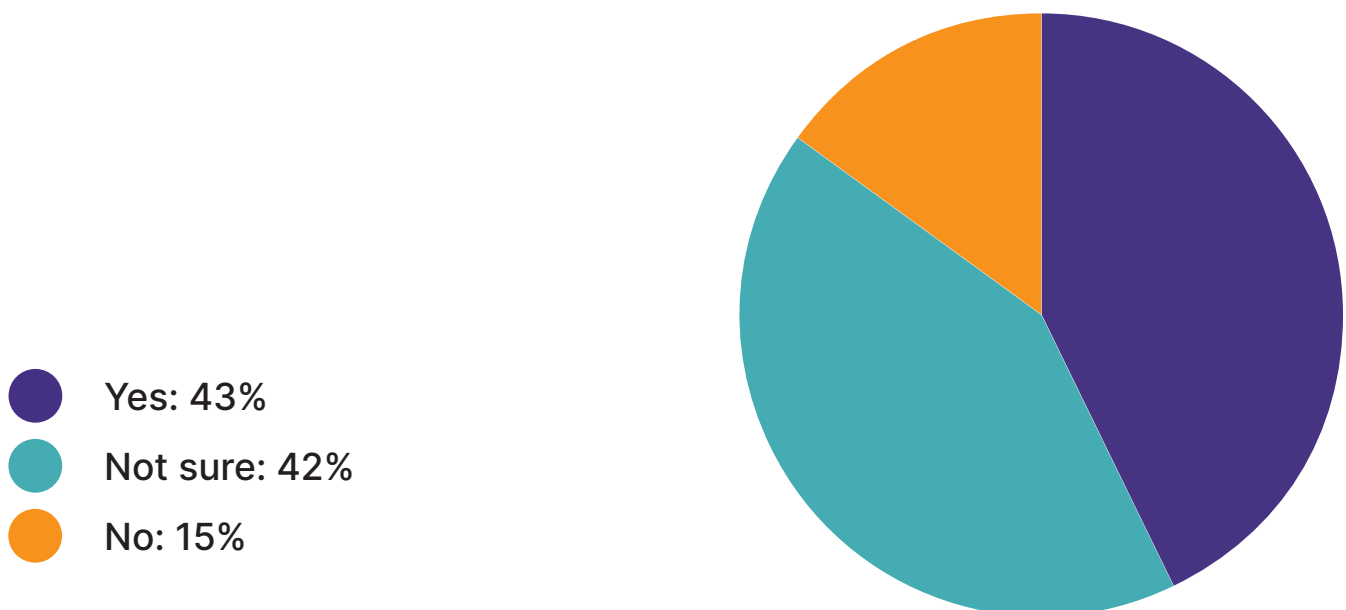
Are you involved in a mental health leadership initiative at school?



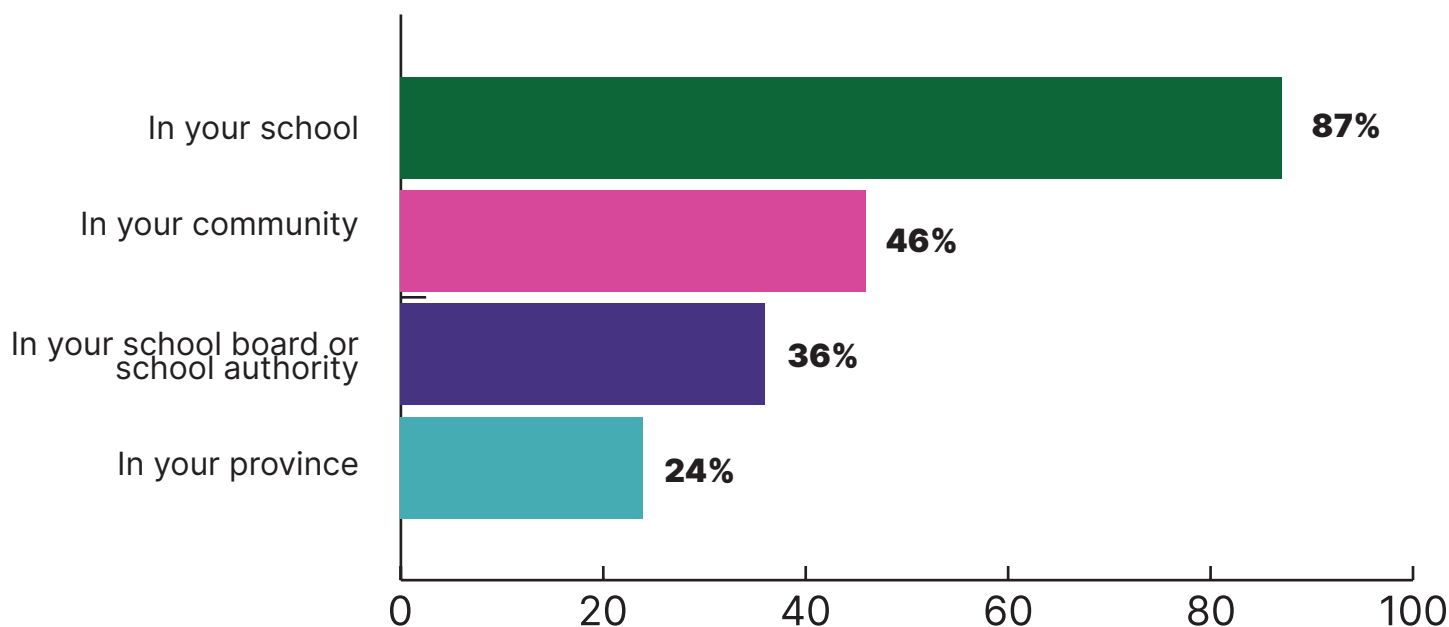
Do you want to get involved in mental health leadership?



Are there ways that students can get involved in promoting mental health in your school?



What level of involvement in mental health leadership would interest you?



Areas for mental health engagement and leadership

Survey respondents noted that students were best positioned for mental health engagement and leadership related to:

1. Raising awareness about mental health and mental illness
2. Helping with stress management at school
3. Raising awareness about equity, discrimination, and mental health
4. Promoting wellness and self-care
5. Reducing stigma related to mental health

Students also noted their important role with respect to noticing when someone is struggling and assisting them in getting help (see Supporting Peers below).

Barriers to engagement

Students indicated, on balance, that COVID-19 had a negative impact on leadership opportunities related to school mental health, though most respondents had little experience with this directly. Still, the impact of COVID-19 may explain why there is a decreased interest in leadership opportunities from 2019 to 2021.

In addition, students noted that it could be challenging, more generally, to participate in school mental health leadership opportunities. Some highlighted financial barriers (e.g., being unable to afford the opportunity due to employment or other costs associated with participation). Minimizing financial barriers might include making sure opportunities are free during school hours to accommodate students who may have work or childcare commitments outside of school. Others described a lack of options for “shy leadership” styles and authentic ways to become involved.

Students suggested broadening working definitions of leadership and recognizing the importance of representation in leadership positions. Students suggested that providing tools for getting involved and giving space for them to learn and practice new skills can help encourage new student leaders.

“Focus should be on everyone, not those most likely to speak up!”

- Virtual forum participant

Helping students to get involved

In both forum discussions and survey questions, many participants expressed an interest in getting involved in mental health leadership opportunities. However, many forum participants also noted that they were unsure where to begin and expressed a desire for opportunities to learn how to get started in leadership or other student involvement activities around mental health. Supporting students in building the necessary skills to find and participate in mental health leadership initiatives is one way to help tackle this accessibility issue.

Supporting a range of leadership styles

Forum participants also discussed how taking on leadership opportunities can be more challenging for students who are shy or who experience social anxiety. Many expressed a desire for resources for shy leaders to find a way to be involved that works for them. As well, students want school systems to re-think how leadership is defined and assumed, recognizing the value of many different kinds of involvement and leadership styles.

Representation matters

Many forum participants also discussed the importance of diverse representation in leadership positions. Seeing themselves reflected in the leaders around them can make them feel that mental health leadership opportunities are also open to them. However, participants were also quick to note that more substantial changes to school policies and practices were vital to effect lasting change.

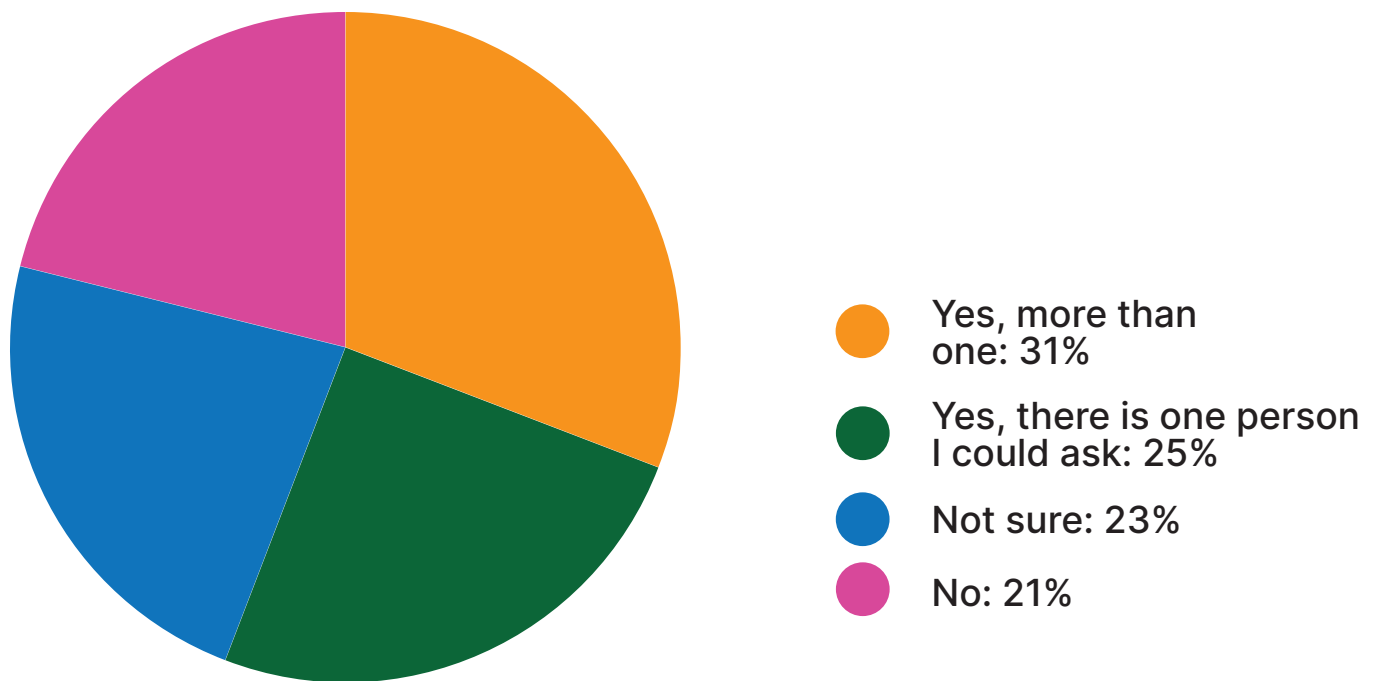
Supporting peers and accessing support

Students indicated that early identification and peer helping was a top priority throughout the survey and the forums. They also emphasized the need to respect boundaries and privacy, and ways to seek adult support when needed.

Peers in school are often the first person a student turns to when struggling with a mental health problem. Students want to be more equipped for these conversations, so they can help their friends without taking on the burden of care for another young person's distress. They are keen to know the difference between "normal" adolescent distress, mental health problems, and mental illness and are explicitly seeking information about warning signs for suicide. This finding is similar to 2019, where students indicated that how to ask for help, ways to cope with common mental health problems, and warning signs for suicide were topics that they wanted to learn more about. Many students were concerned about privacy and respecting boundaries when supporting their peers. These findings suggest that demonstrating respect for boundaries and privacy while being explicit about legal and ethical limits to confidentiality will strength student trust in mental health services.

Overall, 56% of students reported that there was at least one caring adult at school that they could turn to if they had a mental health concern (31% indicated that there was more than one person they could approach). This information shows that students are connecting with supportive staff in their school environment, yet there is also room to form more caring adult-student connections at school. Students noted that this has been more difficult due to the modifications in student learning environments during the pandemic ([see Appendix F for complete list of survey findings about student help-seeking and peer helping](#)).

Is there a caring adult at school that you could turn to if you had a question about mental health?



Lastly, many students also wanted more culturally-responsive resources for their parents, caregivers and family members around mental health literacy, stigma and support. This is a change from HearNowON 2019, as support and services for families, caregivers and parents were not explicitly mentioned. As well, there was not a strong focus on parent or caregiver relationships in the survey and respondents did not prioritize this. However, this theme emerged in conversations throughout the forums.

Students want to learn how to take care of themselves and their friends

In both surveys and forums, participants indicated a strong desire to learn more about ways to take care of themselves and ways to support friends. Forum discussions revealed that many students do have some background knowledge and skills in these areas, but also that there are gaps in that knowledge and that students are eager to learn more.

Students value respect for boundaries

Overwhelmingly, students stressed how important it is to them to feel that their boundaries are respected, to learn how to respect friends' boundaries by not

forcing them to share things unless they want to, and for those around them to understand the importance of boundaries. This finding was a frequent theme in forum discussions around mental health supports, caring for oneself and friends, and essential things participants wanted their peers to learn.

Students are thinking a lot about privacy and confidentiality

Students repeatedly discussed wanting private, confidential channels to seek out mental health support, more information on privacy parameters, and better opportunities to anonymously and confidentially access mental health services for themselves.

Students want support for their parents/caregivers and families

Students at forums also expressed a desire for support and educational resources for their parents/caregivers and families. Many discussed how they felt that mental health information, especially information tailored to different cultural and religious contexts, would help them and their families discuss mental health in meaningful ways outside of school. They also discussed wanting their parents/caregivers to have resources for their own benefit.

“Maybe we can reach parents, or recognize that parents may have gone through these things, not gotten the support or acknowledgement they needed, and then thinking that’s the way it has to be for everyone, or they then don’t open those convos with their kids.”

- Virtual forum participant

Recommendations

Based on the consultations with students through this initiative, the following five recommendations have been identified as the next steps in the work of school mental health across Ontario. SMH-ON will be using these recommendations with the help of students and other key audiences to guide strategic directions, plans, and projects.

Recommendation #1: Students want their teachers, and their parents/caregivers and families, to learn more about mental health

- Students believe that educator mental health literacy should be a top priority for school mental health in Ontario.
- Students want the adults in their lives to be well informed about mental health to better support them at school, in their homes, and in their communities. School mental health resources, supports and initiatives must acknowledge and address cultural understandings and misunderstandings of mental health.
- Students believe that greater knowledge about mental health will reduce stigma and will facilitate help-seeking and an adult response that is validating and supportive.

Recommendation #2: Students want to learn about mental health at school, and prefer that this learning be frequent, early, and varied

- Students believe that there are essential topics in mental health that all Ontario secondary students should have opportunity to learn at school (e.g., coping with common mental health concerns, when and how to seek help for more serious mental health problems, suicide prevention)
- Students want to be involved sooner and learn about mental health, mental illness, and stigma earlier and throughout their education.
- Students would like mental health learning to be offered in different formats, allowing them to choose the best option to accommodate their learning styles and goals.

Recommendation #3:

Students want greater access to tools and resources to support their mental health, cope with stress and navigate peer support safely

- Students are not currently aware of the supports and services available at school and would like better access to resources and tools to help with managing major stress and transitions, emotional self-care, and helping a friend with a mental health problem.
- School mental health programming should continue to recognize and honour students' school experiences and its effects on their well-being, and give students positive, constructive tools to address school stress, especially during uncertain and challenging times.
- Students would appreciate a "one stop" information source about mental health that is responsive and relevant.

Recommendation #4:

Students want strong equity-based and culturally-responsive mental health resources and support

- Students want to learn about mental health in identity-affirming, culturally responsive manner, building on strengths and differentiating instruction to meet student needs.
- Students want student mental health programming that recognizes and values equity-based approaches, knowing that culture is a source of strength for many students.
- Students want more mental health strategies, tools, and group spaces that center on students impacted by inequities.

Recommendation #5:

Students want leadership opportunities to be more accessible to every student, and to create space for different leadership styles

- Students want diverse leadership styles to be recognized and supported by offering various opportunities for leadership roles.
- Students would like greater representation in mental health initiatives to encourage participation amongst diverse students.
- Students want opportunities to learn and practice new skills to support their leadership and participation.

Limitations

There were some limitations to the #HearNowON 2021 findings. For example, students were not required to answer all questions from this survey. This was done intentionally to ensure student comfort. However, this resulted in inconsistent completion for some items. Also, because only close-ended items were used for safety reasons, responses were confined to the options available. It is possible that students had other ideas and suggestions that they were not able to express given the survey format. Though the forums offered an opportunity to obtain a wider range of student perspectives, a much smaller sample took part in these gatherings, so the findings are more limited. Related, there were many important questions about mental health that would have been quite informative, but were not included, again because of the possibility of creating risk for participants who were struggling with their mental health (e.g., asking about mental health problems, service use, etc.).

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the forums for #HearNowON 2021 took place online. The research team acknowledges that offering online forums may have limited some students from participating due to the technology and internet requirements. Although there are limitations to a virtual gathering, the team also acknowledged that this may have made the opportunity more accessible for some students.

Lastly, due to the optional nature of some demographic questions, and the sample size, the survey data was not disaggregated. Instead, geographical location, race, gender identity and grade were used to describe the sample broadly. Although gathering data about demographics provided more clarity about the sample population, the research team acknowledges that underlying trends and patterns in certain groups will not be revealed. It is also noted that in spite of efforts to recruit widely across the province, and to engage with students with diverse identities, most survey respondents were situated in the Toronto and Ottawa regions, and identified as white, girl/woman, and English-speaking. Forum participants included a wider range of diversity with respect to culture, identities, and intersectionalities.

Conclusion

The #HearNowON 2021 initiative built on the lessons of #HearNowON 2019, expanded its inquiry and adapted to the changing context of a pandemic. A bilingual survey and a series of virtual forums collected information about student mental health literacy needs, learning preferences, equity and access, and engagement and leadership ideas. Students not only participated in this consultation but were also given opportunities to take on leadership roles throughout the initiative. SMH-ON will share findings from this engagement initiative to aid in strategic planning in the years to come.

Listening to student voices is what #HearNowON is about, and it is inspiring to see so much interest and engagement from secondary school students across Ontario. Overwhelmingly, this initiative found that students were eager to learn more about mental health, available resources, and how to support themselves and their friends. Students shared many meaningful ideas on how to advance school mental health in Ontario schools.

Acknowledgements & Gratitude

Thank you to all the students across Ontario who participated in this initiative. Your insights and enthusiasm were crucial in making this initiative a success.

Thank you to all the #HearNowON 2021 Student Working Group members for all your feedback and facilitation support.

Thank you to the mental health support staff and Knowledge Keeper for helping to make the virtual forums inclusive and welcoming spaces to talk about mental health.

Thank you to Fédération de la jeunesse franco-ontarienne (FESFO) for your support in reaching Franco-Ontarian students with this initiative.

Appendices

Appendix A Demographics

Survey Findings

Which of the following best describes your current schooling situation?

(Participants were limited to selecting one response to this question, although the percentages may not add up to exactly 100% due to rounding. In 2021 2,465 respondents answered this question and only those who indicated that they attended a publicly-funded school in Ontario were included in the rest of the analysis).

Response	Percentage 2021
English Public-School Board	48%
English Catholic School Board	20%
French Public-School Board	13%
No Response	10%
French Catholic School Board	7%
I am not currently enrolled in secondary school	1%
My school is not in the publicly funded school system (i.e., private school, home schooled)	0%
Provincial Demonstration School	0%

What city is closest to where you live?

(Participants were limited to selecting one response to this question, although the percentages may not add up to exactly 100% due to rounding. 1,271 respondents answered this question in 2021 and 1,000 respondents answered this question in 2019).

Response	Percentage 2021	Percentage 2019
Toronto	40%	35%
Ottawa	28%	13%
Kingston	7%	3%
Hamilton	6%	16%
Sault Ste. Marie	4%	1%
Barrie	3%	10%

Sudbury	3%	5%
Thunder Bay	3%	2%
London	2%	9%
Windsor	2%	7%
Timmins	0%	1%

What term best describes where you live?

(Participants were limited to selecting one response to this question, although the percentages may not add up to exactly 100% due to rounding. 1,261 respondents answered this question).

Response	Percentage 2021
Sub-urban	33%
Urban	26%
Unsure	23%
Rural	15%
Remote	3%

What grade are you in?

(Participants were limited to selecting one response to this question, although the percentages may not add up to exactly 100% due to rounding. In 2021, 1,250 respondents answered this question and in 2019, 890 respondents answered this question).

Response	Percentage 2021	Percentage 2019
12	27%	28%
10	27%	21%
11	24%	26%
9	21%	21%
Fifth year	2%	5%

Do you have an individual education plan (I.E.P.)?

(Participants were limited to selecting one response to this question, although the percentages may not add up to exactly 100% due to rounding. 1,276 respondents answered this question).

Response	Percentage 2021
No	59%
Yes	18%

Not sure	17%
Prefer not to answer	5%

Which of the following best describes your gender (select all that apply)?

(Participants were able to select multiple responses to this question, below is a calculation of the percentage of each choice. 1,260 respondents answered this question).

Response	Percentage 2021
Girl or woman	57%
Boy or man	25%
Cis	23%
Non-binary	9%
Questioning or exploring	7%
Option not listed above	5%
Trans	4%
Prefer not to answer	4%
Two Spirit	1%

People often identify themselves with a particular racial group. Which of the following best describes the group(s) you identify with most (select all that apply)?

(Participants were able to select multiple responses to this question, below is a calculation of the percentage of each choice, although the percentages may not add up to exactly 100% due to rounding. 1,254 respondents answered this question).

Response	Percentage 2021
White or Euro-American	54%
South Asian (e.g., Pakistani, Indian, Sri Lankan)	13%
Black (e.g., African, Caribbean, African Nova Scotian)	10%
East Asian (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, Taiwanese)	7%
Middle Eastern	6%
Prefer not to answer	6%
Southeast Asian (e.g., Thai, Malaysian, Filipino)	5%

Option not listed above	5%
Indigenous (e.g., Métis, First Nations, Inuit)	4%
Latin or Hispanic	4%

What percentage of respondents completed the English vs French surveys?

Response	Percentage 2021
English	92%
French (Canadian)	8%

Appendix B

Impact of Covid-19

Survey findings

COVID-19 has impacted all of us over the past while. As a result of the pandemic, it is very common to feel more worried, sad, or lonely than usual. It is also common to notice new things to be grateful for and to enjoy. Overall, has COVID-19 made you curious to learn more about mental health?

(Participants were limited to selecting one response to this question, although the percentages may not add up to exactly 100% due to rounding. 1,358 respondents answered this question).

Response	Percentage 2021
Yes, COVID-19 has made me want to learn more about mental health	47%
No, COVID-19 has not really impacted my curiosity about mental health	33%
Not sure	20%

What type of impact has the COVID-19 pandemic had on your opportunities for mental health leadership?

(Participants were able to select multiple responses to this question, so the total sum of all percentages adds up to more than 100%. 240 respondents answered this question).

Response	Percentage 2021
Lack of opportunities available	58%
Initiatives and clubs have stopped during this time	47%
Unsure	26%
Difficulty scheduling time with team members	21%
Finding educators to support	21%
Lack of money to fund mental health initiatives	16%

Appendix C

Student Strengths and Pre-existing Knowledge

Survey findings

Have you heard of School Mental Health Ontario (SMH-ON) before?

(Participants were limited to selecting one response to this question, although the percentages may not add up to exactly 100% due to rounding. In 2021, 1,976 respondents answered this question and in 2019, 784 respondents answered this question.)

Response	Percentage 2021	Percentage 2019
No	63%	76%
Not sure	21%	19%
Yes	11%	5%

How much do you know about what your school board is doing to support student mental health? (You can find out more about your board's mental health strategy on the board website)

(Participants were limited to selecting one response to this question, although the percentages may not add up to exactly 100% due to rounding. 1,762 respondents answered this question.)

Response	Percentage 2021
I have heard a little bit about my school board's mental health initiatives	51%
I don't know anything about my school board's mental health initiatives	37%
I have heard a lot about my school board's mental health initiatives	10%
I am involved in supporting my school board's mental health initiatives	2%

How much do you know about what your school is doing to support student mental health?

(Participants were limited to selecting one response to this question, although the percentages may not add up to exactly 100% due to rounding. 1,753 respondents answered this question.)

Response	Percentage 2021
I have heard a little bit about my school's mental health initiatives	47%
I don't know anything about my school's mental health initiatives	33%

I have heard a lot about my school's mental health initiatives	16%
I am involved in supporting my school's mental health initiatives	4%

How would you rate your own knowledge right now about these topics? Rate your current knowledge by clicking one circle for each skill area.

(Participants were limited to selecting one response to this question, although the percentages may not add up to exactly 100% due to rounding. 1,386 respondents answered this question.)

Ways to build healthy relationships, manage peer pressure, and deal with conflict	
Response	Percentage 2021
Strong knowledge	11%
Good knowledge	34%
Some knowledge	32%
A little knowledge	17%
No knowledge	6%

(Participants were limited to selecting one response to this question, although the percentages may not add up to exactly 100% due to rounding. 1,375 respondents answered this question.)

Ways to cope with daily hassles and minor stress	
Response	Percentage 2021
Strong knowledge	11%
Good knowledge	27%
Some knowledge	33%
A little knowledge	22%
No knowledge	8%

(Participants were limited to selecting one response to this question, although the percentages may not add up to exactly 100% due to rounding. 1,377 respondents answered this question.)

Ways to cope with transitions and major stress	
Response	Percentage 2021
Strong knowledge	7%
Good knowledge	19%

Some knowledge	29%
A little knowledge	31%
No knowledge	14%

(Participants were limited to selecting one response to this question, although the percentages may not add up to exactly 100% due to rounding. 1,372 respondents answered this question.)

Ways to figure out and express individual strengths, interests and identity	
Response	Percentage 2021
Strong knowledge	11%
Good knowledge	26%
Some knowledge	30%
A little knowledge	22%
No knowledge	11%

(Participants were limited to selecting one response to this question, although the percentages may not add up to exactly 100% due to rounding. 1,368 respondents answered this question.)

Ways to identify and control emotions	
Response	Percentage 2021
Strong knowledge	12%
Good knowledge	27%
Some knowledge	28%
A little knowledge	23%
No knowledge	10%

(Participants were limited to selecting one response to this question, although the percentages may not add up to exactly 100% due to rounding. 1,366 respondents answered this question.)

Ways to promote positive mental health / emotional self-care	
Response	Percentage 2021
Strong knowledge	12%
Good knowledge	25%
Some knowledge	29%
A little knowledge	22%
No knowledge	12%

(Participants were limited to selecting one response to this question, although the percentages may not add up to exactly 100% due to rounding. 1,366 respondents answered this question.)

Ways to set and achieve goals, be organized, and stay on track with school work	
Response	Percentage 2021
Strong knowledge	16%
Good knowledge	27%
Some knowledge	28%
A little knowledge	20%
No knowledge	9%

(Participants were limited to selecting one response to this question, although the percentages may not add up to exactly 100% due to rounding. 1,368 respondents answered this question.)

Ways to stay optimistic and hopeful, even when things aren't going well in the moment	
Response	Percentage 2021
Strong knowledge	11%
Good knowledge	21%
Some knowledge	25%
A little knowledge	26%
No knowledge	16%

Appendix D

Mental Health Literacy Preferences

Survey findings

Which of the following mental health topics are important for secondary school aged students to learn about? Check all that apply:

(Participants were able to select multiple responses to this question, so the total sum of all percentages adds up to more than 100%. 1,536 respondents answered this question.)

Response	Percentage 2021
When to seek help / when mental health needs are more than “a bad day”	75%
Ways to cope with common mental health problems	69%
How to ask for help	67%
Warning signs for suicide	66%
The difference between mental health and mental illness	63%
How to help a friend without taking on too much	63%
Common mental health problems that begin in teenage years	62%
What to expect from a mental health professional / mental health treatment	56%
The connection between identity, discrimination, racism/oppression, and mental health	56%
Normal changes in mood and emotions	54%
Where to go for help at school and in the community	53%
Stigma and mental illness	53%
Understanding mental health, wellness, and resilience from different perspectives and worldviews	51%
The steps to take to help a friend connect with mental health support	49%
Early signs of substance use problems and how to reduce risks when using substances	48%
The connection between bullying and mental health problems	46%
Ways to manage social media, gaming, and other online activities	38%

Which of the following strategies/skills are important for secondary school aged students to learn about? Select a maximum of five strategies or skills

(Participants were able to select multiple responses to this question, so the total sum of all percentages adds up to more than 100%. 1,508 respondents answered this question.)

Response	Percentage 2021
Ways to cope with changes and major stress	56%
Ways to identify and control emotions	51%
Ways to set and achieve goals, be organized, and stay on track with schoolwork	49%
Ways to build healthy relationships, manage peer pressure, and deal with conflict	47%
Ways to promote positive mental health and self-care	45%
Ways to stay positive and hopeful, even when things aren't going well in the moment	36%
Ways to manage disappointment and loss	35%
Ways to figure out and express individual strengths, interests and identity	34%
Ways to cope with daily hassles and minor stress	34%
Ways to cope with COVID-19 worries, sadness, and loneliness	22%
Ways to connect with my community, and/or others with shared interests, identities, culture, etc.	18%
Ways to prepare and feel good for the return to school in the fall	13%
Ways to cope with COVID-19 public health restrictions and impacts	8%
Ways to cope with COVID-19 over the summer when there is no school	6%

How would you want to learn more about mental health? Check all that apply.

(Participants were able to select multiple responses to this question, so the total sum of all percentages adds up to more than 100%. In 2021, 1,426 respondents answered this question and in 2019, 674 respondents answered this question.)

Response	Percentage 2021	Percentage 2019
As part of a class at school	55%	79%
Self-directed / On my own	39%	Not an option in 2019

With a small group at school	37%	32%
Individually with a counselor/ knowledge keeper/mental health professional at school	37%	Not an option in 2019
Individually with a counselor/ knowledge keeper/mental health professional in the community	28%	Not an option in 2019
Through an online resource	25%	39%
With a small group outside of school	19%	32%
Through a print resource	11%	19%
I don't want to learn more about mental health	0%	3%

Who would you want to learn about mental health from? Check all that apply.

(Participants were able to select multiple responses to this question, so the total sum of all percentages adds up to more than 100%. In 2021, 1,264 respondents answered this question and in 2019, 646 respondents answered this question.)

Response	Percentage 2021	Percentage 2019
A school mental health professional (e.g., psychologist, social worker)	65%	82%
A psychiatrist	48%	52%
A mental health professional in the community	48%	69%
A guidance teacher	40%	47%
A teacher	37%	52%
A friend	32%	31%
A family doctor	24%	27%
A student success or learning resource teacher	23%	32%
A parent or family member	21%	17%
A public health nurse	18%	32%
An Elder	10%	9%
A knowledge keeper	9%	Not an option in 2019
A faith leader	9%	11%
A cultural leader	7%	8%
Other (please specify):	5%	Not an option in 2019

These are the things School Mental Health Ontario is working on right now. Which three are most important to you?

(Participants were able to select multiple responses to this question, so the total sum of all percentages adds up to more than 100%. In 2021, 1,725 respondents answered this question and in 2019, 771 respondents answered this question.)

Response	Percentage 2021	Percentage 2019
Informed Educators	52%	59%
Equity and Mental Health	48%	30%
Youth Engagement	39%	40%
Setting up for Success	37%	29%
Smooth Access to Services and Support	36%	43%
Good Quality Mental Health Promotion Programming	32%	39%
Good Quality Prevention and Early Support Services	26%	36%
Family Engagement	16%	17%

Appendix F Leadership Opportunities

Survey findings

Are there ways that students can get involved in promoting mental health in your school board (clubs, events, campaigns)?

(Participants were limited to selecting one response to this question, although the percentages may not add up to exactly 100% due to rounding. In 2021, 1,319 respondents answered this question and in 2019, 783 respondents answered this question.)

Response	Percentage 2021	Percentage 2019
Not sure	51%	44%
Yes	36%	36%
No	13%	20%

Are there ways that students can get involved in promoting mental health in your school (clubs, events, campaigns)?

(Participants were limited to selecting one response to this question, although the percentages may not add up to exactly 100% due to rounding. In 2021, 1,312 respondents answered this question and in 2019, 781 respondents answered this question.)

Response	Percentage 2021	Percentage 2019
Yes	43%	53%
Not sure	42%	29%
No	15%	18%

Are you involved in a mental health leadership initiative at school? (select all that apply)

(Participants were able to select multiple responses to this question, so the total sum of all percentages adds up to more than 100%. In 2021, 1,300 respondents answered this question and in 2019, 642 respondents answered this question.)

Response	Percentage 2021	Percentage 2019
I am not currently involved in a mental health leadership initiative at my school	82%	82%
School mental health / wellness club	8%	8%

Student mental health workshops and activities (such as Wellness Week)	5%	10%
School mental health advisory committee	4%	3%
Other (Please identify)	4%	Option not available in 2019
School mental health awareness campaign	3%	7%

Are you involved in mental health leadership through community organizations outside of school?

(Participants were limited to selecting one response to this question, although the percentages may not add up to exactly 100% due to rounding. In 2021, 1,313 respondents answered this question and in 2019, 658 respondents answered this question.)

Note: In 2019, the question posed to survey respondents was “Are you involved in mental health leadership through organizations like the new mentality, jack.org, kids help phone or other community mental health organizations”

Response	Percentage 2021	Percentage 2019
No	92%	92%
Yes	8%	8%

Do you want to get involved in mental health leadership?

(Participants were limited to selecting one response to this question, although the percentages may not add up to exactly 100% due to rounding. In 2021, 1,316 respondents answered this question and in 2019, 660 respondents answered this question.)

Response	Percentage 2021	Percentage 2019
Maybe	47%	48%
No	30%	16%
Yes	23%	36%

What level of involvement in mental health leadership would interest you (select all that apply)?

(Participants were able to select multiple responses to this question, so the total sum of all percentages adds up to more than 100%. In 2021, 895 respondents answered this question and in 2019, 541 respondents answered this question.)

Response	Percentage 2021	Percentage 2019
In your school	87%	77%
In your community	46%	59%
In your school board or school authority	36%	43%
In your province	24%	37%

What types of initiatives do you think students are best positioned to help with (select all that apply)?

(Participants were able to select multiple responses to this question, so the total sum of all percentages adds up to more than 100%. In 2021, 1,269 respondents answered this question and in 2019 642 respondents answered this question.)

Response	Percentage 2021	Percentage 2019
Assisting friends to get help when they need it	63%	80%
Raising awareness about mental health and mental illness	63%	67%
Helping with stress management at school	57%	54%
Noticing when someone is experiencing a mental health problem	57%	70%
Promoting wellness and self-care	53%	61%
Raising awareness about equity, discrimination and mental health	53%	-option was not available in 2019
Reducing stigma	52%	70%
Other – please describe	4%	-option was not available in 2019

Appendix G

Supporting Friends and Accessing Support

Survey findings

Would you visit a student-centered website about mental health that was co-created by Ontario students with mental health professionals?

(Participants were limited to selecting one response to this question, although the percentages may not add up to exactly 100% due to rounding. 2,034 respondents answered this question.)

Response	Percentage 2021
Yes	50%
Not sure	33%
No	17%

Is there a caring adult at school that you could turn to if you had a question about mental health? (e.g., teacher, principal, guidance teacher, student success teacher, learning resource teacher, coach, custodian, office staff, chaplain, social worker, psychologist, child and youth worker, knowledge keeper, etc.)

(Participants were limited to selecting one response to this question, although the percentages may not add up to exactly 100% due to rounding. 1,352 respondents answered this question.)

Response	Percentage 2021
Yes, more than one	31%
Yes, there is one person I could ask	25%
Not sure	23%
No	21%