

Implementing a Well-Being and Mental Health Strategic Plan

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The Durham District School Board (DDSB) has focused on supporting student achievement and well-being using evidence-based, whole school approaches. Well-being is considered an essential component of sustaining safe, healthy, inclusive schools. In addition, well-being is recognized as being foundational for student achievement.

Ontario's Well-being Strategy for Education, Discussion Document defines well-being as: "...a positive sense of self, spirit and belonging that we feel when our cognitive, emotional, social and physical needs are being met. It is supported through equity and respect for our diverse identities and strengths. Well-being in early years and school settings is about helping children and students become resilient, so that they can make positive and healthy choices to support learning and achievement both now and in the future." (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016).

Promoting well-being is one of the four interconnected goals of Achieving Excellence, Ontario's renewed vision for education. This goal is based on the principle that our education system needs to help students build the knowledge and skills associated with positive well-being so that they can become healthy, active and engaged citizens (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016).

There is increasing evidence and recognition that well-being is fundamental to overall student success. The recent Discussion Document from the Ministry of Education, Ontario's Well-Being Strategy for Education, highlights the importance of this work by emphasizing that: "Students cannot achieve academically if they don't feel safe or welcomed at school, if their mental health is at risk and if they don't have the tools or motivation to adopt a healthy active lifestyle, both inside and outside of school" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016).

The main goal of the DDSB's well-being strategy is developing the "conditions for learning"; what needs to be done at the school and classroom levels to ensure that students feel that they are part of a safe, inclusive and trusting learning environment in which positive relationships are developed and sustained.

A significant challenge when implementing effective well-being initiatives is that well-being is a very complex concept. As a result, it is difficult to determine which individual factors that have an impact on the well-being of a student or staff member. In the DDSB, we use evidence-informed practices to ensure that the initiatives implemented are considered "best practices", and are based on research. We have partnered with researchers in Ontario universities to assist with this process. For example, in partnership with researchers from Trent University, the DDSB is piloting a project on how to successfully gather student data in the area of self-regulation. Self-Regulation involves helping students become aware of what stresses them and how these stressors impact them. After that, students choose and use

strategies to manage their stressors allowing them to be calm, alert, and willing to learn. Self-regulation is foundational to student achievement and well-being.

The Durham District School Board began a pilot project with the distribution of “Spark” bikes to schools. The schools that received the bikes are collecting data using self-regulation tracking sheet to determine how often the bikes are used, and whether or not the bike helps students to self-regulate. Students are encouraged to use the bike at their own pace and intensity for the purpose of either “burning off” excess energy or raising their energy level. The purpose is for a student to ride the “Spark” bike until he or she feels calm, and ready to focus on learning.

Metrics have been developed, and data gathered based on a “Spark Bike” pilot project. From this pilot, the DDSB will gain a better understanding of effective data gathering in the area of well-being, and then transfer what was learned to other well-being initiatives.

In order to support the effective implementation of well-being and positive mental health, the DDSB formed a Mental Health and Well-Being Steering Committee. This committee is a “working” committee that coordinates and focuses the work being done to support the objectives and vision of the DDSB Mental Health and Addictions Strategic Plan. The mandate of this committee includes the development of targeted workgroups that report to the Mental Health and Well-Being Steering Committee, and coordinating the work of related DDSB Committees including: the Safe Schools Steering Committee; Self-Regulation Steering Committee, and Staff Wellness Steering Committee.

In addition to learning from the “Spark Bike” pilot, the Mental Health and Well-Being Steering Committee will utilize the Results Based Accountability (RBA) model to drive outcome-based decisions (Friedman, 2005).

“Results-Based Accountability” (RBA) is a structured way of planning and taking action that is used to improve the implementation of initiatives. The process starts with the determination of desired “ends” based on identified priorities and then works backwards, step by step, to explore the means by which the outcome can be achieved and measured. RBA also uses a series of questions to help identify if a desired result is present within a defined area of focus. RBA allows for collaboration and reflection at all stages of the process; planning, taking action and assessing success. RBA relies on a shared understanding to produce measurable improvements.

The reason why the Mental Health and Well-Being Steering Committee is using RBA when implementing initiatives is because it is flexible and adaptable to most conditions of well-being. The process involves two main approaches;

1. Planning based on thought-provoking questions:

- What is the Result? *Identify/describe what it is you want to achieve*
- Who is this going to help? *Identify the “population” that will be affected, e.g. students and staff*
- How will they be better off? *Identify the benefits, solutions, gains made etc.*
- What is the impact? *Measure any movement between “baseline” data and follow-up data - the pre and post conditions*
- How will we know if the result has been achieved? *Identify the indicators that will be used to assess whether or not the desired result has been achieved*

- What is the “story” behind the data? *Identify and explain the data trends, and what the likely forecast will be if no action is taken*
- What is the “story” behind the trend? *Identify potential supports or challenges that might influence the direction of the data trend*
- What have others done in similar situations? *Examine the research*
- What action will we take? *Who will do it? When will it occur? When will information be collected to determine progress?*

2. Evaluation of the impact of the initiative - the change that the implementation of the initiative produced, the benefits and who benefited from the implementation of the initiative, and the success of the strategies used. The following three questions will help to evaluate the impact of the initiative:

- How much did we do? *Describe the actions taken and the strategies used*
- How well did we do it? *Assess the actions, findings, strategies used etc.*
- Is anyone better off? *Evaluate and document any benefits and who benefited by the actions*

To get a better understand how to use RBA with an initiative in the area of well-being and mental health, the Mental Health and Well-Being Steering Committee examined the DDSB “Spark Bike” pilot. This was a good place to start because the use of “Spark Bikes” is supported by ‘brain’ research, and as a result we know that it is an evidence-informed initiative (Ratey, 2008). In addition, the DDSB has partnered with Trent University to better understand the impact of our “Spark Bike” initiative. The following represents how we used the “Spark Bike” pilot to better understand how to use RBA:

Planning:

- What is the Result? *Students will be able to use the “Spark Bike” to self-regulate, and as a result be ready to learn*
- Who is this going to help? *The initiative will help the students who have access to a “Spark Bike” in their class or school*
- How will they be better off? *When a student is experiencing a stressor that impacts his or her ability to learn, then he or she will use the “Spark Bike” as a way to self-regulate*
- What is the impact? *The baseline data for the “Spark Bike” pilot is classroom disruptions. Success will be determined if there are fewer disruptions by students during class. This data will be gathered by examining office referral, and by conducting “focus” group interviews with teachers and students. Schools will monitor “Marker Students” in order to measure success*
- How will we know if the result has been achieved? *The schools that have a “Spark Bike” received training on how to use a tracking sheet to determine a student’s “readiness to learn” before and after using the bike*
- What is the “story” behind the data? *Disruptions to the class by “Marker Students” will be used as the data. The trend and forecast will be based on what occurred prior to the implementation of “Spark Bikes” pilot*
- What is the “story” behind the trend? *The schools that received a “Spark Bike” already were committed to using self-regulation to support student well-being and academic success. The supports in place included the established self-regulation initiatives and interventions. A major*

challenge included the difficulty in determining if self-regulation, including the use of a “Spark Bike”, are directly responsible for improving a student’s “readiness to learn”

- *What have others done in similar situations? The DDSB worked with Dr. Stuart Shanker from York University to implement the use of self-regulation based on his research. The use of “Spark Bikes” as a self-regulation strategy is based on the “brain” research of Dr. John Ratey from Harvard University, and the understanding of the results of the DDSB pilot is supported by researchers at Trent University*
- *What action will we take? Teachers who use the “Spark Bikes” will collect data using a tracking sheet based on the research in self-regulation. The data from these tracking sheets will be collected and collated at the board-level*

Evaluating the impact of the initiative – Schools are currently engaged in the collection of data around the use of the “Spark Bike” using a tracking sheet based on the elements of self-regulation. Students who use the bike are asked:

- to identify how they are feeling before they ride the “Spark Bike” (Pre-State)
- to record the length of time they spend on the “Spark Bike”, and
- to identify how they feeling after they ride the “Spark Bike” (Post-State).

The initial information collected and collated at the board-level indicated that the “Marker Students” who used the “Spark Bike” found it helped them to self-regulate, and as a result they were better able to learn. Although a fulsome analysis is pending the collection of more data, an initial review of data indicates that time spent on the Spark Bike helps most riders (53%) successfully move into a “ready to learn” state after spending an average of 4:49 minutes on the “Spark Bike”. Anecdotal interviews with the teachers indicated that the use of the “Spark Bike” reduced the number of class disruptions, and subsequent referrals to the office.

A number of DDSB schools have incorporated self-regulation initiatives and interventions as a means to establish positive classroom environments that supports student well-being and achievement. When a student is able to understand his or her stressors, and then choose an appropriate intervention to address the stressor then he or she is less likely to disrupt the learning environment. Schools are collecting formal data, including data from school climate surveys, attendance, report cards and office referrals, while teachers are gathering anecdotal classroom data such as student engagement and on-task behaviour to better understand the impact of self-regulation on the learning environment. Preliminary data indicates that that self-regulation initiatives and interventions positively impact both student well-being and academic achievement. That being said, the DDSB is committed to better understanding the impact of initiatives in the area of well-being and positive mental health on the well-being and achievement of students. In order to do so, the DDSB has partnered with University researchers to make sure that the initiatives we implement are evidence-informed, has implemented the “Spark Bike” initiative to better understand how to develop metrics and gather data in the area of well-being, and is using RBA as a structured way of planning and taking action when implementing initiatives in the area of well-being and mental health. By being systematic and reflective in our planning and implementation, schools will be able to create learning environments that are healthy, safe and caring.

Promoting Well-Being in Ontario's Education System, 2016. Accessed at <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/about/wellbeing2.html>

Friedman, Mark, *The Results-Based Accountability Guide* (Clear Impact), 2005

Ratey, John, *Spark: The Revolutionary new Science of Exercise and the Brain*, 2008