

## **SESS School Plan 2025-26**

- **A living, working document**

**Will changes to our daily practices and pedagogy lead to improved mental well-being in our students?**

### **SCANNING: What is going on for our learners?**

Similkameen Elementary Secondary School (SESS) is a grade 5-12 school in Keremeos BC. SESS has just over 300 students, with approximately 100 in the elementary division and 200 in the secondary division. We have the unique challenge of creating one single school identity while running as two distinct divisions and meeting the learning, social and emotional needs of two very different age groups. Approximately one third of our whole school population is Indigenous, just over one third has an IEP and we are very diverse in terms of socio-economic factors, family formations, ethnicities and more.

In previous years SESS' school plan was focused on literacy. After the end of two years of purposeful and directed actions to improve literacy results, we were disappointed that we didn't see as much of an impact as we hoped our interventions would have. It was at that point that we decided to swim a little further 'upstream' to see if we could figure out what we were missing.

We collected data from a variety of different sources including:

- MDI and YDI
- Student Learning Survey
- Adolescent Health Survey
- In House Student Forum
- In house student survey
- Attendance Reports
- Street Data

After the initial scanning we decided we needed to scan a little more widely and deeply as a clear focus was not coming through. The staff developed a follow-up survey for the entire student body based on previous findings. The survey focused on 5 key areas:

- Belonging
- Engagement
- Safety
- Resilience/Perseverance
- Attendance

Significant findings from the survey, that was developed by staff and completed by most of the student body, as well as some of the satellite, map and street data we looked at include:

- Most students who cited mental health as a primary reason for school absences identified school-related stress as the leading factor contributing to their mental health challenges
- Students identified personalization and flexibility through individualized support, autonomy, and engaging, interest-driven activities as important to their success and engagement
- Nearly half of student do not perceive a connection between their current learning and their future
- Students ranked the curriculum, subjects and classroom environment as the top aspects they would change about their learning experience
- SESS students have low engagement with volunteering in the school and the larger community
  - Their feelings about their ability to make a difference in their community are low
- Particularly with the older students, there is a low sense of belonging to SESS and a low number of students like school
  - Decreasing attendance
  - Perceived growing apathy towards learning
  - Students reported feeling quite disconnected from their learning
  - Students don't feel what they're learning is relevant
  - Indigenous students would like to see more of a connection to their culture and for learning environments to be more culturally relevant
- Quotes from students:
  - "I don't like coming to school most of the time because of my anxiety, which often makes it difficult to focus, stresses me out, makes me overthink everything and genuinely makes me afraid to come to school sometimes."
  - "it's to exhausting now i know that sounds lazy but i kinda feel hopeless it's so tiring barely any breaks"
  - "I am neutral when it comes to actually liking school. On one hand, it makes me feel like crap and discourages me to try and participate in certain activities, but on the other hand it's alright. I understand I need school to learn the basics in life, and missing school puts even more potholes in my learning abilities, I just wish it wasn't so stressful."

While examining the data we expected one of the five areas of focus to rise to the top, but we found a common thread that underpinned all areas we were exploring.



### **FOCUSING: What is going to give us the biggest impact?**

When the data was collated following the whole school survey, we were surprised to find the Mental Wellness was a thread that wove through all 5 areas we explored. We will explore this area to see if an intentional focus on Mental Wellness will have a positive impact on our learner's well-being and ultimately their academic success.

As we read the data, we also recognized that there is a need to investigate and employ culturally relevant opportunities to focus on Mental Wellness. Further to that, we want to look at our pedagogy and classroom practices to see how they support or have a negative impact on student's Mental Wellness.

Our wonder is, will an increased, and culturally relevant focus on student wellbeing at SESS lead to increased student engagement, safety, sense of belonging, perseverance and attendance?

### **DEVELOPING A HUNCH: What is leading to this situation? What are we doing to contribute to this?**

Questions we asked ourselves are:

- Are we maintaining routines?
- How are we teaching?
- Are we teaching our students to be organized and are we taking time to put the skills into practice?
- Are we preparing/scaffolding our students for the stressful situations we are putting them into?
- Are we good role models – particularly around taking care of our own mental well-being?

Four areas of curiosity came out of focusing and our hunches: Pedagogy, Connection, Social-Emotional Learning, and Executive Functioning.

### **LEARNING: What do we need to learn? How will we design new learning?**

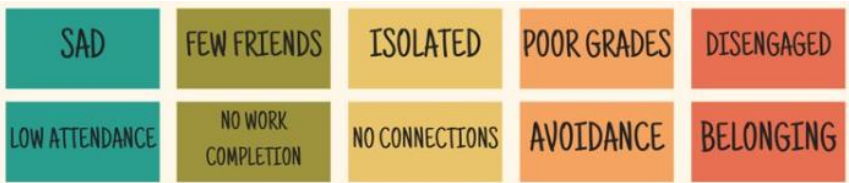
- Helen Gallagher and Dyawen Louis joined, and will join again, a staff meeting to help us learn and have an increased awareness of our students from LSIB, USIB and OIB as well as off-reserve and Metis students.
- The Disengaged Teen, by Rebecca Winthrop and Jenny Anderson
- The Anxious Generation, by Jonathan Haidt
- The Executive Function Podcast
- The Third Path: A Relationship-Based Approach to Student Well-Being and Achievement
- Recommendations for fostering educational resilience in the classroom - article
- We hope to bring in knowledge keepers to deepen our understanding of Syilx culture

- Articles related to our focus are shared in the Weekly Update

**TAKING ACTION: What can we do differently to make enough of a difference?**

Honouring the work that was done for last year’s inquiry, the plan was to undertake an action under each of the areas of curiosity – Executive Functioning, Connections, Social Emotional Learning and Pedagogy – throughout the year. Each staff member will take the same basic action, but it will be adapted to fit their various contexts.

Staff decided that building a stronger connection between home and the school would be an impactful place to start the year. Each teacher will choose 2-3 “Wonder Kids” - students that they may not know well yet, or students that are displaying some of the indicators of students who are facing challenges connected to their emotional well-being. Indicators include:



Staff made plan and took action around intentionally communicating with these students’ families and with the students. Check-ins are to share good news or to ask families about their student. Communication was intentionally meant to be two-way as often as possible, but this was challenging and not always successful. Staff reached out to families at the beginning of each term and at the end in the form of progress reports, which included an option for a parent response.

Examples of questions they asked families and care givers:

- Do you have any suggestions about how to best connect with your child?
- What are you seeing at home?
- How can we help to get to know your child more?
- We are just getting to know your child, what do I need to know?
- Do you remember a time when they loved school? What did that look like?
- What’s important to your family that we could bring into the school?

Examples of questions we asked our students:

- What’s working for you so far?
- What’s been challenging?
- What’s been your favourite part?
- What would you like to see taught in class that isn’t?
- What are your strengths and stretches?
- How can I help?

## **CHECKING: What impact are we having? What evidence do we have?**

To understand the impact of our work, we gathered evidence from multiple sources throughout the year:

- SESS Student Wellbeing Survey (2025 and 2026 comparison)
- Staff monthly check-ins and observations
- Family communication survey responses
- Report card return slips and family feedback
- Attendance data
- Middle Years Development Instrument (MDI)
- Informal student conversations and empathy interviews

Using these sources, we looked for changes in the indicators of wellbeing identified during our scanning process: engagement, belonging, safety, attendance, and self-regulation.

The evidence suggests that student wellbeing is improving, although growth is not consistent across all areas.

Engagement showed clear growth. Students were more likely to describe positive experiences at school, identify classes and activities they enjoy, and describe learning that feels meaningful or interesting. While some students continue to express disengagement, responses shifted from broad negative statements toward more nuanced descriptions of both strengths and challenges within their school experience.

Belonging demonstrated some of the strongest growth across the data. More students were able to identify trusted adults within the school and describe belonging in relational terms such as feeling accepted, included, welcomed, and understood. Staff observations also reflected increased help-seeking behaviours and stronger student-adult connections.

Self-regulation showed moderate growth. Students were increasingly able to identify strategies that help them manage challenges, regulate emotions, and persist through difficult situations. However, many students continue to report feeling overwhelmed and require support in applying these strategies consistently.

Attendance remained mixed. Students increasingly connected attendance to friendships, future goals, and not wanting to fall behind academically. However, many students still reported attending school primarily because they have to rather than because they feel connected to learning or school.

Safety remains an area of growth. While some data suggests slight improvements, students continue to identify concerns related to peer conflict, unpredictability, and specific areas within the school environment. Safety will continue to require intentional attention moving forward.

When the data is examined by division, different patterns emerge.

Elementary students demonstrated the strongest overall growth in wellbeing. Students were more likely to describe school positively, identify trusted adults, and connect school with friendships, activities, and enjoyment. Staff observations aligned with these findings and highlighted increased engagement, stronger relationships, and greater willingness to seek support.

Secondary students demonstrated growth in relationships and self-awareness. More students identified supportive adults and strategies that help them manage stress. However, concerns related to anxiety, overwhelm, attendance, motivation, and safety remained more prominent within the secondary data.

Across all evidence sources, the strongest and most consistent protective factor was meaningful relationships with adults. Students who reported positive experiences at school consistently connected those experiences to feeling known, supported, listened to, and understood by staff members.

### **REFLECTING: What have we learned?**

When we began this inquiry, we wondered whether changes to our daily practices and pedagogy could improve student wellbeing. Through two years of inquiry, our understanding of wellbeing has become both clearer and more complex.

We learned that student wellbeing is not a separate initiative or program. Rather, it is deeply connected to students' daily experiences at school and the relationships they have with adults. Across surveys, staff observations, family feedback, and attendance data, the same message emerged repeatedly: students are more likely to engage, persevere, seek help, and experience a sense of belonging when they feel connected to caring adults.

Our Year 2 focus on intentional student-adult connection and two-way communication with families appears to have strengthened these protective factors. Students were more likely to identify trusted adults, describe positive school experiences, and articulate strategies that help them navigate challenges. Staff also reported increased communication, stronger relationships, and greater trust with many students.

At the same time, the inquiry reminded us that wellbeing is influenced by factors both inside and outside of school. While we saw encouraging growth in engagement, belonging, and self-

regulation, attendance and perceptions of safety remain ongoing challenges. These findings suggest that relationships are necessary but not sufficient on their own. Strong relationships create conditions for wellbeing, but students' experiences within classrooms also matter. Perhaps our most important learning is that students are increasingly telling us they feel connected, yet they continue to describe learning experiences that are not always engaging, manageable, relevant, or motivating. This has led us to wonder whether our next area of influence lies not only in relationships, but in the instructional and assessment practices students experience every day.

As a staff, our thinking has shifted from asking, "How do we improve student wellbeing?" to asking, "How do we create learning environments where wellbeing, engagement, and achievement can thrive together?"