

# Module 2: Strengthening Student Connectedness

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JCSH School Well-being Toolkit



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# Strengthening Student Connectedness

## Module Overview: Purpose and Scope

This module focuses on the importance of building student connectedness within classroom and school settings. School connectedness is foundational to promoting student well-being, healthy social interactions, positive child and youth development and the creation of environments that contribute to student thriving and flourishing.

The initial sections highlight key protective factors that enhance a sense of belonging and explore the ways in which school connectedness makes a difference for children and youth. Also highlighted is the importance of conceptualizing school connectedness through a *Health Promoting Schools* lens. The *Positive Education Pathways* model is introduced as a framework for helping students to flourish in both their social/emotional and academic development. Diversity and cultural humility and their roles in fostering relatedness are explored. Finally, sample strategies for strengthening student connectedness in the school, home and community settings are presented.

# School Connectedness Defined

*School connectedness is the belief by students that adults and peers in the school care about their learning as well as about them as individuals.*

School connectedness also involves creating a sense of community where students feel safe, included, valued, supported and cared about. Approaches to enhance connectedness involve building positive relationships among students and school staff, as well as with families and members of the community.

## **The Importance of School Connectedness**

When students feel a connection with their schools, they are likely to be healthier, to experience greater success in school and to have positive social supports. They are also more apt to have stronger academic achievement, to maintain better school attendance and to stay in school longer. School connectedness has been associated with increased hope and optimism, and is particularly important for children and youth who are at increased risk of feeling marginalized or isolated from others (McCabe, et al., 2021).



# Protective Factors

**Protective Factors** are individual or environmental characteristics or influences that reduce the effects of stressful life events, and that promote the social and emotional capacities of people to adapt and thrive in all aspects of life, both in the present and the future.

Promoting protective factors in the school environment may be of even greater importance than traditional approaches that involve reducing or addressing risk factors in fostering social, emotional and physical well-being (*Morrison & Peterson, 2024*).

School connectedness has been regarded as a particularly promising protective factor in the lives of children and youth. Creating school connectedness transforms school environments into places where student well-being is valued and promoted (*McCabe, et al., 2021*).

Download  
Example  
Protective  
Factors



# Building School Connectedness

Building **school connectedness** requires a whole-school approach that focuses on active engagement with students, understanding their strengths and interests, and providing opportunities for students to demonstrate their competencies and unique gifts within the school and classroom environment.

Established school practices should address the strength profiles of students and be based on evidence-informed approaches that enhance student well-being, agency and engagement. Core curriculum components and instructional resources should also be structured to strengthen students' connectedness with their local schools and communities, and to sustain active participation in their academic programs (*Morrison & Peterson, 2024*).



# Fostering Student Autonomy to Build Connectedness

For students to experience school connectedness, the learning environment must actively foster a sense of **engagement**. Across the whole-school environment, student engagement involves:

- Authentic student voice
- The incorporation of meaningful learning with authentic choice
- Student ownership over the learning process (empowerment and self-efficacy)
- Supportive learning environments with connection to both the school and broader community
- High expectations for every student
- Innovative and suitable pedagogy
- Collaboration and shared leadership among staff, students, families and the community
- Centring student voices and experiences with the goal of removing barriers to student success (Ross & Angelidis, 2020)

Tips for Building  
Student Agency





# Positive Education Pathways

*Positive Education* approaches draw on research and evidence-informed practices from the domain of positive psychology with an emphasis on delineating and embracing “what makes individuals....experience well-being” (Coulombe, Hardy, & Goldfarb, 2021, p. 297).

Example areas of application include *mindfulness*, *student strengths* and *holistic well-being approaches*. With its emphasis on strengths, Positive Education complements school-based mental health approaches and is consistent with a dual model of well-being (Keyes, 2007) in which good mental health is delineated as both the “*absence of mental illness and the presence of positive indices of well-being*, such as satisfaction with life, resilience and social connectedness” (Rickard, et al., 2024, p. 311).

Within the Health Promoting Schools framework, schools can enhance the connectedness of all students through targeted strategic planning designed to address student health and well-being, and through efforts to enhance inclusion and environments that foster the appreciation of **diversity** and **individual differences**.

## *Positive Education Pathways: PERMA*

Positive education practices encourage school connectedness by strengthening relationships, maintaining positive emotions and enhancing resilience. Created by Martin Seligman (2011), PERMA is an acronym for a five-step positive education model that creates a foundation for the development of enhanced school connectedness and positive mental health in students through:

<b>Positive Emotions</b>	Feeling good; experiencing positive emotions such as joy, gratitude, interest and hope
<b>Engagement</b>	Being absorbed in activities that use our strengths, yet challenge us
<b>Relationships</b>	Being authentically connected to others and sharing positive interactions
<b>Meaning</b>	Belonging to and serving something greater than ourselves
<b>Accomplishment</b>	Working toward and reaching desired goals, which often requires motivation and perseverance





## 1. Positive Emotions

Positive emotions involve experiencing feelings such as appreciation, joy, passion, excitement and freedom. Research in positive psychology suggests that people's decisions to reflect on good things actually contribute to their psychological well-being. When students focus on the positive and recognize what is going right within their lives, they embrace a more positive outlook. Even during more difficult times, there are also good things worth recognizing and celebrating. Sample strategies for teachers to promote *positive emotions* include:

- ❖ Display an emotional literacy poster in the classroom.
- ❖ End each day by asking students what went well.
- ❖ Ask students to keep a gratitude journal.
- ❖ Encourage students to give positive feedback to each other.
- ❖ When praising, be specific as to what students did well.

## 2. Engagement

Engagement implies being completely immersed in an activity that captures our attention, involvement and participation. Engagement draws on students' inner motivation and is reflected in their actions of **initiating**, **creating** or thoroughly **enjoying** a task or activity. Identifying and using students' strengths increases their engagement and enhances their appreciation of the gifts and strengths of themselves and others. Sample strategies for teachers to promote *engagement* include:

- ❖ Help students to identify their strengths.
- ❖ Provide opportunities for students to recognize strengths in others.
- ❖ Recognize the types of tasks that engage individual students.
- ❖ Encourage students to increase learning challenges once they have mastered a new skill

### 3. Relationships

The development of close relationships and connectedness involves feeling close to and experiencing positive attachments with others. School connectedness refers to the extent to which students are engaged in school routines, relationships and activities. School connectedness has a powerful influence on student well-being, especially as students move into adolescence. Sample strategies for teachers to promote *relationships* include:

- ❖ Allocate support buddies each week.
- ❖ Identify support networks throughout the school.
- ❖ Perform a random act of kindness for someone.
- ❖ Teach effective communication skills such as empathy, active listening and non-verbal cues

### 4. Meaning

Feeling that life is meaningful is related to the belief that we are each part of something that is larger than ourselves. When we believe that life itself has a purpose, we become more mindful of our words and actions. Schools can play an important role in helping students find meaning in their day-to-day lives. We can facilitate this process by creating opportunities for students to practice **generosity**, **volunteerism**, and **acts of kindness** throughout the community. Seligman's (2011) work on *flourishing* and *happiness* has shown links between such activities and a sense of fulfillment and well-being. Teachers who dedicate themselves to positive contributions to the community and world model for their students the value of a meaningful existence.

PERMA Guide:  
Fostering a Well-  
being Classroom



Sample strategies for teachers to promote *meaning* include:

- ❖ Help students to identify their personal values.
- ❖ Share biographies of inspiring people and how they have overcome challenge.
- ❖ Give *Thank You* cards to recognize what is working well.
- ❖ Encourage students to volunteer their time, knowledge or a possession as a way of helping another person.
- ❖ Have your class become a sponsor for a community cause.

## 5. Accomplishment

Students benefit from the perception that they have the potential to perform successfully and achieve specific accomplishments. A sense of *competency* or *self-efficacy* involves students' beliefs about whether they are capable of successfully meeting personal, academic, health or social goals. Students who have a high level of confidence in their capacity to achieve are more likely to seek out more challenging tasks, and to persist when they encounter areas of difficulty, than their peers with lower self-efficacy.

The most motivating goals are those that have personal meaning for students. Helping students to relate their goals to accomplishments that they've already achieved will enhance both optimism and their sense of self-efficacy as they plan for the future. Sample strategies for teachers to promote *accomplishment* include:

- ❖ Establish and post a class vision statement.
- ❖ Help students set daily and weekly learning or social goals.
- ❖ Frequently recognize achievement using charts, certificates, ceremonies or letters home.
- ❖ Celebrate student successes during weekly class events or daily wrap-ups.



# School Connectedness and Diversity



## *Student Gender Identity*

As with all students, social and school connectedness are essential to personal well-being and resilience for students who identify as 2SLGBTQI. Important social supports include friends, family members, support services and schools. Schools have the capacity to provide supportive relationships and connections through the creation of alliances and through teacher mentorship. Many Canadian students have created Gender/Sexuality Alliances (GSAs) to create safe, caring and inclusive spaces for them to meet and be mentored by teachers or other school personnel who volunteer their time to provide support and encouragement. These Alliances can also serve as a valuable source of information for sharing with families.

The site [Egale Canada](#) offers training and resources in English and French for Canadian schools seeking to enhance inclusivity, understanding and safety for students who identify as 2SLGBTQI and their allies.

*Please be aware of any jurisdictional requirements or guidelines that govern your school's approaches.*

*Module linked with permission from Egale Canada*



## *Canadian Newcomers*

Fostering a sense of connectedness and belonging is an important part of creating welcoming school environments for newcomers to Canadian communities and classrooms. Increasingly, Canadians are focusing on creating culturally competent schools and communities to express a commitment to equity and respect for diverse cultures and life experiences. Beyond creating welcoming and culturally sensitive environments, teachers must also be aware of the potential for newcomer students with refugee status to have experienced past trauma, and of the need for creating safe and supportive classrooms. All school staff members should be provided with information to enhance their awareness of community services and supports for newcomer children and families.

The download below from *School Mental Health Ontario* provides suggestions and reflection questions to help school staff create environments that support the well-being of students who are newcomers to Canada. Points of reflection include:

- The First Welcome
- Orientation to School
- Communication





## *Learners with Complex Needs*

Students may experience heightened risk factors due to complex and often interrelated academic, behavioural, personal, interpersonal, family, economic, social, emotional, neurological, mental and/or physical health problems or difficulties. Children and youth may exhibit a range of complex vulnerabilities inclusive of income security, past trauma histories, familial discord and loss, as well as missed time at school, gaps in achievement, and a range of learning needs.

## *Practices for Engaging Students with Complex Needs*

*Promote Mental Health Literacy among education team members.* In light of the prevalence of mental health needs experienced by students, training in mental health literacy may contribute to reducing stigma, fostering supportive conversations regarding mental health concerns with students, and promoting early efforts to access needed services or supports. Structured programs such as *Mental Health First Aid* or *Changing Minds* may provide beneficial support in this regard.

*Facilitate in-school access to mental health counselling supports.*

The integration of in-school mental health counselling supports may be facilitated through the development of partnership relationships with community and/or government mental health agencies. Engaging mental health professionals as part of school staff teams may further enhance early identification of mental health concerns among students and encourage early intervention to address their needs.

*Adopt a school-wide well-being strategy that promotes student flourishing in relationships and learning.* Engaging Keyes' dual dimensional model of well-being, implement relationship practices and learning approaches that address students' well-being needs (relatedness, competency, and autonomy-support) and their engagement in learning.

*Implement regular online student pulse surveys to gain insights into student mental health, academic engagement and school relationships.* Pulse surveys are brief, targeted measures designed to quickly assess participants' perspectives on a range of themes, such as perceived well-being, engagement or satisfaction.

# Promoting Cultural Connectedness through First Nations, Indigenous, Métis & Inuit Communities

Canada strives to provide an inclusive and respectful home for families from diverse cultural, racial and ethnic backgrounds. Schools, families and communities working together can build supportive environments for all children and youth by collaborating to promote education and positive attitudes about people and their backgrounds.

## *Integrating First Nations, Métis and Inuit Ways of Knowing*

To encourage the engagement of all students, teaching practices must be culturally competent and inclusive. Collaboration with First Nations, Métis and Inuit community resources and other regional school/health personnel helps to ensure cultural humility, awareness and inclusion within school well-being activities.



Strategies for  
culturally-  
conscious  
teaching practices

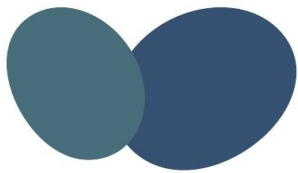




## *Engagement of Elders and Community Members*

The invitation of Elders and other community members to share cultural traditions, values and ways of knowing provides opportunities for the sharing of essential knowledge and values with all students. Schools should familiarize themselves with community protocols for approaching Elders and others to request their support in sharing knowledge and ways of knowing. Parents, guardians, caregivers and community members provide a meaningful source of insight, guidance and support in the education of First Nations, Métis and Inuit students. Schools are encouraged to collaborate with families and communities to ensure sensitivity and respect regarding ways of knowing.





British Columbia's *Integrated Child and Youth Team* (ICY) training framework includes a series of training modules called *Coming Together: Working in Partnership with First Nations, Métis and Inuit Communities, Children and Youth*. These modules were prepared with extensive input from First Nations and Métis people across the BC region, and include information on preferred means of requesting knowledge sharing from members of their communities.

Suggested practices that school teams can engage in to better understand First Nations, Métis and Inuit protocols include:

- ✓ Invite a First Nations, Métis and/or Inuit Elder who can advise you on protocols for working with your school. Be sure to value these services and recognize that the cultural knowledge Elders bring to the table is as valuable as knowledge gained through formal training or professional experience.
- ✓ Consume media (books, art, websites, podcasts, etc.) by people from the local Nations.
- ✓ Recognize that First Nations people, Métis people, Inuit and their communities may have some boundaries around how, when and if knowledge is shared. This may include refraining from writing about or publicizing any information about their teachings without consent from the community.

✓ *BC ICY Provincial Support Office*



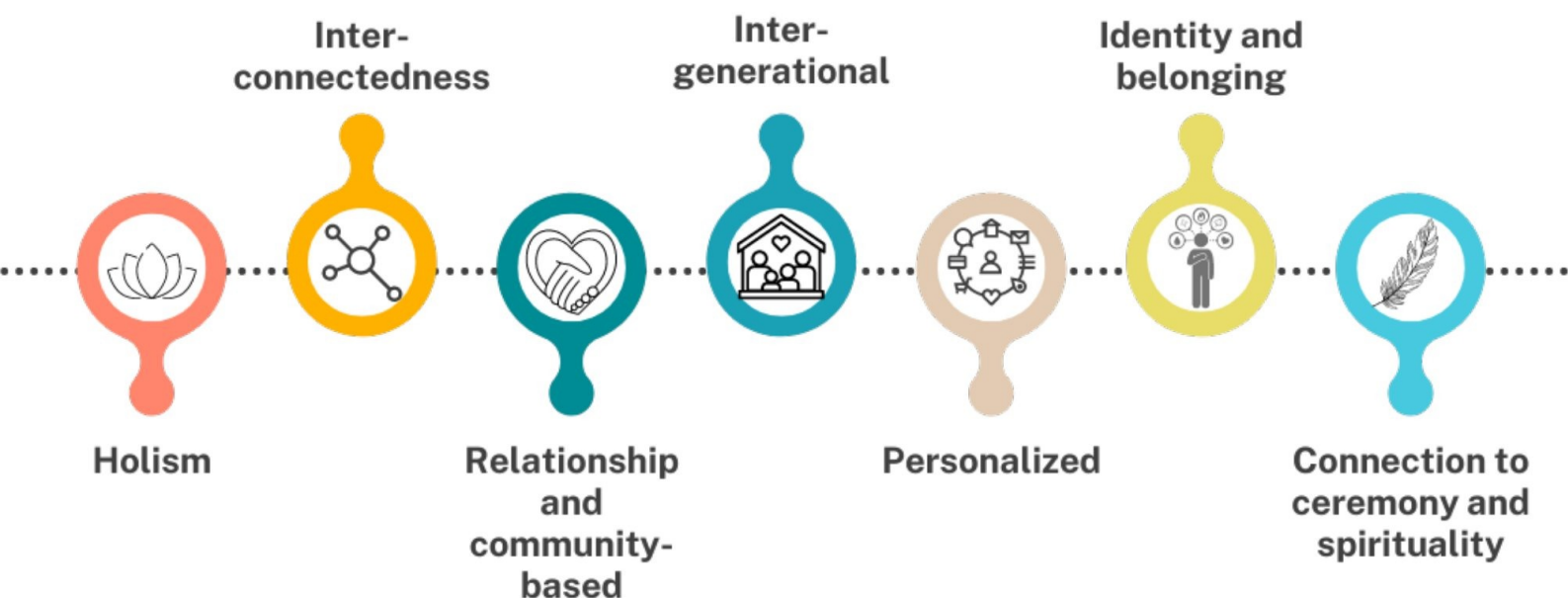
## *First Nations, Métis and Inuit Cultural Connectedness*

Connection to culture is a foundation of health and well-being, and health has always been interconnected with culture, ceremony and relationships. The multi-generational impacts of colonization attempt to separate First Nations people, Métis people and Inuit from their cultures and languages. As a result, many students face barriers to accessing their culture. Educators have a responsibility to support cultural connections for First Nations, Métis and Inuit children and youth.

Barriers to accessing culture may include:

- ❖ A lack of access to relationships with Elders or Knowledge Keepers who can pass on cultural teachings
- ❖ Living away from one's traditional territory and/or Indigenous community due to displacement
- ❖ Not having a place to practice culture because of living in a community that does not value cultural practices
- ❖ Cultural practices are not woven into education activities as they once would have been, so First Nations people, Métis people and Inuit have to carve out separate and/or additional time to connect with culture

Within the BC ICY training modules, a series of commonalities between diverse First Nation and Métis approaches to health and well-being were identified (click on each image to learn more):



*British Columbia ICY Provincial Support Office*







# Strategies for Strengthening Student Connectedness

Student connectedness is related to the psychological wellness need of **Relatedness**, which is essential for the promotion of positive interactions and connections among students, their peers and staff within the classroom and school settings. This need is central to the development of trust and the formation of strong and healthy relationships.

*Relatedness* refers to our need to connect in positive ways with family, peers and others within our social settings.

The need for relatedness is met through interactions with others, our participation in groups and the support and encouragement we receive from others.

Addressing relatedness needs involves strategies that:

- ❖ Provide a welcoming and safe environment in the classroom and school.
- ❖ Encourage exchanges and conversations in which students feel valued and supported.
- ❖ Carry out check-ins with students to see how they are doing and to offer them words of support or encouragement.

## *Strategies to Encourage Relatedness in the Classroom*

The following strategies encourage the development of relatedness in the classroom and at school. These activities can easily be adapted according to the age and level of development of students:

- ❖ Post on a bulletin board interesting pictures and facts about students. This can help newcomers to feel welcomed and that they are an important part of their class.
- ❖ Have students take the initiative to sit in different places during meals, recess or group activities. This will help them get to know other students with whom they have interacted less frequently, and may contribute to a greater sense of community within the classroom.
- ❖ Once or twice a term, write students' names on individual slips of paper and place them in a basket. Invite students to pick a name out of the basket, and to plan one act of encouragement to be carried out for their selected classmate. Encourage students to be creative in how they will encourage others. Possible examples might include writing a nice note, sharing a treat together, or spending time with them during the lunch hour.



- ❖ Set aside a weekly time to develop and reinforce a sense of teamwork in the classroom by doing group work or team activities that require students to get to know each other better. Participate in this team activity with students and be open to sharing interesting facts or points about yourself.
- ❖ Create a committee of students who take care of welcoming new classmates to the classroom or school. Activities may include: checking-in with students to see how they are adapting to their new classroom routines; taking time to eat lunch with students new to the school; providing students and their family members with a tour of the school; or ensuring that newcomer students are introduced to others in their classroom.
- ❖ Adopt a classroom commitment to speaking positively of others when they are not present. Practice skills to support student efforts to speak directly to others in a gentle manner when conflicts need to be resolved or solutions negotiated.

Relatedness in the  
Classroom



## *Strategies to Encourage Relatedness at Home*

The purpose of strategies for relatedness at home is to encourage positive interactions and conversations among students, their parents or guardians, and other family members. These conversations contribute to parents' knowledge of their child's involvement in school and their engagement in learning activities.

- ❖ With your class, carry out a brainstorming discussion on how to apply relatedness strategies at home. Project all students' ideas on a screen, and identify their top six preferred strategies. Invite students to discuss how they might share these strategies with their family members (e.g., emails, school website, Facebook pages, written letters or memos to parents).
- ❖ During a full class or small group activity, invite students to identify three positive things that happened to them during the past week. Ask students to choose one example to share with their parents or guardians.
- ❖ Ask students to share about an activity carried out in class with a family member. Invite students to write down, describe or draw their family member's response or perspective about the class activity, and share in small group discussions.

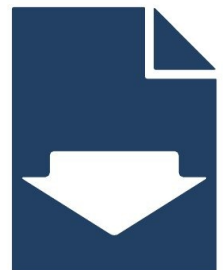
Relatedness at  
Home



## *Strategies to Encourage Relatedness in the Community*

Generosity encompasses actions that contribute to the quality of life of others without necessarily receiving something in return. For relatedness, generosity involves strategies that welcome, include and support others, not only in school, but also in the community. Ask students to undertake a project to help others in the community. Encourage everyone to contribute and work together to come up with a plan for being generous to others. Being generous will help students feel they are contributing to something bigger than themselves.

- ❖ Talk to students about their sense of relatedness and how they can share this with other members of their community. Think about people who may not feel a sense of connectedness with others in their own neighbourhoods.
- ❖ Ask students to think of ways that their school as a whole could develop a greater sense of connectedness within their local community and region. Invite students to brainstorm small-step practices that could be undertaken to involve others in the community in school activities or events.





# Digging Deeper

The Role of School Connectedness in Supporting the Health and Well-Being of Youth

*McCabe, Davis, Mandy & Wong, 2021*



School Belongingness, Well-being, and Mental Health Among Adolescents: Exploring the Role of Loneliness

*Arslan, 2021*



[Manitoba Healthy Schools \(link\)](#)

[Supporting Transgender and Gender Diverse Students in Manitoba Schools \(link\)](#)

Module 2 References

