

# People for Education: Response to Well-Being Strategy

People for Education is in full support of Ontario's work to move the education system beyond narrow goals for academic achievement to a broader, more comprehensive definition of educational success.

Broader goals for education, explicitly defined, will help to ensure that our education system is preparing students to thrive in the long-term. We also support the use of a common framework for success - one that could be used both in schools and in other systems serving young people.

The Ministry of Education's Well-Being Strategy follows strategies developed by the Ministry of Children and Youth Services in identifying four domains of success: Cognitive, Social, Physical, and Emotional. Using the same framework goals within the Ministry and across the youth sector is an essential step in establishing coherence in Ontario's goals and policies for youth, from early learning through post-secondary education. The Well-Being Strategy has also articulated some important core policy areas – for example, Healthy Schools – that have a central role to play in supporting conditions of wellness in relation to learning in schools.

While People for Education supports the broad strokes of this work, we recognize that there are significant challenges that need to be addressed. These challenges sit in three critical areas:

1. Policy confusion, redundancy, and competition
2. Specificity and definition
3. Measurement

## **Policy confusion, redundancy, and competition**

The Ministry of Education is currently supporting a wide array of policies, initiatives, frameworks, and strategies that focus partly or entirely on similar areas of youth development and learning. The range of policies currently in place include:

- *2<sup>nd</sup> Competencies*: focuses on the Interpersonal, Intrapersonal, and Cognitive domains as well as a detailed set of Global Competencies.
- *Foundation for a Healthy School*: includes supports for students' cognitive, emotional, social, and physical development.
- *Equity and Inclusive Education in Ontario Schools*: defines well-being in relation to physical and mental health, a positive sense of self and belonging, and skills to make positive choices.
- *Creating Pathways to Success*: identifies four broad areas of learning: Knowing Yourself, Exploring Opportunities, Making Decisions, and Making Transitions.

While all of these policy taxonomies are potentially viable ways for schools and educators to unpack the complexity of student success beyond academic achievement, together they create confusion. This confusion may become compounded when educators are faced with a range of staff who play different roles in schools, school boards and the Ministry of Education attempting to support implementation of the multiple frameworks. While the intentions of the Well-Being Strategy are laudable, it is vital that we work *first* to rationalize policy redundancy and create one coherent learning framework, in order to reduce work intensification and policy-overload for educators.



## Specificity and definition

The four domains within the proposed Well-Being Strategy are broad and generally defined. They are also, helpfully, the same domain areas that the Ministry of Children and Youth Services is using in their developmental youth framework, *Stepping Up*.

People for Education supports the clarity that a common framework, used across ministries, would provide, and encourages the Ministry to create a competency language that can be used throughout the youth sector in Ontario. A specific competency language is central to creating coherence among strategies, and provides the level of detail required to inform effective measurement methods – one of the goals in the Well-Being Strategy. A coherent competency language also allows for cross-contextual sharing, without diminishing the diverse ways that students may progress within these areas.

Developing a specific language would provide an assessment ‘architecture’ through which schools could generate rich cross-team sharing, and boards could conduct developmental evaluations of the areas of student learning in which they are involved. Having a specific competency language would also ensure consistency of meaning across the diverse landscape of school boards in Ontario – many of which already have locally developed frameworks for broad areas of success.

It is of central importance that each area outlined in the Well-Being Strategy includes specific competencies and well-defined goals. The same language should be reflected in all policy areas across the Ministry, including things like the Learning Skills and Work Habits on report cards and outcomes in the curriculum. The descriptors within the *21<sup>st</sup> Century Competencies* are examples of this level of specificity. Adopting a common learning language would be of great benefit to the Well-Being Strategy and to any work within the Ministry that touches on broad areas of learning.

## Measurement

The Well-Being Discussion Paper states the intention of developing consistent measures for well-being across Ontario schools:

*These measures will provide the system, boards, schools and educators with indicators of how our students are doing beyond literacy and numeracy results. This is not about distilling the complexities of something as intangible as well-being into a simplistic measure. (Ministry, 2016, p. 7)*

Our work in *Measuring What Matters* over the past three years suggests that one set of ‘consistent’ measures cannot provide all actors – system, boards, schools, and educators – with reliable and valid information about how students are doing in relation to their overall success or their general well-being. Asking any single set of measures drawn from one form or method of social research to do this would be an inappropriate use of measurement for the task at hand.

Broad areas of learning are commonly assessed through performance tasks and self-report measures, and well-designed instruments can provide rich information when used together. However, using a single set of indicators of well-being may not only serve to narrow the definition of well-being, but it may also constrain the activities and learning opportunities associated with education for well-being.

We recommend a multiple and diverse approach to the assessment of well-being.

For example, the school climate survey may provide the system, board, or school with information about how students perceive their experience in relation to specific areas such as their feelings of belonging. However, that measure is not appropriate for distilling information about other areas of well-being articulated in the strategy. The school climate survey cannot be used to measure the cognitive domain in relation to students’ classroom learning, nor is it an appropriate assessment for the diverse qualities of social interaction occurring on a day-to-day basis (i.e. the social domain).



A well-designed student survey might provide good information about how students feel, and may even provide information about the dissonance between how they feel, and the goals of various provincial, board or school initiatives. But results of student surveys should not be aggregated to provide one overall measure or set of measures of well-being. While these sorts of measures may sometimes be useful as proxies to assess overall strategies, it is vital to understand their limitations. The kinds of conditions and opportunities provided in schools to support sophisticated concepts such as identity-building or social awareness should not be standardized simply so that they can help to elicit consistent information.

People for Education acknowledges the usefulness of having a number of proxy measures to provide overall information about broad areas of student success and well-being. These proxy measures can be used to inform more effective policy, funding and public reporting. But we strongly advise against using the same measures up and down the system.

We recommend, instead, measuring a number of indicators from a range of domains across a sample of the student population, and investigating further when necessary. This method would prevent people from stretching indicators beyond their intended purpose by, for example, using information to compare schools' well-being achievement.

## Conclusion

Ontario's education system is rightfully lauded as highly successful. Overall scores in reading, writing and mathematics are relatively high, and achievement gaps connected to socio-economic status are relatively low. But People for Education's Ontario School Surveys, and reports from organizations such as the Ontario Principals' Council, have raised concerns about work intensification and initiative overload.

Rather than introducing a new policy, which may be viewed as yet another initiative, People for Education recommends the rationalization of existing policies. For example, many of the goals outlined in the Well-Being Discussion Paper are similar to the goals of Ontario's *Creating Pathways* policy, with its aim that students become "confident, independent, and effective education and career/life planners throughout their lives."

The challenge of these multiple strategies/initiatives is in their lack of coherence and their overlapping goals. They create the perception that schools are responsible for implementing an ever-increasing roster of individual programs. For this reason, we recommended that the Ministry use existing policy – in particular the *Creating Pathways to Success* policy, portfolios, and professional development – as a key anchor for the upcoming Well-Being Strategy. We also recommend that the Ministry develop consistent language and goals throughout its policies so that the links and interconnections are clear. For example, one consistent strategy could link the portfolios in *Creating Pathways* with the Well-Being Strategy and the Learning Skills and Work Habits on Ontario report cards.

It is vital that the system supports the well-being of all students. The most effective way to do that is to focus on policy coherence, deeper support for existing strategies and initiatives, and extreme caution regarding the use of simplistic measures.