



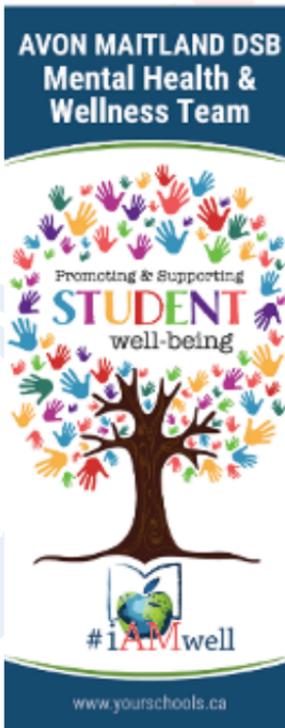
Ontario  
Trillium Foundation



# STUDENTS AS LEADERS: SUPPORTING MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING IN AMDSB



## "YOU MATTER!" INTERIM REPORT JUNE 2020



### Report Outline

This interim report provides an overview of the "You Matter!" project through the 2019-2020 school year.

1. Project Context 2019-2020
2. Connecting "You Matter!" to Relevant Research
3. "You Matter!" 2019-2020 Timeline
4. Symposium Findings at a Glance
5. Learning From School Plan Analysis
6. "You Matter!" Project Discoveries to Date
7. Looking to the Future
8. Proposed Plan for 2020-2021

Report prepared by Dr. Michelle Searle and Dr. Lori Kirkpatrick  
with Research Assistance from Rachael Smyth, Katrina Carbone,  
Christina Julia Koumoutsidis, Rebecca Evans,  
Jayda Conti & Braden Cornfield

*Inquiry team members are affiliated with Queen's University and Western University*

## Project Context 2019-2020

**"You Matter!" Objective:** To engage students as youth-leaders in supporting youth mental health and well-being (MHWB) at AMDSB schools

**Project Summary:** As a collaborative school-community initiative, funded by AMDSB and Rural Response as part of its Ontario Trillium Foundation and Tanner Steffler Foundation project, the project team worked with schools to identify youth-leaders drawn from Grades 7-12. These student leaders, operating with administrator, educator and district support, created plans, and then implemented and monitored MHWB initiatives focused on goals established in their schools.

**Inquiry Questions:** Several inquiry questions were identified at the start of this project. The overarching question, which is the focus of this report, is: **How do student-designed and student-implemented MHWB initiatives support students in schools?**

Secondary questions by inquiry purposes are listed below:

### *Student Perceptions of Mental Health and Well-Being at their Schools*

1. What initiatives do students identify as most successful?
2. What do students perceive as the most significant needs in terms of MHWB at their schools?

### *Designing and Implementing the Initiatives*

1. What are students' perceptions of the leadership activities at the "You Matter!" symposium?
2. What mental health initiatives do students design and implement?
3. How do student teams work together to implement the initiatives at their school?
4. What challenges do they face in implementing their initiatives?
5. How do they overcome the challenges of implementing their initiatives?

### *Influence*

1. What are the experiences of the student leaders who implement the initiatives?
2. How many people at the schools were reached?
3. How often were they reached?
4. How do the initiatives influence the MHWB of students?

## Connecting "You Matter!" to Relevant Research

A mentally healthy school includes teaching social and emotional skills, engaging the guardian community and intentionally creating a positive school community (Beyondblue, 2017). Empowering youth as leaders in MHWB provides lasting traction within the greater community (Iwasaki, 2016). When youth are recognized as leaders at the community level, research reveals they have significant influential power (Hastings et al., 2010). In the school environment, when partnered with teachers and administrators, youth leaders are similarly influential and can address the issues that matter most to students in a targeted and meaningful way (Sussman, 2015).

Emphasizing youth voices and mobilizing youth for the improvement of MHWB leads to positive outcomes. Youth engagement and school connectedness is recognized as a lead predictor of positive adolescent health (Bryan et al., 2012), which highlights the benefits of empowering student leaders for their own wellbeing as well as for the student body as a whole. Empowering students as leaders and engaging students increases students' resiliency (Breg, Willis-Stewart & Kendall, 2016), which in turn leads to long term wellness.

Youth-led programming and monitoring creates opportunities for the community and young people to work collaboratively in addressing issues that matter to them. Learning generated from collaboration can be powerful for everyone involved. Involving youth in planning, implementing and monitoring can help move projects forward, and integrate youth into their schools and communities, while also facilitating the development of questions relevant to the youth and appropriate for their school and community (London et al., 2003).

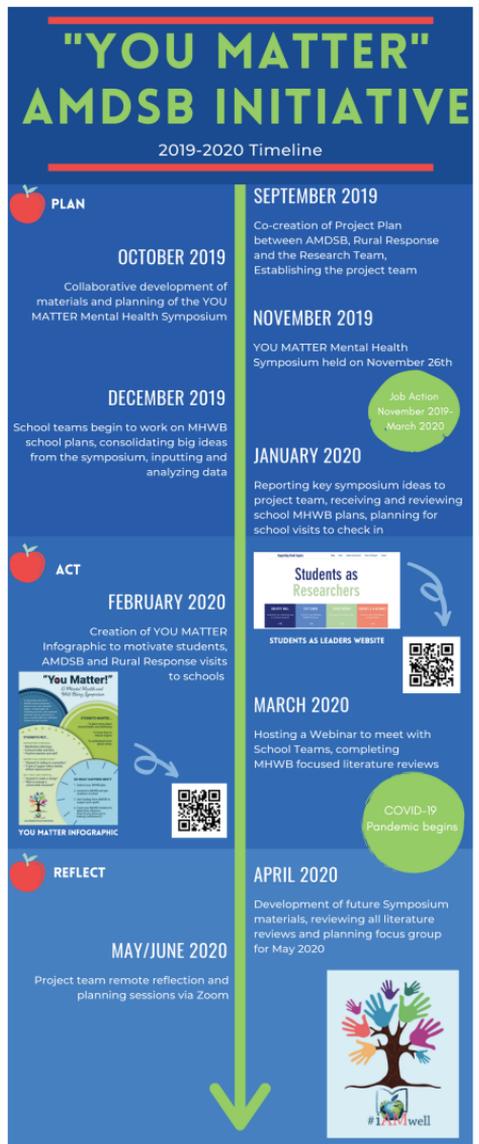
Researchers and practitioners note that when youth are provided with appropriate tools and resources, they can create lasting change for themselves and their communities (Delgado & Staples, 2008).

## Relevant Research Continued...

Many factors influence the success of youth-led initiatives and can also impact whether changes are implemented and sustained. One important factor is the readiness of the organization itself (Fox & Cater, 2011). Research suggests that programs risk being unsuccessful without a supportive adult, and that the support remains important through the entire process (Bulanda et al., 2014). Understanding what motivates youth participants and how they benefit can also promote sustainability (Krasny & Doyle, 2002). Other outcomes, such as, developing relationships, receiving recognition, and seeing tangible results, can encourage sustaining youth involvement (Fox & Cater, 2011).

## 2019-2020 Timeline

This timeline provides an overview of the 2019-2020 school year.



# Symposium Findings at a Glance

On November 26, 2019, AMDSB, in partnership with Rural Response for Healthy Children, hosted the "You Matter!" MHWB symposium. Student leaders from each AMDSB school with students in Grades 7-12 came together to learn about MHWB supports and plan for MHWB initiatives in their own schools. Data collected at the symposium identified students' MHWB knowledge, perceptions and needs. To summarize the key ideas from the "You Matter!" MHWB Symposium, we examined 760 contributing data points. The symposium acted as a "kick off" to brainstorm and implement MHWB initiatives within students' own school communities. School teams were encouraged to think about the goal(s) of their initiative(s) and the ways in which they could monitor the impact of their initiative(s) in their schools.



TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 26, 2019  
(premier session 8:00-12:00 PM)  
10:00AM - 2:30PM

Libro Community Hall (239 Bill Fleming Dr, Clinton)



Aron Millard District School Board

Students and teachers from each school completed **Entry & Exit Tickets** in which they described the supportive initiatives happening at their schools and the desire to reduce stigma so that resources were better utilized. Students value the opportunities for conversation about MHWB. Students requested more information about types of mental health challenges and strategies and resources to share in their schools to support those in their schools struggling with MHWB.





Each school team created a **Mental Health Mosaic** which depicted the MHWB initiatives occurring in their schools (on average 17 initiatives/school) and proposed ideas that could be feasible in their school community and worth implementing in their schools in the future based on their school's needs (on average 4 initiatives/school). Elementary and secondary schools reported similarities in the MHWB initiatives their schools were running. School initiatives were mostly ongoing, established practices (~70% of initiatives). School teams described an ongoing focus in creating student-led MHWB opportunities at their schools.



Finally, school teams participated in a **Gallery Walk** to see other schools' Mental Health MosaiCs. This activity was designed to encourage the brainstorming and sharing of ideas in the context of implementing MHWB initiatives at each school.



Participants at the "You Matter!" symposium demonstrated a shared commitment and desire to support student MHWB. Participants were eager to learn about how to support their own and others' MHWB; they appreciated hearing the student voice throughout the symposium.

### Insights from the "You Matter!" Symposium

- Provide access to knowledge about MHWB
- Continue working to reduce stigma
- Create a MHWB handbook for schools
- Explore difficulties in accessing resources
- Provide opportunities to continue exchanging ideas and discussing MHWB

**"[You]  
inspired  
us to  
make  
change"**

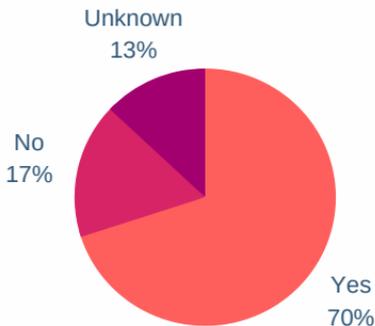
## Learning From School Plan Analysis

At the "You Matter!" Symposium, school teams began brainstorming a MHWB plan for their school. By continuing to work on the plan back at their schools, the plan was intended to be a *living document* to inform intentional and systematic action over the school year. School teams were encouraged to add ideas as the year progressed.

School Group Numbers
Total student leaders: 250
Total school plans submitted: 23
Elementary plans: 15
Secondary plans: 2
Grade 7-12 plans: 6
<b>Total students reached by</b>
<b>"You Matter!" 2019-2020: ~7,514</b>

School teams were asked to share a copy of their plan in January 2020. Based on the plans, a school visit from district staff who support MHWB was organized. The purpose of the school visit was to provide support and offer guidance as needed while schools were implementing and monitoring their MHWB initiative. This spring, all planning documents were systematically reviewed by the "You Matter" inquiry team to provide insight on what school teams did, what went well, and what support can be provided next year

### Did MHWB Initiative Begin Before School Closures?



### Sample MHWB School Goals

- Build a stronger school community
- Raise mental health awareness
- Reduce mental health stigma
- Create a sense of community
- Bring a sense of friendship
- Foster student belonging
- Reduce students' anxiety
- Create relationships
- Support students



## "You Matter!" Project Discoveries to Date

This interim report makes visible some of the work undertaken on the "You Matter!" project to date. To the best extent possible, we have depicted the diverse youth-leaders, educators and community supports who have worked cohesively to create opportunities to increase knowledge, raise awareness, and make a positive contribution to the continuous improvement of MHWB. What is more difficult to fully capture in this report, or any report, is the enormous investment of time and energy of the champions who make a multifaceted initiative like "You Matter!" possible. It is essential to acknowledge the efforts of the students, as well as the collaborators within AMDSB at the district office, in the schools and in the broader community.

AMDSB has had a long-time focus on equity, inclusion and well-being. The "You Matter!" project represents a pivotal collaboration with Rural Response and the involvement of other community organizations to provide a youth-focused extension of the ongoing work in AMDSB. Importantly, the "You Matter!" project was developed in response to data from previous MHWB inquiry which showed that students wanted to have a more significant role in learning about and creating positive change related to MHWB. Students are speaking up about MHWB and AMDSB is listening. While the "You Matter!" project was initiated at a particular point in time, the underlying values about a holistic approach to student success remain a priority in AMDSB and continue to be reflected in the planning cycle for 2020-2021.



The 2019-2020 "You Matter!" project was designed to be fully implemented and the inquiry complete by June 2020. Like so many aspects of our education system this year, the plan for the project was disrupted due to the global pandemic. The project team met throughout school closures to plan for continued MHWB support and look for ways to sustain the "You Matter!" project into the coming school year. Everyone involved remains committed to youth-leadership in MHWB and recognizes the role that youth can have in making changes. As a result of learning from this year, there are plans to amplify the role that youth-leaders have in the "You Matter!" project. The project team will continue to plan for ways to engage and support more youth-leaders and student voice into planning and project decision-making. There is a heightened need to promote youth MHWB and intentionally foster a sense of belonging as we look ahead to 2020-2021. The "You Matter!" project team will rise to this challenge by offering a blend of in-person and online modes to maintain regular contact with youth-leaders and ensure school groups have the resources required to promote MHWB in their school.

The "You Matter!" project was delayed this year, but everyone involved remembers the conversations this topic ignited and the passion youth-leaders brought to this process. The project team remains committed to the promotion of youth-led MHWB as well as identifying ways to continuously improve. Our experiences and data to date suggest that the "You Matter!" project is a successful idea for youth-engagement that was launched in a difficult time. Nonetheless, "You Matter!" has provided a sustainable framework that values youth as leaders. This project recognizes youth as contributors and leaders who have the capacity for further involvement in a positive MHWB movement.

In this interim report, we respond to the overarching question:

## **How does the "You Matter!" project support the mental health and well-being of students in schools?**

What follows is a list of 10 significant ways the "You Matter!" project is supporting the youth mental health and well-being in schools.

### **"You Matter!" is:**

1. Providing an opportunity for people to come together to explicitly talk about and receive education about youth MHWB
2. Fostering a community within, across and beyond schools to support MHWB.
3. Striving to reduce stigma about MHWB by involving multiple people, with diverse perspectives, in the conversations and initiatives/activities.
4. Offering awareness of school and community-based resources to support youth MHWB.
5. Creating an opportunity for students to be involved in identifying MHWB needs and then planning for improvement in these areas.
6. Providing leadership development opportunities for students through the symposium, adult mentoring, web resources and ongoing project support.
7. Promoting awareness and shared conversations between students, teachers, school leaders, families, caregivers, and community partners about MHWB.
8. Supporting the development of activities and initiatives in schools that respond to individual school contexts and needs.
9. Encouraging MHWB and sense of belonging through defining 'sense of belonging' and co-creating criteria to assist in monitoring the impact, through promotion of building school community, school spirit, district-wide pride, and community resource accessibility.
10. Offering different pathways for engagement to remain accessible and relevant to a wide variety of people. For example, there are MHWB initiatives that promote physical activity while others foster creative exploration.



# FUTURE "YOU MATTER" PROJECT ACTIVITIES

1. ENGAGE STUDENTS  
IN LEADERSHIP ROLES  
TO PLAN YOU MATTER

2. BRING STUDENTS  
TOGETHER IN  
SEPTEMBER TO GEAR  
UP FOR THE NEW YEAR

3. IDENTIFY VIRTUAL  
PLATFORMS TO  
CONNECT AND  
COMMUNICATE

4. IDENTIFY  
STRATEGIES FOR  
DOCUMENTING THE  
INFLUENCE OF  
STUDENT LED  
INITIATIVES

## COMING SOON!

A checklist and  
materials to prepare  
for You Matter 2020-  
2021

## CHECK IT OUT!

Scan the code to see resources to  
help you document the influence of  
You Matter initiatives; a guide to  
working with photos is in  
development



## Looking to the Future

Moving into the 2020-2021 school year, the "You Matter!" project will continue to expand to include another year with a deeper focus on youth-led MHWB initiatives that foster a sense of belonging within schools, throughout AMDSB, and the broader community.

Future "You Matter!" project activities are outlined on the infographic on this page and a projection of project phases are outlined on the 2020-2021 timeline (next page).

To close, **we acknowledge the voices of youth-leaders**, without their commitment, a project of this nature could not happen. Youth have tremendous capacity to make a difference; through this project we will continue to collaborate, listen and learn.

