



## Creating Safe & Caring Schools through a Focus on Wellness

In school communities everyone has a responsibility for wellness because healthy students are better learners and better educated children are healthier. Amendments to *The School Act* in Alberta require that **students, parents and school authorities share the responsibility** for ensuring welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environments that respect diversity and nurture a sense of belonging and a positive sense of self. In other words, **we are all responsible for creating a culture of wellness in the school community.**

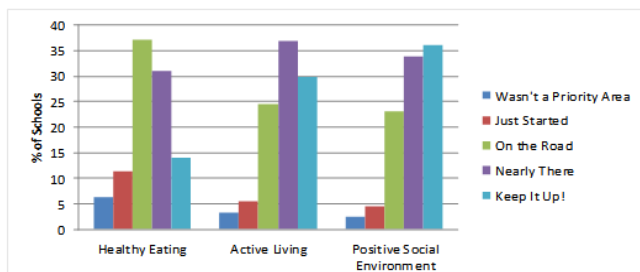
### Accountability Pillars 2014

At school, do most students respect each other?

- **Grade 4 students** 73% said Yes
- **Grades 7 & 10 students** 66% said Yes

Modeling and teaching **social emotional skills to students** helps them to be respectful of one another.

**Wellness Fund projects focus on three priority areas; healthy eating, active living and positive social environments; ALL of which contribute to a safe and caring environment.**



Perceived levels of engagement by schools involved in district projects 2014-15

### What is a Safe & Caring Learning Environment?

#### An environment where:

- Healthy and respectful relationships are fostered
- Students feel that adults care for them as a group and as individuals
- Positive mental health is promoted
- Values, rights & responsibilities are respected
- Support is demonstrated through collaboration, high expectations, mutual trust and caring
- Diversity is respected, celebrated and understood as a strength
- Expectations are clear, consistent, and regularly communicated
- Consequences of unacceptable behaviour take into account the students age, maturity, and individual circumstances
- Support is provided for those impacted by inappropriate behaviour as well as for those who engage in inappropriate behaviours
- Children, youth and adults model positive social-emotional skills

**The Wellness Fund supports school communities to develop a positive environment through a comprehensive school health approach.**

### A Whole School Approach

A whole-school approach is inclusive of all school staff, students and partners and touches all

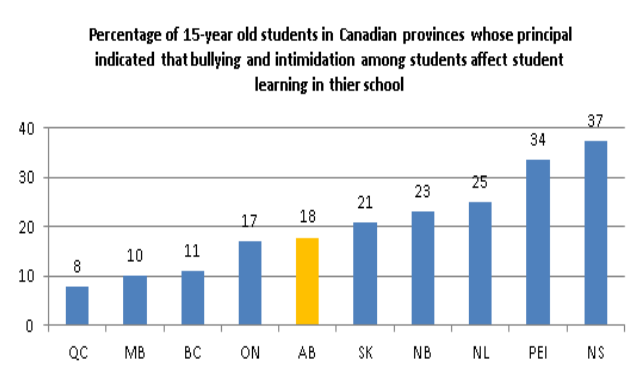
aspects of school life. It promotes positive mental health and academic achievement and includes social-emotional learning in school practices, policies and partnerships. The *School Act* requires school boards to develop a code of conduct.

**This Code of Conduct must include:**

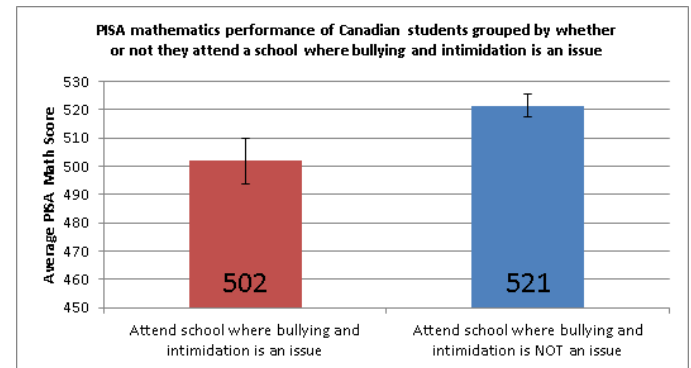
- What is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour, whether or not it occurs within the school building, during the school day or by electronic means
- Consequences of unacceptable behaviour, which must take account of the student’s age, maturity and individual circumstances
- Support for students who are impacted by bullying behaviour, as well for those who engage in bullying behaviour

**The School Act defines bullying as:**

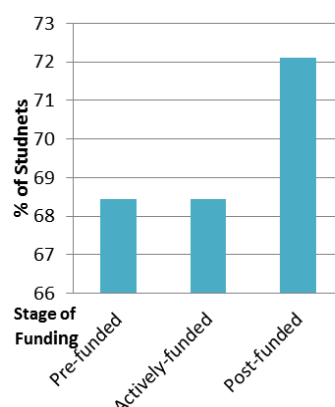
“Repeated and hostile or demeaning behaviour by an individual in the school community where the behaviour is intended to cause harm, fear or distress to one or more other individuals in the school community, including psychological harm or harm to an individual’s reputation.”



**The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) PISA data 2012 shows the levels of bullying in Alberta schools.** We know that bullying not only impacts mental and emotional well-being, but has a negative impact on academic achievement.



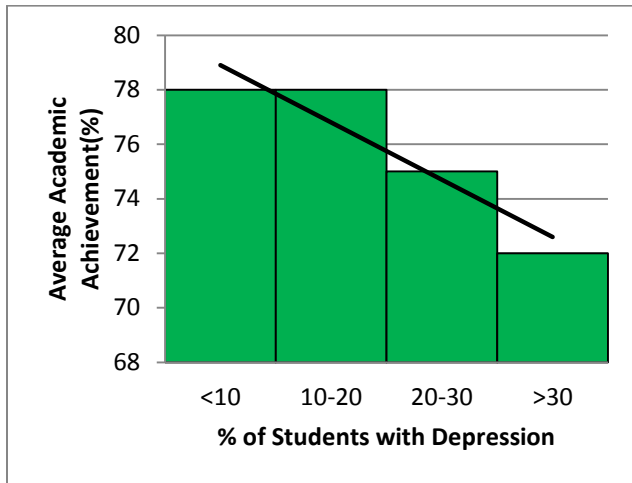
When school communities focus on building healthy relationships between students, bullying behaviours decrease. Alberta schools are using a number of strategies to support welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environments that respect diversity and nurture a sense of belonging and a positive sense of self. By making sustainable changes to the social environment, schools are reducing the level of bullying behaviours in their communities.



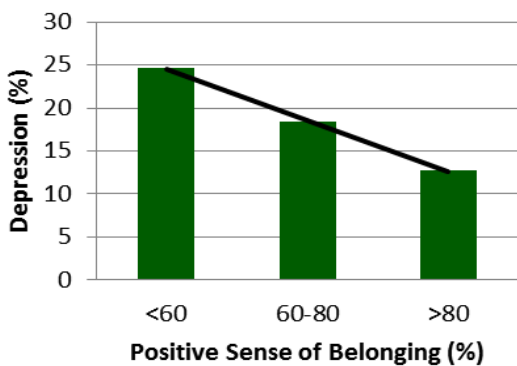
The percentage of students who are **not subjected to bullying** is higher among the schools that are in the post-funded stage (72.10%) than the ones in the pre-funded and actively-funded stage (68.43%)



Provincial *Tell Them from Me* data indicates that a positive social environment increases students' academic outcomes and decreases anxiety and depression.



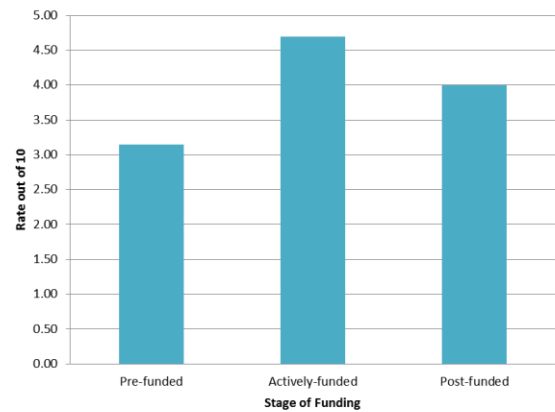
Positive relationships between teachers and students and among students increase the psychological well-being of students and decrease absenteeism, suspensions, substance abuse, and bullying.



Many concerns identified by schools have a relationship element, such as a lack of belonging. One of the principal ways to address these issues is to promote relationships between students and adults, and among students themselves.

Wellness Fund projects report that increased advocacy supports the creation of a sense of belonging for students. It is also important for students to connect with a significant adult to provide them with advice and continuous encouragement.

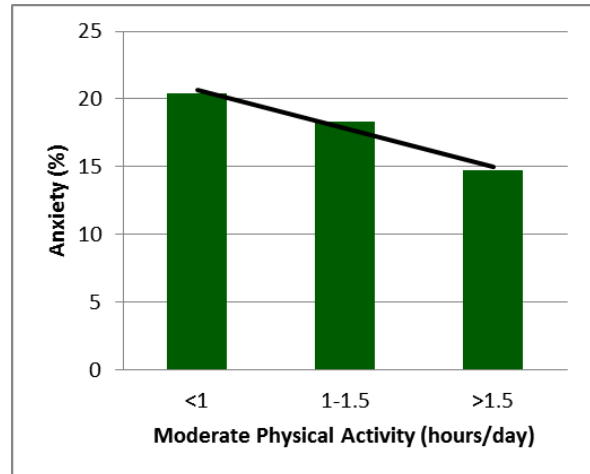
### Advocacy at School



Data suggests that students are engaged more readily in changes to their school's culture when they are leading the change. Providing students with an opportunity to gain greater control over decisions and actions that affect them, creates a sense of belonging and connectedness in schools.

A focus on healthy relationships can include a range of topics such as responsible sexual behaviour, self-esteem, boundaries, relationship violence, LGBTQ and two spirit youth, bullying, addictions and/or healthy choices. Students can help create a school community where **diversity is respected, celebrated and understood as a strength.**

Building social emotional skills in students helps them to take ownership of their own emotional, intellectual, physical, spiritual and social well-being.



For optimal impact on well-being, it is important that opportunities to be physically active occur in welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environments that respect diversity and nurture a sense of belonging and a positive sense of self.

A healthy nutrition landscape is also essential to creating a caring environment. According to the American Psychological Association (APA), students who eat healthy are better able to cope with stress and better regulate their emotions.

CARMMA research into the nutritional impact on social emotional development, reports that, **“Our brains biochemistry is determined by the food we eat more than any other organ in our body.”**

**A whole-school focus on wellness ensures a welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environment that respect diversity and nurtures a sense of belonging and a positive sense of self**

*“Research tells us that mental health development and social emotional learning are not secondary to academic achievement—something to fit in when we have time. They are foundational to academic achievement and to nurturing healthy individuals who can navigate life’s challenges and make positive contributions to our communities.” (Carney P, 2015)*

An **active** lifestyle is associated with improved interpersonal **relationships**, social skills, self-image, self-worth, cognitive functioning, and brain composition changes. Regular physical activity contributes to the management of a range of mild to severe psychological difficulties.