



Canadian School Mental Health
Leadership Network

Le réseau de leadership
canadien en santé mentale scolaire

YEAR TWO SUMMARY REPORT

for

The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation

Submitted by:
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On behalf of the Canadian School Mental Health Leadership Network
Steering Committee

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The Canadian School Mental Health Leadership Network (CSMHLN) would like to express sincere appreciation for the foundational funding offered to School Mental Health ASSIST (now School Mental Health Ontario), without which the newly formed pan-Canadian Network would not be possible. We are pleased to share the continued strides made in developing and optimizing this valued and innovative vehicle for cross-provincial learning. We believe strongly that the model of connecting system leaders with experts in school mental health research and practice has supported the strengthening of evidence-informed decision-making for students in school boards across the country. This report summarizes work from the second year of CSMHLN activity.



CONTEXT

In 2017, School Mental Health Ontario (previously known as School Mental Health ASSIST) received funding from The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation to support further development and communication of a province-wide model for advancing student mental health in Ontario schools. The initiative was sponsored by the Foundation's WellAhead philanthropic initiative which aimed to improve child and youth mental health by integrating social and emotional wellbeing into K-12 education. Project goals included the identification and collation of key SMH-ON implementation science learnings, for the benefit of Ontario stakeholders and leaders in other jurisdictions in Canada interested in system-wide approaches to student wellness. The project was intended to provide a more in-depth analysis of how and why the SMH-ON+ approach had been effective, in alignment with the Foundation's interest in "supporting K-12 education systems across Canada to integrate a focus on mental health and wellbeing as a core priority".


Building on McConnell's approval of the proposed use of the remaining funds allocated the next and final phase of the project has been focused on the development of a national network of Canadian school mental health and system leaders in collaboration with the Canadian School Board Association (CSBA) and the Canadian Association of School System Administrators (CASSA). SMH-ON has core responsibility for mobilizing school mental health experts, project vision and infrastructure, and ongoing monitoring, and CASSA has kindly assumed responsibility for financial management and reporting (see Appendix III). Vania Sakelaris, from VAS & Associates Inc., serves as the Secretariat for the Network. All members of the CSMHLN steering committee have equal input on project directions and decisions.

PROGRESS UPDATE

Members of the 2022 steering committee continued to include the founding members who bring to bear expertise in school mental health and in school system leadership:

- Ken Bain, Canadian Association of School System Administrators
- Dr. Cindy Finn, Lester B. Pearson School Board, Quebec
- Nathan Ip, Edmonton Public School Board, Alberta
- Nancy Pynch-Worthylake, Canadian School Board Association, CSBA
- Dr. Kathy Short, School Mental Health Ontario, Ontario
- Vania Sakelaris, VAS & Associates Inc., Ontario





The work of the Network continued to be informed by Thought Leaders in school mental health including collaboration with the following:

- Dr. Brenda Restoule, First Peoples Wellness Circle
- Dr. Deinera Exner-Cortens, University of Calgary
- Dr. Kathy Georgiades, Offord Centre for Child Studies
- Dr. Jean Clinton, McMaster University
- Dr. John LeBlanc, Dalhousie University
- Dr. Michael Ungar, Resilience Research Centre


Each of the virtual meetings (3) hosted in 2022 included a facilitated topic of focus provided by one of the Thought Leaders that have continued to graciously support this National capacity building and knowledge mobilization effort. The meetings have continued to include fireside chats followed by breakout discussions building on the topic of focus. Following each meeting, members of the Network are provided with a link to the fireside chat recording, as well as a summary of proceedings building on the information shared and received (available to the Foundation upon request). Network members continue to be invited to share the emerging information at their discretion in their regions with their respective stakeholders to help support and address local issues, and to support collective learning and decision-making.

Building on the feedback collected from members via survey regarding topics of interest, below is an overview of the focus for leadership sessions in 2022:

- **March 2022:** (Thought Leader – Dr. Deinera Exner-Cortens)
Impact of Pandemic on Younger Learners and on Youth
- **April 2022:** (Thought Leader – Dr. Jean Clinton)
Early Childhood and the Impact of Toxic Stress on Younger Learners
- **October 2022:** (Thought Leader – Dr. John LeBlanc)
Social Emotional Learning

The session related to COVID-19 impacts led by Dr. Exner-Cortens provided system leaders with a glimpse into trauma and equity informed practices at the school board level, and ways to support educators in their use. It offered a balanced view of what we know, and what we do not yet know, and included a discussion regarding a recent Alberta study and data on trauma. It further provided examples of effective ways to show commitment to mental health as a school system leader, including ways to help influence policy using evidence informed exemplars.





The thought-provoking session led by Dr. Clinton left the Network with much to reflect on, and a strong desire for more learning in this area. She illuminated how categorically different the early childhood years are, and highlighted how toxic stress can affect or derail child development. She provided insightful examples of what this may look like in classrooms today, in the context of the impact of the pandemic. She provided examples and shared related resources outlining how early childhood experiences affect lifelong health and learning.

Dr. LeBlanc's insightful presentation was effective in catalyzing discussions regarding how social and emotional learning (SEL) skills are currently addressed in curriculum and policy and supported dialogue regarding strategies to help address with a school board or provincial context. He reinforced the importance of evaluation, as well as the key role that education systems plan with respect to the development of the 'whole child'. He highlighted the work of CASEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning), including their current work which is focused on developing and refining transformative SEL toward equity. Conversation related to the need for introducing SEL within learning environments that prioritize anti-racism and anti-oppression, with ample learning for educators related to understanding bias and privilege. Identity affirming SEL supports student strengths and is contextualized for the communities served.

During the course of the year, members of the Steering Committee under the leadership of Dr. Cindy Finn, helped to promote the important work of the Network through development of an article for submission to CASSA's *Leaders and Learners* national magazine¹ (published in the summer of 2022). Promotion efforts also included references during Dr. Clinton's keynote speeches². This led to an increase in correspondence and requests for information, as well as requests to become members. The updated membership has been included in the appendix. Copies of this article are available upon request.


NEXT STEPS

In 2023, the Network will continue to offer a series of web meetings on school mental health topics of interest to Network Collaborators. Network members have requested a similar schedule of learning to what was offered in 2022, with web meetings 3-4 times a year and between-meeting sharing as appropriate and

¹ https://www.cassa-acgcs.ca/cms/lib/ON01929128/Centricity/Domain/34/LL_Mag_2022_Summer.pdf

² <https://bcpta.ourconference.ca/index.php?Page=Keynote&track=1>





needed. Surveys conducted at several points in the year have yielded a range of topics of interest, and broad agreement that the structure and content of the sessions to date have continued to be considered beneficial and worthwhile.

All Thought Leaders and Steering Committee members have indicated an interest in continuing in their role, with the exception of Dr. LeBlanc who has since retired, Nathan Ip who left his role as a Trustee to pursue a new opportunity, and Nancy Pynch-Worthylake who resigned in December as she has accepted a secondment opportunity. The Interim CSBA Executive Director Mike Roberts has joined the Steering Committee in her place. All Network Collaborators except those who have resigned from their school system role have continued on with their participation.

A survey was again circulated to members in December 2022 to help inform planning for topics and speakers for 2023 meetings of the network (3 have been planned for February, May and October). The winter session recently hosted focused on Technology Use and School Mental Health, and was presented by two experts: Dr. Christopher Mushquash, Clinical Psychologist and Canada Research Chair in Indigenous Mental Health and Addiction, and Dr. Elaine Toombs, a Clinical Psychologist and CIHR Banting Postdoctoral Fellow. The upcoming session in May will be focused on school violence and implications for school mental health.

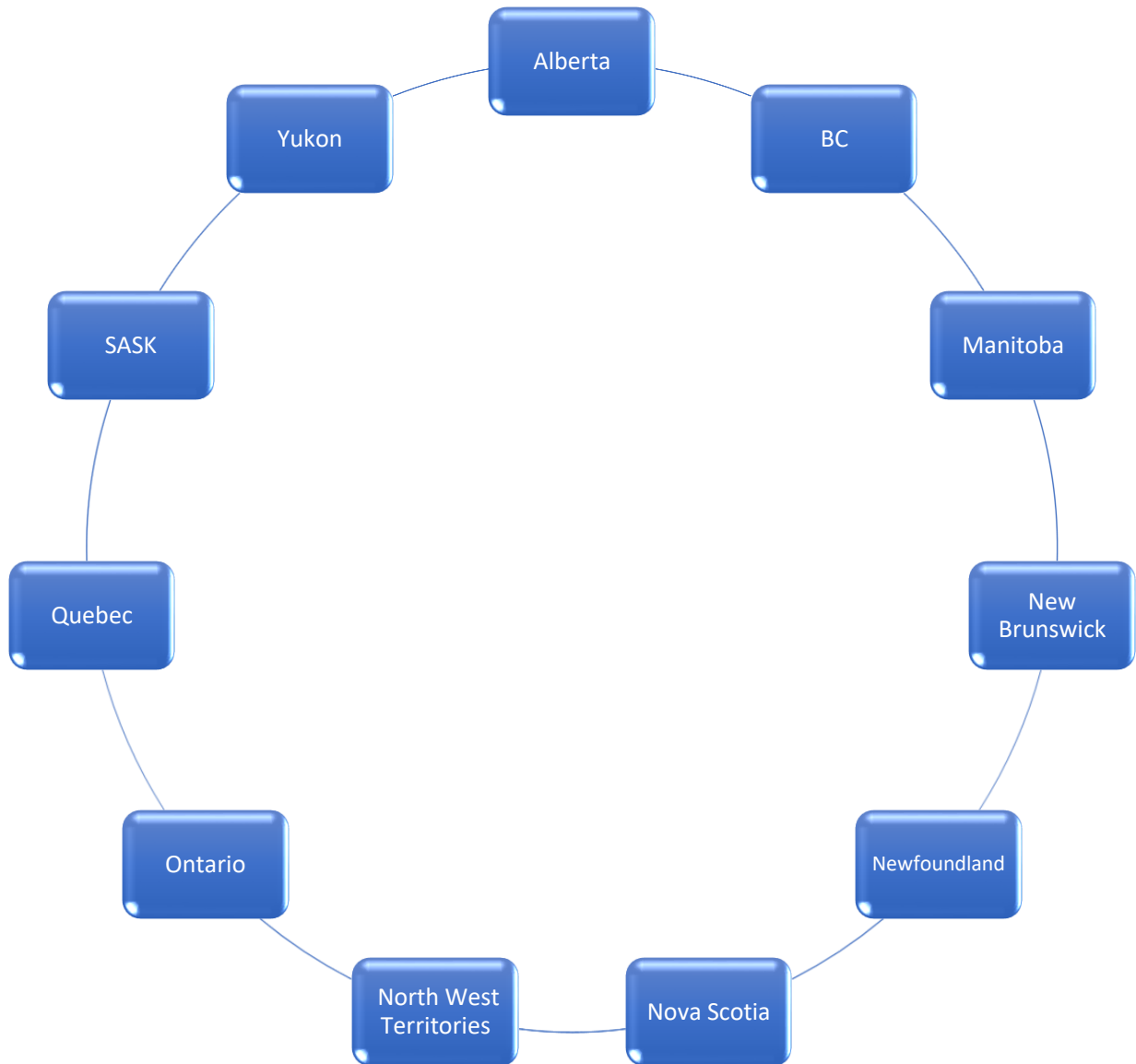
In summary, the CSMHLN has continued to contribute value for the benefit of school mental health leaders from across Canada and has been very well received. We remain extremely grateful for the funding from the McConnell Foundation which will allow for continued expansion of this concept through 2023.

Should you have any questions about the initiative and its vision for the future, we would be pleased to meet to discuss this further.



APPENDIX

Network Membership Overview – As of December 31, 2022 (Provinces & Territories Represented)



Membership also includes National Representation through: Assembly of First Nations, Canadian Association of School System Administrators (CASSA) and Canadian School Board Association (CSBA)

