WellAhead

Advancing Wellbeing in Schools

15 lessons
about education,
philanthropy &
systems change

January 2017

WellAhead Year 1 Overview

15 Lessons on:

Introduction

Child and youth mental health is a growing concern within Canada and internationally. A strong and growing body of evidence shows that promoting social and emotional wellbeing among children and youth can not only support positive mental health, but also improve their success in school and life. The universal and influential nature of schools make them an ideal channel to easily reach young people. Yet, Canadian schools do not consistently address social and emotional wellbeing as a core part of their role.

What is WellAhead?

WellAhead is a national philanthropic initiative that aims to improve child and youth mental health by integrating social and emotional wellbeing into K-12 education. Our focus is on shifting culture, structures, priorities, and practices of schools and the education system at large. Working with stakeholders across Canada, WellAhead takes an emergent approach to test different levers for change, scale what works, and share learnings.

WellAhead

WellAhead in British Columbia

Following nearly two years of consultation, WellAhead launched in British Columbia (BC), Canada in 2015.

41 out of 60 school districts applied to take part, of which 6 were selected based on fit for purpose, existing structures and multistake-holder collaboration, and geographical diversity.

6 Pilot Districts

17 Schools Participated

79 Classrooms Engaged

1600 Students Impacted

Nisga'a (SD 92)
Context: primarily Indigenous
Student Population: 406
Total Schools: 5

Sea to Sky (SD 48)
Context: mixed urban/rural
Student Population: 5,250
Total Schools: 23

Okanagan Skaha (SD 67)
Context: mixed urban/rural
Student Population: 4,194
Total Schools: 33

Alberni (SD 70)
Context: rural
Student Population: 6,147
Total Schools: 23

Greater Victoria (SD 61)
Context: urban
Student Population: 23,754
Total Schools: 77

Coquitlam (SD 43)
Context: urban
Student Population: 34,752
Total Schools: 100

In our first year, we tested whether the following strategies could result in more meaningful integration of social and emotional wellbeing in the six pilot districts:

**1** A community-led, participatory change process based on social innovation labs

We hypothesized that by giving agency to each district to collectively ideate and select solutions, then prototype these in real time, there would be greater ownership, buy-in and sustained support for social and emotional wellbeing.

2 A strategic focus on everyday practices

Everyday practices to promote wellbeing were framed as things that were easy to do, didn't require training, time or money, and could be easily incorporated into the class and/or school routine.

3 Adherence to a core set of values

Our approach was guided by a set of principles: collaboration, mass participation, collective ownership, transparency, and emergence. These values were meant to address the gaps in existing initiatives that we learned about in our consultation phase.
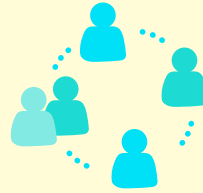
How We Worked

The Structure
The WellAhead team was made up of a **BC Lead** who supported districts through the process, a **Knowledge Manager** who led the learning and evaluation, two people from **MaRS Solutions Lab** who provided advice on lab processes, designed the lab tools and provided communications support, and a **National Lead** who was responsible for overall strategy. Each pilot district identified an existing staff whose position related to wellbeing to take on the role of **Community Liaison.** Community Liaisons were encouraged to bring together a local planning team representing key stakeholders who could help support the process.

Resourcing
WellAhead provided grants to each pilot district to enable their participation in the lab process. These grants subsidized the salaries of Community Liaisons for one to two days per week and also covered costs for community meetings, teacher release time, and communications. Pilot districts matched some of this funding through financial contribution and in-kind supports.
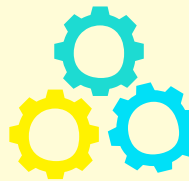
The Approach
Pilot districts were meant to lead the process themselves based on an overall framework and sets of options provided by WellAhead. The WellAhead team acted as a hub of activity, maintaining ongoing communication and providing tools such as facilitation guides, printable handouts, and public relations support for public events and engagement. We also co-facilitated district-level meetings and events as requested. During site visits, we learned about how things were progressing, providing coaching where possible. We also supported the pilot districts to evaluate the everyday practices as well as to reflect on the impact of the process on their community.

Social Innovation Lab Process

We supported pilot districts through a process that involved three phases:

Phase 1 **Co–design**	Phase 2 **Prototyping**	Phase 3 **Scaling**

Phase 1
Co–design

August – December 2015

Bringing diverse groups together to brainstorm everyday practices and decide which ideas to prototype in schools. This phase included:

- **Building the foundation:** School districts gathered existing local data on child and youth wellbeing and summarized this into a Design Brief. This was meant to provide local context upon which to brainstorm ideas.

- **Brainstorm ideas:** Districts hosted ideation workshops of up to 100 people. Multiple stakeholders sat in diverse groups to collectively brainstorm ideas for "everyday practices". Each small group agreed on one idea to bring forward to the rest of the workshop, for a total of 5–12 priority ideas per ideation session.

- **Refine ideas:** School districts brought together 6–12 local stakeholders for an "idea refinement session". These participants, selected as leaders and influencers in their communities, short-listed 3–5 practices, elaborating on their design and clarifying their intended impacts.

- **Select ideas:** Ideas were considered based on existing research, feedback from stakeholders and experts, and broad input through an online public engagement platform. Local planning teams then selected the top 1–2 practices to prototype in their district.

Five Stakeholder Groups
Students
Parents
Educators
Administrators
Community Partners

Design Criteria
Participants used the following design criteria to improve and prioritize their ideas:

✓ **Impact**
the likelihood that the practice would improve student social and emotional wellbeing

✓ **Desirability**
whether students, teachers and others impacted by the practice would positively receive it

✓ **Feasibility**
how realistic it would be to implement in schools

✓ **Integrability**
how easily it could be embedded into the regular practice of teachers and schools

Prototyping   Jan. – June 2016

A low-risk way of testing and improving ideas through rapid iteration. Educators implemented the everyday practices in their own way, reflecting on essential elements, ways to share them with others, and how to integrate them into their work. This phase included:
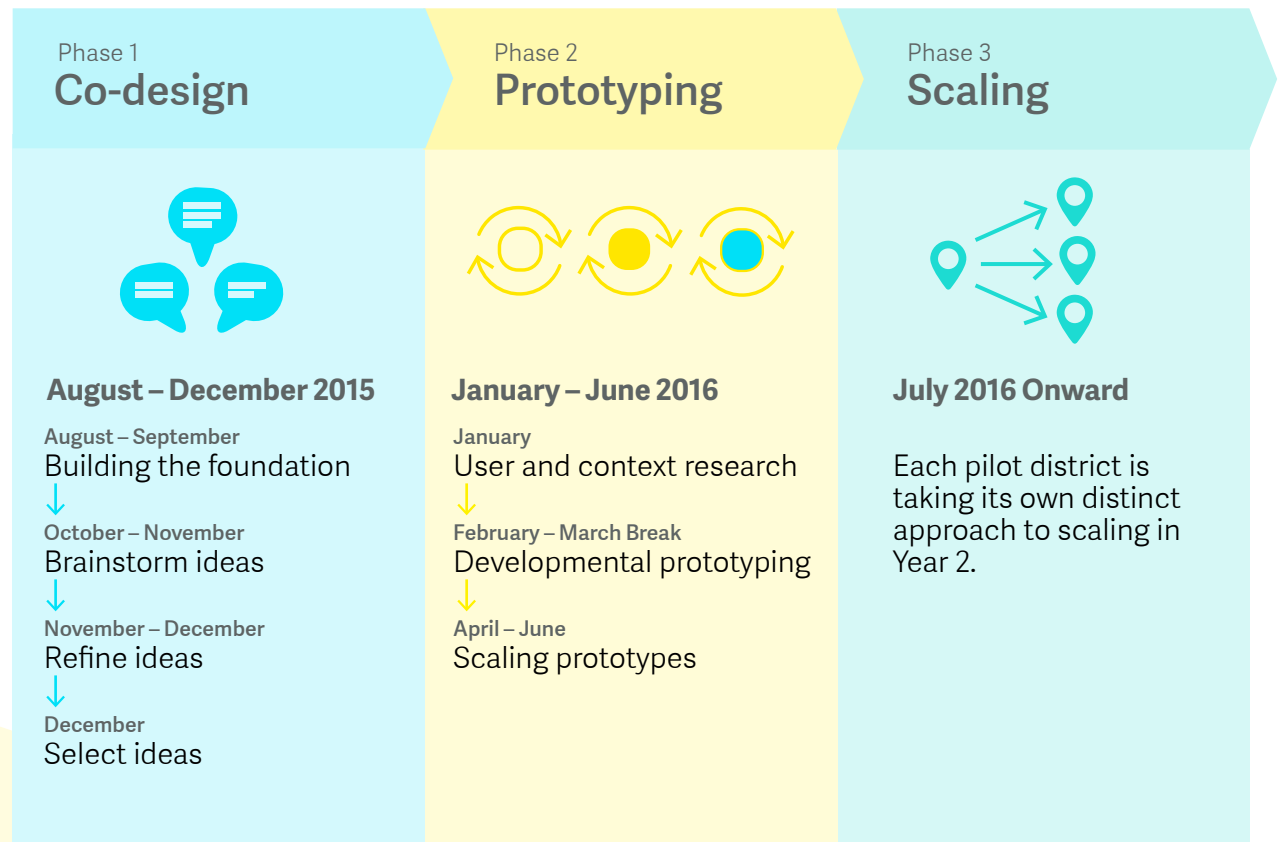
- **User and context research:** School districts were asked to interview students and teachers and/or observe aspects of the school environment to inform the initial design and implementation of prototypes.

- **Developmental prototyping:** An initial prototyping team, representing a maximum of two schools, began implementing their "everyday practice" and collecting data from teachers and students.

- **Scaling prototypes:** Depending on how the prototypes were proceeding, some school districts recruited more teachers and schools within the district to prototype the everyday practice.

Phase 3
Scaling   July 2016 Onward

Pilot districts are building on their learnings from co-design and prototyping to scale their everyday practices and advance their own visions for integrating wellbeing into their district. Four of the six pilot districts have continued onto this phase and are being supported in Year 2.

Phase 1
Co-design

Phase 2
Prototyping

Phase 3
Scaling

August – December 2015

August – September
Building the foundation
↓
October – November
Brainstorm ideas
↓
November – December
Refine ideas
↓
December
Select ideas

January – June 2016

January
User and context research
↓
February – March Break
Developmental prototyping
↓
April – June
Scaling prototypes

July 2016 Onward

Each pilot district is taking its own distinct approach to scaling in Year 2.

Everyday Practices

The strategic focus of WellAhead in Year 1 was on the school environment: ways that wellbeing could be reflected in aspects of school culture, values and day-to-day functioning. Co-designing and prototyping "everyday practices" were a concrete way to introduce or enhance ways that teachers and schools supported wellbeing in their daily approach and way of working.

In the district-level social innovation lab process, communities selected an everyday practice they wanted to pursue further. In prototyping these everyday practices in schools, we looked to see whether **a)** they were demonstrating early signs of positive impact on student social and emotional wellbeing, and **b)** helped integrate wellbeing as a priority in the district.

We hypothesized that by demonstrating that schools and teachers could easily – through their everyday work – impact student wellbeing, that districts would find it more feasible and reasonable to prioritize social and emotional wellbeing as a key role for its schools. In that sense, the everyday practices were meant as a gateway to broader change at the school and district level.

The everyday practices prototyped in Year 1 were:

2 x 10: A Solid Foundation
Connecting through 10 personal 2-minute interactions. Students are more connected to adults in the schools.
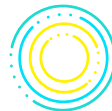SD 61 – Greater Victoria

Be in Nature
Taking learning outdoors to explore and connect with nature. Students will be able to regularly practice physical health, interact with their peers (social learning), and self-regulate (calm) by being outdoors.
SD 70 – Alberni

Circle
Building connectedness by sitting in a circle and sharing together. Students develop confidence, build social skills and connectedness to peers and adults.
SD 48 – Sea to Sky

Mindful Pause
Pausing to take deep breaths and practice mindfulness. Students learn skills to reduce their own stress/anxiety and increase their focus.
SD 43 – Coquitlam

Monday Morning Connection
Intentionally re-establishing connections between teachers and students following the weekend. Students share and develop connection to teachers, enabling teachers to better meet students' social and emotional needs throughout the school day.
SD 67 – Okanagan Skaha

Talking Circles
Gathering to share food, celebrate culture & build community. Students have opportunity to connect more deeply to their culture, develop confidence, build social skills and connectedness to peers.
SD 92 – Nisga'a

Wellness Wednesdays
Taking 10 minutes, every Wednesday, to focus on wellness. Students develop personal knowledge and skillsets in advancing their own wellbeing.
SD 67 – Okanagan Skaha

Core Values

WellAhead's approach in Year 1 was guided by these core values:

Collaboration
We value different types of knowledge. WellAhead sought to engage a range of stakeholder groups (educators, administrators, students, parents, and community partners) to collectively determine how to advance wellbeing in schools.

Mass Participation
We believe that education is an issue of public interest, and requires broad input and buy-in in order to inform future directions. WellAhead aimed to include as many people as possible through wide consultation and novel methods of engagement.
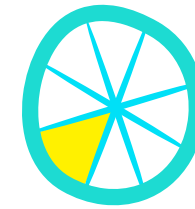
Collective Ownership
We feel that rather than providing people with a solution, communities should be empowered to shape a vision they can collectively stand behind. WellAhead aimed to act as a catalyst and convener for community-led efforts.
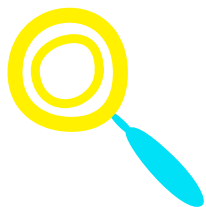
Transparency
We believe in the value of sharing learnings. WellAhead intended to make its tools and materials publicly available, and to share what is learned along the way in a manner that sparked discussion and informed practice.

Emergence
Complex problems are difficult to plan around. WellAhead embraced an emergent approach whereby plans and directions are iteratively informed by feedback from partners and stakeholders.
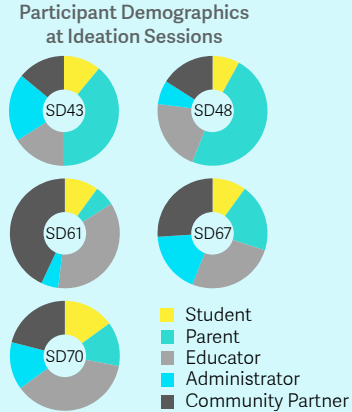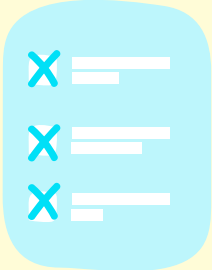
Provincial and Ecosystem Level Work

Alongside this work with pilot districts, WellAhead played a role at the ecosystem level, working with and listening to a range of stakeholders and leaders to support existing work, make linkages, and catalyze action and conversations.

In the last several years in BC, an increased focus on mental health – in particular, an interest in children and youth and positive mental health and wellbeing – has lead to significant provincial initiatives such as the Select Standing Committee on Child and Youth Wellbeing, the Child and Youth Mental Health and Substance Youth Collaborative, the BC School Centred Mental Health Coalition, and a cabinet working group on youth mental health.

WellAhead brought ecosystem players together in spring 2016, and has collaborated with others to convene a collective of K-12 education sector leaders. Through these efforts as well as ongoing relationship-building, WellAhead established working relationships with key players such as government ministries, provincial networks, professional associations, and non-profit organizations and institutions.

Results: The Process

| Phase	Results		Challenges	
Co-design	» Multi-stakeholder groups developed consensus and co-ownership over one proposed idea. » Engagement in co-design raised awareness of social and emotional wellbeing in most districts. » Most participants committed to participating in the prototyping phase.	**93% of individuals strongly agree that co-ownership was developed at ideation stage.**	» The ideas developed through the co-design phase were limited to mostly to teacher/educator practices. We expected a broader scope of more innovative ideas. » Students were not engaged effectively to enable their participation in the process. » Limited time spent building the foundation reduced participants' ability to develop locally relevant solutions.	**Participant Demographics at Ideation Sessions**
Prototyping	» The number of teachers prototyping everyday practices grew significantly from January to June 2016. » Process of prototyping facilitated local ownership of ideas among teachers. » Focusing on the core elements allowed for the development and articulation of the simplest, most scalable version of the prototype.	**# of Prototyping Classrooms (2016)** January **30** June **79**	» Too many milestones & tools for the process (for user research, phases of prototyping, scaling). » Some prototypes did not scale due to limited local buy-in. » Not enough time secured in advance for prototyping teams (primarily teachers) to collaborate and share their learnings.	
Scaling	Some of the preliminary results from Year 1 that would support scaling include: » Strategies developed to further scale out everyday practices » Increased investment in professional development and staff time to support social and emotional wellbeing » New investment in measurement of child and youth wellbeing through the Middle Years Development Index (MDI)		**Resources:** Securing paid staff time to coordinate wellbeing strategies and initiatives across schools; establishing and maintaining implementation teams to lead work. **Knowledge Mobilization:** Access to evidence-based resources and expert knowledge on social and emotional wellbeing; mobilizing resources and knowledge among staff and community.	

Legend for Participant Demographics:
- Student
- Parent
- Educator
- Administrator
- Community Partner

(Charts: SD43, SD48, SD61, SD67, SD70)

Results: Everyday Practices*

2 x 10: A Solid Foundation

Connecting through 10 personal 2-minute interactions.

Results: Teacher-rated student-teacher relationships improved and student behaviour improved correspondingly.

SD 61 – Greater Victoria

Average Teacher-Rated Student Behaviour in Class

Student Behaviour

Week #
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

2 × 10
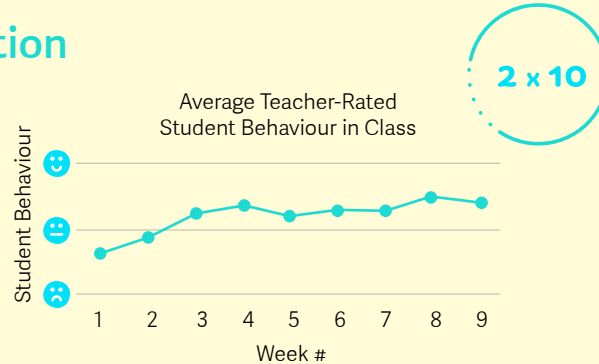
Be in Nature

Taking learning outdoors to explore and connect with nature.

Results:

Students reported feeling 10% more calm and focused after being in nature.
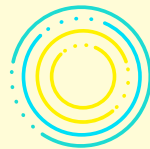
SD 70 – Alberni

Circle

Building connectedness by sitting in a circle and sharing together.

Results: Students reported feeling comfortable sharing, feeling heard, and understanding their classmates better through participating in Circle.

SD 48 – Sea to Sky

Monday Morning Connection

Intentionally re-establishing connections between teachers and students following the weekend.

Results: Students reported enjoying sharing their feelings, and an increased sense of relief/calmness.

SD 67 – Okanagan Skaha

"It makes my day good by writing down my feelings, and when I can tell my classmates how I'm feeling."

– Grade 5 student, SD 67

Talking Circle

Gathering to share food, celebrate culture and build community.

Results: Teacher-reported increase in attendance in class, and deeper participation in practice.

SD 92 – Nisga'a

"Students are becoming more comfortable with talking circle... They are becoming better listeners and their responses are becoming deeper and more heartfelt."

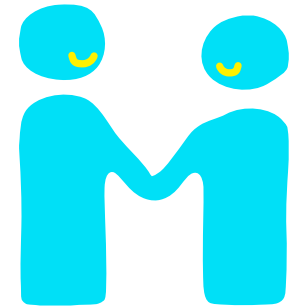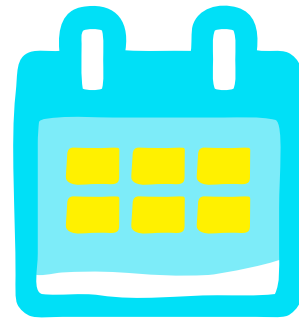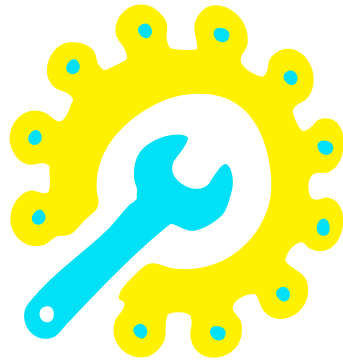– Teacher, SD 92

Wellness Wednesdays

Taking 10 minutes a week to focus on wellness.

Results: Students reported valuing the positive coping strategies that were shared.

SD 67 – Okanagan Skaha

Lessons on Integrating Wellbeing in Schools

Efforts by school districts to prioritize wellbeing require dedicated time from a multi-level leadership team.

As part of their participation, each pilot district identified one person to act as the Community Liaison for the WellAhead process, who in turn was encouraged to identify a local implementation team to support them. **Having a team of people work together, discuss ideas and share the responsibility for this work was a key success factor in moving the wellbeing agenda forward.** In particular, our experience this past year showed the most successful teams had two key members:

- **One person with time specifically dedicated to this work** or a role focused on promoting wellbeing in schools (e.g. a healthy schools coordinator) is key to curating the work – connecting the dots between activities, organizing meetings and events, and asking evaluative and reflective questions throughout.

- **An actively engaged administrator or district senior leader** was also an important part of the team. This role can help ensure that the wellbeing effort fits into district-wide plans, language, and budgets. They can also maintain the initiative as a standing agenda item in district-level meetings. Without this role, school-level efforts were not adequately connected to district-level priorities and conversations.

This finding is consistent with evidence from the field, which suggests that an implementation team is core to success of a school-based mental health initiative.[1]

In SD 48 Sea to Sky, the WellAhead Community Liaison, Sheena Cholewka, was a school psychologist with specific time dedicated to promoting wellbeing district-wide. The support she had from administrators was key. When her team expanded to include an educator and the district principal for aboriginal education, the work of promoting social and emotional wellbeing had much wider reach and meaning. This was reflected in the scaling of SD 48's everyday practice, Circle, which spread far beyond the initial prototyping team.

[1] Short, K (2016). *Intentional, explicit, systematic: Implementation and scale-up of effective practices for supporting student mental well-being in Ontario schools.* International Journal of Mental Health Promotion 18(1). pp-33-48

Lesson 2

The value of a focus on social and emotional wellbeing needs to be clear to all those involved.

Throughout the past year, WellAhead provincial and district representatives hosted hundreds of conversations with students, parents, teachers, administrators, and community partners. We entered into these relationships with the assumption that those we were speaking to believed wellbeing to be an important role for schools, and were equipped with the knowledge, skills and resources necessary to spread this message in their communities. **We moved into talking about "how" to integrate wellbeing and "what" teachers could do, without spending time exploring and naming "why" this work was valuable.**

Over this past year, we discovered the importance of making the value proposition for social and emotional wellbeing as a key role for schools up front. Grounding this argument in evidence and tailoring it to different audiences and stakeholders are critical steps in developing a convincing argument that taps into the hearts and minds of local community.

Our site visits with school and district stakeholders have pushed our thinking to consider not only the importance of communicating the value of social and emotional wellbeing, but how its framing might be different for administrators vs. educators vs. students. Example:

↝ **Why, should I as a teacher, take time out my busy schedule to do a talking circle?**

↝ **Why should I as a principal encourage teachers to take time away from curriculum to support wellbeing?**

↝ **Why should the district pay for a student wellbeing survey?**

One student's story describing how they would not want to take a break for wellness in the middle of their favourite/most important class helped us to understand that students may need to be convinced as to the "why" just as much as anyone else.

As one district planning team member said,

"If you don't understand why it's important, wellbeing is just one more

Lesson 3

# Involvement in prototyping promotes teacher ownership of ideas and enables local adaptation.
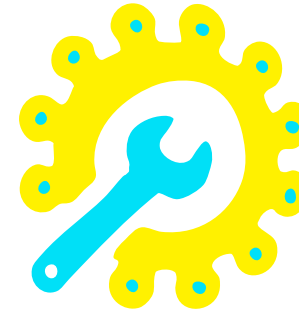
Once everyday practice ideas were selected, each district identified people to take part in an initial prototyping team who would test out the idea in their schools. In prototyping the everyday practice, educators were invited to apply it in a way they felt would work best, reflecting on what was working and not working, and adjusting or "iterating" the practice as they went along. **Educators who participated in prototyping appreciated the ability to develop out the approach, adapt it according to their own context, and collectively identify core elements that made it effective.** This prototyping approach emphasized teachers' professional autonomy and helped the initiative to be seen as grassroots and teacher-led rather than top-down or driven by external interests. Darren Macmillan, the Community Liaison for SD 43 Coquitlam referred to teachers as "private prototypers" in their natural tendency to iterate their practices.

In SD48 Sea to Sky, the prototyping team started their process by developing a document describing how to implement the practice. This "Circle Practice Protocol" ended up being modified 15 to 20 times throughout the process. By the end of prototyping stage, the group had developed a concise one page protocol, which in the end included two core Circle guidelines – "listen while others have the talking piece" and "what is said in Circle stays in Circle" – rather than the original four Circle guidelines proposed.

The process of gathering feedback and seeing the Circle protocol shift over time demonstrated to teachers and staff that not only were their opinions on the practice being heard, they were actively shaping its evolution. **The increasing simplicity of the practice allowed it to be more easily adopted** by those who were not deeply steeped in the work. It also provided flexibility to those who wanted to take the approach to the next level or implement it in a unique way. Circle spread far beyond early adopters: from January to June 2016 it went from three teachers in three schools to 41 teachers at four schools.

3 Teachers **3** Schools → **41** Teachers **4** Schools
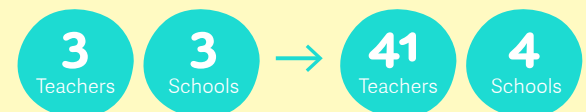
Lesson 4

School-based initiatives should stretch beyond one year and fit with district calendars.
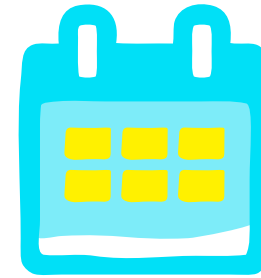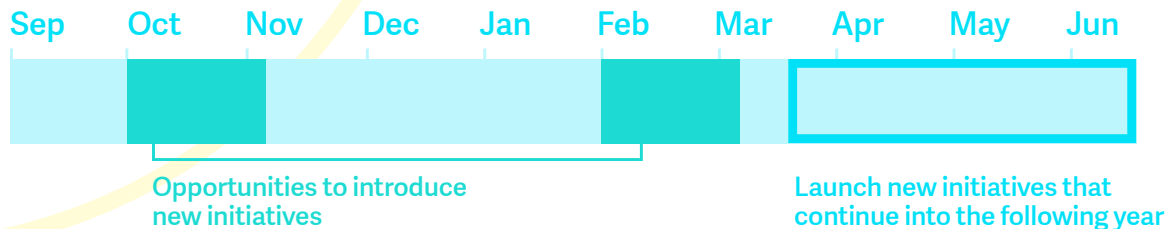
Schools are faced with countless initiatives that target student social and emotional well-being, be it from outside organizations or within the school or district. Within this context of initiative overload, it is important to recognize that one of schools' most tightly strained and guarded resources is time: increasing workloads among teachers, administrators, and school staff limit the time they have available for additional commitments.

Throughout the year, we heard from pilot districts that a key factor for sustainability and success is ensuring that the offering is more than just a one-off. In a context where "initiative-itis" is rampant, commitments of more than one year allow teachers, students and principals to see that the change is meant to stay and will last.

Fitting with the natural rhythm of schools is also key. Planning for the school year begins after March break, and so spring is an ideal time to launch new initiatives that continue into the following year. Additionally, we learned that the best windows of time to take on something new are either early in the school year, or between the winter holidays and March break. Working outside these times made WellAhead's work much more challenging, so we would advise others to be more flexible to local calendars. This may mean adjusting schedules and timelines to accommodate district planning cycles, major decisions such as school closures, and community-based cultural events.

The WellAhead team in SD 67 Okanagan Skaha had originally planned to host prototyping launch sessions in January or February. However, community-wide stress and anxiety caused by pending school closures minimized enthusiasm around the idea of everyday practices. The local Community Liaison, Jenny Mitchell, decided to adjust timelines to shift their prototype launch to after March break – doing so created greater than expected buy-in and engagement from high school teachers in particular. While prototyping was happening in classrooms, Jenny began planning for the following school year, forming the connections required to build on the progress from Year 1.

| Sep | Oct | Nov | Dec | Jan | Feb | Mar | Apr | May | Jun |

Opportunities to introduce new initiatives

Launch new initiatives that continue into the following year

Lesson 5

School leaders and decision-makers need to explicitly "permit" a focus on wellbeing.

WellAhead chose to start its first year in BC in part because of the province's strong commitment and capacity to advancing student social and emotional wellbeing. However, despite this seemingly enabling environment, we heard many times that competing priorities made it difficult for people to make student social and emotional wellbeing a priority. In order for all members of a school community to prioritize wellbeing, we learned that it is important for leaders to explicitly support wellbeing as core to learning, rather than as an "extra" or "add-on".

"We need superintendents AND principals on board to support how wellness will improve things for teachers and staff and students. People need to be given permission to let some things go."

– Jenny Mitchell, SD 67 Okanagan Skaha

This insight also led us to reflect on the need for buy-in at multiple levels of the system for change to happen. While targeting teacher practice at the classroom level is an important piece, principals and district-level decision-makers who shape school culture and policy also play an important role in developing enabling environments for advancing wellbeing.

"People now feel they have 'permission' to go outside."

– Laurie Morphet, Community Liaison, SD 70 Alberni

In SD 70 Alberni, the everyday practice prototyped was "Be in Nature", which provided outdoor learning experiences during class time. Even though the district superintendent was vocally supportive and actively involved in the process throughout, there was a sense from principals and teachers that this might not be "allowed". They became caught up in some of the perceived barriers, such as the need for parental permission or a more explicit mandate from the school district. Later, in planning for prototyping, participants discovered that in fact for short field trips on school grounds, there was no district policy requiring additional parental permission. After working through some of the risks and cautions, and confirming school and district support, Community Liaison Laurie Morphet was finally able to say "people now feel they have 'permission' to go outside."

Lesson 6

Peer mentorship and collaboration time facilitates growth in teacher practice.
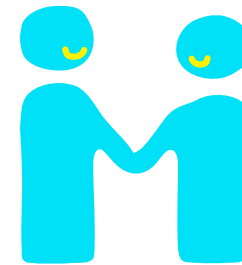
Given the nature of the everyday practices selected, the prototyping teams consisted mostly of teachers and education assistants. While it was important to have other stakeholders (students, parents, administrators, community partners) supportive of the overall purpose and direction of the work, the most significant collaboration time was spent face-to-face with peers either within a specific school, or between participating schools.
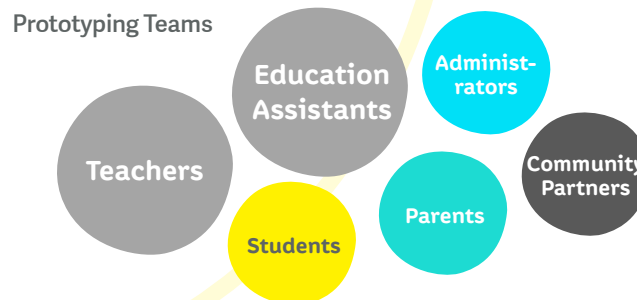
Peer collaboration time was key to building teacher buy-in, sharing learnings, and shifting teacher practice. This combination of reflection, sharing of stories, and a common approach to a shared area of inquiry was powerful. Peer mentorship was an effective way for teachers to share their learnings more broadly and collectively improve their approach to fostering student wellbeing. This finding is corroborated by existing literature on educator practice change, which suggests that teacher learning happens most effectively through peer mentorship and teacher learning teams.[2]

[2] Shalaway, L. (1985) *Peer Coaching ... Does it Work?* Washington National Institute of Education Research and Development Notes, September, pp. 6-7

In SD 70 Alberni, prototyping teams each tried out their own version of the "Be in Nature" practice. One day, two teachers planned to take their classes to the same location, but took different takes on the practice. Laurie Morphet, the WellAhead Community Liaison in Alberni, shared with us that:

"[One] class had free exploration time on a rigorous hike while the other class who accompanied them booted it further up another tr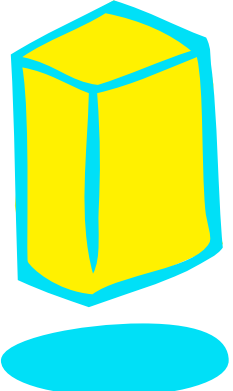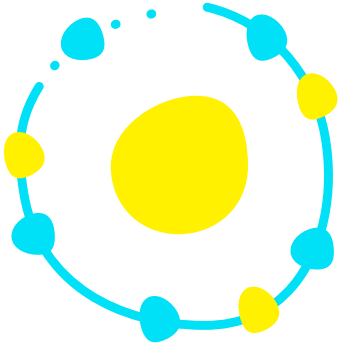ail to see where it went (little to no free time to explore or rest)... Several students in the latter group commented they were tired and wished the hike was shorter compared to the group who stopped to skip rocks, sit and listen to the raging creek or walk on logs."

Teacher collaboration time allowed teachers to share insights about how to improve the practice. As a result, the prototyping teams proposed that unstructured time outside should be a core component of Be in Nature.

Prototyping Teams

- Teachers
- Education Assistants
- Administrators
- Community Partners
- Parents
- Students

Lessons on Social Innovation Labs
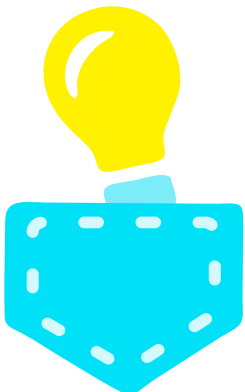
Lesson 7
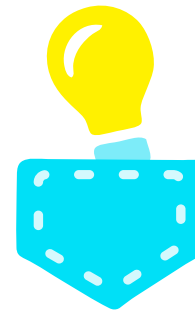
Ideas don't necessarily need to be new: consider how to leverage existing solutions.

Social labs bring multiple and diverse stake-holders together to brainstorm innovative solutions to complex challenges. WellAhead's hypothesis was that the input from multiple perspectives would result in more innovative, outside-the-box everyday practices, and that communities would welcome these fresh new ideas. This did not end up being the case: the practices that emerged from co-design at the district level were for the most part not "innovations"; they were either established practices in local schools, or drawn from existing evidence-based programs.

This raised a question for us about the strongest challenge or question for communities to co-design solutions to. From our previous research, we knew that evidence-based approaches meet significant challenges to wider adoption due to their costs, time for training, and complex implementation protocols.[3] Given that everyday practices were already happening in schools, it was perhaps not new ideas that were needed, but rather innovation on how to better leverage and scale up adoption of existing practices.

The tension between supporting existing ideas and developing new ones was strong in SD 43 Coquitlam. This district was already a leader among BC school districts in promoting social and emotional learning before partnership with WellAhead, and local stakeholders were skeptical of the proposed design process from the start. This was indicated by the district's Community Liaison early in the process:

"People that are more steeped in the language of SEL [social and emotional learning], and the practices of supporting and teaching SEL skills in schools are the most concerned about open brainstorming sessions. Their feelings are that studies already have shown 'what works' and 'what doesn't work'. The fear is putting an enormous amount of time into a process that 'might' generate a(n) everyday practice that they feel won't create the result hoped for."

Conversely, SD 48 Sea to Sky was successful in building upon momentum from an existing practice, Circle, that already was being used by some teachers in the district and had significant backing in research and local Indigenous tradition. Building on an existing idea allowed participants to focus on collective ownership and adaptation of the idea, and on incorporating Circle into school and district-level discussions.

[3] Embry and Biglan (2008). *Evidence-based Kernels: Fundamental Units of Behavioral Influence*. Clin Child Fam Psychol Rev. 11(3) 75-113

Lesson 8

Ideation should be grounded in a strong understanding of the problem's systemic context.
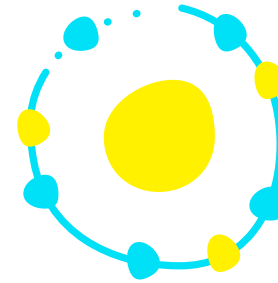
Most social labs involve an initial stage of "systems sensing": conducting research, interviewing key stakeholders, and mapping the system as a whole to identify the nature of the problem and potential leverage points for change. WellAhead spent two years systems sensing at a national level to frame the issue of integrating wellbeing in schools. This process identified everyday practices and participatory change processes as possible leverage points for change. Though there was an initial "building the foundation" stage at the pilot district level that was meant to enable each community to further frame the issue in relation to their local context, in reality, there was little time to do so. As a result, there was a heavy reliance on insights gathered at the national level and an assumption that these would apply equally to the pilot districts.

Taking the time necessary for local stakeholders to develop a collective, big picture understanding of the challenge and identify a shared inquiry question would have been a valuable step for school districts. This may have enabled even those districts that were successful in moving forward, in two ways:

- Generating more locally relevant solutions: Understanding the local challenges may have resulted in everyday practice ideas that targeted these systemic issues.

- Greater buy-in into a deeper change process: Taking the time to analyze issues around student wellbeing in the community may have encouraged participants to take a more comprehensive approach, using everyday practices as a catalyst towards more systemic change.

In most of the pilot districts, there was a strong impetus to push ahead, which often meant forsaking the deeper thinking that should be done at the "Building the Foundation" stage. Our approach in working with SD 92 Nisga'a was less stringent. In particular, we recognized that as an Indigenous community, it was important that our approach be culturally appropriate. On the advice of a Nisga'a government staff member, we were careful to "identify ways to build on a Nisga'a approach" rather than "adapt a WellAhead process to Nisga'a". The process of building relationships and creating buy-in from all four villages, supported by discussions between McConnell Foundation and Nisga'a Lisims Government leaders, ensured a strong grounding in local issues and priorities.

Implementing design criteria too early in the creative process stifles innovation.
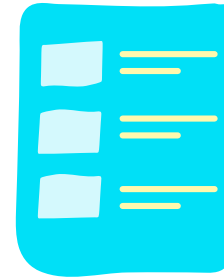
In the co-design process, two mechanisms were used to focus ideation: first, by limiting the scope of brainstorming to everyday practices (efforts that did not require substantive funding or training, and could be easily incorporated into the day-to-day of schools); and second, by filtering ideas through four design criteria: impact, desirability, feasibility, and integrability. Beyond that, we encouraged participants to think broadly about the potential design of the practice.

Our intention throughout the ideation process was to keep people on task and ensure that the ideas selected would lead to greater integration of wellbeing in schools. In practice, we found that introducing the criteria of feasibility and viability so early in the ideation process stifled the kind of divergent thinking that allows for real innovation to occur. Generally, the proposed ideas for everyday practices were "safe" – they were things that were already happening, had an obvious link to student wellbeing, and were typically teacher-implemented or classroom-based. The types of outside-the-box ideas that we had hoped to see, such as offering more nutritional food in the cafeteria or creating more student-centred spaces, either did not emerge at all or were critiqued too early to be fleshed out.

The WellAhead approach to ideation evolved significantly over the fall. During the first ideation session, held in Penticton, organizers soon realized that participants were filtering ideas proposed with comments such as "we wouldn't be able to change ___", "teachers would never ___", and "___ would take too much time". Some form of student greeting emerged in nearly every ideation session, and we came to see this as a symptom of the design process favouring safe ideas. This was noted by one of our Community Liaisons in her reflection on the ideation and refinement sessions:

"The refinement process went well – especially the storyboarding, however I feel like we were too concerned about implementation, sustainability and others that it stifled the creativity."
– Jenny Mitchell, Community Liaison, SD 67 Okanagan Skaha

In subsequent ideation sessions, facilitators placed increased focus on allowing risky, innovative ideas to flourish, and reduced the design criteria to "impact" and "desirability". As a result, in one of the last ideation sessions in Greater Victoria, the ideas that emerged went far beyond "greeting" to include suggestions that incorporated community members, "toolkits" for classrooms, and more.

Identifying "core" elements helps develop the simplest, most scalable prototype.

During the prototyping phase, participating teams were provided with a range of tools to develop and iterate the everyday practice they had selected. This included a "Core, Not Core" exercise. Inspired by developments in academic literature relating to implementation science, this tool enabled prototyping teams to discuss and generate consensus on which elements were key to the practice, and which could be at the discretion of the user.

"Knowing the effective core intervention components may allow for more efficient and cost effective introduction of interventions and lead to confident decisions about the non-core components that can be adapted to suit local conditions at a local site."[4]

Pilot districts noted this was a useful tool to strike a balance between acknowledging local school and classroom context (allowing for informal adaptation to occur), while supporting consistency in approach. Conversations to identify "core" elements of the practice also led to development of an increasingly concise, simple protocol, which made it easier later on to scale the practice to new sites.

adaptation to local context

consistency in approach
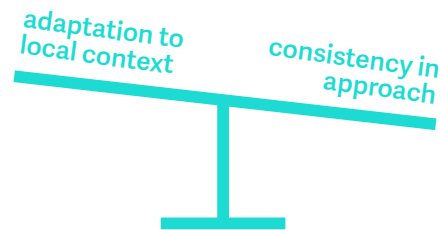
In SD 61 Greater Victoria, the prototype team used the Core, Not Core exercise to reflect on their experience with the 2 x 10 practice. Together, they explored whether two minutes was core or not, and through their analysis concluded that two minutes was indeed the minimum length for conversation. However, the "ten times" of interaction was questioned, with the team deciding that the teacher should simply initiate interactions until the student felt connected enough to initiate contact on their own.

In SD 48 Sea to Sky, prototyping teams agreed that it was core for the Circle check-in to take place in a circle (and not, for example, in rows of desks). However, they enabled informal adaptation to school culture and rhythms by not specifying when in the day the Circle should take place.

[4] Susan Michie, Dean Fixsen, Jeremy M Grimshaw and Martin P Eccles (2009). *Specifying and reporting complex behaviour change interventions: the need for a scientific method.* Implementation Science, 4:40

Lesson 11

Ensure that the ambitious demands of the lab process fit with your participant availability and context.
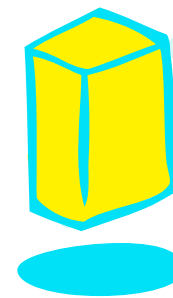
Social labs typically involve a core "lab team" that commits a significant amount of time to going deep on the process of system sensing, co-design, and prototyping. Benchmarks such as 15 days over four months, or a series of two or three day workshops are proposed as best practices to achieve the initial milestones of lab processes.[5]

It's a challenge to gain dedication to a process that is so time-consuming. Within the K-12 education system, this intense time commitment can be particularly daunting. Teachers and principals are key stakeholders in integrating social and emotional wellbeing into schools. However, as frontline staff, it is difficult to secure their extensive time commitment. Pulling teachers out of class, or principals away from their core roles, for many days in a school year is not feasible. Even when funds are available to cover teachers' time out of class, many educators prefer to maintain continuity and consistency for their students.

All of our pilot districts found the lab-inspired process that WellAhead supported to be complex and time-intensive. As the excitement and interest about the social lab approach grows, we caution other lab practitioners to consider the context of your desired participants, and whether they can actually commit to the ambitious time commitments and timelines proposed. Though social labs can be an effective approach to working collaboratively towards change, they can only be successful in achieving their objectives if stakeholders are able to fully participate. **Developing asks that are not feasible can end up stressing relationships, fatiguing champions, and may hinder the long-term progress towards your common goal.**

In SD 70 Alberni, the high demands and tight timelines of the WellAhead process resulted in the district opting out of Year 2. This happened in spite of the positive results that had emerged, including early signs of positive impact of the Be in Nature prototype, and increased commitment to social and emotional wellbeing among local teachers, administrators and staff.

5 Eisenstadt, M., Hassan, Z. (2015). *The Social Labs Fieldbook: A Practical Guide to Solving our Most Complex Challenges.* Available at www.http://social-labs.com/fieldbook/
Westley, F., Laban, S. (2015) *Social Innovation Lab Guide.* Available at: https://uwaterloo.ca/waterloo-institute-for-social-innovation-and-resilience/sites/ca.waterloo-institute-for-social-innovation-and-resilience/files/uploads/files/10_silabguide_final.pdf

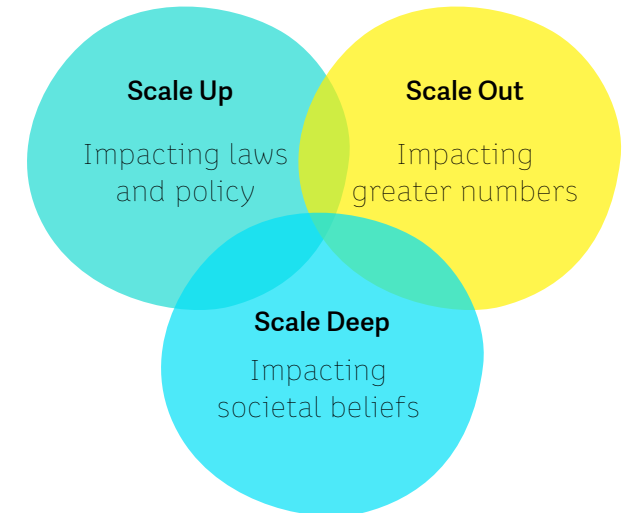# Lessons on Philanthropy and Systems Change
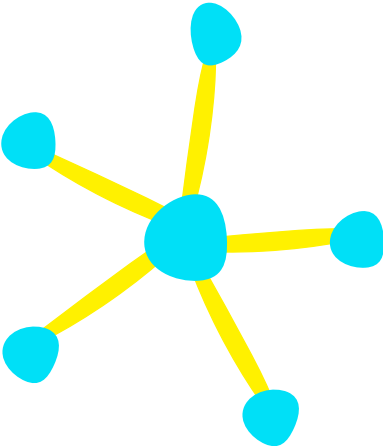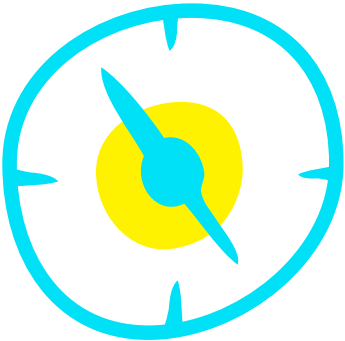
Lesson 12

Be a humble system player: don't assume you have a solution that merits replication.

The increased interest in child and youth mental health and wellbeing has spurred a proliferation of programs intended for schools. One of our observations during WellAhead's research and design phase was the sheer number of initiatives in this space, and the limited collaboration and alignment between them. As a Foundation, we would often receive proposals from programs and initiatives presenting themselves as "the solution" to student wellbeing. In these applicants' minds, all they needed was funding to disseminate their approach across all schools.

This replication model is the dominant approach to scaling, particularly in the education field. Referred to as scaling "out", it assumes that increased impact comes from having more schools or educators adopt your work. While scaling out can serve to spread a useful and effective approach, it is not the only way to achieve impact. In fact, it can have the unintended negative consequence of increasing fragmentation: if everyone is focused on disseminating their own model, there can be little incentive to work with others.

Though we aimed to work a different way, there were definitely moments where we found ourselves falling into this same pattern. We had put so much effort into designing and delivering the social innovation lab-inspired process, that it seemed to be a waste not to find a way to offer it to more districts. Eventually, we began to think more broadly about ways we could increase our impact on the field, such as sharing key elements from our process with other initiatives working with schools, finding ways to collaborate with and work alongside other stakeholders, or mobilizing the knowledge from our learnings to influence policy change. These other types of scaling – scaling up and scaling deep – forced us to think beyond replication to consider how to infuse our work into mainstream.

Scale Up
Impacting laws and policy

Scale Out
Impacting greater numbers

Scale Deep
Impacting societal beliefs

Scaling out, scaling up, and scaling deep for social innovation.[6]

Scale Up: changing institutions at the level of policy, rules and resource flows

Scale Out: replication and dissemination, increasing number of people or communities impacted

Scale Deep: changing relationships, cultural values and beliefs, "hearts and minds"

[6] Riddell, D., Moore, M. (2015) *Scaling Out, Scaling Up, Scaling Deep: Advancing Systemic Social Innovation and the Learning Processes to Support it.* The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation.

Focusing on the immediate outcomes of discrete interventions can distract from bigger-picture systems thinking.

WellAhead's learning and evaluation framework included three levels of inquiry:

↪ **Prototypes:** Are everyday practices an effective means of achieving integration of wellbeing in schools?

↪ **Systems Change:** How does integration of wellbeing happen at the school and systems levels?

↪ **Design/Development:** How can WellAhead achieve the greatest impact?

Our intent was to focus mostly on the shifts and changes that were happening at the district level and how they might be linked to WellAhead's intervention.

In practice, our efforts in the pilot districts ended up being heavily weighted towards the evaluation of the everyday practices themselves. This produced data about the effectiveness of simple, everyday efforts in influencing student wellbeing, which was useful information both for educators and for the WellAhead team. However, the energy we spent focusing on prototypes detracted from our ability to observe and learn from changes at the system-level.

As a philanthropic foundation, we typically fund and partner with organizations working on the ground, rather than deliver interventions ourselves at the school or district level. This may be for good reason, as we found that our direct interaction with prototypes at the school level made it difficult to stand back, be objective, and look at the big picture. As a result, we missed out on important cues around how change was happening at the school and district level and whether the momentum and learnings generated by everyday practices actually had the potential to lead to better integration of wellbeing in schools.

In SD 61 Greater Victoria, teachers, administrators and community partners saw the importance of prioritizing social and emotional wellbeing in the broadest sense. While the focus on teacher and student data from 2 x 10 allowed them to have "evidence" for their practice, we together became so focused on capturing data from prototypes that we missed opportunities to more systematically track developments at the district level. For example, during that period, the district decided to fund the Middle Development Instrument, a population-level tool that measures student self-reported wellbeing and uses this to guide school and community decision-making. In the absence of a broader, more systemic perspective, we missed the opportunity to capture why and how this decision was made and the ways in which this choice reflected and advanced integration of wellbeing in Greater Victoria.

A defined set of values can serve as a compass for a strategy that evolves over time.
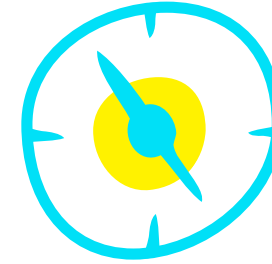
WellAhead intentionally set out to work in an emergent manner. Yet even emergence requires some level of grounding or focus to ensure that the strategy is moving forward in the right way, and course-correcting if need be. In the case of WellAhead, our values served as this anchor. Because the values were created based on our knowledge of the current barriers, challenges and opportunities in the system, we tended to rely on them as a reference point when making decisions. As our colleague John Cawley puts it, "complex strategies need a compass, not a roadmap."

"Complex strategies need a compass, not a roadmap."

– John Cawley, Vice President,
  J.W. McConnell Family Foundation

We found it worthwhile to use our values as a compass in two ways:

- **Adherence:** Assessing whether or not we were, in fact, making decisions based on these values. For example, though we had set out to be very transparent, upon reflection we realized that we were not effectively communicating out about our process and learnings to our stakeholders and broader network.

- **Relevance:** Reflecting on whether these values were in fact critical to our success. For example, our value of mass participation prompted us to create a public input platform for people across BC to provide their input on the everyday practices suggested in each pilot district. This was a time-consuming endeavour, and participation on this online platform was not as high as we expected. Upon reflection, it may have been more worthwhile to focus on more targeted engagement of particular stakeholder groups.

As part of our principle of collaboration, we sought to ensure that perspectives from all five stakeholder groups were included throughout the co-design phase: educators, administrators, students, parents, and community partners. This was a useful guiding principle that helped us think about diversity of representation. However, when we applied this value in a rigid way, we found less success. As a result of our specification that ideation sessions must involve all five stakeholder groups, we discouraged student-only sessions, an idea proposed by SD 43 Coquitlam.

In mandating broad participation, we may have unintentionally posed barriers to some groups – in particular, students and parents – who may have contributed more effectively if they were surrounded by their peers. While we continue to value multiple perspectives, a more open focus on respectful engagement may be a better fit for our work.

Lesson 15
Philanthropic organizations have a unique role to play as connectors, conveners and supporters within ecosystems.

In our two year research and design phase, we spent significant time trying to understand the issue of child and youth mental health, the context of school-based efforts to foster wellbeing, and the overall systemic issues in this field. We began to shape WellAhead as a response to these gaps, which resulted in a strategy that had our team delivering an intervention directly with school districts.

In retrospect, the strategic question to ask ourselves was perhaps not "what needs to be done" but "what is the best role for the Foundation in this space?" This additional filter would have required us to think more critically about existing leaders in the field, the ways in which their efforts could be maximized, and how a philanthropic strategy could complement this work.

Through our experience in Year 1, we found that the best way to leverage our role as a philanthropic initiative was actually as a connector, convener and systems supporter. In BC, WellAhead played this role at two levels:

⮑ **Pilot districts:** WellAhead brought the six pilot districts together in-person three times throughout the year to share their work and learn from each other. These rich opportunities to learn from peers were seen as a significant value-add that would not have been possible without WellAhead's support.

⮑ **Province and ecosystem:** WellAhead was a participant, observer, and sometimes convener or facilitator at a province-wide level. As a fairly neutral, "outside the system" actor, we had a unique role to play. WellAhead helped to catalyze and support initiatives that bridged between sector leaders, the "passionate and committed", and practitioners.

WellAhead

Connector — Convener — Systems Supporter
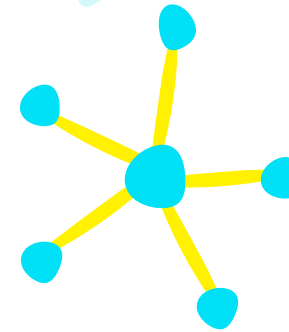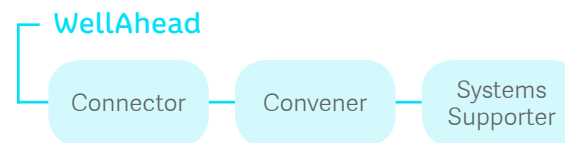
One participant in a meeting of K-12 education sector leaders noted the value of WellAhead's convening role:

"What a pleasure it was to hear from leaders in Education at a meeting supported by the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Education and McConnell. The three of you are leading the 'charge' in the critical need for the alignment of values, beliefs and practices in mental health for all. It has long been recognized that schools will be the epicentre for significant and sustainable change in the development and promotion of mental wellbeing. Well done!"

Conclusion and Acknowledgments

WellAhead began its work with a bold vision: to make a difference in child and youth mental health by helping integrate wellbeing in schools. We took that vision from 20,000 feet in the air and landed in six pilot districts: working alongside and learning from students, educators, administrators, parents, and community partners. After a year of working in British Columbia, we find ourselves humbled, inspired, and thankful.

Early in the year, an advisor suggested that our team read the Seymour Sarason classic, "The Predictable Failure of School Reform": the title itself names the significant intractability of school systems. What we tried in our first year was an experiment, a prototype; some elements worked, others didn't have the impacts we hoped for. We are humbled by the magnitude of the challenge of embedding wellbeing into the education system, and by our growing awareness of all the efforts that have already been made in this domain.

We are inspired by the integrity, hard work, and passion around wellbeing in schools. We've seen leaders and changemakers at all levels invest significant time and energy into this work. From passionate discussions mapping the ecosystem in BC, to packed gymnasiums of diverse stakeholders brainstorming ways to make a difference, to Nisga'a leaders gathering to share heartfelt stories of their own wellbeing, we are inspired to be sharing this journey with people like you.

Finally, we are thankful for the support, patience, and input of our many partners in this process. First and foremost, our Community Liaisons and planning teams in the six pilot districts – without their expertise and hard work, none of this would have been possible. The passion, patience, and sincerity of Sheena Cholewka, Marnice Jones, Jenny Mitchell, Laurie Morphet, Darren McMillan, and Patrick Phillips are the rich source of many of our learnings. We are thankful to MaRS Solutions Lab, who guided and supported our team as well as the pilot districts through this process. We also appreciate the input and feedback from our thought partners and critical friends across the system, who are too numerous to mention. The goodwill of diverse stakeholders to come together, share ideas, and support each other's work goes a long way in any social change effort.

Our experience working alongside districts and ecosystem players this past year has enhanced our understanding of how change happens in schools and identified opportunities for continued progress. Moving forward, we plan to incorporate these learnings into our work, and will continue to reflect on the role we can best play as a philanthropic initiative trying to have an impact in this domain.

WellAhead

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