

# “Here’s how a year of *applying design and systems thinking* changed our approach to advancing social and emotional wellbeing in schools.”

## Child and youth mental health is of growing concern.



In Canada, an estimated 1 in 6 school-aged children and youth are living with mental health problems.



An estimated 70% of mental disorders manifest during childhood or adolescence.



Evidence suggests childhood mental health problems in Canada are increasing over time.

Given that young people spend more than 20% of their waking hours in school, this is an ideal context in which to promote positive mental health and foster social and emotional wellbeing. Yet, schools do not consistently consider wellbeing to be a core part of their roles. When schools do act, it is often with a focus on immediate impact: an intervention or program that exists for a short period of time and might produce positive impacts over the short term. WellAhead asks: how can we better integrate wellbeing as a key role of schools? Achieving long-term transformation requires a system-thinking lens.

Prior to launching in British Columbia in the 2015-16 school year, the McConnell Foundation spent nearly two years consulting with key stakeholders in mental health, education, and public policy across Canada and internationally.

## WellAhead uses a social lab approach to improve child and youth mental health.



WellAhead is a philanthropic initiative of the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation that aims to improve child and youth mental health through sustained integration of social and emotional wellbeing in school communities. The question, “How do we better integrate wellbeing into the role of schools?” does not have one easy answer. As such, WellAhead uses a social lab approach that focuses on this end goal and inquiry question, working iteratively and emergently over time to test a variety of approaches and scale learnings.

## In 2015, WellAhead worked with 6 school districts in BC to test an approach that involved 3 core elements.

### 1. Core set of values

Adhering to a core set of values which include 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 R&D phase.

### 2. Community-led, participatory change process

School districts in BC have significant autonomy, and are in many ways each a mini-ecosystem. We drew upon the design thinking and the social lab model to hypothesize the following: by giving agency to the district to develop a shared vision, collectively ideate and select solutions, then prototype these in real time, there would be more buy-in and the work would be more likely to “stick” over the long-term.

### 3. Strategic focus on ‘everyday practices’

Teachers are often already overburdened, and they don’t need one more thing to do. 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 day. Practices like circle check-in and mindful pause were subsequently prototyped over the school year.

## This was our original theory of change.



## The design process followed 3 stages.



### 1. Co-design: August - December 2015

**Building the foundation:** from August-September 2015, school districts gathered existing local data on child and youth wellbeing and summarized this into a Design Brief. The design brief identified community-level strengths and needs in child and youth wellbeing, and formed the context to inform brainstorming of solutions. (August - September 2015)

**Brainstorm ideas:** from October through early November 2015, school districts hosted multiple ‘ideation sessions’ in their communities to bring together students, parents, teachers, administrators, and community partners in groups as large as 100 people to collectively brainstorm and design ideas for ‘everyday practices’: simple things that schools can easily and naturally do to promote student wellbeing. The design criteria of Impact, Desirability, Feasibility, and Integrability were used to prioritize the best ideas. 5-12 priority ideas emerged from the ideation sessions. (October 2015)

**Refine and select ideas:** after the initial ideation session, school districts hosted a smaller group of local stakeholders (6-12) that met the OPEN criteria to a single ‘refinement session’. The refinement session was used to prioritize a smaller number of solutions, elaborate on their design, and clarify their intended impacts. After the refinement session, the top 1-2 solutions were selected by the local planning teams in school districts. The selections were informed by a document called the ‘Idea Selection Brief’, which WellAhead circulated to local planning teams. (November - December 2015)



### 2. Prototyping: January - June 2016

**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 2 schools, began implementing their ‘everyday practice’ and collecting data from teachers and students.

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



### 3. Scaling: July 2016 onwards

**Interpret and share learnings** while connecting with work in other provinces. This phase will be developed further moving forward.

## We revised our theory of change.

The updated theory of change reflects some major strategic shifts in our thinking.

1. The role we see ourselves playing as a philanthropic organization as distinct from those who are more permanently invested in the wellbeing in schools space
2. The change we want to see happen at multiple levels and in multiple spheres
3. The goals we have related to learning, relationship/capacity, and impact and the interconnectedness between them

## Applying systems thinking showed us how different levels interact.

We observed how intentional efforts at certain levels, even when effective, are more successful when supported at other levels.

1. **Ecosystem** - Common vision and aligned action across stakeholder groups and leaders about goal of integrating wellbeing in schools (rather than only short-term outcomes)
2. **Provincial** - Funding for staff dedicated to overseeing/leading wellbeing in schools, wellbeing in curriculum and standards
3. **School District** - Wellbeing as a named priority in the district.
4. **School** - Principals needed to “give permission” (culturally/figuratively or in some cases literally) to focus on wellbeing
5. **Classroom** - Teacher sense of self-efficacy, empowerment.

## Here are the big remaining questions.

- *Is a social innovation lab process an effective and feasible approach at the school district level?*
- *How can we apply design thinking to inform our work at the provincial and national level. Who do we involve and how?*
- *Given the complexity of the system encompassed by wellbeing in schools, what is a realistic level or scale of intervention? How do we balance breadth vs. depth of learning and impact?*
- *What are tools we could use to better track our efforts at multiple levels and map them against the actions of others to better visualize system gap?*

