



A 5-Year Journey Supporting Innovation in K-12 School Wellbeing

December 2020

Introduction



In 2015, the McConnell Foundation committed to 5 years of funding for the WellAhead initiative, which sought to improve child and youth mental health by catalyzing efforts to integrate social and emotional wellbeing into K-12 education.

Throughout its 5-year term, the initiative supported diverse efforts to promote learning and innovation in this space; convening leaders in education and health together, funding grassroots initiatives, and leading an innovation lab. The following report tells our story of unexpected lessons, impacts and progress on our journey, and where to look next for developments in the field.

Program Launch: Building Our Sandbox

In 2013, responding to increasing public concern about child and youth mental health, the McConnell Foundation began a journey to scope a new initiative. After extensive consultation with experts and champions in mental health and education, we formally kicked off the WellAhead initiative in 2015.

Our analysis showed that schools were a critical setting to reach young people, and there was strong evidence that showed if we lead quality programming to enhance students' emotional skills and resilience, it can pay huge dividends later in life.

The challenge, however, was that these programs rarely reach scale across schools, and encounter significant barriers to sustaining their momentum.

Why focus on social and emotional wellbeing in schools?



Schools are the number one setting to promote wellbeing among children and youth.



An emphasis on social and emotional wellbeing during school hours leads to an 11 percentage-point improvement in academic performance.



Investing in student wellbeing reduces the incidence of bullying, violence, conduct disorders, anxiety, depression and suicide.

Our Guiding Question

Since 2015, our work has been driven by one big question:

How can we support K-12 education systems across the country to integrate social and emotional wellbeing as a key priority?

If you asked us for examples of what that looks like at the time, you would have most certainly heard a vague response (policies, budget lines, etc.).

Part of the journey, it turned out, would be figuring out what it looked like when social and emotional wellbeing was and wasn't a priority in schools and school districts.



Take 1: Social Innovation Labs

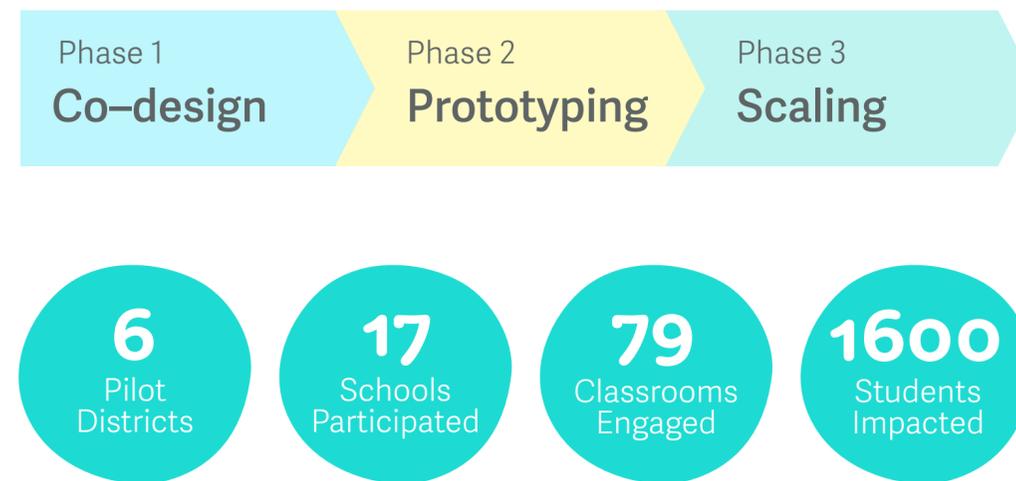
In April 2015 we started our first project, which aimed to bring innovation into schools via a social lab approach in British Columbia school districts. Through an open call for participation, we selected six diverse school districts to work with across the province.

The 'labs' involved a few steps, over the course of the school year:

1. Gathering community together (including students, parents, educators and community partners) to brainstorm multiple ideas for simple practices (or 'prototypes') that could positively impact students' wellbeing
2. Deciding on one or two ideas to test
3. Implementing and evaluating the practices

The brainstorming process was a powerful opportunity to bring communities together to engage in dialogue on an issue of great importance to them: the wellbeing of their next generation. It was creative, difficult, but overall very fun and inspiring.

Social Innovation Lab Process



The Program Trap

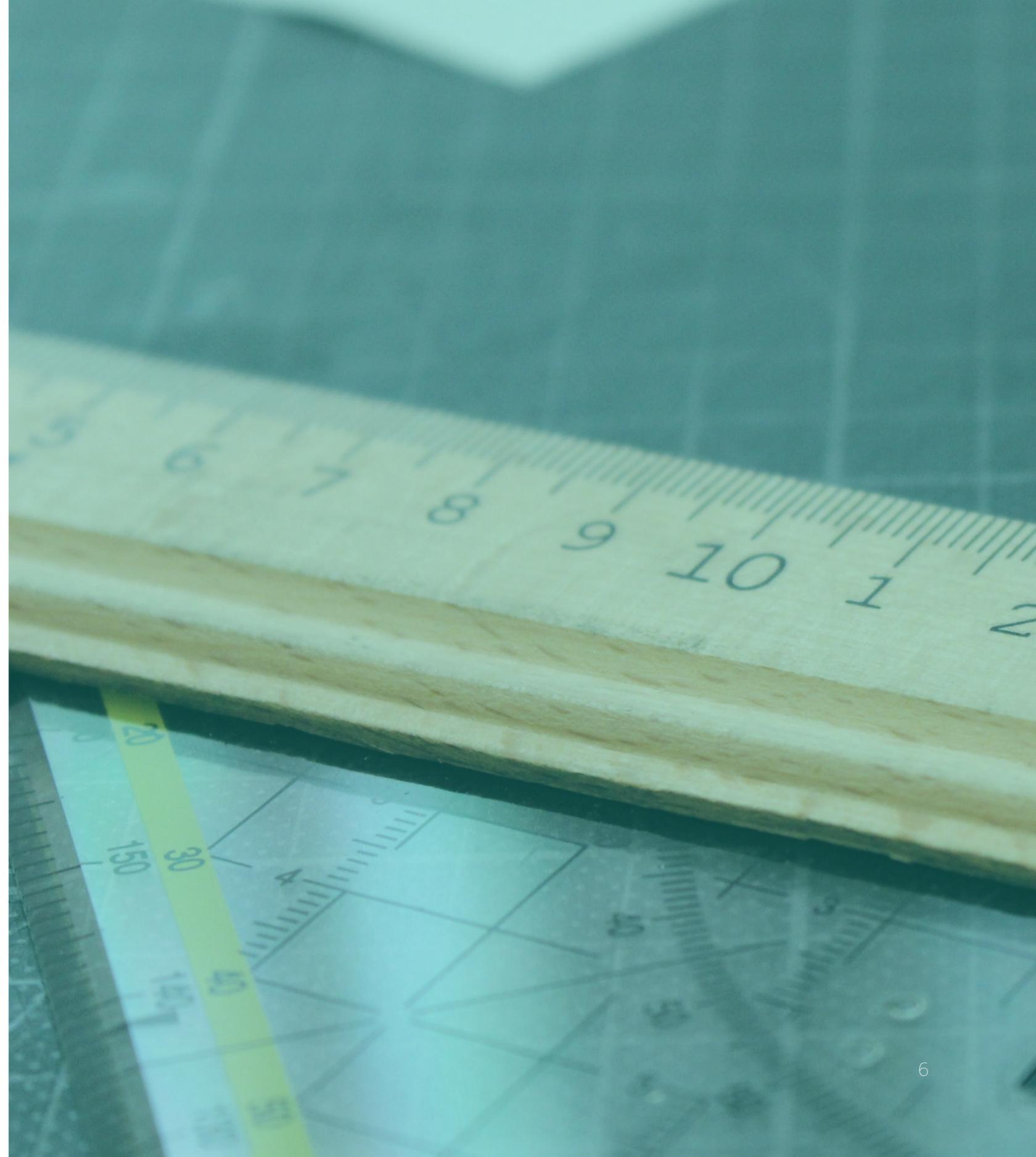
By Summer 2016, we were able to tally up the results from our evaluation. In short, they were mixed. Some practices were showing lots of promise for students, and were scaling to more schools as demand grew. Others never really took off: it was hard for schools to make them a priority alongside big policy issues like school closures, budgeting, and other initiatives.

Amidst all of this, the social labs process seemed to have limited promise in its ability to scale into more districts and regions across the country: it was time-intensive, costly, and involved a number of complicated steps.¹

When two participants declined further funding to continue into a second year, we were struck with an “aha!” moment. **The process had become the exact problem we set out to solve: another one-off initiative sent to the pilot-project graveyard that schools know so well.**

[Blog post: Falling into the “program” trap](#)

¹More on the social labs process in our report: [Advancing Wellbeing in Schools: 15 lessons about education, philanthropy, and systems change](#)



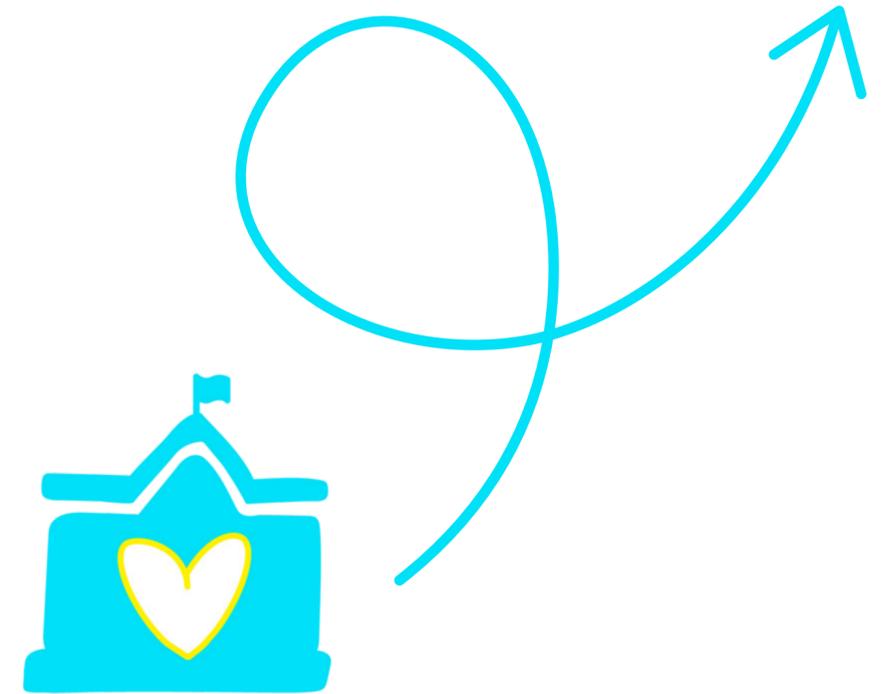
Take 2: Scaling Up (Not Out)

There are a few ways we've learned to think about scaling. We could have 'scaled out' and tried to get the labs process into more school districts. We could have scaled deep and tried an advocacy campaign to influence public opinion. Our insights at the time pointed us in a different direction. We moved to 'scale up' and build more deliberate relationships with provincial decision-makers in an effort to understand how McConnell could play its best role as a funder in catalyzing systemic work in this area.

After determined efforts, some Deputy Ministers of Education took our meeting requests. Yet, despite them putting funding on the table, we heard that the "timing wasn't right" to move ahead with any new province-wide actions. At this same time, we built and maintained

relationships with some engaged bureaucrats and thought leaders in education and mental health, and made some key grants to fund cutting-edge work in the space. Through these relationships, we kicked off the following important projects:

- ↪ 2 projects in partnership with the BC Government and DASH BC; a **user-centred design process** to improve access and use of quality physical and health education teaching resources, and the **Mental Wellbeing Coaching Initiative**
- ↪ A pan-Canadian community of practice on system-wide approaches to student wellbeing



Key Insight: Wellbeing is Relational

The interconnected nature of student and K-12 staff wellbeing also became increasingly apparent at this time. It turns out you can't have one without the other.

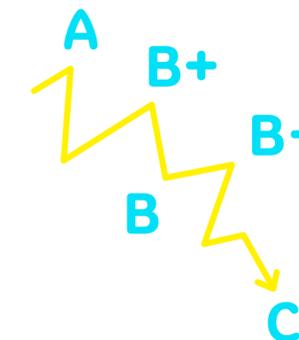
In 2017, we began research to better understand the landscape of work on improving the wellbeing of K-12 teachers and staff.

In the same year, we hosted a first-of-its-kind, national convening on the topic, which informed and catalyzed expanding work on this topic in the years to come.

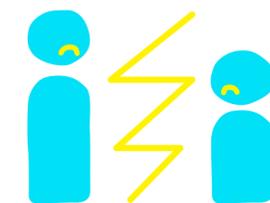
When teachers are burnt out, students have:



Higher levels of chronic stress



Lower performance on academics



Reduced feelings of support from teachers



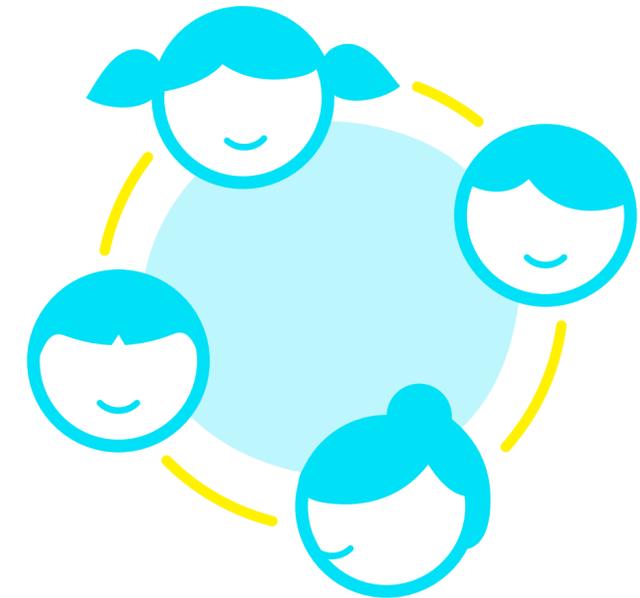
Lower school satisfaction

Take 3: Co-Creation and Distributed Leadership

Setting our sights on systems-level change made it difficult to see the impact of our work at times. But just when we were unsure, our contribution to some big wins for our partners became a little clearer. Key milestones on our journey included:

- ↪ We crowd-sourced clarity on what 'integrated social and emotional wellbeing' in K-12 education looks like, and outlined the concept in a **policy-relevant paper, *Beyond the Binder***, as well as in real-life **case studies** of diverse school districts.
- ↪ More school districts in our BC and Alberta networks are explicitly prioritizing work on teacher and staff wellbeing. They have integrated this focus into their strategic plans, hired staff to lead wellbeing work, and hosted professional learning opportunities for staff.

- ↪ The insights and prototypes from the **user-centred design process** we co-led with Healthy Schools BC and DASH BC were incorporated into a multi-year, multi-million dollar investment to support educators with student physical and health education competencies.
- ↪ BC's Ministry of Education has committed \$8.8M to their **strategy for promoting mental wellness in schools**, which includes systemic approaches and an expanded focus to supporting K-12 teachers and staff.



Sunset

As a means of promoting better mental health outcomes for students, the WellAhead journey began with the question **“how can we support K-12 education systems across the country to integrate social and emotional wellbeing as a key priority?”**. Given what we’ve learned about the massive societal change that has happened since these systems’ original design, and the urgent need for transition to a more sustainable, resilient and inclusive society, we are left wondering whether this goes far enough.

After five years of work on this issue, we believe strongly that acknowledging the deep connection between wellbeing and education for young people (and all people, for that matter) is more critical than ever. So rather than ‘bolting on’ wellbeing as a priority in existing systems, we have pivoted our question to **“how can Canadians re-imagine and rebuild K-12 systems with wellbeing at their core?”**

This tremendous and warranted challenge is already underway, and its path to completion is neither simple nor linear. Asking better questions, then, is a good place to start.

As the initiative comes to a close, our fervent hope is that the work will continue. The following grants and projects will extend beyond WellAhead’s sunset, and have been designed with sustained momentum and impact in mind:

The **EdCan Network** continues to lead knowledge mobilization and field-building work on workplace wellbeing in the K-12 sector via their [Well at Work](#) platform. EdCan will also be implementing *Well at Work 2.0*: a set of solutions to build the capacity of education leaders to implement transformative and comprehensive strategies that will improve staff wellbeing, reduce system-wide costs, and in turn create more positive learning environments for students.

[edcan.ca](#)
[@EdCanNet](#)

The **College of Alberta School Superintendents** are continuing work to leverage the Superintendent Leadership Quality Standard and support superintendents to lead systemic and sustainable approaches to wellbeing across all provincial school districts in Alberta.

[cass.ab.ca](#)
[@CASSalberta](#)

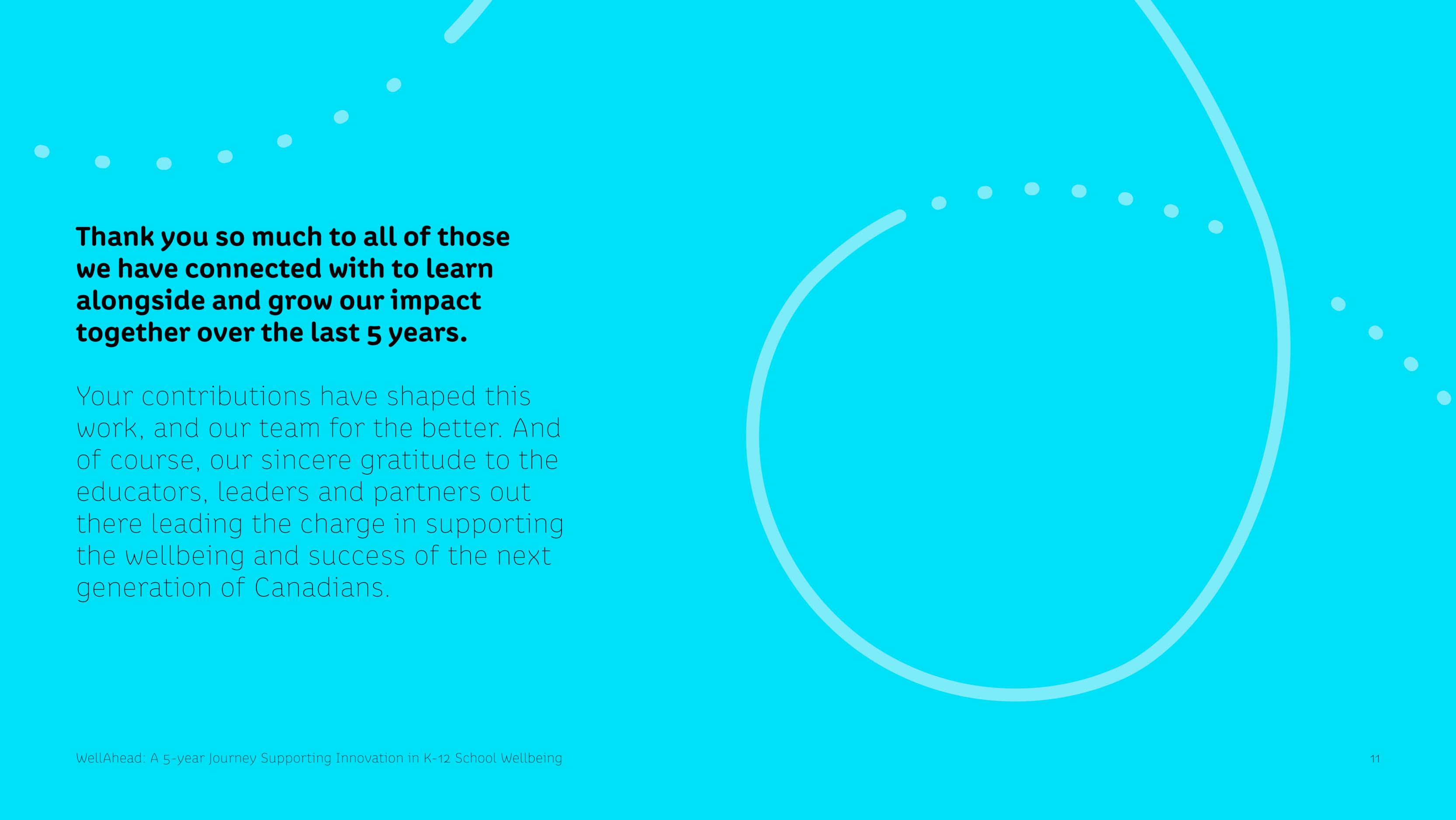
School Mental Health Ontario, the **Canadian Association of School System Administrators**, and the **Canadian School Boards Association** are building on the momentum generated from two pan-Canadian convenings on systemic approaches to school-based mental health and wellbeing by convening a community of practice of leaders in the area.

[smho-smso.ca](#) [cdnsba.org](#)
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[cassa-acgcs.ca](#)
[@cassaacgcs](#)

The **Canadian Healthy Schools Alliance** is leading work to mobilize knowledge on systemic and sustainable approaches to mental health and wellbeing in K-12 education.

[healthyschoolsalliance.ca](#)
[@CdnSchoolHealth](#)



Thank you so much to all of those we have connected with to learn alongside and grow our impact together over the last 5 years.

Your contributions have shaped this work, and our team for the better. And of course, our sincere gratitude to the educators, leaders and partners out there leading the charge in supporting the wellbeing and success of the next generation of Canadians.