# Supporting students during the pandemic and beyond: Lessons learned from British Columbia administrators of inclusive education

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# Contents

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# Acknowledgements

# Author biographies

## Rachel Goossen

Rachel Goossen has worked in education since 2011, serving as a classroom teacher, district administrator and community partnerships manager. In 2019, Rachel completed her MA in Educational Studies at the University of British Columbia. She is a dedicated qualitative researcher, having spent the past five years working on projects related to childhood well-being and social-emotional learning. Her overarching area of focus is understanding the ways in which schools operate within communities to support children, youth, staff and families. Rachel is committed to translating research into action and believes strongly in the power of using data to enact positive change.

## Dr. Hasina Samji

Dr. Hasina Samji is an assistant professor in the Faculty of Health Sciences at Simon Fraser University, a senior scientist in Population Mental Wellbeing at the British Columbia Centre for Disease Control, and the director of the Capturing Health and Resilience Trajectories lab. She leads the Youth Development Instrument, an interdisciplinary study measuring predictors of positive youth well-being, mental health and development in high school students, in collaboration with the Human Early Learning Partnership, educators, community, clinical and policy partners, and youth. Hasina is passionate about working collaboratively across disciplines to improve young people's well-being.

# Executive summary

This report is about sharing stories.

Stories shared through intentional dialogue serve to supplement quantitative data in an illustrative way. We know from recent studies that the COVID-19 pandemic and associated control measures have further exacerbated existing inequalities among students, including those with physical and cognitive disabilities requiring special education support (Dove et al., 2020; Hoofman & Secord, 2021; Houtrow et al., 2020; Mutluer et al., 2020). Existing research spans children and adults who face moderate to severe cognitive and physical disabilities in their experiences at home, work and school. New and emerging reports continue to highlight the unequal impact of COVID-19 on populations facing structural barriers across Canada and British Columbia, further necessitating governmental and community response to be targeted, localized and informed by experience (Gadermann et al., 2021; Gallagher-Mackay et al., 2021).

**The purpose of this study is to expand on the existing knowledge base by hearing from professionals, working day in and day out in British Columbia school systems, regarding the practices that are making a difference for students in their communities. We also seek to understand what guiding principles and specific strategies will propel educators forward, as we collectively work toward recovery from COVID-19.**

This study was commissioned by the British Columbia Council of Administrators of Inclusive Support in Education (BC CAISE), with support from the British Columbia Ministry of Education and Child Care, BC CAISE saw a distinct need to understand not only the barriers facing learners with diverse needs and disabilities throughout COVID-19 but also the strategies and practices school systems have taken to overcome or combat these barriers. BC CAISE reached out to Dr. Hasina Samji and Rachel Goossen, MA, of Simon Fraser University [1] to explore these themes. To gather relevant information from educational leaders around the province, we conducted semi-structured interviews examining areas of success, challenges and experiences in education from March 2020 to December 2021.

The interviews clearly illustrated how practices developed specifically to support students identified with diverse needs or disabilities also benefitted students of all backgrounds and abilities.

"What we've learned is good for our most vulnerable students is simply good practice for all students."

– Participant 14, Lower Mainland

Our study showed that students experiencing higher levels of non-clinical anxiety or struggling with self-regulation were served by inclusive education practices or Tier 1 interventions.[2] Educational leaders indicated the necessity of using innovative strategies to serve students in an unprecedented time, turning to system-wide social-emotional learning (SEL) strategies and greater adoption of universal design for learning (UDL) practices.[3]

Developing and maintaining relationships between schools, students, families and their broader communities quickly rose to the top of educators' priorities as COVID-19 began to impact our daily lives. In some cases, these relationships were novel collaborations or offers of support. In others, they built upon existing connections and were strengthened by a shared goal of meeting student needs, no matter how challenging the circumstances.

"We want families to know we are in their corner."

– Participant 4, Vancouver/Gulf Island(s)

1. As this study was conceptualized as a quality improvement assessment, with participants providing their expert opinions based on their professional work, ethics approval was deemed unnecessary.

2. According to the RTI Network, Tier 1 interventions are core instructional interventions, reaching all students: "All students in Tier 1 receive high-quality, scientifically based instruction, differentiated to meet their needs, and are screened on a periodic basis to identify struggling learners who need additional support." More information at: http://www.rtinetwork.org/essential/tieredinstruction/

3. As defined by the RTI Network, UDL is the "process of designing instruction that is accessible by all students; UDL includes multiple means of representation, multiple means of expression, and multiple means of engagement."

Included in this report is a brief overview of the study design, with the bulk of content focused on findings based on participant interviews. These findings are divided between the following five themes:
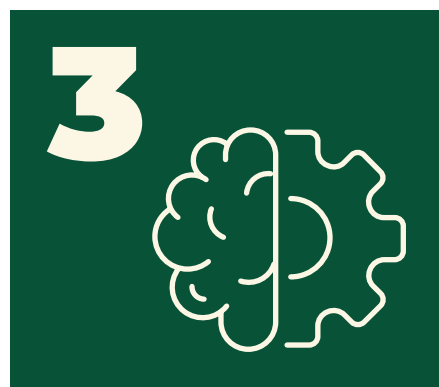
**1**

### Access, capacity and unequal impacts:

The pandemic exacerbated existing challenges around access to specialist services and has also impacted early years experiences for young people.

**2**

### Understanding well-being through relationship development:

Focusing on and understanding the well-being of students and families is possible because of authentic relationship development being prioritized by school and district staff.

**3**

### Collaboration in systems and communities:

Strategies to understand barriers and challenges, as well as approaches to recover from COVID-19, are more effective and beneficial when working in collaboration.

**4**

### Mental health matters:

Promoting mental health and social-emotional learning for students and their families remains top of mind for educators.

**5**

### Caring for adults who care for children:

Supporting adults who work in education is essential when considering pandemic recovery practices and strategies.

# Introduction
## How to read this report

As you read this report, we invite you to reflect upon the following questions for further consideration. These questions were prompted by the conversations that shape this report and are meant to propel our thinking toward action.

**1** What is the role of the British Columbia education system in supporting communal recovery from COVID-19?

**2** What can you identify as successful practices and strategies when considering the ongoing support of students with diverse needs and disabilities?

**3** What successes or practices can you implement or maintain to support students through COVID-19 recovery?

**Throughout this report, we highlight experiences that were shared by participants in rural and remote regions in British Columbia. While many challenges and strategies are common to educators no matter their geography, those far removed from urban centres have unique experiences that should be acknowledged.**

## Study context

Prior to COVID-19, educators and administrators were aware of and working to overcome the challenges of unequal access to services for students with diverse learning or mental health needs. A public consultation commissioned by the BC Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) in autumn 2019 highlighted concerns of accessibility to assessments and interventions due to long wait times, limited remote and rural services, and lack of culturally and linguistically appropriate services (MCFD, 2021). Simultaneously, the BC Ministry of Education and Child Care has continuously supported increased mental health promotion within school systems, acknowledging the need for compassionate systems leadership, a whole-system approach to mental health, and the central role of social-emotional learning (SEL) within classrooms (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2020; British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2021). Published in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Ministry of Education report entitled Key Principles and Strategies for K–12 Mental Health Promotion in Schools emphasizes the need for "proportionate responses and supports," beginning with the understanding that existing systemic barriers influence child, youth and family experiences during the pandemic.

"The events which have unfolded since March 2020, including the pandemic and highlight on [societal] racism, have emphasized the inequities in our systems... people are more aware of relationships and the value of SEL to help our learners be the best they can be."
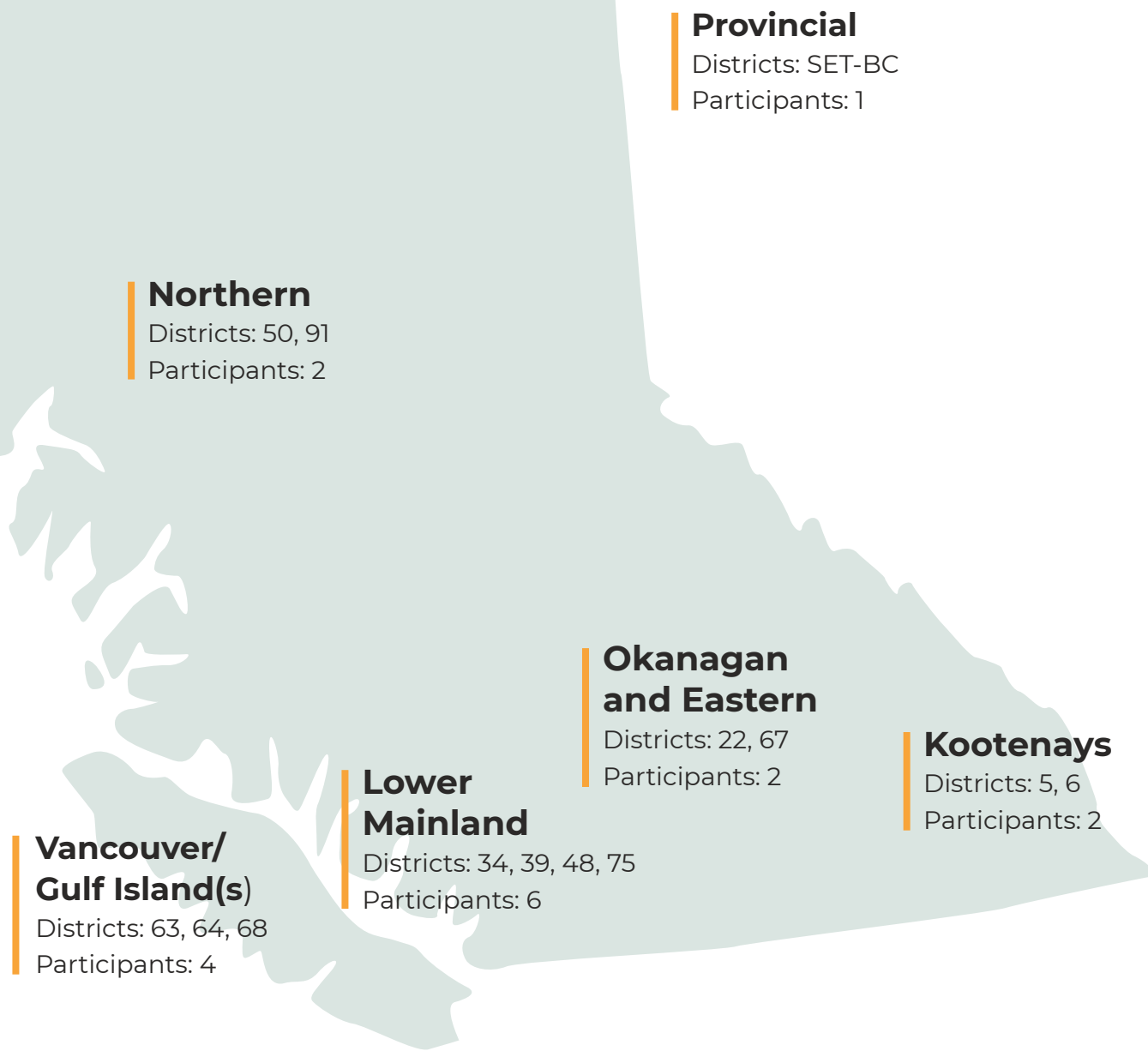
– Participant 15, Lower Mainland

# Study design

The process of data collection was designed collaboratively by BC CAISE and the SFU research team. We invited BC CAISE members from across the province to participate in one 30 to 45-minute interview between the end of November and early December 2021.[4] Each participant was invited to follow up with the researchers with any additional thoughts, ideas or memories following the interview (3 of the 17 did so). All participants hold a part-time or full-time administrator position at the district level, with inclusive learning in their portfolios. Three districts had more than one administrator participate in interviews. The following breaks down participant geographics, divided regionally as seen in the BC CAISE representative network:

**Provincial**
Districts: SET-BC
Participants: 1

**Northern**
Districts: 50, 91
Participants: 2

**Okanagan and Eastern**
Districts: 22, 67
Participants: 2

**Kootenays**
Districts: 5, 6
Participants: 2

**Lower Mainland**
Districts: 34, 39, 48, 75
Participants: 6

**Vancouver/ Gulf Island(s)**
Districts: 63, 64, 68
Participants: 4

# Key points:

**1** Students and families faced structural barriers to accessing support prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

**2** The impacts of COVID-19 are affecting people in differing and unequal ways, requiring proportionate responses.

**3** Pre-pandemic challenges facing children, youth and families have been exacerbated.

**4** This study was collaboratively designed with the intention of highlighting challenges/barriers as well as effective strategies to support learners with diverse needs and disabilities during the pandemic and beyond.

## Overall

**17** district administrators of inclusive education interviews conducted

across

**14** districts in British Columbia

4. Interviews took place in late November to early December 2021, a point in time of the COVID-19 pandemic when we had not yet hit the Omicron variant peak. In British Columbia, there was a general sense of moving forward in 'recovery' rather than being deep in the uncertainties of COVID-19 (with the exception of the Northern Health Authority, where community-based transmission remained high). Unfortunately, that quickly changed as Omicron became widely transmissible and of great concern. On December 15, the federal government announced another advisory against non-essential international travel. Soon after, the Ministry of Education made the decision to slightly delay the start date of K–12 schools following winter break.

All participants have served in various positions throughout the K–12 education system, many working as education assistants, classroom teachers, and school-based leaders before transitioning to leading inclusive education at the district-level. Their breadth of experience in British Columbia and elsewhere provides ample and invaluable insight into education resources and strategies, particularly as related to changes in student needs before and during the pandemic. Interview participants are not named in the report. All quotes are transcribed from the recorded interviews, with only minor editing to ensure appropriate contextual understanding. Quotes are attributed to an individual participant and their region.

A final note: While the interview guide included language focused on students with diverse needs and disabilities, all participants spoke to the needs of their students, families and school communities who face structural inequities and barriers to success. We have included examples of practices and strategies supporting students with specific learning designations; however, the vast majority of participants spoke more broadly of vulnerability, complexity and range of needs in their communities.

## Gratitude

This work would not be possible nor meaningful without the enthusiastic and thoughtful participation of educational leaders throughout the province and the coordination and directional support from BC CAISE. Thank you to all the participants and their colleagues who continue to create positive change for students and their families throughout the province.
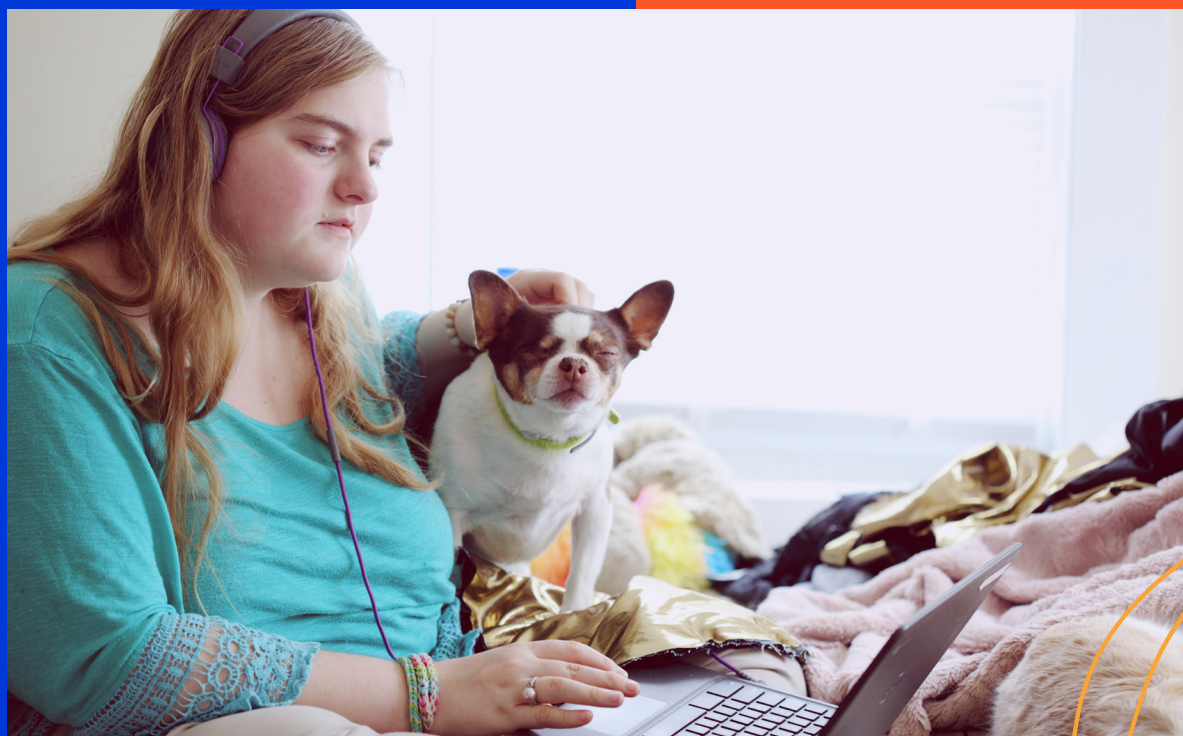
# Findings

## Thematic findings

The interview guide was designed in a semi-structured way with the aim of covering a range of topics, from reflection of tools, practices and resources at the start of the pandemic in March 2020 to ongoing practices used until December 2021. Interview questions (see Appendix) were grouped in three topic areas:

**Area one:**
strategies/resources/practices

**Area two:**
challenges/barriers

**Area three:**
pandemic recovery

As conversation flowed naturally from present-day experiences to past reflections, we grouped our findings based on thematic alignment rather than a linear progression as the interview guide may allude to. After reviewing interview transcripts multiple times and noting recurrent themes, the following five areas were identified as most prominent in our conversations with participants around the province:

**1** **Access, capacity and unequal impacts:** The pandemic exacerbated existing challenges around access to specialist services and has also impacted early years experiences for young people.

**2** **Understanding well-being through relationship development:** Focusing on and understanding the well-being of students and families is possible because of authentic relationship development being prioritized by school and district staff.

**3** **Collaboration in systems and communities:** Strategies to understand barriers and challenges, as well as approaches to recover from COVID-19, are more effective and beneficial when working in collaboration.

**4** **Mental health matters:** Promoting mental health and social-emotional learning for students and their families remains top of mind for educators.

**5** **Caring for adults who care for children:** Supporting adults who work in education is essential when considering pandemic recovery practices and strategies.

Each thematic area showcases challenges, barriers and strategies for support based on the experiences of participants. We encourage you to return to the guiding questions on page 10 as you explore this report.

# Access, capacity and unequal impacts

Students with diverse needs and disabilities–and their families–continue to face great challenges related to access to care and specialist support. This is seen in two specific areas: first, limited access to respite and specialist care for students who had existing services in place pre-pandemic; second, children who have been unable to access early years assessments or interventions, greatly impacting their school-entry experience.

Many "supports from partner groups in the community and from other agencies ceased" when COVID-19 struck, due to restrictions placed on in-person interactions (Participant 5, Vancouver/Gulf Island(s)). This included reduction or elimination of community-based resources such as at-home respite care or community programming. While these supports exist outside of the school, educators quickly became aware of the isolation and excessive stress that reduced in-person care placed on students and their families (Participant 7, Vancouver/Gulf Island(s); Participant 8, Okanagan and Eastern; Participant 10, Northern; Participant 14, Lower Mainland). Many participants noted the fear they and their colleagues experienced, knowing how this isolation was impacting children and youth.

**Across the province, participants noted that lack of access to services or in-person support continues to impact all students–particularly those with diverse needs and disabilities. This is amplified in rural and remote regions, where access to specialists was already severely limited prior to the pandemic. As noted by one participant, "The actual crux of the matter is that we live in a place that doesn't have [specialist] services...ideally, Northern Health would employ an occupational therapist" (Participant 12, Northern). At this time, the district must hire a contract practitioner to visit their region which limits regular access for the child and comes at a larger financial cost to the district.**

"The impact of trauma is felt disproportionately and it's been much harder on our families and students that have diverse abilities and who are more vulnerable. Bringing that [knowledge] into our system, the more we can support our diverse learners."

– Participant 7, Vancouver/ Gulf Island(s)

When in-person support services began to return, COVID-19 capacity restrictions limited the number of people able to access these services, causing a further backlog and subsequent ballooning of wait lists. Regardless of region, educators are observing significantly longer wait times for students needing to access specialist services or assessments. Speech-language pathology assessments, hearing screenings, occupational/physical therapy interventions and psychiatry support were indicated by participants as areas where assessment or reporting wait times have impacted their ability to meet the learning needs of students in schools (Participant 9, Lower Mainland; Participant 17, Kootenays). In response to these limitations, district staff have taken creative approaches to support students by increasing local knowledge and capacity, as best as they are able. Participants highlighted the value of resources and training available virtually through POPARD[5] and POPFASD[6], as well as resource sharing through networks such as BC CAISE (Participant 3, Lower Mainland; Participant 7, Vancouver/Gulf Island(s); Participant 12, Northern; Participant 14, Lower Mainland).

"BC CAISE has been an incredible support. Our regional groups are an incredible support to each other, we reach out to have our regular meetings but also just [individually] through email...supporting our kids with diverse learning needs is really complex, and [BC CAISE] is made up of people who have really specialized information and valuable experience."

– Participant 8, Okanagan and Eastern

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5. Provincial Outreach Program for Autism and Related Disorders, a Ministry of Education and Child Care funded program providing services to schools in British Columbia. More information at: https://autismoutreach.ca/

6. Provincial Outreach Program for Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder, funded by the British Columbia Ministry of Education and Child Care. More information at: https://fasdoutreach.ca/

Beyond the reduced capacity of specialist services, children also lacked access to early years formal learning and informal social experiences. Participants noted this and specifically attributed the lack of access as causing observable behavioural and academic gaps for students entering kindergarten compared to their peers entering prior to the pandemic. Substantially higher "levels of need" facing students entering kindergarten were shared by participants (Participant 3, Lower Mainland; Participant 6, Vancouver/Gulf Island(s)). In the words of one participant, "We have this whole generation of tiny people who didn't get their playgroups or birthday parties or swimming lessons, and all of a sudden they are in school with 300 other kids" (Participant 4, Vancouver/Gulf Island(s)). Another participant shared that staff are "noticing a high number

of kids in kindergarten who are presenting diverse learning needs, but they haven't been exposed to early learning activities and environments...So it is a challenge to provide the support they are needing, and then watching, monitoring, and evaluating" to ensure the interventions are appropriate (Participant 8, Okanagan and Eastern). In other communities, families assumed that early learning opportunities, like StrongStart BC, were not running due to the pandemic. Thus, students were not attending, even when programs may have been available (Participant 17, Kootenays).

Because of these reduced formal early learning experiences, children have been referred for behavioural or learning assessments less than they perhaps would have. Many young children have

had fewer connection points with early childhood development specialists. For those who did engage with formal early learning experiences, the pandemic-related restrictions of in-person interactions limited the informal collaborative points of connection between early childhood educators and kindergarten teachers. This has created an entry-to-school experience that is very different from pre-pandemic years. One participant shared that "because of the pandemic, these kids didn't receive the same level of supports and services from the child development centre or other agencies" (Participant 15, Lower Mainland). The various experiences and observations shared by participants are important to consider as we re-envision effective and appropriate educational systems moving forward.

"We had kids coming to kindergarten who have never attended anything social, they've never been to a preschool or a play date...we have extra intervention in our kindergartens, but we have never seen this level of need."

– Participant 10, Northern

# Understanding well-being through relationship development

Some of the greatest successes throughout the pandemic that were highlighted by participants–many of which continue today–are the relationships that are positively serving students in the midst of great unpredictability and uncertainty. These relationships can generally be seen as existing between 1) school/district and family, and 2) school and child/youth. Developing these relationships has allowed schools and districts to understand overall family wellness throughout the pandemic and subsequently take action to support food security, combat social isolation, and reduce overall stress and anxiety, for example.

School and district staff have gauged their student individual and collective wellness through a variety of formal and informal approaches. Many districts surveyed families at the start of the pandemic to understand their needs when shifting to fully remote learning or reduced in-person instruction time (Participant 8, Okanagan and Eastern; Participant 10, Northern; Participant 12, Northern; Participant 13, Kootenays; Participant 14, Lower Mainland). When schools first switched to remote learning in March 2020, staff scrambled to ensure that students and families had access to basic necessities (food) as well as learning materials (technology and wireless internet). One participant noted how remote learning prompted greater "compassionate understanding" toward students' family lives, as staff got a glimpse into the home (Participant 7, Vancouver/Gulf Island(s)).

Because impacts of the pandemic are ongoing, family well-being remains top of mind for school districts as they continue to build relationships between home and school (Participant 13, Kootenays). One participant recalled the importance of connecting with families as district staff "quickly realized that many of the barriers kids were facing actually had nothing to do with the children, it was the barriers the parents were facing" (Participant 4, Vancouver/Gulf Island(s)). Focusing on the mental health and SEL of all students was named as a top priority by participants when asked about their guiding practices and philosophies that will shape COVID-19 recovery. Beyond this, many educators' strategies appear to be rooted in Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model (1994), and therefore they act with the understanding that a child's personal development must situate their experience in their family, community and broader environment.

When asked to envision a future where pandemic recovery (versus survival) is the reality, many participants responded with their hopes of continued relationship-building to ultimately support students. Strong successes were described, such as greater participation from families in school events because of the option to attend virtually (Participant 8, Okanagan and Eastern). Others noted that they increased online resources available to families, such as live learning sessions focused on mental health, SEL, and dealing with stress and anxiety. Leveraging virtual opportunities to connect and deepen relationships with families was something that some districts "never would have considered previously" yet has resulted in a sense of effectively "wrapping around students and families" (Participant 15, Lower Mainland).

"Children come with families. So if the parents are experiencing barriers, we can't put pressure on the child...we have to figure out what is going on for the family and support those pieces."

– Participant 4, Vancouver/Gulf Island(s)

# Collaboration in systems and communities

Further complementing relationships between children, families and schools are the broader collaborative relationships built between systems, such as the school district and local community partners or provincial networks. Time and again, participants noted how collaborative working relationships within their professional communities strengthened during the pandemic.

A few of these successes are attributed to the benefits of using virtual meeting technology to its fullest extent. The province-wide SET-BC[7] extended their training and support offerings using tools like the Owl Labs system for effective remote sessions with small groups around British Columbia. Their aim in piloting new technologies throughout COVID-19 was to reproduce as best a learning experience as possible, despite being limited to remote sessions. While these creative virtual approaches were prompted by the pandemic experience, there is a vision to increase the "frequency of support" that is made possible through remote offerings (Participant 2, Provincial). Continued collaboration between SET-BC and districts exists in the sweet spot of a hybrid model of support where face-to-face connection is possible and virtual opportunities are leveraged through strong technology and remote engagement.

**In eastern British Columbia, close working relationships among school districts have existed for years with their shared understanding of the unique needs facing rural and remote communities. At the start of the pandemic, an existing working group focused on serving students with diverse learning needs gathered (virtually) to share ideas for support in their region. One participant recalled "the most successful project in the first couple of months were curbside visits by student services, teachers, and education assistants...to maintain connection with the kids" (Participant 13, Kootenays). Amidst the great unknown, the district leveraged its educational community partners to maintain relationships with students and families. Stemming from these curbside visits, the district strengthened initiatives with community partners, such as Backpack Buddies[8] and a local dairy program, to support food security of students while they were out of school.**

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7. SET-BC is an outreach program serving students with complex needs through assistive technology and is provincially funded by the Ministry of Education and Child Care. More information at: https://www.setbc.org/

8. Backpack Buddies is a non-profit organization reaching British Columbia's children who require food security and support out of school. More information at: https://www.backpackbuddies.ca/

"With change of practice, there came more collaboration...and, looking at what do we need to do for learning? What does progress mean and what does success mean?"

– Participant 7, Vancouver/Gulf Island(s)

Many participants indicated that existing partnerships with community agencies were strengthened throughout the pandemic, with the simple focus of "working together to support our families" (Participant 15, Lower Mainland). School district staff worked with internet providers to ensure low-cost wireless was available to families who needed it (Participant 12, Northern; Participant 14, Lower Mainland; Participant 15, Lower Mainland). Others quickly turned to Zoom or Microsoft Teams to increase meeting frequency and participation with community-based non-profit organizations, the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD), and Child and Youth Mental Health (CYMH). Because of the rapid pivot to virtual learning and workplaces, many partners who may have been hesitant in the past to rely on virtual meeting technology shifted to doing so out of sheer necessity. While every participant recognized the value that virtual meeting opportunities can bring, particularly in rural and remote regions, there was the parallel understanding that in-person connection must still exist.

As districts consider communal recovery from COVID-19, many envision continuing the successful collaboration and connection among schools and their community partners. Working consistently in partnership–whether through the BC CAISE network, with local First Nations band councils or with community agencies–was highlighted by the majority of participants as a successful approach that is well worth continuing post-pandemic.

A unique example of collaboration was shared by one participant, where existing connections between the district and local medical community have developed far beyond expectation. What had previously existed as a strong consultative partnership grew to the opportunity of creating a new pediatric care clinic with a school liaison embedded within. The clinic will provide complex attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) care, with "the school team and pediatric care at the table together, right from the beginning" (Participant 4, Vancouver/Gulf Island(s)). This example is possible because of dedicated partners on all sides, who are choosing to build upon baseline collaborative conversations and working relationships to further support children and youth.
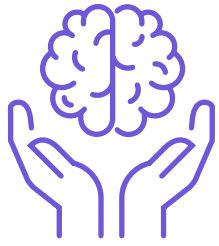
# Mental health matters

Across Canada, "the pandemic is taking an emotional toll on people," with higher levels of stress, worry, loneliness and sadness being reported (How are we feeling?, 2021). As noted in the sections above, understanding student and family well-being–including mental health–has been a priority for school districts throughout the pandemic.

While not indicating clinical diagnoses, participants around the province spoke to observed increases of stress and anxiety in students, families and fellow staff members. This has been observed as particularly salient in the 2021–2022 school year, where we entered the third school year affected by the uncertainties of COVID-19. Unfortunately, long wait lists and reduced services have affected mental health services. As one participant recalled, "With the increased mental health and anxiety issues that weve seen amongst our students, the services got reduced and the waitlists got longer. [Students] might have had that anxiety and

then it got exacerbated so now they need the support. And what we're telling people is they have a six to eight month waitlist" (Participant 1, Lower Mainland). In response to these observed needs, schools have taken on explicit strategies to support the comprehensive well-being of both staff and students.

**The concerns around access to services are again amplified in rural and remote regions: "One of the barriers or challenges we have is around mental health and counselling supports for a small community, so we have had to get really creative...We definitely need some deeper level supports available in a small town" (Participant 11, Okanagan and Eastern). While virtual counselling sessions may be an option in rural and remote regions, participants noted that children and youth find video counselling less engaging and connective.**

When asked about what practices and strategies participants anticipate continuing during COVID-19 recovery, mental health and SEL promotion remain top areas of focus. The Ministry of Education and Child Care's Mental Health in Schools (MHiS) Strategy was cited multiple times by participants as a helpful tool to shape a focused approach toward supporting well-being in school environments. Using the MHiS Strategy as a framework to promote both staff and student well-being, districts are developing important and successful strategies to serve their communities. It was noted by participants that beyond the published MHiS Strategy, increased funding for mental health initiatives made available by the Ministry of Education and Child Care allowed districts to facilitate additional trainings, support families via expanded resources, and ultimately reach more individuals than would have been previously possible (Participant 3, Lower Mainland; Participant 5, Vancouver/ Gulf Island(s); Participant 8, Okanagan and Eastern; Participant 11, Okanagan and Eastern). One district was able to design "deeper learning projects around mental health literacy", which was in process before the pandemic but became both more timely and possible through the Ministry of Education and Child Care area of focus funds (Participant 16, Lower Mainland).

"Mental wellness has been a focus for many years, but through the pandemic it has now become: *there's no competing priority but to put mental wellness first.*"
– Participant 7, Vancouver/Gulf Island(s)

Throughout the interviews, it was noted that more frequent conversations around mental health and wellness have had wide-reaching positive impacts for students, particularly those with diverse needs and disabilities. One participant indicated that the increased comfort in discussing mental health at all levels in school "normalizes" the conversation in a way that supports diverse learners (Participant 7, Vancouver/Gulf Island(s)). Furthermore, while observed anxiety and stress levels of students seem significantly higher, one participant noted that frequent mental health dialogue has allowed students to "feel safe enough to get, or ask for, support" in school (Participant 9, Lower Mainland). These conversations have also led to more explicit recognition that learning cannot happen without students feeling safe; with this understanding, participants are taking action to ensure continued focus on SEL and mental health promotion in schools (Participant 1, Lower Mainland; Participant 17, Kootenays).

# Caring for adults who care for children

Deeply connected to the well-being of children and youth is the well-being of adults. Interview participants shared story after story of staff members feeling burnt out and adult family members being overwhelmed. When asked to share specific feelings related to the challenges and barriers related to COVID-19, many participants noted frustration, heaviness, reluctance, uncertainty, fear, distress and tiredness.

We would be remiss not to include that communities throughout British Columbia have struggled with simultaneous tragic events throughout the pandemic, including the wildfires and deadly heat wave in summer 2021, the ongoing toxic drug supply crisis (Participant 7, Vancouver/Gulf Island(s); Participant 10, Northern), and the recent disastrous flooding in the Fraser Valley (Participant 2, Provincial; Participants 3; 15; 16, Lower Mainland). These continued crises have had compounding effects and are not isolated from those of COVID-19. Recovery strategies moving forward must recognize the trauma that the pandemic has caused, while also allowing room to understand the impacts of coexisting tragedies.

> "People are resilient, [yet] the multiple impacts of these traumatic events has a cumulative effect on people's ability to bounce back."
>
> – Participant 16, Lower Mainland

Alongside difficult feelings and experiences, participants also shared their own sense of pride when recalling the ways in which communities provided wraparound support to students and families (Participant 4, Vancouver/Gulf Island(s); Participant 8, Okanagan and Eastern; Participant 15, Lower Mainland; Participant 17, Kootenays). They shared ways in which communities are supporting resilience, such as a district responding to frequently changing public health guidelines with a spirit of flexibility, leading to some "development of resilience skills where folks were able to adapt to changes and move forward" (Participant 6, Vancouver/Gulf Island(s)).

Two main themes arose when participants were asked about strategies and areas of need related to adult experiences during the pandemic and looking forward to recovery. The first and most prominent area is the shortage of educational professionals and associated hiring challenges around the province. Pre-pandemic, staffing shortages existed across the British Columbia education sector (CBC News, 2018; Fitzpatrick, 2017; Kines & Bell, 2019). Like many others, this existing challenge has been exacerbated by COVID-19, with districts experiencing both acute and chronic hiring challenges.



**While hiring challenges are recognized province-wide, they seem to be more pronounced in rural and remote regions, where specialized staff postings may remain vacant for months. As noted by one participant, "It is next to impossible to hire a temporary school psychologist" while the full-time psychologist is on parental leave (Participant 17, Kootenays). This experience was similarly echoed by another who must regularly develop creative ways to promote vacancies for school-based support staff, well in advance of the job start dates (Participant 13, Kootenays). In these cases, funding for salaries is not the issue: districts simply cannot find qualified staff to fill the roles. Approaches districts have taken to support students in these regions include district-wide job sharing and providing specialist support via virtual connection.**

Participants around the province highlighted staffing shortages as being particularly challenging when considering COVID-19 recovery, as they noted that existing staff understand "the provincial shortage of teachers and feel like they [cannot] take a day off, even if they do need it for their own mental health" (Participant 1, Lower Mainland). When discussing the hope of building greater stability and predictability in a pandemic recovery environment, the greatest concern for one participant was that "teacher shortages [have] created massive staffing inconsistencies. [Yet], one of the most important things when you are working with students with diverse abilities, is consistency and predictability" (Participant 9, Lower Mainland). With regular staffing disruption and subsequent temporary coverage, it is more challenging for staff to develop strong relationships with students, further impacting their learning experiences.

To combat the impacts of the education labour shortage, many participants spoke of the importance of developing skills and capacity of all staff at school sites so there is not a chasm of knowledge when one person is away. Capacity-building was also spoken of in relation to increasing Tier 1 interventions and meeting students where they are, regardless of diagnosed learning needs. School-based administrators in one district "have done a fantastic job in building students' services and teacher capacity to troubleshoot and figure out different strategies to use with kids" (Participant 13, Kootenays). Another participant shared how district-based mental health staff are specifically working to develop the capacity of all teachers to "give time and space to check-in" with students and establish regular connection points (Participant 16, Lower Mainland).

In order to build school-wide capacity, participants shared the value of accessing professional development online. Virtual learning opportunities that were deemed essential due to pandemic restrictions have had the added bonus of allowing a broader group of education professionals to access specialized training sessions. For instance, the goal of SET-BC has always been to build capacity on the ground throughout British Columbia, and using a hybrid approach to train school-based staff allows their team to reach more individuals on a regular basis (Participant 2, Provincial). Furthermore, virtual professional learning comes at a lower financial commitment for school districts as travel and teacher coverage costs are either eliminated or significantly reduced. Thus, more staff have the opportunity to participate in professional learning opportunities (Participant 8, Okanagan and Eastern; Participant 12, Northern).

Many participants shared their hope for the continuation of virtual professional learning sessions being offered, as this contributes directly to expanded capacity-building and the opportunity for more effective school-wide strategies. It must also be mentioned that the value of in-person connection and learning should not be forgotten; perhaps a hybrid approach where virtual professional development is supplemented with intermittent face-to-face connection is an option as we move forward.

# Additional areas of success

The following section outlines explicit practices and resources that participants named as being particularly valuable for students during the pandemic. They are provided in list form with brief descriptions with the aim of further sharing ideas, knowledge and practices that may be of benefit throughout the province.

## Practices



**Intentional connection with students:**
In secondary schools, teachers consistently greet students at the door at the start of the day or class period. This supports a sense of community and care for students (Participant 1, Lower Mainland).



**Longer blocks of class periods:**
In secondary schools, one district found that longer class periods during the quarter system in the 2020–2021 school year supported many different learners, who benefitted from spending an extended class block with the same group of students and teacher. Fewer transitions between classes supported positive behaviour (Participant 10, Northern).



**Mindful minute:**
A practice that was standard in one school prior to the pandemic was implemented throughout all elementary schools in a district to build community and intentionally incorporate mindfulness in the classroom. Each school day starts with a school-wide mindful minute, sometimes including calming, instrumental music (Participant 1, Lower Mainland).



**Restructuring flow of student traffic:**
One district recognized that pandemic-specific structures aimed at reducing congestion in hallways and entryways benefitted students who were highly anxious or neuro-diverse, as the restrictions increased structure, consistency and calm transitions (Participant 17, Kootenays).

## Tools and programs

**4 Blankets of Resilience, Monique Gray Smith[9]:**
One district worked closely with Monique Gray Smith to implement her Cultural Resilience Model, which focuses on development of a strong sense of self, family, community, culture and language (Participant 14, Lower Mainland).

**Classroom programs:**
Both MindUP[10] and the EASE[11] programs were named by participants as helpful training tools and curricular programs their school-based teams continue to implement.

**Masks for deaf and hard of hearing:**
In response to needs presented by students who are deaf and hard of hearing, one district was able to access medical-grade masks designed by the Canadian Hard of Hearing Association for use by support staff and resource teachers (Participant 13, Kootenays).

**Red, yellow, green spreadsheet:**
This tracking system is used by school and district staff to understand the ongoing needs of children and youth in care or other students identified as having unmet needs. It is straightforward way to consistently monitor student well-being and achievement (Participant 4, Island; Participant 5, Island).
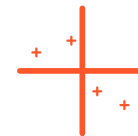
**Vulnerability matrix:**
This tool was used to assess various domains of functioning for students as well as their families. It is intended to both identify students where targeted support may be necessary and to guide school-based teams toward resources that may support each area of functioning (Participant 8, Okanagan and Eastern).

9. More information at: https://www.moniquegraysmith.com/

10. MindUP For Schools is an evidence-based program that has been shown to increase pro-social actions, decrease aggressive behaviours, and improve academic achievement, especially in math and language arts. More information at: https://mindup.org/

11. Everyday Anxiety Strategies for Educators (EASE) is a collection of school-based, evidence-informed, anxiety management and resilience-building classroom resources for use by educators in British Columbia. It was developed in 2019 by the BC Ministry of Children and Family Development. More information at: https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/health/managing-your-health/mental-health-substance-use/child-teen-mental-health/ease

# Concluding notes

Throughout the interviews and subsequent analysis, we were struck by how participants across the province shared similar stories and experiences. Time and again, participants spoke to the role schools serve in providing support to children and families, such as food security, mental health and wellness promotion, and community-based referrals or outreach. These experiences support what many know to be true: that families and communities turn to schools as a resource to meet wide-ranging needs of students beyond academic skills and growth. As an education system, we must thoughtfully consider the role schools will play in communal recovery and healing.



As outlined in the Findings section, many school and district staff used surveys to understand acute needs of students and families, particularly at the start of the pandemic. Beyond survey use in this way, some also spoke to the value of regularly gathering comprehensive data to understand child and youth well-being (Participant 4, Vancouver/Gulf Island(s); Participant 13, Kootenays; Participant 14, Lower Mainland; Participant 16, Lower Mainland; Participant 17, Kootenays). British Columbia is fortunate to have a wealth of resources available to understand child and youth well-being, many of which were originally developed here in the province. The Childhood Experiences Questionnaire (CHEQ), Early Years Development Instrument (EDI), Middle Years Development Instrument (MDI) and the more recent Youth Development Instrument (YDI) have been implemented throughout

British Columbia at varying levels of uptake. These tools provide child and youth self-report data (MDI; YDI) as well as parental and educator perspectives on well-being and development (CHEQ; EDI). The Ministry of Education and Child Care-directed Student Learning Survey is also available for students at four different stages in their K-12 journey, as is the McCreary Adolescent Health Survey in five-year intervals.

It is important to mention comprehensive and ongoing data collection, as we consider pandemic recovery. Data from the interviews presented in this report highlight the necessity of understanding the human experience when crafting ongoing or novel strategies, systems and practices. Trauma and tragedy have impacted everyone since March 2020, with amplified challenges facing students and families who were

already underserved or marginalized. Data from student self-report surveys, combined with quantitative data such as attendance trends and grade-level transitions, will allow us to gain insight into the comprehensive experiences of our children and youth. Unfortunately missing from these available surveys is the opportunity to hear from educators at a population level, in order to understand and take action to support

adult wellness. Our systems and practices must support school and district staff to build local capacity while prioritizing their comprehensive well-being. For our children to be well, our adults must be well. Thus, taken together, hearing firsthand the stories from young people and adults in the system can serve to catalyze responsive mitigation strategies to overcome new challenges as well as those exacerbated by the pandemic.

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# Appendix – Interview Guide

## Introduction

∫ Welcome and verbal acceptance of recording

∫ Introduce purpose of study and background of researchers: project serving as quality assurance assessment

∫ Introduce self, roles, experience

### Area one: strategies/resources/practices

∫ *We would like to hear stories of success.* Can you share an example of success supporting diverse learner(s) since March 2020?

∫ What resources, practices and/or strategies have you found helpful in supporting diverse learners throughout the pandemic?

∫ When you consider strategies and resources that have effectively supported your diverse learners throughout the pandemic, what images and descriptive words come to mind?

~ What does this look like, sound like, feel like?

### Area Two: challenges/barriers

∫ What has been the most prominent challenge(s) for you when supporting diverse learners throughout the pandemic?

∫ When you consider your most prominent challenges, what images and descriptive words come to mind?

~ What does this look like, sound like, feel like?
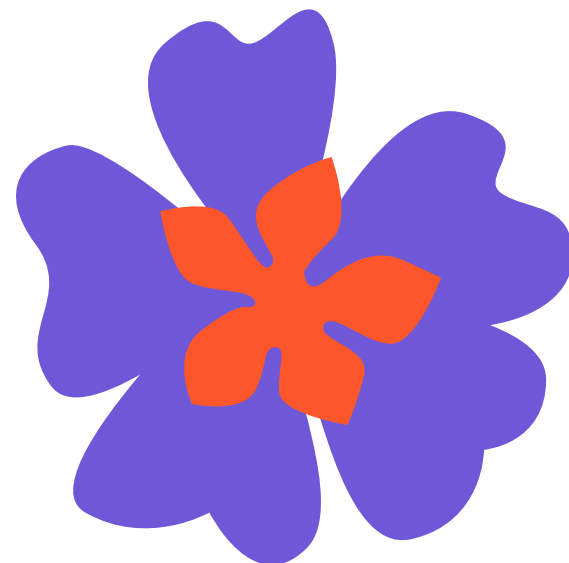
### Area Three: recovery

∫ Uniqueness of the pandemic:

~ How has *supporting diverse learners* been unique during the pandemic, as compared to pre-pandemic?

~ How have the *needs of diverse learners* shifted or developed throughout the pandemic?

∫ Reflecting on your work throughout the pandemic, what are three ideal practices, policies and/or resources you have to strengthen the resiliency and well-being of diverse learners you work with?

∫ How can the BC public education system foster the comprehensive well-being and resilience of diverse learners as we communally recover from COVID-19?

### Closing

∫ Is there anything else you would like to share with us regarding the focus areas of this project?