



Schools Reimagined: Youth-Driven Blueprints for Wellbeing

Harnoor Dhaliwal

Contact Author: harnoor_dhaliwal@sfu.ca

Faculty of Health Sciences, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, British Columbia, V5A 1S6, Canada

Julia Kaufmann (MSc)

Faculty of Health Sciences, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, British Columbia, V5A 1S6, Canada

Giulia Maluf (MPH)

Faculty of Health Sciences, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, British Columbia, V5A 1S6, Canada

Judy Wu (MPH)

Faculty of Health Sciences, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, British Columbia, V5A 1S6, Canada

Jacqueline Maloney (PhD)

Faculty of Health Sciences, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, British Columbia, V5A 1S6, Canada

Hasina Samji (PhD)

Faculty of Health Sciences, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, British Columbia, V5A 1S6, Canada

Abstract

Background: Schools are not only places for learning, but also environments that shape youth wellbeing. The Youth Development Instrument (YDI) is a provincial wellbeing survey for British Columbia (BC) high school students (Samji et al., 2025) and in 2023, among the 14,596 students surveyed, only 36% reported a high sense of school belonging and 35% viewed their school's social atmosphere as strongly positive (Samji et al., 2023). These findings, among other research, emphasize the need to reimagine school settings as spaces that foster belonging and strengthen supportive environments.

Methodology: Building on these insights, our youth participatory action research (YPAR) study (Ozer, 2016) engaged youth in visually designing wellbeing promoting schools, inspired by a United Kingdom workshop (Chapman et al., 2022). We invited 26 BC youth aged 15-18 from two provincial Youth Advisory Council (YAC) cohorts to envision their ideal school environments. Working in small groups, participants reflected on daily school routines and factors shaping their school experiences. Using posters, youth created visual representations of their "dream schools for wellbeing" and presented central features to the larger group. Four youth researchers, supported by adult researchers, conducted inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Approval for the study was granted by the Simon Fraser University Research Ethics Board (Protocol # 30003162).

Results & Conclusion: Through thematic analysis, researchers collaboratively identified seven themes: (1) equity promotion; (2) student autonomy and choice; (3) youth engagement; (4) policy; (5) school environment; (6) outdoor time and engagement; (7) mental health and wellness support. These themes reflect a vision for transforming schools into more inclusive, supportive systems, with special consideration for students who face inequities. Youth also emphasized improved policies for educators and classroom environments, and highlighted opportunities to integrate youth voice in educational planning. These themes align with the Comprehensive School Health (CSH) approach, which recognizes that promoting student wellbeing necessitates coordinated action across multiple levels of the school system (*Comprehensive School Health*, 2025). This work has also informed changes to the YDI, namely the inclusion of questions about school context and student voice in school decision-making. Ultimately, our study provides actionable, youth-informed strategies for enhancing the wellbeing-promoting characteristics of high schools.

Keywords: Wellbeing promotion; youth participatory action research; youth; schools



References

- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2012). Thematic analysis. In H. Cooper, P. M. Camic, D. L. Long, A. T. Panter, D. Rindskopf, & K. J. Sher (Eds.), *APA handbook of research methods in psychology, Vol 2: Research designs: Quantitative, qualitative, neuropsychological, and biological*. (pp. 57–71). American Psychological Association.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/13620-004>
- Chapman, N., Soneson, E., McPartlan, D., & Walker, E. (2022, November 22). *Workshop: Design your dream school for good mental health*. Emerging Minds.
<https://emergingminds.org.uk /workshop-design-your-dream-school-for-good-mental-health/>
- Comprehensive School Health*. (2025). Healthy Schools BC.
<https://healthyschoolsbc.ca/about/comprehensive-school-health/>
- Ozer, E. J. (2016). Youth-Led Participatory Action Research. In *Advances in Child Development and Behavior* (Vol. 50, pp. 189–207). Elsevier.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/bs.acdb.2015.11.006>
- Samji, H., Delgado-Ron, J. A., Schonert-Reichl, K. A., Guhn, M., Long, D., Whitehead, J., Gorfinkle, L., De Arruda Maluf, G., Wu, J., Kaufmann, J., Del Casal, J. M., & Maloney, J. (2025). Development and validation of the youth development instrument (YDI): A comprehensive survey of adolescent health and well-being. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 179, 108557. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2025.108557>
- Samji, H., Maloney, J., Whitehead, J., Low, B., Lee, J., Herring, J., Correia, R., Wu, J., Kaufmann, J., & Long, D. (2023). *Youth Development Instrument Provincial Report*. Simon Fraser University.