



People Always Wave Back: Co-developing a Social Connection Toolkit for School Communities to Improve Youth Mental Wellbeing

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Abstract

Background: Youth social connections have declined in Canada (Public Health Agency of Canada, Centre for Surveillance and Applied Research, 2017, 2024). A similar trend was observed in the Youth Development Instrument (YDI), a provincial wellbeing survey in British Columbia (BC) (Samji et al., 2023, 2024). School communities can foster connection by serving as hubs for social activities, strengthening adult-student relationships, and linking community resources (Barry et al., 2024; Margaretha et al., 2023; World Health Organization, 2025). These efforts can enhance student mental health and wellbeing (MHW) and school outcomes (Afifi et al., 2020; Birrell et al., 2025). However, educators and public health practitioners face barriers to implementing MHW initiatives, including limited evidence of effectiveness, challenges in assessing impacts for equity-deserving groups, and lack of a coordinating body (Goossen et al., 2024). We collaborated with a Youth Advisory Council (YAC) of youth aged 15-18 from across BC, who identified the lack of community social spaces as a key concern. To address these gaps, a novel Social Connection Toolkit (SCT) (Samji et al., 2025) was developed to promote supportive adult relationships, peer, school, and community belonging among secondary school students.



Methodology: Approval for the study was granted by the Simon Fraser University Research Ethics Board (#30003158; #30003436). We conducted a crowdsourcing survey, a review of school-based interventions (Samji et al., n.d.), and consultations with educators, public health professionals, and six YACs. An expert panel of health, education, and researchers, along with YAC members, rated 80 potential initiatives on criteria such as feasibility, acceptability, adaptability, inclusivity, and equity. The highest-rated 24 were refined into 12 for the first toolkit version. Implementation and planning resources were developed by the research team in partnership with education and health partners.

Results & Conclusion: The SCT features 14 practical initiatives encompassing student clubs (e.g., Morning Meal Club), peer-led initiatives (e.g., mentoring), events (e.g., Community Potluck), classroom strategies (e.g., Peer Interviews), community programs (e.g., Community Garden), structural reforms (e.g., After School Space), and targeted interventions (e.g., On the Land Program). The SCT also contains awareness materials and resources to guide the selection of initiatives to align with local context and priorities: "*School Reflection Guide*", "*School Action Plan*", and "*Youth Engagement Planning Document*." The SCT is being piloted in three BC school districts in 2025-2026 and is expected to elucidate what works and for whom to implement youth-engaged interventions that promote social connection and MHW in school communities.

Keywords: Social connection; youth engagement; school-based mental health promotion



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