

# Wellbeing in St. Clair Catholic Schools



ST. CLAIR CATHOLIC  
DISTRICT SCHOOL BOARD  
*Lighting the Way ~ Rejoicing in Our Journey*

September 2016

## A Message from the Director of Education

Dear Parents, Guardians and Members of the St. Clair Catholic District School Board:

At the beginning of each school year, a focus is chosen for this back-to-school community newsletter; and further related resources are made available to you through monthly inserts in your school newsletter.

This year, I have chosen to select student wellbeing as our focus. The reason for this emphasis is found in our Board mission statement:

*Walking together in Christ's light with parish and family, we are called to build a safe and inclusive Catholic school community and to serve as partners in the formation of life-long learners by:*

- *Living our faith;*
- *Promoting educational achievement and innovation;*
- *Fostering stewardship, leadership and social justice.*

You will notice the emphasis on faith-development, academic achievement and leadership development in our mission statement and also in our multi-year strategic plan. For more information about our strategic plan visit our website at:

<http://www.st-clair.net/Data/Sites/1/media/public/Common/Docs/StratPlanBookletJune2014.pdf>

We know that a sense of emotional wellbeing is an important enabler for these important priorities in our mission to be achieved for each and every student. For this reason, we are committed to creating safe, inclusive, nurturing, Christ-centred environments as a pre-condition for learning and faith-development to thrive. We have strong and competent leadership in our Board on the development of wellbeing in our schools and we have valuable partnerships in Chatham-Kent, Lambton and across the province, for building and sustaining wellbeing amongst our students.

We also acknowledge that teachers and school staff, no matter how caring and dedicated they may



be, are not able to address all factors that may interfere with a student's wellbeing.

Sometimes, these factors are more complex and go beyond the ability of educators to address — and sometimes the issues can only be addressed effectively through decisions and actions, which only parents have the authority to undertake.

Despite this, three points are worth emphasizing:

1. The schools of the St. Clair Catholic District School Board are committed to creating and nurturing safe and inclusive environments for all students;
2. Open, ongoing and mutually-supportive communication between home and school is always valuable in nurturing wellbeing;
3. There is an abundance of information and expertise available to help parents recognize and respond to concerns about wellbeing.

In the following pages, you will find a collection of *some* of the information available on the topic of wellbeing. And, each month, I invite you to read about additional insights and information on this topic, in your school newsletter. I hope that you find this brief introduction to the topic of wellbeing valuable.

Wishing you and your family all the best throughout the 2016-2017 school year.

Yours in Christ,  
Dan Parr  
Director of Education

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## What is Wellbeing?

The Ontario Ministry of Education defines wellbeing as a positive sense of self, spirit and belonging that we feel when our cognitive, emotional, social and physical needs are being met. It is supported through equity and respect for our diverse identities and strengths. Wellbeing in early years and school settings is about helping children and students to become resilient, so that they can make positive and healthy choices to support learning and achievement both now and in the future.

- **Cognitive** — The development of abilities and skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, creativity and the ability

to be flexible and innovative.

- **Emotional** — This involves learning about experiencing emotions and understanding how to recognize, manage and cope with them.
- **Social** — The development of self-awareness, including the sense of belonging, collaboration, relationships with others and communications skills.
- **Physical** — The development of the body, impacted by physical activity, sleep patterns, healthy eating and healthy life choices.

The St. Clair Catholic District School Board agrees with this

definition from the Ministry and adds that, as Catholics, a sense of complete and full wellbeing is found in an ever-deeper relationship with Christ our Saviour.

Through prayer, through our Religion and Family Life Program and through the sacraments and participation in your family's parish, your child comes to know the love that God has for her and the greatness that God sees in him.

In our Catholic schools, our students' wellbeing is truly supported in body, mind, spirit and soul through the partnership of home, school and parish.

## Addressing Wellbeing in Our Catholic Schools

Here is just a small sample of the strategies and initiatives we have used to support and promote educational wellbeing in our schools, as we implement our multi-year Mental Health and Wellbeing Plan.

- **Training** — Seven modules on mental health and wellbeing have been developed and are available to staff. These modules allow staff to learn on their own time and during Professional Development days. As well, Dr. Jean Clinton met with principals and provided training on conditions for learning through addressing wellbeing in schools. Dr. Stan Kutcher trained health and physical educators, resource teachers, religion teachers, program consultants and our Student Wellbeing Support Team on mental health literacy.
- **Resources** — The *Supporting Minds* booklet was revised and an abbreviated version was developed for use by all staff. The booklet provides evidence-based information on mental health conditions, signs and symptoms and strategies for helping students. The revised booklet, *Classroom Strategies for*

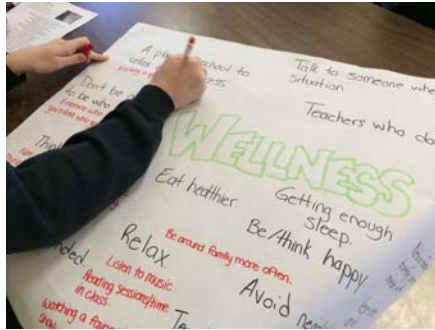
*Supporting Students Towards Positive Mental Wellbeing* was distributed to all school staff by principals.

- **School Climate Surveys** — Parent, student and staff surveys were developed and administered for four weeks. The purpose of the survey is to gain insight into student and staff mental wellbeing, sense of belonging, connectedness, accessibility and safety in schools. Reports will be developed for principals to use in the development of their school-based plans for the 2016-2017 school year.
- **Pathway to Care** — A resource was developed by the Mental Health Lead in consultation with other school board personnel. It helps define a pathway to care to be used by administration and all staff to address students with mental health needs. The pathway of care provides a decision tree for both elementary and secondary school students, with regard to making referrals to the Student Wellbeing and Support Team, referrals to outside agencies and Mental Health and Addictions Nurses,

or hospitals. Referral forms and student wellbeing plans have been developed to complement this pathway to care.

- **Friends for Life** — A comprehensive classroom program focused on building resiliency and addressing anxiety was implemented by the Student Wellbeing and Support Team in partnership with Chatham-Kent Public Health. It was linked with the language arts curriculum in two specific schools for students from Kindergarten to Grade 8. An evaluation has been done on its impact and the program will be revised, based on findings, and expanded to include more schools.
- **At My Best** — A Grade 4 to 6 curriculum-based program developed by Physical and Health Education Canada has been implemented on a trial basis in two classrooms. The program focuses on physical activity and healthy eating and how it relates to positive mental health. Research has been done on this work and findings will include the impact of the program on mental wellbeing.

- **Youth Voice** — A youth design studio was held in December 2015. It was facilitated by youth engagement experts. Students from Ursuline College and St. Patrick's were involved with the development of creative wellbeing bulletin boards, designed by students for students. The bulletin boards are communication tools for students and staff in schools, which will provide everyone with valuable health education about mental health and wellbeing. The students also developed a wellbeing logo (at right), which has been used on all mental health and wellbeing newsletters distributed to principals and parents.



*Students from UCC and St. Patrick's Catholic High School Participate in Youth Voice Event in December 2015.*

- **BRISC** — The Student Wellbeing and Support Team is piloting a resource tool developed by *School Mental Health Assist*. The resource, Brief Interventions for School Clinicians (BRISC),

allows child and youth workers, along with social workers, to help students follow a structured wellbeing plan, assisting them to develop their own coping strategies and build resiliency skills. This work is being researched by the Ministry of Education.



*Above — the logo developed by students at the Youth Voice Event in December 2015*

## Helping Children and Youth to Overcome Anxiety

Anxiety is a common emotional state. It is intertwined with concepts such as stress, fear, worry and uncertainty. The function of anxiety is to signal danger, whether real or perceived. There are developmental considerations surrounding anxiety, with age-appropriate levels of fear

and anxiety. In general, preschoolers may fear large, harmful, dark, imaginary things; while elementary students are anxious about the dangers of the world. Our youth experience academic, social competence, natural dangers and death-related anxieties and fears.

Adolescent fears are based more around abstract issues, such as their future and relationships. Children may not be able to identify or label their feelings as anxiety, which can make it even more difficult to recognize that it may be a problem.

### Common Signs of Anxiety

Children and teens with mental health challenges are usually having such a difficult time that they may not be able to ask others for help. It is really important that parents, teachers and peers watch for signs that a child or teen needs help.

Children may exhibit some or all of the following signs:

- Constantly complaining about physical ailments;
- Marked changes in sleeping and eating habits;
- Refusal to join social activities;
- Isolating behaviours;
- Irritable moods;
- Crying easily;
- Fidgety or nervous habits;
- Demonstrating perseveration;
- Demonstrating perfectionist tendencies;
- Easily overwhelmed;
- Drop in grades or increase in absences from school;
- Excessive worry about homework or grades;
- Demonstrating clingy and overly dependent behaviours;
- Exhibiting trouble with transitions;
- Talking about suicide or feeling hopeless.

### Ways to Support Your Child

Parents and teachers can work together to support children with anxiety disorders. These are some of the ways:

- Model the behavior you want to see in your children and try to control your own anxiety;
- Keep the child's schedule as regular as possible;
- Provide advance warning of changes in routine;
- Encourage your child to talk about his feelings and fears;
- Provide a learning environment where mistakes are viewed as a natural part of the learning process;
- Encourage children to use calming activities such as reading or listening to music;
- Give children choice in selecting strategies to reduce anxiety and reward their use of these strategies;
- Allow children sufficient time when moving from one activity to another;
- Encourage small group non-competitive play activities to promote group participation and team building;
- Decrease stressful situations by differentiating expectations (ie., if a child feels uncomfortable in a large group setting, start her in a smaller group and gradually increase the size);
- Provide development-appropriate books for children, which address children's issues.

# Helping Children and Youth to Develop Resilience

## What is Resilience?

Young people who are valued, safe, connected and engaged are the core foundation of a population that is healthy and productive. As parents, educators and community members, it is what we all want for our children.

To become healthy and productive citizens, our youth must be resilient.

Resilience is the ability to bounce back or return to emotional wellbeing after challenging or difficult situations. Stressors could include:

- Economic stress at home;
- Illness;
- Problems in family or friend relationships;
- Transition periods, such as from elementary to high school, from

childhood to adolescence, or from adolescence to adulthood.

Resiliency can reduce anxiety and depression in youth as they build coping skills for overcoming these challenges. The good news is that resiliency can be learned at all stages of a child's development. Promoting youth resilience requires the combined efforts of parents and families, schools, communities and the youth themselves.

## Why do some kids bounce back easily while others do not?

Scientific research in the area of brain health and development has had an impact on the understanding of resilience in Canada. We know that there are **protective factors** that children experience, which help them function in times of adversity. These include:

- Positive relationships with adults and peers;
- Parental support;
- Self-concept;
- Achievement at school;
- Involvement at school and in the community;
- Spiritual and religious beliefs, values and practices;
- Self-control.



## What can parents do to help build resilience in their children?

- Focus on positive strengths and assets of the child;
- Model resiliency and a “can do” approach to challenges;
- Encourage participation in community events and extra-curricular activities to promote a sense of belonging and competence;
- Help your children connect with people that they care about, building a strong network of supports;
- Be patient and allow your children to make mistakes and persevere;
- Encourage your child to stay in school to enhance his skills and build a future with self-confidence;
- Maintain positive relationships with teachers to develop a caring network;
- Spend time as a family — family meals together are extremely beneficial for healthy family dynamics;
- Participate as a family in the life of your parish;
- Never give up on young people — even when they push you away.

*“We have to re-create the attachment village. There needs to be an attachment relationship between teachers and parents, as much as between teachers and students, so that students see themselves in an attachment network.”*

Dr. Gabor Mate

Physician and Author

***For more information on developing resilience in children and adolescents, visit the following websites:***

<http://www.integra.on.ca/Developing%20Resilience.pdf>

<http://cecp.air.org/familybriefs/docs/Resiliency1.pdf>



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