

# Conceptualizations of Student Wellness in Alberta Public School Results Reports

Matthew D. Nielsen, Joseph Amundrud

University of Calgary

*As concern for student wellness permeates into educational objectives, educators require high-quality tools to better understand wellness. A content analysis of a representative sample of the Annual Education Results Reports from Alberta public school divisions revealed patterns in the framing of student wellness through the five wellness domains outlined in the Alberta K–12 Student Wellness Framework (Alberta Education, 2009). Three key discoveries were highlighted: Most wellness language focused on emotional and social wellness, physical wellness was underrepresented, and ambiguity characterized a significant portion of wellness mentions. We applied a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) analysis to our results, which revealed opportunities for improvement regarding how educators speak about, address, and measure issues of student wellness. Creating a new assurance category for student wellness arose as a significant opportunity.*

*La préoccupation pour le bien-être des élèves s'infiltrant dans les objectifs éducatifs, les éducateurs ont besoin d'outils de qualité pour mieux comprendre le bien-être. Une analyse du contenu d'un échantillon représentatif des rapports annuels sur les résultats en éducation des autorités scolaires publiques de l'Alberta a révélé des tendances dans le cadrage du bien-être des élèves à travers les cinq domaines du bien-être décrits dans le cadre du bien-être des élèves de la maternelle à la 12e année de l'Alberta (Alberta Education, 2009). Trois découvertes clés ont été mises en évidence : La plupart des termes relatifs au bien-être sont axés sur le bien-être émotionnel et social, le bien-être physique est sous-représenté et l'ambiguïté caractérise une grande partie des mentions relatives au bien-être. Nous avons appliqué une analyse des forces, faiblesses, opportunités et menaces (FFOM) à nos résultats, qui a révélé des possibilités d'amélioration dans la façon dont les éducateurs parlent, abordent et mesurent les questions relatives au bien-être des élèves. La création d'une nouvelle catégorie d'assurance de la qualité pour le bien-être des élèves est apparue comme une possibilité importante.*

Across Alberta, the role of schools in supporting student wellness is receiving increased scrutiny. A province-wide focus on safe and caring schools arose from the government mandate to provide learning spaces that nurture a sense of belonging (*Education Act*, 2012, c E-0.3 s.33). Wellness factors directly influence student learning, and educational attainment is a determinant of health into adulthood (Government of Alberta, 2009). The Government of Alberta declared child health a top priority (Government of Alberta, 2005), but a large body of evidence points to a dramatic rise in cases of anxiety, depression, and self-harm in children (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2019; Wiens et al., 2020). Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic negatively impacted the mental health of many young people (Government of Alberta, 2021a; Lee, 2021).

Because the goals of student wellness and academic achievement are synergistic (Bradley & Greene, 2013; Kaya & Erdem, 2021; Littlecott et al., 2018), and healthy students are more socially connected and engaged in learning, schools play a significant role in fostering children's wellness through trusting relationships built with school employees (Dimitropoulos et al., 2021; Lowry et al., 2021; Wong et al., 2021). As teachers regularly witness increased anxiety and mental health challenges among students, issues surrounding how to meaningfully address student wellness concerns necessitate real strategies and precise language as they rise to the forefront among school priorities.

Alberta Education Results Reports (AERRs) provide a framework for the values and priorities that are measured and reported by school authorities. Patterns found in their phrasing about student wellness, therefore, provide a picture of how coherently wellness is framed in the Alberta public school context. Because schools take their cues from their divisions to concretely address wellness issues, it is imperative to understand how clearly school authorities frame student wellness in their public accountability documents in order to improve how school authorities conceptualize, evaluate, and promote student wellness. This study examined these reports in order to shed light on how coherently student wellness was represented therein; we aimed to identify patterns that would contribute insights about how student wellness might be referenced in a more clear, balanced, and relevant manner.

## **Literature Review**

Salient to this discussion, there exist a myriad of definitions of wellness and health. Early health definitions consisted simply of the absence of disease or impairment, the ability to cope with daily life, or a state of balance between an individual and their physical and social environment (Sartorius, 2006). Current references to health are often combined with wellness or well-being, and these terms have often been used interchangeably (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2019). For example, mental, emotional, spiritual, and psychological health phrases in educational literature can have murky boundaries and definitions (i.e. "we support wellness initiatives that bolster the emotional and mental health of our students," or "student wellness priorities must address mental health priorities related to social-emotional health"). As a result, existing definitions of health and wellness have been broad and blurred (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2019; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2018; Kaya & Erdem, 2021), and wellness or well-being have become umbrella terms for a "conflation of different concepts" (Spratt, 2016). This ambiguity is problematic for educators and stakeholders.

## ***Contemporary Conceptions of Wellness***

An Organisation for Economic Co-operation Development [OECD] Working Paper aimed at student wellness defined well-being as a dynamic state of being able to fulfill personal or social goals within five wellness domains: cognitive, psychological, physical, social, and material (Borgonovi & Pál, 2016). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2018) acknowledged that well-being is multidimensional, and that multiple wellness domains have often been included as contributing measures. They also stated that well-being is subjective and typically understood through self-reporting mechanisms, but that "both objective and subjective measures, when available, are desirable for public policy purposes" (2018, *How is well-being measured?* section, para. 1). The American Psychological Association currently defines wellness broadly as "a dynamic

state of physical, mental, and social well-being,” and also mentions four key factors within the realm of individual control: biology, environment, lifestyle, and health care management (American Psychological Association, n.d.). Considering these many definitions, real challenges emerge regarding a standard for measuring and supporting wellbeing. One must ask: how can we meaningfully discuss a concept that lacks a clear definition?

Significantly, the notion that wellness is subjectively measured presents quagmires for those attempting to coherently support it for diverse groups. Questions surrounding student maturity to define their own wellness present significant reliability hurdles, especially for those younger than 12 years of age (Tomyn et al., 2016). The children’s rights movement supports the engagement of students in consequential dialogue and in decision-making processes about health; however, the implicit dilemma is the imbalance of power between children and adults (Lundy & McEvoy, 2012; Simovska & Jensen, 2009). Are young individuals able to define and frame their own wellness accurately? Are educators able or willing to assume positions of authority regarding the wellness of the students in their care? In a world where individuals subjectively define their own wellness realities, is an objective framing of wellness even possible? Clearly these issues strike at the heart of the spirit of the age in education: as individuals authorize their own wellness truths, how can an educational system simultaneously and robustly support the ever-multiplying diversity of perspectives? Realistically, it may not be possible unless we clarify the conversation and labor to find authentic shared values regarding student wellness.

Regarding the role of subjective measures when measuring wellbeing, the OECD has asserted that subjective well-being data should be interpreted carefully, and that such data should be used to complement and not replace other well-being indicators (2013). In that spirit, we argue that progress on this front is possible based on carefully discerned, broadly acceptable guideposts for the discussion, but until definitions with clarity of scope find consensus among educators, targeted support and measurement cannot occur. Dogged cooperation must embody the effort to improve the fomenting student wellness crisis; again, as the OECD has stated, “Comparable data require comparable methods, and a degree of standardization that will require determination and cooperation to succeed” (2013, p. 3). We argue that such comparable data emerges from a focused analysis of our current reporting measures and from the manner in which public accountability documents represent realities of student wellness. This is where our study begins.

Our belief is that wellness issues will loom larger and more complex for public education the longer we ignore them. It is our aim and hope to provide useful insight into potential future solutions through our study of Alberta’s public education reporting on student wellness.

### ***Student Wellness in the Alberta Context***

In the context of education in Alberta, significant work has been done to establish an Alberta-specific wellness framework for students. The *Framework for Kindergarten to Grade 12 Wellness Education* (Alberta Education, 2009) arose from the work of an Alberta Education External Working Group, in consultation with a First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Advisory Committee; a K–12 Wellness External Advisory Committee; and a nominated group of Alberta teachers and administrators. Discussion groups and online questionnaire results were gathered, and government ministers, community stakeholders, and health and education organizations were included in its development process. Their vision is stated clearly:

The vision of wellness education in Alberta is for students to be educated, informed and contributing members of society and to develop the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to be well in every sense of the word—emotionally, intellectually, physically, socially and spiritually. (Alberta Education, 2009, p. 1)

The purpose of the framework is to guide future wellness programs of study, but it also explicitly aims to “describe the fundamental concepts and inherent values of K–12 wellness education” (Alberta Education, 2009, p.1). Though it has not been updated since its first publication, the intentional collaboration with a robust and diverse community of stakeholders provides a compelling case to utilize the framework as a context-specific guide for student wellness. Five specific domains are included in the framework’s wellness definition: “a balanced state of emotional, intellectual, physical, social, and spiritual well-being that enables students to reach their full potential in the school community” (Alberta Education, 2009, p. 5).

A discrepancy exists between the OECD’s inclusion of material well-being versus Alberta Education’s inclusion of spiritual well-being. We defer to Alberta Education here; although socioeconomic status is correlated with overall health (Wang & Geng, 2019), material inequality in Alberta schools is addressed within the education funding model (Alberta Teachers’ Association, 2019; Riep, 2021). Furthermore, in their study of spiritual wellness among Canadian provincial wellness curricula, Pilato & Michaelson (2022) noted that Alberta is among seven provinces that officially recognize spiritual wellness. They also note the importance of the spiritual dimension among First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples in Canada, and the necessity of involving Elders in the presentation of this spiritual dimension. Indeed, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s *Calls to Action* (2015) call on the government to provide for comparative spiritual education, including Indigenous spirituality developed in collaboration with Aboriginal Elders (article 64). Considering these factors, spiritual wellness is a relevant domain to retain in the Alberta context.

## **Annual Education Results Reports**

In Alberta’s K–12 system, schools operate under a school authority (sometimes called a division, district, or school board), which is an organization accountable for fulfilling the responsibilities of delivering education programs to students (Government of Alberta, 2021b). The Department of Education allocates funds to school authorities, creating an accountability relationship whereby school divisions are required to publicly report on the expenditure of public funds (Government of Alberta, 2021b).

The annual public report generated by school authorities in Alberta is the AERR, which draws upon the Alberta Education Assurance Measures (AEAMs) for evidence of the effective delivery of educational programming (Government of Alberta, 2022). The AEAMs encompass a variety of evidence sources, such as Provincial Achievement Tests (PATs), Diploma exams, high school completion results, and surveys of students, parents, and teachers, which measure engagement, citizenship, safe and caring schools, and success of Indigenous peoples (Government of Alberta, 2022). Table 1 outlines the characteristics of the assurance areas and AEAMs that are currently required. School authorities may combine the AERR with a three-year forward-looking plan that outlines strategic targets for the school division, and they must publish AERRs on their websites to ensure access to stakeholders.

A unique aspect of the AERRs is that they are used to inform strategic plans required from

Table 1

*Assurance Framework Assurance Measures*

Assurance Area	Alberta Education Assurance Measures (AEAMs)
Student Growth and Achievement	Provincial Achievement Test results Diploma Exam results High School Completion results Survey measures of Citizenship and Student Learning Engagement
Teaching and Leading	Survey measure of Education Quality
Learning Supports	Survey measures of Welcoming, Caring, Respectful and Safe Learning Environment and Access to Supports and Services
Governance	Survey measure of Parent Involvement  School authorities report the amount budgeted for past school year, the amount spent and the variance between these amounts for operational expense categories.
Local and Societal Context	Local measures/data and information about the school authority

*Note.* Adapted from “Assurance and accountability in Alberta’s K to 12 education system,” Alberta Education (2022)

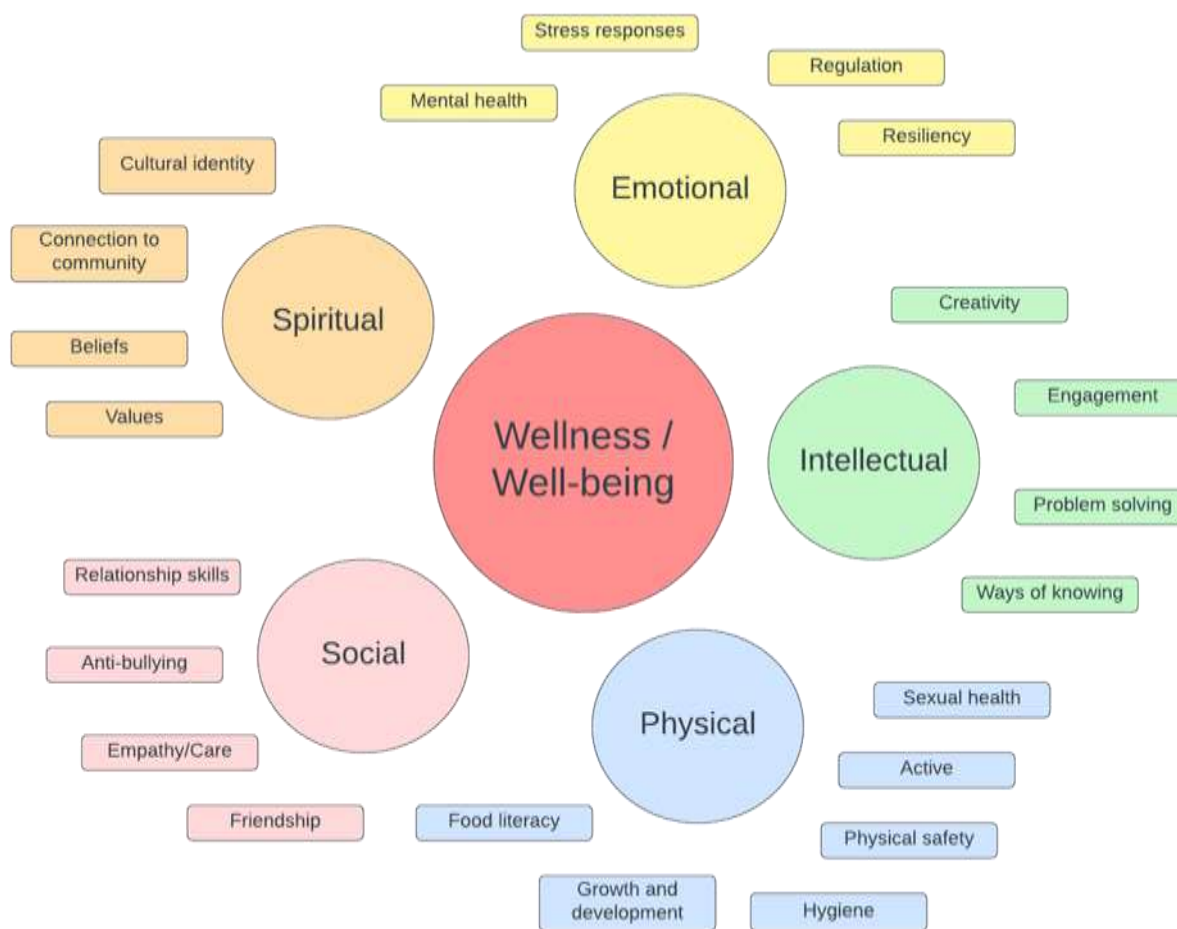
each authority by Alberta’s Ministry of Education. School authorities report their performance based on five assurance areas in their AERRs and use the results to develop their education plan (Alberta Education, 2022, para. 12). Alberta Education has stated that their “Assurance Framework is about building public trust and confidence that the education system is meeting the needs of students and enabling their success” (para. 3). The AERR reports are specifically required in order to provide “the results achieved from implementing the plan” (para. 14), acting as the accountability mechanism for assuring stakeholders that divisions are reporting their progress. These reports require school authorities to transparently provide evidence to inform decisions that account for the investment of their resources to support students and their families. Their public availability demands that certain criteria are met so that stakeholders can clearly understand a division’s performance on indicators. The challenge of adequately measuring and reporting, in order to better plan supports to improve student wellness, therefore, is a relevant priority for these public accountability documents. As reporting documents, their parlance provides an indication of how clearly wellness is understood, and their conceptualizations will function as a guide for how schools and teachers talk about and conceive of student wellness. Reviewing AERR framing of wellness, with attention focused on areas with potential for improvement, can have a positive ripple effect on all downstream systems under the jurisdiction of the school authority.

**The Need for Clear and Coherent Wellness Communication**

Teachers feel the tension between academic and wellness priorities, and ambiguous or trite programs that are not holistic reduce confidence (Willis et al., 2019). A return to the domains visualized in Figure 1 may be in order. Imprecise communication and lack of shared language between stakeholders inhibits the creation of indicators or benchmarks, and could impede schools and divisions from enacting meaningful evaluations of the effectiveness or appropriateness of initiatives designed to support student wellness. Division-level communication about student

Figure 1

Concept Map of Five Wellness/Well-Being Domains in Alberta Schools



wellness plausibly sets the stage for the wellness conversation amongst schools and teachers. Therefore, we believe that analyzing the current state of the wellness conversation within AERRs is a worthwhile step towards improving their clarity and effectiveness.

### Research Scope and Goals

Our research worked to distinguish patterns in Alberta public school communication about student wellness. We seek to contribute to the discussion by allowing the framings of wellness embedded within AERRs to emerge, revealing potential guiding wellness definitions latent within them. Highlighting specific wellness domains will also paint a picture of the present state of balance among domains in current conceptual understanding. To accomplish this, our research examined how wellness was conceptualized in communication by Alberta school divisions through an interpretive content analysis of the 2020-21 AERRs of a representative sample of the 42 public school divisions in Alberta. Our content analysis interpreted phrases within the AERRs to answer the primary research question: *How is student wellness conceptualized and/or framed in Alberta public school divisions' Annual Education Results Reports?* Our secondary research

Table 2

*Content Analysis Framing Samples*

Frame	Sample phrase
Problem/issue	"Increasing student mental health needs require much greater support"
Strategy	"Support emotional health by implementing emotional regulation curriculum"
Community partner	"Collaborate with Alberta Health Services to support student health"
Neutral fact	"Schools have implemented social-emotional wellness supports"
Statement of intent	"We aim to provide schools where students feel safe and connected to the community"
Covid impact	"COVID-19 significantly impacted community relationship building"
Success/Accomplishment	"We noted an increase in students indicating they felt safe and included by others at school"

*Note.* Phrases are approximations, and do not represent actual phrases extracted in our study.

questions were: *Which domains of student wellness were most prevalent in 2021 AERRs? and How were the most prominent health domains most often framed?* For our study, framing referred to the context that oriented or enclosed the health phrases. For example, a phrase may have been framed as a forward-looking goal, a strategy, or as a report of success, as modeled in the examples found in Table 2. In total, we inductively identified seven types of framing statements.

## Methodology

As we collaboratively reviewed several AERR documents, we created a coding system to guide inferential processes to determine the intended wellness domain of phrases within the AERRs, our chosen unit of analysis. Our goal was to identify counts of AERR phrases referring to specific domains of student wellness identified in the *Alberta Student Wellness Framework* (Alberta Education, 2009) and to interpret their framing, generating a "numerically based summary of a chosen message set" (Neuendorf, 2017, p. 121). Through this interpretive lens, we sought to reveal generalizable knowledge about how public school divisions within Alberta framed and conceptualized student wellness in their public accountability communications.

## Sampling

To determine a representative sample for our content analysis, we reviewed and categorized the characteristics of the 42 public school authorities present in Alberta. We limited our study to AERRs from public school authorities to best represent Alberta's diverse multi-ethnic, multi-faith student population. Employing a purposive sampling strategy, school authorities were grouped into one of four categories by population density and geographic features (Rural, Rural/mixed, Urban/mixed, and Urban school divisions). A mathematical ratio of each division type proportional to the overall division count was determined, which allowed us to select a sample of divisions that accurately reflected those ratios. After a collaborative preliminary review of all available AERR documents, we chose divisions that were content rich (LeCompte et al. 1993) in student wellness data while maintaining the ratios of each division type to the total within our

Table 3

*Subcategories of School Divisions by Population Density*

	Number of Divisions	Ratio	%	Representative Sample 15 (or 1/3 total)	Divisions included in content analysis
Rural (no urban centres >10,000)	16	16:41	0.39	6	Fort Vermillion St. Paul High Prairie Prairie Land Wild Rose Peace River
Rural/Mixed (1+ centre >10,000 and included multiple municipalities)	9	9:41	0.22	3	Battle River Chinook's Edge Grasslands
Urban/Mixed (1+ centre >30,000 and included multiple municipalities)	8	8:41	0.20	3	Palliser Black Gold Peace Wapiti
Urban (serves a single municipality)	8	8:41	0.20	3	Edmonton Medicine Hat Red Deer
Excluded ( <i>Lloydminster reports to SK Ministry of Education</i> )	1				

selection. This process resulted in the inclusion of fifteen public school divisions within our sample. We believe this strategy assures a defensible representation of the province's makeup, while featuring AERRs that are rich in content relevant to our inquiry. Our method of categorizing and quantifying school divisions is demonstrated in Table 3.

**Coding Strategy**

In order to choose codes organically, we employed an emergent process by immersing ourselves in the AERR data to allow authentic variables to arise inductively. As we reviewed the reports, variables and potential codes for their analysis arose naturally from existing features and patterns of phraseology; frames were then established from these emerging trends. We carefully crafted rules, as shown in Table 4, to guide our coding and establish clear connections to explanations of different student wellness domains as specifically described in Alberta Education's (2009) *Framework for Kindergarten to Grade 12 Wellness Education*. These domains and the seven frames employed in our analysis are clearly outlined in Table 5.

Grounding our codes in external definitions and allowing the framing to arise from textual examples helped to limit our biases in coding results, as our aim was to summarize rather than report all the details of these documents (Neueundorf, 2017). We sought to take a value-neutral perspective, employing our method more descriptively than critically through an explorative lens (Drisko & Maschi, 2015). Any additional biases are latent within the interpretive coding itself; we



acknowledge that the complete elimination of unconscious bias was impossible, but we made efforts to code objectively.

Table 4

*Coding Rules*

General Rules	Specific Terms	Exclusions	Double-codes
unit of analysis is phrase	"mental health" will be coded as emotional	exclude achievement/standard references—focus on creativity, problem-solving and engagement with intellectual wellness	"social-emotional" coded as emotional and social
wellness phrases must be student-related (excludes teacher wellness)	"engagement" references will be coded as intellectual wellbeing	exclude non-specific 'support students' statements (quantify unclear meanings of student support)	"truth and reconciliation" coded as social and spiritual
when phrase refers to more than one framing category, <u>both</u> will be noted	"trauma-informed" references will be coded as emotional	exclude information impacting data collection for assurance surveys	"inclusive" or "inclusivity" coded as social and spiritual
only AERRs (not combined 3-yr plan documents); we used combined material when it was all that was available	"safe and caring" or "welcoming" coded as social	exclude neutrally presented chart data	1:1 ratio with frames when double codes are using
	"diversity" and "equity" references will be coded as spiritual	exclude "citizenship" as a social norm	
	"resiliency" references will be coded as emotional		
	"ways of knowing" references will be coded as intellectual		

Table 5

*Coding Domains and Frames*

WELLNESS DOMAIN: Does the text refer to						
Emotional Wellness (e.g., mental health)	Intellectual wellness (e.g., engagement)	Physical wellness (e.g., exercise)	Social wellness (e.g., relationships)	Spiritual wellness (e.g., core beliefs)	Unclear (e.g., domain not identified)	
FRAMING: Is the wellness content framed as a...						
Problem/issue	Strategy	Community partner	Neutral fact	Statement of intent	Covid impact	Success/accomplishment

Table 6

*AERR Phrase Coding Table: Pooled Data From All Submissions in Sample*

Domain→	Emotional	Intellectual	Physical	Social	Spiritual	Unclear	<b>Totals</b>	%
Frame↓								
Problem/issue	10	9	0	6	1	3	<b>29</b>	4%
Strategy	84	6	21	68	40	26	<b>245</b>	36%
Community partner	13	1	3	11	6	8	<b>42</b>	6%
Neutral fact	26	15	10	31	15	22	<b>119</b>	17%
Statement of intent	21	22	6	48	33	21	<b>151</b>	22%
COVID-19 impacts	7	8	17	7	0	29	<b>68</b>	10%
Successes/Accomplishments	6	6	1	11	3	2	<b>29</b>	4%
<b>Totals</b>	<b>167</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>182</b>	<b>98</b>	<b>111</b>	<b>683</b>	
%	24%	10%	8%	27%	14%	16%		

After coding was completed, codes from each AERR were counted and then added to a pool including data from all divisions within our representative sample. This pool of data represents a re-contextualization of codes from all sampled school divisions, allowing for a quantitative representation of wellness framing across Alberta public schools. Table 6 displays this re-contextualized pool of data. After pooling all codes from all the divisions in our sample, we inductively drew conclusions based on the relative frequency of related wellness domains and framing categories.

### Reliability

To establish reliability, we both coded the same three AERRs independently (one-fifth of our sample), then cross-referenced our findings. Following Yan’s (2020) recommendation, we completed this practice run, met to compare our coding decisions, then refined our framing codes and rules based upon consensus about emerging themes and frames. Preferring a simpler method of substantiating reliability, we coded five AERRs together (one-third of our sample) to ensure interpretive alignment between coders. As a result, shared coding practices were established experientially. The remaining divisions were then divided between our coders, each of whom coded five AERRs independently. In sum, practice and comparison drove our iterative process before coding one-third of our material together, which established a robust shared vision of interpretation, generating a credible level of inter-coder reliability.

## Findings

### Coding Challenges and Emerging Themes

Our research has revealed several interesting trends in how student wellness was spoken of in the AERR reports. Before interpreting the findings, it is important to reiterate that the AERR

documents have certain assurance categories that they are designed to address, and none of these categories explicitly requires a focused evaluation of student wellness. The Assurance Areas where most phrases were found were *Student Growth and Achievement* and *Learning Supports*. The required categories in the reports considerably influenced their language and specificity (or lack thereof) to wellness.

At the outset, a few broad observations are in order. First, it was our general experience that many phrases in the AERRs pertaining to student wellness required thoughtful interpretation to code within an identified wellness domain. It is instructive here to note our sample phrase approximations indicative of those we encountered (again, see Table 2). Deliberation was necessary, since domains often had to be inferred as opposed to being overtly stated. One might deduce that wellness was poorly understood in terms of domains, or that generalities were preferred.

Second, it was notable that student wellness was a prominent topic within many divisions, despite the fact that it was not deliberately measured by the Assurance surveys. This highlighted the rising urgency of the topic, but made it perhaps less likely to be mentioned coherently, since no specific correlating assurance measure existed to delineate from.

Third, spiritual wellness was not mentioned explicitly in any of the documents we reviewed, apart from our interpretation of it based on the definition from the *Alberta Education Wellness Framework* (Alberta Education, 2009). This definition states that “Spiritual wellness is an understanding of one’s own values and beliefs leading to a sense of meaning or purpose and a relationship to the Community” (p 3). Accordingly, spiritual wellness is implied in many familiar educational statements that are rooted in beliefs and values. For example, words like *inclusion*, *diversity*, and *equity*, as well as references to *truth and reconciliation*, postulate beliefs and values rather than objective truths. Interpreted through the framework definition, spiritual wellness emerged as a discernible theme in many AERRs, though it was not explicitly acknowledged as such within them. It is not surprising that beliefs and values undergird much in education, confirming the appropriateness of including them in the wellness discussion.

## **AERR Content Analysis Results**

The results of our content analysis reveal specific answers to our research questions. Figure 2 demonstrates specific framing trends, while Figure 3 demonstrates how these division documents covered the spread of student wellness domains. A few themes are worth noting.

### ***Future-oriented Frames Dominate***

As Figure 2 demonstrates, the majority of frames for student wellness information were communicated as *Strategies* (36%) and *Statements of Intent* (22%). Seeing these forward-looking frames as the most prominent in public accountability documents might be expected, but it also might be noted that these reports are supposed to provide the results of Assurance surveys, rather than functioning as planning documents. According to Alberta Education, “Schools and school authorities share their results with their stakeholders through their Annual Education Results Report (AERR)” (2022, para. 1). In light of this function, a prominent focus on future-oriented plans and intentions appears mismatched with the purpose of the AERR. However, we acknowledge that, without a wellness category of assurance, this framing might have been the most feasible means of including wellness in the reports.

Figure 2

Wellness Mentions by Framing

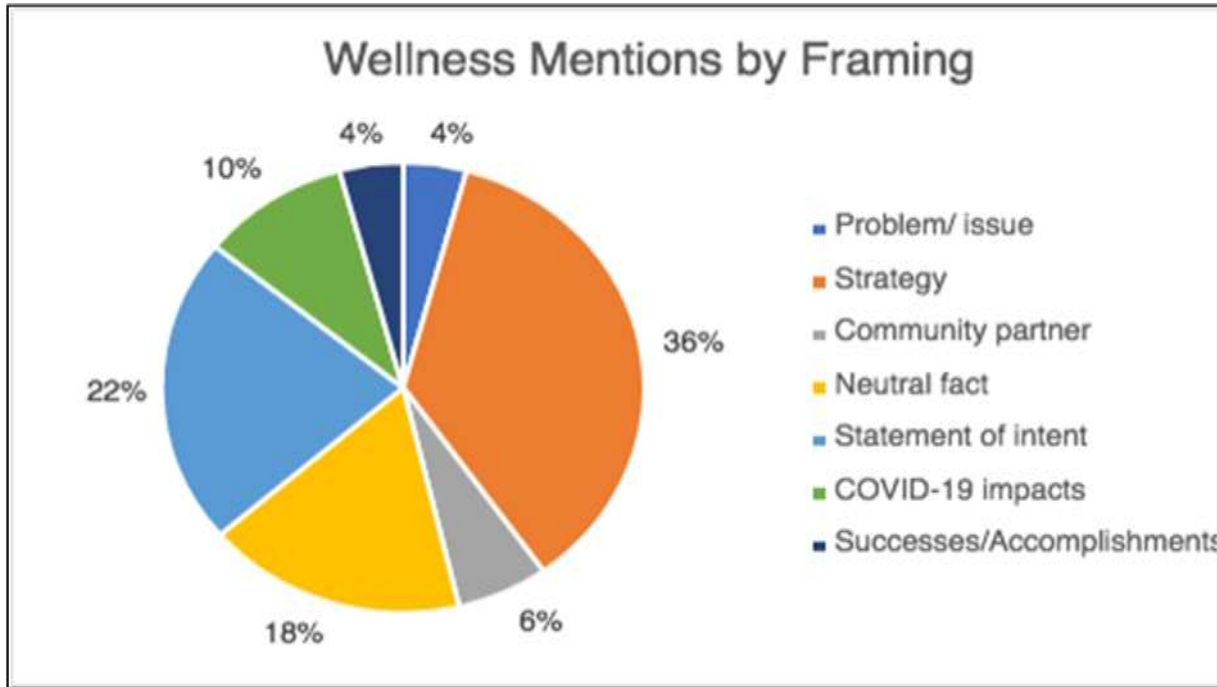
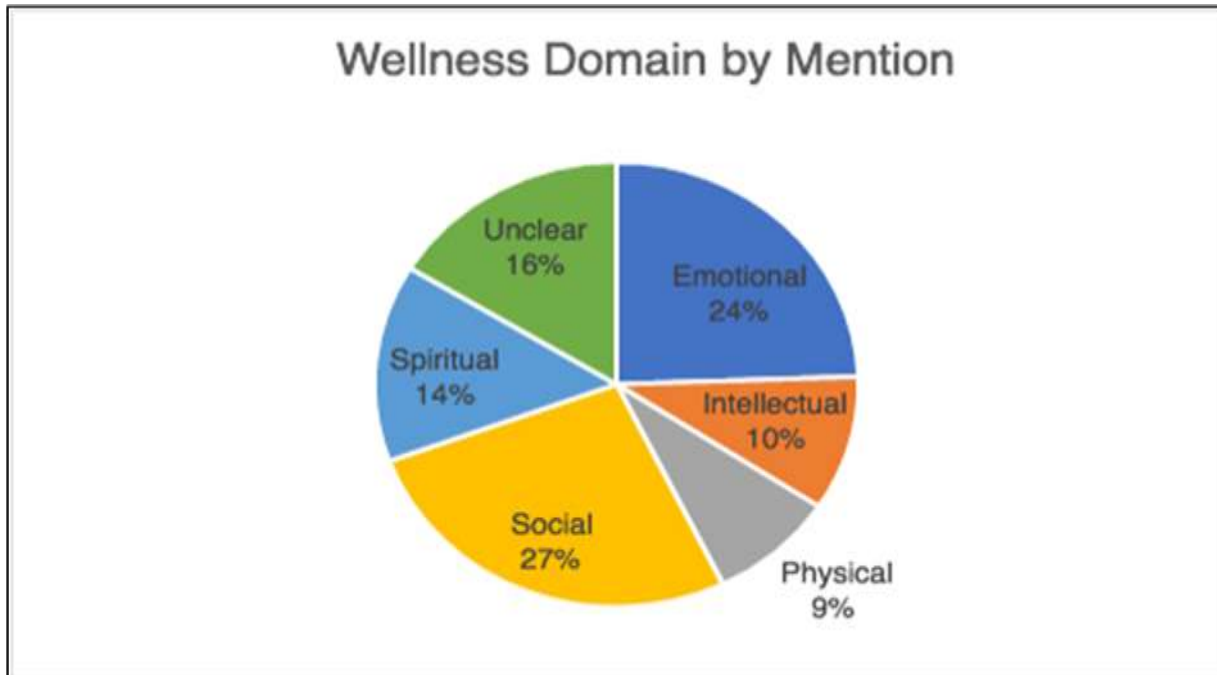


Figure 3

Wellness Domains by Mention



**Issues and Accomplishments Underrepresented**

Following the trend of focusing on the future rather than results, the frames used least to describe student wellness were “Problem/Issue” and “Successes/Accomplishments,” each of which received only 4% of the mentions. Again, this seems a mismatch when considering the purpose of the AERR; one might expect that these frames would receive more attention in light of findings, as results by nature report what is (or what was) as opposed to what will be. A reduced number of mentions in these two frames leaves readers to decide for themselves about why accurate reports of the wellness situation for students, or any successes or accomplishments of the divisions in this regard, were generally not prominent components of these public transparency documents.

**Emotional Strategies Lead Domain-frame Relationships**

Perhaps not surprisingly, the domain-frame correlation receiving the most mentions was emotional strategies, with 84 codes; social strategies came next, with 68 mentions. This indicates that emotional wellness is acknowledged as a prominent need by most divisions, but also represents a mismatch to the AERR purpose, looking forward instead of simply reporting division results. Although this clearly alludes to an awareness of the need for emotional wellness support, it does not in itself provide an accurate picture of how divisions actually know emotional wellness is a dominant issue among their students. Clearly school authorities need strategies to support emotional wellness, but one is left to wonder how emotional issues are identified or measured. Relationships of interest, noted in Table 7, provide further analysis of trends for consideration.

Table 7  
*Highest and Lowest Domain-Frame Correlations*

10 Highest Correlations			10 Lowest Correlations		
<i>Wellness Domain—Framing</i>	Rank	# of codes	<i>Wellness Domain—Framing</i>	Rank	# of codes
<i>Emotional—Strategy</i>	1st	84	<i>Physical—Problem/issue</i>	41st	0
<i>Social—Strategy</i>	2	68	<i>Spiritual—COVID-19 impacts</i>	41 (t)	0
<i>Social—Statement of Intent</i>	3	48	<i>Physical—Successes/Accomplishments</i>	40	1
<i>Spiritual—Strategy</i>	4	40	<i>Spiritual—Problem/issue</i>	38 (t)	1
<i>Spiritual—Statement of Intent</i>	5	33	<i>Intellectual—Community Partner</i>	38 (t)	1
<i>Unclear—Neutral Fact</i>	6	31	<i>Unclear—Successes/Accomplishments</i>	37	2
<i>Unclear—COVID-19 Impacts</i>	7	29	<i>Unclear—Problem/Issue</i>	36	3
<i>Emotional—Neutral fact</i>	8	26	<i>Spiritual—Successes/Accomplishments</i>	34 (t)	3
<i>Unclear—Strategy</i>	8 (t)	26	<i>Physical—Community Partner</i>	34 (t)	3
<i>Unclear—Neutral Fact</i>	10	22	<i>Social—Problem/issue*</i>	27 (t)	6

\*six combinations in total received six mentions, landing this spot as a six-way tie.

### ***Social and Emotional Wellness Dominate, Physical Wellness Lags***

An analysis of Figure 3 reveals which wellness domains received the most attention, revealing that the top two domains were social (27%) and emotional (24%). Considering the pandemic context, these foci are perhaps predictable, as isolation and emotional duress characterized much of the school year, particularly from March onwards. By contrast, one is left to wonder why physical wellness was the least-mentioned domain, comprising only 9% of student wellness phrases. One might surmise that physical wellness is mentioned less because of health and physical education curricula containing specific strategies pertinent to this domain, but this finding demonstrated an imbalance among domains.

Lastly, it is also perhaps striking that 16% of the mentions were unclear about their connection with a specific wellness domain, meaning a specific domain connection was unintelligible (i.e. “student wellness is a division priority”). Perhaps in the absence of a category with specific AEAMs outlining wellness domains and priorities, it becomes difficult to denote student wellness realities with an adequate level of specificity.

### **Results Summary**

In summary, we discovered that wellness was mostly focused on the social and emotional wellness domains, while strategies and statements of intent dominated the framing. Of note, physical wellness generally received the fewest mentions as a domain, and approximately one out of every six framings were stated with an unclear connection to a specific domain. Emotional strategies comprised most domain-frame correlations. From these data and further analysis of our results we arrived at the following conclusions:

- Divisions focused on future-oriented statements about wellness in their AERRs. Though this trend mischaracterizes the purposes of these documents, it may be due to a felt need to respond to certain trends.
- Strategies and statements of intent largely excluded physical and intellectual wellness domains, drawing most attention to social and emotional wellness in the AERRs. Although this is perhaps understandable during a pandemic, it does represent a lack of balance among wellness domains.
- Emotional strategies were the leading domain-frame relationship, reflecting a perceived need to address this wellness domain; however, the measures employed by divisions to identify its importance were opaquely specified.
- A significant proportion of codes included statements that were unclear about which wellness domain they were addressing. This revealed that ambiguity about the umbrella term “wellness” did indeed impact public communication. It also demonstrated the need for greater understanding of wellness domains in order to make more focused statements and plans.
- Problems and issues within wellness domains were infrequently disclosed in the AERRs, which may reveal a lack of reliable corresponding data.
- Problems and issues within physical and spiritual wellness domains were excluded from most AERR documents. These omissions may reveal a lack of understanding these domains

and their relevance, or that other wellness domains simply dominated the reporting based on their apparent urgency.

### **Outcomes**

Our analysis of the findings employed the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) method to facilitate a realistic recognition of weaknesses and threats as the first step to counter them with a robust set of strategies that build upon strengths and opportunities (Renault, 2022). The benefit of a SWOT analysis is that it provides a balanced critique of what is currently working well, contrasted with areas that may be deficient.

We identified four strengths of AERRs. First, they follow a policy-driven framework. As such, they have a standard form and structure across school authorities. The Assurance Areas identified in the Accountability Framework indicate specific areas which the reports must address while allowing for a variety of evidence measures. At the same time, AERRs communicate the local priorities of the school authorities. Boards have flexibility to identify local priorities and respond to the needs of their unique populations. Finally, school authorities are able to create alignment between schools through setting division goals. Professional learning communities (PLCs) may operate at a variety of levels to support transfer of knowledge throughout organizations as educators take multifaceted approaches to meeting division goals.

The weaknesses of the AERRs may be a product of their nature as an annual report. The AERRs frequently relied on imprecise phrasing when describing student wellness, indicating that a weakness is a lack of shared language. Compounding the differences in wellness communication is the dearth of wellness measurement tools that are appropriate to children. Third, teachers may not have the qualifications or professional knowledge required to teach and support wellness. Finally, AERRs are released annually, which limits their effectiveness as knowledge transfer tools for the dynamic social contexts of schools.

School authorities may be able to capitalize on opportunities to grow the value of AERRs. We noted that student wellness was addressed in some capacity in AERRs, which indicates that there is a growing awareness of the importance of student wellbeing. Additionally, students have a greater capacity to influence decision-making processes. Students are able to participate in problem-solving and as consultants through existing measures, such as the Accountability Pillar surveys. Thirdly, curricular renewal is an opportunity to include current research in student wellness. Finally, increased interagency partnerships, such as Child and Family Services and Health Alberta, open up abilities to provide increased support for students.

We identified three threats to AERR communications. Imprecise or vague statements about student wellness may limit the perceived usefulness of AERRs as accountability or planning documents. AERRs are released online; however, our investigation found that there is little consistency regarding where they are located. A serious threat to AERRs as wellness communication tools is the heterogeneous needs of diverse populations across Alberta. Our content analysis chose representative samples based on populations and geographic location, yet we acknowledge that a much more detailed study of student needs based on age, socio-economic status, family structure, geography, and ethnography may be required to more accurately measure student wellness.

Our research uncovered substantial answers to our research questions. In addressing how student wellness is conceptualized in these documents, each of the five wellness domains—

emotional, intellectual, physical, social, and spiritual—have been discussed by school authorities in some capacity. The domains that are most commonly discussed are social (27%) and emotional (24%). The domains that received the least number of mentions were physical (8%) and intellectual (10%), while emotional strategies were the leading domain-frame relation.

These trends provide us with evidence-informed insights into the nature of the coherence of current student wellness discourses among Alberta public school authorities. In light of our SWOT analysis shown in Table 8, we offer the following recommendations as potential paths towards improving that conversation. Each suggestion emerges from the nexus of an Opportunity-Strength, Opportunity-Weakness, Threat-Strength, or Threat-Weakness.

### Add Student Wellness to the Accountability Framework

Although student wellness is not an Assurance Area on the Accountability Framework (Alberta Education, 2022), there is a growing awareness of the synergistic relationship of student wellbeing to academic achievement. The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted student health dramatically in several domains and forced school authorities to adjust how programs were delivered and how student needs were met; it was therefore acknowledged as a framing category in our coding. Even so, only 10% of student wellness statements were framed in the context of COVID-19, indicating that concern for student wellness extended beyond the temporal implications of the pandemic.

Acknowledging that it implies a notable shift of the purposes of education, our key recommendation is that student wellness be added to the Accountability Framework (Alberta Education, 2022) as an Assurance Area. We contend that a balanced perspective of student

Table 8

#### SWOT Analysis of Wellness Communication in AERRS

	<p><b>Strengths</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Framework for stakeholder communication</li> <li>2. Local</li> <li>3. Assurance Areas</li> <li>4. Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)</li> </ol>	<p><b>Weaknesses</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Lack of shared language</li> <li>2. Tools for measuring</li> <li>3. Professional knowledge</li> <li>4. Communication across a division</li> </ol>
<p><b>Opportunities</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Rising awareness of student wellbeing</li> <li>2. Student agency</li> <li>3. Curricular redesign</li> <li>4. Partnerships with outside agencies and supports</li> </ol>	<p><b>Opportunity-Strength (OS) Strategies</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Connect targeted external resources with schools (O4, S2)</li> <li>2. Share wellness strategies and knowledge in Professional Learning Communities (O1, S4)</li> </ol>	<p><b>Opportunity-Weakness (OW) Strategies</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Professional development on wellness (O3, O4, W3)</li> <li>2. Collaborate with outside research organizations on measurement tools (O1, O4, W2)</li> </ol>
<p><b>Threats</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Imprecise definition of wellness</li> <li>2. Accessibility of AERRs</li> <li>3. Heterogeneous wellness needs</li> </ol>	<p><b>Threat-Strength (TS) Strategies</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Division input in an updated wellness curriculum framework (S2, T1)</li> <li>2. Include Student Wellness as an Assurance Area (T1, T3, S3)</li> </ol>	<p><b>Threat-Weakness (TW) Strategies</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Focus groups and community engagement (T1, W1, W4)</li> <li>2. Report student wellness for past three years (T3, W2, W4)</li> </ol>

Note. adapted from David, F. R., (2010). *Strategic Management* (13th ed.). Pearson.



wellness includes all five domains of health used in our research, and that each of these domains should be specifically referenced in each AERR. We believe that developing and implementing a wellness Assurance Area within Alberta's assurance model is the most direct way to meaningfully frame the wellness conversation through measurable AEAMs. Providing concrete measures will result in the clarification of school responsibilities and goals regarding student wellness. Clearer accountability measures, featuring a justifiable balance of wellness domains, will result in more focused support for students in these areas. School authorities could still employ local governance to identify what needs to be done according to specific measures and find ways to authentically measure their success. This new category would substantiate a spoken commitment to support holistic wellness by framing wellness in specific, measurable ways that acknowledge the important wellness domains most relevant to student needs in an educational context. Since AERRs are public accountability documents that shape school policies, addressing a balance of wellness domains within this new Assurance Area would provide the structural impetus for overall improvement in wellness reporting.

This significant adjustment to the Assurance Framework sets the working context for a few additional recommendations. The Assurance Area would establish the framework for accountability more clearly, and would therefore require school authorities to give an account of what they have done to meet the AEAMs. This would facilitate the development of a common language and the creation of targeted strategies to meet the measures, and would also help align wellness-related professional development and expenditures with clearly stated categories of the assurance model.

If this suggestion were enacted, we envision that AERRs would eventually provide student wellbeing measures over multiple-year periods so that trends in wellness could be identified, just as achievement data is reported for prior years to show trends in academic growth. This could allow school authorities to make evidence-based decisions (a leadership priority) in their three-year plans targeted at the most relevant wellness areas of need in successive school years. Targeted planning would lead to better alignment of resources, nomenclature, measures, and professional development along coherent lines. More focused alignment in these areas would likely bolster improved support of targeted student wellness needs.

### **Creating a Common Language of Wellness With an Updated Wellness Framework**

Our findings indicated that AERRs often used positive statements about the general wellness of students, but imprecise statements like these may have limited usefulness for communicating goals, strategies, or progress, and have reduced functional meaning to school leaders and educators. It is foreseeable that parents might also harbor skepticism when they hear vague, sweeping statements about student wellness.

Therefore, to improve clarity for school leaders, teachers, and community stakeholders, we recommend that an updated Student Wellness Framework be advanced with the input of Alberta stakeholders. Our research used the definition of wellness from Alberta Education (2009), which is strong, but may not reflect more current wellness perspectives. An updated Student Wellness Framework could incorporate current values and research in wellness and the emergent contexts of Alberta students. As responsible agencies for education of K–12 students, school authorities could effectively gather input from many sources within their jurisdictions, especially teachers, providing key insights into current wellness needs and perspectives. School divisions are also able to pilot redesigned curricula, which can provide valuable feedback to Alberta Education. A

renewal of the Student Wellness Framework that incorporates the latest research with professional input from teachers could substantially facilitate a common language between educators and other stakeholders, resulting in more holistic student wellness support.

### **Develop Measurement Tools for Student Wellness**

Considering the impact of a new Assurance Area, we believe that further research is required to discover effective tools to measure student wellness. Adding targeted AEAMs to the Assurance framework would be an important means of contextualizing relevant measurement tools for student wellness. As they work with heterogeneous student bodies with distinct wellness needs at different stages of development, school authorities are positioned best to monitor and take action to develop contextualized measures that paint a relevant picture of the student wellness situation. “School boards exist because of the belief that government—and decisions—made closest to the people being governed are the most effective” (Alberta School Boards Association, 2022, para. 1).

Existing tools measure objective or subjective well-being (Cho & Yu, 2020), and an analysis of wellness measurement tools is beyond the scope of this study. Further research is required to determine if suitable tools exist or if new tools are necessary. Finding those tools requires focused support from qualified community partners, and we envision school authorities partnering with external organizations that are engaged in educational and wellness research, such as universities or local communities of professional health practitioners in various domains.

### **Leverage PLCs and Professional Development to Build Teacher Capacity**

Teachers holding health certifications should not be the only ones to provide student wellness instruction. The impact of existing teachers on student health knowledge can be enhanced through teacher professional development (Murray et al., 2019). Professional learning communities are effective structures for teachers to collaborate to solve problems of practice; such communities could surely become fruitful contexts for targeting specific wellness needs that emerge contextually. Teachers are ideally situated to determine the local needs of students and to find optimal solutions. The ability of teachers to implement initiatives to improve student wellness is certainly a topic for further study, but within a wellness framework that is well-designed, which requires accountability, professional learning communities could organically develop contextualized and purposeful measures of student wellness support.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

Our research is contextually limited because our content analysis was based on a representative sample of Alberta public school authorities. Alberta’s school authorities include diverse groups such as Francophone, First Nations, independent, and Catholic schools, each of which may feature different systems and contexts for accountability. A wider review of different school jurisdictions would reveal a richer dataset representative of a more complete view of the Alberta schooling context.

Further research could also be done to uncover particularities within wellness priorities based on geographic location, population density, socioeconomic measures, or student demographics. A longitudinal content analysis of AERRs could reveal trends in student wellness priorities and the evolution of wellness conceptions over time. It could be also argued that 3-year planning

documents might reveal more nuanced language surrounding student wellness than the AERRs. If so, an analysis of these documents could provide a distinct planning context to the understandings revealed through our research.

## Conclusion

Our research contributes to the growing body of literature that explores how Alberta educators present, think about, and address student wellness priorities. Student wellness is a complex issue that schools must be equipped to address. Wellbeing deficits inhibit student learning, and educators need a coherent framework to inform assessment and support of student needs. A clearer image of emerging trends in Alberta student health can provide a better roadmap for policy makers, and can engender greater public trust in the ability of schools to respond to the changing needs of students. We invite school boards and educators to carefully consider and clarify the ways they communicate with stakeholders, and call upon the Ministry of Education to consider the implementation of our research recommendations to build deeper trust and transparency in public education. Enriching our conceptual understanding of student wellness is surely a worthwhile endeavor that will inform concrete steps to coherently tackle the rising student wellness needs in Alberta's schools.

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*Matthew D. Nielsen* is a Junior High teacher at an independent school in South Calgary. A former Edwin Parr recipient (2015), he earned his M.Ed. in the Leadership for Learning program at the University of Calgary in 2022. His passions include student wellness, music, and the course he teaches to budding critical thinkers: Logic.

*Joseph Amundrud* is a Vice-principal with Chinook's Edge School Division in Central Alberta. His interests are positive psychology and living gratefully every day.