

# Discussion Brief:

## Pan-Canadian Supports for K-12 Workplace Wellbeing

### Context and Background

Canadian K-12 education stakeholders are increasingly concerned about the mental health and wellbeing of their staff. They recognize that supporting staff wellbeing simultaneously supports student wellbeing and educational outcomes, and minimizes the legal, financial, and human resource costs of staff stress and burnout ([see infographic here](#)).

Some schools and school districts have begun to actively address workplace wellbeing, while others are overwhelmed by the range of approaches and programs available and the lack of clear solutions. Overall, progress on systemic workplace wellbeing (see sidebar) at the district, provincial/territorial, and pan-Canadian levels remains slow and unevenly distributed.

The [McConnell Foundation](#) has been supporting K-12 workplace wellbeing through its [WellAhead](#) initiative since 2017. The Foundation is currently exploring ways to support a measurable impact on K-12 workplace wellbeing in Canada through collaborative investments with a range of potential funders.

Towards this end, the Foundation is working closely with a five-person “design team<sup>1</sup>” to develop and refine a set of approaches to help advance K-12 workplace wellbeing at multiple levels of the education system. This work includes a consultation phase, which the design team intends to approach with openness, curiosity, a spirit of innovation, and a commitment to deep listening. The team seeks to further understand the challenges surrounding K-12 workplace wellbeing, the structures, policies, and initiatives that are already in place, and whether and how these might be enhanced by the suggested approaches outlined in this discussion brief. The design team has drafted an initial concept as a starting point for discussion, guided by the question: **How might we advance K-12 workplace wellbeing at district, provincial/territorial, and pan-Canadian levels?**

#### SYSTEMIC WORKPLACE WELLBEING

- ✓ Permanently embeds wellbeing into district priorities, culture and structures
- ✓ Addresses the wellbeing of all workers, regardless of their role
- ✓ Includes strategies and supports for individual wellbeing
- ✓ Tackles organizational issues that contribute to stress and burnout

### Initial Concept

Our initial concept includes a set of four complementary and connected parts that:

- Encourage school districts to designate Workplace Wellbeing Leads or Teams
- Connect and coordinate stakeholders and school districts to collectively advance K-12 workplace wellbeing through provincial/territorial “hubs”
- Build the capacity of education leaders to lead sustainable change around K-12 workplace wellbeing
- Increase awareness of K-12 workplace wellbeing through a knowledge mobilization platform

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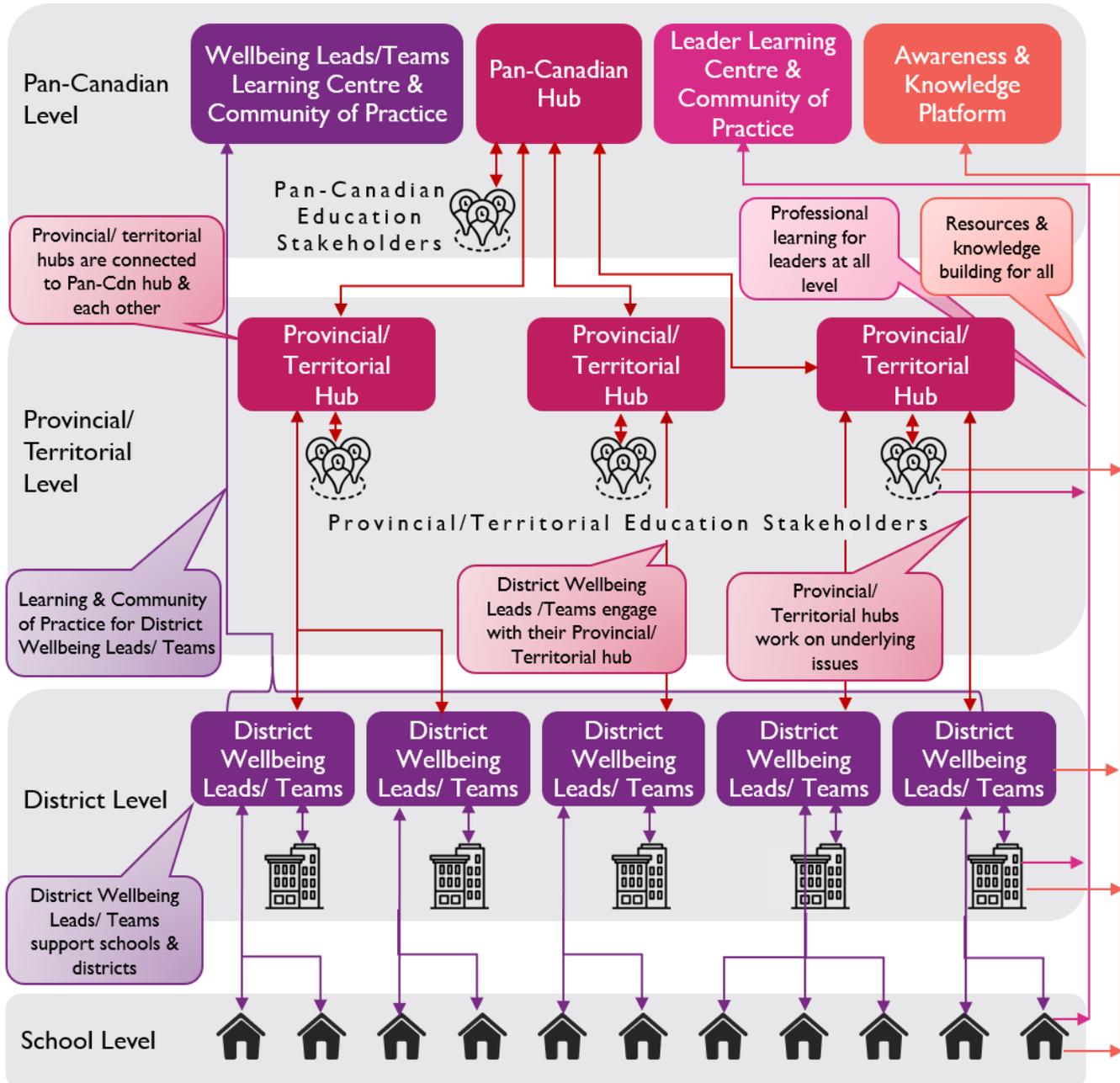
<sup>1</sup> Charlie Naylor, Felicia Ochs, Andre Rebeiz, Tammy Shubat, Kim Weatherby.

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Our initial concept reflects the consensus of K-12 workplace wellbeing thought leaders convened earlier this year and builds on prior WellAhead investments. One of those investments is the EdCan Network's [Well at Work](#) knowledge mobilization initiative, which would continue to serve as an awareness- and knowledge-building platform. The other three parts would be new initiatives. We are also exploring possibilities around an additional part that would target individuals and schools more directly to support the wellbeing of K-12 staff in their daily work. The initial concept is depicted below.

### A Comprehensive Framework for K-12 Workplace Wellbeing



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### Workplace Wellbeing Leads/Teams

**Problem:** Fragmented responsibility and limited capacity to address K-12 workplace wellbeing.

**Proposed approach:** Incentivize the creation of a staff wellbeing lead role at the district level through funding, professional development opportunities, and engagement in a pan-Canadian community of practice. This role would serve to coordinate workplace wellbeing strategy and activities at the school district-level, and would likely work closely with a district leadership team.

**Challenge and refinement questions:**

- Is there value in having a position dedicated to K-12 workplace wellbeing at the district level?
- What role might a broader workplace wellbeing team play at the district level?
- What issues would a role like this not be able to address?

### Network of K-12 Workplace Wellbeing Hubs

**Problem:** Lack of collective/coordinated action among education stakeholders and school districts to address K-12 workplace wellbeing at the provincial/territorial level.

**Proposed approach:** Provincial/territorial K-12 workplace wellbeing “hubs” that are part of a pan-Canadian hub network.

- **Provincial/territorial hubs** would bring together key stakeholders to tackle underlying systemic challenges, such as policies, structures, and priorities. They would also support and engage school districts on effective approaches to workplace wellbeing, while respecting local context and priorities.
- **A pan-Canadian hub** would provide overall coordination, engage provinces/territories that don't have their own hub, foster relationships across the country, and support evaluation.

**Challenge and refinement questions:**

- How might school districts, unions, associations, and government engage in and be supported by a hub like this to improve K-12 workplace wellbeing?
- What specific functions would be valuable for a hub to support?

### K-12 Leader Learning & Capacity Building

**Problem:** Lack of knowledge among K-12 leaders on how to lead effective workplace wellbeing initiatives.

**Proposed approach:** Targeted, accessible professional development for district and school leaders on the fundamentals of K-12 workplace wellbeing and on how to take comprehensive, systemic action to improve staff wellbeing and reduce stress and burnout. A pan-Canadian learning community would further extend the learning and foster cross-jurisdictional sharing. The potential to provide professional development credits could be considered.

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### Challenge and refinement questions:

- What preparation do education leaders currently receive on how to lead a healthy workplace, and what would enhance this?
- What existing district or union professional development could be adapted or extended for wider utilization?
- Who should be engaged in designing the professional development opportunities?
- What other key stakeholders/roles would benefit from this type of training in order to increase impact on improving K-12 workplace wellbeing?

### Awareness and Knowledge

**Problem:** Limited awareness and understanding of K-12 workplace wellbeing.

**Proposed approach:** Continue to build awareness and knowledge across the country through the existing [Well at Work](#) platform. *Well at Work* provides plain-language K-12 workplace wellbeing content in a variety of mediums and from a variety of perspectives and jurisdictions across Canada in both French and English. Its curated resources and webinar learning opportunities support rapid pan-Canadian mobilization of emerging research, good practices, and actionable strategies to improve workplace wellbeing.

### Challenge and refinement questions:

- What value has the *Well at Work* platform provided, and how could it be improved or enhanced?
- Has any *Well at Work* content sparked a change in your thinking or practice?
- What content or topics are most essential to include on a knowledge mobilization platform?

## Conclusion

We recognize that there is no silver bullet to solving K-12 staff stress and burnout, particularly given the diversity of local contexts and education systems in Canada. We also recognize that K-12 workplace wellbeing cannot be solved by one person or organization. It is a shared responsibility among individuals (K-12 staff), organizations (schools and school districts), and entire systems, including government, unions, and other influencers. The ideas presented in this discussion brief are some initial suggestions for how we might reinforce supports at these different levels to help advance systemic change. They will need to be further defined with the principles of social justice and cultural relevance in mind.

Canadian K-12 education stakeholders are at a critical juncture in recognizing K-12 workplace wellbeing, particularly in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and the competing budgetary priorities it presents. We believe that there is enough readiness among a critical mass of stakeholders to embrace action on this issue, and that the time to catalyze real change and improvements is now.

We look forward to constructive feedback on these ideas, and a discussion on how we can work synergistically, collaboratively, and collectively to advance K-12 workplace wellbeing in Canada.