



2021 BC STUDENT VOICE FORUM

by

North Delta Secondary School Students
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Without question, the pandemic has forced upon us many restrictions and changes in our schools. We haven't gathered in large groups for many months, and our face-to-face interactions have been significantly reduced. Our inability to conduct many long-anticipated events in the customary manner has left many people feeling disappointed. However, others have accepted the new parameters under which we live and learn as merely a 'challenge'.

'Challenged' is precisely how Tanisha Misra, Tavneet Jandu, and Bhuvnesh Kaushal – student leaders from North Delta Secondary – have approached their desire to lead throughout the pandemic. All three were a part of organizing and participating in a BC Student Voice Forum held at North Delta in January 2020, and joined the BC Student Voice presentation held virtually in the Fall of 2020. Their experience of meeting with approximately 200 Grade 7-12 students from five different school districts, and discussing topics such as student success, mental health and wellness, vaping, and student transitions, was positive and rewarding. They were so pleased by the high level of engagement that as late Fall 2020 approached, the team started to ask about again hosting a similar conference. Soon enough, conversations with the BCPVPA began and, this time, the team accepted the opportunity to host the BC Student Voice Spring Forum.

The team was excited by the opportunity to organize the forum, but quickly realized that the pandemic would necessitate a significant number of adjustments. This started with the planning process which, for the most part, took place through virtual meetings. The team established the following main objectives:

- To provide participants the opportunity to share how the pandemic has impacted their well-being and learning.
- To engage participants in authentic and open conversations about some key topics that are currently impacting school communities.

- To ask participants to consider action plans and steps that they can initiate in their local school communities.
- To enable student leaders from across the province to connect with one another, share successes and challenges, and inspire one another to action.

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The conference was divided into two main components. After a brief opening breakout room check-in with participants to find out how the pandemic has been impacting their learning, the conference kicked off with a keynote presentation from Dr. Kristin Buhr about student mental health. Dr. Buhr shared strategies that students can use to improve their mental wellness. She also shared information about Cognitive Behavioural Therapy to help students reduce their physical symptoms of stress and anxiety, develop healthier self-talk to combat worries, and take active steps to face fears and improve their emotional health.



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The second portion of the conference allowed students to contribute their perspective on a variety of topics that are having an impact on student learning and schools. Participants chose one of the following topics: Student Mental Wellness, Promoting Digital Citizenship, or Anti-Racism in Schools. Each participant was placed into one of eight breakout rooms. Each room included approximately 6-8 students, and two North Delta students acting as facilitators and recorders. The dialogue was rich, authentic, and thoughtful. Students identified gaps, shared concerns, described creative initiatives at their respective schools, and shared with one another a sense of hope and optimism that by working together, and by involving their school staffs, they could set in motion new innovations and initiatives.

These student leaders, along with a dozen other leaders, facilitated similar discussions during a Delta Youth Advisory Council (DYAC) Meeting in mid-May. Similar to BC Student Voice Forums, DYAC meetings are platforms for secondary students from Delta School District to contribute their perspectives.

What emerged from the BC Student Voice Forum and the Delta DYAC Meeting was an incredible collection of thoughts. What follows is a summary of ideas and recommendations that have been prepared by the team from North Delta.

MENTAL WELLNESS

During this year's BC Student Voice Forum, powerful conversations took place surrounding Mental Wellness. Within the breakout rooms, the participants quickly cultivated a safe environment with their high levels of enthusiasm and courage. This effectively broke down the walls, eliminated stigma, and made the discussions all the more impactful.

The conversations began with a look at each participant's definition of mental wellness and, more specifically, the role it plays in their everyday lives. Students shared that mental wellness essentially occurs from understanding one's emotions to the point that one is able to achieve a balance in life that is right for them, and navigate through stressful situations. They added that mental wellness does not necessarily mean being happy, but rather describes

being in a state of peace and balance.

Later on, the conversations shifted to shed light on the factors that influence students' mental wellness. Themes of social media, relationships, exercise, and society quickly surfaced in the conversation. Although participants recognized that the internet can be used to find helpful resources for sustaining mental wellness, many acknowledged the negative influence of overusing social media. Many students shared how spending too much time on various social media platforms led to comparison and an unhealthy mindset. For this reason, they stressed the importance of self-regulating and 'unplugging' oneself for a while if needed. Students then elaborated on the influence society has on their mental wellness. Society has constructed the barrier of stigma which can prevent students from openly addressing mental health. Many of the participants who joined from smaller communities shared about the lack of counselling and psychiatric support available to them; at times, there may be only one psychiatrist across their school district. In this situation, students shared their frustrations of being waitlisted for needed support, and being judged while waiting for school counsellors. Participants advocated the need to change the narrative surrounding the concept of mental wellness. We are pleased to report that many participants are planning to conduct honest discussions similar to the BC Student Voice Forum within their own communities, to help create a positive shift in people's mindsets.

While participants voiced their thoughts on mental wellness, they simultaneously provided valuable insight to help enhance the student experience and increase access to mental health resources. Participants identified that the root cause of challenges associated with managing mental wellness is a lack of education early on. In their experience, students noted that conversations about mental wellness had not taken place in elementary school, and they felt that this would be the best time to introduce the topic. The sooner youth are informed about mental wellness, the better prepared they are to manage their own health. Furthermore, students said that a positive environment can easily be created at a young age, which is instrumental to battling the stigma associated



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with mental health. They proposed the idea of having peer or staff groups to turn to for support at school. This would encourage conversations like the ones held during the forum on a more regular basis, and help students cope with having limited access to counsellors or psychiatrists.

ANTI-RACISM IN SCHOOLS

Often, students find it difficult to share their input on the implementations that are necessary to combat racism within schools. However, the BC Student Voice Forum provided students with the platform to voice their ideas in an independent and collaborative manner in an effort to spark change within schools. In an attempt to further explore these ideas, delegates

took a step back and discussed what anti-racism means to them.

A key point raised in the forum was, “Anti-racism is acting against racism.” This statement spoke volumes to the students, and rich conversations arose. This included the topic of bringing racial and cultural awareness into elementary classrooms. Whether it be integrating anti-racism literacy into Humanities-related subjects such as Language Arts and Social Studies, or honouring a variety of cultural celebrations within the classroom, participants stressed the importance of exposing elementary school-aged students to the cultural and racial diversity that surrounds them. So many students come from a variety of different backgrounds, and they wish to have the opportunity to educate their peers about their cultural roots and simultaneously immerse themselves in other cultures.

However, students believe that racism is often portrayed as an uncomfortable subject to discuss. As a result, conversations surrounding what racism is and the impacts of racist behaviour have been limited within schools. Yet, discussing important issues like this enables students to be more conscientious about their actions, and to think ahead about the consequences for others of their actions. Moreover, students will be equipped with the knowledge they need to promote anti-racism activities beyond the scope of their classroom and into their everyday lives. In an effort to cultivate safe learning spaces for students, having anti-racism school clubs and anti-racism workshops enables students to seek resources to learn more about racism, identify racist behavior and learn how to actively take steps to call out racist behaviour. Ensuring that students are educated on these topics is a vital factor in the prevention of further racist conduct in school communities.

The discussions surrounding anti-racism amongst the student participants at the BC Student Voice Forum fostered a safe space for students to ask questions about racism, share their thoughts, and combine their brain power to develop implementations that can be made within schools to combat racism. Implementing discussions like this into schools allows a greater number of students to ask questions and voice their ideas. A greater emphasis on racial and cultural awareness within school settings will be



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a profound opportunity for students to broaden their understanding of anti-racism, and contribute to the cultivation of racially inclusive learning environments for all students.

DIGITAL CITIZENSHIP

In the vital and thoughtful discussions at the BC Student Voice Forum, participants discussed the platform that the online world provides, with a focus on how education can contribute to making it a safer

and more reliable place for students in the future. As students continue to immerse themselves in a technology and automation-based world, there is no doubt that the anonymity and sense of protection provided by a computer screen are having an immediate effect on youth in our province.

Students commented that they were unable to recognize the intentions of someone through a screen, and that it became an obstacle to effective and honest communication. Students also mentioned that social media applications are a platform for concerning online activities, such as the creation of fake accounts for cyberbullying. These interactions can have a detrimental effect on students' mental health and can evoke feelings of helplessness, exposure, and fear when there is a lack of digital literacy and understanding of the difference between the online world and the physical world. With their personal and school lives becoming more digital, students suggested that the incorporation of digital citizenship and literacy into the curriculum is a fundamental step. This plan includes an introduction to internet safety from an early age, and opportunities to learn new computer skills to better understand and communicate in the online world.

Despite the seriousness of the online interactions, participants emphasized that the online world provides platforms for anyone to display exemplary digital citizenship. They commented that social media applications have helped bring social justice issues to light, and keep people informed about topics they might miss on other news sources. Students explained that because of the digital world, they have unprecedented access to an enormous amount of learning and working opportunities. Participants emphasized that there need to be more seminars or assemblies, where someone educated on the subject could help students better leverage the online world. Instead of viewing social media as an obstacle or a hazard to student learning, schools and educators should emphasize its importance as a tool and a key ingredient for success in the modern world.

As a part of the first generation living digitally-dependent lives, most students are in uncharted territory. So, when questions do naturally arise, they do not consult with those they trust the most:



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their parents. Participants highlighted that parents often have little to no experience with the social media applications their children use, and that the advice when offered can sometimes be outdated or irrelevant. Consequently, it's essential that the older generation also have access to resources that enable them to stay updated and connected with their children and the world around them. Students came to the conclusion that it is crucial for parents to be better informed on digital citizenship to help their children to become responsible and honest digital citizens.

The conference organizers would like to thank all of the students and facilitators who participated in the BC Student Voice Spring Forum. The forum proved once again to be a tremendous success, and listening to the perspectives and ideas of the student participants provides a sense of optimism that these passionate leaders will continue to shape and build their school communities positively in the future.