

The Generative Listening Experience:

Co-designing a professional learning cohort to build principals' capacity to shape safe, welcoming, caring and inclusive school communities.

Facilitators from the EdCan Network's Well at Work program have been working with principals to co-design and deliver a professional learning cohort program. Early results indicate that the program is:

1. Supporting the personal wellbeing of the participating principals;
2. Fostering relationships among the participating principals; and
3. Giving the participating principals the tools and confidence to shape safe, welcoming, caring and inclusive communities in their schools.

The co-designed nature of the program ensures that the content is relevant to local context and builds internal capacity to sustain the work as a locally directed and delivered collaborative learning experience. As such, we recommend that Alberta Education expand the pilot by launching new cohorts across the province.

Acknowledgements

This pilot project is supported by one of Alberta Education's Mental Health in Schools pilot project grants. We would also like to recognize the ongoing support and participation of Horizon School Division and Prairie Rose Public Schools.

Background

As part of the Alberta Education Mental Health in Schools pilot projects, facilitators from the EdCan Network's Well at Work program have been working with Horizon School Division and Prairie Rose Public Schools to co-design and deliver a professional learning cohort program for principals. The goals of the cohort are to:

1. Support the personal wellbeing of the participating principals;
2. Foster relationships among the participating principals; and
3. Give the participating principals the tools and confidence to shape safe, welcoming, caring and inclusive communities in their schools.

Although we are only half-way through the pilot implementation, our project is showing promise as a sustainable way to support mental health in schools by giving principals the tools and confidence to create safe, welcoming, caring, and inclusive school environments. Our co-design approach has ensured that learning is relevant to the local context of the school authorities, while building momentum and internal capacity to sustain the work beyond the duration of the pilot project. Expanding this work by launching professional learning cohorts in each geographical region of the province could enhance our approach to professional learning while building the capacity of school leaders to authentically support a healthy working and learning environment.

Key Elements of our Approach: The Evidence Base



A Universal Approach

Research shows that providing a welcoming, caring, safe and respectful school environment benefits both student¹ and staff² wellbeing. When teachers experience positive mental health, it enhances student-teacher relationships³ and student achievement⁴. Likewise, when teachers experience burnout, student stress increases⁵ and teaching quality decreases.⁶



Principal Focused

School leaders play an important role in shaping the school environment.⁷ Declines in principals' mental health, such as those seen during the pandemic, reduces principals' ability to positively impact student engagement, school functioning, and school-wide wellbeing.⁸



Cohort-Based Learning

The cohort-based model bridges the theory-to-practice gap by offering opportunities for ongoing practice and reflection.⁹ Cohort-based programs have also been demonstrated to be effective at building community and connection among participants¹⁰ and enhancing the personal wellbeing and professional effectiveness of participants.¹¹



Co-Designed

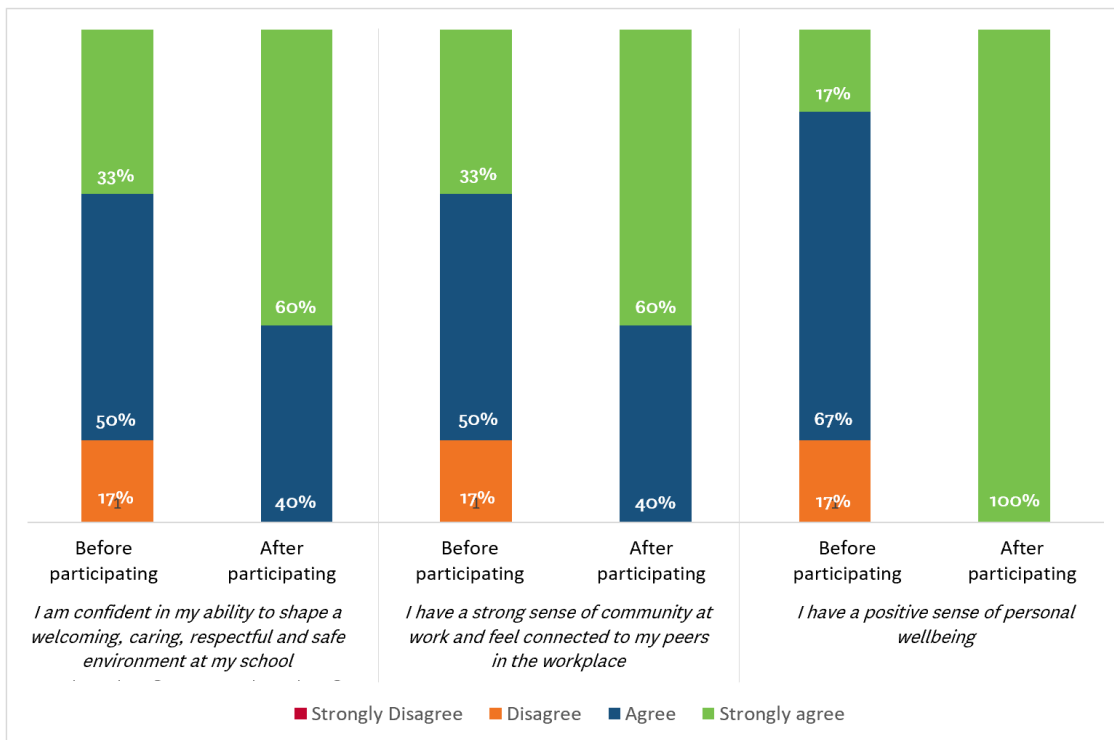
Co-design is about working with the people who are closest to the solutions, prioritizing relationships, being honest, making sure people feel welcome, using creative tools and building capability. Co-designing the cohorts with a small team of principals ensures that the resulting program is relevant to the local context while building momentum and excitement for the program. Co-designed learning has been shown to foster the development of shared responsibility, respect, and trust; create the conditions for collaborative learning; and enhance individuals' satisfaction and professional development.¹²

Our Pilot Project: *The Generative Listening Experience*

Phase 1: The Co-Design Process

From February to May 2023 a [Well at Work](#) Facilitator guided six principals and two school authority leads through a co-design process to develop what would become the *Generative Listening Experience*. The co-design process ensured that pilot cohort would be meaningful and relevant to the needs of principals in the two school authorities and would enhance their ability to foster welcoming, caring, safe and respectful environments in their schools.

Towards the end of the co-design process, we asked the participating principals for their feedback. Five of the six principals completed the evaluation. After participating in the co-design process, these five principals reported greater agreement with the following statements:



In the comments, principals expressed appreciation for the opportunity to participate on the design team. Comments included:

“This is by far the best PD I have attended where you leave inspired”

“I always walk away with a renewed sense of wellbeing and a revived energy for this work and its importance in education.”

Phase 2: Delivery of the *Generative Listening Experience*

The pilot professional learning cohort, entitled the *Generative Listening Experience*, consists of six full-day modules that are being facilitated by the Well at Work facilitator throughout the 2023-24 school year. The *Generative Listening Experience* considers all three levels within the being, knowing, and doing framework¹³ by providing opportunities for the principals to:

- Experience personal wellbeing and develop authentic relationships
- Learn from experts on topics identified by the design team
- Practice with community building tools that they can apply in their schools

Each of the modules is being hosted in a different school, allowing participants to experience and celebrate the uniqueness of each school community. Facilitating the professional learning experiences in-school respects that day-to-day reality of a principals' work and further enhances the connections with the school community.

The first two in-person sessions were delivered in October and November 2023. Feedback from the first two days of the *Generative Listening Experience* has been overwhelmingly positive. Participants appreciated the positive energy, warmth and trust developed through the day. Similar to the co-design experience, participants are indicating that the *Generative Listening Experience* feels different from other professional development experiences. One principal shared this unsolicited feedback:

We keep saying “this is different from regular PD”. THIS is so true!! Things stick, I’m forced to wrestle, and I’m building supportive relationships. Finally, I want to assure you that the work you have been doing with our leaders is making a tangible difference in Horizon. ... The conversations we are having (some really hard) are forcing system changes. It’s incredible, encouraging and life giving.

Insights and Lessons Learned from the Pilot (so far)

Recognizing that wellbeing is complex and multi-dimensional and that shifts in school environments take time, we embedded a developmental evaluation approach into the *Generative Listening Experience*. Although we are still in the early stages of the project, we are seeing progress towards the three goals for the professional learning cohort:

Goal 1: Support the personal wellbeing of the participating principals.

Participants overwhelmingly report that participating on the design team and in the *Generative Listening Experience* supports their personal wellbeing. Principals report feeling better after the sessions and demonstrate a high degree of commitment to show up and be fully present throughout the sessions.

Goal 2: Foster relationships among the participating principals.

Principals indicate that participating in the *Generative Listening Experience* is creating professional relationships that they would not otherwise have the time or tools to develop. The small group activities explored during each of the sessions give principals an opportunity to practice with community building tools. These activities are increasing trust and building morale among participants.

Goal 3: Give participating principals the tools and confidence to shape safe, welcoming, caring and inclusive communities in their schools.

Some participants are already applying the tools from the sessions to build connections and influence culture change at both the school- and division-level. However, this application is not yet universal. Moving forward, we are being more intentional about emphasizing the practical aspects and tangible takeaways.

Additional Insights

Wellbeing is something that must be experienced. The design and facilitation of each of the co-design and cohort days creates space for participants to experience wellbeing and to connect with each other authentically while learning tools and strategies to bring back to their schools. Having a facilitator who can create this degree of warmth, trust and positive energy is essential. On a more practical level, beginning each session “slowly” with a school tour, connection and coffee check-in creates the tone for the professional learning and models a wellbeing approach.

Allowing principals to self-select for participation enhances the learning experience and builds momentum. The process of co-designing the program with a small group of engaged and enthusiastic principals, then expanding to include all interested principals in the pilot has been beneficial. As participants talk about their experience with others, it sparks curiosity and openness among those who might have been less interested. Mandating participation would likely make it more difficult to generate positive energy in the room during each session.

School Authority support for the project is essential. The two participating school divisions have welcomed and valued this project. We believe this is a key element of its success so far. Active participation in the co-design process and the *Generative Listening Experience* by the two Division Leads shows their ongoing support for the project. This is particularly notable, as there was turnover in both school divisions, with a new person stepping into the respective division lead positions.

Hosting the *Generative Listening Experience* in-school showcases the unique culture and features of each school community. Identifying and celebrating local successes has proven to be inspiring and instructive.

The co-design process builds capacity among the principals to sustain the work. Although we have only facilitated two of the six modules of the *Generative Listening Experience*, several of the principals on the design team are demonstrating the potential to facilitate future iterations of the cohort. To ensure a smooth transition to a locally directed and delivered program, the Well at Work facilitator would provide ongoing coaching and guidance for at least one academic year.

Co-creating New Professional Learning Programs

Recent research highlights that authentically engaging the employee voice and increasing opportunities for employee participation are among the most reliable ways to enhance workplace wellbeing.^{14 15} The co-design approach to professional learning does both, while giving principals dedicated time to practice with community building tools that they can apply in their schools to create safe, welcoming, caring and inclusive school environments.

Given the positive impacts that we are seeing at this early stage in delivering the *Generative Listening Experience*, we are excited to work with additional school authorities to co-design professional learning programs that reflect their local context. To get started, school authorities will need:

- 4+ principals and 1+ district leader to participate in the initial co-design process.
- 4+ days to get together over the school year.
- A budget for coaching and facilitation.
- Hope, imagination, and love.

Conclusion

The early, positive results from our experience of co-designing and delivering the *Generative Listening Experience* indicate that this approach holds significant promise as a sustainable way to support mental health in schools. Principals play a critical role in shaping school environments; giving them the tools and confidence to shape safe, welcoming, caring and inclusive communities in their schools has the potential to improve the mental health and wellbeing of students and staff across the province.

To learn more about this project, or to explore the possibility of co-designing a cohort in your school authority or region, please email Kathleen Lane, Well at Work Program Director, at klane@edcan.ca.

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