

Online Submission Form

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This is an exciting time in education in Ontario. We have spent the last decade working with our education partners to create an education system that is recognized as one of the greatest around the world. Our task now is not to settle for great, but instead to continue striving for excellence.

One of the most significant challenges and opportunities before us is how to best prepare our students for a rapidly changing, technology-driven, globalized world. To do so, we need to broaden our view of student achievement to include even greater emphasis on higher-order skills – such as critical thinking, communication, collaboration, creativity and entrepreneurship. These are skills that are necessary for developing global citizens who bring the competencies and qualities that employers of tomorrow are looking for, and that our children will need to thrive.

Working with a diverse group of thinkers, we can build an updated vision for the future of education in Ontario that will guide us in our journey.

Thank you for taking the time to be a part of this consultation, and for your interest in education in Ontario. Your thoughtful consideration and answers to these questions will help to create a new vision for the future of education in Ontario.

Deadline for all submissions is November 30, 2013.

About yourself:

I am submitting on behalf of an institution / organization / company etc.

Name of organization (required)

Discover Mindfulness

Description of organization (optional)

Discover Mindfulness is a non-profit umbrella group whose mission is to be a hub for information and a catalyst for the integration of mindfulness into education as a means to overall well-being for students, educators, families and society.

Our members include teachers, administrators and other education professionals, parents, and others who want to bring mindfulness to education, including leaders from the major mindfulness programs for schools that are currently in Ontario, such as Mindfulness Without Borders, MindUP, The Mindful Edge and Learning to Breathe.

Discover Mindfulness does not have mindfulness programs of its own, so we are not tied to any one program.

We are knowledgeable about the use of mindfulness to train students and teachers in social and emotional learning, including:

- which programs are available and in use in Ontario and elsewhere*
- details about each program, including age range, methodology, content, evidence, and training*
- given its details, the suitability of each program for its intended use*
- practical experience in implementing mindfulness programs in schools*

Discover Mindfulness held a consultation on October 26 attended by 80 people, mostly educators. We have also provided an opportunity for our over 300 subscribers to comment on our submission, by posting it on our website and asking subscribers to review and comment on it.

What are the skills, knowledge and characteristics students need to succeed after they have completed school, and how do we better support all learners in their development? (1000 word-limit)

Success includes both outward success and well-being in its broadest sense, as detailed in the next answer.

Success means different things for different students. Context is important. The world is increasingly complex, fast-paced, and uncertain, and many students suffer from stress, anxiety and depression. Against this backdrop, students should be equipped to see problems as challenges and to respond skillfully and creatively.

Our focus is on the skills, knowledge and characteristics required to develop and maintain well-being, rather than on traditional content like math and history, which are important but outside the scope of our expertise.

1. COGNITIVE:

To succeed, students need to be able to learn, adapt, and be effective. These skills include the ability:

- (1) to pay attention and maintain focus;*
- (2) to have strong executive function (working memory, reasoning, problem solving, planning, and execution), including working effectively with interruptions and looking at situations objectively and creatively, without being captive to pre-conceived ideas; and*
- (3) to be meta-aware of thoughts, so as to be able to objectively evaluate them and decide what to do.*

2. EMOTIONAL:

Emotional skills to succeed include the ability:

- (1) to cultivate emotional health, including a positive attitude, self-esteem, and self-awareness;*
- (2) to be resilient, able to cope with peer pressure and stress;*
- (3) to self-regulate, recognizing strong emotions when they arise, and knowing how to deal with them without repressing or acting out, thereby:
 - (i) avoiding taking harmful action or escalating a conflict; and*
 - (ii) maintaining emotional balance, clear thinking and a positive outlook.**

3. SOCIAL:

Social skills to succeed include the ability to:

- (1) empathize with others, and to do so with compassion so as to avoid being overwhelmed;*
- (2) work and live in partnership and harmony with others;*
- (3) communicate effectively, including the ability to listen well and skillfully resolve conflicts; and*
- (4) develop a spirit of service towards others, live ethically and responsibly, and be a role model for integrity, kindness, and compassion.*

SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING (SEL) AND MINDFULNESS

Social and emotional learning (SEL) and mindfulness are needed to develop these skills. It's not enough to say what SEL is and how students should act. Students must actually be trained in how to improve their social and emotional intelligence.

Habits of mind are strong and do not change easily. We should not just be telling kids to pay attention, we should be teaching them how. We should not just be telling them what it's like to be socially and emotionally intelligent, we should be training their minds.

Mindfulness is the "how" of SEL. It's an evidence-based methodology to develop social and emotional intelligence, as well as cognitive skills, a strong sense of self, and a spirit of service.

We know about neuroplasticity and that mindfulness can be effective to cultivate cognitive, social and emotional skills, to actually re-wire students' brains.

Schools are the ideal places to teach and nurture the development of these skills by providing quality, evidence-based SEL and mindfulness programs.

We believe SEL and mindfulness should be taught as a systemic K-12 approach to education. Given the science of neuroplasticity, we know that the brain is constantly changing, hence, developmentally appropriate lessons and practices throughout the school experience could add immeasurably to life effectiveness.

Mindfulness can act as a prophylactic against the difficulties faced by students in middle and high school. To be most effective, students should start training well in advance of middle school, ideally beginning in kindergarten.

MINDFULNESS EVIDENCE BASE

School mindfulness programs have a strong and growing evidence base. As noted by Stanford University psychologist Kelly McGonigal in her book “The Willpower Instinct”, “Neuroscientists have discovered that when you ask the brain to meditate, it gets better not just at meditating, but at a wide range of self-control skills, including attention, focus, stress management, impulse control, and self-awareness. People who meditate regularly aren’t just better at these things. Over time, their brains become finely tuned willpower machines. Regular meditators have more gray matter in the prefrontal cortex, as well as regions of the brain that support self-awareness.”

A 2012 literature review found studies with K-12 students demonstrate “improvements in working memory, attention, academic skills, social skills, emotional regulation and self-esteem, as well as self-reported improvements in mood and decreases in anxiety, stress and fatigue.” (Integrating Mindfulness Training into K-12 Education: Fostering the Resilience of Teachers and Students, Meiklejohn et al., Mindfulness, Springer 2012, pages 1-2, see <http://mindfulnesseveryday.com/pdf/WhitePaperMindfulnessInEducation.pdf>)

A 2012 randomized control trial study by UBC of the MindUP K-8 program, which combines neuroscience, SEL, mindfulness and positive psychology, and is now in use by over 3,500 public school teachers in BC, found a 24% gain in positive social behaviors, a gain of 15% in math achievement, a gain of 20% in social-emotional competencies and skills, and a reduction of 24% in aggressive behaviors, after just 15 lessons. See <http://discovermindfulness.ca/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/Schonert-Reichl-et-al.-MindUp-RCT-2012-Under-Review.pdf> (under review for publication).

A 2012 mixed method research study by University of Toronto (Smith-Carrier, Gallinaro, in review) of The Mindfulness Ambassador Council was conducted to gain an understanding of the benefits and limitations of mindfulness training among Ontario secondary school students. Research findings demonstrated that post participation in the 12 week program students can better cope with challenges, better manage stress and anxiety, communicate more effectively with others and are applying mindful skill sets to their daily lives.

A June 19, 2013 issue of Science Daily reported that mindfulness, “a mental training that develops sustained attention that can change the ways people think, act and feel — could reduce symptoms of stress and depression and promote wellbeing among school children, according to a new study published online by the British Journal of Psychiatry.” See <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2013/06/130619195139.htm>.

We are not suggesting that mindfulness is the only approach to developing these skills and habits, but it is one that has merit.

As noted psychology professor Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi stated, “control of consciousness determines the quality of life.”

What does student well-being mean to you, and what is the role of the school in supporting it? (1000 word-limit)

To Discover Mindfulness, student well-being includes the whole person:

1. Physical well-being:

- a. physical health and safety;*
- b. material comfort and the financial ability to sustain it;*

2. Cognitive well-being:

- a. strong executive function, including:*
 - (i) ability to think clearly, creatively and objectively;*
 - (ii) working effectively with interruptions;*
- b. ability to pay attention and maintain focus;*

3. Mental well-being:

- a. sense of satisfaction with life, and sense of purpose;*

- b. positive psychological functioning, including self-awareness and self-acceptance;*
- c. positive attitude, being interested and enthusiastic about life;*
- d. mental resilience;*

4. Emotional well-being:

- a. happiness - high positive affect and low negative affect;*
- b. emotional resilience;*

5. Social well-being:

- a. positive relationships;*
- b. positive social interaction, including well developed honesty, integrity, kindness, compassion and caring;*
- c. sense of connectedness (as opposed to isolation);*

6. Societal well-being:

- a. a society that is safe, peaceful, sustainable, and supportive of individual well-being.*

ROLE OF SCHOOL IN SUPPORTING WELL-BEING

The school can directly support all of the above categories of well-being except societal well-being, and can have a powerful indirect impact on societal well-being by graduating students who embody well-being in this broad sense.

As mentioned in Question 1, having effective Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) and mindfulness programs would provide students with the skills, knowledge and characteristics they need to develop and maintain well-being.

In addition, it is important to create a positive, supportive learning environment, one that creates a sense of community and connectedness, and that feels safe.

*It is important to provide time to support a broad range of mental development. Professor of Psychiatry Dr. Daniel J. Segal, author of *The Whole-Brain Child*, has identified seven essential mental activities necessary for optimum mental health in daily life. By engaging in each one every day, the brain can coordinate and balance its activities, which strengthens its internal connections and connections with other people. Schools should do their best to include all those that are appropriate for each age level. The seven essential daily mental activities are:*

- 1. Focus Time - closely focusing on tasks in a goal-oriented way, taking on challenges that make deep connections in the brain.*
- 2. Play Time - allowing students to be spontaneous or creative, playfully enjoying novel experiences, which helps make new connections in the brain.*
- 3. Connecting Time - connecting with other people, ideally in person, or taking time to appreciate our connection to the natural world around us, richly activating the brain's relational circuitry.*
- 4. Physical Time - moving our bodies, aerobically if possible, which strengthens the brain in many ways.*
- 5. Time In - quietly reflecting internally, focusing on sensations, images, feelings and thoughts, helping to better integrate the brain.*
- 6. Down Time - being non-focused, without any specific goal, letting our mind wander or simply relax, which helps our brain recharge.*
- 7. Sleep Time - giving the brain the rest it needs to consolidate learning and recover from the experiences of the day.*

From your perspective, what further opportunities exist to close gaps and increase equity to support all children and students in reaching their full potential? (1000 word-limit)

The most important thing to do is ensure that our public schools and their school teams are given the resources to teach the skills, knowledge and characteristics set out in Question 1, so that all students can develop and maintain well-being to the greatest extent possible.

It is also important to have programs for students who have particular needs and disadvantages, and those who suffer from mental illness.

Not all kids arrive at school ready to learn. Some haven't been provided the basic necessities of physical well-being, such as a proper breakfast. School breakfast programs would be helpful here.

Many children and students have mental difficulties or are dealing with difficult situations at home. It would also be helpful for teachers to be trained to be sensitive to their students' state of being, and to be able to respond effectively and supportively. It is also important to improve student resilience, in order to guard against them falling into serious problems with stress, anxiety and

depression.

MINDFULNESS AND SEL

As noted in our other answers, Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) and mindfulness training are effective in increasing mental and emotional resilience.

SEL and mindfulness have tremendous potential to reduce bullying. They help potential bullies to be happier and to see and take care of strong emotions in a healthy way, so they don't have to lash out. If they do lash out, they are far more aware of the harm they've done, providing a strong incentive not to repeat their mistake.

SEL and mindfulness help create an atmosphere of peace, kindness, compassion and inclusivity, one in which bullying is far less likely.

SEL and mindfulness also help to close gaps in learning, by helping those who have difficulty paying attention to do so, and helping those with low self-esteem to understand and accept themselves, and develop a positive attitude.

How does the education system need to evolve as a result of changes to child care and the implementation of full-day kindergarten? (1000 word-limit)

Full day kindergarten is an excellent opportunity to teach and develop attentional and social and emotional skills to develop healthy mind habits that will translate to future success.

One skill that has been shown to be important and able to be taught early in life is self-control. Recent research has shown that self-control is a strong measure for positive outcomes for school, health and adult quality of life. (See Moffitt et al, 2011, <http://www.pnas.org/content/108/7/2693>).

Self-control entails developing practiced skills that allow for meta-awareness of one's thoughts and emotions in the context of any situation. This awareness is a core component of mindfulness training, and this research suggests that mindfulness should be included in kindergarten.

What more can we all do to keep students engaged, foster their curiosity and creativity, and help them develop a love of life-long learning? (1000 word-limit)

In the view of Discover Mindfulness, being engaged, curious, creative and having a love of life-long learning are subsets of the skill, knowledge and characteristics noted in the first question. However, we will use this opportunity to expand on these particular attributes and what more can be done to cultivate them.

Mindfulness and SEL teach people how to become more self-aware and more able to cultivate the qualities they want in themselves, so they can be the person they want to be. Mindfulness and SEL cultivate the positive attitudes that will help keep students engaged, curious, and wanting to learn throughout their lives.

Mindfulness has been shown to have a positive impact on creativity. As noted by George Hofmann in "How Mindfulness Can Help Your Creativity" (<http://psychcentral.com/blog/archives/2013/10/05/how-mindfulness-can-help-your-creativity/>), researchers at Leiden University found a positive impact of mindfulness on creativity. Another study found mindfulness reduces cognitive rigidity and found mindfulness practitioners were more likely to quickly figure out new approaches to solving problems. They found "that mindfulness meditation reduces cognitive rigidity" as it reduces people being "blinded" by experience. Mindfulness was found to reduce the tendency to overlook novel and adaptive ways of responding. The study found mindfulness practitioners "were less rigid in their thinking, and they ruminated less."

In addition to teaching mindfulness and SEL, schools can develop programs that teach students life and leadership skills, and promote service learning projects as a way to enhance compassionate action in the community.

How can we use technology more effectively in teaching and learning? (1000 word-limit)

Some mindfulness programs make excellent use of technology, such as the Center for Mindful Learning's Modern Mindfulness program now being developed in Vermont.

This program is delivered by an interactive online computer program that guides both teachers and students. There are two programs,

one for K-5 and one for 6-12. It is broken down into 5-minute lessons, and works as follows:

- (1) The teacher watches a training video, reads online materials, and passes a quiz to confirm their understanding;
- (2) Teacher introduces a short video to students using a smartboard or computer;
- (3) Teacher and students practice the mindfulness exercise the next day using a smartboard or computer;
- (4) The above steps are repeated for each chapter, at the teacher's desired pace. There are 10 chapters. After their completion, teachers should be able to teach mindfulness on their own without the program.

See <http://discovermindfulness.ca/programs-k-8/> for details.

In summary, what are the various opportunities for partnership that can enhance the student experience, and how can they benefit parents, educators and our partners too? (1000 word-limit)

TEACHERS AND PARENTS

In addition to helping students directly, Discover Mindfulness believes that the best approach to bringing mindfulness and SEL to schools is to bring them not only to students, but also to teachers and parents. When teachers and parents model these competencies, observational learning by the students takes place. As a result, students are able to learn and embody these skills and characteristics more fully, quickly and easily.

Teachers and their students benefit tremendously from mindfulness training. A 2012 literature review found mindfulness training “can increase teachers’ sense of well-being and teaching self-efficacy, as well as their ability to manage classroom behaviour and establish and maintain supportive relationships with students.” (Integrating Mindfulness Training into K-12 Education: Fostering the Resilience of Teachers and Students, Meiklejohn et al., Mindfulness, Springer 2012, pages 1-2, see <http://mindfulnesseveryday.com/pdf/WhitePaperMindfulnessInEducation.pdf>)

A more recent study suggests that training teachers in mindfulness not only reduces burnout but also improves their performance in the classroom. (See http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/can_mindfulness_make_us_better_teachers)

Teaching mindfulness to parents is also helpful. As noted by child psychiatrist M. Lee Freedman, “Recent findings in neuroscience research suggest that parenting our children mindfully provides them with a sense of security which fortifies their health and wellness, enhances their abilities to learn to their full potential in and out of school, potentiates their ability to regulate their emotions and attention and to make good decisions, fosters resilience in the face of any curve balls that life throws their way, and enables them to thrive and positively contribute in this fast-paced and uncertain world.” (see <http://mindfulnesseveryday.com/parenting.html>)

DISCOVER MINDFULNESS

Discover Mindfulness asks to be included in the Ministry’s ongoing discussions on its new Education Strategy, as that strategy moves forward.

Discover Mindfulness is a non-profit umbrella group whose mission is to be a hub for information and a catalyst for the integration of mindfulness into education as a means to overall well-being for students, educators, families and society.

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- practical experience in implementing mindfulness programs in schools

Discover Mindfulness has just launched its Mapping Project so it can track where in Ontario schools mindfulness is being taught.

Discover Mindfulness thanks the Ministry for the opportunity to participate in this consultation and would be pleased to offer the Ministry any assistance it can to help support the Ministry's efforts in promoting student success and well-being in its schools.

Additional Comments

(No response)

Thank you for taking the time to help us build the next phase of Ontario's Education Strategy.