



Advancing Scalability and Sustainability in School Mental Health

School Mental Health Ontario
Global Leadership Exchange, School Mental Health Match
Toronto, 2026

Outline

1. Challenges for Scalability and Sustainability
2. Brief Background to School Mental Health Ontario
3. Implementation Enablers for Scalability and Sustainability
4. Table Dialogue - Research, Policy, and Practice Implications



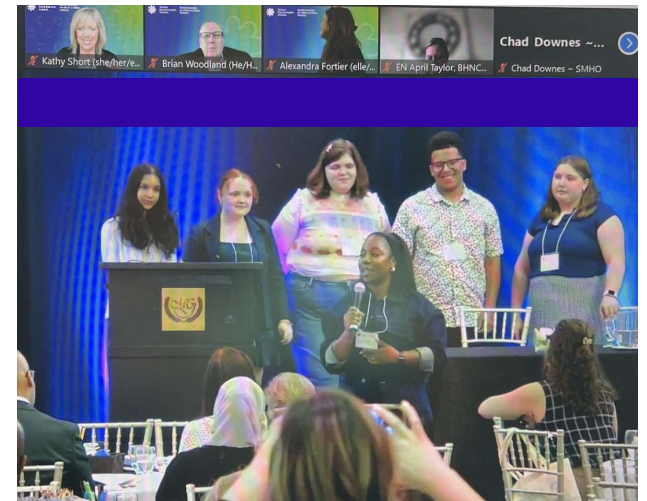
The End in Mind...

- **Scalability** = the ability of a mental health intervention or program of support shown to be efficacious on a small scale, and/or under controlled conditions, to be expanded under real world conditions to reach a greater proportion of the eligible population, while retaining effectiveness.

[Milat et al., 2013](#)

- **Sustainability** = the capacity to maintain or improve the quality and availability of services, supports, and/or conditions over the long term.

[Center for Mental Health Implementation Support](#)



Challenges for Scalability and Sustainability

What gets in the way?



Challenges for Scalability and Sustainability

What gets in the way?



Context Challenges

- Inconsistent funding support
- Frequent changes in leadership
- Workforce shortages
- Competing demands

Program Challenges

- Costs of materials, training, etc.
- Complexity / fit of the program
- Responsiveness of the program
- Insufficient evidence

Implementation Challenges

- Scale of system
- Lack of engagement / buy in
- Insufficient training / ongoing support





We work together with Ontario school districts to support student mental health



-  @smhosmso
-  @SMHO_SMSO
-  School Mental Health Ontario
-  company/smhosmso

smho-smso.ca/#connectwithus

Stay informed! Subscribe to receive the latest information, research and resources to your inbox.



School
Mental Health
Ontario

Santé mentale
en milieu scolaire
Ontario

From Program to Province

CHAT Program

Choosing Healthy Actions and Thoughts



Practice Book
2006-2007

Name: _____

Act

To change a tough situation...

- Use the problem solving STEPS
 - Make time for fun, stay busy, or lend a hand
 - Keep your cool with deep muscle relaxation and quick calming
- Put your best foot forward

Adapt

If you can't change a situation...

- Identify and change BLUE and negative thoughts
 - Get support and help from a friend
- Find the silver lining
 - Distract yourself – don't replay bad thoughts

Also, when using ACT or ADAPT skills,

- Keep trying until you feel better!

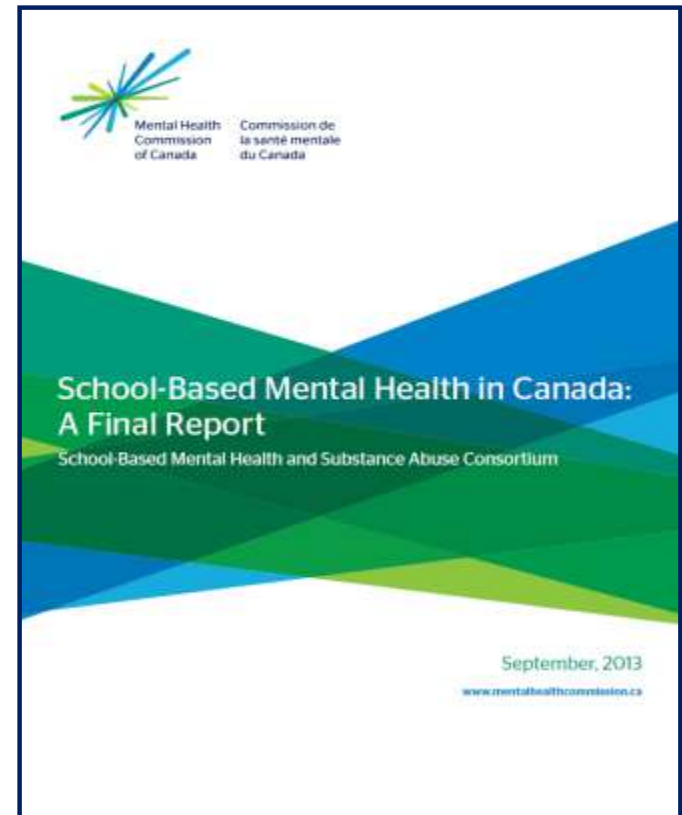
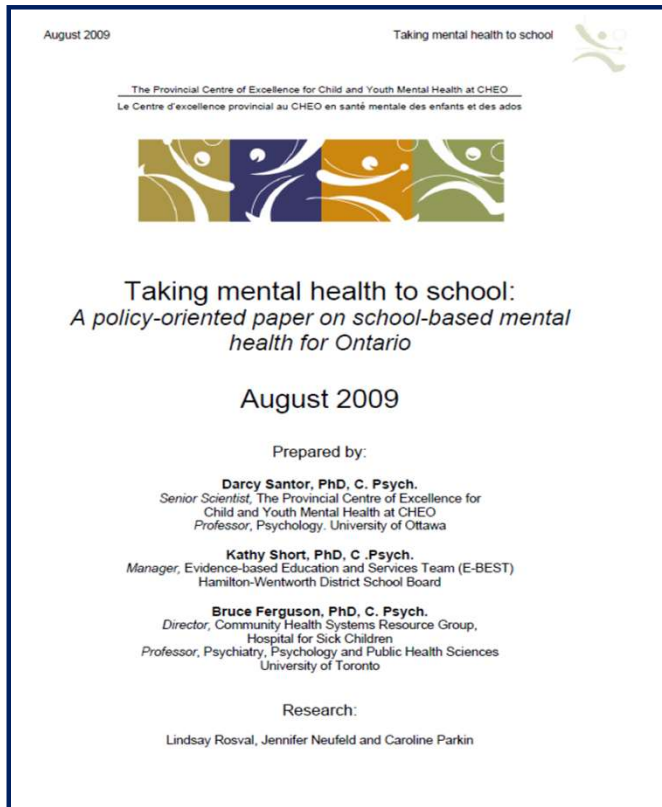
- 2 -

Table of Contents

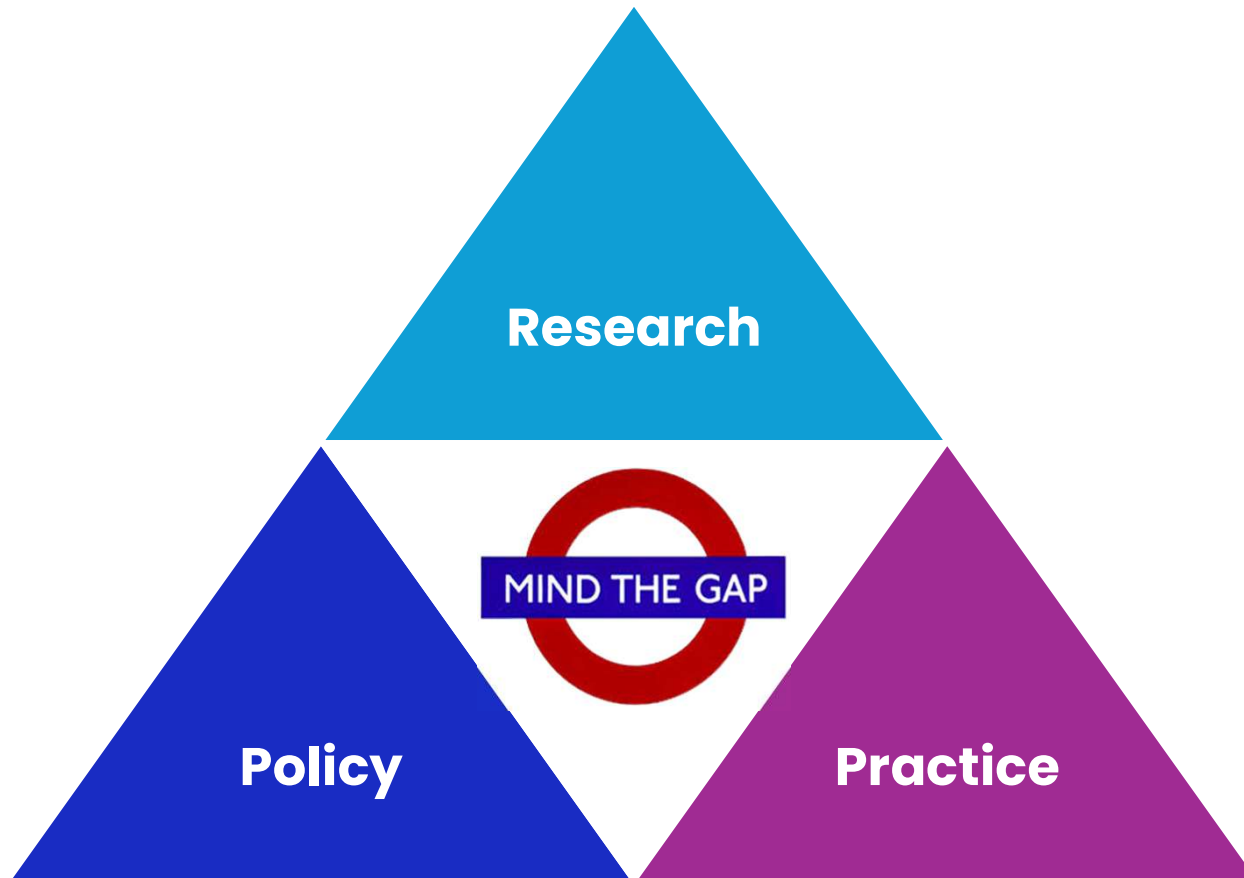
Act & Adapt chart	page 2
Reward chart	page 4
Session A: Introductions	page 5
Session 1.1: Solving problems (part 1)	page 13
Session 1.2: Solving problems (part 2)	page 20
Session 2.1: Make time for fun (part 1)	page 26
Session 2.2: Make time for fun (part 2)	page 31
Session 3: Keep your cool	page 42
Session 4.1: Put your best foot forward (part 1)	page 51
Session 4.2: Put your best foot forward (part 2)	page 57
Session B: Review of ACT skills	page 64
Session 5.1: Identify your negative thoughts (part 1)	page 71
Session 5.2: Identify your negative thoughts (part 2)	page 80
Session 6: Change your negative thoughts	page 87
Session 7.1: More ways to adapt (part 1)	page 94
Session 7.2: More ways to adapt (part 2)	page 98
Session C: Review ACT and ADAPT skills	page 107
Session 8.1: Keep trying until you feel better (part 1)	page 115
Session 8.2: Keep trying until you feel better (part 2)	page 120
Session 9.1: Act? Adapt? or both? (part 1)	page 128
Session 9.2: Act? Adapt? or both? (part 2)	page 133
Session 10: Review & goodbye!	page 143



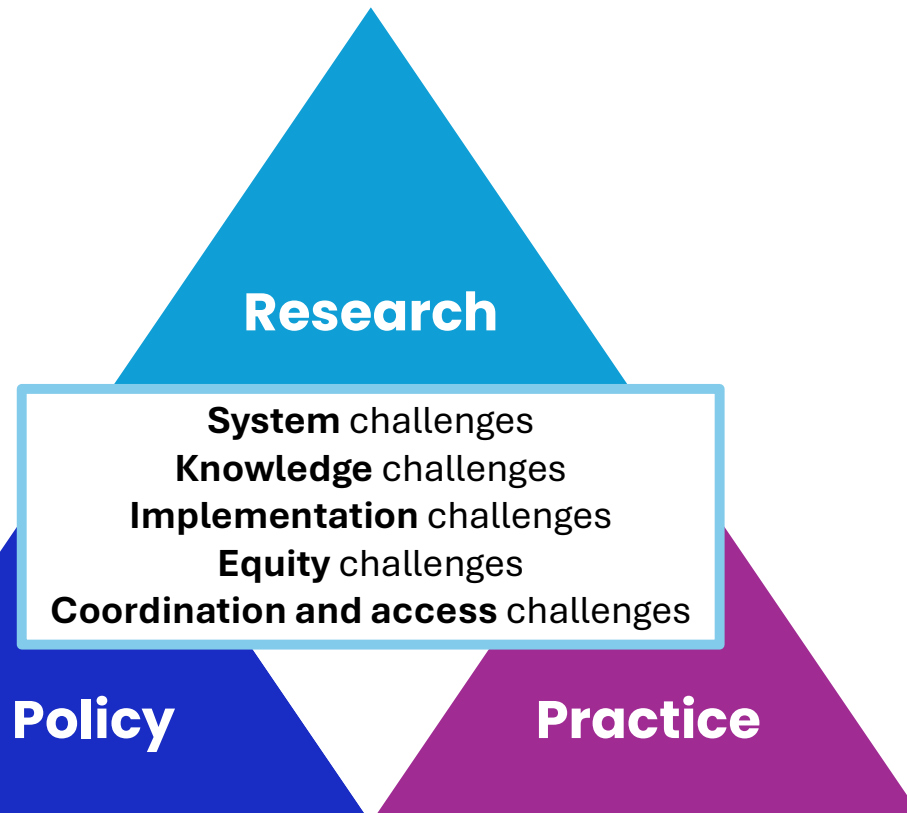
We Did Our Homework



What We Learned (circa 2010)



What We Learned



“We are set up for student education. We aren’t set up to deliver mental health services.”

“Educators want to help, but they don’t feel equipped and are worried they will make a mistake.”

“Programs are expensive add-ons that are hard to implement and sustain.”

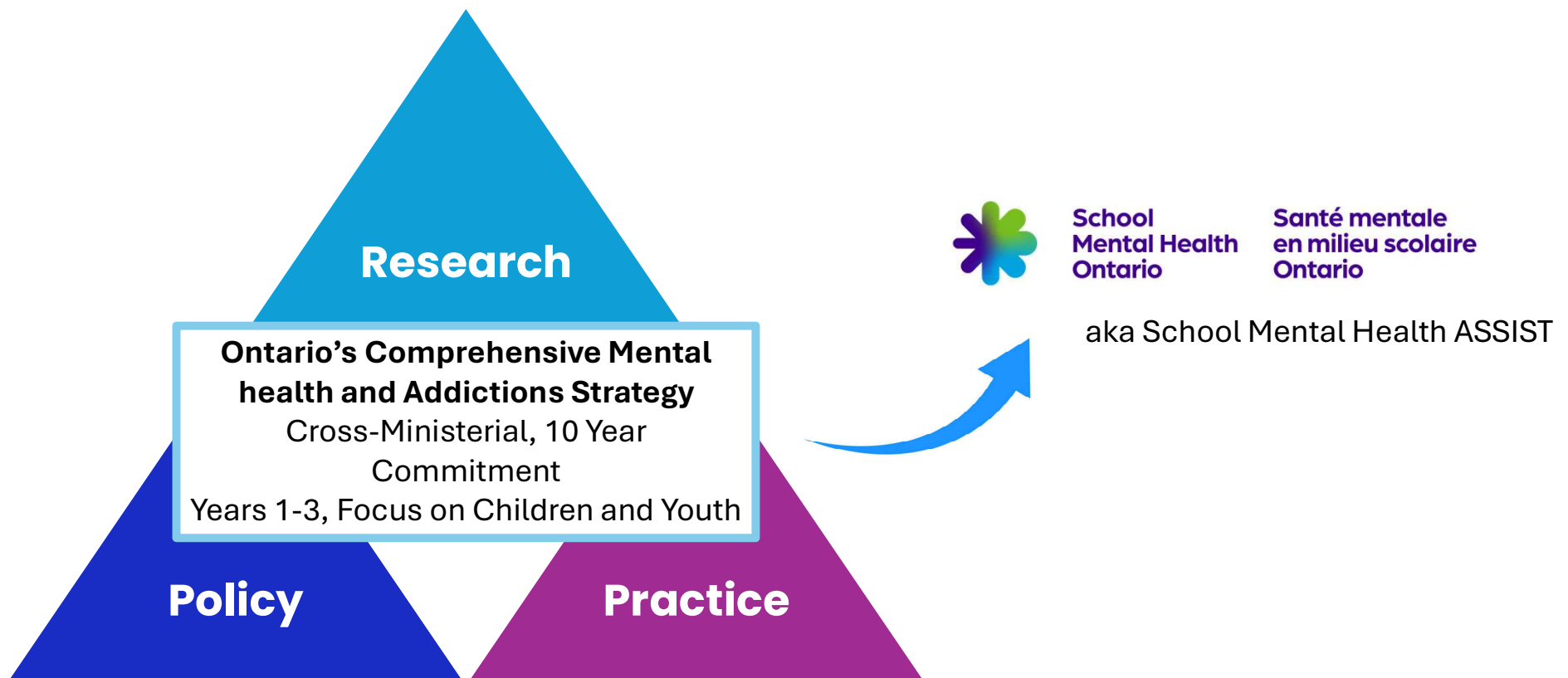
“Programs don’t meet the specific needs of our diverse populations in Canada.”

“We can’t access mental health services in our community because of waitlists, geography, unique student needs, etc.”

“We need help to do this right.”



Integrating Research, Policy, and Practice



Beneficial role of Intermediary Technical Assistance Centres (e.g., [Covell, 2023](#); [Brooks et al., 2025](#); [Katz & Wandersman, 2016](#); [Lyon 2017](#); [National Academic Press, 2019](#))

Role of Intermediary Organizations

Intermediaries act as “translators” for EIPPs and provide technical assistance to organizations and providers that deliver services for citizens, while informing policy and systems.

- Relationship and communication with state / provincial / national agencies
- Relationship and communication with school districts (or schools)
- Infrastructure to support training, resource development, implementation, and progress monitoring
- Tailored training and technical assistance
- Offering multiple EBPs to optimize outcomes
- Facilitation of peer support through communities of practice

[Bullock & Lavis, 2019; Bullock et al., 2024; Covell, 2023](#)



Start Small, and Build Iteratively

Year one (2011-2012)  15 school districts

Year two (2012-2013) + 15 school districts

Year three (2013-2014) + 42 school districts

***Bonus* to scale up over 3 years:**

- iterative feedback loops
- learning lab approach
- commitment and ambassadorship

All 72 school districts



Broad Theory of Change

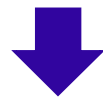
Robust focus on **Infrastructure X Interventions X Implementation**



SMH delivered with quality, consistency, scalability and sustainability



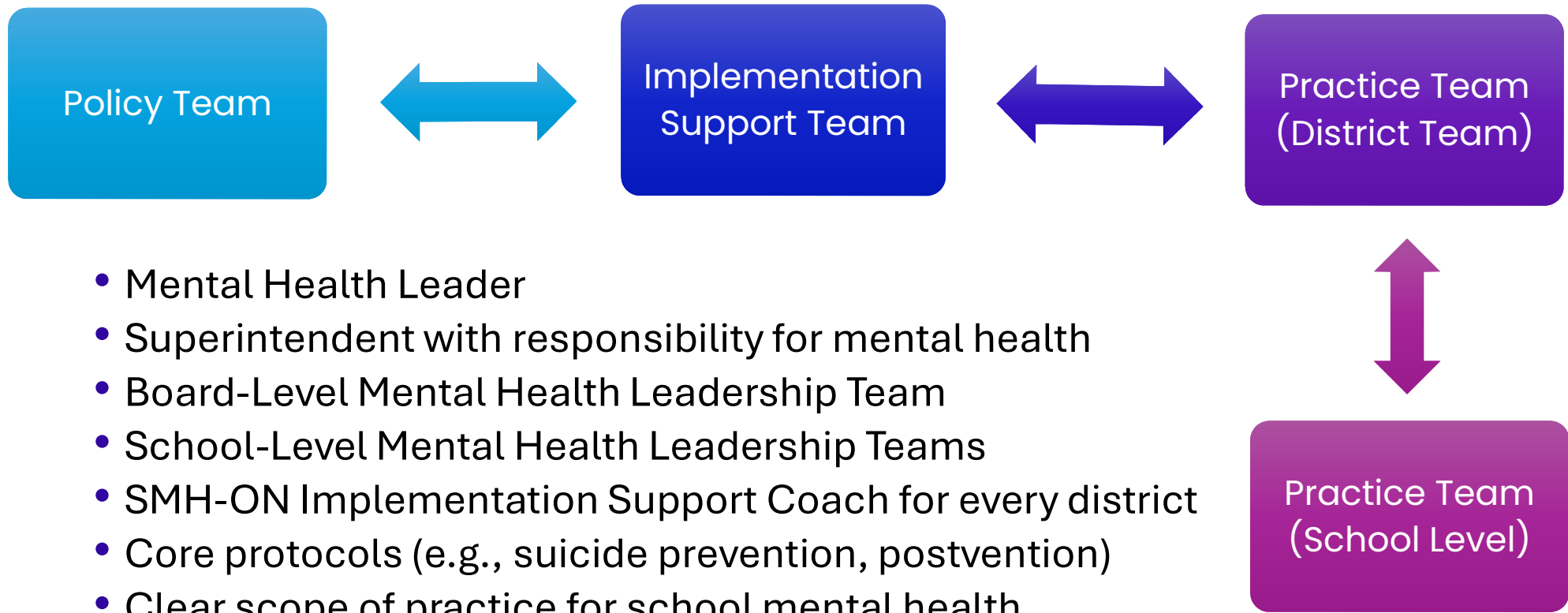
Increased access to high-quality mental health services across Ontario



Better student mental health and well-being outcomes



Foundational Infrastructure in Ontario



Sample Interventions Across the MTSS

Curated programming and co-created resources

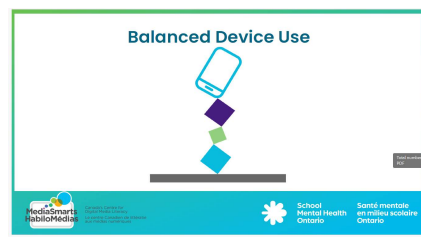
Educators



Leaders



Support Staff

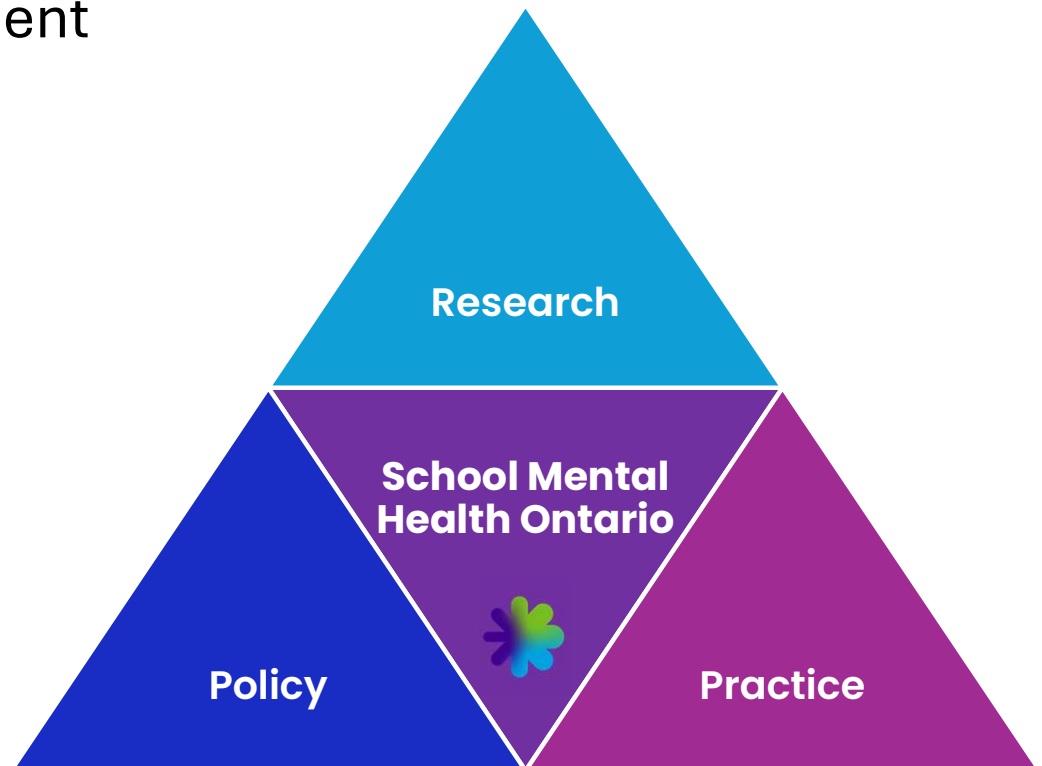


SMH Professionals



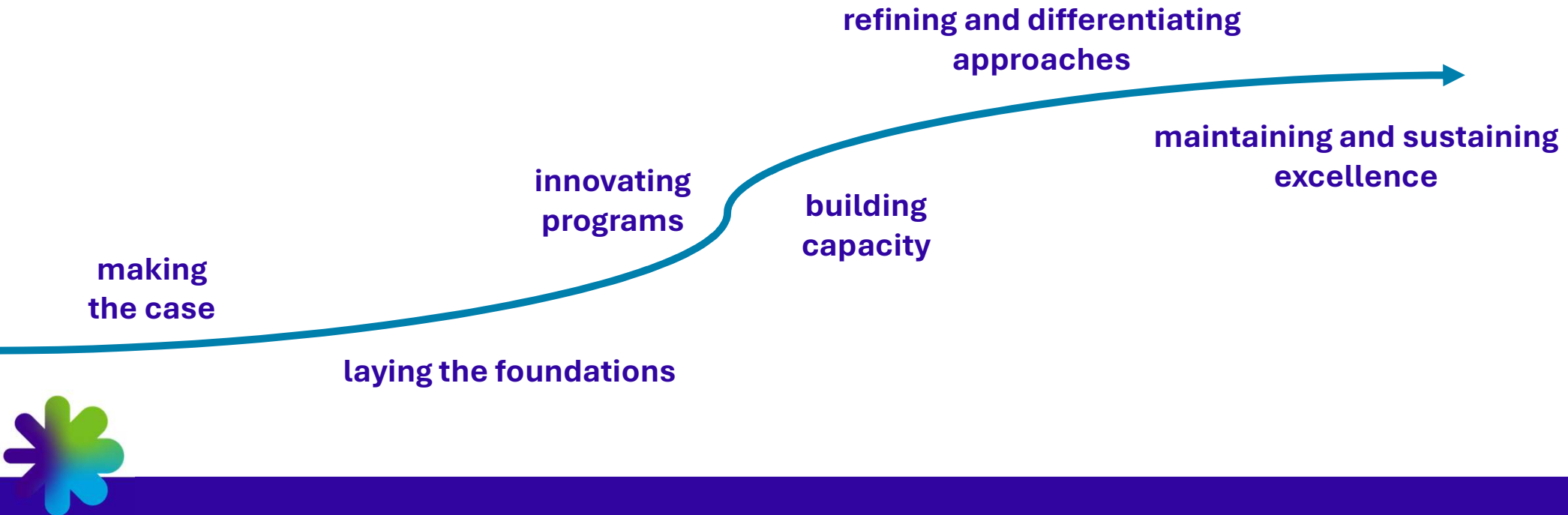
Ongoing Implementation Support

- Strategy and action plan development
- Provincial guidance
- Multi-tiered programming
- Co-created resources
- Professional learning and training
- Implementation coaching
- Communities of practice
- Platforms for student leadership
- Platforms for family engagement



15 Years At a Glance

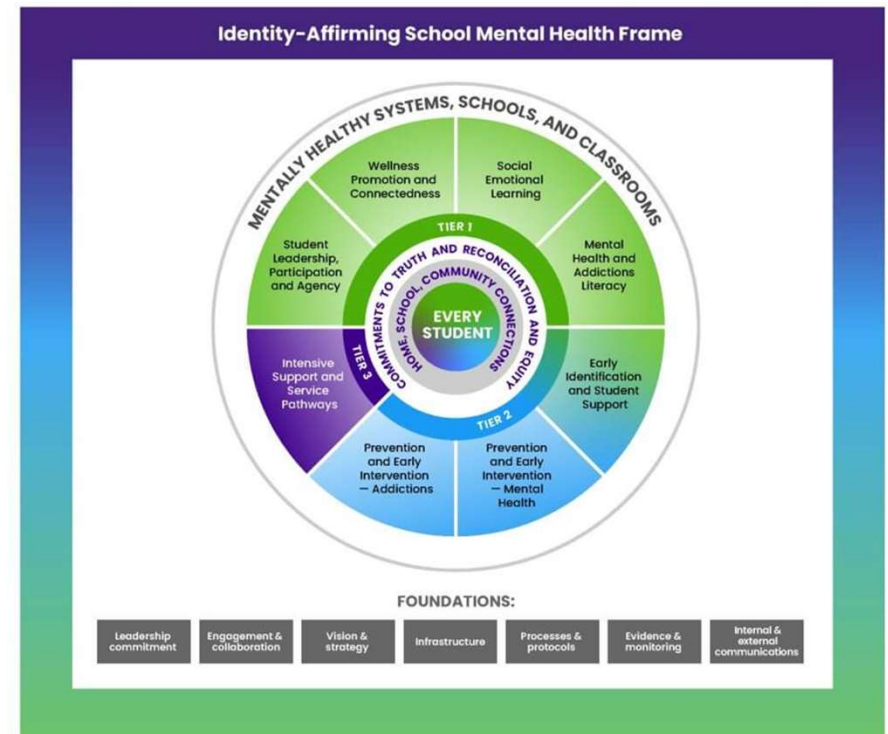
- SMH-ON has matured over the years
- From making the case, to laying foundations, to innovating programs, to building capacity, to refining and differentiating approaches, to maintaining and sustaining excellence



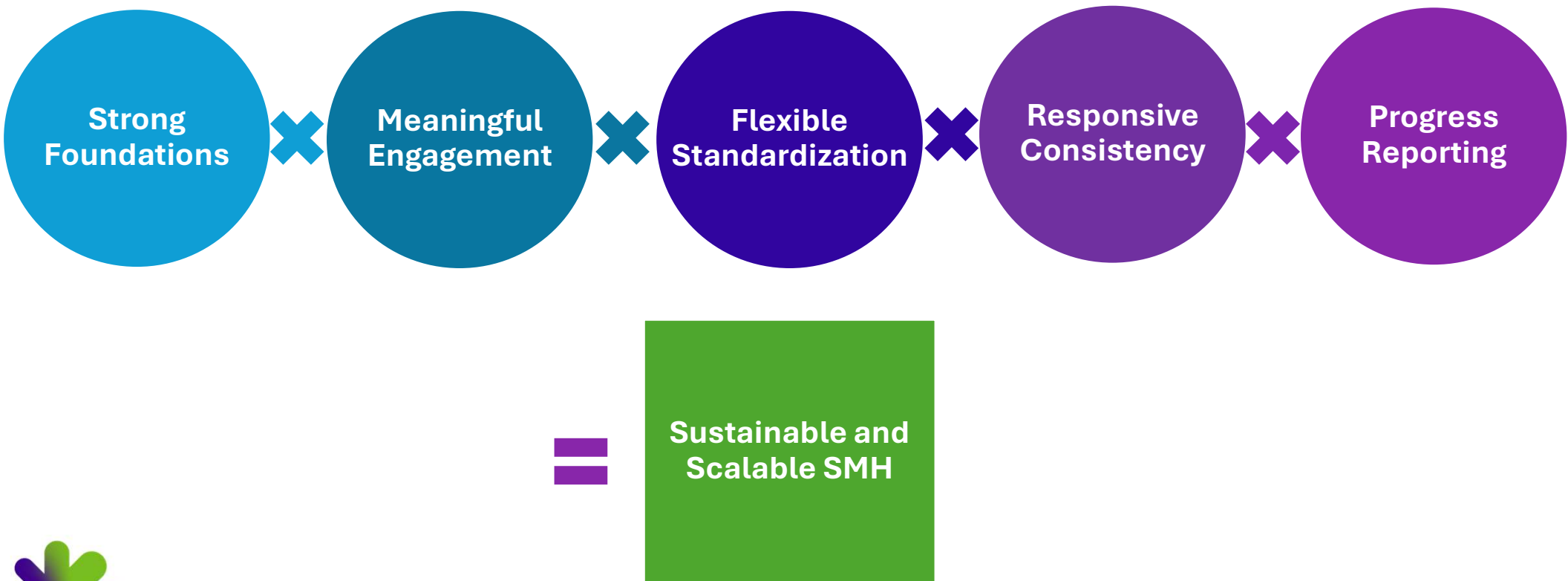
Today's School Mental Health Strategy

Multi-tiered system of support wraps around every student and family:

- mental health promotion
- early identification and support
- prevention and early intervention
- intensive support and service pathways



Essential Enablers for Scalable and Sustainable School Mental Health



Build the Foundations

- Several implementation frameworks cite the importance of core infrastructure for scalable and sustainable practice (e.g., [Damschroder et al., 2009](#); [Greif Green & Splett, 2026](#); [National Academies Press, 2019](#); [Weist, McQuillin & Kern, 2024](#))
- **Theory to Action in Ontario**
 - Sustained Ministry commitment
 - PPM 169 expectations
 - Provincial strategy helps to prevent “drift”
 - Permanent funded leadership roles in districts
 - **Foundations for Effective SMH**
 - Ongoing technical assistance through SMH-ON
 - Routine and regular communication channels and opportunities (e.g., provincial leadership meeting, regionals)

1. **Leadership commitment**
2. **Engagement and collaboration**
3. **Vision and strategy**
4. **Infrastructure**
5. **Processes and protocols**
6. **Evidence and monitoring**
7. **Internal and external communication**



Example – Foundations for Effective School Mental Health

FOUNDATIONS FOR SYSTEM LEADERS

Structures and Processes for Scalable and Sustainable Mental Health Promoting Practices in Schools and School Boards



"Coherence is a shared depth of understanding about the purpose and nature of the work in the minds and actions individually and especially collectively."
– Michael Fullan

Overview of Foundations

There are many evidence-informed initiatives, resources, services, and programs that can assist in promoting good mental health in schools. Selecting and introducing these approaches requires careful consideration, but this is only part of the necessary work involved in successfully supporting mental health in schools.

For resources, services, and programs to truly reach every student, and to yield positive outcomes over time, schools and school boards must have the necessary infrastructure, the **Foundation**, for scalable and sustainable mental health practice. This resource provides a summary of key Foundations that are common to boards and schools that have managed to introduce, scale and sustain mental health programming effectively. They are drawn from implementation science research, and a decade of SMH-ON implementation coaching practice in Ontario schools. The Foundations are relevant for system leaders, as directors of education and superintendents of education create the conditions at the board level that facilitate uptake and widespread use of high-yield mentally healthy practices. The same Foundations are equally pertinent for school leaders who establish the climate and setting upon which identity-affirming evidence-informed practices can thrive. School leaders and educators are uniquely positioned to inspire purpose, hope, belonging, and meaning, through teaching and learning and daily interactions with students.

1. Leadership commitment
2. Vision and strategy
3. Infrastructure
4. Protocols and processes
5. Evidence and monitoring
6. Engagement and collaboration
7. Internal and external communication

 School Mental Health Ontario

Santé mentale en milieu scolaire Ontario

PAGE 01
www.smho-smso.ca

MH LIT for System Leaders

▼ Introduction and welcome

Introduction

Welcome

▶ Module 1: System Leadership – What you do

▶ Module 2: Building your understanding; Five things

▶ Module 3: Building System Coherence

▶ Module 4: Exploring the system of care

▶ Module 5: From system to student desk



Introduction

Thank you for your interest in MH LIT in Action for System Leaders. This course is designed with flexibility in mind, allowing you to complete each module at your own pace and on your own schedule. We have also included interactive components to provide opportunities for engagement and dialogue with other system leaders.

Throughout the modules are references to the requirements outlined in [Policy/Program Memorandum 169 \(PPM 169\)](#) for school boards to provide culturally responsive, evidence-informed student mental health promotion, prevention and early intervention services and to work within the broader system of care.

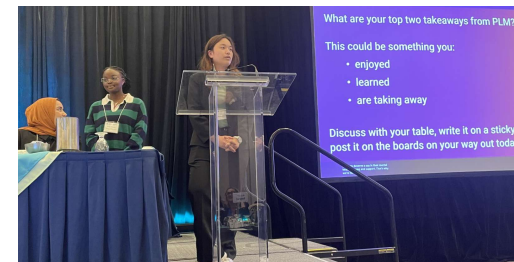
You will find references to PPM 169 throughout the modules identified in a blue text box.

 BUILD YOUR TOOLKIT

Your Notes

Bring People Along

- The greatest barrier to complex change is resistance. **Early** and ongoing **meaningful** engagement of interest holders, and role-specific capacity-building, helps to anchor uptake (e.g., [Bruns et al, 2025](#); [Endrejat, 2021](#); [Carucci, 2026](#); [Cheng et al., 2026](#); [Garbacz, Minch, & Weist, 2025](#); [Hazel, 2024](#); [NICE, 2007](#))
- **Theory to Action in Ontario**
 - **Centre relationships** (districts, professional organizations, cross-sector partners, etc.)
 - **Student and family engagement and leadership**
 - Co-create resources (meet identified needs, honour past practices, diverse perspectives)
 - Role-specific professional learning and training (not one-size fits all, task-shifting) **#ERLI**
 - Ongoing implementation support (not train and hope)
 - Feedback loops and iterativity
 - Create space for processing and dialogue
 - Routine consistent communication



Example – Newcomer Student Working Group

Hello, and welcome to Ontario!

One of the best things about being here is the incredible cultural diversity you'll experience. Each person you meet has a unique story, just like you, which adds richness to our community.

Take the time to learn about different cultures and share your own. You are part of what makes Ontario full of life!

—Mariana



smho-smso.ca

Together, we can support the mental health of every student.



School Mental Health Ontario

Santé mentale en milieu scolaire Ontario



Are you a newcomer student with a positive school experience to share?



We'd love to hear your story!



School Mental Health Ontario

Santé mentale en milieu scolaire Ontario

@thrivesmh



STUDENT STORYTELLING CAMPAIGN

What is a moment at school that made you feel included?



Dave: A moment that made me feel included at school was when I brought my Egyptian food to school. Although I did not know many people at this school, they were felt intrigued, and showed not love or kindness, but rather they showed curiosity. And that curiosity then developed into love and kindness. I did not feel like I was at home, but rather, what I did was I turned the area, which was referred to as my school, into my home. I couldn't have done this without love and kindness shown first, which I took advantage of and gave myself courage.

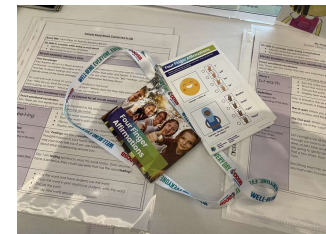


School Mental Health Ontario

Santé mentale en milieu scolaire Ontario

Facilitate Standardization with Flexibility and Support

- For many years, implementation focused on uptake of manualized programs with fidelity. Increasingly, transdiagnostic, modular, culturally-adapted and embedded “kernel” approaches have been introduced. A balance between standardization and flexibility supports evidence-informed, community relevant programming (e.g., [CAMH, 2011](#); [Cohen et al., 2025](#); [Fonaghy & Luyten, 2019](#); [Kendall & Frank, 2018](#); [Lee et al., 2023](#); [Naeem, 2023](#); [Weist, McQuillin & Kern, 2024](#)).
- **Theory to Action in Ontario**
 - Vertical collaboration cascade from province to district to school to classroom (and back!)
 - **Provincial guidance and strategy with local nuancing through implementation coaching**
 - Culturally and identity responsive adaptations
 - From manuals to embedded programming
 - Autonomy supportive messaging



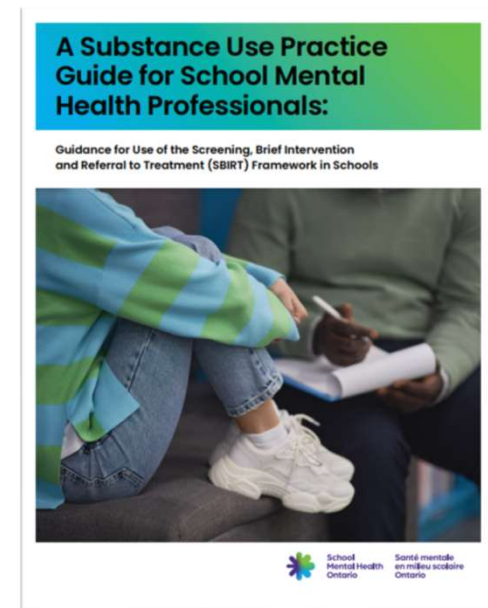
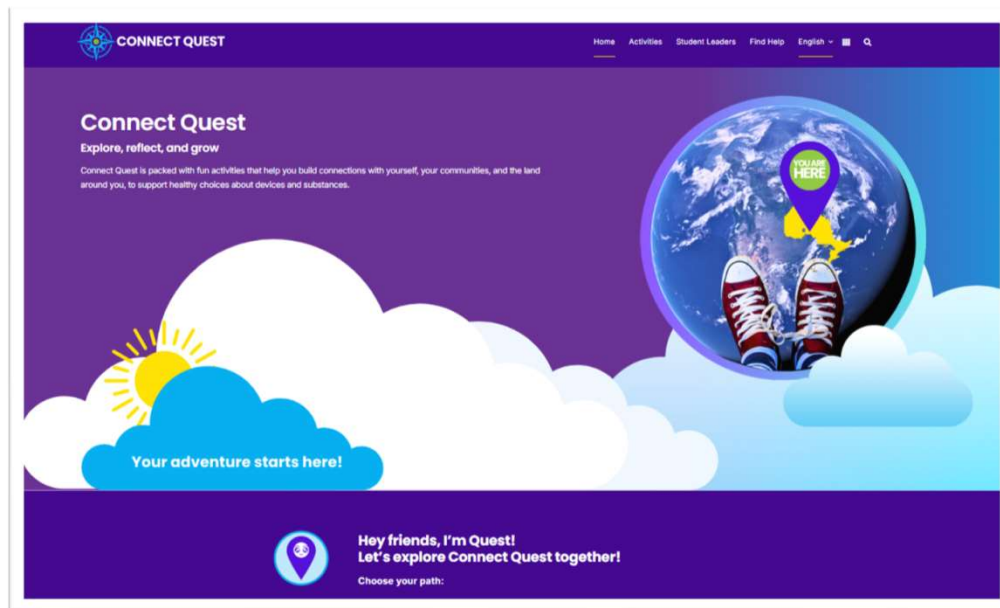
Keep the Focus AND Meet the Moment

- Transformation does not occur in a vacuum. World events, local tragedies, and political pressures all impact SMH practice. Implementation science provides guidance re: understanding and harnessing the internal and external context to advance the vision (e.g., [Bullock et al., 2024](#); [Damschroder et al., 2009](#); [Fixsen et al., 2009](#))
- **Theory to Action in Ontario**
 - Responsive without being distracted by urgent initiatives and priorities
 - **Engage with windows of opportunity, but weave these to the bigger picture**
 - Secondments from field and back to stay relevant
 - Feedback loops and coaching rounds to hear “what’s bubbling up”
 - Consecutive 3-year SMH Strategy that builds year over year
 - Consistent leadership over time



Example – PPM128 Addictions Focus

- Window of opportunity - 6 new projects, one year time frame
- Aligned to multi-tiered action plan, engaged with student voice, created complementary programming



Monitor and Communicate Progress

- Research has evolved from measuring efficacy to assessing uptake, scalability and sustainability of programming (aka real-world effectiveness). Research related to the impact of comprehensive, multi-tiered systems of care is also available. However, sustaining the “proof of concept” for a MTSS cross-sectoral approach is challenging, in light of the significant current mental health needs of students, and gaps in clinical service availability. A certain degree of social marketing is required (e.g., [Crooks et al., 2022](#); [Fleming, 2026](#); [Hoover et al., 2019](#); [Short et al., 2022](#))
- **Theory to Action in Ontario**
 - **Innovation and Scale Up Lab** –feasibility, enablers of scale-up and sustainability
 - Monitor theory of change proximal indicators
 - Making the case - data, evidence, and stories
 - Regular communication, not just quarterly reports
 - Community engagement, participatory research



Example – ISU Lab – Brief Coping Interventions

JOURNAL OF CLINICAL CHILD & ADOLESCENT PSYCHOLOGY
https://doi.org/10.1080/15374416.2025.2660290



OPEN ACCESS Click for updates

Initial Evaluation of a Brief, Transdiagnostic Intervention for Youth in School Mental Health Care

Nicole S. J. Dryburgh^{a,b,c,d}, John R. Weisz^a, Linda Duong^{a,b}, Ryan Miller^{a,b}, Kate Jamieson^{a,b}, Christine Rodriguez^{a,b}, Tracy Weaver^a, Katherine E. Ventura-Conerly^a, Olivia M. Fitzpatrick^a, Alexandra Fortier^a, Kathy H. Short^a, and Katholiki Georgiades^{a,b}

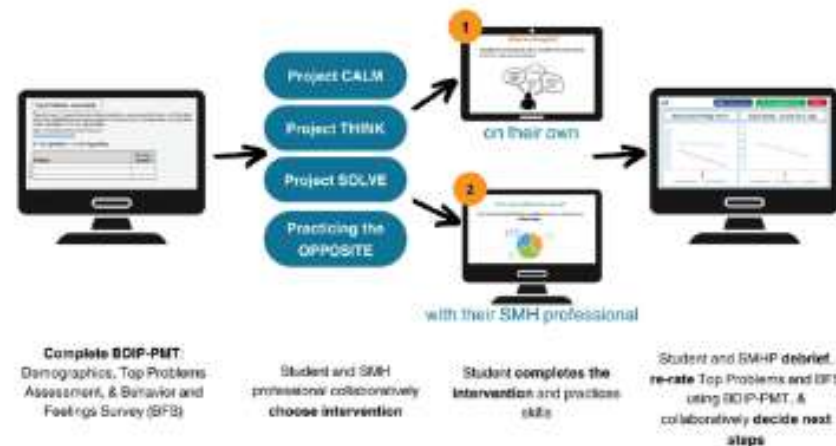


Figure 1. Visual depiction of the process of using the BCI-PMT in the school mental health setting.

Evaluation of Brief Coping Interventions (BCIs) For School-Aged Youth in Ontario Schools

Background

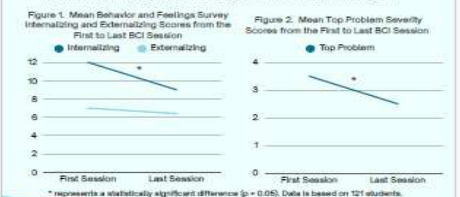
- Rising demand for youth mental health services indicates the need for **brief, accessible interventions** and continuous **measurement** to track progress.
- BCIs include 4 **Coping Kits** that introduce practices shown to work in addressing common mental health concerns and an Excel-based **Progress Monitoring Tool (BCI-PMT)** to track progress on identified problems.
 - Coping Kits can be **self-directed** or completed with the support of a **school mental health (SMH) professional**.
- Between 2021-2024, we evaluated **user satisfaction** and **changes** in youth **mental health concerns** from the BCIs.

Participants



Findings

- Common student problems were **anxiety** and **depression**.
- **Project CALM** was the most used Coping Kit, followed by **Project THINK**, **Project SOLVE**, and **Practicing the Opposite**.
- **SMH professionals and students** were **highly satisfied** with the Coping Kits and BCI-PMT.
- There was an **improvement** in student-reported **internalizing symptoms** (e.g., depression, anxiety) and **top problem severity** from the first to last BCI session (Figure 1 and 2), but no change in externalizing symptoms (e.g., behavioural challenges).



Conclusions

- Findings suggest **potential benefits** of the BCIs for students and SMH professionals in Ontario school mental health settings.

Strong Foundations ✕	Meaningful Engagement ✕	Flexible Standardization ✕	Responsive Consistency ✕	Progress Reporting ✕	Scalable and Sustainable SMH

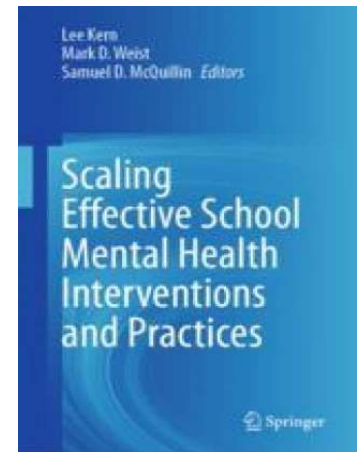


Adapted from the Lippitt-Knostr Model of Managing Complex Change

Enablers for Scalable and Sustainable School Mental Health

Apply at the level of:

- System (country, province/state, region, district)
- School
- Program



Strong Foundations	Meaningful Engagement	Flexible Standardization	Responsive Consistency	Progress Reporting	Scalable and Sustainable SMH
--------------------	-----------------------	--------------------------	------------------------	--------------------	------------------------------



Table Dialogue – Research, Policy, and Practice Implications

1. What examples of scale up or sustainability can you share from your jurisdiction?
2. What have been the strongest enablers?

Strong Foundations	Meaningful Engagement	Flexible Standardization	Responsive Consistency	Progress Reporting	Scalable and Sustainable SMH
--------------------	-----------------------	--------------------------	------------------------	--------------------	------------------------------



Enablers for Scalable and Sustainable School Mental Health

Apply at the level of:

- System (country, province/state, region, district)
- School
- Program



**Strong
Foundations**

**Meaningful
Engagement**

**Flexible
Standardization**

**Responsive
Consistency**

**Progress
Reporting**

**Scalable and
Sustainable SMH**





Advancing Scalability and Sustainability in School Mental Health

Contact us:

Joyce Erogun - jerogun@smho-smso.ca

Kathy Short - kshort@smho-smso.ca

Susan Sweet - ssweet@smho-smso.ca

Theresa Kennedy - tkennedy@smho-smso.ca