

# **Community Consultation: Mental Health Promotion in West Mississauga, Post-Pandemic**

July 2023

## **Introduction**

Erin Mills Connects (EMC) is a not-for-profit community collaborative of area schools, agencies, settlement workers, municipal government representatives, The Dam, Peel Public Health, caregivers (including parents/guardians) and youth. It was founded in January 2016 at a community needs analysis that identified that children and youth required assistance in Erin Mills, especially to promote and safeguard well-being and mental health. In 2019, an in-person community consultation added that young people and caregivers needed help to develop resilience, reduce stress and anxiety, and mitigate negative psychological impacts of social media.

Recognizing that the pandemic had significant impacts on the mental health and well-being of the population, EMC's Steering Committee committed to a study that could detect the differing and intersecting mental health needs of our expanded catchment of west Mississauga. From this information, the Steering Committee (which includes all major stakeholder groups), would be better able to plan to address well-being needs of children, youth, and families after the pandemic.

## The Research

With financial assistance from the Region of Peel Change Fund, EMC contracted Ei Amplified, a local, one-of-a-kind technology enterprise that uses Artificial Intelligence to reveal sentiments and emotions from written or spoken answers to open-ended questions. Research shows that marginalized respondents' answers to open-ended questions provide more authentic, nuanced information than to closed questions (Campbell, 2021).

EMC with Ei Amplified held an in-person consultation with community stakeholders on Mar. 1 at Churchill Meadows Community Centre & Mattamy Sports Park. Ei Amplified's Co-founder Aman Sahota facilitated with the assistance of EMC Collaborative Coordinator Catharine Chamberlain and two high school volunteers.

In addition to asking Community Consultation participants (three high school students, a settlement worker, three residents, a Peel Public Health nurse, a school trustee, a city councillor, a representative from a social enterprise, two parents, an elementary teacher, an administrator of a youth program, and a guidance counsellor) to answer open-ended questions in small groups, they were asked to complete a questionnaire online. This in-person consultation served to refine and clarify the online survey for distribution through EMC's networks (settlement agencies, The Dam youth members, Agenda Gap youth pilot, Steering Committee members and their local networks, EMC's subscription list, targeted LinkedIn account holders, and registrants to EMC's webinar workshops on Self-Regulation.) Final surveys were anonymous, and 104 responses were collected by only Ei Amplified via Google Forms from Mar. 16 to June 5. Agenda Gap youth participants and Youth Steering Committee members were given a \$5 coffee card to encourage youth participation. No other rewards were given for survey completion. The length of time to get a

minimum of 100 responses may be attributed to the stigma still surrounding mental health discussions.

## Survey Questions

An ad-hoc evaluation subcommittee of EMC suggested questions to test EMC's objectives which are: Empowering youth to advocate for mental-health resources; giving tools to caregivers to assist young people in their mental health journeys; helping children and youth develop skills to achieve or maintain mental well-being, and creating a community to promote mental health. Questions were also reviewed by InnovEd at the University of Toronto to ensure there was no bias.

In 2022, EMC launched a post-secondary pathways compendium, *Beyond High School: A guide to discovering your pathway to success*, and accompanying workbooks. In 2023, it released the same resources in French, Arabic and Urdu. Urdu and Arabic were prioritized by area settlement workers. The project was funded by Canada's Healthy Communities Initiative, with Urdu translation and community workshops sponsored by the Region of Peel's Change fund for 2023. A question to determine access to post-secondary resources--post-secondary plans being key to long-term mental well-being (Brown, 2020)--was included in the survey.

In addition to determining respondents' positionality (i.e., their neighbourhood (such as Erin Mills, Meadowvale or Churchill Meadows), gender identification (he/him, she/her, they/them, other), cultural identification, and role (student, caregiver, educator, other)) on the final survey, EMC asked about the following.

## **Access to Post-Secondary Resources**

During the pandemic, barriers to opportunities were exacerbated for racialized youth. EMC created *Beyond High School* to be a compendium of resources and steps to get into post-secondary programs. A separate research study on the use of *Beyond High School* indicates that these resources (in four languages) engender a sense of confidence in many families about Ontario education, and provide a way for parents/guardians to thoughtfully connect with their children about the future. The question of access to post-secondary resources helps EMC understand where youth are let down by a shortage of resources and how EMC can improve prospects for youth, leading to better long-term mental health.

## **Perception of Youth Well-being and Mental Health**

The intent of this question is to determine the gaps in mental health resources and services for youth from the point of view of various stakeholders. Different perspectives may provide insight and offer EMC an opportunity to consider alternative/additional solutions.

## **Access to Mental Health Resources for Caregivers**

From conversations with youth, educators, psychotherapists and parents/guardians, EMC was well aware that caregivers—important influencers of young people’s well-being—need to be supported as well. This question helps EMC understand where it can change conditions upstream to reduce burdens on caregivers and provide helpful information and connections.

## **Connection To Community**

EMC is a community collaborative whose stakeholders are west Mississauga residents, service providers and students (including those who live elsewhere, but are enrolled in regional specialized programs in elementary, middle, and secondary schools as well as University of Toronto Mississauga). EMC's ability to understand its neighbourhoods (EMC's services are now used in more than just Erin Mills) and their differing needs can help it tailor programs and outreach. Community is also an asset in mental health as a place of belonging. The collaborative's ability to connect people in west Mississauga and help develop deeper attachments will help improve well-being.

# Results

## **Access to Post-Secondary Resources**

For this topic, analyses show conflicting sentiments and emotions. Qualitative data indicate that guidance counselling is seen both negatively and positively. In addition, answers about access to post-secondary resources show frustration and conversely, satisfaction.

Individual respondents noted being pleased with the resources they received (e.g., support from The Dam youth program, free post-secondary online resources of EMC's *Beyond High School*, and assistance of specific guidance counsellors) but found too many other resources hard to access.

Furthermore, many respondents saw guidance counselling as mental health counselling. People for Education surveyed principals for its 2022-23 Annual Ontario School Survey about the place schools have in helping reverse the mental health crises of children and youth. Principals' top request of the Ontario Education Minister was to: "Focus on funding human resources, especially support staff for mental health and well-being." With too few mental health specialists available to schools, guidance counsellors fill the role.

Students also showed fear in their answers to this question, perhaps revealing their anxiety about getting into post-secondary programs.

## **Perception of Youth Well-being and Mental Health**

Youth well-being and mental health are topics of frustration for most respondents. They are disappointed in schools, lack of resources, and the system's inability to respond adequately to mental health needs. For all

population segments except two, fear was also evident in respondents' answers.

## **Access to Mental Health Resources for Caregivers**

Access to mental health resources for caregivers also arose feelings of frustration in many survey respondents. Ability to get help was the biggest complaint. However, respondents did acknowledge that when supports were available, they were appreciated. Some resources that were noted were therapy sessions, parenting sessions, and mental-health coaching workshops.

Several population segments also revealed fear, notably students and educators, but not parents/guardians. The difference between caregiver groups—parents/guardians and educators—may reflect that educators also carry the professional concern of helping children and youth.

## **Connection To Community**

Respondents were overwhelmingly positive about connections to the community. They noted the work of not-for-profits and having access to their programs. Many mentioned COVID's interruption of community programs and gatherings, and now, lack of time to engage in community events.

## **Other Themes**

Analyses uncovered other themes that warrant future investigation.

### Other cities show more positivity

Based on the analysis within the consultation, it was seen that participants from Mississauga neighbourhoods experienced more negative emotions compared to those outside Mississauga (sample size 16). Those in Mississauga include participants from Meadowvale (25 responses), Erin Mills (19 responses), and Cooksville (8 responses). Those from outside of Mississauga came from areas such as Toronto, Hamilton, and Oakville. Some respondents chose not to give their location.

### She/Her experience more negativity

It was also seen that those who identified as she/her experienced more negativity than those who identified as he/him in the four main topic areas. EMC knows that women comprise 70% of its subscribers to news, events and learning events. This may be a reflection of the caregiving role that many women have. Statistics Canada reports that females (15 and older) are significantly more likely to be caregivers of children and care-dependent adults, and that, “44% [of unpaid caregivers] felt worried or anxious during the past 12 months” (2023).

### What does fear indicate?

Fear is detected in answers from Meadowvale (regarding access to post-secondary resources), Erin Mills (regarding youth mental health and well-being), and Cooksville (regarding resources for caregivers and connection to community). On various topics, different cultural groups also reveal fear. Further discussion is needed to consider what causes fear in certain populations and not others.



## **Recommendations**

The community consultation provided insights into further areas of development.

### **Access to Post-Secondary Resources**

Mentorship programs, making The Dam more accessible through partnerships with school boards, and providing further resources to complement guidance counselling could improve knowledge of post-secondary pathways, improving youths' long-term prospects of well-being.

Developing supplemental modules such as *Beyond High School* for Computer Science, sports, health care, policy & justice and more could provide deeper insights into different pathways related to each field. Additional languages of the original compendium of post-secondary pathways in Ontario and added interactivity may engage more families to use *Beyond High School* resources when making future decisions. Continuing promotion of these resources will also encourage their use.

For some, guidance counselling is synonymous with mental health support. Providing more assistance to youth, inside and outside schools, can help reduce needs for interventions by overwhelmed counsellors. Also, The Dam is already seen as a safe space and can be an asset to more schools.

## **Perception of Youth Well-being and Mental Health**

References to mental health were most negative when respondents were questioned about well-being resources for students.

EMC is helping pilot Agenda Gap, a youth policy advocacy program developed by Wellstream: The Canadian Centre for Innovation in Child and Youth Mental Health and Substance Use housed at the University of British Columbia. Agenda Gap is a research-driven program that helps youth understand how policies impact mental health and equips them to contribute to policy change through more than 20 weeks of workshops and discussion. It would be in the community's interest for EMC to continue to support this youth-led advocacy to help change the culture within schools and communities and push for greater resources to support the positive mental health of young people. The 2023 Ontario youth cohort's Calls-To-Action poster (which focuses on in-school mental health promotion) is posted on EMC's blog and webinar library site: [Kidswellness.ca](https://www.kidswellness.ca).

Other, high impact and high commitment EMC programs include Healthy Relationships Plus (HRP) programs that give teens skills to navigate changing relationships with their parents/guardians, friends and teachers. The program is evidence-based from Western University's Centre for School Mental Health and in use throughout Ontario. Post pandemic, it has been employed by public health units in southwestern Ontario for delivery to schools by public health nurses.

EMC introduced HRP to Peel Region in 2018. Participating schools, especially John Fraser SS, have been running it as a leadership program. EMC-sponsored HRP groups have been delivered online, in-person, during weekends, after school and at summer school to 350 youth and adult facilitators, providing lasting skills to youth at a crucial time. The program

consists of between 12 and 16 modules, depending on the program version used (e.g., newcomer youth programs are longer to accommodate language and cultural differences). A minimum of 20 hours of facilitation is needed. With greater uptake by other schools and health institutions in Ontario, it may be easier to find facilitators in Peel for more school-based HRP groups.

Parents/guardians and educators, in particular, experienced a lot of frustration regarding youth mental health and well-being, according to survey results. The recent proposed program of The Dam/EMC for Community Attachment for Feeling Safer in Schools (CAFSS) supplies a solution to reduce educators' stress and parent/guardian worries. The CAFSS proposal includes bringing community leaders to schools to help mentor students.

EMC's further promotion of mental health and well-being resources, for instance the new 9-8-8 mental health crisis and suicide prevention line, will help direct community members to existing resources.

## **Access to Mental Health Resources for Caregivers**

Survey analyses revealed frustration about caregivers' access to mental health resources. Creating a mental-health pathway of prescribed programs/workshops or asynchronized modules can help parents/guardians and other caregivers develop a deeper understanding of well-being.

To date, EMC has offered parenting and well-being programs in-person and online. It has found that offering a short series ( e.g., two webinars or workshops) provides enduring connections to the organization and lasting learning. In April and May, for instance, EMC offered two 90-minute webinars to give parents/guardians, educators, and others strategies about Self-Regulation. The workshops were led by THE MEHRIT Centre, founded by Dr.

Stuart Shanker, author of *Self-Reg.* Since 2020, EMC has delivered 22 caregiver programs to increase participants' understanding of mental health, and 10 programs to help educators and other professionals increase their capacity regarding well-being.

Investigating the existence of similar moduled programs as Agenda Gap or HRP for caregivers would be useful.

For instance, South Asian youth in Peel recommended programs for their guardians/parents in a 2017 study to reduce the stress of intergenerational and cultural conflicts, as well as increase willingness to ask for mental health help. Researchers pointed to the example of “Strengthening of Intergenerational/Intercultural Ties in Immigrant Chinese American Families” (SITICAF) studied by Yu-Wen Ying in 1999 (Islam, 2017).

In addition, EMC should continue to offer unique workshops and short series programs that offer caregivers mental health guidance.

In the analyses, educators revealed fear about access to resources. EMC can offer workshops for educators and others, with school board support. For instance, a second series of Self-Regulation may be welcome.

Finally, *Beyond High School's* Section 4 about mental health and well-being can be posted as a separate resource on EMC websites.

## **Connection To Community**

Community is a bright light. When asked about community, the majority of respondents felt connected. This connection to the community could be leveraged to expand events and safe spaces for caregivers to have peer support groups about well-being and mental health.

EMC and The Dam are uniquely placed to serve the community, being centrally located in Mississauga for a number of years. The Dam was also mentioned positively in the survey for supporting youth well-being and providing access to post-secondary information such as the *Beyond High School* resources developed by EMC.

Expansions of not-for-profits focused on mental wellness such as The DAM and EMC may be a longer-term solution.

Continuing to offer sessions, events and workshops will help to facilitate and encourage increased connections between individuals and groups in the community.

## **Discussion**

From late 2022-2023 when travel, in-person contact and other routines returned to pre-pandemic levels, many noticed that children, youth and adults were altered. This transformation encouraged EMC to check in with its community.

It appears that EMC's events and programs still have merit. Child and youth programs are evidence-based. Workshops for adults are delivered by those

highly accredited in their fields. The common complaint is there aren't enough of them (people and programs) to keep up with the need.

EMC is a collaborative committed to building community connections, pooling community assets, and promoting good mental health. It doesn't provide treatment. However, it does have influence, and can help empower community members to make changes that will help alleviate pressures on systems and people.

"While it stands to reason that we want the most highly educated and skilled teachers in our classrooms that is possible, we also know that each and every classroom and school has a wealth of "untapped resources" (Raible, 2008)," note Emma Chen and Debbie Pushor in their 2023 paper about engaging family members in schools. This idea can go beyond literacy to encompass mental health education. Community members can be an asset to busy schools and a comfort to many anxious children, as is suggested in EMC's recommendation to assist schools.

"By operating "upstream," mental health promotion targets the social determinants of mental health, or the everyday circumstances and social and structural forces that shape opportunities for health and wellbeing," writes Dr. Emily Jenkins, the founder of Agenda Gap. "As such, mental health promotion holds the potential to impact mental health across socioecological domains..." (Jenkins, 2023).

It is this place in the mental health and well-being environment that EMC and its many community partners hope to make a difference in the lives of children, youth and families.

## **Conclusion**

Community collaborative EMC surveyed 104 youth, caregivers, educators and others to determine how it can be of assistance to community members in west Mississauga to improve or maintain mental health of youth, educators and caregivers. Survey analyses uncovered many dichotomies within respondents' long-form answers using unique AI technology that leverages large language models. Mental health services and guidance counselling were revealed as both frustrating and positive, which can be attributed to respondents' appreciation of good, but scarce resources. Community connections were viewed positively.

Recommendations mainly focus on using community and organizations' assets to provide upstream support to school systems to build mental health awareness, skills and knowledge.

Further research is needed into differing sentiments and emotions revealed by different segments of the population, e.g., cultural and gender identified groups.

## **Acknowledgements**

Contributing their experience and time to develop survey questions, the format of EMC's community consultation, to review findings and provide feedback on the report are:

Lynn l'Anson, Region of Peel Public Health; Catharine Chamberlain, EMC; Ken Dryfhout, The Dam; Haris Khan, Peel Multicultural Council; Robert Martellacci, MindShare Learning; Miguel Martinez, MTClife; Mary Nanavati, Flourishco.;

Loretta Neebar, Community Member; Namita Parmar, John Fraser SS; Carol Reist, The Dam, and Aman Sahota, Ei Amplified (now named Factors Education Inc.). Thank you to all.

## References

Brown, R., Gallagher–Mackay, K., & Parekh, G. (2020). Redefining risk: Human rights and elementary school factors predicting post–secondary access. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 28.

<https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.28.4200>

Campbell, R.D., Dennis, M.K., Lopez K., Matthew, R. and Choi Y. Joon (2021). [Qualitative Research in Communities of Color: Challenges, Strategies, and Lessons](#). *Journal of the Society for Social Work and Research* 2021 12:1, 177–200. <https://doi.org/10.1086/713408>

Chen, E. and Pushor, D. (2023). “This Is My School Too!”: Working with Newcomer Parents to Create a Familycentric School Landscape. *Read Teach*, 76: 610–617. <https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.2185>

Isla, F., Multani, A., Hynie, M., et al. (2017). Mental Health of South Asian youth in Peel Region, Toronto, Canada: a qualitative study of determinants, coping strategies and service access. *BMJ Open* 2017;7:e018265. doi:10.1136/bmjopen-2017-018265

Jenkins, E., Daly, Z., McAuliffe, C., McGuinness, L., Richardson, C., Hill, T.G., Goodyear, T., Lind, C., Barbic, S., Rivers, R. and Haines–Saah, R. (2023). Advancing socioecological mental health promotion intervention: A mixed



methods exploration of Phase 1 Agenda Gap findings. *Front. Public Health* 11:1066440. doi: 10.3389/fpubh.2023.1066440

People for Education (n.d.). Principals sound the alarm about students' mental health. Retrieved July 26, 2023 from <https://peopleforeducation.ca/report/principals-sound-the-alarm-about-students-mental-health/>

Raible, J. (2008, March 18). Lessons in humility: Teaching as a struggle and a service. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New York, NY.

Statistics Canada (2023, January 5). More than half of women in Canada are caregivers. Retrieved July 23, from <https://www.statcan.gc.ca/oi/en/plus/2649-more-half-women-canada-are-caregivers>

Ying, Y.-W. (1999). Strengthening intergenerational/intercultural ties in migrant families: A new intervention for parents. *J. Community Psychol.*, 27: 89-96. [https://doi.org/10.1002/\(SICI\)1520-6629\(199901\)27:1<89::AID-JCOP6>3.0.CO;2-O](https://doi.org/10.1002/(SICI)1520-6629(199901)27:1<89::AID-JCOP6>3.0.CO;2-O)