

Agenda Gap Community Report

Yarmouth 2023-2024



Report prepared April 2025



Wellstream



Nova Scotia Health Authority and SHYFT Youth Services collaborated to implement and co-facilitate the Agenda Gap program at Yarmouth Consolidated Memorial High School in the fall of 2023. Interest in youth mental health had been heightened by a public engagement event on youth wellness, where numerous youth spoke about their experiences with mental health challenges. A total of 12 youth indicated interest and were invited to participate in the program, with weekly after-school meetings running from December 2023 until program completion in June 2024.

Agenda Gap is a facilitated relationship- and capacity-building program that centres the expertise of youth in identifying factors that strengthen mental health in their communities. It is action-oriented and supports youth and adult allies to collectively engage in influencing **policy**. This process promotes participants' own mental health while also improving conditions that influence the mental health of their peers, families, communities, and society as a whole.

Over the course of 23 meetings totaling 45.5 hours of program delivery, participants learned about mental health promotion, engaged in rich discussion about their mental health experiences and how they connect to policy, explored ways to improve conditions for youth in their community, built supportive relationships, and shared plenty of laughter. As a group, the youth accomplished several milestones, including developing a community agreement and mission statement (see Appendix A), completing a School Health Grant application, and connecting with adult allies to refine a policy change strategy.

This resource was provided to the school leadership. Subsequently, school staff sought out program youth for their expertise and input on future planning.

The “Know Your Resource” poster developed by the youth will inform the creation of a school-based Wellness Tree aiming to increase awareness and access to community mental health resources available to youth and their families. The second Yarmouth Agenda Gap (2025) cohort will also lead the development and promotion of a Youth Helping Tree in partnership with the Youth Wellbeing Network.



Personal Impacts

Participants reported that their involvement in Agenda Gap resulted in a variety of positive personal impacts. Overall, 75% of participants reported that their involvement had led them to develop relationships that support their well-being and over one-quarter reported that their mental health has improved directly as a result of their involvement.

Youth-Facilitator Relationships

Participants indicated youth-facilitator relationships were positive, which included a sense of mutual respect, trust, co-learning, and shared power. All participants reported that youth and staff learned a lot from working together, that they learned a lot from the staff, that it was clear that youth and staff respected and trusted each other, and that there was a good balance of power between youth and staff.



Measures of Mental Health and Well-Being

A number of established scales were used to measure indicators of mental health among youth participants, including self-efficacy, well-being, and peer and adult support. An overview and brief description of the included measures are provided in Appendix C. Consistent with results from other Agenda Gap sites, Yarmouth participant scores improved across each of the measures between program start and completion (Figure 1).

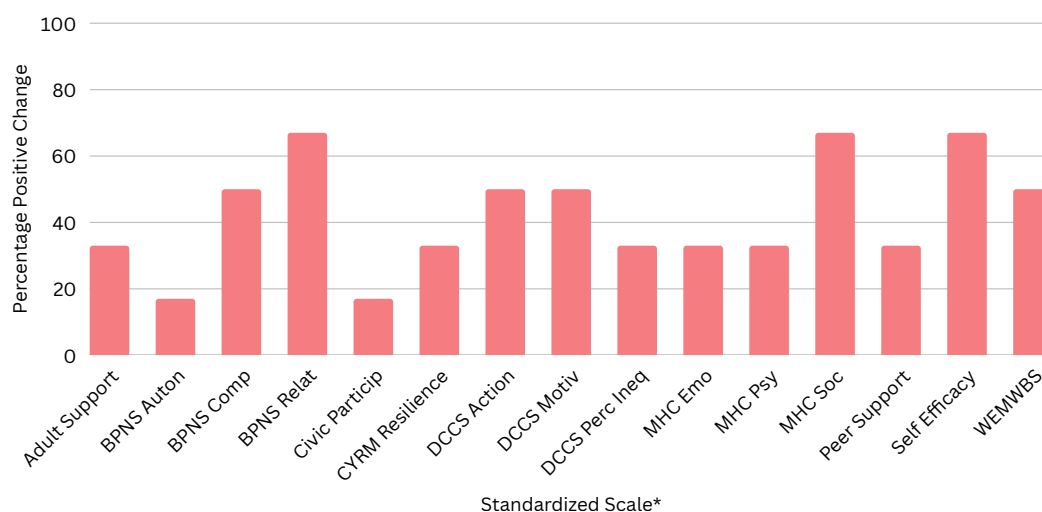


Figure 1. Percent positive change pre- vs. post- intervention on mental health and wellbeing scales.

*See Appendix B for a description of the measures used

Workshop Evaluations

Over the course of 23 workshops, a total of 82 evaluations were collected. Of the participants who provided these data, 90% rated the sessions as good/excellent, 91% indicated the meetings were productive, 89% felt they contributed meaningfully, and 84% agreed they learned something new.

Open-Ended Responses

Open-ended responses collected via the workshop evaluations and post-survey allowed youth to elaborate on aspects of their Agenda Gap experience that were particularly impactful. Participants shared a variety of insights, including how Agenda Gap helped them to feel valued. One participant reflected:

"It helps me continue to know that there will always be people who are like-minded like me, and it only takes one voice to be heard."

Additionally, participants endorsed positive impacts due to program participation, including:

"[Agenda Gap provided an] opportunity to create change and build relationships with others. For many, it was also probably a chance to realize they weren't alone in their struggles with the school".

Another participant noted:

"I know that students in Agenda Gap brought up more issues and problems to staff when they felt things could change, I heard people speak out more".

WORKSHOP EVALUATION RESULTS



PERCENTAGE OF PARTICIPANTS WHO RATED THE SESSION AS:

excellent/good
90%

Agreed they contributed a lot/a satisfying amount
89%

Agreed the meetings were productive
91%

Agreed they learned something new
84%

LIKES

- Group discussions.
- Feeling included, heard, and understood.
- Working together and everyone contributing equally.
- Interactive activities.
- Learning about human rights and the role of government.
- Talking about their successes as a group.

CHALLENGES

- Managing time and balancing conversation.
- Finding allies and resources in community to start change.

Based on 82 responses, Jan - June 2024

This report presents highlights from the survey data collected as part of an evaluation of the Agenda Gap program delivered to youth in Yarmouth, Nova Scotia in 2024/2024. Overall, the program was well-received and impactful to youth and their adult allies.

We would like to extend our sincere appreciation to the youth, staff at Yarmouth Consolidated Memorial High School and Nova Scotia Health, as well as the broader community that made this work possible!



Appendix A

'Know Your Resources Guide' – Page 1

KNOW YOUR RESOURCES:



ACCOMMODATION, MENTAL HEALTH, AND THE INCLUSION CRISIS AT YARMOUTH CONSOLIDATED MEMORIAL HIGH SCHOOL (YCMHS)

We are Agenda Gap, a student-led group of empowered youth who focus on bridging the gap between communal and individual issues by promoting education on mental health and accommodations, and by sharing our experiences involving our education system.

The policies for accommodation resources at YCMHS are not well understood and are not being properly or fairly applied.

Students, teachers, substitute teachers, teaching assistants, and administrators lack clarity on both how to access and provide access to resources. While the resources exist, the pathways to access them are not made readily available or executed in a consistently helpful fashion. This situation is made worse by the absence of a point person with a strong understanding of the existing policies, and by an overall lack of communication and transparency regarding accommodations.

It is vital that resource access is provided through accurate application of policy, and attends to the intersectional needs of all students across spectrums of gender, sexuality, race, and other attributes.

This document reflects the lived experiences of students at YCMHS, including those with accommodation needs. It presents calls to action to improve our school experience, and to meet the goals of the Inclusive Education Strategy.

HOW THIS PROBLEM IS AFFECTING STUDENTS

Unclear or poorly applied accommodation policies have serious repercussions on student well-being. Students often experience stigma as a result of how they are identified with regards to their accommodation needs, or when burdened with the need to re-explain their accommodation requirements to teachers and administrators. When students are unable to access resources, whether through a lack of information or being denied access, this leads to higher stress levels, worsened mental health, and less school and academic engagement. Failing to inform students and families about available resources, as well as ignoring or improperly applying these resources, contributes to inequity in the school environment.



STUDENT TESTIMONIES

Students often encounter issues when trying to gain access to resources such as access to the guidance room, the sensory room and other spaces, or use of assistive technology such as headphones, as students often receive conflicting information on the requirements for requesting access to resources, or have their requests or documented needs ignored. As articulated by students, relationships with teachers and administrators are difficult to navigate when trying to gain access to these resources.

The ongoing negative social and academic effects of the current state of accommodation resources demonstrates a clear need for new avenues of communication and access. Students have noted receiving troubling replies by adults in the school environment following their request for resources, such as "neurodivergence isn't a thing" or "you're smart, you shouldn't have a problem doing this". When providing instructors with documented need for assistive technology youth report simply being told they can't use them without further explanation.

Students describe bewilderment when providing adults with documentation for accommodation needs, such as medical descriptions and diagnoses, only to have them not properly documented or read by the adults they go to for help. In several cases students have noted having resources taken away in the middle of critical learning, such as assistive technology being removed mid-exam, or in situations of intense stress, such as being removed from the resource room mid-panic attack without an adult providing crisis alternatives.

Most troubling, students have expressed worry when they exhibit visible signs of sensory overload or the onset of a panic attack, that adults in school often do not know what to do and sometimes ignore the situation or intervene inappropriately (i.e., by touching or rough handling without consent). Disregard for the documented accommodation requirements of students diminishes student confidence, sense of belonging and safety in the classroom.

POINTING TOWARDS POLICY

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION POLICY:

This policy document clearly outlines Nova Scotia's commitment to high-quality and equitable education to support the well-being and achievement of every student. It includes several guiding principles, such as:

- 4.5 Every student deserves to belong (affirmed, validated, and nurtured), be safe, and feel welcomed in all aspects of their daily experience.
- 4.8 All partners are committed and empowered to work collectively to identify and eliminate barriers that interfere with students' well-being and achievement.
- 5.4 Every school will establish a Teaching Support Team that will meet frequently to address immediate issues facing teachers and quickly identify resources, people, and strategies that can help those teachers more effectively support their students.

JOINT ACCESSIBILITY PLAN

This document outlines Nova Scotia's plan to "provide accessible learning and teaching experiences for all, in every aspect of education". This plan, in alignment with the Nova Scotia's Inclusive Education Policy, includes a commitment to creating accessible education in Nova Scotia by 2030.

CALLS TO ACTION

In response to the ongoing difficulties students are experiencing in accessing accommodation resources, and to improve communication between students, teachers, administrators and families, we put forward the following calls to action:

- 1** Further training should be provided to all administrators and teachers on equitably granting access to resources. This material should be updated as necessary to reflect active policies and protocols, and those undertaking this education should officially confirm their completion and understanding of the material.
- 2** Resources, policies and protocols should be better introduced to all students and their families on an ongoing basis, and there should be opportunities for direct communication between students and teachers on available resources.
- 3** Teachers and administrators who enact resources should be introduced and connected to students early at the start of each new semester, so students know the appropriate person to go to with accommodation questions.
- 4** When adults in the school environment are faced with accommodation situations they are not equipped or comfortable addressing, they should find an alternative trusted adult to assist. Students should never be left mid-crisis.
- 5** Protocols for accessing resources such as the guidance room, should be public posted in an accessible space so that these guidelines can be better understood by students, teacher and administrators.
- 6** Policies and protocols around accommodation resources must be consistently applied by all school staff in all school spaces. Discriminately applying or altering the policies and protocols should only occur with prior approval and notification.
- 7** Non-punitive, non-physical approaches to dealing with mental health and behaviour issues should be used as a first approach. Physical intervention methods should only be used as a last resort and with given student consent, if appropriate for the situation.
- 8** Students, teachers and administrators in the school community should work collaboratively to de-stigmatize accommodation allowances, and respond to student needs in a fashion that fosters an inclusive and welcoming learning environment.

Appendix B

Overview of Survey Measures

1. Basic Psychology Need Satisfaction Scale (BPNS): A scale that helps us understand whether people feel their core emotional and psychological needs are being met. It looks at three key areas: feeling in control of your own choices (autonomy), feeling capable and effective in what you do (competence), and feeling connected to others (relatedness). The scale explores both the positive experiences of having these needs fulfilled and the challenges people face when these needs aren't being met.

2. Child & Youth Resiliency Measure (CYRM): A questionnaire that helps us understand what supports young people's ability to bounce back from challenges. Aimed at youth ages 12 to 23, it looks at the strengths and resources they have—not just within themselves, but also in their relationships, communities, and cultures. Whether it's family support, a sense of belonging, or cultural identity, the CYRM helps identify what's helping youth stay strong and thrive, even in tough situations.

3. Diemer Critical Consciousness Scale (DCCS): Helps us understand how aware people are of the social and political issues around them—and how motivated they are to take action. It looks at two main things: how people think about fairness and inequality in society, and whether they get involved in efforts to make things more equal. This includes speaking up, getting involved in the community, and working toward positive change.

4. Mental Health Continuum (MHC) – Short Form: A short survey that helps assess overall mental well-being. It looks at how we're doing emotionally, how we feel about ourselves and our lives, and how connected we are to others. This tool helps identify whether someone is flourishing (feeling great and doing well), languishing (feeling low or stuck), or somewhere in between. It's a helpful way to check in on mental health—not just by looking for problems, but by recognizing and building on the positives too.

5. Mental Health Promoting Knowledge: This measure explores understandings about the key factors that support positive mental health. It focuses on mental health literacy from a strengths-based perspective, highlighting knowledge that promotes well-being rather than just identifying illness.

6. General Self-Efficacy Scale: Measures how confident people feel in their ability to handle life's challenges and reach their goals. It focuses on how much someone believes in themselves when facing tough situations, and whether they feel capable of making things work. In short, it looks at how strong someone's belief is that they can overcome obstacles and succeed through their own efforts.

7. Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS) – Short Form : Assesses overall mental well-being. It looks at how we feel day-to-day—like our happiness, life satisfaction, and how well we're coping with stress. It also considers how we function emotionally and socially, including things like staying positive, having good relationships, and feeling able to handle life's ups and downs.

8. Youth & Community Survey: This measure gathers information about youth's experiences and perceptions about **adult support**, **civic participation** within their communities, and **peer support** to assess impact on youth development and well-being.



Wellstream

The Canadian Centre for Innovation in Child & Youth
Mental Health & Substance Use



Wellstream



Agenda Gap

Yarmouth 2024 Community Report

April 2025

