



Building a Culture of Student Wellness

DURHAM, NORTH CAROLINA



The WHOLE Schools Movement is an initiative led by the Durham Public Schools Foundation in partnership with Durham Public Schools, Duke University, and the Durham County Health Department.

A focus on holistic mental health transforms public school environments into trauma-informed, culturally-responsive support systems for everyone. The initiative is structured around four pillars: school-level grants, mental health ambassadors, model schools, and community education. With support from The BUILD Health Challenge®, the WHOLE Schools team trained educators as mental health leaders and seeded community-led wellness initiatives in schools across the district, which are creating a culture of belonging for Durham’s young people.

COMMUNITY IMPACT



Funded 44 schools (out of 57 in the district) to implement mental health and wellness initiatives, totalling \$367,942 in funding.



Trained 50 educators and school staff across 20 public schools as Mental Health Ambassadors in youth mental health first aid and restorative practices.



Launched and co-managed a well-being specialist position embedded in two model schools, contributing to a decrease in suspensions.



Hosted a student-led mental health training where middle schoolers traveled to the state capitol to advocate to the state superintendent.



Developed the Thrive Guide, a bilingual mental health resource.

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH



Public Health





Listening to the Young People of Durham

Durham has a history of listening to its young people. The City of Durham Office of Youth conducted a listening project in 2019-2020 to identify challenges facing Durham's young people, who made up a third of Durham County's population in 2019, and to engage them in developing recommendations for positive changes.

High school students spoke of feeling left out of activities or programs, or not having the money to participate. Many youth felt there were no opportunities for leadership and wanted their schools or local government to incorporate youth more into decision-making. Young people talked about how Durham has attracted new residents and focused on transforming the image of its public schools, but they didn't feel welcome in downtown Durham or in school. They shared that they found some teachers, school resource officers, and administrators were not caring or trustworthy. Young people talked about how diverse Durham is, but that many youth-serving agencies have staff who do not reflect the community they serve. The report also highlighted concerns about mental health: "A lack of affordable mental health supports, plus the presence of law enforcement in their lives, harm the wellbeing of young people," the report reads.

The Durham Youth Listening Project identified challenges but also included youth-centered recommendations,

including several strategies focused on wellness: greater access to mental health supports; mental health providers trained in a trauma-informed approach; and improved school wellness policies.

"We're in a state that does not have a budget, but has been able to put about a billion dollars away for private school vouchers and does not fund its public schools at the rates that it should," said Brianna Kennedy, the interim executive director of Durham Public Schools Foundation (DPSF). Many of the issues that students identified stem from chronic underfunding of public schools. The people of Durham decided to take action. Community organizations, residents, teachers, and local foundations rolled up their sleeves and got to work. "Durham does things differently," Kennedy said. "This community has the stamina to approach any sort of problem or crisis, knowing that we're going to be in it for the long haul. That's not something that you'll see across the state or across the country."

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— **BRIANNA KENNEDY**
Durham Public Schools Foundation

DPSF was one of the community leaders who listened to students and families to learn what they could do to help. After conducting their own community survey, they published a paper called *Onward* to share their learnings, noting that students felt extremely isolated. Kennedy reflected, “The way students were experiencing school even before the pandemic needed to be drastically changed. Folks were excited to go back to school and see their friends, but I can’t say that everyone was excited to be in the same old, same old.” A return to school brought an opportunity to take a closer look at how schools could support students’ well-being holistically, including what the school day looks like, what resources are available, and approaches to blend academics with wellness.

The school district also invested in listening to students through its 2022 Panorama social-emotional survey, which measured student perceptions of teaching and learning. Only one-third of students reported feeling connected to their peers; ninth graders reported the lowest sense of belonging of any high school grade; and nearly two-thirds of Hispanic students reported they did not feel the self-efficacy to navigate school successfully. As one Durham Public School parent shared, “Our kids have experienced trauma. Focusing on their well-being is essential as we catch them up academically.”

For students to succeed in the classroom, schools also need to address the adverse childhood experiences students may bring with them. “It was very clear that there needs to be a stronger wellness framework within our school system to address how students were approaching life post-pandemic,” said Xavier Cason, senior program manager at DPSF.



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Durham Public Schools Foundation

WHOLE Schools – which stands for Wellness, Healing, Opportunity, Learning, and Equity – is working to help Durham ensure its students are supported as whole human beings. The vision statement for the initiative is: “We believe we heal together. We believe we heal in community.”



As an early funder of the WHOLE Schools Movement, Duke brought resources and expertise from multiple sectors to the partnership: healthcare, science and research, and community affairs. “Duke helped us refine what youth mental

After a foundational year, receiving the BUILD award strengthened partners' capacity to bring to life their vision to enhance mental health support, increase equitable opportunities for engagement, and foster relationships in schools. Since then, the Durham team has focused on building out four core pillars to its approach, ranging from school grants to the development of new resources.

WHOLE Schools started providing school-centered wellness grants directly to schools in 2022, distributing \$112,000 to 26 schools in the first year. They provided \$82,000 to 25 schools in 2023 and \$75,000 to 17 schools in 2024. To date, they have provided over \$350,000 to Durham Public Schools, with funding coming from a variety of foundations, companies, and partnerships. Over the past three years, the grantmaking process has matured from informal check-writing to a formalized cohort experience in which grantees learn alongside each other.

The school grants pillar focuses on providing up to \$15,000 to public schools to design and implement wellness initiatives, led by educators, students, and family members. Applications start with engagement at the school level to identify what people need and what they already have. “Every application starts with a conversation between several educators and students or students and their families,” Cason said. “These are grassroots ideas that get funded for a year, and then we support them in figuring out how to keep those things going.”

Seeded school projects include wellness rooms, buddy benches, literacy projects, or training. Kennedy shared, “Sometimes those projects look like cozy corners,” which are an effective way to help students reduce anxiety by providing a dedicated and safe space to process emotions. “Sometimes those projects look like training principals on resilient schools and peaceful schools, and how to build resilience within your building.”

One thing all projects have in common is that grants build on the strengths of the school community. “One of our grantee leaders is an educator and also a parent,” said Kennedy. “She took the valiant step of starting her own nonprofit called Lighthouse Leaders and is working with students who are assuming their responsibility in being good people to themselves and others.” This includes learning how to self-regulate when something happens in students’ environment that upsets them, intentional breathing, checking in with themselves, and learning to understand their own feelings.

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Pillar 2: Training Adults to Become Mental Health Ambassadors

The Mental Health Ambassador initiative trains school staff to help navigate mental health and crisis intervention for students. It provides educators, counselors, and other support staff with a cohort-based learning experience that blends self-reflection with training and certifications. “They first identify their own understanding and possible stigmas around mental health, perform self-care, and then create their own plan of how they’re going to participate in the cohort and still be able to show up as an educator as well.”

Ambassadors receive mental health first aid certification and restorative practices training, engage in cohort-based wellness coaching, and build skills in mindfulness, trauma-informed care, and best practices for Social-Emotional Learning (SEL). SEL is the process of learning to manage emotions, build empathy, foster healthy relationships, and make responsible decisions. The cohort model fosters a peer network of adults in schools who work together to destigmatize mental health support and share mental health tools. They also provide peer support to other educators, help increase awareness of referral resources for student mental health, and identify opportunities by leading ongoing needs assessments and conducting community listening at their schools.

To date, 52 educators on 20 campuses in Durham have been trained to support the mental health and wellness of students and the school community.



Pillar 3: Investing in Model School Sites

At Neal Middle School and Southern School of Energy and Sustainability, two schools located in Durham's historically underserved southeast neighborhood, the partners embedded a well-being specialist co-managed by DPSF and Durham Public Schools, and also provided enhanced funding and support. The Durham partners called these "Model Schools," where the aim was to collaboratively co-create approaches where the mental health and well-being of every student, educator, and staff member are at the forefront.

DPSF approached the school district and worked with the superintendent to select community schools where the work could be most impactful. Cason, who lives in the southeast, recalls: "The high school principal at the time just stood and said, 'Everybody keeps overlooking us, but we're going to rise together.' It really hit me because my daughter went to those schools." By concentrating efforts on a combined school population of 2,400 students and 300 educators and staff over multiple years, the dedicated specialist worked with each school's Mental Health Committee — composed of students, staff, parent teacher association, district, and community partners — to co-create a Well-being Action Plan.

The dedicated specialist then helped the schools put the plan into action, including establishing a network of supportive relationships with nonprofits and other community organizations that enriched each school's wellness environment. With a rise in mental health crises linked to

the evolving political and social climate, including a growing U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement presence in the community, the specialist was also on call to help the school community address what was emerging. This demonstrated a larger need for a team at the district level to support students in crisis — something the district is now exploring. Co-managing a staffing position forged a deeper partnership between DPSF and the school district's student support services team. Kennedy explained, "It helped us know the lay of the land with student support services. Having names, phone numbers, and emails of those other direct contacts who would be able to answer questions for us just allowed us to work well with that entire department." In addition, the specialist helped increase collaboration across school departments, enabling different departments to better support the well-being of students.

One such partnership was with Black and Belonging, an organization that trains students in peer-to-peer mental health advocacy. After training students at Neal Middle School, students visited the State Superintendent, where they shared their experiences with mental health and peer leadership. Cason was in awe of the power of students exercising their voices and leadership: "These students have no fear. They're naturals. They were firm in their understanding because it's their experience. To hear students say, 'I can help my friend because of what I've been trained to do. I found a life raft, and I can help you find yours.' I almost went to tears hearing that."

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Neal Middle School and Southern School of Energy and Sustainability both served as incubators for some of the first Mental Health Ambassadors, positively influencing the district-wide rollout of that initiative. At Neal Middle School, they're seeing significant results: "One of our principals said the model schools had a direct impact on the number of students that were having to deal with in-school and out-of-school suspension," said Kennedy. "He saw those numbers decrease just over the year."

While funding for the specialist position sunsetted this year, the new community relationships continue to live on. "Our model schools continue to have access to community partners who came on when we had the embedded employee," said Kennedy.

Pillar 4: Developing Educational Materials on Mental Health

As part of its efforts to educate the community about mental health, the WHOLE Schools team developed a new guide called the Thrive Guide, a bilingual, plain-language mental health resource giving students, educators, and families a shared vocabulary for wellness. Built around the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) strategies for youth mental health, it includes a glossary, activities, and simple tools to help students and adults talk about mental health and take care of themselves and each other.

Presented at the 2024 Healthy Minds, Stronger Schools Conference, the guide provides a recipe for "successful community conversations," complete with ingredients (e.g., thoughtful and inclusive decision-making, community voices, and evidence-backed policies) and instructions (e.g., stir in community voices as champions of our educational initiatives). "Protecting the safety, accessibility, and sustainability of public education is a pillar of upholding social justice within our communities," said Durham Public School parent Jenna Meehan, in the guide. "Using our energy intentionally to



advocate for ourselves, our children, and our neighbors can be a powerful practice of community care, resistance, and growing toward liberation." Two hundred Thrive Guides have been distributed across the district to date.

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Durham Public School parent



A Trusted Friend and Partner

The WHOLE Schools Movement started deeper conversations, supported educators and staff with training and peer support, helped students and parents amplify their voices and exercise their agency, and developed a bilingual resource that anyone in the community can use. WHOLE Schools partners are now considered trusted thought partners to the public school district in Durham. The initiative recently influenced the district's strategic planning process by encouraging the administration to tailor approaches to subgroups of students, such as students with disabilities, when focusing on its goal of increasing a sense of belonging among students.

Today, work is distributed across DPSF, district departments, community organizations and groups as well as school teams. For example, one school district training partner, Alliance Health, will be providing ongoing training to the Mental Health Ambassadors. Alliance Health will also incorporate the Thrive Guide into its

district-wide training program, which will continue to advance the goals of reducing stigma and empowering community members with the knowledge they need to take care of their own mental health.

As Cason described: "Part of my scope of work for this year has been to bring the community in and quilt that blanket that's going to keep our students safe and well, and our staff trained. Alliance Health has become a trusted partner, and being able to collaborate with them gives me a lot of hope so that work can continue."

When Cason walks through the school hallways in Durham, he also sees a notable cultural shift: "It is not uncommon now to be in a school building and hear students and adults say, 'That's not good for my mental health. I'm looking out for my wellness.' Breaking the stigma and people being willing to speak about their own well-being — it's amazing to see it becoming more and more a normal part of conversation."

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The BUILD Health Challenge® (BUILD) invests in multi-sector, community-centered partnerships that transform systems and elevate community power to advance health and racial justice.

Through learning, connecting, and amplifying these local initiatives, BUILD champions the national movement for health equity and moves attention, resources, and action upstream to support vital community conditions for health and well-being across the United States.

The BUILD Model for Transforming Community Health



Bold

Drive fundamental shifts in policy and sustainability, creating systems-level changes through a lens of justice, equity, diversity, and inclusivity.



Upstream

Focus on the social, environmental, and economic factors that have the greatest influence on the health of a community, rather than on access or care delivery.



Integrated

Align the practices and perspectives of cross-sector partners under a shared vision, establishing new roles while continuing to draw upon the strengths of each partner.



Local

Prioritize the diverse lived experiences, voices, and leadership of neighborhood residents and community members throughout all stages of planning, implementation, and evaluation.



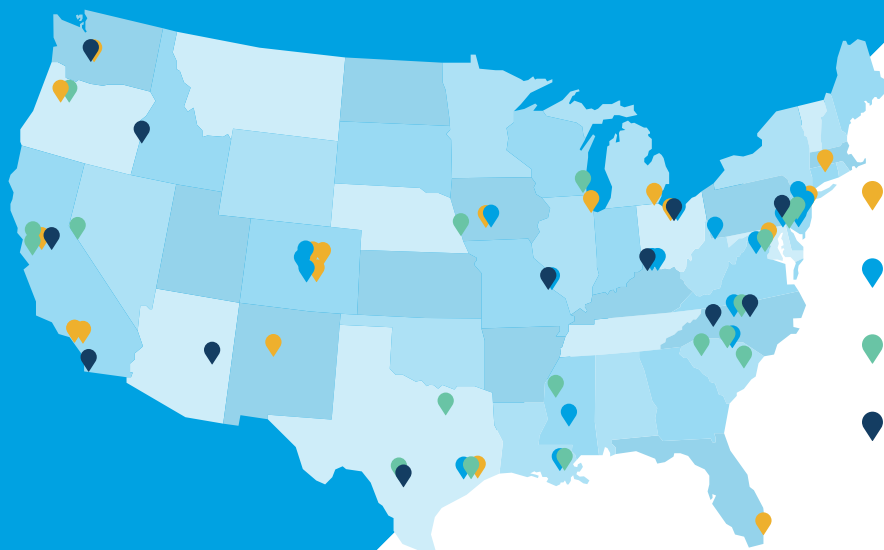
Data-Driven

Use varied forms of data from both clinical and community sources as tools to identify key needs, measure meaningful change, and facilitate transparency amongst stakeholders in order to generate actionable insights.



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BUILD 1.0
2015-2017

BUILD 2.0
2017-2019

BUILD 3.0
2019-2022

BUILD 4.0
2023-2026