

# Parent/Guardian Information Letter

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Dear Parent or Guardian,

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Schools are always working to make safe and inviting learning environments for students and staff. One way to measure the effectiveness of our efforts is to ask students questions about their experiences with bullying, discrimination, and their perceptions of the school environment, as well as their thoughts and feelings about their health and behaviour. Toward this aim, Dr. Vaillancourt and her research team at uOttawa will be conducting a study in partnership with School Mental Health Ontario called the *Health and Peer Relations Study*.

## **What will happen during the study?**

In this study, students in Grades 4 to 12 will be asked questions about their safety, bullying, relationships, health, and behaviour (e.g., screen time use, physical activity). We estimate that it will take about 25 minutes for the youngest students to complete the survey (during school hours). Your child will also be asked some questions such as their age and cultural background, but they will not provide their name so their answers will remain anonymous. Two days before your child is given the survey, their teacher will read instructions about the survey out loud, which includes information about their rights as participants, such as their right to skip questions and their right to not participate. A study information letter will also be provided to your child along with a letter on how to access help if they need it. These information letters will be emailed to all students.

## **Who will know what my child said in the survey?**

Your child's answers will be confidential—nobody will know who they are and what they said. The information that your child provides will be combined with that of other students and will be stored securely on the board's network and at uOttawa. The findings will be used to produce reports for HWDSB schools that will help them to plan or revise their Mental Health and Wellbeing and Safe School initiatives. The findings will also be used for scientific publications (such as in journals and in conference presentations) to help other schools in Canada and around the world learn about when and where students feel safe at school and best practice strategies for helping to improve students' relationships with other students and staff and their health. In these publications, no student or school will ever be identified—we are only interested in how all students, together, answered the questions in the survey.

Because your child will complete the survey in a classroom with their peers, we cannot guarantee that other students will not see some of your child's answers. To reduce this risk, we will provide instructions about privacy.

### **Will this study be on-going?**

We would like to ask students the same questions over the next few years and to combine their responses over time without using their name. To do this, we have created a special code that is unique to each student that uses probabilities (math) to combine surveys without names. This approach guarantees that your child's responses remain anonymous. We plan to collect data again in the Spring of 2026, 2027, and 2028. At each time point, we will formally ask you for your consent for your child to participate and we will again ask your child if they too would like to participate.

### **Are there good things and bad things about the survey?**

Although no risks are anticipated for completing the survey, if your child feels uncomfortable answering any of the questions, they can either skip the question or can stop entirely without giving a reason. They will then be asked to do some reading or a learning task until the class has finished the survey.

### **Where will my child's data (answers) be kept?**

All the information collected will be stored in Dr. Vaillancourt's laboratory at uOttawa which is protected by a state-of-the art security system and monitored by uOttawa Protection Services. Data will be encrypted with strong password protection and securely stored on a protected laboratory computer that is located at the University of Ottawa with restricted access.

### **Who can I contact if I have concerns, or if I want to see the survey, or if I do not want my child to participate?**

Should you have any concerns, if you would like to view the survey, or if you do not wish for your child to participate, please fill out the opt-out form that was sent to you by HWDSB or contact your school office. Your child's participation (yes or no) will have no impact on their activities, relationships, or learning opportunities. We fully respect your decision regarding your child's participation. If you do not want your child to participate or if your child doesn't want to participate, a fake (pretend) survey will be given to them to keep this decision private. The fake survey is formatted the same way as the real survey and asks nonthreatening questions like "How much do you like sports" and "How much do you like pizza". The responses to these questions will not be kept. In fact, they will be deleted as soon as the fake survey is completed.

We encourage you to discuss the survey with your child. Again, please contact us if you or your child have any concerns.

### **Who approved this study and who can I contact about the study?**

This project has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through uOttawa and the HWDSB. If you have questions or would like further information about this study, please contact Dr. Tracy Vaillancourt (tracy.vaillancourt@uottawa.ca). If you have any concerns about your or your child's treatment or rights as research participants, please contact the Protocol Officer for

Ethics in Research at uOttawa ([ethics@uottawa.ca](mailto:ethics@uottawa.ca), 613-562-5387) or the HWDSB Review Ethics Board ([reb@hwdsb.on.ca](mailto:reb@hwdsb.on.ca); 905-527-5092 x2120), or your school's principal.

Thank you very much for your continued interest in our school survey and for helping us to do our best to maintain a healthy, safe, and respectful environment for learning.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'TV' or similar initials, written in a cursive style.

Tracy Vaillancourt, Ph.D., uOttawa and the HWDSB

**Note. Please keep a copy of this form for your records.**