



# Attendance Support and Wellness Initiative

## Phase 2

### Pilot Year (Phase 2) Evaluation Report

### Executive Summary

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The purpose of the provincial Attendance Support and Wellness Initiative (the “**Initiative**”) is to establish common procedures and best practices for public school districts in British Columbia to support employee attendance and wellness. A consistent, coordinated and non-mandated approach to attendance support and wellness will help create common expectations and understanding among employees, unions and management across the sector. The Initiative arose out of the recommendations of the 2012 Deloitte report and the Phase 1 Attendance Support and Wellness Working Group Report of the Service Delivery Project.

### Scope and Deliverables

The Phase 2 Attendance Support and Wellness Working Group worked to meet the following specific objectives during the 2015-2016 pilot school year:

1. Develop and implement common procedures and resources to support employee wellness and attendance in seven (7) pilot districts, including the creation of:
  - a. a toolkit of common procedures and best practices to support employee attendance;
  - b. a needs assessment and readiness audit tool for districts to use in developing their own attendance support and wellness project plans;
  - c. confidentiality and privacy guidelines to ensure compliance with the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act (“**FIPPA**”);
  - d. template guides and communications materials for supervisors;

- e. a comprehensive supervisor training module; and
- f. template materials for communicating with employees about attendance support;
2. Engage and consult with unions, employee associations and other stakeholders about the Initiative;
3. Explore and establish a model of centralized specialist medical expertise to support pilot school districts in their implementation of an attendance support program;
4. Enhance the Employment Data and Analysis System (“**EDAS**”) to allow provincial analysis of attendance and leave data; and
5. Develop recommendations for implementation of attendance support and wellness programs (“**ASWP**”) in other school districts.

While effective disability management programs and wellness initiatives are integral parts of a successful ASWP, Phase 2 of the Initiative focused on the development of common procedures and best practices to support employees experiencing high Non-culpable, Incidental Absenteeism<sup>1</sup>. It was also outside the scope of Phase 2 of the Initiative to address Culpable Absenteeism<sup>2</sup>.

## Outcomes

Each pilot district was at a different level of readiness to proceed with implementing an attendance support program during the 2015-2016 pilot school year. Accordingly, Phase 2 of the Initiative proceeded through a phased approach. Pilot districts implemented attendance support and wellness at different times and via different paths, depending on their resources and challenges.

During the 2015-2016 school year, the Working Group developed common attendance support procedures and best practices, and training and communications resources, to support districts in planning, developing, and implementing attendance support and wellness programs. Five of the seven pilot districts and all three advisory districts have implemented, or will shortly implement, attendance support and wellness programs. Two other pilot districts will need more time to continue consultations with their local unions and ensure adequate resourcing before proceeding to implement an ASWP. The Working Group also engaged in extensive consultations with unions, employee associations and other stakeholders to consult on and improve the Initiative. Finally, the Working Group explored and implemented a model of centralized medical support services for the pilot districts, which will be evaluated over a one-year trial period. The upgrades undertaken to EDAS as part of Phase 2 will be complete by the end of 2016.

As the pilot districts spent most of the year carefully engaging in consultations, planning and development of an ASWP, there is insufficient quantitative data to evaluate the effect of the common attendance support procedures developed as part of Phase 2 of the Initiative. Advisory districts which have had ASWPs in place for some time have seen a positive impact from their attendance support programs, both in terms of employee experience and costs. Further, a member of the Phase 2 Working Group is participating on a broader K-12

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<sup>1</sup> Non-Culpable Absenteeism is absenteeism which is not within the employee’s control, such as a legitimate illness, injury, disability or family emergency, and cannot be addressed through discipline. Incidental Absences are not part of an authorized disability claim or accommodation or workers’ compensation claim.

<sup>2</sup> Culpable Absenteeism is absenteeism which is the result of blameworthy or willful conduct by an employee, such as taking an unauthorized leave, using sick leave when he/she is not ill or injured, or being late without legitimate excuse.

sector Benefits Tracking Working Group to develop and validate a benefits tracking framework and key performance indicators for evaluating the impact of the Initiative over the coming 2016-2017 school year.

## Recommendations

This evaluation report describes in detail the pilot and advisory districts' experiences in developing and implementing attendance support and wellness programs and provides recommendations to other school districts which are interested in doing the same. The key recommendations of the Working Group are summarized as follows:

1. Districts should carefully review their needs and readiness to implement an attendance support and wellness program by using the Needs Assessment and Readiness Audit Tool and centralized advice through BCPSEA. After identifying areas where improvement is needed, districts should develop a realistic project implementation plan which factors in items such as budget, staff capacity, timelines, communications and sustainability.
2. Districts should take a holistic view of employee health and wellness in the district and set priorities before proceeding with implementation of attendance support, including gathering information from their EFAP and benefits providers, employee surveys, unions and other sources about employee health and wellness; ensuring accurate data collection and analysis; developing sustainable wellness initiatives; and having in place effective disability management processes.
3. Districts should invest time in fulsome consultations and communications to ensure stakeholders understand the program and correct misunderstandings, and may modify their attendance support procedures, without eliminating any critical elements necessary for the legally defensible program, based on feedback from stakeholders.
4. Districts can expect challenges since attendance support often involves a change in culture, and should ensure their procedures and practices are clear and consistently applied and those involved in implementing the program are comprehensively trained in the skills necessary to perform their responsibilities.

## Project Overview

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The provincial Attendance Support and Wellness Initiative (the “**Initiative**”) aims to establish common procedures and best practices to support employee attendance support and wellness for public school districts in British Columbia. The Initiative arose out of the recommendations of the 2012 Deloitte report and the Phase 1 Attendance Support and Wellness Working Group Report of the Service Delivery Project. The Deloitte report recommended that school districts share services in supporting employee attendance in order to improve service delivery and reduce costs.

The Initiative, however, is broader than the Deloitte report's recommendations. It is not directed at reaching specific cost savings objectives or attendance statistics. The Initiative is intended to create more positive, productive work and learning environments for employees and students by supporting employees to optimize their health, wellness and ability to attend work. A consistent, coordinated and non-mandated approach to

attendance support and wellness will help create common expectations and understanding among employees, unions and management across the sector.

The specific objectives of Phase 2 of the Initiative during the 2015-2016 school year were to:

1. Develop and implement common policies and procedures to support employee wellness and attendance in seven (7) pilot school districts;
2. Engage and consult with unions, employee associations and other stakeholders about the Initiative;
3. Explore and implement a model of centralized specialist medical expertise to support pilot districts in their implementation of an attendance support program;
4. Enhance the Employment Data and Analysis System (“**EDAS**”) to allow provincial aggregation of attendance and leave data; and
5. Develop recommendations for implementation of attendance support and wellness programs (“**ASWP**”) in other school districts.

## Project Scope

It was recognized from the earliest inceptions of the Initiative that, in order to meet the objectives of supporting employees to optimize their health, wellness and ability to attend work, an ASWP must be one of three inter-related components which includes wellness support and disability management:

- **Attendance support** is the promotion and monitoring of regular attendance at work and identifying and offering support where there may be non-culpable reasons for high, incidental absenteeism.
- **Wellness support** encompasses programs for employees that increase awareness of various resources to improve health and wellness and the creation of a culture that ensures employees have the resources they need to be successful and engaged at work.
- **Disability management** is the management of sick leave usage, short- and long-term disability and workers’ compensation claims.

While effective disability management programs and wellness initiatives are integral parts of a successful ASWP, Phase 2 of the Initiative focused on the development of common procedures and best practices to support employees experiencing high Non-culpable, Incidental Absenteeism<sup>3</sup>. The model ASWP is intended to complement, not duplicate, existing disability management programs, such as the Public Education Benefit Trust (“**PEBT**”) Joint Early Intervention Service (“**JEIS**”) and the British Columbia Teachers’ Federation (“**BCTF**”) Health and Wellness Program (“**HWP**”), Salary Indemnity Plan (“**SIP**”) and Long-Term Disability (“**LTD**”) Program.

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<sup>3</sup> Non-Culpable Absenteeism is absenteeism which is not within the employee’s control, such as a legitimate illness, injury, disability or family emergency, and cannot be addressed through discipline. Incidental Absences are not part of an authorized long-term disability claim or accommodation.

It was also outside the scope of Phase 2 of the Initiative to address Culpable Absenteeism<sup>4</sup>. Culpable absences will continue to be addressed outside of the Initiative through progressive discipline and a district's normal human resources or labour relations processes.

## Project Structure

The work of Phase 2 of the Initiative was conducted by the Phase 2 Attendance Support and Wellness Working Group (the "**Working Group**"). The Working Group was comprised of representatives from:

- each of the seven (7) pilot school districts:
  - SD 34 (Abbotsford)
  - SD 35 (Langley)
  - SD 41 (Burnaby)
  - SD 51 (Boundary)
  - SD 57 (Prince George)
  - SD 59 (Peace River South)
  - SD 72 (Campbell River)
- three (3) advisory school districts which had already implemented attendance support programs:
  - SD 36 (Surrey)
  - SD 39 (Vancouver)
  - SD 61 (Victoria)
- the British Columbia Public School Employers' Association ("**BCPSEA**");
- the British Columbia Principals' and Vice-Principals' Association ("**BCPVPA**"); and
- the Ministry of Education Service Delivery Branch ("**SDB**").

Each pilot district was at a different level of readiness to proceed with implementing an ASWP during the 2015-2016 pilot school year, and each pilot district faced different challenges in planning and implementing an ASWP. Accordingly, Phase 2 proceeded through a phased approach as pilot districts implemented attendance support and wellness at different times and via different paths.

## Development of the Program

The Working Group recognized that effective attendance support must take a supportive and coaching approach. Based on its review of best practices identified through the advisory school districts, other well-functioning public sector attendance support and wellness programs, and feedback from disability and workplace wellness specialists, unions and employee associations and others in the sector, the Working Group developed the following resources to support employee attendance and wellness in the pilot school districts:

- a toolkit of common procedures and best practices to support employee attendance;
- a needs assessment and readiness audit tool for districts to use in developing their own attendance support and wellness project plans;

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<sup>4</sup> Culpable Absenteeism is absenteeism which is the result of blameworthy or willful conduct by an employee, such as taking an unauthorized leave, using sick leave when he/she is not ill or injured, or being late without legitimate excuse.

- confidentiality and privacy guidelines to ensure compliance with the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act (“**FIPPA**”);
- template guides and communications materials for supervisors;
- a comprehensive supervisor training module;
- template materials for communicating with employees; and
- establishment of centralized specialized medical support services.

The toolkit of common procedures was developed to provide guidance to districts on the critical elements required for a legally defensible, effective ASWP. Apart from the ‘critical elements’ identified in the toolkit, the procedures and resources can be used and adapted by districts to best suit their unique needs, resources and culture.

This evaluation report will describe the experiences of the pilot districts and Working Group in implementing attendance support and provide recommendations to all school districts on effectively planning and implementing programs to support employee attendance and wellness.

### Engagement and Consultation

The Working Group valued and recognized the many voices within the K-12 sector that are interested or may be affected by the Initiative. To ensure that the Initiative incorporated these diverse voices to effectively support employees, BCPSEA, in conjunction with the Working Group, identified the stakeholders which may be affected by, or otherwise have an interest, in the Initiative. The goals of the Working Group’s communications and engagement were to:

- ensure that all interested or affected stakeholders understand the purpose and design, and their responsibilities (if any) under, the Initiative; and
- engage with and gather feedback from key stakeholders at all stages of the development, planning and implementation of Phase 2 of the Initiative.

At the provincial level, BCPSEA initiated consultations and communications with the BCTF, Canadian Union of Public Employees and the K-12 Presidents’ Council (“**CUPE BC**”), the PEBT, BCPVPA and other stakeholders in the spring and early summer 2015. The Working Group also reached out to all school districts, BCASBO, BCSSA and BCSTA through presentations, a quarterly Project Bulletin and Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) document, to provide information about the design and progress of the Initiative. A summary of stakeholder meetings and communications is attached at **Tab 1**. At the local level, districts engaged in ongoing consultations with local unions and employee associations throughout the pilot year.

### What were the primary concerns raised by stakeholders?

Stakeholder groups raised a variety of concerns about the Initiative which were taken into account in the development and implementation of the ASWP during Phase 2.

For example, some stakeholders were concerned that an ASWP was unnecessary or would erode confidence in existing, well-functioning disability management programs such as the JEIS or BCTF HWP. We have clarified directly with the stakeholders and in the common procedures that an ASWP is focused on supporting

employees with high levels of *incidental absenteeism* only, and will not apply to those employees who are already being supported through JEIS, the BCTF HWP or another disability management process such as WorkSafeBC, short-term disability or long-term disability. We have also further clarified in our communications and procedures that districts can engage disability management programs to support an employee as soon as an employee identifies that a health-related condition or disability may be causing his/her incidental absenteeism, and such an employee should not proceed in the attendance support process while his/her health condition or disability is being supported through a disability management program. In other words, there is no duplication between an ASWP and an existing disability management program as an employee will not be involved in both at the same time.

A second important area of stakeholder concern was related to privacy and confidentiality. Unions were concerned that employees would feel pressured to share personal or medical information with their supervisors. In response to this concern, the Working Group has developed information and confidentiality guidelines as part of its best practices for attendance support to help districts comply with their obligations under the FIPPA. We have made it clear in the toolkit and related resources that an employee must not be encouraged to share medical or personal information with his or her supervisor during the attendance support process. If an employee wishes to share such information, he/she may do so confidentially through Human Resources. Finally, the Working Group has engaged an external service provider, discussed further below, to provide specialized disability management services to support the pilot districts so that employees' personal and medical information is kept secure and separate from the district.

We also heard concerns from stakeholders that they were concerned the Initiative would result in a traditional 'attendance management'-style program which would result in punitive or disciplinary consequences for employees unable to attend work regularly for reasons outside their control. We have worked to consistently communicate that the goals of the program are to maximize employees' health, wellness and ability to attend work and there are no disciplinary consequences to employees as a result of participation in an ASWP. To that end, we have made it clear in the toolkit that it is a critical element for the program to distinguish between culpable and non-culpable absenteeism and have sought to ensure that the program adequately focuses on supporting employees.

Not every local union agreed to participate in consultations with pilot and advisory districts. In the event that a local union refuses to meet or consult about attendance support, we recommend that districts continue to communicate and reach out to the union so it remains informed about the status and content of the program, such as by inviting them to attend supervisor training and responding to requests for information about the program.

However, despite extensive consultation, unions have in some cases remained strongly opposed to any form of attendance support program and have provided guidance to their members on how to challenge districts when implementing an ASWP. The Working Group shares guidance on how districts can respond to the most common challenges to the program made by employees or union representatives in the Toolkit, described further below.

Local unions have also initiated policy grievances in respect of ASWPs implemented in the advisory districts. In one advisory district, the union withdrew its policy grievance of the ASWP without conditions. In another advisory district, the union's policy grievance was also withdrawn without conditions. In each case, BCPSEA worked with the district to strongly defend the grievance and is confident that the common procedures and best practices developed as part of Phase 2 are fair and legally defensible.

Finally, effective local consultation extends more broadly than unions. The support of the board is critical. An ASWP should be tailored to address the district's needs and purposes in supporting employee attendance and wellness without eliminating any critical elements necessary for a legally defensible program. Other employees, such as senior management and exempt staff, employee associations, such as the local BCPVPA, and other stakeholders, such as the local JEIS committee, should be informed and consulted about the program. For example, a pilot district established a district-level working group comprised of senior executive staff, senior management and Human Resources to ensure fulsome internal consultation about the development of an ASWP.

### **How are stakeholder concerns addressed by the Initiative?**

An ASWP should be adjusted and modified in response to stakeholder feedback, provided that the program retains the critical elements required for it to be effective and legally defensible. For example, at the provincial and local levels, unions often raised the need for early union involvement and representation at attendance support meetings. Districts have responded to these concerns by offering employees the option to request union representation at every step of an ASWP, including a casual check in conversation, even though the process is non-disciplinary. In one pilot district, the attendance support process has been modified to include a step before the casual check-in meeting so that employees who appear to be having difficulties with their attendance are provided first with brochures and information on available health and wellness resources (a "wellness package") rather than having a meeting.

In addition to the steps taken above, to further address these concerns raised by stakeholders, we also recommend (and have included these recommendations in the developed materials) that districts:

- engage in early, ongoing, transparent consultations with their local unions, employees and local JEIS committees in developing and implementing an ASWP and wellness initiatives, including sharing data, information and materials,
- provide comprehensive, interactive training to supervisors and principals on how to ensure that conversations with employees as part of an ASWP are supportive and sensitive (discussed further below),
- invite unions to attend the training provided to supervisors in order to solicit their feedback,
- train all staff and have procedures in place to meet the district's obligations not to discriminate on the basis of disability or other characteristics protected by human rights law, including age, sex, family status, religion, ancestry, etc.,
- ensure that the foundations of employee wellness are met, such as occupational health and safety standards, including thorough review of attendance data to identify trends by location,

- take steps to gather and analyze relevant available health data to ensure that wellness initiatives effectively address their employees' health and wellness challenges,
- ensure that any Employee and Family Assistance Program is confidential and responsive,
- partner and consult with employees and unions in developing and communicating wellness initiatives,
- support and promote jointly managed disability management programs such as JEIS and ensure referrals are made appropriately,
- explore and seek to understand and address levels of engagement in their employee groups, and
- develop a communications plan and adapt template materials, discussed further below, to ensure that communications with employees about the ASWP are not perceived as supportive, and not threatening or intimidating.

### Needs Assessment and Readiness Audit Tool

The Working Group recognized that there are certain minimum requirements which a district must meet before proceeding with development and implementation of an ASWP. In particular, a district must ensure that, at a minimum, it has a well-functioning disability management process, wellness initiatives, accurate data collection and analysis capabilities and support from its board before it can effectively plan and implement an ASWP. The Working Group developed and tested a Needs Assessment and Readiness Audit Tool to help districts identify their readiness to implement attendance support and develop a customized project plan. The Tool has been extensively revised over the pilot year and the most up-to-date version is attached at [Tab 2](#).

For example, one pilot district developed a comprehensive health strategy to roll out all three pillars of support – wellness, disability management and attendance support – during the pilot year. Another pilot district took four main areas identified as part of its audit process and developed objectives for the pilot year. Other pilot districts determined, as a result of the audit process, that they needed to focus primarily on further development of wellness and disability management programs before proceeding with attendance support.

### Wellness Initiatives

Supporting employee wellness is a critical pillar of an ASWP. While the focus of Phase 2 of the Initiative was to develop common procedures and best practices for attendance support, the Working Group also explored and identified options for effective, sustainable wellness programs at the provincial and local levels.

Wellness is an area in which partnership with unions and employees is productive and essential. For example, an advisory district asked for union and employee input on a resource brochure and posters to inform employees about available wellness resources. Their involvement not only helped ensure an effective scope of resources was offered to employees, but also helped increase employee awareness of the available resources. In another example, a pilot district established a joint Wellness/EFAP committee comprised of representatives from local unions, local BCPVPA and exempt staff to jointly develop, communicate and promote wellness initiatives.

As examples, pilot and advisory districts developed and implemented the following wellness initiatives at the local level:

- brochures on:
  - health and wellness resources available to employees, within the district, through benefits provider and in the community
  - leaves available to employees, including roles/responsibilities, process and district contact information
- strong, consistent promotion of the EFAP through brochures, newsletters and staff meetings
- enhanced EFAP to include additional services such as depression care and fitness coaching
- additional resources, such as LifeSpeak on Demand video library to staff website
- separate surveys of employee groups on wellness initiatives to ensure initiatives and resources were well suited to each employee group's interests, needs, hours of work, location, etc.
- monthly health and safety and EFAP newsletters
- monthly wellness links to articles on health and wellness
- membership discounts at local gyms and fitness facilities
- use of district facilities for staff activities such as gym floor hockey and badminton
- worksite wellness events, such as yoga or zumba
- district-wide course offerings and challenges, such as healthy cooking classes and walking challenges
- quarterly meetings to review EFAP statistics and discuss wellness initiatives in response to trends
- wellness workshops, such as presentations by the EFAP provider, as part of employee professional development days
- employee flu vaccination clinics
- recommending that the Board of Education include a statement on value of employee wellness in the district's strategic plan

Districts have received positive feedback on wellness initiatives through increased utilization rates of their EFAPs (up to 15% higher than the industry average) and LifeSpeak on Demand services, and positive feedback from individual employees.

At the provincial level, Pacific Blue Cross ("**PBC**") shared information and provided a proposal to the Working Group on the options available for school districts to review and analyze their benefits and claims data to create wellness initiatives which target specific district health issues. For example, the aggregate data available from PBC can show the top therapeutic prescription drug classes by amount of claims, and total number of claimants, for a school district. Wellness initiatives aimed at improving employee health and wellness in these areas are most likely to be effective and sustainable.

PBC also identified that, under the current provincial extended health benefits plan, online health assessments and wellness services are accessible through CARESnet. This service is available for all members and is entirely confidential. The member creates an online profile, and receives an individual assessment of his/her health

risks and how to take action to improve his/her health. The program also provides relevant links to community resources and supports available within the individual’s municipality or region. If districts are interested, PBC can provide resources to help promote employee awareness and use of the online assessment tool. Further, PBC can provide aggregate, non-identifying information from the online health assessments to help districts ascertain the health risks faced by their employees and in what areas employees may be most willing to change. Further, PBC can customize the online assessment to add questions about work location or classification to help districts better understand the aggregate data –for example, are teachers interested in/facing different health risks than administration or support groups?—and help develop targeted wellness initiatives accordingly.

### **Attendance Support Procedures and Best Practices**

The Working Group developed a Toolkit of common procedures and resources to support employee attendance and wellness based on best practices and recent case law. The Toolkit is intended to provide school districts with a framework program which they can adapt and implement to support employees to regularly and consistently attend work. The Toolkit is focused on the attendance support pillar of the Initiative, setting out best practices to support employees with high levels of incidental absenteeism who are not currently supported by an existing program and are ‘falling through the cracks’.

Requirements for a fair, legal, effective ASWP are highlighted as “Critical Elements” in the Toolkit. There are also components of the Toolkit that each district should customize for their employee groups, as well as tips to promote the best outcomes; these are “Flexible Steps”. Finally, additional resources, such as confidentiality and information protection guidelines and template conversation guides, are included as appendices to the Toolkit to assist school districts to implement and administer an attendance support program. The Toolkit with appendices is attached at **Tab 3**.

Generally, the procedures to support employee attendance fall into three stages:

1. *Data review and analysis*, to identify employees within the top percentile of absenteeism within their employee group over a 12 month period and determine which employees should and should not participate in the ASWP;
2. *Informal check-in conversations*, by a supervisor or principal to reach out to those employees who may need additional support to attend work regularly; and
3. *Formal support meetings*, facilitated by Human Resources to communicate the district’s expectations for attendance and seek to understand how the district can support employees who may be struggling with high incidental absenteeism.

These stages are described in detail in the Toolkit. Districts’ experiences in implementing the common procedures and best practices set out in the Toolkit are described below.

## Stage 1 - Data Collection and Analysis

Collecting and analyzing accurate attendance data is critical to effectively identify employees who may need support in attending work regularly. The Working Group, in conjunction with BCSPEA staff, developed best practice guidelines on which attendance and leave data should be included and excluded for purposes of attendance support. Most importantly, districts must ensure that employees do not participate in the ASWP if they are already supported through an existing disability management program, such as JEIS, Short-Term Disability (“**STD**”), the BCTF HWP, WorkSafeBC or LTD. Districts must also ensure that their data collection and analysis procedures are internally consistent, to ensure that they are tracking all relevant absences accurately and treating similar cases similarly.

Generally, responsibility for reviewing attendance data should be centralized to ensure confidentiality and consistency. The data review and analysis phase of an ASWP is time-intensive and requires thorough consultation with the employees’ supervisor and/or the district’s disability management and human resources departments to identify which individual employees should participate in the attendance support process. Districts have assigned one person, typically within Human Resources, to review and analyze the attendance data and determine whether an employee should be involved in the ASWP. In some districts, the same person also approves all significant leaves. Some districts have split these responsibilities among several excluded positions. For example, one person in records management is designated to prepare the data and extract attendance reports, while another person specialized in disability management reviews the list of employees at the data review stage to remove employees on authorized disability claims and accommodations to ensure there is no duplication between the attendance support process and employees who are being supported through authorized disability claims and accommodations.

Both pilot and advisory districts typically took six months or more to review and, if necessary, modify data procedures or systems required for attendance support. In some cases, significant time was needed to lay the groundwork. For example, one district was required to first ensure that all health-related absences and leaves were being accurately tracked and coded for all employee groups. This involved new procedures and accountabilities, and amounted to a substantial culture change which required additional support for supervisors and managers. Another district had to take steps to modify its payroll procedures to ensure that unpaid leaves, and absences where employees were not dispatched to provide coverage, were being tracked within its system.

In most districts, no upgrades were required to Human Resources Information Systems (“**HRIS**”) in order to pull and review the necessary data for attendance support. Instead, districts worked with their vendors to create spreadsheets to pull the data about top percentiles of absenteeism from both HRIS and payroll data systems. Other districts found it helpful to purchase enhancements to HRIS systems to more efficiently identify employees on approved medical leaves and reduce number of manual steps in the data review phase of the ASWP. For example, one vendor’s software provides an enhancement which can help a district identify the number of occurrences and automatically remove those on approved medical leaves from the list of employees in the top percentile.

In addition to their regular support to school districts, SRB Education Solutions and Harris School Solutions (SDS) provided opportunities for all school districts to take part in sessions and webinars related to attendance support. At the November 2015 SRB User Conference, a session was provided to school district participants on the Initiative, SRB functionality related to attendance support and how one pilot district was using their employee data from various SRB modules to create reports for attendance support. In December 2015, Harris School Solutions (SDS) hosted a series of regional webinars to demonstrate the reporting and analysis capability currently available through their Absence Management system. As part of this event, they engaged school district participants in conversations around what else might be helpful to support the Initiative.

A challenge faced by two pilot districts in collecting and analyzing attendance data was that they do not use an automated absence tracking system. Instead, employees speak with their supervisor or a single dispatch clerk when they are absent. While the size of the districts did not warrant implementation of an automated system, one district was able to modify its attendance support process so that the call in procedure was an opportunity for the supervisor to demonstrate care and seek to offer support to employees who have high incidental absenteeism. Supervisors have been trained to have supportive, informal check-in conversations and the District's Board office reviews the data to identify employees who are having difficulty attending regularly.

### **Stages 2 and 3 - Supportive Conversations**

After a district has analyzed its attendance data and identified the employees who should participate in the ASWP, the next step in attendance support is typically for the employee's direct supervisor to meet with the employee for an informal check-in conversation. Supervisors are usually in the best position to address absenteeism issues with employees at the initial stages because they have an established relationship with the employee, are responsible for the employee's health, safety and performance at work, and are directly aware and able to communicate the impact of an employee's absences.

However, there are other options for the initial step in attendance support before the informal check-in meeting. For example, an optional alternative first step may be for the district to send employees who are approaching or have reached a top percentile of absenteeism with a "support package" about the ASWP, available resources to support the employee's health and wellness, and an invitation to a meeting if the employee wishes to discuss any issues related to his/her attendance. The benefits of this initial step are that it may increase an employee's awareness about available resources in a positive and low-key manner, and may help reduce the supervisor's workload arising from the program. Similarly, a district may refer an employee to an existing disability management program for initial support, such as JEIS, if the employee has approached the top percentiles of absenteeism and is off work on a health-related absence (even if the absence has not continued for six consecutive days).

Over the pilot year, two pilot districts adapted the Toolkit attendance support procedures to better suit the size of their districts. In smaller districts, there may be very few employees with high, incidental absenteeism where the reasons were unknown by the district. For this reason, the districts considered whether it was most suitable for the initial informal check-in conversations to be undertaken by the Secretary-Treasurer or other

exempt staff person such as Human Resources, or how best to involve supervisors and principals at the informal conversation stage of attendance support.

In most districts, attendance support represents a significant culture change and, since supervisors are involved at the initial stages, districts must recognize and support supervisors through the change. While most supervisors and principals recognize the need to demonstrate care and concern for their employees, the attendance support process nonetheless involves additional time and effort for those with already busy workloads. In addition to the comprehensive training developed by the Working Group for principals and supervisors, described further below, districts should also consider how to provide ongoing support to supervisors. For example, districts have provided the following supports to supervisors in addition to training:

- a dedicated Human Resources liaison/advisor who contacts a supervisor to discuss each attendance report, coaches the supervisor before and after every attendance support conversation, and confirms when a conversation with an employee has occurred;
- supervisors are asked to complete a survey after each informal check-in conversation to debrief;
- a district schedules small group meetings with supervisors who are scheduled to do a second informal check-in conversation with employees to discuss best practices in advance;
- Human Resources has offered to support and assist principals in their discussions about the ASWP at staff meetings or informal check-ins;
- template key messages and powerpoint slides are provided to supervisors to ensure a consistent message about the program at staff meetings; and
- supervisors and principals are provided with a concise summary of the ASWP, so that they can effectively reference and revisit the key principles and process of the program at a glance.

## Implementation of the program

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### Building Supervisor Capacity

Supervisors and principals are responsible for engaging with their employees at the initial steps in the attendance support process. The Working Group recognized that it was critical for an effective, sustainable ASWP to build supervisor capacity to have supportive conversations with employees. Unions also emphasized in consultations the importance of ensuring that supervisors are adequately supported to have sensitive conversations with their employees during the attendance support process. The Working Group determined that comprehensive, interactive training was needed to build supervisors' and principals' capacity and skills in implementing the program. The training must clearly communicate to those responsible for implementing the program the purpose and process of the ASWP, their responsibilities under the program, and how to have supportive conversations with employees.

### Training Options

The Working Group reviewed the models available to provide training to supervisors, which included:

- District in-house training;
- External service provider, such as Morneau Shepell; and

- BCPSEA-provided training module.

The advisory districts conducted their supervisor training using either entirely in-house training, or partially in-house and partially through an external service provider (a “hybrid model”). While the interactive training on supportive conversations through the external service provider received very positive feedback, it was more expensive than other options and, depending on the choice of facilitator, may involve delay due to facilitator travel. Similarly, while in-house training is the most affordable option, it requires expertise within the district to develop and provide the training.

In order to ensure a consistent and cost-effective training option was available to all districts, BCPSEA, in conjunction with the Working Group, developed and tested a training module for principals and supervisors which covers the purposes and principles of attendance support, and how to have productive, supportive conversations in the ASWP. The BCPSEA training module can be adapted to address specific issues and needs of the district. The learning intentions of the BCPSEA training module are to:

- Reinforce and promote best practices to support employee attendance and wellness
- Develop an appreciation of the benefits of an ASWP
- Describe the integrated program
- Understand the attendance support process, including roles and responsibilities
- Develop and practice supportive conversation skills

To date, three pilot districts have trained over 140 principals and supervisors who will take on an active role in the ASWP through the BCPSEA module. Over 95% of participants either agreed or strongly agreed that the course activities were relevant and helped them learn, and that they were satisfied with the course. Most of the comments from participants expressed an appreciation of the ability to learn actively and the importance of having respectful conversations with their staff members. During the training and through the evaluations, questions have been asked which have shaped and modified the course. Supervisors leave with a workbook that they can use once they begin to have conversations as part of the ASWP.

An outline of all three supervisor training options is available at [Tab 4](#).

### **Feedback and Recommendations on Training**

Based on consultations with unions and the experience of advisory districts, the Working Group recommends that unions should be invited to attend a training session to provide feedback and input. One pilot district involved their local unions in the training while two pilot districts wanted the training to provide first to supervisor groups only to encourage internal dialogue. Two advisory districts which have implemented an ASWP invited their local unions to attend and provide feedback at at least one supervisor training session or a separate training session, which allowed the district to receive frank feedback from their local unions on the training and make any necessary adjustments in the future.

When implementing the training program, districts typically scheduled multiple training sessions to ensure that every principal, supervisor and manager was able to attend at least one session and the sessions were small enough to encourage active participation. Smaller districts have been able to train the majority of their

supervisors in one group session while larger districts required several sessions. An advisory district found it was helpful to have a senior executive attend the training to help emphasize the importance of the program and training with participants.

Based on feedback from supervisors, districts may also wish to consider providing the training separately to operations/facilities supervisors and school principals/vice-principals in order to focus and facilitate discussion on the specific issues and nature of the relevant employee groups. Districts may also want to consider supplementing the attendance support training with training on managing employees with mental health issues and disability management generally.

To ensure that the training is relevant, comprehensive and effective, the Working Group identified the need for districts to gather and review information about supervisors' experience and feedback on the training. The Working Group has developed a template survey which districts may adapt and use to gather feedback on the supervisor training as well as their experience with implementing the program generally. The template supervisor survey form is attached at **Tab 5**.

Finally, the Working Group also identified that the most cost-effective, sustainable training option would be for the course to be provided through a train-the-trainer model. BCPSEA has begun work with Open Schools BC to develop the training module into a train-the-trainer module and to develop an online refresher course for principals and supervisors; these additional options will be available by early 2017.

### **Communicating with Employees**

Employees are most directly impacted by the implementation of an ASWP. Consistent communications with employees to make clear the purpose and process of the ASWP and respond to any misconceptions are critical to successfully and fairly implementing procedures to support attendance and wellness. Communications should also promote awareness of wellness initiatives and resources within the district.

The means of communications employed will depend on what is best suited to a district's culture, but should provide a consistent and clear message through a variety of formats. Districts have used the following methods:

- brochures or information sheets on the attendance support process, wellness resources and available leaves under the collective agreement, provided directly to employees through internal email or mail
- staff meetings facilitated by supervisors, with support available from Human Resources and/or a template presentation
- developing an employee information video on workplace health and wellness
- explaining the ASWP as part of on-boarding process for new employees, and at every informal check in or other meeting during attendance support process

Employee feedback to communications has been mixed. However, negative feedback has been strongest in cases of communications where the tone or method (such as letters from senior management) was perceived as intimidating. The most effective communications provide information in a relatively low-key, factual

manner through regular communication channels, whether at regular staff meetings, through email or internal mail, and with the knowledge of supervisors.

Finally, the timing of communications is important. Communications to employees should occur after supervisors are trained and consultations have been undertaken with the local unions but, needless to say, before conversations with employees as part of the ASWP.

The Working Group developed template communications materials for employees, including a brochure for employees, email newsletter, and a slide deck presentation and key messages for supervisors to communicate at staff meetings. These materials may be adapted by a district if it chooses to use these methods of communicating about attendance support with its employees. The template materials are attached at **Tab 6**.

### **Specialized Medical Support Services**

The Phase 1 Working Group recommended that districts have access to shared specialized expertise, such as medical advisors and occupational therapists, to provide districts with advice on disability management and accommodations required to support employees under the ASWP. The pilot districts advised that they needed the following two major types of specialist support in implementing a model ASWP:

- a) initial and routine medical advisory services; and
- b) referrals for independent medical evaluation and/or specialist evaluation.

The Working Group explored potential models for providing these specialized medical advisory and evaluation services and decided to engage an external service provider to provide these services to the pilot districts for a trial period. BCPSEA issued a Request for Proposals for disability management services on November 18, 2015. The RFP closed on December 31, 2015. An evaluation committee reviewed the proposals over January 2016 and selected Homewood Health Inc. as the successful proponent.

BCPSEA and the pilot districts will evaluate the model and services over the one-year trial period in order to evaluate the efficacy of the model, volume and nature of claims arising under the Initiative, and feasibility of expanding services to other districts.

### **EDAS Enhancements**

To ensure that attendance data can be reviewed at the provincial level, Phase 2 of the Initiative also involved upgrades to EDAS. These upgrades will include collection of unpaid leave days and hours due to illness or injury, and allow for more detailed provincial analysis of attendance data based on various types of leave. BCPSEA is working with the HRIS vendors and school districts on software development and testing to make the necessary upgrades to the vendor and EDAS systems. The Phase 2 EDAS upgrades are expected to be complete for the December 2016 collection (January 2017 submission).

## **Outcomes and Impact of the Program**

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### **Progress to milestones**

An effective attendance support program cannot be developed or implemented quickly. Both pilot and advisory districts found that the planning and development of an effective ASWP takes careful deliberation

and time. Most of the first year of implementation may involve planning, consultations with stakeholders, and enhancing and refining foundational elements such as district data collection and analysis capabilities, disability management processes and wellness initiatives.

The three advisory districts have fully implemented their ASWPs among all employee groups and regularly have informal check-in conversations with employees in the 95<sup>th</sup>-100<sup>th</sup> percentile of absenteeism of their employee groups. In two advisory districts, some employees have progressed to the formal support meeting stage. The number of employees involved in the ASWP in each advisory district ranges from 13 to over 300. In general, far fewer employees participate in the attendance support process than are identified during the data review phase. For example, in one advisory district, an average of 395 employees are identified in each quarterly review period over a one year period, but only 332 employees have actually had informal check in conversations with their supervisor.

Of the seven pilot districts, two districts have fully implemented an ASWP and commenced having informal check-in conversations with employees. Three other pilot districts are moving steadily toward implementation of attendance support over the summer and fall 2016. The final two pilot districts will need more time to continue consultations with their local unions and ensure adequate resourcing before proceeding to implement an ASWP. For example, in one pilot district, the loss of several personnel responsible for the project near the start of the school year meant that there were insufficient resources within the district to proceed.

Inadequate resources within a district was identified by the Working Group as a potential risk in the Initiative, which we sought to mitigate through centralized advice and support through BCPSEA, the development of template materials and resources to support pilot districts, and the funding grant provided by the Ministry to support the Initiative in each school district in March 2015. The risk may be further mitigated by other school districts who wish to implement an ASWP taking advantage of the resources developed during the pilot year and centralized advice from BCPSEA, and participating in ongoing discussions with advisory and pilot districts. Another possibility is for school districts to share resources such as common or regional Attendance Support and Wellness Manager. However, districts should be aware that the development and implementation of an ASWP requires an investment of time and resources, and likely requires at least one position to be available within the district to drive the initiative forward.

### **Impact of the program**

As the pilot districts spent most of the year carefully engaging in consultations, planning and development of an ASWP, there is insufficient quantitative data to evaluate the effect of the common attendance support procedures developed as part of Phase 2 of the Initiative.

Advisory districts which have had ASWPs in place for some time have seen a positive impact from the program, both in terms of employee experience and costs. All advisory districts have received positive feedback from employees about their experiences and the supports offered to them through the ASWP. Advisory districts have also seen increased utilization of wellness resources, such as the EFAP and LifeSpeak on

Demand, which shows that the ASWP successfully increases employee awareness of available resources to support their health and wellness.

In addition, while not the primary goal of an ASWP, advisory districts have also seen increased cost savings after implementing attendance support. An advisory district saw reduced numbers of incidental absences among employee groups, resulting in a 14.7% reduction in replacement costs (approximately \$1.25 million) from the year prior to implementing an attendance support process. Another advisory district experienced a 39% reduction in incidental absences for employees who participated in the ASWP and approximately 1,403 fewer total replacement days for all employee groups in the year following implementation of an ASWP; this resulted in approximately \$450,000 savings in replacement costs. Finally, another district has seen a decrease in the total average sick days within the district from previous years, resulting in an approximate \$100,000 savings in replacement costs.

A pilot district also realized a significant positive impact in one employee group in particular. In fall 2015, the district filled a previously vacant supervisor position and provided the new supervisor with training to support employee attendance and wellness. The supervisor began to have informal, supportive check-in conversations with employees. Despite a very similar workforce from the previous year, the district found the employee group had 2800 fewer sick leave hours than the previous year, resulting in an approximate cost savings of \$70,000 over a four month period.

The Working Group discussed the importance of measuring, monitoring and tracking both quantitative and qualitative benefits to determine the immediate, mid-term and long term effectiveness of the Initiative. A Working Group member is representing the Initiative and participating on a broader K-12 sector Benefits Tracking Working Group. This member will help to validate the content and approach of a benefits tracking framework by providing advice and recommendations on a logic model and key performance indicators for the Initiative. Both working groups recognize the importance of focusing on the purpose of the Initiative – supporting employees to optimize their health, wellness and ability to attend work – versus cost savings, when developing this framework and associated measures.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

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The pilot implementation year has helped to identify what works well and what can be done better in the planning, development and implementation of an ASWP in school districts. While each pilot and advisory district has faced unique challenges and developed unique solutions to support employees' attendance and wellness, we provide the following key recommendations to school districts seeking to develop and implement an ASWP:

1. *One size does not fit all.* Implementing attendance support will often involve a change in culture among employees, supervisors and unions in the district. Districts should proceed slowly and carefully, with fulsome consultation, in order to tailor their project plan and attendance support procedures to the district's needs and resources. The first step is to understand the district's purposes in developing and implementing an attendance support and wellness program so that the program can be developed

consistently with this intent and clearly communicated to all stakeholders. While a district's program must be tailored to its needs, resources and purposes, districts should incorporate the "critical elements" outlined in the Toolkit into their program to help ensure a consistent, coordinated and legally defensible approach to attendance support and wellness across the sector.

2. *Communications and consultations are vitally important.* The consultation and communications process for attendance support may take significant time. In order to ensure stakeholders understand the program and its intent and correct misunderstandings, districts should engage in a variety of consultations and communications. The tone, message and timing of communications must be carefully and thoughtfully developed to ensure they are clear and consistent with the district's intent, program and culture. Several districts have recommended monthly meetings with unions to ensure they are kept up to date on, and involved in, the planning and progress of the program. Districts should listen carefully and adjust the program, as necessary and without eliminating any "critical elements", based on feedback from supervisors, employees, unions and other stakeholders.
3. *Planning and development of an ASWP requires an investment of time and resources.* It may take significant time to set the foundations of attendance support, such as wellness initiatives, effective disability management processes, and accurate data collection and analysis. We recommend that districts use the Needs Assessment and Readiness Audit Tool (Tab 2), and access centralized advice through BCPSEA, to develop a realistic project plan, identify challenges (such as change management) and ensure they have sufficient internal resources available to implement the plan. It is also valuable for districts to obtain a holistic view of employee health and wellness in the district to set priorities before proceeding with implementation of attendance support, including gathering information from their EFAP and benefits providers, employee surveys, unions and other sources.
4. *Districts may be surprised by the data.* In several pilot districts, Human Resources believed it knew the employees and groups where absenteeism was most significant. However, many found that, once the data was reviewed, there were patterns of high absenteeism among employees and employee groups of which the district was previously unaware and which would have been overlooked without a consistent, systematic process.
5. *Expect challenges.* As described above, stakeholders will have concerns any time there is a change in culture, which often occurs when implementing an ASWP. We recommend that districts mitigate challenges through careful development and implementation of their programs. For example:
  - a. ensure each stage of the ASWP is clear and applied consistently (including what is meant by an absence, what absences are included in attendance data, and the process for determining whether an employee will be involved in the program);
  - b. ensure that the district's systems are collecting and reviewing data accurately and in accordance with best practices, and individuals with similar attendance patterns are treated consistently (including noting why exceptions are made to take into account individual circumstances); and
  - c. invest in training those involved in implementing the program. This requires more than a single meeting or orientation and should involve regular follow-up or refresher training to provide ongoing support.

6. *Persevere*. Districts which have implemented ASWPs have found very positive experiences from the perspectives of both the district and employees. While implementation of an ASWP may involve challenges, the changes brought by pro-actively and fairly supporting employees are consistently positive.

## Next Steps

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BCPSEA and the Ministry's SDB, in conjunction with Working Group members, will be taking the following steps to continue to support the Initiative over the next 2016-2017 school year:

- Continue implementation, evaluation and sustainment of attendance support and wellness programs in the Phase 2 pilot school districts;
- Continue to refine and evaluate the common attendance support procedures and resources based on the experiences of school districts and feedback from stakeholders;
- Plan and implement attendance support and wellness programs in other school districts which have self-identified as interested in proceeding with implementing an attendance support and wellness program during the upcoming 2016-2017 school year ("Phase 3");
- Continue consultations and engagement with employees, unions, employee associations and other stakeholder groups on the ASWP and related initiatives;
- Evaluate a model of centralized specialized medical support and disability management services to Phase 2 pilot school districts and develop recommendations for providing these services to all school districts;
- Develop a benefits tracking framework, including a logic model and key performance indicators, to evaluate the impact of attendance support among school districts;
- Develop additional training options for supervisors in meeting responsibilities for attendance support, including through a train-the-trainer model and an online refresher course; and
- Finalize enhancements to EDAS to allow provincial analysis of attendance and leave data.