



## Year 7 Evaluation Report

# Understanding Impact

Prepared by All in For Youth, The Community-University Partnership for the Study of Children, Youth, and Families and Concordia University

# Table of Contents

<b>2</b>	<b>LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY</b>
<b>6</b>	<b>YEAR 7 EVALUATION FOCUS &amp; DATA</b>
<b>8</b>	<b>THE AIFY SCHOOL COMMUNITIES</b>
8	AIFY Schools and The Structure of AIFY Supports
9	School Enrolment, Demographics, and Vulnerability Scores
<b>10</b>	<b>YEAR 7 SUPPORT AND SERVICE USE</b>
11	Support and Service Type Comparison
12	Use of Multiple Supports and Services
<b>13</b>	<b>YEAR 7 IMPACTS &amp; OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE FUTURE</b>
14	Family Wellbeing
17	Sense of Inclusion & Support/Safety
20	Positive Child-Adult Relationships
22	Student Mental Health & Wellbeing
24	Student Engagement & Life Skills
28	Opportunities for Growth
<b>29</b>	<b>LOOKING FORWARD</b>
<b>31</b>	<b>REFERENCES</b>



## **LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

All in for Youth and their partners acknowledge that AIFY schools are located within Treaty 6 territory and Métis Nation of Alberta Region 4. We respect the histories, ancestors, medicines, languages and teachings of this land that continue to nurture our spirits and positively impact our lives. It is in reciprocal relationships with Indigenous people that the work of AIFY is possible. We are able to work, live and play on Treaty 6 territories and Métis homelands because of the generosity of Indigenous nations.

# Executive Summary

In 2016, All in for Youth (AIFY) was formed as a collaborative partnership of 10 organizations to support vulnerable children in Edmonton. The aim was to provide high quality teaching and learning environments, and enable strong communities through focused, supportive services available to children and their families as school-based supports. Originally a five year pilot program, AIFY is now in Year 7 and has evolved to include 8 schools, providing supports and services to thousands of students and families.

## WHAT IS ALL IN FOR YOUTH?

AIFY's mission is to end the cycle of poverty for children in Edmonton by providing school-based wraparound supports to children and their families. Various supports are provided to children and families to ensure critical needs are met and children have the best chance possible to thrive academically and personally and ultimately complete high school.

Wraparound supports provided by AIFY include:

- Nutrition support
- Child and family mental health therapy
- Child and youth mentoring
- Child and youth success coaching
- Out-of-school-time programming (OST)
- Roots and Wings In-home family support services

AIFY's wraparound model is evidence-based and provides schools and practitioners with a way to work together more effectively as they support the complex needs of students and families (Hill, 2020, Malone, 2020). Evidence indicates wraparound supports are effective when it comes to producing positive outcomes (e.g., student wellbeing, graduation, etc.; Maier et al., 2017), and that access to these services help students and their families overcome social, psychological and economical challenges. Unaddressed, these challenges can have a detrimental effect on children and youth's development and future success (Hill, R.A. 2020, Malone, H. J. (2020.)

There are currently 11 partner organizations that comprise AIFY:



## IMPACTS OF ALL IN FOR YOUTH

This year's evaluation focused on the impact of AIFY on students, families, and alumni. Various sources of qualitative, quantitative, and secondary data are used to capture the context and impacts in Year 7 of the AIFY initiative. New for this year, the research team utilized art-based data collection methods (Draw-and-Speak and Photovoice) with students alongside in-depth interviews with alumni and caregivers. Focusing on the experiences of students and families across various levels of the AIFY initiative allowed us to better understand the full reach and impact of AIFY supports and services in their lives. An overview of key findings on these impacts and recommendations for the future is provided below.

### Family Wellbeing

AIFY addresses families' **critical needs** through its in-school provision of essential supports. Families said that this helps to reduce the burden of financial need and provides emotional relief because they have a safety net of support for their children and family.

AIFY **removes barriers to service** access because students and families are more easily able to access needed supports in school, which otherwise can be difficult to navigate outside of school (due to such things as restrictive criteria, long waitlists, fragmented services, transportation challenges). Additionally, when families require supports beyond the scope of AIFY, staff help families to navigate external services, which makes access easier.

AIFY fosters **collaborative school-home relationships**. When caregivers have collaborative relationships with school and AIFY partners, they said they can better support their children because all partners are aligned with shared goals and strategies, which provides a consistent environment for the child to grow their skills.

### Sense of Inclusion and Support

AIFY schools foster a **positive, supportive, and caring environment**. Students and families said that this supportive school culture enhanced their sense of connectedness and trust with the school, which made them feel more comfortable in going to the school for support if needed.

AIFY schools promote **cultural inclusion and empower students**. Students said that these efforts (e.g., recognizing student diversity and promoting inclusive messages) made them feel like their school was a safe space.

AIFY supports and services provide **safe and supportive spaces for students**. In AIFY spaces, students said that they could relax, decompress, and reach out to trusted AIFY staff for help if needed, and they felt comfortable and supported.

### Positive Child-Adult Relationships

AIFY supports and services provided students with opportunities to build **trusting and supportive relationships with staff**. Students said that these trusting relationships made them feel safe to go to AIFY staff when they needed support.

Families emphasized that AIFY staff are **positive role models** for students and **fostered healthy child-adult relationships** with them, which is key for healthy child development. Caregivers said that AIFY staff were safe adults for their child to go to for advice when they were not comfortable speaking to their family and helped students to make positive choices.

## Student Engagement and Life Skills

AIFY's **recreational activities** brought **fun and enrichment** to students' lives.

Recreational programming provided students with the opportunity to try new and engaging activities, spend time with friends, and take a break from the stress of school and life. Without this service, students said they would likely participate in less productive activities after school.

AIFY's **learning and homework support** helped students to manage schoolwork and understand class concepts, which made students feel better equipped to succeed in school. This was particularly important for students who do not have a home environment conducive to studying or family members available to help them.

AIFY helped students develop **life skills in and out of school** and **plan for life after graduation**.

Students received guidance from AIFY staff on skills and strategies for success in school (e.g., time management), as well as outside of school (e.g., job and university applications). Students said that this helped them to plan for and achieve their goals and made them feel less overwhelmed.

## Opportunities for Growth

Continue to invest time and resources in fostering collaborative relationships between families and school and agency staff on planning for student care.

Continue to develop and expand strategies to promote cultural inclusion and empowerment in school spaces (e.g., such as through posters or artwork with inclusive and welcoming messages).

Disseminate information about available AIFY supports and services to caregivers to reduce the knowledge gap about supports and provide families with the opportunity to self refer for support.

Invest funding and resources into the AIFY staff workforce so there is adequate staff capacity to meet student needs and to reduce staff burnout and turnover.

Increase the availability of supports and services (i.e., more spaces available for students or greater service availability throughout the week) so that more students are able to access needed supports.

## Mental Health and Wellbeing

AIFY supports helped students process and regulate their emotions and navigate life challenges. When students accessed mental health supports, they said that they experienced an **improved sense of mental health and wellbeing**.

AIFY supports helped students with their **social and emotional skills** (e.g., self-management, coping, and communication). Students and caregivers said that this helped students to grow their skills and succeed in school and life.

# Evaluation Focus & Data

The All in for Youth (AIFY) Year 7 evaluation focused on the impact of AIFY supports and services on students, their families, and front-line staff. We collected data with students in elementary, junior high, and high school, using arts-based data collection techniques, and interviewed student alumni of an AIFY high school as well as caregivers. Finally, we analyzed quantitative data provided by schools and agency partners on student enrolment, demographics, and service provision and use. Focusing on the experiences of students and families across various levels of the AIFY initiative allowed us to better understand the full reach and impact of AIFY supports and services in their lives.

## **Data source: Draw-and-Speak**

**Collected from:** 48 Elementary students (grades 1-6) across 3 AIFY schools, St. Alphonsus, John A. McDougall and Delton.

**How did it work?** Students participated in an art-based focus group known as Draw-and-Speak. In small groups, students were asked to draw pictures of the impact that AIFY supports and services had on them. While drawing their pictures, interviewers asked questions such as: What does AIFY mean to you? What AIFY staff do you connect with at your school? Students shared what AIFY meant to them through their drawings and in discussions with the researchers. Draw-and-Speak took place at AIFY schools during their Out-of-School Time (OST) spring break camp.

Drawings are used throughout the [Impacts & Opportunities](#) section to emphasize and illustrate the impact themes.

## **Data source: Photovoice**

**Collected from:** 13 Junior High students (grades 7-9) from Spruce Avenue. 14 High School students (grades 10-12) from Eastglen.

**How did it work?** Students participated in an arts-based data collection method known as Photovoice. Students were asked to take photos that represented their responses to the question: How has AIFY impacted your life? To prepare students for this process, the researchers led a brainstorming session with the students where they asked questions such as: Who are the AIFY staff at your school? What AIFY supports and services do you participate in? What does it mean to you to have these supports and services? Before students took their photos, they were provided with instructions on ethics and consent. For example, students were not permitted to take personally-identifying photos of peers. For adults over 18, such as AIFY agency staff, students were required to ask for permission to take a photo and complete a consent form.

Junior High students were provided with disposable cameras to take the photos. The researchers provided instructions on how to use the cameras. High School students used their phones to take their photos, since all high school students who participated in the project owned their own phone. A photography teacher at Eastglen provided the students with basic instructions and tips on how to take photos. The Junior High

photovoice project took place during OST spring break camp, while the High School project took place after school at their OST program.

Students took their photos over a 2 week period. Once students had a series of photos, they participated in interviews where they picked their top five photos and discussed why they took each of the photos, what they mean to them, and what AIFY supports and services at their school mean to them. When the photovoice projects were completed, a pizza party was held at each school for the students with a slide show of their favourite photos.

Photos are used throughout the **Impacts & Opportunities** section to emphasize and illustrate the impact themes.

### **Data source: Student Alumni Interviews**

**Collected from:** 4 Student alumni (Graduates from Eastglen High School).

**How did it work?** Alumni of Eastglen were invited to take part in interviews based on their experience with AIFY supports and services. The research team was connected to alumni by school staff at the AIFY high school. Alumni were also recruited through a snow-ball sampling method, in which an interview participant connects the research team to another individual who might be interested in participating in an interview. Interviews took place in person, over the phone, or via video chat. Alumni received a \$25 gift card as thank you for their participation.

### **Data source: Family Survey and Interviews with Parents and Caregivers**

**Collected from:** 72 Family Survey Respondents. 16 Caregiver Interview Participants.

**How did it work?** Parents and caregivers (collectively referred to as “caregivers”) were recruited to participate in surveys and/or interviews. First, the research team attended events at AIFY schools such as parent-teacher conferences, Celebration of Learning, and family bingo night. At these events, the research team spoke with caregivers and provided them with the option to complete a survey to share their impressions of the impact of AIFY supports and services. The research team attended 10 in-person events across the 8 AIFY schools, attending at least 1 event at each school and 2 events at 2 schools.

The family survey provided the caregivers with the option to participate in a more in-depth follow up interview on their experiences with AIFY. Some survey respondents expressed interest in completing a follow up interview and other interview participants were connected to the research team by school and AIFY staff. In total, 16 caregivers participated in interviews, in which they were asked to share more information about their experiences with AIFY and the impact AIFY supports have on their children and family. Interviews took place in person, over the phone, or via video chat. Parents received a \$25 gift card as thank you for their participation.

### **Data source: Quantitative Data from AIFY Schools and Agencies**

**Collected from:** AIFY Schools (e.g., Data on student enrolment and demographics and AIFY service use for each school).

AIFY Service Delivery (i.e., Data on the number of students accessing targeted AIFY supports and information about service adaptations due to the pandemic).

Documents for review (Notes from AIFY meetings held during the 2022–2023 school year).

### **Why are arts-based data collection methods beneficial for research with children and youth?**

Arts based methods are an evidence-informed data collection method that can be used with a variety of participants. It allows participants to articulate their thoughts, feelings and ideas through images such as their drawings or photographs. Draw-and-Speak and Photovoice are such examples. Draw-and-Speak is a useful method of research with younger children as language abilities are often limited in this developmental period. Drawing allows children to articulate their thoughts and ideas that they may be challenged to express simply with words. Draw-and-Speak allows children to express, elaborate, and communicate their ideas to others (Pope, Tallon, Leslie et al., 2018). By simultaneously drawing and talking, individuals are able to communicate more complex ideas or thoughts, while researchers are less likely to misinterpret their meaning (Punch 2002; Angell, Alexander & Hunt, 2015).

# The AIFY School Communities

## AIFY SCHOOLS AND THE STRUCTURE OF AIFY SUPPORTS

Currently, there are 8 AIFY schools. AIFY was first implemented in 5 schools in 2016 and expanded to 3 more schools in 2021. The structure of AIFY supports and services in each school is outlined in the following visual. Due to limited resources, there are some differences in the capacity of AIFY agency staff in individual schools; for example, not all schools have access to full time AIFY agency staff.

## AIFY SCHOOLS AND THE STRUCTURE OF AIFY SUPPORTS

◐ Part-time   ◉ Full-time

<b>Abbott Elementary*</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◐ Mentoring Facilitator</li> <li>◐ Success Coach</li> <li>◐ Mental Health Therapist</li> <li>◐ Roots and Wings Worker</li> <li>◐ Nutrition Support Worker</li> </ul>	<b>Delton Elementary</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◉ OST Coordinator</li> <li>◐ Mentoring Facilitator</li> <li>◉ Success Coach</li> <li>◉ Mental Health Therapist</li> <li>◉ Roots and Wings Worker</li> <li>◐ Nutrition Support Worker x3</li> </ul>	<b>John A. McDougall Elementary</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◉ OST Coordinator</li> <li>◐ Mentoring Facilitator</li> <li>◐ Success Coach</li> <li>◉ Mental Health Therapist</li> <li>◉ Roots and Wings Worker</li> <li>◐ Nutrition Support Worker x2</li> </ul>	<b>Norwood Elementary</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◐ Mentoring Facilitator</li> <li>◐ Success Coach</li> <li>◐ Mental Health Therapist</li> <li>◐ Roots and Wings Worker</li> <li>◐ Nutrition Support Worker x2</li> </ul>
<b>Ivor Dent Elementary and Junior High</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◐ Mentoring Facilitator</li> <li>◐ Success Coach</li> <li>◐ Mental Health Therapist</li> <li>◐ Roots and Wings Worker</li> <li>◐ Nutrition Support Worker</li> </ul>	<b>St. Alphonsus Elementary and Junior High</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◉ OST Coordinator</li> <li>◐ Mentoring Facilitator</li> <li>◉ Success Coach</li> <li>◐ Mental Health Therapist</li> <li>◐ Roots and Wings Worker</li> <li>◐ Nutrition Support Worker x2</li> </ul>	<b>Spruce Avenue Junior High</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◉ OST Coordinator</li> <li>◐ Mentoring Facilitator</li> <li>◉ Success Coach</li> <li>◉ Mental Health Therapist</li> <li>◉ Roots and Wings Worker</li> <li>◐ Nutrition Support Worker x2</li> </ul>	<b>Eastglen High School</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◉ OST Coordinator</li> <li>◉ Success Coach</li> <li>◉ Mental Health Therapist</li> <li>◐ Roots and Wings Worker</li> </ul>

**Note:** Elementary = Kindergarten to Grade 6; Junior High = Grade 7 to 9; High School = Grade 1- to 12. Norwood and Ivor Dent have nearby sites that offer OST programming within walking distance to their schools.

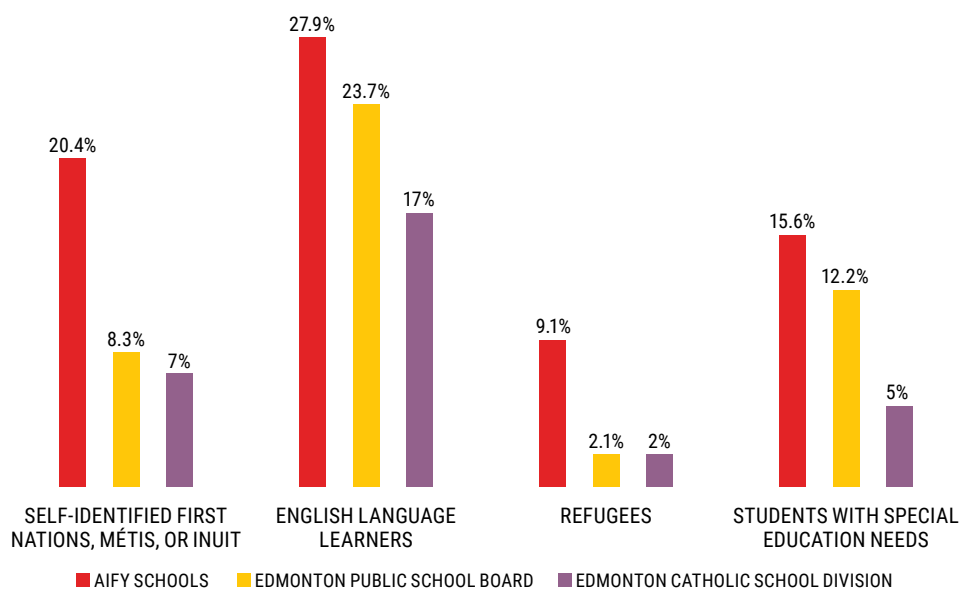
\*New AIFY school as of 2021



## SCHOOL ENROLLMENT, DEMOGRAPHICS, AND VULNERABILITY SCORES

In Year 7, approximately **2,940 students and their families** were part of the 8 AIFY school communities. Among students, there are English language learners, refugees, students with special needs, and self-identified First Nations, Métis, or Inuit students (there is also some overlap in students who identify with more than one of these specific populations). Compared to division averages, AIFY schools have higher proportions of these specific student populations, as illustrated in the following visual.

### SUB-POPULATION DEMOGRAPHICS, AIFY COMPARED TO DIVISION AVERAGES



It is important to acknowledge the diversity of students and families that make up AIFY school communities, because this connects to the varied experiences and needs of students. Children and youth from across the eight schools experience a range of potential barriers to learning; therefore, AIFY supports and resources are responsive to the unique needs of each child and family in their critical efforts to remove learning barriers, so all students are set up for success.



# Support and Service Use

AIFY provides comprehensive school-based wraparound services for students and families. These services are developed around evidence-based practices and help remove barriers so that students are able to succeed in school and life. This past year in particular students and families are faced with additional complexities that can compound the struggles they face. The number of low income families in Edmonton has steadily increased since 2021 (Statistics Canada, 2023) alongside food insecurity and housing prices (ECF, 2023). This has resulted in a greater demand on social services and is predicted to continue to rise through 2024 (Alberta Seniors, 2023). The visual on page 11 provides a snapshot of the magnitude and breadth of support students and families received from AIFY during Year 7.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>There may have been student entries that were duplicated. However, this is not expected to significantly impact the data as reported.





### NUTRITION SUPPORT

**204,280 meals served** throughout the school year across all 8 schools

**202,332 snacks served** throughout the school year across all 8 schools



### OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME

**718** students participated in **OST programs**

**OST programs** attended **14,005** times by students during the year

**160** students attended **summer camp programming**



### MENTORING

**288** students supported by a **mentor** (school, community, corporate, staff, or peer mentor)

**55 junior high and high school students** participated as mentors for younger students



### SUCCESS COACHING

**63** students supported as **formal clients**

**729** students supported through **short-term engagements**

**242** students supported through **group engagement**



### ROOTS & WINGS FAMILY SUPPORT

**61** students and family members supported as **formal clients**

**209** students and family members supported through **short-term engagements**

**7** students and family members supported through **group engagement**



### MENTAL HEALTH THERAPY

**233** students/families supported as **formal clients**

**433** students/families supported through **short-term engagements**

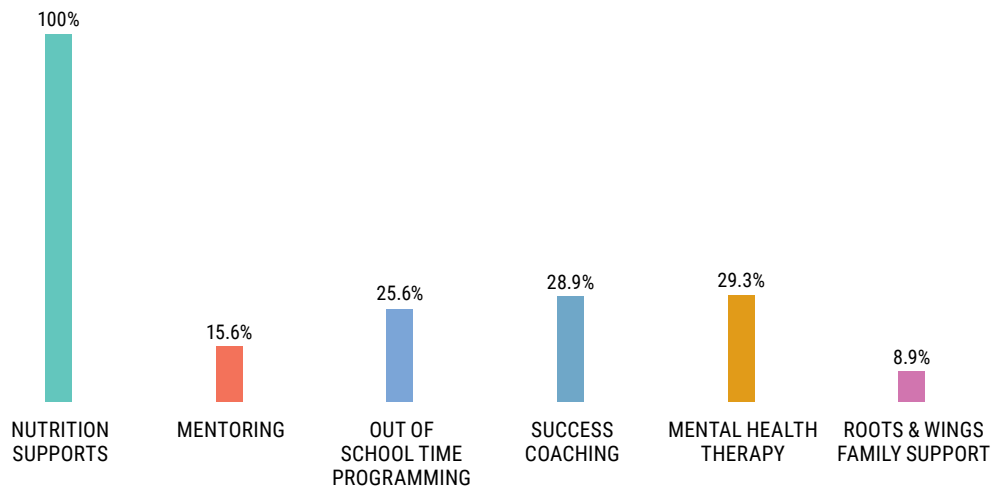
**406** students/families supported through **group engagement**

#### SUPPORT AND SERVICE TYPE COMPARISON

In Year 7, approximately **1,993 individual students and their families** accessed *targeted* AIFY supports and services, which represented **67.8% of the student population across the 8 schools**. Targeted supports include mentoring, out-of-school programming, success coaching, mental health therapy, and Roots and Wings family support. This does not include nutrition supports, which are a *universal* support because they are available to and used by all students across the 8 schools.

The following visual provides a breakdown of all service use based on the proportion of the total student population that used services, including universal and targeted services.

**PROPORTION OF STUDENTS USING SUPPORTS AND SERVICES, BY SERVICE TYPE, %**



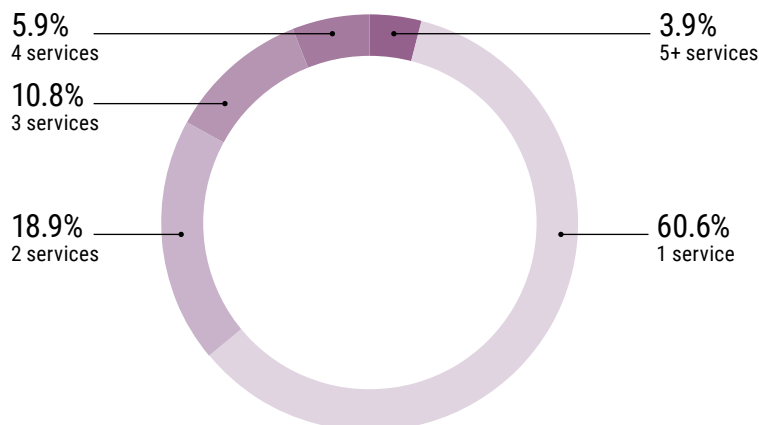
A substantial proportion of the total student population accessed mental health therapy, success coaching, and out-of-school programming, with **close to 1/3** accessing **mental health therapy** and **success coaching** and **over 1/4** accessing **out of school time programming (OST)**.

OST typically has a high level of service use because this service is able to support many students at once (i.e., it is not a 1:1 support). Additionally, mental health therapists and success coaches are able to support a large number of students and families by providing support on a short-term basis and in group settings. In Year 7, success coaching and mental health therapy was accessed most often on a short-term basis (70.5% and 40.4%, respectively) or in a group setting (23.4% and 37.9%), with the remaining services accessed over the long-term (6.1% and 21.7%). This demonstrates the adaptability of AIFY staff to respond to and support large numbers of students and families.

**USE OF MULTIPLE SUPPORTS AND SERVICES**

Many students accessed more than one *targeted* AIFY service at their school (i.e., mentoring, out-of-school programming, success coaching, mental health therapy, and Roots and Wings family support, on a formal, short-term, or group basis). In fact, **approximately 40% of students** accessed **multiple targeted AIFY services** to meet their needs, excluding nutrition.

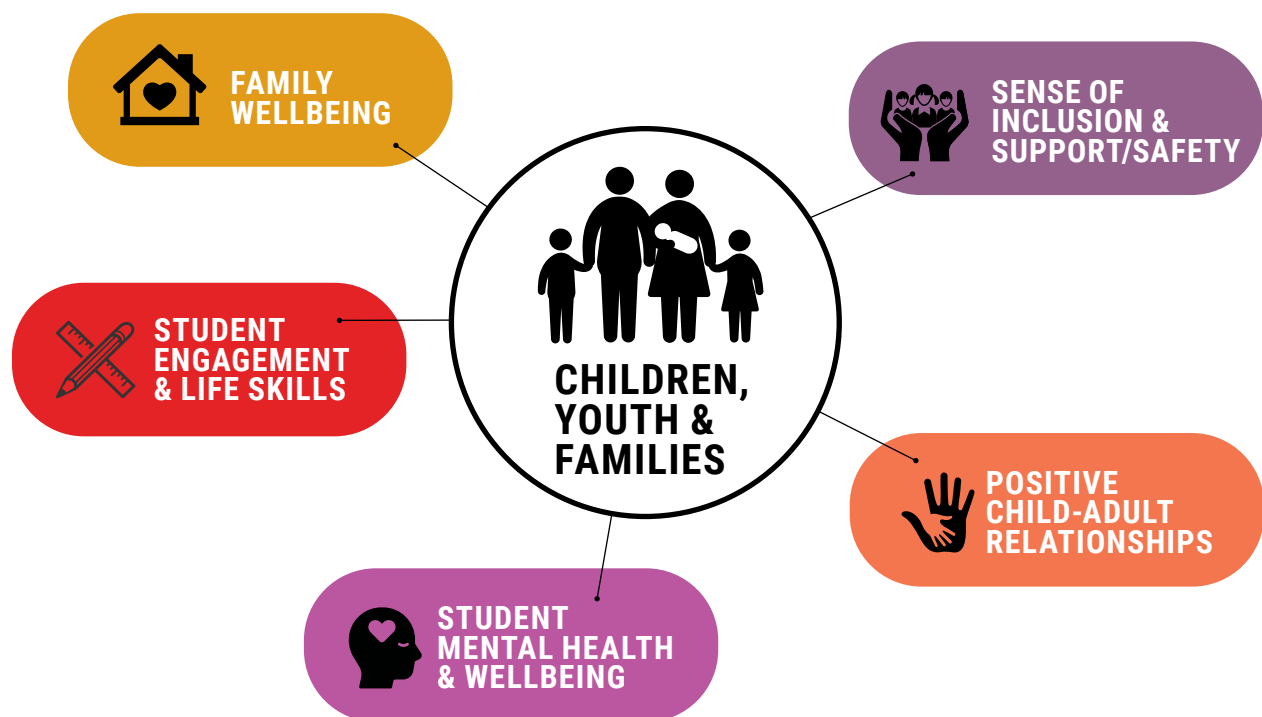
**USE OF MULTIPLE TARGETED SERVICES**



This shows that students and families are frequently accessing multiple supports to meet their needs. Families may be experiencing challenges, for which one service type is not sufficient to remove critical barriers. Therefore, AIFY is providing students and their families with the ability to access multiple coordinated supports as needed.

# Impacts & Opportunities for the Future

The Year 7 evaluation focused on the impact of AIFY supports and services provided to students and families. To understand these impacts, we collected data from students in elementary, junior high, and high school, student alumni, and parents and caregivers, through interviews, focus groups, and arts-based data collection methods. The findings are organized according to **5 key impact areas**.



In the following sections, the term “caregiver” is used to refer to both parents and caregivers who play the role of primary caregiver in children’s lives. Students are identified by their level of schooling, including elementary students (written as “EL Student”), junior high students (“JH Student”), high school students (“HS Student”), and student alumni (“alumnus”).



## FAMILY WELLBEING

### FULFILLING UNMET NEEDS

AIFY supports and services helped families to access critical resources (e.g., nutrition, clothing, and housing) which reduced the financial burdens that they faced. Caregivers and students often shared that they struggled to access critical resources needed for their family. One caregiver shared, “I can’t afford it,” referring to private mental health services for her child. Another caregiver commented, “I’m just barely floating above water, right?...You got your house, you got the car, you got insurance, you got groceries, bills and everything.” With AIFY, however, students and caregivers explained they were able to access supports to address their unmet needs, with one caregiver sharing, “having this program gives us some really huge relief...the parents don’t have to struggle as much.”

Specifically, many families discussed struggling with the cost of food prices and high inflation. AIFY nutrition supports provided families with a source of food security which eased their financial burden. One caregiver explained, “It helps me because...five days out of the week...I know that they’re [children] having at least some nutrition in their life.” Another caregiver shared:

*We’re a low-income family, so not having to pack a lunch or snack every day really saves me a lot of money. ... [And] it feels good knowing that my kid is coming home, and she’s been fed. It just takes a lot of stress off my shoulders.*

Similarly, a student alumni shared that they had more regular meals when they were in school because of the nutritional supports, “If you didn’t have any food at home, you could talk to them [AIFY staff]. And they would supply you with something so you would be alright until the next morning.” Nutrition supports are important because, as emphasized by students, it is needed for everyday functioning, healthy growth and development, and focusing and learning in school:

*If you don’t have food in your body, the rest of the day you can be thinking about the hunger, especially at school. Like me personally, I wouldn’t be able to focus at all if I’m hungry. Being able to go and get food or snacks when you need is like really helpful. (HS Student)*

As a result of the support that AIFY provided, caregivers felt that the burden of stress was reduced, “it’s given us breathing space.” Another caregiver from a single-provider household commented, “it’s always been a struggle being a single mom...It’s not an easy task at all...And without support, it’s a nightmare. So having the support, you feel a little more comfortable.” AIFY provided families with a sense of reassurance that services were in place for their children and family if needed. One caregiver shared, “when we moved here [to the school community], finding out there’s all these resources...I actually cried... This is so amazing.”



*“Parfait” by High School Student*



Apples are a snack provided by AIFY nutrition supports

"Apples" by High School Student

## Local Context: **Did you know?**

Edmonton has seen a steady rise in the number of low income families in Edmonton since 2021, alongside cost of housing and food. A recent report released by the Edmonton Community Foundation and the Edmonton Social Planning Council stated that 20% of Albertans experience food insecurity, a rise from 12% in 2011. Additionally, more than 20% of Alberta children live in food-insecure households, which has long term impacts on children's health such as greater susceptibility to chronic disease, inability to manage chronic disease, and poor mental health. Furthermore, the report found healthy food accounts for 41% of a low-income family's monthly budget, while rent takes up 54% (Edmonton Community Foundation, 2023).

## REMOVING BARRIERS AND SUPPORTING ACCESS TO CRITICAL SUPPORTS

Outside of the AIFY model of support, there are social service agencies that offer external services for families who are struggling; however, caregivers and students shared that it was difficult to access these services. Many caregivers struggled to get connected with the agencies because their systems can be confusing to navigate. This was particularly challenging for newcomer families, "You're new in that country...You don't know where to go...Or where to find this and that" (Caregiver). Some families also did not meet the criteria for support from these service agencies, "A lot of them are really hard to get into" (Caregiver). Furthermore, when families finally got connected to agencies, they experienced long wait times and delayed access to critical support. One caregiver shared that her child needed mental health therapy, but she was placed on a long waitlist, "I've been waiting probably over a year." Another caregiver explained that service agencies are, "just overburdened and overwhelmed." This is difficult because children and youth who are struggling may not be able to wait for support, "it's sort of immediate when you need it [support]...Because when you are in crisis, you need it" (Caregiver).

Alternatively, caregivers and students felt it was easier to access supports in their AIFY school, without the cost, transportation, and time constraints they experienced with external services. One caregiver explained, "It's convenient" and another caregiver commented, "[it] removes barriers." Caregivers explained that having the support in their school made it accessible when needed, "it's actually there...[students] can access it when they need it" (Caregiver). In fact, one caregiver shared, "I don't think the growth that we've seen out of [my son] would be here if these programs weren't readily available inside the school on a daily basis." Additionally, caregivers indicated their children are more comfortable accessing supports in their school environment, rather than through external services which may be perceived as intimidating and are less convenient to access. One caregiver explained this, "Having those resources at the school, as opposed to...let's go see a therapist'...It's not as comfortable or as easy to convince youth to do that. But when they're at the school, it's there, it's accessible."

Although AIFY provides a comprehensive range of supports and services, there are also cases in which families require services that extend beyond the supports offered in school. In such circumstances, caregivers and students explained how AIFY staff helped them navigate the external services. For example, an alumnus explained that she had to leave home in high school and AIFY staff helped her to connect to provincial funding (i.e., Student Learning Benefit) so she was able to continue her education and did not have to drop out of high school to work:

*I was like I can't stay at home anymore. I need to leave. I was talking to my grade coordinator. And I was like, I am freaking out. I need to drop out of school. And I need to go find a second job...I just explained everything that was happening. And he's like..."I think I'm gonna sit you down with a success coach." ...They were like, "AIFY is here to help you."*

The alumnus shared the impact of this support, "It felt like I still had somebody who wanted me to succeed." The alumnus went on to emphasize that if AIFY was in every school, it would, "create a safety net that would catch all these kids that are just falling through the cracks."

Similarly, a caregiver shared that AIFY staff helped connect her to the Bissell Centre so that she could find "a location in Edmonton to rent." The caregiver shared that the AIFY staff made the process easier to navigate, "[The Roots and Wings worker] took me right down there. ...Having him [made] it more comfortable ...it just got the ball moving so much quicker and everything worked out really well." The caregiver went on to share that without this support from the AIFY staff she would have struggled more in navigating services and finding housing support, "I wouldn't have support. ...I would probably still be in a lineup...because there's so many people that are trying to find places in the city...It's not an easy process." Additionally, another caregiver who is a newcomer to Canada shared that AIFY staff helped her find a job, "[The Roots and Wings worker] connected me to some other companies that help newcomers to get jobs. ... it was really, really helpful knowing that someone is trying to help you find a job." Therefore, having AIFY staff to connect families with and navigate external services removed barriers and helped them to access needed resources to promote their wellness and stability.

## COLLABORATIVE SCHOOL-HOME RELATIONSHIPS

Caregivers often spoke about the relationships they developed with their school and AIFY staff. Many caregivers valued the open lines of communication and collaborative relationships with the school and AIFY staff. For example, one caregiver shared:

*I'm also amazed by how they communicate with the parents. We've had a couple of phone calls with 'Hey, you know, there's a little bit of concern, can we talk about this? Is there more support we can give her?' And we were able to talk it out, figure out what was going on. And then I was able to help my daughter out more too.*

Caregivers appreciated it when the school reached out to them about their child, whether it was to talk about their child's strength or areas in which they require support. For example, one caregiver shared, "[The Success Coach] was able to openly talk and be like, 'hey, you know, this is how we can help her,' and then [this] gives both of us different ways to be able to help my daughter." Caregivers said that these collaborative relationships made them feel more connected to their school and better positioned to take a team approach to supporting children with the school and agency staff. One caregiver explained:

*His teacher, me, [the principal], we all talk regularly and we're all on the same page with [my son's] behaviours...We have kind of like a biweekly phone call and [share] updates on how things are going. Behaviours at home that I'd like [the mental health therapist] to explore with him...I'll send her off an email and say, 'hey, you know, can you kind of explore this with [son] a little bit, and see what he's feeling about these things?' Same with the teachers, right? I've got a close relationship with the teacher, we talk regularly about [son's] behaviors.*

This collaborative relationship meant that caregivers and the school were better able to support the child because caregivers, school staff, and AIFY staff had shared goals and strategies at home and at school to support the child. One caregiver illustrated how without a team approach, this can undermine the effectiveness of supports:



*If we're not on the same page, and we're getting confused constantly about the actions of everybody, then I'm in a situation where nobody's actually learning anything. And we're all just wasting our time at that point. So, it's been great for me that everybody in the program and staff has been on board with this as well. They're supporting me, in my decision making...[My son is] getting the help he needs as well.*

Therefore, a team approach to supporting children and youth was emphasized by caregivers to be critical to promoting positive outcomes. Another caregiver shared the impact of this team approach within the AIFY wraparound model:

*I've been through so many programs, and I've been there, done that. I believe this program, the wraparound, is the only successful program that's out there...Because it's not one agency working on one thing, it's multiple agencies...partnering together, [engaging in] communication...Working with the teacher, working with the school.*



## SENSE OF INCLUSION & SUPPORT/SAFETY

### FOSTERING SUPPORTIVE SCHOOL CULTURE

Students and caregivers often discussed the culture at their school and shared that AIFY schools provide a positive, supportive, and caring environment, “the care and the compassion. It just radiates with people” (Caregiver). AIFY schools use trauma-informed, strength-based, and resilience-focused practices to foster student and family wellbeing. Students and caregivers noticed these supportive practices in their school; for example, one caregiver commented on the strength-based support her child received, “everything’s turned from negative to positive... It’s always...What positive can you do?” Another caregiver commented on the trauma-informed and resilience-focused care, “I just think overall the school has a welcoming environment... And there’s a lot of understanding [for] the kids and flexibility.” This supportive school culture was also described to enhance the caregiver’s sense of connectedness and trust with the school which made them more comfortable going to the school for support. For example, one caregiver shared:

*A lot of people will frown upon it [receiving support at school], because getting help at the school involves, well, social services or, you know, things that they’re scared about. But...with [the Roots and Wings worker], he’s very warm, and family orientated. And he just, he cares. So he made it feel safer.*

This supportive school culture meant that the school is a welcoming and safe place for all families. Caregivers felt that their family’s needs were being accommodated and that their children would be well-cared for at school. For example, one caregiver shared, “we’re being listened to.” Another caregiver commented:

*It’s just knowing that when she [child] does have a bad day, she has a safe place at school, she has supports, she has people to keep her safe. You know? Like she’s not just gonna get shrugged off...So it’s nice that she has, like, empathetic people in their circle.*

In fact, a survey<sup>2</sup> across AIFY schools found that 71.3% of students agreed with the prompt, “I know where to get help.” This demonstrates the reach of the supportive environment at school, in which students and families know where they are able to get help at school if needed.

<sup>2</sup>The Youth Resilience Survey was completed by n=1161 students across AIFY schools during the 2022-23 school year.

## What are trauma and resilience?

Trauma-informed practice is focused on providing staff with tools to create a safe environment for all students to learn healthy ways to regulate their emotions and cope (Government of Alberta, 2023). Resilience practices focus on how to recognize and foster an individual's strengths (Ungar, 2011). Together, these practices create a supportive environment for students and families to build their skills for success.

## SCHOOL CULTURE IS INCLUSIVE AND EMPOWERING

Some students spoke about efforts by their AIFY school to promote cultural inclusion and empower all students. Students recognized and appreciated these efforts, which contributed to making school a safe space. For example, one student noticed artwork by Indigenous artists displayed at the front of their school. The student said this was meaningful to them because, "I am part Indigenous. So, it symbolizes my relatives and ancestors...It represents Indigenous culture" and by having this art at the front of the school it promotes the importance of showing, "love and care for one another." Another student shared that there were posters on the wall supporting "Black Lives Matter" and "Every Child Matters." The student explained that these messages are "helping black families and everything [with] racism." When asked what it meant to have supportive messages at school, the student shared, "It feels like I'm in my new home." These simple gestures that recognized student diversity and promoted inclusivity had a significant impact on students and made school spaces more welcoming.

## AIFY PROVIDES SAFE SPACES FOR STUDENTS

AIFY supports and services were described by students to be safe and supportive spaces. Many students spoke about spending time in OST, with OST coordinators and staff, or in the mental health and wellness office, where the mental health therapist, success coach, and Roots and Wings worker are located. Students described these spaces as safe, where they could relax, decompress, and reach out to trusted AIFY staff for help, if needed. For example, one student shared that OST, "is a safe space for people" (JH Student). The student went on to explain:

*You can hang out with friends and [OST staff] and you can have fun time and talk with each other...Like me and some of my friends often hang out there, talking to [OST staff] about what happened [in life] and it's where everyone could hang out with each other and feel good.*

Similarly, another student shared:

*[At OST] we gather around, and we just express our thoughts and talk about our feelings and it's a safe space for us. And...if we need some advice from the staff... we would just ask them and they give us really good advice. (HS Student)*



School entryway that features artwork by an Dakota/Objibway artist Linus Woods

"The Welcome" by Junior High Student

Another student described the impact of having the mental health and wellness office, where students can receive support from mental health staff:

*I go to the [mental health and wellness office]...You could just go there and relax, not think about your day at school. Or talk to [the success coach] or [the mental health therapist]...Like it's basically a place that you could be at without feeling any pressure, or stress or anything. It's just like a safe place to be.*  
(JH Student)

Students felt comfortable to seek refuge in these AIFY spaces when they were feeling overwhelmed. For example, one student shared, "When you don't feel good you can go there [referring to the OST office]" (JH Student). Similarly, another student shared, "[OST] is where I chill every time I have a mental breakdown...It's my happy place" (HS Student).

Students also said that they felt comfortable to be themselves or share their emotions in these spaces without experiencing judgment, with one student sharing, "I'm quiet and I didn't have many friends. At OST I feel comfortable to be myself and I get to show my personality" (HS Student). Another student commented, "OST makes you feel like you belong" (HS Student). Furthermore, students also knew that they would be supported in these spaces by trusted AIFY staff, "[The AIFY staff] is there for you" (JH Student). Overall, these safe spaces were meaningful for students. One student commented, "[OST] feels like home" (JH Student). Another student shared that, without AIFY supports, "A piece of my life would be missing" (JH Student).



School OST office space with the OST Coordinator in the background

"The Meeting Ground" by Junior High Student



## POSITIVE CHILD-ADULT RELATIONSHIPS

### STUDENTS BUILD MEANINGFUL AND TRUSTING RELATIONSHIPS

AIFY supports and services provided opportunities for students to build healthy relationships with staff. For example, students often described having fun with OST staff during the OST after-school program, with one elementary student drawing a photo of her with her OST Coordinator (see photo). Other students spoke about spending time with the mental health staff. For example, at one school, mental health staff ran group activities like “Girls Group” or “Kindness Club” where students could connect. Other students received one-on-one support from mental health staff. One student shared, “[name of mental health staff] is my ‘favourite person’ and explained that “[she] provides good advice” and “makes me calm” (JH Student).

The relationships students had with AIFY staff were meaningful to them. AIFY staff were described as “awesome,” “wonderful,” and “someone to talk to” (JH Students). Students said AIFY staff were safe and trusted adults who they could go to if they needed support. Students also described AIFY staff as their friend in addition to being a responsible adult, “We can be friends. But then when time matters that she [AIFY staff] can also, like, be a trusted adult. Always [a] reliable person too...That nice balance that you want to have” (HS Student). Another student commented, “They’re [AIFY staff are] also like a friend at the same time. So, yeah, you can be close to them, but you can also rely on them” (HS Student).

This trusting relationship meant students felt safe to go to AIFY staff when they needed support. One student explained, “when you’re close with them and understand that they’re trusted adults...it makes it...easy to tell them what you’re going through and everything like that” (HS Student). Another student commented, “I could talk to the staff about anything” (HS Student). This is important because “teens have down days and need someone to talk to” (JH student). Therefore, if students were struggling, they had someone safe to go to rather than dealing with it on their own, as described by one student, “If they [students] have any problems, we’ll come to that person [AIFY staff] and talk about it instead of you know have to, like fight with themselves... because...people keep putting themselves through depression and anxiety” (HS Student). Another student explained, “they could help me if I was in some kind of trouble” (JH Student).

When students connected with AIFY staff, they felt like they received supportive guidance to help them navigate their personal issues. One student commented, “If we need some advice from the staff... we would just ask them and they give us really good advice” (HS Student). Another student remarked, “She’s [OST staff] like a big sister...She helps with everything” (HS Student). Additionally, some students explained that these relationships motivated them to do their best. For example, one alumnus shared that they attended class more regularly because “I wanted



*“Me and Ms. [OST Coordinator]” by Elementary Student*

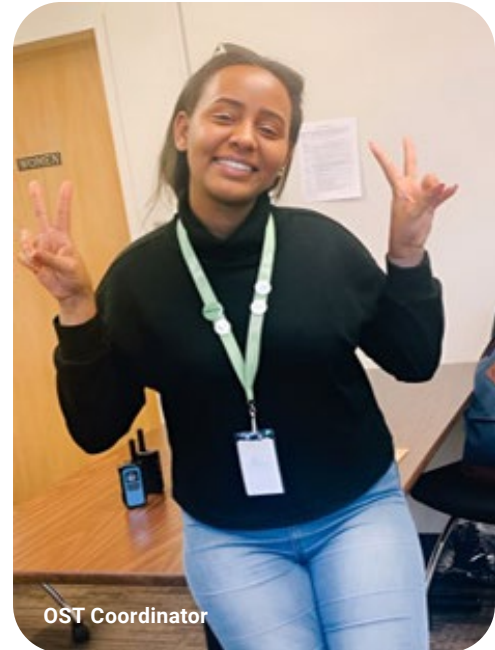
to make them [AIFY staff] feel proud." Finally, these positive relationships with a trusted adult helped students feel supported and built their confidence. One student explained, "All the staff... help[ed] me improve, made me more of a strong person, now [that] I have more support" (HS Student).

## POSITIVE ROLE MODELS FOR STUDENTS

Caregivers emphasized that AIFY staff were positive role models for students and fostered healthy child-adult relationships with them. One caregiver shared, "having those supports, [my daughter] gets to have some good role models...They make her think about her choices." This is important because, as the caregiver explained, children are not always comfortable talking to their family, "I'm her mom...whatever I say is kind of dismissed, but hearing it from other people, I think has impact... these other adults who are positive influences." Another caregiver commented, "There's definitely moments that [name of child] may not feel so good about herself...So speaking to somebody else that's not necessarily mom bridges that gap some days." These relationships are also particularly important for children "who don't have much mentoring or positive mentoring in their family life" (Caregiver). In such cases, when children have positive adult relationships at school, children can see that "there is a different way to live" (Caregiver). Another caregiver whose child had challenging experiences, emphasized the importance of positive adult relationships outside the home:

*The support and the access have all been very positive for [my son], it's showing him a different way of life. And how different things can be...So he's not stopped stuck in one mindset...Different perspectives. Not just mine...He kind of opens them up, so he gets to see a lot of positive interactions with adults.*

Therefore, AIFY staff were able to develop healthy child-adult relationships with students and model positive behaviours, which is important for child development.



"My Supporter" by High School Student



"[Mentoring Coordinator]" by Junior High Student



## STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH & WELLBEING

### STUDENTS FEEL SUPPORTED WITH THEIR MENTAL HEALTH

Students spoke about the significance of mental health support and staff in their school to help them navigate life challenges and receive guidance. One student explained, “[students] can talk about their hard time at home or school. And then [the success coach] and [the mental health therapist] can help” (JH Student). Another student remarked, mental health support “helps with emotions, troubles at home” (JH Student). Furthermore, mental health supports mean that students do not have to struggle alone, as described by another student:

*[The mental health therapist] is someone that you go and talk to if you feel like any kind of strong emotions, it doesn't have to be like, negative, but if it is like a negative emotion like sadness, anger, everything, you can go and talk to her and like get some advice to like deal with what you're going through. And not just hurt yourself or hurt someone else. It really helps [to] process everything. So that's why I feel like it is really important. (JH Student)*

Other students reflected on the impact that access to the AIFY mental health services had on their friends and their own wellbeing. One student shared:

*[The mental health therapist] has like really helped me with my mental health. I was at some time like really struggling. I decided to go and ask her if I could talk to her...She just helps me just say all my problems and stuff and just like feel better after talking to her. (JH Student)*

Another student shared, “if you're not feeling so good. You could go there [the mental health office] and just lay down and not stress too much. Because then you know, you're in a safe place...That is a place that you can relax” (JH Student).

When students received mental health support, they experienced an improved sense of wellbeing. One student shared that the mental health therapist, “provides good advice [and] makes me feel calm” (JH Student). Caregivers also reflected on the impact of mental health support on student wellbeing. One caregiver shared:

*It's part of the culture of the school so there's not a stigma or anything to getting help... I think it also helps normalize like it's okay to get support. Like people do it all the time. It's just, it helps to stay healthy. You don't have to do the journey alone.*

Therefore, mental health supports at school helped students to process and regulate their emotions and achieve wellbeing. Additionally, a culture of positive messaging surrounding mental health helped to remove stigma in getting support.

### AIFY SUPPORTS STUDENTS' SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL SKILLS

Caregivers often shared that AIFY mental health supports and staff had significant impacts on their child's social and emotional skills. Many caregivers explained that their children struggled with self-management and coping; however, with support, they were able to learn supportive strategies to help them. For example, a caregiver shared, “We've been able to work with my daughter and help her out with how to regulate her emotions and deal with, you know, the stressors that are going on



*“[Mental Health Therapist]” by Junior High Student*

around her.” A grade one student spoke about working with mental health staff and learning finger breathing technique to regulate their emotions, which is a mindfulness exercise that helps individuals calm their emotional response by counting their fingers while breathing (see drawing below). Another student described learning about brain science and how to understand and respond to their emotions, “I know a big word for lizard brain, Amygdala” (EM Student).<sup>3</sup> With these supports, students were able to grow their social emotional skills, such as self-management, coping, and communication. For example, one caregiver shared that mental health supports, “helped me teach him management of his behaviors.” Another caregiver commented, “She’s able to regulate her emotions a little bit better, she’s able to communicate a lot more.” A student also shared that AIFY staff helped them feel safe, which helped them to relax (see picture).

For many families, improved social emotional skills demonstrated a meaningful change in their child’s lives. One caregiver shared, “my daughter is a completely different kid than she was when we started the year.” Caregivers explained that their children learned healthy coping skills to set them up for success. For example, one caregiver shared that after receiving support, her daughter learned, “ways to help herself where she felt anxious instead of hurting herself, because [before] she would pick out her fingernails and hurt herself instead.” Caregivers also shared that their children had more confidence and self-esteem. One caregiver shared, “her confidence went up. ...she feels it’s okay to communicate...she will openly tell her emotions, and she will not let anyone tell her that her emotions are not valid.” Similarly, a student shared how AIFY built their self-esteem and helped them know that “I matter” (EM Student). Caregivers also said their children’s improved social and emotional skills had a positive impact on their schooling and relationships.



Finger breathing is a mindfulness exercise that helps individuals calm their emotional response by counting their fingers while breathing

“Finger Breathing” by Elementary Student

*She’s communicating herself better...She used to just get angry and shut down...[but now] she’ll actually just open up and talk...That helps a lot, because it’s hard to understand why is she feeling the way she is?”*

*We’ve had huge amounts of growth...I was talking with [his teacher] and she said, you know, the child that came here...and the child here now...it’s night and day...He’s so much better than the person who was getting started at [school]...He’s doing way better.*

Similarly, another caregiver explained that mental health staff were able to help her child’s self-management skills to set her up for success in her relationships. The caregiver explained that before receiving support, her child was “getting upset, she was lashing out, she was hurting her peers, she was getting frustrated. And it was causing such a blow up that none of her peers wanted to be anywhere near her, they were terrified of her.” The caregiver went on to explain:

*And then we started working with AIFY. And her friendships got...a lot better. She was a lot happier. She wanted to go to school more often...She’s a whole different kid. She’s a lot calmer and they’re able to regulate her a lot more in class when she’s getting upset.*

Therefore, working with mental health staff had significant impacts on students’ social and emotional skills and helped to set them up in school and life.

<sup>3</sup>Lizard brain is a metaphor for the amygdala, the part of the limbic system which is responsible for processing our emotions, such as fear. Mental health staff teach students the Lizard Brain concept when working on self regulation with students so they can better understand and manage their emotional responses.



## STUDENT ENGAGEMENT & LIFE SKILLS

### AIFY PROVIDES OPPORTUNITIES FOR FUN, SOCIALIZATION, AND RECREATION

AIFY provides opportunities for students to participate in recreational activities which bring fun and enrichment to their lives through the OST after-school and mentoring programs. Students and caregivers spoke about different activities, such as arts and crafts, cooking, gardening, and sports and physical activities, in addition to homework support. Students explained that these activities provided “an opportunity to enjoy yourself and have fun” (HS Student). For example, one student shared, “We’ve been doing cooking[sic] during OST...[it’s a] great opportunity to learn how to cook” (JH Student). Another student discussed playing sports at OST, “the opportunities to have fun and get better at sports...It helps your mental health and physical health get better, strengthens your body and opens up your mind” (JH Student).

Students explained that participating in fun and engaging activities as a part of AIFY meant that they could try new activities, spend time with peers, and take a break from the stress of school and life. One student explained, “With school we don’t really have enough time to like, play games and stuff like that. ...Especially with finals coming up and stuff. We are studying a lot. We just need some time for your mind to take off” (HS Student). Another student shared, “It gives me time to rest my brain from school stuff. Because I have a lot of classes this year. And my brain is overloaded...So I really like a rest” (HS Student). Furthermore, many activities in OST, such as arts and crafts and gardening, were described to be calming and promote self-care. One student explained how gardening is a self-care activity:

*Well, sometimes you just need like, a calming activity to do. The plants, it’s honestly, it’s really fun. You can check on them every day, water them, and see the progress...It’s almost like taking care of yourself as you’re taking care of the plants because you both are growing, in a mentally, physically way. So sometimes getting some alone time with the plants can be very good for yourself. (HS Student)*

Additionally, OST and mentoring provides opportunities for students to interact with each other and bond. Students explained that this made it easier to make friends in OST because they could spend more time with peers in an environment that is welcoming, safe, and supportive and they could bond over games and fun activities. One student explained, “OST helped me make friends, because it was an easier environment to make friends” (HS Student). Another student shared, “OST allows me to socialize and meet people” (HS Student). These positive



“Art Piece” by High School Student



“Basketball Game” by Junior High Student



OST Camp





*"My Loves" by Junior High Student*



*"Being Nice to a Friend" by Elementary Student*

peer interactions were meaningful for students. One student shared that spending time in OST, “made me have the confidence to talk to people” (HS Student). Another student shared, “Making friends at OST helps with wanting to go to school” (HS Student).

Overall, these AIFY supports and services provided students with a space to take a break, have fun with their friends, and brought enrichment to their lives, “I think it’s a great time to spend time with friends and interact and engage with each other” (HS Student). Without OST, some students felt like they may be listless after school or they may engage in less productive activities. One student shared, “I’m going to OST because I don’t know what to do in my house...I’m kind of bored and I’m gonna sleep. I’m gonna be watching TV for a few hours and then going to sleep” (JH Student). Another student shared that “without OST, I wouldn’t do activities after school” (JH Student). This was an excellent opportunity for students to engage in recreational activities and have fun with friends.

## **AIFY SUPPORTS STUDENTS ACADEMIC SUCCESS**

AIFY provides learning and homework support for students through the OST after-school and mentoring programs. Students explained that this homework support is important because they often require additional instruction to understand complex concepts taught in class; however, teachers are not always able to provide personalized learning support in a large, busy classroom. One student explained:

***[A] teacher has like 30 other students to take care of...So you have OST and then you also have staff there that can help you. If you need help, you have them...If you have questions they can give you time for it, rather than teachers who have so many other students. (HS Student)***

Similarly, parents and caregivers are not always well-equipped to support their child’s learning. One student commented, “My parents didn’t even do high school here. So, they don’t even know how to do math here” (HS Student). The student went on to explain, “I don’t have a lot of people that could help me around. So it feels kind of nice to have somebody there [OST]” (HS Student). Another student commented, “I need help [with] my school stuff and my mom, she’s kind of busy with work” (HS Student).

It was important to students to have access to a dedicated learning space. This is because not all students have a home environment that is conducive for studying, as described by one student, “After school, if you don’t have a place [and] if you’re busy at home, or like home is not really the best place to work on homework or something, OST is there for you” (HS Student) Another student shared, “As soon as I get home, I have other responsibilities” (HS Student). Furthermore, an alumna explained that having homework resources provided accountability for completing schoolwork:

*Adding AIFY in my school made it so that making an excuse to not do the thing [homework] was impossible. At a high school level, you know, there's four volunteers and staff in the library who are available to help me with chemistry homework. I have no excuse to not get chemistry homework done now. So, it just gets done and it's somewhere I can access it and not go out of my way.*

By receiving homework support from AIFY staff, students felt better equipped to succeed in school. Students were able to better understand class concepts and manage classwork and assignments, “[AIFY staff] helped me with my math work. It was so hard...He explain[ed] everything to me...details how to do the math work... he helped me a lot” (HS Student). Another student commented, “[AIFY staff] help me with math and physics. He helped bring my grade up.” An alumnus shared:

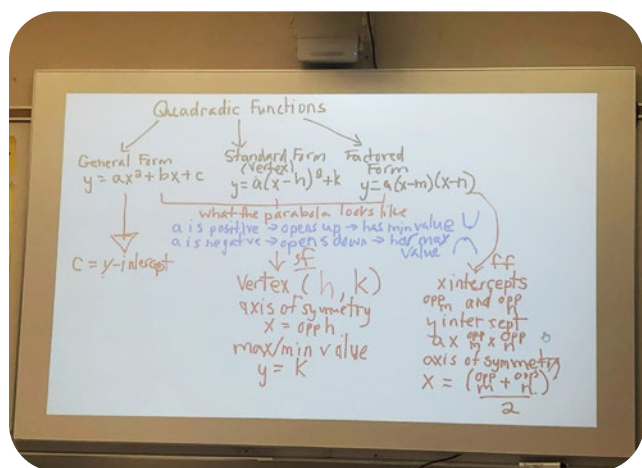
*I think it [AIFY] helped me academically...My parents didn't graduate high school. So as soon as I passed ninth grade, they were kind of like, 'well, you know, we can try,' but it was like, they couldn't really help me academically with anything. So, I think it was really, really, really imperative to have volunteers and staff through OST that were accessible. You know, I'm just gonna walk down the hallway to the library, where I had adults that could help me with my math. I'm not a math person and barely passed math. But like I passed, because, you know, I had these accessible tutors and people who have been through it already to help me with it.*

Furthermore, without this homework support, students explained that they feel more overwhelmed and struggle to cope with school:

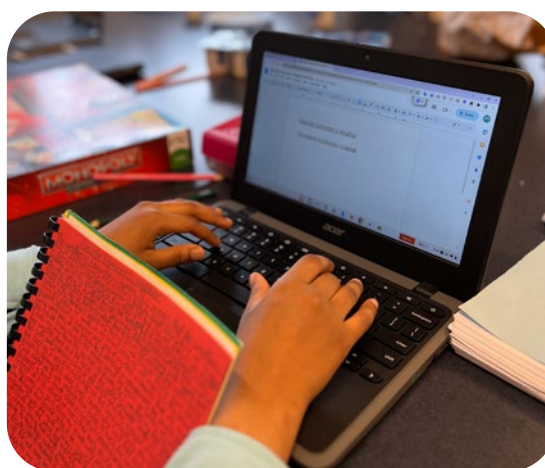
*If you don't have that help, then everything will just pile up on you and you'll feel too stressed to come back. I know for a fact that this happens because it happened to me last year...I just didn't want to come to school. Because I was like I don't know what to do...So when you don't have anybody to help you then you don't want to do anything. (HS Student)*

Therefore, homework support helps students manage school work, master concepts, and improve their academics in school, “OST helps my grades” (HS Student). Beyond this, students also said that it helped them with class management skills and confidence, “tutoring helps kids feel better” (HS Student). A caregiver explained that if AIFY supports and services were available in all schools across Canada, they would have far-reaching effects on students’ academic performance, “I think you would have more school completion.” Another caregiver remarked:

*I think there would be more attendance at school. I think you'd get happier kids. Maybe a little more motivated kids. And kids who might otherwise fall through the system could probably get something at least interim, because it's fair and accessible.*



“Help” by High School Student



“Bringing Up the Grades” by High School Student

## AIFY HELPS STUDENTS WITH LIFE SKILLS AND PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE

AIFY helped students develop life skills in and out of school, and plan for life after graduation. Students described working with AIFY staff on skills and strategies for success in school. For example, one student shared that AIFY staff, “helped with time management” (HS Student). Older students also described receiving help and guidance on life skills outside of school, such as applying for jobs and getting their driver’s license. High school students explained that the OST program has a dedicated space for helping students with job applications, “Usually every Wednesday...they help us to get our resume done. And cover letters” (HS Student). Another student shared, “It is also an opportunity to do resumes, [get] help with jobs, volunteering” (HS Student). An alumnus reflected on getting a reference from the OST coordinator:

*He [the OST Coordinator] was always like, ‘yeah, I’ll give you a reference for a job’ and this and that. I can’t think of anyone else that I had that with. So, if you weren’t like one of the kids who accessed AIFY you didn’t have that [support].”*

Students explained how AIFY staff taught many skills, like how to apply to jobs, networking, and social skills. One alumnus shared, “I think there’s so many skills, like soft skills that OST staff lead and teach...like, what are you going to put on your resume? Where do you look for applications? Just things like that.”

AIFY staff also helped students plan for their future after high school. As a part of the OST program, high school students explained that AIFY staff talk to them about opportunities for post-secondary and also invited different guests to present on career and academic opportunities, “staff come from universities to talk to students about careers” (HS Student). Another student shared, “OST helped us to get some new information about post-secondary and stuff, like universities...So it just helps us to know and just get a plan about the future” (HS Students). This was meaningful for high school students because they were aware they would be making life decisions in the future, “we always get asked where we want to go? Or do?” (HS Student). Sometimes it was confusing to know where to start and how to plan for the future, as described by another student:

*I want to study law. So, I just wanted to know, like, what subjects that I have to take and what should I do? What’s the plan? Because I get some information but it’s not complete. So I just ask them [AIFY staff] and they helped me...They tell me like, what usually the majors to...take and then go to law school... Because sometimes you don’t know where to ask and where to get information. (HS Student)*

The student went on to describe the impact of having AIFY staff accessible to help during this this planning phase of their life, “When you see someone in front of you that you can ask...you can just go and ask [them] because that helps you to like build your plans...So you have to take it step by step so you have a plan.” Similarly, an alumnus shared that AIFY staff helped with the application process and scholarships for post secondary, “because of all of these people...I was able to win scholarships towards my school, which is amazing.”

Without AIFY staff, students expressed that they may feel less motivated. An alumnus shared, “I don’t think I would have had as big of a drive to do post-secondary.” A few alumni interviewed were also involved in a “teen takeover” at other AIFY schools, which led to working part-time or over the summers with AIFY or Boys and Girls Clubs Big Brothers Big Sisters (BGCBig). These part-time or summer jobs helped alumni pay for post-secondary education and gain valuable work experience. One alumnus acknowledged that by working with AIFY/ BGCBig they were more aware of community resources that they could turn to when they needed support as an adult.



“Future” (HS Student)



Student high-fiving with OST Coordinator

“The Highest of Fives” (HS Student)

# Opportunities for Growth

## ENHANCE COMMUNICATION TO ADDRESS GAPS IN KNOWLEDGE ABOUT AIFY

Although AIFY supports and services were described to have meaningful impacts, caregivers frequently had gaps in their knowledge about what supports were available at their school. Of the students and caregivers who were interviewed, participants were typically familiar with one AIFY support at the school that they participated in, but they were not familiar with other AIFY supports or staff at the school. For example, when a student who participated in the OST program was asked if they were familiar with mental health staff in their school, the student replied, “I’m not, I haven’t really heard of them” (HS Student). Additionally, of caregivers who participated in surveys at school sites, many were not aware that their family was at an AIFY school with unique supports and services. For example, a survey respondent said, “I am not familiar with the [AIFY] service[s].” Another survey respondent commented, “I hadn’t heard of the [AIFY] program until today.”

Caregivers indicated that more information about AIFY supports and services would allow them to better connect to needed supports. It should be noted that school and agency staff frequently reach out to families who they believe may benefit from AIFY supports. However, for families who are struggling but not identified as someone who might need support from the school, more information about available AIFY services would allow them to self-refer to get the supports they need. One caregiver commented, “There’s such a lack of communication about what programs are within the school to access. ...I think more people would take advantage of it [AIFY]. If they knew that there were programs available for them to help.”

## NEED FOR AIFY STAFF CAPACITY AND STABILITY

Students and caregivers expressed concerns about limited staff capacity. One caregiver shared, “I wish there was more [AIFY staff]. Because there’s so many kids.” Similarly, some caregivers talked about high staff turnover which was challenging, “There has been some [staff] turnover over the last couple of years...It does make it a little difficult because the child starts to connect to one individual, then they moved on” (Caregiver). Another caregiver shared, “It takes a while to develop that trust. And then just to have that carpet gets pulled out...And there’s gonna be a new person starting...It’s deflating because they’re going, ‘okay, I’m gonna start all over again,’ right?” Another student shared that she wanted to access mental health support at school; however, the appointment took “3 months” (HS Student). When the student was able to receive the appointment, she felt hesitant to confide in the mental health staff because she “didn’t know them” and was not comfortable with the staff. This underscores the importance of continuing efforts by AIFY staff to build relationships with students. It also emphasizes the need for more funding and resources to build staff capacity so more students can receive the support they need.

## ADDITIONAL PROGRAMMING

In some cases, caregivers wanted more AIFY programming and shared suggestions for additional supports and services. Some caregivers wished that AIFY services were available for more students or held more often during the week (e.g., OST programming for all ages every day of the week or mental health staff on-site full time). For example, one caregiver shared, “the program is great,” but, “there’s definitely not enough of it.” Another caregiver commented, “there’s actually nothing I would change other than having it open to more kids.” Additionally, some caregivers proposed additional services that may be beneficial for the AIFY program. As one caregiver shared, “I’d love to see schools have a designated quiet spot...A monitored space where kids can go if they’re having one of those days, right?” The parent explained, “when kids are having an anxiety attack at school or...a meltdown...the last thing you want to do is just have them leave the building...We want to be able to stay in the environment...be in a safe space and be well.” Finally, one parent also expressed an interest in more school community events to connect with other families and school and agency staff, “It would be good to...kind of build that community again, right? To have those offerings of...hey, let’s get to know the students...Let’s get to know the mentors.”



# Looking Forward

Over the past 7 years, the positive impact of AIFY on the lives of students and families has been consistently demonstrated. An overview of key findings on these impacts and recommendations for the future is provided below.

## KEY IMPACTS

### Family Wellbeing:

Families discussed how AIFY helped them meet their critical needs, which reduced anxiety and improved family wellbeing. Examples of these critical needs included food security, mental health, housing, and after school care.

### Sense of Inclusion and Support:

Students, alumni, and caregivers reported that the AIFY model created an inclusive and supportive school culture. As a result, families and children feel they have a safe and welcoming place. Students also felt an increased sense of safety, empowerment and confidence in themselves after having accessed supports.

### Positive Child-Adult Relationships:

Students shared that AIFY staff were trusted adults they could go to if they needed support. Students also described AIFY staff as their friends and mentors. This trusting relationship meant students felt they could access support from a safe adult when needed.

### Student Mental Health and Wellbeing:

Students, families and alumni felt that AIFY supports and services helped them develop and maintain their mental health and wellness. Students and caregivers saw AIFY staff as positive influences when navigating life and/or academic challenges because they offered them perspective and guidance. AIFY staff also helped children improve their social and emotional skills and regulation, and improved their ability to engage in learning.

### Student Engagement and Life Skills:

Students discussed how AIFY supports introduced opportunities for fun and academic support. Opportunities for recreation, socialization, friendship and mentorship, along with academic assistance and dedicated homework and learning support, supported student engagement in their education as well as in their life outside of school.

## OPPORTUNITIES FOR GROWTH

The AIFY partners are focused on sustainability of the model while continuing to evolve to meet the needs of students and families.

### Need for Communication to Address Gaps in Knowledge about AIFY:

Caregivers expressed gaps in their knowledge about the AIFY supports available at their school. Caregivers indicated that more information would allow them to better connect and access supports and services.

**Need for More AIFY Staff Capacity and Stability:**

Students and caregivers expressed concerns about limited staff capacity. In order to sustain staff capacity and support more children and families, AIFY requires stable forms of funding and resources.

**Suggestions for Additional Programming Opportunities:**

In some cases, caregivers wanted more AIFY programming and shared suggestions for additional supports and services. Some caregivers wished that AIFY services were available for more students or held more often during the week.

As learnings emerge throughout the year, AIFY partners are constantly re-assessing and making adaptations accordingly. Furthermore, in addition to the annual evaluation this year, the research team published a research study focused on the impacts of mental health services administered by the AIFY program. This study, [Haight et al. \(2023\), "A collaborative, school-based wraparound support intervention for fostering children and youth's mental health,"](#) provides key insights into the mental health needs of students, enablers and barriers to service use, and the impacts of mental health services. The results of the study were shared in a workshop with AIFY frontline staff to foster ongoing learning and adaptability on service delivery. Evaluation and learning are key values of AIFY.

**In Year 8 of the AIFY initiative,** the AIFY model will continue to evolve and grow to serve students and families in Edmonton. The AIFY partners will prioritize knowledge mobilization as a key research and evaluation activity. The research team will focus on mobilizing knowledge about the meaningful impacts of the AIFY program to the wider community in Edmonton and across Alberta, which will support efforts to sustain and grow the AIFY initiative.

**Sustaining and growing the AIFY initiative** continues to be an important area of work. The costs to implement the AIFY model are covered by AIFY funding partners (i.e., Foundations, donors, the City of Edmonton FCSS, United Way), as well as school divisions and agency partners who deliver AIFY services. As funding for the AIFY model of wraparound supports has not yet been embedded into provincial policies, AIFY partners continue to work hard to secure annual funding to sustain and expand the AIFY initiative.

During Year 7, United Way hosted school tours at AIFY schools and an open house at Eastglen High School. This was an opportunity for community partners and potential funders to connect with AIFY partners, staff, and students to learn more about the impacts of AIFY first hand. In the past year, AIFY also partnered with [RunWithIt Synthetics, who created a video](#) showing the long term benefits of supporting AIFY, including the economic impacts for Edmonton 20 years into the future. This was the first time AIFY has been able to offer forecasting that was specific to the local context to demonstrate the importance of this work. This video was shared with community partners and potential funders at the open house event. In the coming year, the AIFY partners will continue to work hard to mobilize knowledge about AIFY to funding partners and the greater community and take hold of opportunities to nudge larger policy systems to understand how wraparound models like AIFY can support students to fulfill their full potential.

**We look forward to the future of the AIFY initiative.** AIFY stakeholders (i.e., teachers, agency staff, school administrators, agency supervisors, division leaders, and operations and funding partners) demonstrate an incredible commitment and dedication year after year to helping students and families reach their full potential.

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