

2025 WHOLE SCHOOLS FUND RECIPIENTS

We are excited to announce our WHOLE Schools Fund recipients for the 2025-2026 school year. These school teams will be entering a year-long cohort to support their project completion. Read below for a little bit about their project and what question they are trying to find a solution for!

One Valley, One Vision, One Hope: Wellness for All \$4,000

Hope Valley Elementary School

How can schools ensure that all students have consistent, accessible spaces and tools to support their mental health and emotional regulation?

This project will create a school-wide culture of wellness at Hope Valley Elementary by ensuring every student and staff member has access to safe and supportive spaces. With grant funding, the Counseling Suite will be transformed into a welcoming, therapeutic environment designed for emotional regulation and social-emotional learning. Each classroom will be equipped with calming baskets stocked with sensory tools and mindfulness resources for on-the-spot support, while teachers will receive training to integrate trauma-informed strategies and maintain consistent, non-punitive calming corners. Together, these efforts will reduce behavioral disruptions, foster resilience, and strengthen connections across the school.

Brave & Safe: Empowering Fifth Graders Through Classroom Community Corners \$4,000

Lyon's Farm Elementary School

How can schools help Covid Kindergartners—now fifth graders—heal social-emotional gaps and build resilience through safe, supportive spaces?

This project focuses on supporting Lyons Farm's fifth graders—students who began their education as "Covid Kindergartners" during a time of disrupted routines, limited socialization, and inconsistent learning environments. To address the lasting impact on their social-emotional readiness, they will create Safe & Brave Spaces in each fifth-grade classroom. These spaces will provide calming tools, inclusive materials, and tablets with SEL apps for mindfulness, self-regulation, and reflection. By fostering classroom circles, identity exploration, and conflict resolution practices, the project will help students strengthen emotional regulation, empathy, and belonging, while creating a consistent, supportive climate across all fifth-grade classrooms.

Fatherhood Engagement Initiative \$6,250

Riverside, Hillside, & Northern High Schools

How can we empower teen dads to lead the design of programs that support their wellness, parenting, and future success?

In collaboration with H.E.A.R.T.S., this project centers teen dads as leaders in designing the support they need most. Through a paid internship, dedicated wellness sessions, and father-child bonding events, participants will directly shape the program's direction and impact. The Father Ambassador internship provides one teen dad with a stipend, mentorship, and a leadership role as liaison between peers and staff—ensuring the voices of young fathers guide programming decisions. Monthly wellness-focused group sessions, will create safe spaces for teen dads to share experiences, strengthen mental health, and learn from each other. In addition, two father-child bonding events per year will be co-designed by teen dads to foster connection, skill-building, and career readiness. By placing decision-making power in the hands of participants, this project builds both resilience and leadership, creating a model where young fathers are not just served but empowered to lead.

A Mental Health Support Proposal for Middle School Students in Special Education \$2,000

School for Creative Studies

How can schools create inclusive, student- and family-informed supports that strengthen mental health for students in special education?

This project will strengthen mental health supports for middle school students in special education by equipping resource classrooms, inclusion settings, and Exceptional Children (EC) spaces with new SEL framing signage, resources, and accessible information in multiple languages tailored to the needs of students with disabilities. Alongside these visible supports, the initiative will host family workshops and student groups to gather perspectives, share resources, and ensure changes reflect the lived experiences of those most impacted. EC classrooms will also be reimagined as calming, inclusive environments designed to foster regulation and resilience. By combining classroom resources, family engagement, and trauma-informed design, the project creates a holistic system of care where students feel safe, supported, and ready to learn.

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Growing Wellness: Nurturing Tigers, Inside and Out \$5,000

Y.E. Smith Elementary School

How can schools create intentional spaces and routines that support wellness for both students and staff while promoting social-emotional growth?

This project will strengthen wellness and social-emotional learning by supporting both staff and students. For staff, the Wellness Well will provide a calming space stocked with healthy snacks, aromatherapy, stress-relief tools, and monthly wellness incentives to reduce burnout and sustain morale. For students, Safe Zones Kits in every classroom (35) and student-facing space will offer bilingual calming visuals, sensory tools, SEL books, reflection journals, and kindness challenge cards aligned with the Character Strong curriculum. The project also includes school-wide Wellness Days and daily mindfulness and movement activities, fostering a culture of empathy, resilience, and well-being for the entire school community.

Fostering Belonging and Uplifting Mental Health Wellness Program \$4,000

Carrington Middle School

How can a school create a cohesive, community-wide approach to mental wellness that supports students, staff, and families while fostering belonging and resilience?

This is a school-wide initiative designed to strengthen the social-emotional well-being of students, staff, and families. The program creates dedicated calming spaces—a Stress-Free Space in the Student Support Center for students to recharge and connect with counselors, social workers, and nurses, and a Wellness Informational Room for staff to relax, explore strategies, and sustain their own well-being. Teachers receive professional development to integrate mental wellness into daily classroom routines, while parents and guardians engage with mental health awareness stations offering resources, multilingual support, and strategies to support their children at home. By combining thoughtful spaces, targeted training, and family engagement, the program fosters a cohesive culture of belonging, resilience, and mental wellness across the entire Carrington community.

Creating Safe Spaces to Support and Improve Student Wellness \$4,000

Creekside Elementary School

How can schools provide equitable emotional regulation supports for students of all learning levels and backgrounds while equipping staff to foster academic and social success?

This initiative aims to strengthen student emotional regulation and mental health through school-wide supports. New Calm Corners will be established in every classroom and shared space, including pre-k, exceptional children, and general education classes - in addition to high-traffic shared spaces. There will be structured tools and strategies for students to manage feelings of sadness, anger, or frustration and return to an “upstairs” learning state, provided. Complementing these spaces, staff will participate in targeted professional development, including the “Beyond Behavior: Understanding Students Through a Sensory Lens” workshop, equipping educators with strategies to support diverse emotional and behavioral needs. Together, these efforts create a cohesive, school-wide approach that promotes resilience, self-regulation, and academic readiness for all students.

Inclusive Sensory Walk for Neurodiverse Learners \$1,500

Eastway Elementary School

How can schools create inclusive, sensory-rich outdoor spaces that promote emotional regulation, movement, and social-emotional learning for all students?

This project will create an innovative, inclusive sensory walk designed to support students of all abilities—especially those with autism, ADHD, sensory processing challenges, or trauma histories—who may not engage with traditional playground equipment. The vibrant, interactive pathway will promote physical movement, sensory regulation, cognitive engagement, and imaginative play in a safe outdoor environment. Integrated visual, tactile, and movement-based elements will encourage mindfulness, coordination, and social-emotional learning, while calming prompts like “Breathe,” “Stretch,” and “Smile” help students develop coping strategies. Located in high-traffic areas for Pre-K through grade 5, the sensory walk will be used during recess, PE, and behavioral support interventions, offering an equitable, flexible, and inclusive resource that strengthens peer connections, supports adult-guided mental wellness, and fosters confidence, resilience, and joy across the school community.

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Bridges to Belonging: Family Navigation for Student Success \$6,250
Eno Valley Elementary School

How can schools foster a sense of belonging and support family wellness and mental health while empowering families to engage in their children's education?

This is a six-month initiative designed to strengthen family wellness, access to resources, and engagement for 25 families, particularly those with immigrant backgrounds or exceptional children (EC). The program creates a sense of belonging and reduces stress by removing barriers such as language differences, transportation challenges, and limited understanding of school systems. Monthly three-hour after-school workshops combine bilingual instruction, culturally themed community dinners, childcare, transportation support, and access to school and community resources. Families explore topics including school systems, IEP/504 and ESL services, parent advocacy, crisis management, and summer planning, while connecting with peers and school staff in a welcoming, supportive environment. By integrating practical support, education, and cultural celebration, the program promotes family well-being, strengthens home-school relationships, and empowers families to actively support their children's academic and social-emotional success.

Crafting for Wellness \$5,000
Hillside High School

How can creative outlets foster emotional well-being for students? Especially for students who aren't as outwardly expressive?

Crafting for Wellness is a mental health enrichment program that empowers students to manage stress, build emotional regulation, and strengthen peer connections through creative expression. In bi-weekly sessions—ranging from journaling and painting to clay sculpting and mural-making—students practice mindfulness while exploring culturally inclusive, hands-on art activities. Each participant receives a take-home craft kit to extend wellness practices into their household. With trained peer Wellness Ambassadors and community partnerships, the program creates a sustainable, trauma-informed approach to supporting emotional well-being in schools.

Students Against Sexual Harassment: Creating Safe and Brave Spaces for Student Wellness \$5,000
Jordan High School

How can student-led initiatives foster a safe, inclusive, and wellness-centered school culture that empowers all students to thrive socially, emotionally, and academically?

This is a student-led initiative that builds a safe, inclusive, and wellness-centered school culture. They will launch the SASH ambassador program to deliver at least four schoolwide awareness campaigns, including Teen Dating Violence Prevention Month and Sexual Assault Awareness Month, visibly promoting resources and reducing stigma. Students will host screenings and guided discussions of age-appropriate films and documentaries that explore the connections between harassment, equity, and mental health. The program will partner with DPS-approved speakers, the Durham Crisis Response Center, and Duke SHAPE to provide evidence-based workshops for students and families. Peer-led "Decompression and Discussion" circles, art and journaling sessions, and other safe spaces allow students to process difficult topics in supportive environments. All activities will be accessible to historically marginalized students through snacks, translation services, and incentives, while open dialogue about consent, boundaries, and respect will be normalized as part of everyday school culture. Toolkits, campaign materials, and the SASH Ambassador program ensure that wellness, inclusion, and harassment prevention are embedded sustainably across school life, fostering belonging, mental health, and peer support for all students.

Mindful Moments in Afterschool \$5,000
Bethesda & George Watts Elementary Schools

How can creative expression and mindfulness practices in after-school programs foster emotional regulation, empathy, and family engagement for students?

This is an after-school program that supports students' emotional well-being while fostering peer relationships and family engagement through creative expression and mindfulness-based movement. The program combines art-making with activities such as yoga, Zumba, meditation, and guided breathwork to create a safe, inclusive space where children can develop emotional regulation skills, build empathy, and express themselves. Family engagement is central: monthly art nights, mindfulness workshops, and collaborative projects help caregivers participate in their child's emotional learning, strengthen home-school connections, and build a shared language around wellness, creativity, and empathy. Through structured experiences—ranging from resilience journals and gratitude art to Mindful Art Challenges and gallery walks—students develop coping strategies, self-awareness, and collaboration skills, culminating in showcases, legacy projects, and co-created wellness toolkits that extend the benefits of the program beyond the classroom.

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The Buddy Bench \$2,000

Murray Massenburg Elementary School

How can intentional spaces like the Buddy Bench strengthen inclusivity, improve student mental health, and boost school attendance through everyday acts of kindness and connection?

The Buddy Bench initiative aims to foster inclusivity, build friendships, and support student mental health by creating a safe, welcoming space for connection. Located in a central area and introduced during Social Emotional Learning (SEL) lessons, the bench serves as a signal for students seeking companionship or support. Peers are encouraged to invite anyone sitting on the bench to join them in play, conversation, or shared activities—promoting empathy, belonging, and kindness. By nurturing friendships and creating a culture of inclusion, the Buddy Bench helps improve school attendance, as students who feel connected are more likely to enjoy school and look forward to being there each day.

Safe Faces in Multiple Places \$10,000

School for Creative Studies

How can increasing mental health awareness, equipping “safe people” with training, and providing accessible tools for emotional regulation improve the well-being, inclusion, and overall school climate for all SCS students?

This comprehensive mental health initiative at SCS aims to strengthen awareness, access, and response to student mental health needs through education, training, and tangible supports. The project will first raise awareness of existing Durham Public Schools (DPS) mental health services by sharing clear information with families and displaying resource posters throughout the school. Next, the team will build a network of trusted “safe people” by asking students to identify supportive adults at school and at home, who will then be invited to complete Youth Mental Health First Aid or similar training to better assist students in times of need. The project will also provide practical stress-relief tools—such as fidgets, yoga mats, and coloring books—for classrooms and individuals, helping students and teachers manage anxiety and improve focus. Finally, professional development with a guest speaker on autism and ADHD will equip staff to better support neurodivergent students and reduce classroom conflict. Together, these efforts aim to create a more informed, responsive, and compassionate school community where every student feels seen, supported, and safe.

Eliminating Period Poverty \$6,000

Durham School of the Arts

How can ensuring reliable, stigma-free access to period products improve student mental health, confidence, and school attendance while reducing the impact of period poverty at DSA Middle School?

This student-led project aims to eliminate period poverty and support student well-being by installing free, clearly visible period product dispensers throughout DSA Middle School. Stocked with pads, tampons, liners, and disposable underwear, these dispensers will ensure students have reliable, stigma-free access to essential supplies. The project also includes a symposium and product drive to raise awareness about period poverty, featuring a guest speaker and community engagement. By addressing a key barrier to attendance and comfort, the initiative helps reduce anxiety, embarrassment, and absenteeism among menstruating students—factors that directly impact mental health and academic confidence.

Bringing Joy to the Garden \$5,000

Lakewood Elementary School

How can integrating outdoor learning, family engagement, and wellness programming into the Lakewood School Garden strengthen community connections and support the mental health of students, staff, and families?

This project aims to transform the long-standing garden into a fully integrated part of the school's culture, curriculum, and community. By engaging teachers, students, and families in hands-on, outdoor experiences, the project will nurture both learning and well-being. Plans include a fall Garden Open House to connect teachers and staff to the space, a pilot Outdoor Science Learning program that brings two grades and an EC classroom into the garden for co-taught science lessons, and Family Garden Gatherings focused on gardening, cooking, and community building. Through these intentional activities, the garden will become a hub for connection, reflection, and joy—promoting mental health, belonging, and healthy living for the entire Lakewood community. The project will also enhance garden accessibility with raised beds, new signage, shaded seating, and expanded gardener support to ensure sustainability.