

Turning the Tide:

A Plan to Champion Mental Health by the Next Generation

Mental health is a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his own community.⁶

Government Action:

Provide sustainable funding for **every elementary school to have a full-time mental health professional** that will fulfill the following mandate:

1. Ensure every student receives the most beneficial psycho-educational assessments for classroom support in a timely manner
2. Coordinate holistic and community-oriented mental health strategies for the benefit of families, students and staff
3. Oversee the successful training of all school staff in evidence-based mental health pedagogy and trauma-informed practice

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A mental health professional for every school. #turnthetideAB

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Rationale:

Why focus on elementary schools?

Despite more than a decade of research that shows the benefits of mental health promotion and mental illness prevention throughout childhood, Canada does not do enough.²⁷

Intervention needs to start earlier

We know that up to 70 per cent of young adults living with mental health problems report that the symptoms started in childhood. We also know that children who have mental health problems are more likely to become adolescents and then adults with mental health problems and illnesses. In addition, promotion and prevention early in life can bring significant return on investment, by reducing demand for services in the mental health system and also in other sectors, such as the criminal justice system.

Changing Directions, Changing Lives: The Mental Health Strategy for Canada (Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2012)

Child and youth mental health problems are prevalent

Studies suggest that as many as 14-25% (over 800,000 in Canada) of children and youth experience significant mental health issues. Most mental health problems can be detected prior to the age of 24, and 50% of these difficulties surface before the age of 14. Mental health difficulties contribute to problems with achievement and relationships at school. In severe cases, they prevent students from regularly attending class, but more often students simply struggle with these problems on a daily basis, leading to further social and academic functioning concerns.

School-Based Mental Health in Canada: A Final Report (Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2013).

Our time is demanding urgent attention to mental health

Beyond issues of physical health, the current COVID-19 pandemic has caused serious mental health concerns for old and young alike. This current climate calls for a systematic response to the mental health needs of our vulnerable children in order to minimize more complex issues as society begins the difficult journey of recovery. With the inevitable return of students to the classrooms, school administrators will need expert mental health educators to lead evidence-based strategies suitable for children and families.

Even under normal societal circumstances, current research clearly identifies the importance of mental health to learning, as well as to students' social and emotional development. Students who experience positive mental health are resilient and better able to learn, achieve success and build healthy relationships. However, we are seeing far too many students emerge from the school system without these essential skills. It is estimated that 10-to-20 per cent of children and youth in Canada experience mental illness and that only one in five children and youth who need mental health services receives them. Seventy-five per cent of mental illnesses have their origin in childhood.

Given the important relationship between positive mental health and academic success, now is the time for schools to be better equipped in nurturing students' mental health and well-being. By investing in specialized and qualified mental health educators, we can ensure effective treatment of mental health at the early stages.

Working Together to Support Mental Health in Alberta Schools, Alberta Education

Why should schools be responsible for mental health services?

Schools are ideally situated to promote mental health, identify and intervene early to prevent the onset of problems

Given that children and youth spend a substantial part of each day within the school setting, these communities become a natural and important venue for mental health service delivery. Senators Kirby and Keon state that this platform for mental health promotion should be recognized. In fact, "development of the school as a site for the effective delivery of mental health services is essential".

School-Based Mental Health in Canada: A Final Report (Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2013).

In statistical terms, the effect of most interventions is small to moderate, but when applied in real world settings the effects are much larger. The characteristics of the most effective interventions include: focusing on positive mental health, delivering a mix of universal and targeted approaches, starting early with the youngest children, long term interventions which embed within the whole school's approach, linking with academic learning, working with and educating parents, community involvement and coordinated work with outside agencies. "School-based Interventions", [The Association for Child and Adolescent Mental Health](#)

There is growing momentum for school-based mental health in Canada and elsewhere

Over the past decade, a number of provincial, national, and international initiatives have emerged in support of school mental health. These innovations include communities of practice, mental health literacy initiatives, provincial coalitions, research projects, resources, and discussion papers. International groups, such as the International Alliance for Child & Adolescent Mental Health & Schools and the US-Canada Alliance for School Mental Health serve to further inspire ideas and actions in this area. *School-Based Mental Health in Canada: A Final Report (Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2013).*

Many Alberta schools are using a whole-school approach to create welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environments that support the positive mental health of students. A whole-school approach recognizes that all aspects of the school community impact students' mental health and well-being, and that learning and mental health are inextricably linked.

There is an abundance of programming, services, speakers and campaigns available for promoting mental health, from both commercial distributors and not-for-profit agencies. However, many of these options provide an introduction only, and are often designed as one-time events. These types of programming can be challenging to adapt to local contexts and are often difficult to sustain and scale up over the longer term. *Working Together to Support Mental Health in Alberta Schools, Alberta Education*



Why a mental health educator for every school?

Many children and youth with mental health problems will not receive intervention

Most children will not receive treatment for mental health difficulties. Social stigma associated with mental health problems deters many youth from seeking help from community professionals. Problems with access and availability of resources further limit mental health service use amongst children and families. Given the high prevalence of mental health problems, and the relatively low rates of community service use, it is important to consider alternative sites and methods for promoting the social-emotional wellbeing of Canada's young people. *School-Based Mental Health in Canada: A Final Report (Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2013).*

The right investment is building internal capacity

Studies have shown that success and sustainability were achieved by building internal capacity by an on-site coordinator that was able to align various strategies with their organizational mission. This requisite capacity, coupled with content and organizational flexibility, allows each site to create its own strategic and business plan that considers contextual factors, adheres to the expectations of the local school district, and links to locally desired youth outcomes.¹

Essentially, with regards to ensuring long-term sustainability of programs, the initial investment of a full-time mental health school coordinator proves the most cost-effective. With the objective to scale programs across school

districts, the plan allows each school to operate as a cohort, exchanging ideas that work for that community, creating a network of diverse models embedded across a whole city or region.

1 “The RALLY Program: Scaling an Inclusive Approach to Intervention and Prevention”, [the Harvard Family Research Project](#)

Why are assessments needed for every child?

These are critical tools to help students who have high needs

Not all students require specialized, or formal, psycho-educational assessments. Unfortunately, there are currently too many students who require specialized assessments that cannot access a qualified practitioner within an adequate period of time. Having a qualified professional on site who can oversee the implementation of formal assessments will not only reduce current caseloads, but build internal capacity to expand formal assessments of students for the future.

The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence in the UK points out that children's social and emotional wellbeing is important in its own right, but also because it affects their physical health (both as a child and as an adult) and can determine how well they do at school. Good social, emotional and psychological health helps protect children against emotional and behavioural problems, violence and crime, teenage pregnancy and the misuse of drugs and alcohol.

“Social and emotional wellbeing in primary education”, [Public health guideline](#), Published date: 26 March 2008

There are strong arguments to support making specialized assessments more accessible

Both an ethical and a scientific argument exist for improving access for all children, irrespective of their income, to high quality mental health services. A population-based approach will ensure that young people can access preventive and treatment services whenever they are needed. Application of the evidence base can ensure quality, but public and political will are needed to ensure that the evidence base is successfully implemented universally.

“Mental health interventions in schools”, Mina Fazel et al, [Lancet Psychiatry](#). 2014 Oct; 1(5): 377–387.

Why is training of teachers in mental health issues important?

The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence in the UK recommends that for primary aged children, there should be a comprehensive programme in place in schools which include: a curriculum that integrates the development of social and emotional skills within all subject areas, training and development for teachers and practitioners, support to help parents or careers develop their parenting skills, along with integrated activities to support the development of social and emotional skills and wellbeing and to prevent bullying and violence in all areas of school life.

In order to achieve these objectives, it is absolutely critical that all staff, including teachers and support workers, are following coordinated and consistent practices in their interaction with students and parents. What takes place in the classroom has immeasurable impact on the life of the children, and teachers must ensure the strategies being taught by mental health professionals outside the classroom are being reinforced. Moreover, as teachers interact with parents regularly, they have a unique opportunity to support parents in creating a positive environment for their children as well. Only through consistent training and support can teachers gain the right confidence and skills to address the urgent mental health needs of children. Not only that, but ongoing training in mental health will provide opportunity for the kind of self-care needed to sustain the work of caring for others.

Why not have the ministry of Health be responsible for mental health?

The provincial government already recognizes the need to cooperate in providing the most effective services

According to the Alberta government report on *Working Together to Mental Health in Alberta Schools*, the goal of Alberta Health is to ensure that all Albertans (including students and their families) receive the right health

care services, at the right time, in the right place, provided by the right provider with the right information. Moreover, a key priority is improving the connection and integration of mental health services across health and community partners.

The role of government is to establish legislation, policy and standards; allocate funding; and support the development of programs, professional development and initiatives that contribute to the overall well-being of all Albertans. Cross-ministry initiatives are areas of special importance to the government that, because of their nature, span across ministries and require a system-wide approach. There are times, *such as we are in*, when various ministries need to work together and rely on the joint efforts of partners across government and the community. When government ministries work together to support the mental health of students, this collaborative effort enhances integration, communication, alignment and co-ordination across projects and initiatives.

Working Together to Support Mental Health in Alberta Schools, Alberta Education



The Mental Health Commission of Canada asserts that the increasing attention to mental health in Canada provides poignant examples on a daily basis of how too many people in Canada are not receiving the services and programs that we know can improve the quality of their lives, reduce the limitations imposed by their illnesses, or even help prevent certain mental health problems and illnesses from developing into larger problems. Mental health needs to be addressed in everyday places like schools, workplaces, long-term care facilities, and at home. Doing so will also contribute to achieving broader goals such as increasing productivity and rates of employment, improving physical health across the lifespan, helping people to do better in school, and reducing crime.

How much money will this cost?

It will cost less than the fee to join a school sports team

\$114 – that is the cost for each child to have equal access, along with each parent and teacher, to a mental health professional. According to the Ontario Psychological Association’s guidelines, school boards should employ one school psychologist for every 1000 students. The Alberta Education data reports there are currently 411,606 elementary students in publicly funded schools in the province. Currently, there are only itinerant qualified mental health professionals in most elementary school systems– leaving a current ratio of roughly 1 psychologist for every 3,500 students. By adding 295 mental health professionals in school communities across the province, we would fulfill the goal of providing equal mental health care for every child. Based on the average administrative cost of a mental health professional, which is approximately \$144,000 (including employer costs and liabilities), the cost of this province-wide initiative for the Alberta government would be approximately \$42,480,000 per year across all school districts. To put that into perspective, the current provincial budget for mental health and addictions is \$100 million, \$8.3 billion for education, \$3.9 billion for community and social services, and \$1.6 billion for children's services “to ensure children, youth and families have the services and supports they need to thrive”.

The return on investment means a sustainable government and stronger families in Alberta

For further perspective on the return of investment, consider the recent report from Alberta Education. In any given year, one in five people in Canada experiences a mental health problem or illness, with a cost to the economy of well in excess of \$50 billion. We know that up to 70 per cent of young adults living with mental health problems report that the symptoms started in childhood. We also know that children who have mental health problems are more likely to become adolescents and then adults with mental health problems and illnesses.

Promotion and prevention early in life can bring significant return on investment by reducing demand for services in the mental health system and other sectors. Screening for developmental, social, and emotional delays, and focused initiatives for families with infants and young children affected by chronic stress can yield long-term benefits to the children, their families, and society, particularly when these programs are integrated with education and social services.

Working Together to Support Mental Health in Alberta Schools, Alberta Education

By investing now, we can turn the tide on mental health in one generation.

Model of Success

Integrated School Support Program (ISSP), Calgary Police Foundation

The Integrated School Support Program (ISSP) is a prevention-based initiative in two elementary schools located in the Forest Lawn community; Patrick Airlie School from the Calgary Board of Education (CBE) and Holy Trinity School from the Calgary Catholic School District (CCSD). ISSP is designed to provide targeted services addressing a variety of needs within a diverse school and community. ISSP merges a number of new and pre-existing programs, to create a supportive environment in which a child can attain personal success, both academically and socially. The objective is to ensure students and their families receive the necessary supports in the school, including a positive police presence, on-site psychologist, physical education specialist, social worker, access to a health clinician, breakfast and lunch programs, and after school programs that include mentoring and tutoring. The approach is based on a holistic perspective, which encompasses nutrition, fitness, academic success, emotional well-being and building a safe and strong community.

<https://cpf.cpsevents.ca/programs/integrated-school-support-project/>

Testimonial

Through the ISSP, the school is provided a full-time psychologist (in comparison, the current ratio for the district is 1 counselor for 12 schools), a social worker on site 3 days per week, as well as a Phys Ed specialist, which allows the school to run a daily SPARK program. A hot lunch and breakfast is provided daily (an average of 30 students participate). One highlight is Walking Wednesdays around the neighborhood with police officers, and the relational support both students and parents receive. Student academic performance is improving, teachers are less stressed, parents are engaged. The program is a holistic 'wrap-around' approach to student well-being, and the benefits are clear.

Kimron Wilson, VP, Holy Trinity School