



Coalition for Children
and Youth Mental Health
Let's put our heads together.

Coalition pour la santé mentale
des enfants et des adolescents
Réfléchissons ensemble.

COALITION FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH: RESPONSE TO CONSULTATION ON THE NEXT PHASE IN ONTARIO'S EDUCATION STRATEGY

Introduction

The Coalition for Children and Youth Mental Health is pleased to provide input into the current consultations on the next phase in Ontario's Education Strategy. The Coalition comprises organizations from health, children's services, child welfare and education sectors along with parents and youth who share a passion to radically transform the life chances of children and youth and their families who are experiencing the challenges of mental health issues. This dynamic group champions the value of focusing on the whole child and working for integration of supports and services that contribute to the social, physical, emotional and mental well-being of Ontario students.

The Coalition for Children and Youth Mental Health is pleased that the Government of Ontario in its consultation on the future of education places a distinct focus on student well-being and the role of schools in fostering student well-being. This helps all of us to see student success as a goal that goes beyond simply measuring academic achievement and includes examining how well the education system is doing its job in developing healthy, well-rounded and resilient young adults.

As a Coalition, we have discussed the seven questions posed in the Consultation document and take the position that there is no question about the future of education that does not have a significant connection to student well-being and is, in fact, foundational to everything that we do to support student learning, engagement and overall success in school and in life. Our response is, therefore, on themes that are important to the integration of student well-being into our education system, recognizing that education does not exist in isolation from the other systems in our society concerned with the health and well-being of our children and youth. As a body particularly dedicated to mental health and well-being, we emphasize that building a robust, holistic system of supports and services will benefit students, teachers, parents, and communities while positioning a new generation of Ontario students for success both personally and academically.

Supporting Student Well-Being in the School System

As the government prepares to write the next page in Ontario's Education Strategy, the Coalition asks the province to broaden its definition of excellence to include the positive mental health and well-being of each and every student. The Coalition believes that mental health permeates every aspect of a student's school experience and this is an essential perspective when we engage in this kind of systemic strategic planning. Students who have a sense of well-being are flourishing, engaged, and have a strong sense of belonging in their home, school and community. They have a sense of confidence and competence; they have hope and optimism.

They have fluent pro-social and resiliency skills, and the willingness to take healthy risks in an effort to reach their full potential.

In its project, *“Imagine a School”*, The Canadian Education Association enlisted high school students to share their feelings about school through a dramatic performance. When given the opportunity to express what well-being meant to them, students defined well-being as: the feeling of confidence, being inspired, finding their courses relevant and having a curriculum refined to build on their interests. Students also cited physical activity, breaks and extracurricular activities as being important to their well-being. The students offered enlightening and honest descriptions of well-being that merit consideration as the Ministry defines well-being within a new education strategy.

Student well-being can be better supported by creating welcoming environments that foster a sense of belonging, provide a place of safety and social justice, and signal that it is safe and appropriate to ask for help. The Coalition sees a strong commitment on the part of teachers. The Coalition sees a strong commitment on the part of teachers and other valued members of the educational team such as attendance counsellors, child and youth workers, psychologists and social workers, to increase their knowledge and deepen their understanding of mental health so that they can support students effectively. We believe that creating a healthy, welcoming and caring culture within our schools is foundational to improve learning, engagement, achievement and success in school and in life.

The isolation of students experiencing mental health difficulties is a significant issue. A project by Children’s Mental Health Ontario entitled *“Building a Better School Environment for Youth with Mental Health and Addiction Issues”* explores what schools can do to be more supportive of students experiencing mental health issues. The project reported that youth who experience mental health problems feel a strong sense of isolation and this, in turn, further alienates them from the school, which should be a safe haven for them. The Coalition strongly supports the development of inclusion strategies that target isolation along with greater inclusion of the family within the school community. With increasing literacy in mental health among students and staff there will be increased capacity to identify when help is needed and empathy in responding. Pathways to mental health care within the school and community should be easy to identify, navigate and timely so that it is easier for students to seek assistance.

Across the curriculum there is ample scope to integrate mental health promotion activities and development of pro-social skills. One suggestion would be to build on what some schools have done in developing a learning skills curriculum and make this a mandatory course in Grade 9. The course would include mental health literacy, resilience, asset building, studying habits, anxiety and stress management. It is not a stretch to say that if this kind of integration does not happen at the curricular level, the goal of ensuring mental well-being across our system will not be achieved.

Our work to support First Nation, Métis and Inuit students should also take into account cultural perspectives in matters related to mental well-being. We highlight the paper *Rooting Mental Health in an Aboriginal World View Inspired By Many Hands One Dream* by Cindy Blackstock (2008). The principles outlined in that document including approaches that are holistic, inter-generational and respectful of traditional health care practices of Aboriginal peoples, are important values to be incorporated in how we support the students in our schools.

There is an excellent body of research specifically on mental health in school in ***Taking Mental Health To School: A policy-oriented paper on school-based mental health for Ontario***

(Santor, Short and Ferguson, 2009) This report noted: *“The interview participants were unanimous in their concern regarding student mental health. There was a sense from many respondents that the degree of emotional strain that students are experiencing is severe and escalating. Worrisome student social-emotional issues occur daily in our schools, and educators feel insufficiently equipped to respond effectively. They also recognize a clear association between mental health and academic achievement, and see a role for schools in identifying and preventing mental health problems, and supporting student wellness. Many individuals described student mental health as their top priority concern.”* The interview participants who are leaders in school boards also identified a pressing need for mental health literacy for educators and an urgency to build capacity in this area. They emphasized as well the importance of working collaboratively with community partners to co-create and provide services for students experiencing mental health distress.

We acknowledge the excellent work that has been done by School Mental Health ASSIST in strengthening the capacity of the school system to identify and address issues of mental well-being that the above paper brought to light. Every school board now has a mental health lead and has or is in the process of developing a mental health and well-being strategic plan that is founded on evidence-based practices, protocols, programs and resources. We see ASSIST as an essential component of a school-based mental health response and recommend further expansion of this initiative as a key part of the province’s Future of Education strategy.

Another aspect of capacity-building is ensuring that new teachers entering the system do so with a foundation of mental health literacy. It is vital, therefore, that the new, expanded pre-service education program for teachers include training in mental health literacy.

Focus on Research

Research confirms that by fostering positive well-being students can be engaged to reach their academic potential. The use of evidence-based practices in children’s mental health services has been gaining recognition and is strengthening our response to mental health issues in Ontario. Mental health care that is based upon sound research and empirically supported is more likely to result in positive outcomes for students (CMHO website). Evidence-based research can be used with confidence when developing ways to improve student well-being.

The Coalition asks that the Ministry build on its own research as evidenced in the *Student Well-Being Research Framework* (August 2011). Positive Psychology emphasizes individual strengths, well-being, and optimal human functioning (Duckworth et al., 2005; Linley, Joseph, Harrington & Wood, 2003). It suggests that individuals tend to feel the greatest sense of satisfaction when they are learning about things that interest them and are allowed to work in their area of unique ability. It also considers how people can flourish under relatively normal conditions (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). In his book *“How Children Succeed”* which reflects this research, Paul Tough identifies seven personal strengths that are the most crucial in determining a child’s long term success: grit, self-control, zest and enthusiasm, crucial intelligence, gratitude, optimism and curiosity. Ontario’s curriculum and professional teaching practice can help to foster these strengths and incorporate the kind of flexibility that teaches to students’ interests and supports the development of confident, well-rounded and mentally healthy young people.

We underscore again the school-based mental health research noted above (*Taking Mental Health To School*) which highlights the need to work from strategies that have been proven to be effective. We should build on the recommendations of this research and ensure that Ontario

has a repository of evidence-based practices, protocols, resources and programs for elementary and secondary schools.

It must be noted that it is equally important to commit to ongoing evaluation of the strategies we put in place to make sure that the goals intended in those strategies are in fact being achieved.

3. Partnerships to Enhance Student Well-Being

The initial years of implementation of Ontario's Comprehensive Strategy on Mental Health and Addictions, with its focus on children and youth, show that there is tremendous scope for partnership-building. At the community level, a great deal of work is being done to bring schools and agencies responsible for health, mental health and education together to help streamline mental health services for children and youth. Examples include partnerships between Public Health and school boards in Ottawa, and team approaches between pediatricians and school boards through Orillia Memorial Hospital. While the government has placed an emphasis on cross-ministerial collaboration and integration, this is not readily transparent to the field and requires a much more explicit level of alignment and coordination.

An example of apparent separation in ministerial efforts, is the current consultation process where three separate Ministries – Children and Youth Services, Health and Long Term Care, and Education – are each conducting consultations aimed at building future strategies for the province. Each consultation poses important questions related to mental health. The Coalition would suggest that the mental health related issues discussed in these separate consultations have a great deal in common. We would like to see that there will be opportunities to pool the wisdom that emerges from these consultations in order to realize cohesion and efficiency in the strategies that will be developed.

The Coalition emphasizes the strong level of cross-sectoral dialogue and collaboration among community agencies and schools. These coordinated partnerships are very positive and will be essential to building a network of supports and services that recognizes that the mental well-being of youth is a broad community responsibility. A sustained alignment of school and community services with an emphasis on clear pathways to support and care is essential to increasing student mental well-being and successful educational experiences for all students.

Recommendations

1. The Coalition for Children and Youth Mental Health strongly advocates for an Ontario Education Strategy that sees student well-being and positive mental health as a core element for success right alongside academic achievement.
2. The Coalition recommends an expanded focus on mental health literacy for teachers and staff as essential first steps towards eliminating stigma and improving mental health in schools.
3. The Coalition recommends that a key part of the province's Future of Education strategy include further deepening of the services of School Mental Health ASSIST as an essential component of a school-based mental health response; this should entail integration across branches of the Ministry as well as alignment of complementary efforts across Ministries.
4. The Coalition recommends an education strategy that builds on evidence-based research that addresses the connection between strengths-based education and well-being, that recognizes the capacity for establishing healthy relationships as an essential

core element of success and student engagement, and that includes a commitment to support ongoing evaluation.

5. The Coalition recommends greater and more transparent levels of communication, collaboration and integration among the Ministries of Children and Youth Services, Health and Long Term Care, and Education in the development and implementation of the strategies emerging from current provincial discussions.
6. The Coalition, as a body that exemplifies effective cross-sectoral collaboration, recommends that the Ministries of Education; Training, Colleges and Universities; Children and Youth Services; and Health and Long Term Care take advantage of the Coalition's expertise and engage the Coalition in ongoing work that will contribute to the engagement, well-being and success of Ontario's children and youth.

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<http://www.positivepsychologycanada.com/What-is-positive-psychology>:

Duckworth, A. L., Steen, T. A., & Seligman, M. E. P. (2005). Positive psychology in clinical practice. *Annual Review of Clinical Psychology, 1*, 629-651.

Seligman, M. E. P., & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2000). Positive psychology: An introduction. *American Psychologist, 55*, 5-14.