

TO: Chair and Members of the Board of Health

FROM: Graham L. Pollett, MD, FRCPC
Medical Officer of Health

DATE: 2012 September 13

WELLNESS WEEKS: A HEALTHY SCHOOLS MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVE

Recommendation

It is recommended that Report No. 108-12 re Wellness Weeks: A Healthy Schools Mental Health Initiative be received for information.

Background

Research shows that 1 in 5 people under the age of 65 will experience some form of mental health problem. Suicide is the second cause of death in youth aged 15 to 24 years, and youth in this age group are more likely to report mental illness and or substance use disorders than other age groups. Youth spend a lot of their time at school. It is not surprising that their school related experiences have a significant influence on their cognitive development, and their physical and mental health. Comprehensive school health is an evidence based approach that addresses the positive growth and development of children and youth.

Canada's first national Mental Health Strategy entitled Changing Directions, Changing Lives: the Mental Healthy Strategy for Canada was released during Mental Health Week (May 7-13, 2012). The Report has the following strategic directions:

1. Promote mental health across the lifespan in order to prevent mental illness and suicide wherever possible.
2. Provide access to the right combination of services, treatments and supports, when and where people need them, and
3. Mobilize leadership, improve knowledge and foster collaboration at all levels.

Under the guidance of a Public Health Nurse, a teacher and social worker, the youth from the Healthy Schools Committee at Beal Secondary School, decided that mental health was an issue that had not been addressed in the past and that there was much to be done to reduce stigma and to promote mental wellness amongst their peers.

Youth Engagement

Healthy Schools Committees (HSC) are facilitated by Public Health Nurses from the Child and Youth Team in many Middlesex-London schools. The Committees operate encouraging youth engagement - young people being actively involved in addressing issues that affect them personally and/or that they believe are important. Youth engagement means amplifying young people's voices and leadership, creating safe spaces where they can discuss issues that affect their lives, and taking action.

The HSC at Beal Secondary School recognized that youth and adults are exposed to myths and misinformation regarding mental illness and wanted to reduce the stigma associated with this. They chose to call the two week long event Wellness Weeks, as it sounded positive and more in line with mental health rather than mental illness.

The overall goals of the program were to encourage peers to gain a broader understanding of mental health, to increase knowledge regarding community agencies that offer support/counseling and to develop resiliency through stress reducing, fun activities. The Public Health Nurse assisted in the completion of an application for the 'Youth United' grant. The application was successful, and the funding was utilized to cover the costs of guest speakers, T-shirts and mood pencils that had Live Healthy-Learn Better printed on them. The Kick-Off assembly was done in partnership with three community agencies: Mind Your Mind, Craigwood Youth Services, and London Urban Services Organization. The agencies educated students on awareness and identifying the issue, importance of accessing community and on line supports and providing understanding and empathy to peers who may have mental health issues. Subsequently, guidance counselors and social workers had a noticeable increase in the number of students coming forward who realized that they may have a mental health problem.

Lunch hour presentations with guest speakers also provided more opportunities to increase staff and students' knowledge of mental health. An Aboriginal speaker addressed wellness from their perspective, which helped increase students' awareness of a culture that represents a high percentage of Beal's student population. A counselor from Addiction Services Thames Valley spoke about services they offer and how they can assist youth. Daily activities, such as Mandala colouring, knitting and quiz questions about mental health issues, provided opportunities to promote developing healthy habits during the lunch hour.

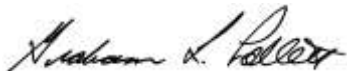
A primary goal of the HSC was to engage their peers to participate in fun activities that are known to help reduce stress. A drumming circle was lead by six students in the music program, hand massages were provided by students from the cosmetology program, yoga , a hip hop Fit2Dance class and Uber twister were all lunch hour activities that helped to meet the goals.

Summary

Approximately 440 youth participated in events over the two week period. Sixteen hundred youth attended the kick off assembly and eighty staff received an in-service from Mind Your Mind on the use of a Mental Health on line game called Reach Out for use in classrooms. Informal feedback was extremely positive and more is planned in the future.

According to the Ministry of Education and People for Education Reports, partnerships with public health units and other agencies are key components in developing positive healthy school climates that can positively address mental wellness. The Wellness Weeks Initiative was a collaborative partnership that addressed the needs of the school community and focused on addressing positive growth and development for the youth at Beal Secondary School.

This report was prepared by Ms. Shelley Steel, Public Health Nurse, and Ms. Christine Preece, Manager, Young Adult Team, Family Health Services.



Graham L. Pollett, MD, FRCPC
Medical Officer of Health

This report addresses the following requirement(s) of the Ontario Public Health Standards: Child Health Standard 4,5,7 and 8.