

DATE: April 24, 2018

TO: Board of Trustees

FROM: Trustee Shelagh Dunn

SUBJECT: Increased Access to Mental Health Services in Schools

REFERENCE: [Gap Analysis of Public Mental Health and Addictions Programs \(GAP-MAP\) Final Report](#)
[Alberta Education – Working Together to Support Mental Health in Alberta Schools](#)
[Alberta Health Services – Comprehensive School Health Approach](#)
[AEBB.BP – Wellness of Students and Staff](#)
[Trustees’ Handbook – Section 5.2.2 – Notices of Motion](#)

ISSUE

Notice of motion was served at the April 10, 2018, Board meeting.

BACKGROUND

Our District is committed to fostering growth and success for every student, and providing welcoming, high quality learning environments with a focus on well-being. We know that supporting students socially and emotionally is crucial in enabling them to fulfil their potential for academic growth and leadership.

Schools in our District have been engaged in efforts to promote positive mental health, and teach mental health awareness and social-emotional learning. Our staff have training in delivering mental health curriculum, mental health first aid, and supporting students and families to access mental health services, interventions and supports.

However, educators cannot provide all necessary mental health interventions and services. While there are access points to some mental health services in schools through partnerships with Alberta Health Services (AHS) and external agencies, there are also [significant gaps](#) in the availability of mental health services in the province. There are specific gaps in services such as counselling and in services for children and families. This is present both in our schools and in the larger community.

RELATED FACTS

The Canadian Mental Health Association¹ provides compelling information about the status of mental illness in Canadian children and youth:

- 10-20 per cent of children and youth experience mental illness.
- Only one-fifth of these children and youth will get mental health services.
- Canada’s youth suicide rate is the third highest in the industrial world.

These numbers refer only to mental illness. There are many more students who have mental health concerns but do not suffer from a diagnosable mental illness. Many young people could benefit from professional mental health support for healthy relationships, loss, or stress. This type of support may help prevent a social or emotional difficulty from becoming a mental illness later on, as the majority of mental illnesses start in childhood.

RATIONALE

Children and youth need to be healthy in order to do their best learning at school, and mental illness or other mental health concerns can significantly impact a student's ability to learn and succeed in school. Students, parents and staff in our District have been identifying mental health as a growing area of concern. Many District projects have been undertaken to address these concerns, including a District mental health framework currently under development, two student conferences on mental health planned by the Student Senate, and many initiatives at the school level. However, this work is in addition to the already heavy demands of teaching in increasingly complex classrooms.

The need for mental health supports in schools and the role of schools in the mental health of young people is vital. Comprehensive, whole-school approaches to mental health have been recognized as important by [Alberta Education](#) and [Alberta Health Services](#).

So far, much of the focus has been on promoting positive mental health in schools and understanding the pathways to mental health service. But, this is not enough. Students need access to professional mental health services. These services need to be available in a timely, accessible and sustainable way. Although it is not universal at this time, when mental health professionals work directly in schools, they have the opportunity to form relationships with students, parents, educators and community partners, and can become a part of a school community. This model reduces barriers to accessing mental health and completes the picture of comprehensive school health.

Currently, our [District policies](#) recognize the need for access to available professional guidance and counselling services for students. However, we have had to rely on multiple provincial and external funding sources and partners for mental health service provision that is accessible in schools, and it has not received the funding support needed to serve all students. This can make it challenging for students to access sustainable, predictable and equitable mental health services.

Mental health is one example where the needs of our children are not captured in one provincial Ministry. There is tremendous potential for collaboration in the provision of mental health services that are accessible in schools, and this could be an innovative way to connect to the vision of schools as community hubs. We need cross-ministerial collaboration to provide dedicated, stable and predictable funding specifically for mental health. Just as importantly, we need collaboration across ministries to provide streamlined access to accredited mental health professionals who can develop long-standing relationships with students in schools. This means that we need quality spaces in or adjoining schools where mental health professionals can focus on the health of students so that educators can do the important foundational work of education.

RECOMMENDATION

That the Edmonton Public School Board of Trustees advocate to the provincial government for improved access to mental health services available to students in schools, through dedicated funding and increased collaboration between the Ministries of Education, Health and Infrastructure.

OPTIONS

1. Approve the recommendation.
2. Provide feedback and request changes to the recommendation for approval.

NEXT STEPS

Should the Board of Trustees approve the recommendation, letters will be sent to the Minister of Education, the Minister of Health, and the Minister of Infrastructure requesting collaboration and dedicated funding for improved access to mental health services to students in schools.

Should the Board of Trustees approve the recommendation, this policy position will also be communicated through our representation on PSBAA and ASBA.

Potential future steps could include:

- Hosting municipal, provincial and federal government partners to a discussion of the need for mental health services in schools.
- Establishing a Trustee working group focused on the issue of mental health and/or establishing mental health as a key area of focus for Board advocacy efforts.
- Collaborating with other school boards for combined advocacy efforts focused on the mental health needs of students.

¹Canadian Mental Health Association, Fast Facts About Mental Illness. (<https://cmha.ca/about-cmha/fast-facts-about-mental-illness>)