

## REFEREED ARTICLE

### Youth Mental Health: Roadblocks and Solutions to Student Success

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#### Abstract

*This article looks at ways schools can address the problem of increased mental health concerns among students in the school setting. Insufficient training of school staff, lack of mental health professionals in schools, inconsistent programming, and teacher mental health concerns make supporting students mental health difficult. Addressing these concerns is possible through teacher training, mental health professionals in all schools, school programming, and support for teacher mental health. These changes would have a positive influence on student academic success and children's future emotional well-being.*

After 25 years as an educator, it is evident to me that schools are not doing enough to address the rising mental health concerns of our students. Schools are an ideal place to address mental health issues faced by a large number of youth (Reinke et al., 2011). Unfortunately, roadblocks prevent schools from effectively providing the mental health support needed by up to 25% of school aged children (Ohrt et al., 2020, p. 833). Insufficient training is making it difficult for educators to support the mental health challenges in today's classrooms (Ohrt et al., 2020). When a mental health disorder is recognized, choosing the strategies to support the student can be a daunting task (ACMH, n.d.). It is important that teachers have accessible mental health professionals to consult (Korinek, 2021). For these reasons, schools need to have mental health professionals working on site. In addition, there needs to be a commitment to a whole-school approach for mental health education (Manitoba Education, n.d., 2021). Teachers have a difficult job in the classroom, given the curricular and management demands. They are experiencing an increase in their own mental health disorders (Zarate et al., 2019). Support for teacher mental health is essential in supporting youth mental health (Carrington, 2019). If schools can solve these problems, we can begin to address the mental health concerns of our students.

#### Training Educators

Educators do not have the training to recognize when a mental health issue is responsible for learning difficulties. They can often mistakenly assume it is due to factors unrelated to mental health (ACMH, n.d.). When the mental health issues of children go unrecognized, it can negatively affect their academic success during school years, and their future adult life (Ohrt et al., 2020). Early identification can be extremely effective (Hubel et al., 2020). However, recognizing mental health issues can be difficult because many people working with young children are not well versed in the identification process. Mental health difficulties are often ignored because of this lack of knowledge (Danby & Hamilton, 2016). Professional training on how to help students suffering from mental health issues needs to be offered to all educators (Ohrt et al., 2020). More training for teachers would increase their ability to support students and their emotional well-being (Reinke et al., 2011). Training on mental health issues would facilitate early identification, intervention, and possible prevention of youth mental health concerns in classrooms.

Lack of training on the topic of youth mental health is a common issue. This has been my personal experience in my school division. Our division has offered minimal training. For example, the last professional training on the topic of mental health, Mental Health First Aid, was offered over five years ago. It was optional, and offered in August during summer holidays,

so participation was minimal. Since then, there has been high staff turnover, no training offered to incoming staff, and no discussion on what teachers are expected to do in their classrooms to support the mental health of their students. Training could be accomplished more effectively in a variety of ways. Using scheduled professional development days, or monthly early closures, to offer workshops by trained professionals is one option. Short informational sessions at monthly staff meetings would be another ideal way to keep the topic current, and would ensure that new staff hired are included in important conversations about the mental health of our students. Teacher training is an important piece in supporting youth mental health in schools.

### **Including Mental Health Professionals**

Schools require the support of mental health professionals to choose effective strategies (Danby & Hamilton, 2016). Addressing the mental health concerns of students is essential to their success, but meeting their needs in the classroom is not always easy. After a mental health issue has been identified, proper supports are necessary to increase academic success. Teachers do not feel confident that they have the needed skills to offer these supports (Reinke et al., 2011). Educators alone do not have the necessary skills to treat the many mental health concerns facing youth. Mental health professionals, including psychologists, youth mental health workers, counsellors, and social workers play a vital role in supporting students with mental health issues. Their role in supporting educators in the classroom is equally important. Mental health professionals, working in the school setting, can offer support to educators on identifying mental health concerns or managing students' mental health needs in the classroom. Also, these professionals are often the connection between families and important professional services in the community (Korinek, 2021). Having qualified people readily available to consult in the school setting, and act as a liaison between teachers and families, is an invaluable service. If schools want to support student mental health, having mental health professionals available is necessary.

Lack of available professionals is a problem that many schools in Manitoba are currently experiencing. For example, our division has been unable to hire a full-time school psychologist. In recent years, we have had to share with neighbouring divisions or contract a psychologist on a case-by-case basis. This year, securing a .25 psychologist for our school division felt like a victory. In reality, the wait time for psychological assessments in our division is lengthy and we cannot offer the services our students need in a timely manner.

This is also true for youth mental health workers. Our school relies heavily on our youth mental health worker for student therapy, consultations with teachers, and as a connection to families. This role is essential in supporting students with mental health issues and supporting teachers in classrooms. Currently, youth mental health workers are often shared among several schools and multiple divisions, especially in rural areas. Our school has one mental health worker, shared among seven schools and two school divisions. The logistics of this, including services lost to commute time and a large caseload, are unacceptable. All schools need more access to these professional resources. There need to be recruitment procedures and an increase in funding for these important positions. Using schools as the venue to care for students' mental health needs makes sense; however, it needs to be done in partnership with other agencies and experts (Danby & Hamilton, 2016). Funding to have mental health professionals in every school would be another important step toward supporting youth mental health.

### **Programming and Commitment**

Along with providing support to children diagnosed with mental health disorders, schools need to commit to offering programming for mental health education for all students (Manitoba Education, 2021). Educating all students about their own mental health needs to be a priority.

Currently, many programs are available for use in classrooms to teach children about mental health and emotional well-being. The problem is when teachers are completely autonomous in choosing and implementing programs. If school administrators do not give a clear mandate on programming, there is no guarantee it will be used consistently, or at all. Consistently incorporating mental health education across all curricular areas gives students strategies to maintain their emotional well-being as they move through childhood into adolescence (World Health Organization, 2004, as cited in Manitoba Education, n.d.). This is a preventative measure, giving all students the tools that they need to manage their mental health as they age.

I found two Manitoba Education (n.d., 2021) documents that address the role that schools play in teaching mental health. Both reinforce the idea that mental health education in schools has to be addressed on a whole-school basis. The fact that I had never seen either of these documents, as a veteran teacher, made me question my division's commitment to mental health education. A whole-school approach ensures that we are reaching those children who may not have recognizable mental health concerns, and works as a collective approach to mental health education (Manitoba, 2021). Schools need to be as accountable for mental health education as they are for all other curricular areas. Being committed to mental health programming is essential in successfully supporting students' mental health needs.

### **Supporting Teacher Mental Health**

Supporting teacher mental health is essential in supporting student mental health. Educators have many obligations in the classroom and can struggle with meeting academic expectations. The demands on teacher time are leaving many teachers feeling unable to meet the increasing needs of students in their classrooms. The task of effectively supporting the mental health difficulties of students, without adequate time and support, can be emotionally taxing and affect a teacher's own mental wellness (Strahan & Poteat, 2020). Schools need to find ways to support increasing demands on teachers in the classroom. Solutions such as support from administrators, support for student needs, increased preparation time, and mental health support for teachers are crucial to help teachers meet classroom obligations.

Administrators need to find ways to ensure that educators feel supported and valued. Carrington & McIntosh (2021) explored the idea that teachers do not feel burnout because of the difficult job caring for students, but rather when they do not feel like their work matters or is appreciated (Carrington & McIntosh, 2021). Administrators who make time to listen to teachers and ask for feedback are letting teachers know that they are valued. Teaching is being recognized as a "profoundly emotional activity" (Kinman et al., 2011, p. 37, as cited in Hanley, 2017, p. 254). Having support from other professionals can help to prevent teacher burnout (Hanley, 2017). Educators need opportunities to debrief with a colleague or supervisor on difficult days. Having emotionally healthy teachers in the classroom is vital to supporting students.

In my school, the administrators have implemented several initiatives that have been a part of successfully supporting teachers' emotional well-being. Common preparation time and personal learning communities give teachers time to collaborate with colleagues on immediate classroom needs. It allows them to share knowledge on teaching strategies, or seek emotional support on a regular basis. Early closures at the end of every month are used for professional development or to give teachers time to address classroom needs. Time to learn and prepare is important for teacher mental health. When teachers feel acknowledged and supported, they are better able to care for their students.

### **Conclusion**

Recognizing and addressing the mental health needs of students is complicated work. Mental health issues can have a significant effect on a child's ability to successfully perform in

school (Agnafors et al., 2021). Schools have an obligation to address the mental health needs of their students (Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2013). Finding effective ways to overcome the roadblocks that prevent students from achieving academic success is challenging, but possible. If we are serious about addressing youth mental health in schools, solutions need to be implemented. Educators need training in mental health issues (Reinke et al., 2011) and the support of an expert team to implement best practices (Danby & Hamilton, 2016). Having mental health professionals readily available in the school setting, for students and staff, is imperative. In addition, schools need to be committed to mental health education for all students, evidenced by staff training and programming. Finally, schools must address the needs of students without jeopardizing the well-being of teachers (Carrington, 2019). Support from administrators and opportunities to implement wellness strategies contribute to protecting teacher mental health. These solutions would be an investment toward improving academic performance and the lifelong well-being of our children.

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### ***About the Author***

*Paula Opperman graduated in 1995 with a B.Ed. from Brandon University. After spending 25 years as a classroom teacher at Killarney School, she became a Student Services teacher, which led her to enrol in the M.Ed. program. She has 3 children, who inspire her to challenge herself and learn every day.*