CASS — College of Alberta School Superintendents

LEARNING GUIDE

A Systematic Approach to Promoting Positive Student Mental Health
March 27, 2024

Featuring Stories of Practice from East Central Catholic Schools, Rocky View Schools, and St. Albert Public Schools

The intent of a CASS Learning Guide is to apply research, deepen understanding and enhance professional practice within the Alberta context. With a focus on optimum learning for all students, a Learning Guide provides an opportunity to grow system leader knowledge, resulting in quality school leadership and quality teaching throughout Alberta.

Summary

During the 2023-2024 and 2024-2025 school years, Alberta Education funded nearly 80 Mental Health in Schools Pilot Projects. This webinar, the first in a series of four webinars, highlights stories of practice from three Alberta school authorities who are promoting positive student mental health as part of their Mental Health in Schools Pilot Projects.

Danica Martin, Leadership Consultant, CASS, (2:36)

Danica set the stage for this webinar by highlighting some of the foundational research and legislation that now guides the work of school authorities in supporting student mental health.

Alberta Education emphasizes that schools are key environments for promoting mental health and supporting positive mental health is a responsibility shared by parents, educators, and community partners. The Centre for Wellbeing in Education at the University of Calgary's Werklund School of Education is conducting research that relates to the Mental Health in Schools Pilot Projects. Their early findings support the important role that schools play in facilitating mental health support services and delivering universal mental health programming to students. Alberta Education (2017) in *Working Together to Support Mental Health in Alberta Schools* underscores that in welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environments "promotion and prevention strategies for mental health and social-emotional learning are embedded in daily instruction and school-wide activities" (p.7).

Overall, the research and legislation that guides the work of system education leaders compels them to promote positive student mental health throughout all Alberta school authorities.

Michele Revoy
Director of Teaching Quality and Staff Development
East Central Catholic Schools (8:25)

Michele shared the story of how East Central Catholic Schools have taken a two-pronged approach with their Mental Health in Schools Pilot Project. They have worked to build capacity within their school authority as well as to ensure that barrier-free pathways exist for students and families, so they can easily access mental health supports and services. This story of practice highlights the importance of system education leaders' clearly understanding their local context and then managing their operations and resources in a way that supports their strategic vision.

The capacity-building strategies they implemented include offering Mental Health Literacy sessions for all staff to create a common language and shared understanding. A similar session was offered to parents. Mental Health Literacy components are included in regular parent and staff communications to ensure that this learning remains at the forefront. A systematic focus on addressing concerning behaviours has also been a focus, thereby leveraging the work of Dr. Ross Greene with related training being provided to key staff throughout the school authority.

To help ensure barrier-free access to mental health services and supports, school websites were updated with a consistent Mental Health Support tab which includes a one-stop shop for families, students, and staff. Mental Health resource libraries were purchased and provided so each school had consistent and easy access to valuable literature and resources. Community events were hosted to bring families together with the available community services in a fun and engaging way.

The unplanned benefit of this work is that staff are making connections between all of the resources and the ongoing learning and thereby have been seeing how these resources complement each other to support student mental health. The next steps will include a focus on wellness for the 2024-2025 school year with allotted time embedded in school calendars and the implementation of a district wellness framework.

Wendy Ruzicka, Assistant Director of Learning Supports and Allison Salazar, Acting Program Manager of Stepping Stones to Mental Health
Rocky View Schools, (34:00)

Wendy and Allison shared the story of Rocky View Schools' work to cultivate wellness and implement effective mental health supports in schools as part of their Mental Health in Schools Pilot Project. The goal of their work is to collaboratively increase and expand their ability and reach to promote positive mental health in children, youth, families, and all school staff in their communities with a particular focus on middle years students (grades 5-9).

Rocky View Schools' Stepping Stones to Mental Health program is a research-based and multi-tiered approach that provides universal and targeted supports for the students across their school authority. Both programming and support services are provided by Success Coaches. Success Coaches offer classroom presentations, facilitate small group activities, deliver universal and targeted interventions, offer staff learning sessions and wellness activities, and collaborate with school and district staff.
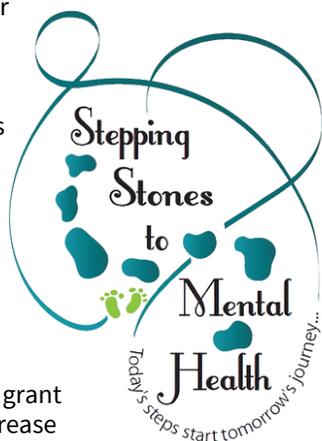
The Mental Health in Schools Pilot grant allowed Rocky View Schools to increase the personnel that provide this important programming throughout their school authority. As a result, dozens of new schools were able to access the programming and support their students.

To date, they have seen several positive impacts of their work, including increased and more equitable access to universal and targeted supports, staff feeling more empowered and less stressed, and students feeling more confident and better equipped with skills to manage emotions and challenging situations. Factors that are contributing to this positive impact include the purposeful onboarding process for new Success Coaches, creating positive relationships between coaches and school staff, offering innovative and engaging materials and resources connected to the curricula, and key divisional support.

This story of practice clearly reflects Rocky View Schools' commitment to promoting positive student mental health with a focus on proactive and preventative strategies and tangible outcomes for students.

Dr. Marianne Barrett
Deputy Superintendent
Program and Planning
St. Albert Public Schools, (55:54)

Dr. Barrett shared the story of St. Albert Public Schools' work being undertaken to ensure an interconnected approach to supporting mental health and wellness. Understanding that connection and belonging are keys to student mental health and well-being, their efforts have strongly emphasized students' sense of belonging when at school.

Grounded in their Education Plan, which embeds Mental Health promotion, St. Albert Public Schools' work is based on the key pillars of connection, wellness, growth, and equity. They have explored what it truly means to create welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environments throughout their school authority. The senior leadership team also demonstrated both vulnerability and reflective practice, as they explored their own values and belief system and how both impacted their work.

An overarching goal of their work has been to disrupt dominant narratives within their system. This required creating purposeful spaces for all voices to be heard and then engage with other ways of knowing, being, and doing. A variety of implementation strategies were used, including professional learning, collaboration, preparing the system, ongoing professional conversations, gathering student data, offering stakeholder engagement workshops, and implementing divisional policies, procedures and events.

In their quest to ensure that students feel a sense of belonging and connection in their schools, the team at St. Albert Public Schools has tackled relevant and impactful topics, including racism, stereotypes, sexual orientation, gender identity, neurodiversity, reconciliation, decolonization, and indigenization. Indigenous education and worldview have been woven throughout their work to support mental health and a sense of belonging for all students.

This story of practice clearly highlights the importance of system education leaders' being willing to be vulnerable and disrupt the current system in order to achieve their vision of wellness, growth, and equity.

Research to Practice

Questions for reflection and dialogue within your local context:

- To what extent do you agree that supporting and promoting positive student mental health is the responsibility of education systems?

- How is your system promoting positive student mental health? What could you be doing more of to achieve greater success?

- What is your data telling you about the welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environments in your school authority? How can you best respond to that data?

- How are you ensuring that students and families have barrier-free access to mental health supports and services?

- How are you communicating to your stakeholders that positive student mental health is a priority in your school authority?

- How are you building the capacity of your staff to support positive student mental health? What evidence do you have that this effort is having the desired impact on student mental health?

- What universal and targeted strategies that support student mental health are in place in your school authority? Where are the gaps?

- What are the dominant narratives in your school authority? What can you do to disrupt these?

- Do your students feel a sense of belonging in your schools? How do you know that is true? If not, what can you do to address this issue successfully?

- What strategies could you use to elevate the authentic voices of your stakeholders?

- What system education leaders practices or behaviours are necessary to support student mental health and ensure optimum learning for all students?

Additional Supports for System Education Leader Capacity

- Alberta Education. (n.d.). *Mental health in schools.* Alberta.ca. https://www.alberta.ca/mental-health-in-schools

- Alberta Education. (2017). *Working together to support mental health in Alberta schools*. Alberta.ca. https://open.alberta.ca/dataset/e403b1b4-4232-4a3d-a9d4-f01 098218f9d/resource/91d0b431-5a3f-4192-af68-b35a427c817e/download/working-together-to-support-mental-health.pdf

- Alberta Education. (2022). Implementing a continuum of supports and services. Alberta.ca. https://open.alberta.ca/dataset/17f94fa5-05ae-4bfa-af99-6deac0775087/resource/d8c9a97e-835d-4b79-9a51-9f4b8cd0b550/download/edc-implementing-continuum-supports-services-resource-guide-school.pdf

- Grain, K. (2022). *Critical hope: How to grapple with complexity, lead with purpose, and cultivate transformative social change.* North Atlantic Books.

- Kanold, T. D., & Boogren, T. (2022). *Educator wellness: A guide for sustaining physical, mental, emotional, and social well-being.* Solution Tree Press.

- Mentalhealthliteracy.org. (2024, January 25). *Mental health literacy.* https://mentalhealthliteracy.org/

- Safir, S., & Dugan, J. (2021). *Street data: A next-generation model for equity, pedagogy, and school transformation.* Sage Publications Inc.

- Turner, J., MacGregor, S., Friesen, S., Sumara, D., McMorris, C., Domene, J., Allan, S., & Mesner, B. (2023). *The implementation and evaluation of school-based mental health supports: A scoping review and environmental scan.* Centre for Wellbeing in Education, Werklund School of Education, University of Calgary.

- Building Effective Relationships
- Modeling Commitment to Professional Learning
- Visionary Leadership
- Leading Learning
- Ensuring First Nations, Métis and Inuit Education for All Students
- School Authority Operations and Resources
- Supporting Effective Governance