



Mental Health
Commission
of Canada

Commission de
la santé mentale
du Canada



School-Based Mental Health and Substance Abuse Project

It is estimated that 1.2 million children and youth in Canada are affected by mental health problems and illnesses each year.

The Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC) believes that identifying youth at risk and intervening as early as possible improves life trajectories and reduces the prevalence of mental health problems and illnesses in adulthood.

PROJECT BACKGROUND

The MHCC supported a comprehensive research project to determine the current state of mental health and substance use programs and practices in Canadian schools. The information is being provided to policy makers and school boards to help inform the delivery of future mental health services in Canada's schools.

The School-based Mental Health and Substance Abuse Consortium (SBMHSA), a group of 40 leading researchers, policy makers and practitioners, began its work in 2009. It reviewed literature from all over the world on mental health and substance use, conducted a scan of best practices in Canadian schools and distributed a national survey to school boards and schools seeking input on the state of child and youth mental health programs.

The consortium's findings are aligned with the [Evergreen Framework](#), a guide for child and youth mental health released by the MHCC last year, which emphasizes mental health promotion and prevention from intervention through to ongoing care. Results from the SBMHSA Consortium's work also support recommendations related to promotion and prevention for children and youth in school, which were made in [Changing Directions, Changing Lives: The Mental Health Strategy for Canada](#) released by the MHCC in early May.

KEY FINDINGS

Survey

(643 respondents from 177 school districts completed a survey)

- Over 80% of respondents indicated there were unmet student mental health needs in schools.
- *The survey revealed many areas that must be addressed before systematic, evidence-based programming can be effectively placed in Canadian school boards.*



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Respondents identified:

- *A need for enhanced system coordination and leadership, educator mental health literacy, and protocols to ensure smooth pathways to service for students in need.*
- *A lack of trained school mental health professionals capable of delivering high-quality preventive services and responding to the substantial needs of individual students in Canadian schools.*

Scan

(All provinces and territories were represented during interviews of 145 people associated with programs and models currently being used in Canadian schools.)

Most programs identified were from Ontario, B.C. and Alberta, which likely reflects the larger scale of mental health service activity in these provinces. Most programs in the scan were English, with some designed for special populations such as a specific cultural group, clinical needs group or targeted age group.

The national scan of best practices found:

- Many research-informed programs are being used in Canadian schools.
- Many programs in Canada have never been tested and would benefit from rigorous evaluation.
- There are programs currently in use that have been created in response to a local need that do not align clearly with the evidence and have not been evaluated systematically.
- There is a growing number of community-school partnerships, coalitions and networks focused on moving mental health promotion forward.

Review

The findings from the review suggest there are benefits to mental health promotion for all students through class-wide instruction that includes social emotional learning/social skill building (e.g., approaches that use modeling, coaching, and learning through observing others in social situations).

This synthesis of research also offers compelling evidence for the use of behavioural and cognitive behavioural approaches in school mental health programs that focus on skill development and on identifying and challenging thoughts and beliefs that can lead to negative feelings and behaviours. This is supported for both *prevention* and *intervention* with students exhibiting internalizing symptoms (including problems related to depressed mood and anxiety) and externalizing symptoms (such as problems with aggression and conduct).

In the area of substance use prevention and intervention, the literature is mixed. Some support was found for interactive approaches that focus on resistance education and life skills.



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There is an insufficient body of research evidence to provide direction for special populations such as a specific cultural group, clinical needs group or targeted age group.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

In spite of limitations in the current literature such as inconsistent language, there is sufficient research evidence in the area of mental health in schools, to inform policy and practice directions in Canada. For example, the findings point to a need for:

- ▶ Investment in mental health promotion/social emotional learning initiatives
- ▶ More trained mental health professionals in schools
- ▶ Systematic professional learning in mental health for educators
- ▶ A method for organizing the current patchwork of mental health programs in Canada, and maintaining an updated directory of evidence-informed practices
- ▶ Identification and scale-up of helpful, evidence-based mental health promotion and prevention programs in schools
- ▶ Rigorous evaluation of untested but research-informed approaches, and careful consideration of the continuation of programs that are inconsistent with the evidence base
- ▶ Research programs in educator mental health literacy and mental health for schools with special populations
- ▶ Attention to organizational conditions for effective school mental health at the provincial, district and school/community level. Organizational conditions include protocols for decision-making, systematic training, role clarity, implementation, collaboration and system communication
- ▶ Increased coordination and sharing across provinces and territories, though several provinces are working to address key policy issues
- ▶ Because schools are an excellent place to promote positive mental health, more needs to be done to take advantage of the growing number of school/community partnerships, coalitions and networks focused on moving the field forward



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School-based Mental Health and Substance Abuse Consortium Partners

Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child & Youth Mental Health (Lead Organization)

B.C. Mental Health and Addiction Services

Bluewater District School Board

Canadian Association of School Administrators

Canadian Association for School Health

Canadian Teachers' Federation

Centre for Addictions Research of B.C.

Council of Ontario Directors of Education

Dalhousie University

Directions Evidence in Policy Research Group

Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board

Hospital for Sick Children

IWK Health Centre

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