

# Mental Health and Well-Being Belongs to Us

## *Back to School Edition* *Attendance – Does it Really Matter?*



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### **Welcome Back!**

I hope the school year is off to a good start. As we begin Year 3 of the implementation of the Children and Youth Mental Health and Well-Being Strategy, I would like to take this opportunity to outline and share with you some key highlights. This year the work will focus on “Integrating, Enhancing and Embedding” the goals and actions of the four components of the Strategy. Of particular note is the creation of the Mental Health and Well-Being Student Engagement Leadership Committee and Mental Health and Well-Being Parent Partnership Committee. These two committees will help coordinate system symposiums and forums to further address and promote mental health awareness and well-being. “Caring Adult” initiatives, anti-stigma work in all secondary schools and now in schools with Grades 7 & 8 students, along with strategies that include mindfulness, resilience and self-regulation will continue to drive our actions that will result in mentally healthy students.

It is important that School Improvement Plans are aligned to the goals and actions as articulated in the Board Improvement Plan – Student Achievement (BIPSA) and the *Years of Action* related to students’ mental health and well-being. Furthermore, “activating” the Children and Youth Mental Health and Well-Being Strategy through the school-based mental health teams and action plans will ensure coordinated efforts in achieving these goals and actions.

As we work together to deepen our own learning and capacity building, please review the “Foundations of Children and Youth Mental Health and Well-Being” online training module on KEY to Learn. This module has been loaded onto everyone’s Learning Profile - click on the “MyLearning” tab to get started.

This year, Children’s Mental Health Week takes place on **May 1 – 7, 2016**. You will be hearing more about this in the coming months.

Our monthly newsletters have been very well-received and as such we will continue to publish them this year as they not only provide valuable information, tips, strategies and resources on a variety of topics, but more importantly they showcase the incredible work that is being done in our schools and within our school communities. Once again, we will be seeking your contributions.

Our external webpage can be found at [www.tdsb.on.ca/mentalhealth](http://www.tdsb.on.ca/mentalhealth). Also, follow us on Twitter @TDSB\_MHWP.

In closing, I look forward to another productive and successful year as we work together to integrate, enhance and embed the Children and Youth Mental Health and Well-Being Strategy in our schools across the district.

Mental Health and Well-Being truly belongs to all of us!

(by: Sandy Spyropoulos, Executive Superintendent – Student Support Services and Care)

### **Attendance is the Best Way to a Successful Day**

By Alexandra V. at R.H. King Academy



### **“Glad you are here”**

### **Engaging students to attend school**

#### **What do all students need to ensure they attend school?**

- A warm welcome
- A smile
- A connection to a caring adult, every day
- A chance to learn
- A safe place to take risks
- Someone who notices when something is wrong
- Someone who reaches out when they notice
- Someone who listens, and tries to find help for them
- Someone who believes in them, and instills hope

#### **Students engaged at school are:**

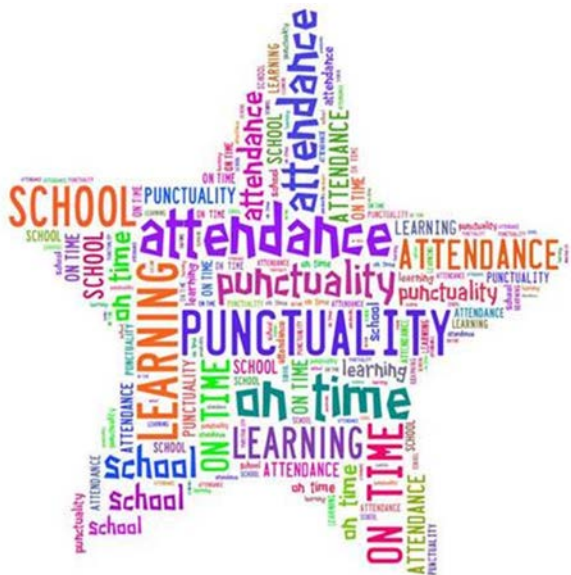
- Physically well, nourished, and active
- Physically and psychologically safe
- Loved, included, valued and supported at home, school and in the community
- Able to participate in productive activities including being academically successful
- Able to form and sustain healthy relationships with adults and peers
- Able to cope with adversity – are resilient
- Know that adults care about their well-being

They are flourishing!

Adapted from SMH ASSIST

## Attendance – It Really Matters

Students need to be present and engaged in order to learn. If we all agree that schools are the gateway to opportunities, then we know this starts right from Kindergarten. Research has confirmed that early intervention is key to the success of a child's early experiences with school. Missing 1 ½ days of school each month equates to students missing one full month of instruction. The impact could result in gaps in education, students feeling disconnected with peers and the learning process.



A focused committee of Social Workers/Attendance Counsellors in Area C has been exploring this issue in greater depth through qualitative analysis of attendance referrals in the elementary grades, literature review, consultation with school-based staff, and pilot school-based initiatives to increase awareness of the importance of attendance (i.e. poster competitions, assembly presentations, parent education). Most recently, we have developed an Attendance Package for Principals that incorporates parent hand-outs, sample letters, and guidelines for improvement.

All of us at the TDSB play a critical role in affecting the attendance of our students. Absences decrease when we actively communicate the importance of attending school regularly and reach out to families when a pattern of absence begins to develop.

The research tells us that attendance is the single most important factor in school success for a child. Increasingly, we are also learning that intervention in the early years has the greatest impact<sup>1</sup>. It can change a student's future opportunities and significantly benefit their social and emotional health.

Absenteeism is often an indicator of many concerns for our students. Students who experience difficulty attending school may be struggling with mental health and addiction concerns, parenting challenges, impact of poverty, learning needs, medical concerns, trauma and other in school and out of school experiences. Dr. Ferguson (May, 2005) recommends that schools can be proactive in helping students attend school. Partnerships with school staff, parents and community are key in supporting students to attend school daily<sup>2</sup>.

"Monitoring chronic early absence and using it as a trigger for early intervention could help schools and communities partner with families to ensure every child begins school with an equal opportunity to reach his or her potential."<sup>3</sup>.

As we look forward to the start of the 2015/2016 school year, it is important for school communities to work together to support and educate students, families and staff on the importance of attending school. Creating inclusive caring school environments that are reflective of our diverse student body will help to ensure that our students are welcomed, engaged and present in our schools. We know that "Attendance Matters".

For great ideas on how to implement attendance strategies in your classrooms and schools please contact your Social Worker/Attendance Counsellor.

"Generally absenteeism rate:

- are somewhat higher among JK/SK students compared to other elementary school student;
- are fairly stable throughout the elementary school years from ages 6 to 13 (Grades 1 to 8); and
- rise in secondary school from age 14 to 18 (Grades 9 through 12)."

TDSB FACTS, Student Success Indicators, ISSUE 5, September 2013: Absenteeism @ the TDSB

"The majority of students with an absenteeism rate of less than 10% (e.g., missed less than half a day a week) were performing at or above the provincial standard (Level 3 or 4) in EQAO's Mathematics assessment."

TDSB FACTS, Student Success Indicators, ISSUE 5, September 2013: Absenteeism @ the TDSB

"...high absenteeism is strongly connected to low achievement, but the causes of absenteeism are often complex, including health, engagement, self-confidence, and the broader interconnection of social economic and environmental challenges. Consequently simplistic solutions to lowering absenteeism rarely work."

TDSB FACTS, Student Success Indicators, ISSUE 5, September 2013: Absenteeism @ the TDSB

## Tips for Staff and Administrators - How to Improve Student Attendance:

- Personalized connections with students and their families early in the year
- Ensuring students have a sense of belonging and responsibility, i.e. classroom helper, involvement in school activities and teams etc.
- Monitoring classroom attendance for early intervention
- Recognizing good and improved attendance
- Positive messaging
- Breakfast Clubs and early morning programming
- Mentoring – Parent Buddies for “walking school buses”
- Monthly School Newsletter highlighting attendance
- Parent Engagement i.e. volunteering, parent council etc.
- Accessing support from School Attendance Counsellor and/or Social Worker

## Tips for Parents - How to Improve Your Child's Attendance:

- Talk with your child about the importance of attending school regularly;
- Discuss with your child what happened at school each day;
- Make sure your child stays healthy by eating nutritious food and getting enough sleep and exercise;
- Help your child prepare for the next school day;
- Avoid family trips or doctor's appointments during school hours;
- Support school rules and consequences for being late or absent;
- Show your child why education is important. Give specific examples of how education helps people succeed; and
- Make sure your child stays home only when he/she is sick with a fever, vomiting or with a doctor's note.

Sources:

<sup>1</sup>“Student attendance and educational outcomes: Every day counts”, Hancock, K. J., Shepherd, C. C. J., Lawrence, D., & Zubrick, S. R. (2013). Report for the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, Canberra, Australia.

<sup>2</sup>Ferguson, B., K. Tillecze, K. Boydell & J.A. Rummens. (May 30, 2005) “Early School Leavers: Understanding the Lived Reality of Student Disengagement from Secondary School. Final Report”

<sup>3</sup>“Present, Engaged, and Accounted For The Critical Importance of Addressing Chronic Absence in the Early Grades”, Hedy N. Chang and Marijosé Romero: (September 2008)

(bv: Social Work and Attendance Committee. Area C)

## Highlights of the Implementation of the Mental Health and Well-Being Strategy 2015/2016 Integrating, Enhancing and Embedding - Year 3

### 1. High Quality Services and Programs

Provide ongoing professional learning and training of staff to further understanding and knowledge of Mental Health and Well-Being on topics of:

- Depression
- Anxiety
- Suicide prevention, intervention and postvention
- Specific populations – Early Years, Aboriginal and LGBTQI

### 2. A Caring School Culture and Healthy Physical Environment

Support and strengthen Mental Health Action Plans and Mental Health Teams in every school

- Evidence based practices and programs in schools will be highlighted specifically focused on wellness
- A “Caring Adult” program in every school

### 3. A Supportive Social Environment

- Enhance anti-stigma initiatives in all secondary schools and expand to middle schools
- Establish Student Engagement Leadership Committee to guide and inform anti-stigma work
- Organize Area student-led Mental Health and Well-Being Summits (Fall) and a District wide student-led Mental Health and Well-Being Symposium (Spring);
- Promote students’ mental well-being by fostering resiliency, self-regulation and positive self-esteem

### 4. Parent and Community Partnerships

Enhance parent engagement and “parents as partners” in supporting students’ mental health and well-being:

- Work with newly established Mental Health and Well-Being Parent Partnership Committee to raise awareness, educate and communicate mental health and well-being opportunities for parents
- Organize a parent speaker series
- Organize other events/workshops/conferences for parents to increase awareness of mental health and well-being

Continue to collaborate with community partners, children’s mental health agencies to provide pathways to support

### Mental Health and Well-Being Core Leadership Team

Heather Johnson & Saleem Haniff, Social Workers, Mental Health and Well-Being – System Support

Rose D’Alimonte – Chief of Social Work/Attendance – Area D

Marcia Powers-Dunlop, Interim Senior Manager – Professional Support Services

Sandy Spyropoulos, Executive Superintendent – Student Support Services and Care

Leslie Fox, Executive Assistant – Student Support Services and Care