Support Team Releases A Suicide Prevention Framework For Ontario School Boards

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Student mental health is a rising concern at Ontario school boards. This is perhaps not surprising, considering that more than one in three Ontario students in grades seven to 12 report moderate-to-serious psychological distress, according to the latest numbers released in the 2016 Ontario Student Drug Use and Health Survey ("OSDUHS") conducted by the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health ("CAMH"). The OSDUHS, which has been tracking issues relating to Ontario student mental health since 1977, is the longest-running school survey of adolescents in Canada.

In recent years, the alarming statistics relating to student mental health, including prevalence of attempted suicide among students, have prompted the Ontario government to set health priorities and facilitate preventative policies, programs and services that support student mental health. One such initiative is the School Mental Health ASSIST ("SMH"), a provincial implementation support team under the Government of Ontario's Open Minds, Healthy Minds: Ontario's Comprehensive Mental Health and Addictions Strategy. SMH offers its services directly to school boards by working with their Mental Health Leadership Team, most often through the Superintendent and each school board's Mental Health Leader, who have a shared responsibility to create and implement their board's mental health strategy and action plan.

On April 26, 2017, SMH released the *Life Promotion and Suicide Prevention Framework* (the "Framework"), an important guideline with respect to student suicide prevention at school boards. The Framework sets out guidelines for school boards in establishing conditions for effective practices in school-based life promotion. This includes school boards ensuring that they have in place suicide-specific protocols, communication plans, teams and capacities.

For example, every school board should have an articulated suicide prevention, intervention, and postvention protocol that is well-understood by staff and other key stakeholders in the school community. The Framework provides guidance in creating and supporting school board crisis support teams and preparing them for 'worse case scenarios' like suicide clusters or pacts. The Framework provides guidance with respect to ensuring role clarity within the school, board, community, parents, and mental

health/health organizations as part of the work of setting foundations for suicide prevention.

The Framework also discusses the requirement for special supports for certain student groups such as students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, Two Spirit or queer who experience suicidal ideation and behaviour in disproportionate numbers, and the factors which contribute to these groups' experience.

Of particular note, the Framework sets out the strategies which research has shown to have the most efficacy in the education context, including:

- mental health promotion programming that emphasizes flourishing and resiliency, with particular emphasis on skills like help-seeking;
- meaningful engagement of students at school, with a view to enhancing a sense of belonging and purpose;
- early identification of depressive symptomatology in self and others (effective safety nets in place);
- clear pathways to, from, and through care; and
- focused and coordinated care following visits to the emergency department or hospitalization related to suicidal behaviour.

Schools are in a uniquely advantageous position when it comes to being able to impact youth mental health. In school settings, students are often in the best position to learn supportive skills like solving problems, resolving conflict, making decisions, building resiliency, seeking help and coping with stress. The Framework is an important tool which provides timely guidance for school boards in ensuring not only that they are proactively creating safe and accepting school environments, but that they also have in place targeted mental health supports for students with the greatest need.

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