

Featured Mental Health Initiative

Mental Wellness Retreat Day

Whitehorse Individual Learning Centre (Whitehorse, YT)

Background

The Whitehorse Individual Learning Centre is an alternative drop-in high school for youth aged 16-21 who want to further their education outside of the regular school system. Students work independently in a self-paced learning environment with opportunities for individual support from teachers. Students can graduate with either a B.C. Certificate of Graduation or an Adult Graduation Certificate. The school offers flexible hours for students who may have full-time employment and/or family commitments that prevent them from having a set timetable.

Promising Practice

This initiative includes three, full-day restorative wellness retreats for the students to participate in throughout the year. These retreats are voluntary, and will provide students with an opportunity to practice research-based skills and strategies to help mitigate symptoms of anxiety and depression, and improve overall well-being through activities such as journaling, guided meditation, breathing techniques, restorative yoga, healthy eating, and gratitude practices.

The wellness retreats will take place at the Vista Outdoor Learning Centre, a retreat facility outside of Whitehorse. This setting will allow students to reflect on and practice different types of wellness techniques. During the retreats, staff will be able to share a variety of practical skills with students that they will be able to use at home and at school. The staff will also follow up with students to support them in developing their own plan to manage their mental health proactively and in response to crisis.

Last year, the centre received one-time funding and were able to pilot the initiative. Two wellness retreats were hosted but unfortunately the third was cancelled due to COVID-19. Students gave positive feedback and advocated for the opportunity to participate in more wellness retreats. The hope is that this initiative will be able to continue each year so that students can apply the wellness skills they learn and practice into their day-to-day lives.



Impact

The staff believe that providing students with opportunities to learn about, and practice, mental wellness is so important. With this in mind, two overarching goals of wellness day retreats were developed. The first is to provide a nurturing and supportive space in a neutral and natural environment, where they can focus on developing feelings of self-worth, appreciation, and understanding. The second goal is for students to enjoy participating in a variety of wellness practices so that they may determine which would be effective to use in their daily life. Students will have an opportunity to provide feedback about the retreats and the staff will also follow up with them throughout the year to assess the impacts of their learnings and experiences at the retreat.

Sustainability

Wellness Retreats were developed as a result of an addressed need within the centre and a lack of community resources to meet that need. The Whitehorse Individual Learning Centre is an inclusive space that welcome students from diverse backgrounds and experiences, and the Wellness Retreats are opportunities to support students' mental health. Funding will support the rental of the retreat space, however, after the general approach and schedule of activities is completed, it can be sustained for years to come.

Modifications

Here are suggestions to modify this approach for different learning environments.

- Designate a specific time of day/week within your classroom to practice strategies to support students' mental health
- Consider taking your class for a nature walk and practicing mindfulness while surrounded by nature
- Create a Wellness Day at your school where students participate in a variety of activities to learn about, and practice, positive mental health

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