

## Featured Mental Health Initiative

### Youth Wellness Mentors

Summerland Secondary School/Summerland Middle School (Summerland, BC)

#### Background

Summerland Secondary School (SSS) and Summerland Middle School (SMS) are located in the Okanagan Skaha region of British Columbia. SSS and SMS serve a combined 750 students and are located very close to each other providing a unique opportunity to learn and collaborate together. From 2015-2019, SSS has had a student led wellness group facilitated by the school counsellor. Students in grades 9-12 meet weekly to connect and plan activities and initiatives that promote the well-being of the school community. In 2016, the group identified a need to support the mental health of grade 8 students, and the Youth Wellness Mentors program was created.

#### Promising Practice

The Youth Wellness Mentors program includes high school wellness mentors identifying the positive coping skills and knowledge they had acquired as they navigated the challenges of high school and sharing these with grade 9 students. The goal of this program is to build connections between students from the two schools in preparation for the transition from middle school to high school.



High school youth mentors believe one of the biggest strengths of the program is their ability to relate to the grade 8 students. They share relatable stories, skills, and learnings that are relevant and meaningful. SSS students volunteer to be a youth wellness mentor at the start of the school year. Once the team of approximately 20 students is assembled, the guidance counsellor trains this group in mentorship and mental health literacy. The group also establishes goals for the year and lesson themes. They then become connected with the grade 8 teaching team and counsellor at SMS to plan for the year, and teams of wellness mentors are matched with a grade 8 class. Wellness mentor teams visit their class every second

Thursday for 30 minutes of instructional time. The wellness mentors lead activities to build connections and lay the foundation for conversations around mental health and well-being. The wellness mentors also deliver lessons on mental health literacy and positive coping skills. They share information, lead evidence-based practices that support well-being, and share stories about well-being. During this 30-minute block, middle school grade 8 teachers remain in the class, but take on an observational role. The teachers often review and extend the lesson ideas and themes later throughout the week with their classes. They also report that these sessions provide a unique opportunity to learn more about their students and develop a clear understanding of students' needs.

As the wellness program has become an integral part of the culture at SSS, wellness mentors are now being approached to share in other environments. Mentors have shared in classrooms at the request of teachers at SSS and across the district. They have shared at parent nights, staff meetings, and local conferences. The staff strongly believe in continuing to build this capacity for wellness in their school community by engaging youth in facilitating learning about mental health literacy and positive coping strategies for all areas of their lives.

## Impact

What they have learned in developing this initiative is that proactive learning is building capacity for youth to handle many facets of their mental health before they reach crisis. By using learning tools and strategies to help them self-regulate their emotions, as well as by recognizing warning signs of mental illness or distress, youth are able to identify issues sooner for themselves and others. Youth wellness mentors model inclusive behaviour in their interactions and activities are scaffolded in a developmentally appropriate manner. Mentors invite students to engage in a way that fits their needs, offering variations to activities, while always giving permission to pass when needed.

## Sustainability

There is an increasing number of students who, after being part of the wellness mentor program as a mentee in grade 8, become wellness mentors in high school. These students continually express what a positive difference this program made in improving open communication about mental health, increasing their awareness of the importance of well-being, and supporting their transition to high school. Now they want to give back to this program and help others.

## Modifications

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

- If your school is not in close proximity to another, invite older students to be wellness mentors for the younger students
- Incorporate a Youth Wellness Mentors Program into a Leadership class
- Have Youth Wellness Mentors visit a local elementary school and implement mental health activities with students

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