

## Featured Mental Health Initiative

### Ventures Program

Centre for Learning Alternatives (Prince George, BC)

#### Background

The Ventures Program is implemented at an alternative high school and the school population is comprised of at risk youth. Students that attend the school have exhausted all mainstream school supports, are in danger of dropping out, and are in need of significant support including targeted mental health initiatives. Over half of the students have a medically diagnosed mental health problem and many remain undiagnosed.

#### Promising Practice

Ventures is a 10 month program that combines physical education, outdoor education, and leadership in a fun and supportive environment. It involves a combination of experiential learning, community engagement, mentoring, leadership, and volunteerism. The program is administered by a Registered Clinical Counsellor (who is also a certified teacher and physical education specialist) with the additional support of a youth care worker who specializes in mental health. Various community members and staff also play a role in the program.

An approach titled *Challenge by Choice* is utilized so students are met where they are at physically and emotionally, and are supported in a way that works for them. This approach empowers students and creates a safe, supportive, inclusive, family-like environment to support mental health and increase physical activity. This is achieved through therapeutic strategies and by offering a variety of activities in a variety of environments. Each class starts and ends with a talking circle where students are encouraged to rate how they are feeling on scale of 1-10 and share anything they feel is appropriate. Students are also taught empathetic listening skills and take part in trust building exercises to aid this process. Throughout the year, students are exposed to various trails, outdoor recreation facilities, and community facilities, helping to further connect them to the community. This also promotes positive physical activity behaviour, increases the chances students will stay active, and develops strategies to support their mental health.



As a group, Ventures students also volunteer in the community. They learn skills in the Ventures class to lead physical activity and healthy living sessions with younger students. They run theme days and also work with small groups of elementary students who benefit from a mentorship model. Finally, Ventures students are involved in the maintenance of the school ice rink and help in the school meals room, learning how to make healthy meals for themselves and others.

As members of the Ventures program, students receive several certifications that further strengthen their employability skills and to increase their confidence. These include First Aid level 1, CORE, and High-Five Principles of Child Development. The belief with the Ventures program is that the combination of the outdoor environment, physical activity, skill development, community involvement, and a well-supported therapeutically engineered program, will improve the overall health, attendance, and confidence of students.

### Impact

Students in the Ventures program have an attendance rate of 87% while the attendance rate of students that are not in the program is 62%.

### Sustainability

School administration fully supports the program and has developed numerous community partnerships using creative ideas to maintain the partnerships (e.g., having students clear brush in the fall at the cross country ski centre and then having the opportunity to ski in the winter at a reduced rate). The program also partners with the local elementary school and is working toward a peer mentor program with Ventures students.

### Modifications

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

- Host the program once a semester, or once a month if there are not enough resources or support to implement it for on semester.
- Arrange an outdoor education weekend that encompasses the teachings of the program in an overnight excursion.
- Schedule guided hikes/walks along nature trails within your community where the leader facilitates conversations about the strategies to support physical and mental health.
- Plan physical activity options that include talking about mental health and its positive connection to physical activity.

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