

July 10, 2023

Honourable Dan Williams
Minister of Mental Health and Addiction
130 Legislature Building
10800 - 97 Avenue
Edmonton, AB T5K 2B6
Via e-mail: mha.minister@gov.ab.ca

Dear Minister Williams:

Congratulations on your election and appointment as Minister of Mental Health and Addiction. As a school division, we have a special interest in the mental health of young people. Researchers estimate that by age 25, approximately 20 per cent of Canadians will have developed a mental illness, with 70 per cent reporting that symptoms started in childhood.¹ With an enrolment of over 114,000 students in Edmonton Public Schools, this equates to almost 23,000 students who are likely experiencing or will experience a mental illness. (Note that this number does not include the number of students who may have a mental health concern such as grief, trauma, or family difficulties.) Add to this the effects of the pandemic, and the number grows even larger.

Our [2022-2026 Strategic Plan](#) prioritizes mental health with an emphasis on relationships and building learning environments that support a sense of belonging. In collaboration with multiple community partners, we are working to:

- Support student well-being and mental health through utilization of the Comprehensive School Health approach, resilience science and the provision of a range of universal, targeted and specialized supports (i.e., a Pyramid of Intervention).

¹ [Mental Health Commission of Canada](#)



- Build staff capacity through training focused on supporting student well-being and mental health, building staff efficacy and leadership skills, and building skills to support staff's own well-being.

Given the importance of student mental health, the Board of Trustees in 2018 created a Mental Health Committee. The Committee considered what would constitute the ideal mental health supports to students. As part of the formation of their answer, they gathered information from our Comprehensive School Health team, principals, parents and teachers.

They heard that the students in our 213 schools have different needs and there is not a “one size fits all” model. There was consistency in the feedback that the presence of mental health support staff in schools allows for the relationship-building necessary to reduce stigma and earn the trust and support of a school community including school staff, students and families.

An ideal system would offer the flexibility to provide for the needs of students and families, and different levels of supports based on need, with additional bridging between services offered through schools, Alberta Health and the broader community. The system would have layers of support and access to services in every school:

- Education: Mental health should be embedded in the Alberta curriculum and professional development should be offered to all teachers and educational assistants.
- Prevention: Preventative services should be offered to students and families, including workshops and in-services for parenting and common mental health concerns.
- Outreach: Outreach workers such as success coaches should be present as a first line of contact for students and families, but should not replace credentialed mental health workers.
- Bridging: Social workers or outreach workers should be available to navigate systems for students and families and provide a bridge to help integrate health, education, children's services and social programs existing in the community.
- Counselling: Teacher-certified counsellors and accredited mental health professionals should be available to offer counselling services.
- Crisis Care: Crisis support teams should be available to visit schools and families in crisis.

Ideally, all of these services would be present in every school building, or accessible through a nearby hub of services, and would be supported with consistent sustainable funds rather than through the variable budgets of charitable organizations, pilot projects and grants.



Currently, the multiple paths to service combined with multiple ministries each overseeing different parts of the path is resulting in variable and fragmented access to mental health supports for students.

We believe in the power of prevention, especially in schools, for both reducing stigma and longer-term mental health challenges. Schools are uniquely positioned to help with prevention and risk reduction through access to mental health services.

We also believe in collaboration; it is one of our Division's cornerstone values. We invite you to be a partner and collaborator with us to help ensure the good mental health of our students, staff and families.

For maximum benefit, cross-ministry collaboration will be required to provide seamless, accessible service, efficiency and cost savings. Challenges as complex as the interplay of poverty, mental health and education on the success of students requires whole-system collaboration.

By focusing on prevention, reducing disparities in risk factors and maximizing opportunities for access to earlier, lower-cost services in schools we can work together to realize our mutual goal of helping the youth of our province find dignity and fulfilment through lives as competent, contributing citizens.

We would be pleased to meet with you early this fall and discuss ways in which we could work together. Please contact Catherine Angeles at 780-429-8443 or catherine.angeles@epsb.ca to arrange a time. In the meantime, I hope you enjoy a wonderful summer.

Sincerely,



Trisha Estabrooks
Chair

