



Quarter of kids have mental health woes

LANDMARK REPORT: Thames Valley teachers were surveyed in an effort to build a plan for services
By JENNIFER O'BRIEN, The London Free Press
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Paige Lawson, 20, is "excited" the Thames school board wants to develop a consistent approach to students' mental health issues. Lawson finished high school online because of anxiety attacks. (SUE REEVE, The London Free Press)

In excess of one in four students in the Thames Valley District school board suffers from mental health issues — most strongly linked to bullying — a study has found.

In what some consider a ground-breaking report for the board's mental health strategic plan, researchers say there must be a more consistent way to deal with student anxiety, depression, substance abuse and other issues that have been surfacing repeatedly in classrooms.

"The numbers we found and the level of need were surprising," said board psychologist Michelle Gilpin. "It's hard to see it and I don't think people know there is that need out there."

And where there is need, it is great, said Paige Lawson, 20, who left London's A.B. Lucas secondary school in Grade 11 to complete her

courses online because of severe anxiety attacks that left her feeling ashamed, isolated and unable to focus in class.

"When I got anxious in classrooms, I would faint in class in front of all my peers and staff. This happened regularly," Lawson said in an e-mail interview.

"You can imagine how difficult it would be to try and write a test or listen to a lesson when your body is feeling dizzy and stressed. I would become afraid of fainting again in classrooms, so I would miss class."

The fear of anxiety attacks affected her self-esteem, her social life and her marks, she said.

"My attendance became poor and that affected my social life with friends, and also the opinions of staff," Lawson said. "I was fortunate that I possess strong communication skills, because for many students, they are unable to advocate for themselves and get these issues resolved."

In recent years, both area boards have been participated in provincially funded programs to tackle mental health issues among students, on the premise that such issues have a direct impact on educational success.

“There is a direct connection between literacy and well-being,” said Gilpin. “The link to educational outcomes is really clear and our teachers and support staff are seeing potentially very bright kids with mental health issues that are preventing them from learning.

“Because of what they are dealing with, they are not mentally prepared to learn and not able to engage,” she said. According to nearly 4,000 teachers surveyed by board psychologists, the wide-ranging issues that affect classroom behaviour include anxiety, depression, anger management control, attention issues, childhood stress, impulse control, self-control and substance abuse.

Self-conscious children and teenagers dealing with any of these symptoms can make easy targets for bullies, said Gilpin, pointing to a direct link between well-being and bullying — a “critical” finding, according to one trustee. “This is the first time I’ve seen a report make that link,” Peter Jaffe said. “(Traditionally) we see bullying as a safe school issue and mental health as a special education issue, but this shows we need to work together, because kids with mental health problems may be more vulnerable to bullying or being bullied.

“This raises awareness of a link, and tabling that in a report is critical, more than words.”

Corina Morrison, of the London and area Anti-Bullying Coalition, said she’s “glad,” to hear the report make a connection between bullying and mental health.

“We have known that there is a link,” she said. “We know kids that are bullied need help, but the bullies also need services wrapped around them more than the targets.

“A lot of kids who are bullied don’t start out with mental health issues until they are bullied and it’s the relentless harassment — your self-esteem can drop into your boots. And we’ve got to start dealing with this before we lose more kids (to suicide).”

The board’s five-year strategic plan aims to build a board-wide system to deal with various problems teachers see in classrooms, Gilpin said.

Teachers are often first to notice something wrong, yet there is no board-approved bank of resources for them to turn to.

“There are all kinds of programs floating around out there . . . but there is no consistent resource,” Gilpin said. “So now teachers just look for a program — it can come to them through hearsay.”

Provincial youth organizations have been publishing a slightly less alarming figure of one in five students being unwell, but educators in this city recognize alarming symptoms more and more, said the superintendent of the London District Catholic school board.

“Every day we have teachers across the district who are experiencing challenges of student learning because it is being impacted by student mental health,” said Tamara Nugent. “There is an increasing need for teachers and other support staff to respond to children’s needs appropriately.”

Recent area initiatives include the 2010 launch of www.mentalhealth4kids.ca, a Web portal that aims to provide a one-stop shop for children and teens with mental-health issues with links to 250 mental health agencies.

MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES

Mental health issues teachers identified as affecting students' ability to focus and learn include anxiety, depression, anger management control, attention issues, childhood stress, substance abuse, lack of impulse control, lack of self control.

\$250M for mental health

Thames Valley District school board officials reacted positively Tuesday to the McGuinty government's budget promise to direct more than \$250 million to children's mental health initiatives.

"It is certainly very encouraging," said board psychologist Michelle Gilpin. "Anytime there is a dollar amount attached to an issue it shows that people are paying attention. Many of us have known for a long time about the concerns in our schools, but the readiness within the board and the province to deal with them is very encouraging."

The London District Catholic board also welcomed the news, said superintendent Tamara Nugent.

"It shows there is awareness that (mental health issues) are impacting learning, and we welcome any funding we can devote toward initiatives to help."

THE SURVEY

Among findings of the Mental Health Literacy and Capacity survey filled out by 3,917 Thames Valley District school board teachers:

- 28.6% of students in Thames Valley classrooms exhibit emotional issues in behaviour that affect classroom learning.
- Bullying/harassment was the most significant issue overall, and for each grade level.
- Anger management, anxiety and impulse control were the next top three issues for primary, junior and intermediate students.
- Substance abuse, depression and stress were the next top three issues for senior grades.