

CMHO Submission for the Ontario Government Consultation on Education

Introduction

Children's Mental Health Ontario (CMHO) appreciates the opportunity to participate in the consultations regarding Ontario's education system. CMHO is the association representing Ontario's publicly-funded Child and Youth Mental Health Centres. With the combined strength of our members, we advocate for government investments, policies and programs that are responsive to the needs of children, youth and families seeking mental health services in Ontario. Our primary goal is to promote a coordinated and high-quality system of care that puts children, youth and families first. Given our role and expertise, this submission will focus on the following area of the education consultations: **Building a new age-appropriate Health and Physical Education curriculum**, with an emphasis on the need for the inclusion of mental health literacy in any curriculum updates.

Importance of Mental Health in the Education System

Mental health is a significant concern for Ontario's children and youth. As many as 1 in 5 children and youth in this province will experience some form of mental health problem, and mental health issues have significant impacts on young peoples' ability to thrive. In the education system, especially in high schools, we see significant need for mental health supports. In 2017, 39% of Ontario students (grades 7-12) indicated a moderate-to-serious level of psychological distress (symptoms of anxiety and depression) while 17% indicated a serious level of psychological distress.¹ At the same time, 31% of students wanted to talk to someone about mental health but didn't know where to turn.² Our educators have highlighted similar concerns, with 73% of teachers reporting that anxiety disorders are a pressing concern in the classroom, and 59% reporting depression disorders as a pressing concern.³

Mental health issues affect a student's ability to succeed in the classroom. If ignored, mental health problems can impede social development, leaving young people feeling socially isolated, stigmatized and unhappy.⁴ In addition, some studies show that students with emotional disturbances and poor social-emotional functioning have difficulty meeting academic standards.⁵ Given these realities, it is critical that Ontario's new health and physical education curriculum include significant mental health information.

We have outlined four key considerations that should inform the development of the revised Health and Physical education curriculum below.

1) Incorporating the Voices of Student

Through our engagement with youth across the province, we have heard time and time again that students want and expect more mental health content to be included in their educational curriculum. Children and youth want to better understand mental health and mental illness and learn how they can support themselves and their classmates. They also want to learn about tools and resources they – and their friends – can access. Although we have come a long way in terms of reducing mental health stigma, there is still important work to be done to ensure young people have an accurate understanding of mental health, mental wellness and mental illness.

To ensure that the curriculum meets the needs of our children and youth, young people must be involved – throughout the process – in the development of the revised curriculum. This will ensure that the new material is meeting the specific needs of our children and youth, is based on the current realities our young people are facing and addresses their concerns in an appropriate manner.

2) Supporting Educators

Any new curriculum must be implemented in tandem with an educational strategy for teachers and other educators. We know that educators want and need more mental health literacy and training. According to a 2012 survey, 68% of teachers had not received any professional development such as knowledge acquisition or skills training to address student mental illness.⁶ Educators require an evidence-informed and age appropriate curriculum, accompanied by structured lesson plans and training to ensure they have the skills and knowledge necessary to adequately deliver the curriculum. [School Mental Health ASSIST](#) (SMH ASSIST) has taken on a leadership role in this area and we strongly support their continued involvement in this work.

3) Broader than Mental Health

The revised Health and Physical Education curriculum must also include learnings on broader issues related to wellness and social and emotional development. For example, the curriculum should include age-appropriate content related to conflict resolution, problem solving, and healthy relationships, etc. All of these are critical pieces to ensuring our young people build resilience and learn how to deal with normal stress and emotions—both so that we can prevent feelings of stress from becoming more serious, and so that young people understand the difference between feelings that everyone experiences and feelings that might require support from peers and/or adults.

4) Leverage Existing Expertise and Build Partnerships

Lastly, it will be important to leverage the in-house mental health expertise that presently exists in Ontario schools. Schools are uniquely positioned to offer mental health wellness and prevention programs – especially for at-risk children and youth – and promote overall student success. More broadly, schools can continue to partner with community partners, including CMHO agencies, to ensure students are identified and referred to specialized treatment, when required. To this end, CMHO and SMH ASSIST are eager to continue to build on our already strong partnership, to promote enhancing pathways to care and ensuring wraparound care for vulnerable students. Collaborations like this, between the education and community sectors, can be expanded to develop improved pathways to care and better connect children and youth with more significant needs with the appropriate mental health services in the community.

Conclusion

We know that our educators and the school system are at the frontlines of the crisis in children and youth mental health. The education system places a critical role in prevention, education and identification of students requiring specialized mental health care. The Ontario Government has an opportunity to establish a revised Health and Physical Education curriculum that places significant emphasis on mental health wellness, which would have important impacts on our students. CMHO and our members appreciate the opportunity to participate in this consultation and we look forward to working with the government as we move forward with the new Health and Physical Education curriculum.

¹ CAMH. (2017). *The Ontario Student Drug and Health Survey, 2017*. Toronto, ON: CAMH.

² Ibid.

³ Canadian Teachers' Federation. (2012). *Understanding Teachers' Perspectives on Student Mental Health: Findings from a National Survey*. Ottawa, ON: Canadian Teachers' Federation.

⁴ Meldrum L, Venn D, Kutcher S. *Mental Health in Schools: How Teachers have the Power to Make a Difference*. Halifax, NS: Dalhousie University and IWK Health Centre.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Canadian Teachers' Federation. (2012). *Understanding Teachers' Perspectives on Student Mental Health: Findings from a National Survey*. Ottawa, ON: Canadian Teachers' Federation.