

South Shore students' mental health wait times cut

BEVERLEY WARE SOUTH SHORE BUREAU

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South Shore Health and the region's school board say a unique collaboration between them has led to a dramatic drop in wait times for mental health and addictions counselling for students.

Todd Leader, director of community health for South Shore Health, said in the first year of the partnership, wait times for children and adolescents to access these services dropped from five months for a first appointment to between one and seven days.

South Shore Health and the South Shore regional school board established an eight-member committee three years ago to improve collaboration between the two agencies. The ultimate aim is to have healthier, happier, more productive students, said Jeff DeWolfe, the board's director of programs and student services.

The two agencies explained the partnership to board members of both organizations Monday.

DeWolfe said, "it's one of the most impressive (partnerships) in the province," aimed at getting students the services they need sooner.

Leader said health authority staff have told him they are seeing students who are only getting help because it is being offered in the school.

"There are tonnes of kids now getting help who would never have accessed our service," he said.

DeWolfe said the board and health authority realigning some of their resources has meant better access to health services and preventative programs for students.

Leader said the health authority has the equivalent of seven full-time staff who work only in schools. "That's unprecedented in this province, and it's not the end point, either," he said, as the two organizations planned to expand their services.

Leader said the health authority positions are funded partly through reallocating staff at South Shore Health and partly through the province's mental health strategy with one position funded through a private donor.

Leader said collaboration is a natural fit for the two agencies.

While education is a predictor of longevity and health, he said, "We know that what happens in the schools more directly has impacts on the health and well-being of students."

And that means a school's policies and a positive atmosphere can improve a child's overall health as well as performance at school, Leader said.

"The culture of a school affects the way kids learn, it affects their mental health and their physical health, we know that," he said.

A healthy, safe school environment is critical for student learning, DeWolfe said, and data shows respectful relationships at school and a student's health are also vital to improving a student's performance at school.

He said students who experience anxiety, have behavioural problems or feel excluded, whether due to cultural, economic, religious or ability differences, can become disengaged. Their academic performance as well as their health can suffer.

Because of this committee there is a guidance counsellor for every 500 students — the best ratio in the province. Three schools have outreach workers offering comprehensive services for high risk students and their families. Community health workers offer addictions, mental and sexual health counselling in every junior and senior high school.

DeWolfe said there are also clinical therapists at all junior and senior high schools and a physiotherapist and two occupational therapists working in the schools, as well as eight nurse practitioners available to students.

He said these services support teachers as well as students.