

# Mental Health and Wellness in the Classroom

*Research and collaboration lead the way forward*

BY KIM ARNOTT



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*Kathy Short, School Mental Health ASSIST*

**T**HE RESULTS OF FIVE YEARS OF focus on mental health and wellness are readily apparent across Ontario's school system. Awareness, compassion and mental health literacy have spiked, and a range of programs and supports are being introduced to address wellness issues for students at all grade levels.

But underneath the more visible changes are foundational ones that will ultimately sustain the transformation, says Kathy Short, director of

School Mental Health ASSIST. As head of the provincial team charged with supporting school boards in their efforts to improve student mental health and well-being, Short says the emphasis has been on encouraging boards to tackle change in a coherent way.

This effort begins by addressing infrastructure and protocols and clarifying roles, then moves on to building staff capacity, and then selecting and implementing the programs. "We do it in that sequence because it's tempting, I believe, to put



PHOTO COURTESY OF BRIAN MISHARA

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**BRIAN MISHARA**  
*Université du Québec à Montréal*

programming on the ground. But what the research shows is that if you do that in a piecemeal way, it’s unlikely it will be sustainable over time, and it will benefit only those lucky enough to be in those initial pilots,” she says. “And, really, we’re all looking for something much bigger. We’re looking to support the well-being of all of the students across the province.”

Along with the establishment of board-level strategies guided by mental health leaders, Short says, the last five years has seen a growing body of research into students’ mental health and the development of strong partnerships across sectors. “I really think the stars have been aligning with respect to mental health and well-being in Ontario schools.”

The growing impact of collaboration, research and foundational work was on display at the 2016 Summit on Children and Youth Mental Health held in Toronto in the spring. Below are just a few of the programs that are making a difference.

### **Suicide Prevention: Making Problems Manageable**

The best way to prevent adolescent and adult suicides is to arm children with coping strategies for managing their problems, says Brian Mishara, professor and director of the suicide prevention centre at the Université du Québec à Montréal.

Research has consistently shown that people who attempt suicide have fewer and less helpful coping strategies than those who have experienced a similar situation without suicidal behaviour. It’s even been shown that they have less success in brainstorming a range of coping strategies for a fictional problem.

“There’s a good rationale for believing that improving coping skills will help prevent suicides,” says Mishara. “The idea is if you learn good coping strategies, they’re self-reinforcing in the sense that you feel better or the situation improves, so it’s a thing you keep doing.”

This philosophy led him to participate in the creation of a school-based suicide prevention program called Zippy’s Friends, aimed at grade 1 students and now running in 30 countries. More than 1.3 million children have participated in the program, and a number of research studies have shown it to improve coping skills.

A similar program called Passport: Skills for Life, aimed at students ages 9 to 11, has now completed several years of design, testing, revision and piloting. The 17-week program is available in French and English and can be incorporated into various subjects. It can be used in conjunction with Zippy’s Friends or on its own, and also contains a parental component.

Students are encouraged to develop, and then assess, various strategies for coping with problems. They learn to evaluate the helpfulness of these coping mechanisms by looking at the impact on the problem, on how they feel and on other people. They also learn to seek out and share help with other students when seeking solutions.

Standardized observations among schools where the program was piloted found it improved children's coping skills and emotional awareness; it was also found to have a positive impact on the personal lives of the teachers who delivered it.

### Controlling Mind and Body

Practise a kick often enough and you develop a muscle memory that can carry you through the movement almost instinctively. In a crisis, a trained fighter can rely on those hours of repetition to take the leg where it needs to go. Similarly, the study of martial arts teaches mental and emotional control – including the ability to use breath, find calm and release tension in the muscles during a stressful event – and those skills are developed through practice.

“You can't learn to swim in a tsunami,” explains Martin Gage, a teacher at Haliburton Highlands Secondary School in Haliburton. A third-degree

black belt in karate, Gage helps students practise self-regulation strategies, such as mindful self-talk, to fall back on when faced with situations that make them feel angry, frustrated, anxious or even bored. “With practice, it gets easier and eventually becomes the go-to behaviour.”

Gage delivers the Mindfulness Martial Arts program, created by Integra (through the Child Development Institute in Toronto), in partnership with a staff member from the Point in Time Centre for Children, Youth and Parents, the local agency responsible for children's mental health. Integrated into a full-credit learning strategies course, the program combines training students in yoga, meditation and martial arts with providing academic assistance with their other high school courses.

The success of the Haliburton high school program has inspired the Trillium Lakelands District School Board to bring in a similar program for students in grades 4 to 6, says superintendent Katherine MacIver. This fall, trained school staff and mental health agency partners will deliver an Integra program known as Young Warriors, which uses martial arts training to build confidence, self-esteem and self-regulation skills.

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*Martin Gage (top left) leads a Mindfulness Martial Arts program at Haliburton Highlands Secondary School.*

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On a new website, topics will range from how new teachers can manage the stress and isolation they may feel in their early years of teaching to how educators can manage difficult conversations with parents and kids about mental health.

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students,” says MacIver, who believes the program provides strategies for managing everything from challenging academic struggles to frustrating schoolyard interactions. “We all have a multitude of stimuli that act on us, and we all have responses to that. What we’re trying to do is stretch the space so that kids are making good choices that will work for them in reaction to the stimulus.”

### **Mental Health Resources for Teachers**

With 10 minutes before the morning bell rings, teachers don’t have time to read research studies or theoretical papers on supporting the mental health of their students. But they may have time to quickly scan a list of practical, evidence-based tips for addressing specific classroom tensions or issues.

A project undertaken by researchers at Western University’s Faculty of Education recognizes that mentally healthy classrooms are led by mentally healthy teachers who have access to the resources they need in order to care for the well-being of both themselves and their students.

The result is a website where Canadian educators will be able to access the most effective and practical resources available for addressing issues such as anxiety, depression, resiliency, emotional intelligence, stigma reduction, workplace stress and school climates. “We were looking at this from a very practical standpoint, asking, ‘What are the best programs that have the best transferability into a school environment?’” says Western

associate professor Susan Rodger.

Along with helping educators quickly identify the most helpful resources for themselves and their students, the website will offer a range of simple-to-use strategies, tools, lesson plans and resources. Topics will range from how new teachers can manage the stress and isolation they may feel in their early years of teaching to how educators can manage difficult conversations with parents and kids about mental health. Teacher-to-teacher resources will include podcasts and v-blogs.

“We know from the literature that what helps people deal with stress is to be able to be in a safe place where they can talk about it, where they can share it,” says Rodger. “These videos are a way of providing people with that moment for self-reflection where they can think, ‘Okay, I’m not the only one.’”

The tip sheets and podcasts were created in collaboration with a 26-member team of school professionals, who helped focus the work on the day-to-day needs and resource limitations of the classroom. “Each tip that’s in there is certainly something that is reflected in the evidence, but it also uses language and is presented in a way that is doable for teachers,” says Rodger.

### **Bringing Brain Science into the School System**

Feeling drowsy and bored during a lesson on a warm spring afternoon, one student needs to stand



up and move a little to improve his alertness. Another recognizes her overstimulation and uses a calm corner in the classroom to bring herself back to a place where she can focus and learn.

A self-regulation initiative at the Durham District School Board encourages students to be aware of how they are feeling, understand what's happening in their brains and take steps to bring themselves to a state of "calm, alert and willing to learn." Working with York University research professor Stuart Shanker, the board has linked self-regulation to its safe schools and mental health strategic plans in an attempt to bring about a widespread culture shift in thinking about student behaviour. "It really is a paradigm shift in how we see behaviour," says Allison Potts, the board's mental health leader. "We're encouraging everyone to recognize the difference between stress behaviour and misbehaviour."

What started three years ago as a pilot project at 13 of the board's 130 schools has grown organically, as interested schools, teachers and even school council groups embrace the concept. "I'm amazed at the energy educators can put into it, when they believe something might help kids," says Potts. "It's pretty phenomenal."

Along with integrating the theory into elementary classrooms, teachers have also brought the

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concepts to older students. As a pilot project, a secondary school applied-English class studied self-regulation in the cognitive, biological and emotional realms. Positive feedback from students has encouraged teachers at that school to teach the material as part of the grade 9 health and phys ed course. Study of self-regulation in the social and pro-social contexts is being considered for the grade 10 careers course. "These are lifelong skills that help feed learning," says Potts. "If I'm worrying or agitated, I'm not going to be able to focus on the curriculum." ▲

**Kim Arnott** is a Hamilton-based freelance writer and frequent contributor to Education Today.

## Links

### Zippy's Friends

#### **Passport: Skills for Life**

<http://www.partnershipforchildren.org.uk/teachers/passport-skills-for-life.html>

#### **Zippy's Friends**

<http://cbpp-pcpe.phac-aspc.gc.ca/interventions/zippys-friends/>

<http://www.partnershipforchildren.org.uk/zippy-s-friends.html>

### Controlling Mind and Body

**Mindfulness Martial Arts program** [www.childdevelop.ca/programs/integra-program](http://www.childdevelop.ca/programs/integra-program)

### **See what Haliburton students have to say about the program**

<https://vimeo.com/110940746>

### **Mental Health Resources for Teachers**

[www.teachresiliency.ca](http://www.teachresiliency.ca) is expected to launch in mid-October 2016.

### **Self-regulation at Durham District School Board**

<http://www.ddsb.ca/students/safeschools/pages/self%20regulation/introduction.aspx>

### **Stuart Shanker**

<http://self-reg.ca/about-us-4/dr-stuart-shanker/>