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## **Western study finds culturally relevant mentorship improves Indigenous students' mental health, academic success**

A new study of Indigenous students in southwestern Ontario public schools shows those who received mentorship from a member of their community had better cultural connectedness, improved mental health and higher school credit accumulation than peers who were not mentored.

The study, published this week in the *Journal of Primary Prevention*, was led by Western University's Claire Crooks, who serves as director of the Faculty of Education's Centre for School Mental Health. It is the first of its kind in Canada.

Crooks and her team implemented a mentorship program in the Thames Valley District School Board (TVDSB) where groups of Grade 7 and 8 Indigenous students met once a week with an Indigenous adult mentor. Sessions focused on acquiring skills in areas like stress management and combined them with spiritual, physical, mental and emotional teachings based on the traditional First Nations medicine wheel.

A total of 105 students were followed for a two-year period from 2011-2013. Crooks and her team reviewed student report cards and standardized test scores, annually surveyed and interviewed participating students, and spoke with principals and teachers. Results showed stronger academic success, and a markedly increased sense of cultural awareness and pride among mentored students. The mentoring group also scored higher on positive mental health.

"Knowing who you are is an important task for any youth," says Crooks. "This program was able to help these Indigenous students develop a positive sense of identity tied to their culture. We can now show with real evidence that when they feel better about themselves, know who they are and understand where they came from, there are hugely positive impacts in almost all other areas of their lives."

The mentorship program also had positive impacts on the larger school populations.

Paul McKenzie, superintendent of student achievement in the First Nation, Metis and Inuit (FNMI) portfolio with the TVDSB saw mentorship participants work with school staff and students to raise awareness and help build a sense of belonging.

"Mentored students brought an understanding of their backgrounds and communities to the schools, and in doing so really helped to bring this into our collective identities as well," says McKenzie.

As Canada's Indigenous youth continue to be disproportionately affected by struggles with mental health, suicide and higher than average rates of leaving school, and the country looks to implement calls to action presented in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission report, Crooks hopes the study will spark conversations in Canadian schools about the role they can play in the success of today's Indigenous youth.

"Ministries of education have an obligation to provide programming and supports that are inclusive of Indigenous culture and ways of knowing. For a long time, our school systems weren't designed to meet the needs of these youth," says Crooks. "This study shows educators can partner with Indigenous communities to make a profound and important difference for these students, and the evidence proves it really does work."