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## Initiative to promote 'sound young minds'

**Week of events prompted by rising numbers of troubled students, waiting lists**

April 29, 2008

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FAMILY ISSUES REPORTER

Every day in classrooms across the GTA, children are struggling with more than math equations and book reports. They may be anxious, sad or unable to pay attention. They may be schoolyard bullies. By high school, some distressed youth are cutting themselves, skipping classes or abusing drugs.

Next week, the Toronto District School Board will mark Children's Mental Health Week in Ontario with three separate events for teachers, parents and students – the first initiative of its kind by the country's largest school board.

The intent is to raise awareness about the increasing number of students who need help with mental, emotional and behavioural problems. And the school board will stress the need for collaboration between schools and community agencies to support these kids.

The board's plans include:

- Two half-day information sessions to help teachers identify and advocate for children in need. To be held Monday, May 5, they will be led by Dr. Richard Meen, chief psychiatrist at Kinark Child and Family Services, and school board psychologist Dr. Tayyab Rashid. A similar event held last year drew so many staff that people were turned away.
- A 6:30 p.m. meeting for parents on Tuesday, May 6, at Rosedale Heights School of the Arts (711 Bloor St. E. at Castle Frank) featuring Susan Hess, president of the support and advocacy organization Parents for Children's Mental Health, who fought for years to find help for her daughter.
- Student walks to raise awareness on Friday, May 9. There will be a walk for staff and students at school board headquarters at 8:30 a.m. Or schools can hold their own walks on school property as part of students' daily physical activity.

Schools are also encouraged to hold assemblies and invite school psychologists, social workers or community agencies to educate students and staff.

"Teachers are the first line of defence other than parents," says school trustee Cathy Dandy, one of those spearheading the events. Dandy, who also works at Kinark, a children's mental health centre in York Region, regularly sees situations in which struggling children are labelled as "bad kids" and disciplined with detentions. She says teachers require continuing training to flag children needing support, to recognize that disruptive behaviour may be caused by underlying mental health issues and to push for services.

According to Children's Mental Health Ontario, one in five Canadians will face a mental health problem in their lifetime, often during childhood or adolescence.

Donna Quan, superintendent of safe schools for the board, says next week's events reflect the

need for a more holistic approach to learning. "In order to get our kids reading and writing, they have to be of sound mind and body," she says.

Tony Diniz, executive director of the Child Development Institute in Toronto, says collaboration is key and welcomes the board's moves to draw attention to problems that often surface first in the classroom.

"We see kids whose early years are failures, who quickly fall behind and school becomes a negative experience," he says. But often by identifying the cause and providing small adjustments and support, "we can get them on the right path."

The institute runs about 30 programs at Toronto schools aimed at identifying children in need and teaching them coping skills. While raising awareness is critical, so are adequate services. According to a 2008 survey of Ontario schools by the advocacy group People for Education, 15,000 elementary schoolchildren are waiting for special education this year in the GTA.

Sixty-four per cent of elementary schools have a regular psychologist, but only for 14.4 hours per month; 70 per cent have a regular social worker, for 13.6 hours a month.

Among Ontario high schools, 28 per cent have a psychologist, 58 per cent report a regular social worker and 38 per cent have a youth worker. Two-thirds of high schools have students on wait lists for services.

The shortage is equally grim in the children's mental health sector, which has had two base funding increases from the province in 15 years. Organizations say that without more money, service cuts are inevitable. Waits for publicly funded services can be many months.

Camille Quenneville, director of policy and communications at Children's Mental Health Ontario, says she's hopeful that with schools joining the push for more services, the province will respond with more money.