

Healthy Minds:

Mindfulness in Winnipeg School Division



“I am reminded that often times, the best way to get ahead is just to slow down...”

— WSD Classroom Teacher (Grade 3-5)

Students at Stanley Knowles School in Winnipeg, Manitoba, practice mindfulness. In the back is teacher Mme. Jessica Harrison (left) and guidance counsellor Joanne Rusen (right).

By Jón Olafson and Julie Millar, Winnipeg School Division

Healthy Minds, Winnipeg School Division’s (WSD) comprehensive mental health literacy strategy, had its humble beginnings with the Preventing and Responding to Anxiety in Children and Youth project (PRACY) in 2013. We were aware of all the supportive divisional initiatives happening under the umbrella of social emotional learning and mental health supports. However, the Healthy Minds strategy brought a distinct and specific focus to this priority. PRACY was the result of student responses in the *Tell Them From Me* survey that year.

About 20 per cent of students from Grade 4 to 12 reported intense feelings of fear, anxiety and worry; and about 20 per cent of students in Grade 7 to 12 reported prolonged periods of feeling sad, discouraged and inadequate. These statistics were noted as being above the Canadian norm and identified a need to teach coping skills and strategies to support all students.

The goal of the PRACY project was to promote mental wellness and positive mental health with students in Grades 4 and 7 by teaching social emotional learning to reduce risk factors contributing to anxiety and depression, and the stigma associated with mental illness. Strategies were facilitated through the interdisciplinary collaboration of teachers, guidance counsellors and clinicians.

In developing PRACY, the bulk of the current theoretical and empirical literature supported a social-emotional competence perspective in which children with positive social and emotional skills demonstrate resiliency when confronted with stressful situations (e.g., Durlak et al., 2011; Luthar & Brown, 2007).

Such competencies and protective factors include self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision making (Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning, 2013). A meta-analysis of over 200 school-based social and emotional learning (SEL) programs provided evidence that such initiatives have a positive and

direct impact on student social and emotional skills, well-being and academic success (Durlak et al., 2011). Through this research, we learned that mindfulness is a powerful tool for promoting mental health and wellness, not only for students, but staff and parents as well.

“After I started doing some mindfulness activities... I have noticed that students have been willing to try harder and to make mistakes, knowing that they are being supported by their teacher and classmates,” said a WSD Classroom Teacher (Grade 9-12).

Mindfulness is the psychological process of bringing one’s attention to experiences occurring in the present moment, popularized in the Western world by Jon Kabat-Zinn. As students learn to recognize the signs of stress or anxiety, they can apply mindfulness techniques to help them adjust their responses. Through regulating their breath and becoming aware of their reactions, students can return to a focused state, ready to learn. Following PRACY, our divisional professional development plans extended beyond the pilot project and moved towards including all levels of school staff who were interested in embedding mindfulness as a regular part of the school learning day.

Currently WSD is implementing the evidence-based MindUP curriculum (from Kindergarten to Grade 8), a program developed by the Hawm Foundation. MindUP is grounded by four core pillars: neuroscience, positive psychology, mindful awareness and social emotional learning. MindUP has 15 lessons that teach activities around topics such as gratitude, mindfulness and perspective taking and provides an immersive discovery experience

along with daily core practices, such as the guided “Brain Break” breathing exercise.

Our junior high and high school staff are implementing Patricia Broderick’s *Learn to Breathe* curriculum (a mindfulness curriculum for adolescents) to embed mindfulness into the experience of our youth. This curriculum is intended to strengthen attention and emotion regulation, cultivate wholesome emotions like gratitude and compassion, expand the repertoire of stress management skills and help participants integrate mindfulness into daily life. Since the introduction of these two curriculums, mindfulness is happening division-wide as an individual student strategy, in small group interventions with counsellors and clinicians, at the classroom level and at a school-wide level during designated common mindful moments.

“We are taking time to self-reflect on what each student needs to be successful during learning time and students are taking ownership over creating a better learning environment for themselves,” said a WSD Classroom Teacher (nursery to Grade 2).

In our data collection around impact and observations in the classroom, we have heard several stories and experiences connected to success in the classroom environment. Teaching

staff have reported seeing benefits on student’s academic skills and behaviours, most notably in focus, engagement/participation and task and perseverance/stamina. In addition, we uncovered reports and observations around gains in attendance, literacy, numeracy and general academic performance.

We also learned from our feedback that the classrooms and programs who noted the most significant gains were more often the educators and staff who were implementing mindfulness-based exercises on a regular and more long-term basis. In addition, WSD staff reported seeing a wide variety of benefits for student’s social-emotional skills and behaviours, including:

- Reductions in anxiety, stress, emotional outbursts and/or aggression.
- Increases in feelings of calm, happiness, hopefulness and confidence.
- Improvements in self-awareness and self-control.
- Improvements in empathy, problem-solving and conflict-resolution skills.
- Improvements in communication/listening skills.
- Increased sense of community and friendships.

“If they have come in from a stressful morning at home or something has happened on the way to school, this gives an opportunity to self-manage their feelings and start fresh,” said a WSD Classroom Teacher (Grade 6 to 8).

Our vision is for current and future people learning and working within Winnipeg School Division to be engaged, confident, inspired and successful learners. We are focused on addressing barriers to learning and believe this goal can be accomplished by enhancing partnerships with healthcare and other organizations to address mental health concerns, provide mental health education to staff and students and to build on programming created to improve awareness and address mental health.

The infusion of mindfulness-based curriculums and programming into the daily classroom routine continues to enhance academics, fosters social emotional learning skills and teaches children and youth how to best cope with our ever-changing world. In Winnipeg School Division, we are learning to breathe. ■

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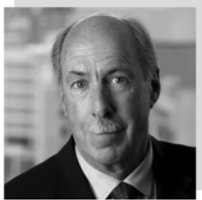
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