

## **Mental Health Promotion for Secondary Schools - *Mind Matters Basics: How is the Australian Strategy different than here in California or the U.S.***

### **Purpose:**

This report will identify the key strategies of the Mind Matters Campaign for mental health promotion that are significantly different than strategies that have been tried in the U.S. The purpose of this is to learn the campaigns' successes and struggles, which possibly can assist in developing a more mental health literate youth population. The purpose of raising the mental health literacy rate of youths is triple-fold. First, youths learn to identify symptoms within themselves, friends, and loved ones. Secondly, youths learn where and how services can be accessed. Third, and probably most important, youths learn that seeking treatment for symptoms is not only appropriate, but also effective. This report will first begin with a brief history of the campaign and then move forward to explain key strategies.

### **Background:**

Since the early 1990s, Australian National Leaders have continuously identified that the detection and treatment of mental health problems and disorders is a priority area for health improvement initiatives. In 1996, an Audit of Mental Health in Australian Secondary Schools was funded under the National Mental Health Community Awareness Program (CAP), a National Mental Health Strategy initiative designed to reduce the stigma and discrimination experienced by people with a mental illness, their families and carers. This first set of research was funded through a national initiative that sought to uncover why Australia has the highest rate of youth suicide among nations with established market economies. CAP's benchmark research into community attitudes, knowledge and behaviors shows that young people are one of the least informed groups on mental health issues in our society. However, they are also one of the most tolerant groups and have an interest in learning more about mental health. The study further illustrated that although teachers felt they were seeing children and youths with mental health problems in their classrooms, they felt uncomfortable and not skilled enough to teach them about what to do if they are experiencing a mental health problem. Thus, the report found that while schools are appropriate settings for the promotion of mental health of young people, a number of barriers to effective mental health promotion existed. These included a lack of comfort in teaching about mental health and sensitive issues, poor availability of classroom resources, and a crowded curriculum.

In response to this research, the CAP Steering Committee first decided to explore the most effective methods of promoting sustainable and positive attitudes towards mental health issues amongst young people. As part of this process, an audit of mental health programs in Australian secondary schools was commissioned. The audit was again paid for by the national government, this time from the Department of Human Services who located researchers who specialize in researching youth issues. The audit was undertaken by the Youth Research Center and the Center for Social Health and makes recommendations about the development and effective delivery of mental health programs in secondary schools nationally.

A successful pilot project was conducted in 24 schools across Australia during 1998 and 1999. Each State and Territory was included, with representation across both urban and rural communities, and in state, catholic and independent schools. The materials and approaches to be employed in Mind Matters grew out of this pilot project. This program has been evaluated at length in recent months and a complete evaluation report is available. For the purpose of being brief, the main findings are included below.

- v The program enabled pilot schools to focus more purposefully on issues related to mental health.
- v The program's suggested structure for implementation (Core Team, Audit, Strategic Plan) was well supported by the participating schools.
- v The curriculum taught in all pilot schools incorporated specific content related to one or more mental health issues.
- v In general, the comments from schools about the content and educational value of the Mind Matters curriculum were very positive. Most schools believed that the resources they used worked well with their students and were able to be adapted for local use.
- v Many of the pilot schools attempted to reorient their policies and other organizational structures towards achieving a school ethos that was more supportive of the mental health of the whole of the school community. Many of these changes are ongoing, having been incorporated into the structure of the schools.

- v Teachers, who were exposed to training in the use of the resources, either by members of the Mind Matters consortium on field visits to the school, or at national training events, were perceived to be more confident in, and inclined to use the curriculum resources on mental health.
- v New partnerships with the broader community were observed in some schools.
- v There was an increase in the willingness of students to seek help from sources that may have a higher level of professional training in counseling. Strategies may need to be developed to ensure that help from these sources is in fact available, accessible and acceptable to adolescents.
- v Although schools did encounter some barriers in their efforts to implement the Mind Matters program, each school was able to make progress to achieving their own set goals. Many schools reported positive outcomes (in areas such as student learning, student welfare, staff welfare, staff attitudes, school policies etc), which they attributed to their participation in the program.
- v Valuable feedback was given to program designers about the efficacy and usefulness of the program materials.

By 1999 the renewed Commonwealth Government's *Mental Health Promotion and Prevention National Action Plan* identified Mind Matters as program that was worthy of being spread nationally. With funding coming from the Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care, all Australian government schools and non-government schools are entitled to one free copy of the Mind Matters resource "kit" in addition to two days of professional development programs for school teams. The training program provides an overview of the resources and advice about strategies to foster a school environment that encourages the promotion of social and emotional competence and well-being. In addition, organizations that work in partnership with secondary schools, such as providers of health, guidance, and pastoral services, are also entitled to key documents in the "kit" such as *Educating for Life*. Recently, the state of Victoria has taken this program one step further by working to make sure that their state "mental health promotion" representatives are working to link parents and school personnel to various community service providers in order to ensure that target groups know how to access care. How did this program, which was only piloted back in 1996-1997, already begin to spread nationally by 1999? Let's take a look at the program's strategies...

### **Tactics for Success:**

**Strategy #1 – Development of Materials Came from Direction of School Leaders** – When project leaders decided that they wanted to do something pro-active about the low mental health literacy in schools, the first step was to involve school leadership. Thus, at the project's inception both health and educational leaders were brought to the table to discuss what form and shape the program should take on. The development team consisted of a Consortium drawn from Sydney, Melbourne, and Deakin Universities, the Australian Council for Health, Physical Education and Recreation and the Australian Principals Associations Professional Development Council (APAPDC). This group of program developers represents a variety of interests but also makes sure that educators are involved every step of the way

**Strategy #2 – Involvement of all Key Stakeholders in Reviewing Program Documents** – Representatives from the Curriculum Corporation (CC), which now oversees the expansion phase of the program, pointed out that before the materials were distributed nationwide, over 200 different organizations were invited to review them and offer feedback. What they found was that these various organizations had very useful and important suggestions that brought additional perspectives to the development process. For example, creating culturally appropriate materials is very challenging and the Curriculum Corporation could not have developed effective and sensitive materials without the input of various representatives from Australia's ethnic communities.

**Strategy #3 – Reach Out to Teachers** – Once the program was slated to be part of the Commonwealth Government's *Mental Health Promotion and Prevention National Action Plan* in 1999 – the Curriculum Corporation directly outreached to teachers themselves. Similar to teachers in California, teachers throughout Australia have a lot of responsibilities and duties to fulfill on a very tight budget and timetable, therefore the Mind Matters program is promoted as a toolbox for teachers. As a tool that promotes mental health, Mind Matters addresses many issues that teachers have to take the time to face – but does so as an on-going process. For example, teachers have to take the time out to address issues such as school violence and substance abuse. A school that uses the Mind Matters program addresses these issues continuously and through curriculum that does not require teachers to take time away from

teaching to specifically discuss drug use. Drug abuse can be discussed as part of a lecture on American Literature or even in chemistry class. The discussion about the risks of substance abuse can be apart of many lectures, discussions, or class exercises. This is what Mind Matters' Whole School Approach means – *lessons are embedded into the mainstream learning process*. Teachers agree that the repetition of the message is more effective, plus time does not need to be taken away from teaching the basics

**Strategy #4 – Ease the Transition by Offering Readily Accessible Training and On-Going Technical Assistance –** The Commonwealth government expressed a commitment to the program by putting 2.3 million dollars into the program – stating that all schools in Australia, either government or non-government funded – are entitled to one kit and at least two days for teacher training. Realizing that training and on-going technical assistance was essential in order to increase the likelihood of success, the state of Victoria offered up more money to support more extensive training and on-going technical assistance. Training was also made available to other human services professionals that work with students and youths. The Mental Health Branch in Victoria argued that in order for Mind Matters to be truly successful, agencies that either receive mental health referrals from schools or end up providing joint services to school-aged youths should be exemplifying the principles of the Mind Matters programs and demonstrate continuity.

**Strategy #5 – Access Additional Funds that Support Eased Collaboration Between Mental Health Services and Schools –** In the state of Victoria, the Mental Health Branch (a division of the Health and Human Services Department) in conjunction with the Department of Education created a competitive grant program that offered assistance to community-based programs/professionals to act as liaisons between schools and local area mental health services. In some cases, funding supports the position of a “student welfare coordinator” which is often sometimes a parent or counselor who is responsible for linking a student with services provided outside of the school. In other cases, funding supports the position of a “mental health promotion officer” who is responsible for on-going technical assistance and training to various school sites within a community. These positions can be full or part-time.

### **The Mind Matters Resources Kit**

The Mind Matters mental health promotion resources kit for secondary schools consists of:

- v Two whole school resources:
  - Ø School Matters: mapping & managing mental health in secondary schools
  - Ø Educating for life: a guide for school based responses to preventing self-harm & suicide
- v Five curriculum materials:
  - Ø Enhancing Resilience 1
  - Ø Enhancing Resilience 2
  - Ø A Whole School Approach to Dealing with Bullying & Harassment
  - Ø Understanding Mental Illnesses
  - Ø Loss & Grief
- v One video:
  - Ø Understanding Mental Illnesses