

■ GOOD SCHOOLS GUIDE ■

MINDFUL EDUCATION

ENSURING A MENTALLY SAFE SPACE FOR STUDENTS

The pandemic brought challenges to students' mental well-being, but schools adapted to the circumstances and bolstered their support systems, writes **Amanda Sheppard**



Canadian International School has several full-time guidance counsellors.
Photo: Handout

“Mental health and education are interrelated – because in order to do well, students must *be* well,” says My Thanh Mac, department head and upper school guidance counsellor at Canadian International School (CNIS) in Aberdeen.

The derogatory “snowflake” tag unfairly dogs members of our younger generations. A certain generation of old-school adults still think mental health issues are largely imaginary, that if youngsters just knuckled down and get on with their studies, everything would be fine.

That, of course, is a simplistic and outmoded approach. Mac’s common-sense assertion is given weight by a recent survey by the United Kingdom’s National Health Foundation that found children with a probable mental health disorder were three times more likely to miss lessons than their peers.

Mac also highlights a point that is often overlooked – that mental health does not imply a focus on ill health, disorders or negative experiences in isolation. Rather, it is a focus on well-being and how to safeguard it, as well as how to support those experiencing challenges.

The emphasis on mental health – whether in schools, the workplace or at home – has increased in recent years, due in no small part to the effects of the pandemic. Covid-19 brought unprecedented challenges to the mental health of the global population, and to school-going children, thanks to prolonged closures.

“While Covid accelerated mental health issues, this was already a topic of discussion in today’s modern education,” argue Jeanette Dellinger and Dominique Talebli, counsellors at German Swiss International School (GSIS), in a joint email interview with Good Schools Guide.

The causes of mental health challenges inevitably change over time, and consequently, so do school responses. “At CNIS we have at times pivoted to a weekly newsletter with resources, or conducted counselling in the Zoom format, but the approach and intention has always the same – to listen to students and meet them where they are,” says Mac.

Echoing this sentiment, Shelly Chutke, lower school guidance counsellor at CNIS, said, “Because students spend most their day at school, it stands to reason that

mental health awareness and education should be included in the curriculum.”

A 2020 report by Save the Children Hong Kong found 23 per cent of school-aged children reported increased feelings of sadness, while 46 per cent reported increased worry. Coupled with this, the waiting time to receive mental health support has increased to an average of 113 weeks, making access to it in school settings more important now than ever before. In response, many schools have adapted and created specific support systems, as well as taken the opportunity to broaden their support systems and offerings more generally.

However, while the pandemic accelerated a number of mental health challenges for pupils and families, mental health discussion and integration into education settings isn’t an entirely new concept, said Dellinger and Talebli. “The world of digitalisation, and being digital natives, has created a whole new reality for our students in life and at school,” they said. “The growing challenge we see our students facing is finding a healthy balance of online and offline pressure, and prioritising and finding their own identity.”

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German Swiss International School uses student statistics to inform its mental health services. Photo: Handout

Dr Jadis Blurton, head of The Harbour School (THS), echoes these sentiments. “Mental health and general well-being is not just an absence of negative symptoms but rather a general ability to thrive,” she said.

Adopting a broad definition, her school considers mental health as something all-encompassing. “It includes such things as finding and expressing meaning, enjoyment, engagement in activities and relationships, joining with and doing for others,” Blurton said.

Mental health has been an integral component of education at THS since its inception in 2007, but its offerings have increased in recent years to adapt to new contexts. “We take a whole school approach to mental health,” Blurton explained. Students have access to a full-time guidance counsellor, as well as the opportunity to share concerns with their teachers and principals.

“We have social skill groups and clubs – many of which are student-created – during lunch times that students can join if they’re feeling lost during open-ended recess,” added Blurton. This is bolstered by THS’ Second Step curriculum for primary-age students, which offers a holistic, evidence-based approach to well-being, teaching socio-emotional skills and increasing opportunities to develop preventive, prosocial skills.

Another recent success in this field at THS is the TIDE programme, which seeks to help “normalise differences” among students. “For example, one student shared about her eczema, another about having PANDAS [paediatric autoimmune neuropsychiatric disorders associated with streptococcal infections] syndrome, and another about being a musical savant. The programme is a very powerful way for students themselves to explain that it is OK to be different,” Blurton explained. “The daily TIDE programme for primary school is echoed in the secondary school’s advisory programme. Both allow and promote reflection and sharing around social and emotional issues or skills.”

Advocacy and acceptance are also key pillars of CDNIS’ approach to mental health and well-being. These take different forms for pupils across the school. At primary level, “We are implementing the Paws B and Mindup programmes to foster a culture of ‘being in the present’,” Chutke said. These mindfulness-based programmes are designed for pupils aged between seven and 11 years and teach practical, integratable mindfulness techniques to promote stress reduction. The lower school has also launched a wellness hub where students and families can access a wealth of activities and support for remote learning. While on campus, mindful breaks are integrated into the daily schedule during the school day.

At the senior school, mental health is integrated into the curriculum and teaching in new ways. “All grades are taught a structured curriculum that includes



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mindfulness, emotional literacy, growth mindset, decision making, conflict resolution and other topics,” Chutke said. And in the upper school, traditional physical education classes include a Healthy and Active Living course for students to engage in not only physical activity, but also units of inquiry on self-care and stress management.

In addition, secondary school students are invited to participate in a monthly well-being survey, allowing counsellors to track common stressors and other variables. Students can also request counsellor support through these surveys. That enables them to ask questions, give feedback and ask for a check-up. The data collected helps inform the work of CDNIS counsellors, and how they approach grade-level programming.

Students are also paired with a mentor teacher. “That close relationship with an adult at school has been shown to be a major protective factor to build student resilience,” Mac said, adding that students know their mental health is a priority, and that support can come from any trusted adult in the building.

At GSIS, the holistic approach treats mental health as an integral part of education, and not an addition. “Academic performance and mental health go hand in hand. Children can only excel in life and at school if we provide the necessary skills and tools for them to flourish emotionally and mentally,” Dellinger and Talebli said.

The pair see their role as school counsellors as twofold. In addition to individual counselling for students, parents and staff, they strive to integrate mental health into the curriculum and across the school community.

“The School Counselling team implements a pastoral curriculum which contains life skills and prevention topics including social interaction, team building and group dynamics, mental health awareness, stress coping mechanisms and strategies, managing challenging situations, digital safety, sex education, drug prevention and more,” they said.

GSIS uses statistics gathered from their student population to inform their approach to mental health. Through this, the most pressing issues identified for students today include academic pressure, self-esteem and confidence, and anxiety and friendship. The school’s counselling team has grown from one to six in the last seven years, serving all members of the school community from kindergarten to secondary school. In 2018, GSIS introduced a safeguarding policy – a programme that involves the cooperation and participation of all staff to create a safe and secure environment for children. Dellinger and Talebli see this as a significant milestone.

The school is also looking to implement future programmes to support mental health in the community, including one for socio-emotional peer mentoring, Dellinger and Talebli said, adding that this would build interconnected relationships between students, from Year 7 up to Year 13.

While Covid-19 created all manner of difficulties both within and outside school environments, several schools have taken the opportunity to not only adapt to unusual and challenging circumstances, but to bolster their existing mental health support systems, further heightening awareness of mental health in education settings and creating long-lasting change.

The Harbour School Hong Kong takes a holistic approach to mental health. Photo: Handout

