



Grade 11 students at Centennial High School in Calgary take part in discussions about various mental health issues with their teacher, Kathy Penner.

## Big demand for new mental health programs

*Nearly 1 in 5 children has a diagnosable psychiatric concern - making mental health issues the single largest health problem facing young people in our country today. To help address this, generous donations from the community are funding three innovative programs to increase understanding and mental wellness for kids.*

### In the Classroom

Since kids spend more time in the classroom than anywhere else except home, schools are a logical place to work with them on learning about, living with and seeking help for mental health concerns.

Thanks to community support, two programs have been introduced in Calgary area schools so students and teachers can increase their knowledge of mental health – ultimately leading to greater understanding, more timely and appropriate intervention, broad-based prevention and reduced social stigma.

### TEACHING TEENS

Did you know that half the lifetime cases of psychiatric disorders begin by age 14? Or that bodily changes around puberty also impact mental health?

Recognizing that raising awareness and understanding are key to improving teenagers' mental well-being, a groundbreaking program has been launched that embeds mental health literacy into the curriculum of grade 9 and 10 students

across Calgary. The program provides training that helps people distinguish between mental health problems, distress and disorders and how to access support and resources. It incorporates mental health into everyday classroom discussion, reducing the tendency to sensationalize and ostracize those who are affected.

Since it began two years ago, 1500 teachers and school personnel have benefitted from the program. The response has been quick and overwhelmingly positive says Andrew Baxter, Alberta Health Services Mental Health Specialist. "In the past, in other parts of the country where this program has been offered, schools would generally send one delegate to the training session. Our experience has been that the majority of schools want their entire teaching staff to have the training because it is so desperately needed."

So far, training has been provided for teachers in both the public and Catholic schools boards in Calgary, as well as Rocky View School Division. In fact, while the curriculum was designed for Grade 9 and 10 students, Rockyview has been incorporating

it into Grade 8, 11 and 12 classrooms as well.

"Word gets around and we also have elementary school teachers requesting the training," says Baxter. "Teachers are dealing with issues in the classroom on a daily basis and have a strong need to be well-equipped to help their students."

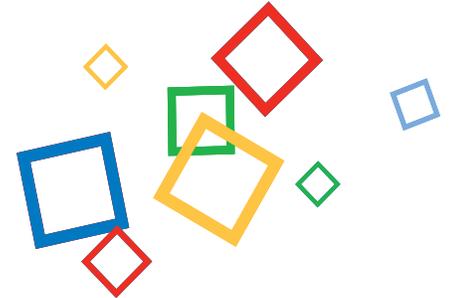
"In order for students to fully learn, they need to be fully engaged. We need to get them help for their mental health concerns before they can be expected to thrive in their school work," points out Kathy Penner, a teacher and coach at Centennial High School who received the training early last year. "This training equipped me to facilitate great conversations with students and their parents and then point them in the right direction to get the necessary help for what they're dealing with – be it anxiety, depression or attention issues."

### EMPOWERING EDUCATORS

A program to identify and address the concerns of younger children and teens is also proving to be very successful. More than 4000 people have signed up for online



To learn more about our Brain Health initiatives or how you can support these Mental Health literacy programs, please visit:  
[www.childrenshospital.ab.ca/brainhealth](http://www.childrenshospital.ab.ca/brainhealth)



The first CanREACH class in May 2014, led by (first row from L-R, second from the left: Drs. Geraldine Farrelly, Abdul Rahman, Sam Chang and Peter Jensen).

courses created specifically to address issues relevant to teachers and students in elementary and junior high schools in our community.

Mental Health Online Resources for Educators (MORE) is a free, web-based training tool with detailed information on specific topics, including: Creating a Learning Environment that Promotes Mental Health, Managing School Bullying, Anxiety in Children and Adolescents and Substance Abuse Prevention in the Classroom. Twenty different concisely and conveniently packaged modules are available for teachers across southern Alberta to take whenever they can fit them into their busy schedules.

Feedback on the program has been very positive with more than 95 percent of participants indicating they were satisfied with the courses they took and almost 90 percent saying what they learned would likely improve their skills and improve outcomes for students in the classroom. Teachers reported that as a result of the training, they will be “more attuned to anxious students and will also be incorporating more coping techniques for the whole class”, that they plan to “integrate the topic of mental health throughout the curriculum”, “use strategies, relaxation and schedule mental health time” and work to “bring the walls of stigma down, taking it out of the dark and into the light”.

## In the Doctor's Office

In Canada, suicide is the second highest cause of death for children and youth aged 10-24, second only to injury. Yet few medical professionals appropriately screen their young patients for mental health issues.

With the vast majority of education in medical school devoted to understanding, diagnosing and treating physical illness, primary care providers often lack adequate training, experience and confidence in managing mental illness.

Thanks to community support, Calgary is the first in Canada to provide specialized training for front-line health care professionals through a program called CanREACH (Canadian REsource for Advancing Children's Health). The six-month long course – modelled after a successful program called REACH in the United States – is designed to empower pediatricians, family physicians and health care providers to better identify and initiate mental health interventions for children.

Only three people in Canada – Dr. Sam Chang, Dr. Abdul Rahman and Dr. Geraldine Farrelly – have been certified to provide this training. All three live in Calgary and are now helping our city become a national leader in addressing the care gap. Their goal is to train 50 people

per year for five years, resulting in 250 more doctors and healthcare practitioners with better mental health knowledge and skills enabling them to better diagnose, treat and refer children appropriately.

The first two sessions filled up within weeks of their offering and there is already a waitlist for training in May and November 2015. Feedback from participants has been remarkable:

*“CanREACH was not only the best mental health conference I have attended, it should be attended by all physicians who deal with children's mental health complaints in the province. Transformational in how I will approach mental health concerns.”*

*- Dr. Michael From*

In fact, of those who attended, 100% said what they learned through the training would change their practice. Dr. Chang and his colleagues say they are grateful for the generous community support that made this program possible. “Now, families, children and teens in our community will get the help they need sooner because more doctors are equipped to understand the issues they're facing. I have no doubt that this investment will change and save kids' lives for years to come.”