



Lethbridge Public School District raises Mental Health Awareness with *Well Aware* program.

Well Aware SUCCESS STORY

“It’s just so well laid out and so easy to use. I feel confident that even without that training day, could our teachers have simply stepped in and read through it and begun to teach it – absolutely.”

— Cayley King
Counselling Coordinator
Lethbridge Public School District No. 51

Overview

In Canada, only 1 out of 5 children who need mental health services receives them¹ —a statistic the staff at Lethbridge Public School District No. 51 hope to change for local students with the help of Pearson’s *Well Aware* program.

Challenge

In 2014, district survey results and educator experiences indicated that LethSD 51 students greatly needed mental health education and support.

Lethbridge also has the highest rate of child poverty in the province of Alberta—with one in five children affected by child poverty².

The situation made it clear to educators that mental health was a key priority for the district to work on.

“The whole community was aware that we have been in crisis and that we needed to do something,” explains Cayley King, Counselling Coordinator for the district. “And that something was developing a unified response to mental health issues where everyone is committed to prevention and promoting support.”

King says the district has several programs with mental health components but felt they were still missing something.

“We didn’t have a program that specifically addressed mental health and the stigma around mental illness. And we really felt we needed that missing piece.”

“*Well Aware* was the best fit for our district, providing the most learning material and meaningful material for us to work with,” says King.

Background

District survey results and educator experiences indicated that Lethbridge Public School District students greatly needed mental health education and support.

Goals

The district wanted a program to help better prepare students to deal with mental health issues both at school and home.

Implementation

In 2016, after a successful pilot program, LethSD 51 implemented Pearson’s *Well Aware* program districtwide.



Solution

After a successful pilot program, LethSD 51 implemented Pearson's *Well Aware* program districtwide in 2016.

Through a series of short books for Grades 4–8 written by acclaimed Canadian children's authors, the program provides an awareness of mental health issues and fosters discussion on a wide variety of topics related to emotional well-being.

Teachers incorporate the texts and activities into their existing literacy and health programs, making it easy to add to the curriculum and get students talking about mental health in a comfortable setting

Ashelyn Redman, a grade 4/5 teacher at Fleetwood Bawden Elementary School says the program is just what students needed.

"Well Aware really breaks mental health apart and looks at knowledge and strategies that kids can use every day in every family," explains Redman. "It doesn't matter what type of family background you come from, you're going to use the information yourself or you're going to have kids around you that need you to understand them."

Both King and Redman say the quality of the program materials helped make it successful in the district.

"For the kids, the Well Aware program has been fantastic because the materials are so awesome. The stories we read are so well done, interesting, meaningful and timely," explains King.

"That's the magic of the Well Aware program—kids are eating these stories up and then read them a number of times over. Once we hook their attention and engagement with the books and then we deliver the lessons, it just flows naturally. It's made a huge impact, frankly."

Redman agrees that the activities are exceptionally engaging. *"This isn't superficial literacy or just fill in the blanks. You actually engage the learner and help them think critically."*

She also says the sheer amount of resources and activities available not only saves teachers time but allows them to tailor lessons to suit students' learning styles and needs.

Results

King explains that early reports from teachers indicate students are learning coping strategies, becoming more accepting of students with mental health issues and are better prepared to deal with mental health issues both at school and home. Not only that, but teachers say the program is easy to implement, makes it easier to discuss difficult topics and includes effective and engaging texts and activities.

Safe discussions

"I can't emphasize enough how positive it's been to have that decrease in the secrecy or just the level of what we don't talk about in our community," says King. *"Historically we've had struggles in our community and there are certain issues that we just don't talk about. And I see this as an action change. We are talking about it and we're making it OK to talk about it and we're seeing the results."*

Redman says some of her students were reluctant to participate in discussions when she first introduced the *Well Aware* program but that changed quickly. *"We read such a variety of ideas, there was quickly a collective knowledge that made it safe for kids to share. I found by the time we were reading the second book we had more and more students sharing."*

Student growth

Redman says her students learned to recognize emotions and understand what an emotion is. She uses anger as an example, *"They understand that anger is ok, it's how you choose to deal with it that is important."*

She's seen this play out in everything from classroom dynamics to school sports. *"Take dodgeball for example, in September, there was often pouting on the sidelines and frustration, but now students are high fiving at the end of a round and congratulating each other – even their opponents."*

King has seen similar growth. She says students are more aware of the types of self-regulation strategies that work for them and aware of when they need to employ these strategies. She cites one classroom where students have learned to find a quiet space to pace or use

an exercise band to avoid an outburst. Strategies the teacher says has helped reduced the instances where students struggle to control their emotions.

A hopeful future

King says implementation is ongoing with some schools most of the way through the *Well Aware* units, some just beginning the program and others set to start in January 2017. But she looks forward to seeing the lasting effects the *Well Aware* program has on students.

"It really provides us with a lot of hope for what things are going to be like over the next five years as those kids move into high school and move towards graduation. I think the potential for impact is huge."

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¹Canadian Mental Health Association Website; <http://www.cmha.ca/media/fast-facts-about-mental-illness/#.WFqoE3eZP-Z>

²Low Income in Lethbridge: A Profile; <http://www.lethbridge.ca/living-here/Our-Community/Documents/Vibrant%20LethbridgePovertyReport.FINAL.Feb.%202015.pdf>