BCCPAC Representation Report

Submitted by: **Terry Berting, Director**
Name of Event: Promoting Mental Health in BC Schools
Date of Event: August 25, 2011
Location of Event: Riverview Hospital Auditorium, Coquitlam, BC

This annual one-day conference brings together various partner groups who are concerned with Promoting Mental Health in BC Schools. There were about 200 participants, with the majority being school counselors and teachers, with some health care practitioners, government representatives, and several parents, including Deborah Garrity and myself representing BCCPAC.
The busy schedule was facilitated by Kathryn Gretsinger, a CBC journalist.

The morning consisted of a presentation by Kathy Cassels of DASH BC who emphasized the importance of positive mental health, and of the notion that "*There is no health without mental health*" and that within the school setting mental health is critical for success, more so than physical health.

Elizabeth Saewyc of UBC revealed some disturbing statistics about teen mental health. Teasing / bullying is still prominent, as are teen suicidal thoughts and attempts, although it was noted that most teens (80%) feel good about their own mental health; but there is work to do. School connectedness can help; kids want to feel that they matter & belong.

Next was a Panel Discussion on School Based Mental Health. Panelists included a parent of a special needs student, a Psychologist from the MCFD, a High school counselor, and a teenager who has been battling depression. Not surprisingly, the teenager stole the show as everyone wanted to hear what she had to say.

After a brief break we all did a Mind-Up exercise (meditation) which is being taught in some schools and has been very successful.

Art Steinman, the director of SACY, a comprehensive Substance Abuse Prevention program in SD39 Vancouver, talked about his program which is now in 18 schools in Vancouver. "Connection is Prevention" as the importance of youth having "adult allies." If ever we need someone to talk about drug prevention in our schools; this is the guy. Very powerful stuff.

The afternoon consisted of workshops and I chose one on school policy.
The workshop first identified the 4 pillars required to deal with the drug problem:

1) Social & Physical environment 2) Teaching and Learning 3)Partnerships and Services
4) Healthy School Policies.

Pillar #4 Healthy School Policies was identified as an area where PAC's and DPAC's can definitely be involved. Parents should be aware of their school's policies regarding drugs, as every District has its own policy. There was considerable discussion regarding the "Zero Tolerance" Drug Policy which is common in many schools; i.e. students caught using or in possession are immediately suspended from school, often for a considerable amount of time. Most counselors at the conference argued that there should be mandatory "in-school" drug programs for students rather than straight suspensions.

The conference ended with a powerful speech by Jeff Stewart, a principal with North Island Distance Education. His desire is to develop curriculum around a "child's spark" and rather than pursuing the government's goal to make BC the most literate jurisdiction in the world. Instead, he'd prefer to try to make it "the most caring, inspirational education jurisdiction in the world." (Deborah tracked him down as a potential conference presenter; he was awesome).

It is noteworthy that many participants at the conference were glad to see BCCPAC there, and would like to work with us to help bring about change in the school system, especially regarding school drug policies.

In summary, Mental Health is now recognized as the most important aspect of student health and there is considerable work now being done (within the last 5 years) to address the many Mental Health issues within the education system. BCCPAC, along with some of its many partner groups, can be an important part of that work.

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