

# Youth Mental Health & Addictions Champions



## Students as partners

Students' grades	7 and 8
School board	Bruce-Grey Catholic District School Board
Staff contact	Jennifer Kirby, <a href="mailto:jennifer.kirby@bgcdsb.org">jennifer.kirby@bgcdsb.org</a>
Initiative period	October to June each year, since 2013
Caring adults involved	Educators, Child and Youth Workers, Administrators

## OVERVIEW

Child and Youth Care staff and educators co-facilitate a tailored version of the [Youth Mental Health & Addiction Champions Initiative](#). The goal of this program is to empower students to take the lead in creating healthier school environments, where stigma around mental health could be addressed, as well as the promotion of mental health and wellness activities that were meaningful to students.

In the program's early years, grade 7 and 8 students were asked to consider and nominate their peers who they felt would be good advocates and leaders to take on a role as Mental Health Champions. Students who were not nominated by their peers, but who were interested and committed to the program were also invited to join, creating a group of highly motivated youth champions for mental health. More recently, the program has changed to a self-nomination practice only, giving all students the agency to participate in the program at their schools. This has also resulted in a high level of commitment to the team.

Youth champions work to promote wellness and reduce the stigma of mental health and illness in their schools. Staff deliver a training module to the youth champions to support their mental health literacy and team building. They are given a budget and asked to brainstorm about their vision for the year. Some of the events that youth champions have held in the past include a "Who We Are" bulletin board in which students included a short profile on a bulletin board to introduce themselves to the larger community, nature walks, movie days, and hot chocolate and popcorn tables near winter break. Near the end of the year (i.e., around Mental Health Week in May), youth champions facilitate a culminating activity. Some past activities have included guest speakers and therapy dogs.



An outcome of this program has been a noticeable shift in student investment and understanding of mental health promotion and wellness. Overall school community engagement in wellness activities has increased and younger students look forward to their transition to grades 7 and 8 to have their opportunity to be leaders in the school as Mental Health Champions. There has been increased participation from self-nominated students, suggesting that the stigma reduction efforts are making an impact. Students have shared that they feel more confident moving into high school knowing information from the training around mental health and wellness.

As this program is initiated by caring adults, and students carry out all phases of the projects, engaging with both the process and outcomes, students are engaged as partners.

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## STUDENT PERSPECTIVE

### Grade 8 students shared that they:

- Enjoyed being mental health champions and felt that they were able to help others.
- Were able to gain an insight on what's happening.
- Enjoyed the planning process and learned from it.

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## STAFF PERSPECTIVE

"I have worked with mental health champions since the pilot. I think what I have seen from staff in this initiative was some concern initially that the students would be "counsellors" or given too much responsibility, but quickly saw that the program developed mental health awareness and that the students were involved in many activities which promoted interaction and inclusion between grades. Many staff have asked to get involved or be part of the program through the years, which we don't always see with extracurriculars. I feel like they see the program as positive and want to be part of it and learn from it as well.

One of the things that we have learned is the impact it has on the selected mental health champions, specifically when students voted for each other. Many students were excited to be selected by their peers or quite often shocked that they were selected, and some students were not happy. It was important for us to hear that some students felt that they were at the time of selection struggling with their mental health and did not want to be part of the initiative. They shared that they felt that they had to be part of the project because they were selected, however the choice to decline was supported and understood by staff. I appreciated this, while initially it was difficult to hear, it made me realize how far we had come that a student could articulate that and recognize where they were at with their own needs. The important message learned from staff, was to convey to these students that they had strengths and leadership potential that that was recognized by their peers and other adults, regardless of their choice to participate.

It is also important to step back as staff and allow the students to lead the way in many initiatives. It is easy to take over for them sometimes, but they are so aware and able to communicate what they need for positive mental health experiences and how they think they can impact others. I love the ownership that they have." — Intermediate Teacher

