

# **Response to Reduction in Elementary Counselling FTE and to Proposed Re-Organization of Counselling Service Delivery**

## **Preamble:**

We understand that the school district needs to reduce expenditures in order to manage budget shortfalls, and that as a result you have to make some very difficult decisions. We want to raise with you, the unique role of the elementary counselor in supporting and providing service to the students, families and communities, and the long-term wisdom and advisability of cutting what some would consider to be an “essential service.”

## **The Role of Counsellors in the Elementary School:**

According to the Surrey School District delivery model, elementary counsellors are expected to

- “provide direct counselling to children and families” – this means addressing issues of social-emotional distress across a spectrum of mental health, emotional trauma, family stress and dysfunction, peer conflict, etc.
- “consult with school staff and parents” – often preventing issues such as those mentioned above from being expressed behaviourally and becoming a problem to teachers, administrators, and society at large
- “act as advocate for the children and their parents” – as they negotiate difficulties with peers, siblings, poverty, and family crisis
- “participate as a member of the school-based team” – to provide support to other educators teaching Personal Planning and to promote healthy school environments
- “act as liaison with community agencies and allied professionals” – for example dental work, eyes tested, hearing, separation and divorce issues, poverty issues, suicide, substance abuse, and mental health issues (anxiety, depression, eating disorders, gender identity, obsessive compulsive disorders etc.)
- “be knowledgeable about current procedures for reporting Child Abuse and Neglect” -- counselling sometimes requires that *outside services and supports* are tapped into by way of reporting by the counsellor directly (as in the case of crisis or abuse), or by referring the client to access services for themselves.~ Follow-up by way of consultation and ongoing support is key to the continuing counselling relationship
- “be familiar with the Special Education Manual of Policies, Procedures and Guidelines”

In providing these services, the counsellor functions to provide less visible, but essential functions, not provided by other teaching staff.

- The cornerstones of counselling are trust, relationships, and confidentiality – dealing with extremely sensitive and confidential subject matter – in contrast to other relationships in the school which are more authority-based.
- Counsellors perform an essential service in managing behaviour for purposes of safety and reduced [school district] liability (*Responding to Children's Problem Sexual Behaviour in Elementary Schools: A Resource for Educators*, BC Ministry of Education, 1999, Introduction.)
- Counselling services reduce the stress on teachers and promote the maintenance of a healthy and effective workplace.
- While the counsellor's role is distinct from that of the administration, teacher and parent, it constitutes a core component of the school network supporting the most vulnerable children and providing direct instruction to students in areas such as peer helping, conflict resolution, social skills and life skills.
- While counsellors may not provide direct academic instruction, they are a powerful force in promoting academic success by assisting students in fostering independence and self-responsibility, optimizing the development of their full potential, and assisting in situations that might interfere in development.
- Counsellors often serve a preventative function due to their unique role as trusted adults in the school building – students will often seek their assistance before problems become visible elsewhere.

### **Potential Consequences of Service Cuts:**

With reduced counselling staff we can expect an increase in crisis situations, an increase in school board liability, an increased stressors in the classroom and workplace, a reduction in student acquisition of life skills like conflict resolution, an increase in academic difficulties and drop-out rates for vulnerable students (such as aboriginal students or those designated as learning disabled).

At a time when outside services are either non-existent or difficult to access, elementary counsellors are in many cases the only service available. Without counselors to intervene in crisis situations, who will take on these responsibilities, and who has the skills to do so? What is the consequence/expense to that child and family, to the school, to society if these services are not provided?

There is much research that indicates that social, behavioural and academic problems among high school students initially appear in the elementary school years. Further, it has been shown that early interventions are more effective and ultimately less costly than waiting until problems

have exploded into bigger issues during adolescence. Too often these later solutions involve school dropouts and school violence – and likely increased expense for other social services. We are extremely concerned that school counselling services, already stretched thin, are facing severe cutbacks.

### **The Family of Schools/HUB Model:**

The elementary counsellors also have a number of questions around the proposed changes to a family of schools or hub model:

- Has the board investigated or researched satisfaction with the proposed model as used elsewhere?
- As noted above, *relationships* are an essential component in providing counselling service. An established relationship enables us to effect a huge amount of service in a short length of time. It takes time and energy to establish relationships – counselling is different from interviewing. Service can be provided in a short period of time, perhaps a matter of minutes, when the relationships have already been established. Will the new model facilitate more efficient counselling service for the district? If not, who will have the skills and expertise to perform this service?
- Continuity has traditionally been cited as a core value of student services. How does the new model facilitate continuity for elementary counselling services?
- It is a major change to cut elementary counsellors by 25%. Increasing case loads is one result of the cuts, but the change in delivery model becomes in effect is a second cut, slashing both relationships and continuity of service. Is it good management to make so many changes at one time?

### **Conclusion:**

In our role as elementary counselors, we deal with the most vulnerable children in the district, regularly dealing with life and death situations such as suicide intervention, sexual abuse, and many other versions of children at risk. We seem to be encountering ever-increasing demands on caseloads with fewer people and resources to meet those demands. The Surrey School District has for many years been respected and admired for its excellent student services and the quality and quantity of available counselling in schools. Even in this time of fiscal restraint, we urge you to carefully reconsider the proposed cuts and changes to elementary counselling.

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*This report was prepared by a group of elementary counsellors, elected by their peers.*

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