

Chapter 4: Living Sky School Division—Providing Intervention Services to High School Students with Significant Mental Health Concerns

Why It Matters

Poor mental health can negatively impact student engagement and achievement, as well as can affect student vulnerability to other at-risk behaviours such as substance abuse, violence, and suicide. Without effective assessments to inform resource allocations, there is a risk that students who need ongoing counselling for significant mental health concerns may not receive it timely.

Why We Did This Audit

Living Sky has over 2,500 students in Grades 7–12, including at its largest school, North Battleford Comprehensive High School.

Living Sky's Grades 7–12 survey results in 2022–23 showed students experiencing moderate or high levels of anxiety and depression worsened since 2015–16 from 21% to 32%

Studies indicate that mental health supports in schools are effective in reducing symptoms of mental disorders with especially positive results when schools integrate support into students' academic settings.

Key Facts and Figures

- For the students we tested, 40% of them seeing counsellors were in Grades 7 and 8
- Living Sky employed 12 counsellors (part-time and full-time) at its 13 high schools at November 2023
- One counsellor was responsible for over 820 students at three high schools who could potentially have mental health issues
- Since January 2018, Living Sky has had eight student suicides (three in 2023) and six other student deaths such as from accidents
- Since 2019, North Battleford Comprehensive High School has participated in the Mental Health Capacity Building initiative led by the Saskatchewan Health Authority

What We Found

We found the Division needs to assess counsellors' caseloads to assess whether it allocates appropriate staffing resources to support high school students with significant mental health concerns.

Our analysis not only found the number of students seeing counsellors on a regular basis steadily increased since the 2020–21 school year as well as at the three high schools (North Battleford, Unity, and Spiritwood) we tested, but also caseloads varied significantly between counsellors.

Our Recommendations

Living Sky School Division needs to:

- Analyze counsellor caseloads to identify resource gaps
- Formally track mental health emergencies (e.g., suicides, student deaths) and write critical incident reports as required by its Safe Schools Handbook to assist in assessing trends, root causes, and sufficiency of actions to potentially mitigate these emergencies
- Have counsellors formally complete risk assessments and safety plans for students at risk of suicide to help inform appropriate support services (e.g., referrals)
- Track student referrals to outside agencies (e.g., Saskatchewan Health Authority) and work with these agencies to develop information sharing agreements to help assess the level of mental health supports (e.g., intensity and nature of supports needed, frequency of referrals) provided to students with significant mental health concerns
- Analyze and report key information (e.g., counsellor caseloads, critical incidents, outside agency referrals) to assess adequacy of intervention services provided