

MEDIA RELEASE

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Program links schools with mental health services

A program designed to promote partnerships between Toowoomba schools and local mental health services is having a positive impact for school students with mental health issues.

The School LinQ program was piloted in five schools in Toowoomba in terms 1 and 2 this year and was set up by the Toowoomba Community Child and Youth Mental Health Service (CCYMHS) at the Toowoomba Hospital.

Ed LinQ Coordinator Melody Shepherd said the team started by conducting a needs analysis of all stakeholders involved in the support of child and youth mental health in the Darling Downs Hospital and Health Service.

“We identified a number of issues relating to partnerships, capacity and clinical guidance and proposed a School LinQ pilot project to address some of these concerns,” Ms Shepherd said.

The School LinQ program focuses on enhancing the capacity of the school community to identify and support children with mental health needs early. Similar programs are already run in a several other locations in Queensland and interstate.

“Teachers and school support staff are often the first to notice when a young person is at risk of developing mental illness,” Ms Shepherd said.

“It is therefore vital that teachers have access to resources, support and referral options to assist them in identifying emerging mental illnesses and to enhance their ability to support students within the education framework.

“As part of the program, we have a staff member who attends support meetings at each school.

“They also provide education to the school teams on referral pathways, both to the public mental health service and other service providers, as well as advice on identifying risk factors and the potential impacts of mental illness on learning.”

At the conclusion of the trial, 100 per cent of participants stated that they would like to program to continue.

“Some of the improvements we have seen as a result of program have been in the areas of communication and relationships between the health and education sectors, the perceived quality of service provided to the consumers, as well as the schools’ capacity to support students with mental health needs,” Ms Shepherd said.

Centenary Heights State High School Deputy Principal Michelle Zilm said the school had found the program beneficial.

“One of the great things was that we were able to get immediate feedback from the CCYMHS staff member about whether we should refer a student to the service,” Ms Zilm said.

“It was also good when we were discussing behaviours and possible strategies to have someone say ‘here are some ideas you could use’.”

Psychologists Daniel Hay and Sueanne Gola were the two CCYMHS team members responsible for visiting the three high schools and two primary schools as part of the pilot program.

“The staff were really excited to see us. For the first few weeks, we were just bombarded with questions,” Ms Gola said.

“I think one of the main outcomes we saw was improved confidence in the staff at the schools in talking to mental health services, GPs and parents.

“The program helped them feel more capable and confident in being able to refer students and their families to services and even just to know what services are available for the different age groups.

“In the past, they might have just referred the student to CCYMHS because they didn’t know what else was out there so we’ve been able to educate them on what’s available and how to make referrals to those services.”

“I think the program also helped improve the links and communication between CCYMHS and the schools,” Daniel said.

“It gave them a better understanding of how CCYMHS works but it also helped me to understand how much the schools are really trying to help their kids.”

Given the success of the initial trial, the program has now been expanded to two more schools in Toowoomba as well as two schools in the South Burnett with an aim to outreach further to more schools in 2015.

Ends

Photo caption: Psychologists Sueanne Gola and Daniel Hay have been part of the School LinQ program working in schools in Toowoomba.

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