

**DEMAND FOR HELPING SKILLS TRAINING
FOR
NURSES AND TEACHERS**

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Northern Labour Market Information Clearinghouse

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Appendix A: Background Discussion Document

Demand for Helping Skills Training for Nurses and Teachers

The Northern Labour Market Information Clearinghouse partners have requested an examination of the requirements of northern teachers and nurses for continuing education, particularly for an extension certificate program in basic helping skills.

The proposed program would assist front-line professionals to deal more effectively with the day-to-day concerns of their students and patients. It would also increase the ability of these workers to make timely and effective referrals to appropriate community agencies. These skills would not be intended to replace services provided by school guidance counsellors or community psychologists.

1. Background and Overview

It is common for people in crisis to seek the assistance of counsellors, psychiatrists, psychologists and social workers. However, there is a second level of professionals who often deal with individuals in crisis. These include doctors, lawyers, ministers, police, teachers and nurses. Second-level helpers are specialists in their own professions, but in addition, they often help their “clients” deal with social and emotional problems. A review of Bachelor of Education and Bachelor of Science Nursing curricula from a number of Alberta postsecondary institutions revealed that there is no consistent approach to providing this basic training in undergraduate programs.

The College partners in the Northern Labour Market Information Clearinghouse expressed interest in providing an extension program that would give participants greater aptitude in applying a range of helping skills in their daily work.

2. Methodology

As a first step, a review of related literature was undertaken. This included a search for journal articles on websites. This information formed the basis for a short discussion piece that was prepared in anticipation of interviews with front-line teachers and nurses. The discussion piece is found in Appendix A.

Interviews were conducted with:

- a high school guidance counselor
- the Vice-President, United Nurses of Alberta
- a representative of the Human Resources Department of Northlands School Division

- teachers from an elementary school and a junior/senior high school
- a front-line nurse working in the region
- a nurse manager working in the region and
- the Director of Nursing, Peace River Hospital.

Those interviewed received a background discussion document (Appendix A) prior to their interview. This document provided some initial structure for the conversation. Respondents were allowed the opportunity to provide their individual perspectives on the issues as well.

During each interview, the principles of basic helping skills were discussed. These principles include: respect, genuineness, attending, listening, good communication (verbal and non-verbal), empathy and paraphrasing.

Both conversations with interviewees and the literature review led to an exploration of staff wellness training. The professional workers unanimously indicated that stress and overwork were both endemic among teachers and nurses. A curriculum outline for a staff wellness program is discussed below.

3. FINDINGS

a. Educator Perspectives

Those interviewed were very clear about the issues that were of greatest concern in their work. All interviewees indicated that teachers experience continuous frustration due to time pressures created by competing demands including preparation, marking and extracurricular responsibilities.

Many northern teachers also have responsibilities for a family farm and may spend considerable time commuting from their home to their place of employment. Thus, they have limited time available to pursue their own professional development and lifelong learning opportunities.

Teachers identified a number of factors that create ‘stress’ in their work environments as follows:

- Teacher turnover is high. Several schools in the Northlands School Division experienced 100% turnover last year. This factor impedes staff cohesiveness and was identified as a source of stress.
- Housing for teachers is a significant factor. The teachers indicated that having the employer acting as landlord as well has, on occasion, put teachers in an awkward position, especially when the housing was not satisfactory.

- Teachers in small communities are among the most highly visible residents. They feel that all aspects of their lives must be seen to be exemplary. Thus, a teacher who is experiencing personal or professional difficulties often feels unable to seek assistance in the community.
- The groups indicated that there was occasionally a need for conflict resolution facilitation when differences of opinion occur among staff members. They felt that they would benefit from training in this skill.
- Both groups interviewed indicated that their schools had perpetual vacancies for teacher assistants. Not only does this situation detract from individual student success, it increases the workload and stress for the classroom teacher.

Those interviewed also identified stress-inducing factors related to student demographics and behaviour as follows:

- The teachers and one principal from Wabasca described the dramatic increase in the incidence of fetal alcohol syndrome. They indicated that these high-need children require trained community volunteers and teacher aides to assist both in the classroom and in the community. At the time of writing, there is no one who can fill this need.
- Those interviewed indicated that they felt ill prepared to deal with increasing levels of violence among their students in both school and community settings.

The teachers pointed out that their salaries were based on a grid of years of training and experience. They felt that they and their colleagues would not be prepared to undertake any certification program that was not recognized by the school division as applicable to the training axis of the pay grid.

The representative of Northlands School Division indicated that the Division had a concern based on the loss of the individual who could provide an employee assistance service to staff. The Alberta Teachers' Association provides support for an employee assistance program, **if** a school jurisdiction has service delivery capability.

b. Nursing Perspectives

Generally, the picture concerning nurses' employment conditions presented in both interviews was a bleak one. Respondents indicated numerous factors that created a stress-filled work environment including:

- Funding cutbacks have resulted in considerably fewer permanent nursing positions. Consequently, many nurses are considered part-time with no employee benefits and no access to employer sponsored in-service training.
- There is a severe nursing shortage, particularly in northern Alberta. As a result, nurses are often expected to work back-to-back shifts of 10 to 12 hours.
- The nursing profession is aging, not only in Alberta but in all of North America. In addition, because of negative perceptions of the profession, recruiting to nursing schools is at an all time low, exacerbating the shortages.
- Employers have come to expect that nurses most of whom are older will enter employment possessing the secondary skills that are acquired from experience.

The nursing respondents did not provide any comments that suggested that patients were presenting behaviours that required specific helping skills on their part. Those interviewed raised some questions about the priority for inservice training given the current labour market climate, as follows:

- The nurses indicated that in-service training in helping skills would be a “nice to have” opportunity but their priorities are presently focused on strategies to recruit additional nursing staff.
- They also questioned the feasibility of providing in-service programs to staff who work unpredictable shifts and who are mostly part-time. There was some doubt that current staff would be motivated to undertake any self-study programs that were not directly related to professional/technical updating.

c. Future Community Resources

Through the course of conducting these interviews, the researcher learned of two new initiatives that may well provide some additional community resources in the near future. Both of these academic programs include helping skills content and are developed with the particular needs of Northern communities.

(i) Teacher Education North Program

Grande Prairie Regional College conducted a needs assessment of teachers and school administrators during 1997/98. The result is the Teacher Education North program. The program, the third and fourth years of a Bachelor of Education degree, emphasizes the “unique knowledge, skills and attributes required for effective teaching in northern classrooms”. Learning activities to meet the needs of children from diverse backgrounds or with a wide range of capabilities are included. Cultures of Northern Alberta and issues relevant to teaching in small rural communities and working with Aboriginal children are courses as well. The needs assessment confirmed the issues related by the teachers in this smaller study.

The first graduates of the program will be available in the Spring of 2001.

(ii) Social Work Program

The University of Calgary has made the final two years of the Social Work program available in Northern Alberta. The program is offered in any community where there is a group of people who wish to complete a B.S.W.

4. Support for Research Findings

a. Stress and Teaching

There is a considerable body of literature that examines the issues presented by the teachers.

Jevne and Zingle, (1993), studied teacher health in Alberta. Teaching, according to the authors is now considered a high stress occupation. Less than 50% of teachers-in-training enter and remain in the school system for three years. In the early 1990s approximately 600 Alberta teachers were on long-term disability for physical and emotional conditions.

This research reported prime factors in teacher stress and burnout to be “large class loads, changing curriculum, inadequate resources, multi-problem students, increased parental participation and poor professional image”. These factors were studied and then interventions were offered through a variety of inservice programs addressing teacher stress. The remainder of the study examined teacher wellness, particularly concerns for rehabilitation of teachers who had been on long- term disability and who wished to return to the classroom.

As a result of this landmark research, a number of teacher wellness programs are now sponsored by the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) and regional school divisions. An example of one such program is outlined below.

Strathcona County: Striving for Health

In 1991, an ad hoc committee from ATA Local #6 was established to examine issues related to quality of life and health of their teachers, referred to as "wellness." A needs assessment that included the following categories was conducted: professional needs, school environment needs, administrative needs, personal needs, career enrichment needs, personal and professional development needs, accessing information, criteria for attending staff development activities, and responsibility for wellness costs.

The respondents consistently expressed the need for a sense of professional and personal balance in their lives. The areas of greatest concern related to maintaining professional competence despite an ever-increasing workload, large class sizes and the diverse and often conflicting demands and expectations placed on teachers. The open-ended questions on the survey yielded (in order of frequency) the following concerns: workload, diverse demands, time pressures, student/teacher ratio, availability of release time, professional recognition, sense of being in control, sense of balance of life, change, support from the Board of Education, career burnout prevention and basic respect.

As a result of this study, an employee wellness program was offered through the Employee Assistance Program. Available program subjects included:

- Understanding and dealing with emotions; anger, depression, anxiety
- Stress; risk factors, workaholics, job stress, burnout, avoiding burnout, stress releases, alcohol use
- Stress management; assessment self-care, maintaining mental fitness, controlling emotional "hotbuttons", conflict resolution, positive belief systems, overcoming anxiety, building a stress reduction program, relaxation responses
- Wellness; wellness strategies; sleep, exercise, eating right, smoking, planning a healthy balance, self-esteem builders
- Self-management; setting priorities, setting goals, success strategies, budgeting, "sandwich generation" care-giving strategies
- Jobs and Work; motivators, job market myths, career resources
- Restructuring; major change, managing the transition process, approaches to downsizing, impact of workplace change, emotional impact of uncertainty, social supports, guiding the team through change
- Coping with change; understanding the phases of transition, grief cycle, personal power, decision making, meeting change creatively, developing a personal affirmative action plan
- A list of resources for the county

The Health Canada Website has a two-volume program, *Best Advice of Stress Risk Management in the Workplace*. This provides program materials that addresses workplace /home wellness.

b. Stress and Nursing

The Health Canada website reports a national study that found that funding cutbacks had negatively affected the ability of hospitals to hire full-time staff. Nurses are working without benefits and are often called in at the last minute. The same cutbacks have forced bed closures and put pressure on health care providers to maintain an adequate level of care.

Nurses are in short supply. Many nurses were recruited by U.S. hospitals with the promise of permanent positions and good pay. At the same time, enrollment in nursing faculties dropped in the 1990's because of the mostly accurate perception that nursing was not an attractive occupation. The nurses who remained in the field experienced overwork on overcrowded wards, long shifts and, on occasion, back to back shifts.

The nursing profession is aging. Experienced nurses, nearing retirement age are questioning when an influx of young trained nurses will begin entering the system.

5. Discussion and Observations

The expressed level of interest on the part of nursing and teaching staff in helping skills training was very low. In fact, the key priority for both professions at this time is developing the human resource complement necessary to respond to community need.

1. Both nurses and teachers indicated relatively low interest in participating in a certificate program that would develop helping skills. These individuals are experiencing considerable stress given their current workload and consequently inservice training was not a high priority for them.

Issues related to negotiated pay grids, overwork and other priorities were given as reasons for their lack of interest in such training at this time.

2. The implementation of the new Grande Prairie Regional College (GPRC) Teacher Education North program will eventually help address the need for skilled teachers in northern communities. The University of Calgary Social Work program should also have a near term impact in northern communities.
3. While the GPRC teacher program is designed to provide the skills that current teachers say are missing in their communities, there is an immediate need for training in the special needs of fetal alcohol children, in the schools and in the

communities. This training, offered by area colleges, could well be a real service to these communities.

4. Rural communities are experiencing difficulty in recruiting and retaining teacher aides. This might provide a training opportunity for northern colleges.
5. The work environments of teachers and nurses are demonstrably difficult. School Boards and Health Authorities in the North have lost what capability they might previously had to offer employee assistance programs. The teachers, particularly, were interested in employee wellness presentations. Nurses could well be interested as well, but their ranks need to grow before they might take advantage of such programs. This may provide an opportunity for northern colleges to work in partnership with these organizations to deliver such material.
6. Teachers and the Northlands School Division representative thought that the development of wellness programs would be welcome and utilized in the form of presentations at annual teachers' conventions and as hands-on workshops during professional development days.
7. Some teachers in the smaller communities indicated that "fun" continuing education offerings offered in the evenings or on weekends would be of interest and would also be a great stress reducer.

6. Sources

a. Contacts

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b. Resources

Egan, Gerald. The Skilled Helper. Brooks/Cole Publishing Company, Monterey, CA, 1986

Elgin, Suzette Haden Ph.D. Staying Well With the Gentle Art of Verbal Defense. Prentice-Hall Inc. Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1990

Jevne, R.F. J. and Zingle, H. W. Striving for Health: Living With Broken Dreams. Alberta School Employees Benefit Plan, Edmonton, 1993.

Strathcona County Schools: Employee Wellness Resource, Striving for Health – Help Yourself ... Help a Friend, 1994

Health Canada: <http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hppb/ahi/workplace/>

Overview of the Project for Discussion With Practitioners

Helping Skills for Front-Line Nurses and Teachers

The Northern Alberta Development Council (NADC) created the Clearinghouse Project in 1995. Partners in the Clearinghouse Project, a consortium of northern Alberta colleges and the NADC, require ongoing research relevant to the northern labour market to keep them abreast of training and employment needs and trends. Each year, the Clearinghouse partners establish research priorities.

A top priority topic for the 2000/01 year is a research report concerning the feasibility of offering an Extension certificate in helping skills for nurses and teachers. This would not be intended to replace services provided by school guidance counsellors or community psychologists. Rather, it would assist front-line workers in the helping professions to deal more effectively with the day-to-day concerns of their patients and students. In addition, it would increase their ability to make timely and effective referrals to appropriate community agencies. Practitioners would know the limitations to their helping interactions with clients.

In addition to the perception of a possible need for helping skills training, it has become apparent that both teachers and nurses are in high stress occupations and may wish to participate in “work wellness” facilitation. This could involve learning stress management techniques, recognizing burnout, self-management techniques, peer support training and individual wellness.

The approach to completing this research report has to date involved undertaking secondary research. Now, it is necessary to hear from front-line workers in northern Alberta. It would be helpful to have telephone conversations with practitioners around the following issues:

- What kind of training in helping skills and personal wellness did you receive in your basic training?
- Do you now or have you had access to employee assistance programs?
- How useful to you would the acquisition of additional skills be (listening, responding, identification of individuals who need special emotional attention, referrals etc.)?
- Would you and your work group consider participating in a personal wellness/assertion training/peer support training program?
- What conditions need to exist in order for you to participate?
- What would be your choice of a continuing education program?

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