

The importance of having a full-time psychologist in schools

During such an important stage in the mental development of children and adolescents it is crucial, in an environment plagued with stress and expectations, at a time of changes both at home and at school, to provide them with sufficient guidance, advice and support. It is important for students to know that they have access to professional council from someone whose job it is to help when they are struggling, with no judgement on their part. It can be extremely daunting to reach out to friends and family when you are stuck in a period of uncertainty, fear or despair for whatever reason, and knowing that you can take the first step by opening up to someone who is easily available can be the difference between recovery and a prolonged suffering in silence. The benefits of school psychologists are numerous and obvious, however when that psychologist is often absent and unavailable, the opposite effects can also occur.

Firstly, a school psychologist who is gone half of the time and shut in their office the rest of the time, trying to fit in all their scheduled meetings into tiny segments is hardly able to attend to even a fraction of the students in need of their attention. There are simply too many students in our school to cram them all in short periods of 10 to 15 minutes at a time, on one or two days of the week, especially since this can lead to many, who are either ashamed of or deem their problems “not serious enough”, giving up on seeking an appointment at all.

Furthermore, the fact that there is a school psychologist is not a widespread one. Of course, if you are in a desperate situation and go looking, you will, after having perhaps asked the infirmary or your conseillère, finally get access to their schedule, however this exact rarity is what further stigmatizes wanting to talk to someone. If the students themselves don't find the courage to seek help, they don't even know they have the option. And, as the case is with most mental or personal problems, the instinct is to keep quiet, not openly advertise them. This is why having someone who is readily available in order to normalise and encourage discussion is very important.

Since the wellbeing of the students should be of most important interest of the school, they need the possibility to talk to a psychologist anytime they want. The students' needs for a professional should not depend on the psychologist's schedule. The students should know that there is someone in school who will listen to them and give them advice. A student constantly being greeted with a closed door and an absent sign at the psychologist office, due to the psychologist working half-time, will result in the feeling of their problems not being important enough.

With the lack of a full-time psychologist there is not only an issue with the length and frequency of meetings, but also with their inconvenient timing for the students. When the person you need to see is only there a couple of times a week, has breaks and other meetings, often the only possible time for them to see you, is when you yourself have other engagements such as class. This is impractical, especially since the last thing a student in such a vulnerable position needs is the added stress of compromising their studies.

There is also the fact that, as the first and biggest European school of Brussels, we are also the only one without a full-time employed psychologist. Surely, when our sister schools in Laeken,

Woluwe and Ixelles and even that of Luxembourg have made it a priority in their yearly budget, it is odd that we, what with more than 3,000 students, haven't¹.

Taking into consideration the importance of having such a figure in the permanent staff of the school and having seen the problems and complications that can occur from the lack-there-of, it is our sincere hope that the school will take the initiative and do all it can to make it a reality. The mental health of students is of the utmost importance and should be the primary investment of the adults responsible for them. They need to be provided with proper and easily accessible aid and guidance, so that they can properly develop and become independent, stable and functioning young adults, without adding the extra stress of hurried and infrequent appointments and rejection.

¹ <https://www.eursc.eu/Documents/2017-10-D-31-en-2.pdf>