

A ?blanket of care? in North Hastings



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By Nate Smelle

Since members of Ontario's four education unions began withdrawing services in opposition to the provincial government's cuts last October, much of the media's attention has been focused on teachers. However, standing alongside the teachers on the picket line and in the classroom are tens of thousands of education workers who are also represented by the unions. Among these ranks are educational assistants, social workers, custodians, early childhood educators, administrative staff, speech and language pathologists, and library technicians.

As a social worker at both North Hastings High School in Bancroft and Centre Hastings Secondary School in Madoc, Marsha Depotier understands how valuable each student's mental health is in terms of their education and personal well-being. Without the supports she and others in her field are providing, she said the children they are helping will unnecessarily suffer the consequences. Furthermore, by reducing the already limited mental health resources for children in North Hastings, Depotier said the Ford government will be taking away the next generation's opportunities to heal and succeed in life through their educational experience. Noting how she is personally providing support for more than 1,000 students between the two schools, Depotier said ?If we don't have the supports, our kids don't have anywhere else to go. Let's talk about Bancroft, there isn't very many external services for children, and if there is, there are wait-lists. So by me being able to be in the school offering mental health supports directly to the students and to the staff we are able to make a real and positive difference. And we have already seen that difference right here at North Hastings High School ? we have seen a climate change.?

Describing the support from parents, staff, and administrators as ?phenomenal? Depotier said if students were to lose their access to social workers in the schools, the province's education system would be taking 10 steps backwards. Speaking as someone who personally gets to see the positive changes in students through her work, she said the government should be looking to increase supports rather than dismantling them.

?I see most of the students anywhere from one to six times, so it is in short intervals and you see that change,? Depotier said. ?You see them re-engaging and doing the things that we want them to do in a positive way. We can't take the cuts because our children's mental health is worth it.?

Taking into consideration how many local families do not have a family doctor, and therefore don't have access to their family health team's social workers; and that there is only one children's mental health social worker in all North Hastings, Depotier stressed how essential the supports they offer local children at school are for this community. For example, by having a social worker actually practicing in the school, she said they are able to identify the children who are most at risk (Tier-3) while helping them navigate the system and find wellness. Without a social worker at the school to identify children who are most at risk, she said it is inevitable that

many students will not receive the care they need.

“We have a blanket of care for these kids,” explained Depotier.

“We have Student Success Team meetings weekly where we discuss what is going on with kids so teachers have the opportunity to come to us and let us know when someone is struggling. That gives me the opportunity, along with our administrative team, to be able to really hone in on each student that we know could fall through the cracks.”

At the moment, Depotier said they are able to provide immediate crisis response in the school for students dealing with mental health and/or other personal issues. Speaking to an ongoing crisis she is currently addressing through her work, Depotier said she is helping several students faced with homelessness find housing. By reducing or eliminating funding for social workers in schools, she said these students will be left out in the cold to deal with these dire circumstances alone.

“You can't offer kids a healing modality and then take it away from them,” said Depotier.

“Our government needs to see that. They need to see the importance of investing in mental health in our education system for our kids.”

Depotier continued “At the end of the day this is about the kids, and what they deserve. Our kids deserve a better future, and we don't need the PCs taking away the opportunities they already have. I want my grandchildren to have a stellar education, not a mediocre one. And that's the kind of education the Ford government wants to give us, mediocre.”