

PDAF Profile – Mindfulness in Action

Teachers and other staff at the South Shore Regional School Board have been given the opportunity to learn about mindfulness, develop a personal practice and integrate classroom-based mindfulness approaches thanks to support from the Program Development Assistance Fund (PDAF), and the efforts of school psychologists Shannon Hartlen and Kelly Humphries. *Mindfulness in Action* empowers teachers to embed mindfulness-based practices into their classrooms.

“Mindfulness has grown in popularity across the field of education namely because children and adolescents are experiencing stress at unprecedented levels,” says Humphries. “Mindfulness falls under the umbrella of social emotional learning, and directly relates to multiple outcomes, and helps to reach the goal of healthy learners.”

Both Humphries and Hartlen know that well-being, behaviour and programming go hand-in-hand, and well-being of the classroom relates to classroom performance, no matter the subject.

“We want to help educators and all staff understand behaviour from a brain-based standpoint, so they understand better why kids are behaving the way they are, and can interpret it differently and be more proactive,” continues Humphries.

Through a series of 90-minute sessions, participants learn about the neurobiology of learning and mindfulness, including topics such as neurobiology of behaviour, mindful communication, conflict resolution, and mindfulness-based stress reduction.

“Schools have more students with complex behavioural challenges and this contributes to the overwhelming demands being placed on teachers,” says Hartlen. “Mindfulness in classrooms can also directly impact the health and well-being of school staff.”

Both Mindful Schools Certified Instructors, Hartlen and Humphries received a \$5,000 PDAF grant for resources to conduct the program. “It was thrilling to get \$5,000 through PDAF for *Mindfulness in Action*,” says Humphries.

Hartlen and Humphries have been offering *Mindfulness in Action* (MIA) since September 2014, but with the support of PDAF have been able to continue the program with all the necessary resources. The PDAF MIA program was set to begin last school year with 42 participants, but the work-to-rule job action interfered with the program, because the sessions are voluntary and take place after school.

This school year, Hartlen and Humphries are running two groups. One group is continuing the program through online learning. “We are supporting these teachers on their mindfulness journey as they learn how to implement it into their classrooms,” says Humphries. The other group is participating in the after school programming facilitated by both Hartlen and Humphries.

The seeds of this program were planted a number of years ago, when Hartlen was providing support for teachers and students at the now closed Milton Elementary School. “We were dealing with a particularly disruptive cohort of students, and I had discovered the Mind Up curriculum,” says Hartlen. Mind Up is a research-based curriculum that uses the latest information about the brain to dramatically improve behavior and learning for all students. “As we were helping teachers support students, we asked how are we taking care of these teachers and how can we build relationships among students and between students and teachers,” she continues.

“We realized we had to do something really different here,” adds Humphries. Hartlen and school staff got permission from their student services coordinator to do a day of training on mindfulness, the science behind it, and how teachers can deliver it in the classroom.

Hartlen and Humphries see that what initially started as support for students has grown into great support for their teaching colleagues. “We are two of five psychologists in the board, and we were seeing the numbers of teachers coming in stressed was hitting an all-time high,” says Humphries.

“There was nothing to offer them so we decided to team together and provide some self-care, make a positive impact, and provide them with something they could then deliver to the classroom,” she continues. “We can give our time, and give back to teachers, and all staff, because we’re all in it together.”

They were cognizant of the fears of teachers in seeing this as just another thing “they had to do.” Hartlen says once they saw how it could be implemented in the curriculum and saw the brain-based connection their

fears disappeared. “Teachers were being the learners along with their students, and positive things started to happen.”

Even Humphries admits she was resistant with the whole “mindfulness thing” at first. “I was feeding into the stereotype about it being all about meditation and it coming from a religious context,” she says. “As I learned more about it I could see it as clinically-based and realized there are multiple entry points into the practice. It’s a skill that can be taught, and it comes from a secular context.”

Both Humphries and Hartlen could not have been able to carry out the program without the great support from the school board. “We are fortunate to have the support we have, and recognition of a new way of delivering support in classrooms.”

Hartlen is excited about what could potentially turn into a three-year project at South Queens Middle School. “We are working toward delivery of a full mindful skills curriculum to all Grade 6 students. If this moves forward, in three years a whole mindful school could exist in our board,” she says. “This is the most exciting work I’ve done in my career.”

The PDAF program encourages innovative program development in Nova Scotia’s public schools. Co-sponsored by the NSTU and the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development with an annual sum of \$200,000, it provides financial support for projects directly related to the Public School Program. Application deadlines coming up this school year are February 1, April 1 and June 1 by 4:00 p.m. For more information visit the Professional Development section of the NSTU website at www.nstu.ca or contact the NSTU at 1-800-565-6788 or 902-477-5621 or pdafe@nstu.ca.



Shannon Hartlen and Kelly Humphries