

Media Release

Issued: 15 November 2022

Mental health initiative in schools expanded across North and West Auckland

A new Te Whatu Ora initiative teaching students skills to navigate life's adversities is being launched in up to 18 North and West Auckland secondary schools.

The Skills Training for Emotional Problem Solving for Adolescents (STEPS-A) programme is designed to help young people develop life skills to manage emotions, make better decisions and improve interpersonal relationships.

The 30-week targeted, early-intervention course is based on Dialectical Behavioural Therapy for Adolescents (DBT-A) which has proven effective in decreasing concerning behaviours in adolescents who struggle with relationships, academic pressure, alcohol and drug use, self-harming, anti-social behaviours and bullying.

It aims to provide students with key social and emotional skills within a school setting before these sorts of problems escalate and require secondary mental health services.

The initiative was trialled in West Auckland and is now being expanded to include North Auckland. It aims to reach 18 Auckland schools by July 2024, prioritising those currently making high numbers of referrals to secondary mental health services or within high-referring communities.

Dr Mirsad Begic, Service Clinical Director for Child, Youth and Family Mental Health Services for Te Whatu Ora in Waitematā, says the programme consists of four modules: mindfulness, distress tolerance, emotion regulation and interpersonal effectiveness.

"Research shows that schools teaching students social and emotional skills see reduced levels of stress, improved self-esteem, better academic performance and a reduction in disciplinary referrals and suspensions," he says.

"Participating schools will be provided with mental health clinicians to train teachers for one year to identify and support students experiencing mental health issues.

"This means clinically trained teachers will then be able to independently deliver the programme in subsequent years, significantly expanding the number of students able to access the support STEPS-A provides."

Michele Kooiman, Operations Manager for Child, Youth and Family Mental Health Services for Te Whatu Ora in Waitematā, says the value of STEPS-A for participating students – and schools – cannot be underestimated.

"We know that STEPS-A has already had a significant impact on the students who participated in the trial and we're excited to be expanding the initiative so we can continue to support young people experiencing mental health issues," she says.

The STEPS-A programme has been supported by Well Foundation and the Ministry of Education which will provide guidance on school prioritisation and paid release time for teaching staff involved.

ENDS

Media contact:

Media Line: 09 487 1276