

Letter 5: YRT1_Y6.F.16

To whom it may concern,

Mental health within the youth in our community is worse than we think. We assume we know the numbers; the number of kids affected by mental health, the numbers of the kids in need of mental health services, etc. In reality, these numbers are much greater than we make them out to be. When I was in middle school, several kids trusted me enough to tell me about their self harm, and I can't begin to imagine how many were battling their illnesses on their own. We were only 12 years old, forming harmful habits to cope with the mental illnesses we were unaware we had. The thing is, our grades were good. We kept up with our extra curriculums, and any other academic commitments. From an educator's eye, we were okay. When I would try to go to my friends, most of them didn't suffer from the same things I did, making me feel even more alone. Feeling alone fueled my anxiety, making me feel so isolated from the world around me. If we had any knowledge of mental health, we would have known to ask for help, we could have developed healthy coping mechanisms, we could have done so many things that would have made a huge difference in many of our lives.

There are three main ideas I have that will help support our community's youth. Firstly, they need to be able to help themselves. By the time they reach high school, most children's mental illnesses have already begun taking a toll on their lives. Mental health education should be introduced at a younger age, as early as elementary school, allowing them to learn about healthy coping mechanisms, developing healthy habits, finding ways to deal with their emotions, etc. This education will help kids take themselves down a much healthier path. The two main benefits that would likely follow are;

Children and youth would overall suffer from less mental health issues, because they would know how to take care of themselves, and reach out to others, before it worsens. The stigma around mental health and illnesses would slowly fade away, as it would be talked about more in a professional and helpful setting.

Secondly, there needs to be more recognition of high functioning mental illnesses. It is often believed that since they are able to take care of other aspects in their life, they are capable of handling their mental illnesses. This is not the case. I myself have been told by multiple mental health professionals that I am just 'stressed' or 'over analyzing' after they took a look at my grades or my extracurriculars. I was later properly diagnosed, but it should not have taken neglect from four professionals before getting to that stage. The point is, high functioning youth exist. Especially in school settings, it should be recognized more by the staff, such as guidance counsellors and teachers. Grades and involvement are not an accurate representation of a student's well-being.

Lastly, I wanted to address the toxic positivity that exists within our system. Toxic positivity is where someone is given false reassurances that dismiss negative emotions, opposed to empathy. Although it is often well-intentioned, it can cause people to feel they are not understood, and disconnected from those around them. Common phrases include; 'it

could be worse,' 'look at the bright side,' 'think happy thoughts,' and 'positive vibes only.' None of these phrases are helpful. No one can be constantly happy, and overly positive phrases push the narrative that any emotions other than happy ones are wrong. This only pushes people to repress their feelings, doing more harm than good. Professionals should be aware of phrases like these, and make a conscious effort to avoid them.

I do appreciate and thank you for the effort that has been put into the system, but as with every system, there are always ways to improve. Overall, to improve, mental health education should be introduced at a younger age, more recognition of high functioning illnesses should occur, and there should be a conscious effort to avoid toxic positivity.

Thank you for your time, [name]