

MINDS

Mental health

Area schools expand mental health services to enable students to better cope with trauma

CULTIVATING RESILIENT

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suburban schools across Monroe County, veteran educators increasingly are sounding the same refrain: It didn't used to be this way. Children, they say, weren't coming to school with such overpowering anxiety about their math test, their Instagram account or their after-school activities. They weren't as likely to be hungry or homeless or struggling with addiction in their families. They weren't traumatized — not like this. "Kids coming to us today look a little different from five or 10 years ago," said Deborah Miles, Fairport's director of student services. As a result, schools are beginning to look a little different, too.

Suburban Monroe County school districts have greatly expanded their mental health offerings over the last several years, part of a growing recognition that students cannot learn when their minds are occupied with more pressing matters.

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At Johanna Perrin Middle School in Fairport, Hayden McCue and fellow sixth-graders end a yoga session — part of a mindfulness activity — with breathing.

TINA MACINTYRE-YEE/@TYEE23/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

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In part, the increased services correlate with increasing levels of poverty in most suburban districts. Poor students are more likely to suffer emotional trauma and to be classified with a disability for a variety of

reasons.

Besides poverty, though, school counselors and administrators point to several factors that are putting students less at ease. Some of the suspected culprits: overexposure to social media, stress from high-stakes testing, a lack of physical activity and, in many cases, mounting problems at home including drug use or fighting parents.

“In the last couple of years, the mental health needs of students have really gotten more notice,” said Bill Hurley, who runs the Family Life Education and Counseling Service at Monroe 1 BOCES. “People are finding that discipline or resource room or tutoring isn’t successful. What’s really going on is, the child is (extremely) nervous about what’s going on at home or outside the classroom. More tutoring or more discipline isn’t going to change that.”

Districts are reflecting that understanding with several different approaches. Underlying all of them is a common understanding, based on research and experience: Schools cannot ignore their students’ nonacademic needs.

“We need to help our staff understand, this is all of our job now,” Brockport psychologist Amber Hildebrand said. “Stressed brains can’t learn.”

A daunting problem

Increasingly, children’s mental health is being seen through the lens of trauma — both major events, like being physically or sexually assaulted, and chronic conditions, like not having enough to eat or having one or both parents absent.

Childhood poverty and trauma are, of course, most readily associated with the Rochester City School District; more than half the children there live in poverty, one of the worst rates in the country.

Annual local statistics on children’s exposure to various traumatic experiences show the consequences. The study, the Youth Risk Behavior Survey, shows 40 percent of city children ages 12-18 had experienced three or more from a list of 10 “adverse childhood experiences” (ACEs). The parallel countywide number — including the city and suburbs — was 28 percent.

Nationwide, 10 percent of adults have experienced three or more ACEs, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Specific to mental health, 12 percent of children in Rochester and 8 percent of children in Monroe County reported having made a suicide attempt in the 2014-15 school year (the national number is 8 percent). An additional 32 percent in Rochester and 27 percent in the county said they’d had a two-week period when they felt so sad or hopeless they couldn’t continue their regular activities.

“The feeling is that students have greater needs than they once did — more than districts can handle with what has been their previous array of services,” said Amy Scheel-Jones. She is director of the Monroe County Consortium for Trauma, Illness and Grief in Schools.

At the same time, schools are getting better at identifying mental health. Their goal is to head problems off early and prevent greater suffering for students.

The City School District, faced with struggles of an entirely different magnitude than suburban districts, is

developing an ambitious agenda to reorient its approach in terms of trauma and mental health. It ties in with a parallel effort to reduce student suspension rates.

In the suburbs as well, school districts are largely in accord in their changing philosophy on mental health. A day-long seminar on trauma and trauma-informed education in early October, for instance, drew social workers, psychologists and teachers from districts across the region. Many districts also recently received mental health first aid certification through Monroe County Project AWARE (Advancing Wellness and Resilience in Education).

Beyond that basic recognition, suburban schools are trying out a variety of tactics to help their children.

Different approaches

Perhaps the most ambitious effort currently underway is happening in the East Irondequoit, Honeoye Falls-Lima, Pittsford and Webster school districts through Monroe 1 BOCES on the county's east side. A retooled counseling service there is expanding the traditional scope of how far a school should go to help students.

Many schools help their students' BOCES' Family Life Education and Counseling Service has gone a step further by actually providing mental health counseling services to family members, all in the service of getting the child back on track in school.

For instance, if a child is having a hard time concentrating at school because her parents are always fighting, a FLECS counselor will work with them in marriage therapy sessions. If the therapy is effective, the parents stop fighting and the child can focus on school.

"A lot of people say to focus on what's going on at school, because you can't change what's going on at home," FLECS administrator Hurley said. "But we're thinking — maybe you can change what's going on at home."

FLECS has a caseload of about 100 families. Hurley's team urges the schools to identify eligible students based on signs of anxiety or absenteeism rather than waiting for more serious problems.

In the three years FLECS has been using the family-centered model, Hurley families sign up for benefits or other social services for which they qualify. said he could point to individual students who were diverted from a special education designation because of the help they received. That saves money for the district and stress for the child.

Part of the reason the model works, he said, is that it uses outside counselors, avoiding any friction between the school and the family.

"Often it's much safer for the family to talk to someone who's not part of the school," he said.

The Fairport Central School District is taking a multifaceted approach centered around a partnership with Strong Behavioral Health at the University of Rochester Medical Center.

Strong has a clinic at Minerva DeLand School, for ninth-graders, open to students and their families four days a week. It mirrors a setup in place in several Rochester schools; the hope is that children and their families will be more likely to seek medical help if it's in a convenient location. Furthermore, Fairport staff have regular consultations with Strong mental health professionals where they can talk about specific

students. About 50 students got help that way last year, and about 20 went to the clinic.

Social-media safety is being covered in health class, a recognition of the powerful sway that Instagram, Snapchat and Twitter have over many teenagers. And schools are adding things such as mindfulness meditation and yoga as ways to increase resilience against stress.

“Kids today ... are anxious about home or social relationships or academics or what they’re going to encounter during the school day,” said Miles, the student services director. “We’re recognizing we need to be proactive about providing support to kids.”

In Penfield, the district is wagering that the best way to reach out to troubled students may be through other students. About 50 high schoolers were identified as peer leaders, then trained in “sources of strength” — how to build resilience against difficult experiences, and how to connect other people with help.

Twelfth-graders Mikayla Bird and Chris Griswold both received the training last spring and said they already have spoken with a number of fellow students about various stressors in their lives. What’s more, they helped lead training for school staff on the same topic.

“Our society in general, puts a pretty big stigma on mental health issues,” Bird said. “(We want to) let students know a lot of people go through these issues, and there are ways to alleviate them.”

Both Bird and Griswold said they struggled to find their place in the school in ninth and 10th grades. Getting involved in after-school activities — Model United Nations and mock trial for Bird, drama club and the Gender and Sexuality Alliance for Griswold — helped change their perspective, and put them in a position to help others.

“I found a lot of freshmen in GSA and drama didn’t have anyone to talk to about gender and sexuality,” Griswold said.

Now, school counselor Teresa Kneezel said, it’s not uncommon for a student to show up in her office and say: “Chris thinks I should come and talk to somebody.”

The Penfield school district has been visited by a number of tragic student deaths in the last few years, including by suicide. Most mental health issues do not progress that far, but Kneezel said it gives a sense of urgency to the work she and others across the county are increasingly doing.

“When we have tragedies, it really reminds us how precious all our students are, (and how we) really need to make sure we keep their emotional well-being at the forefront,” she said. “We know right now there are many students who are suffering with mental health issues. Sometimes they’re getting the help they need, and sometimes they’re not.”

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Penfield High School junior Isaiiah Preston helps hang “treats” that students have written to highlight positive thoughts and behavior.

MAX SCHULTE/@MAXROCPHOTO/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER



Penfield High School students have written positive messages that hang in the lunchroom.

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