

Why students' mental health needs are soaring during virus pandemic

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Brittany Cruickshank has noticed a change in her students over the past 11 months.

The Pine Plains social worker said she's seeing heightened anxiety, depression and difficulty with maintaining focus.

In the past, her students may have used a two-hour practice with a team as a way to decompress, or an afterschool gathering with friends.

But when restrictions relating to the COVID-19 pandemic forced schools into remote learning last March, creating an unfamiliar educational environment, students were also denied some of those coping mechanisms, further encouraging feelings of isolation.

"It's heartbreaking to know there are so many students who are struggling," Cruickshank said.

The social worker said she has seen the number of students reaching out for help increase since last March. Area school officials, though, also worry about the students who are remaining silent, and are adapting strategies to reach out to them despite the inherent barriers of distanced learning.

While many schools and professionals are reporting an increased number of students in need of assistance, it appears there's also a rise in the number of incidents in which students do not receive help before they are in the midst of what can be characterized as a serious crisis.

Mental health experts say the impact of the pandemic is going to be felt by children for years, and school districts need to provide support for children when schools return to full-time in-person instruction. Though districts are preparing plans for additional services, resources vary from district to district.

and staff that are reaching out about students who weren't in class or appear to be struggling," she said. "We are making sure that we are maintaining connectivity and engagement with these students."

The Poughkeepsie City School District has resources available for students, ranging from online materials to print and social emotional learning lessons incorporated in their schedules. Rosser said the district is also doing home visits and partnering with community organizations to provide extra support.

"The impact of the pandemic on some students has been very visible," Rosser said. "In those situations we have created individualized supports for those students.

"For example, a high school student was experiencing some levels of stress while at home and was not able to focus on his school work; under the supervision of the principal, arrangements were made for him to come into the school to log onto to his classes in a more comforting environment," he added.

Rural districts struggle

In a district of fewer than 600 students, spread out over an 88-mile radius, mental health resources are not easy to find for Webutuck students. Jennifer Eraca, director of student services and curriculum and instruction at Webutuck, said the Amenia district is providing as much support as possible, but outside the school community, resources are difficult to come by.

"Distance-wise, throw in some snow, throw in the inability to leave and being quarantining, it's all compounded," Eraca said. "I know that our school counselors and school social workers schedules are to the max, just in terms of check-ins and support and making sure our students are doing okay."

Christopher Van Houten, presidentelect for the New York Association of School Psychologists, said he is concerned by the lack of resources available for rural districts across the state.

Peter Faustino, president of Westchester Psychological Association and a New York Association of School Psychologists trustee, said there was a mental health crisis taking place before the pandemic, and it's become alarmingly worse.

"Most of the kids that needed mental health intervention were getting it in the school building during the school day," Faustino said. "When you took away the resources, the routine, the support within the school building ... I feel like we just totally stripped away any support that the children that were struggling with mental health needed."

Speaking with psychologists across the state, Faustino said they are seeing increases in anxiety, depression and the number of students flagged for risk assessments.

But locating those who need help is a challenge, one that's more difficult for rural districts and those in which the majority of students are still learning remotely. That includes the Poughkeepsie City School District, which did not begin a hybrid learning plan until this month, and roughly 70% of students are opting to remain remote for this academic quarter.

Some districts have invested in programs to monitor student engagement while on their computers.

Poughkeepsie Superintendent Eric Rosser acknowledged the district is not able to connect with its students the same way it would in-person. He said the district provides support in the virtual learning, but there is not "the same level of awareness."

"Every staff member knows when a student is experiencing challenge by their outward disposition," Rosser said, "without having students in school full-time it is difficult to monitor on a daily basis."

Cruickshank praised students' "determination, their strength and their resilience" during the pandemic, noting there may be interpersonal issues that can impact moods "more than in a typical world." She is trying to refer students to avenues in which they can get help earlier than she would have in the past, with many typical coping mechanisms unavailable.

"What we realized in the pandemic is that the systems that existed in the community before were inadequate and now the pandemic really highlighted how much of a barrier there is," said Van Houten, the school psychologist in northern New York's Malone Central School District.

"Kids that were being seen once a week are now being seen once a month, there's a lot of cancellations," he said. "And those kids are being seen through telehealth, so if there's issue with internet or anything like that they are not being seen."

Van Houten says a solution would be to allow school psychologists to privately practice within the communities they serve. A proposed New York state bill would help to address the inequity in rural districts by giving psychologists the license to work with students during breaks and over the summer in a private practice.

"Increasing the number of trained individuals who are able to assist students outside of an educational setting will be a positive to the children, parents, school and society," the bill reads.

Eraca said Webutuck began focusing on mental health before the pandemic, as part of an effort to address absenteeism. To keep children from falling through the cracks, she said the district put students considered chronically absent into a mentorship program in which they meet with a mentor once a week to set goals and check in.

The district is also opening a schoolbased health clinic next fall that will include mental health services for students. It will be located within the high school building and will have no out-of-pocket costs for families.

"We will have a dedicated space specifically for mental health resources beyond what our social workers and counselors are able to do," Eraca said about the clinic. "(Our counselors) typically cover school-related topics. We will be able to delve into more of the acute and chronic issues that students are dealing with."

Finding solutions in school and out

Faustino said the New York Association of School Psychologists is working with districts to create plans to provide resources and support for students in the long term as the number of students returning to schools increases.

“It’s a lot of going back to the drawing board of, ‘Okay, that coping strategy may not work ... what else can we identify as something that can help you?’” Cruickshank said.

Early identification difficult

Pine Plains works with Astor Services, a Rhinebeck-based organization that provides mental health services to school-aged children throughout the Hudson Valley and the Bronx.

Dr. Todd Karlin, chief program officer for Astor, said through surveying his programs and talking with professionals in crisis programming in Dutchess County, he’s seen an increase in significant incidents, as well as kids struggling.

The Astor program served 1,983 clients in Dutchess in January 2020 and 2,098 in January 2021. While that increase may not be significant, he said more students are seeking services when they’re already in a serious crisis.

“Kids aren’t being identified as early as they normally would when they are beginning to struggle,” Karlin said. “For that reason, the overall number of kids referred to us are down, so now when the kids do come in, they are already in crisis, they already may be having some significant behaviors and are really struggling at that point.”

Beth Rizzi, president of New York Association of School Psychologists, said she agrees with Karlin. While she hasn’t seen a significant increase in her personal caseload, the school psychologist at John Jay High School in Wicoppee has seen an increase in referrals and reports of significantly higher stress levels.

“Students are not being identified as early due to lack of in-person interaction,” she added. “Unless a student is comfortable self-referring it is difficult to determine who needs help.”

Karlin said the organization’s partial hospitalization program, which supports children ages 11 to 18 to prevent psychiatric inpatient hospitalization, has been at full capacity through the pandemic. In January 2020, the program served 25 Dutchess residents. That number went up to 38 last month.

Hudson Valley district leaders say mental health is a priority upon reopening. Some plan on giving students breaks throughout the day and are encouraging teachers to create spaces in the classroom for students to share emotions.

Cruickshank said the Pine Plains district uses a tiered approach to supporting students’ mental health. Support is given to the entire student body through the distribution of resources and conversations in the classroom.

“It’s about creating a space where students can speak their truth about what’s going on and coming up for them, and they can build their empathy and understanding for each other by hearing different perspectives about what is going on,” Cruickshank said. “Then you have the next level, which is more individualized support, where they seek help from their guidance counselors who will recognize they aren’t functioning as well as they want to.”

Some districts are using programs, such as Go Guardian, that monitor students’ devices while they are in class and measure engagement with learning material.

Spackenkill Superintendent Paul Fanuele said the district has the program installed on students’ laptops. It will give teachers access to screens and will create notifications if students are looking at websites or programs other than classwork.

Spackenkill, though, also prioritized reopening for students early in the fall and remaining open whenever safely possible.

“We are trying to have kids in school as much as possible and to give them ways to connect with peers other than inside the classroom through clubs, sports and through the arts,” Fanuele said.

Rizzi said a lot of her work is providing the tools for students to cope with the lack of continuity in their environment. She noted her profession was “able to pivot” to find new ways of helping on new platforms.

“I think that the pandemic has opened many people’s eyes to the fact that school psychologists, social workers, and school counselors are able

The program offers services to children who are at risk for self-harm; children who are unable to function in a school setting, at home or in the community; children that were discharged from a higher-level facility; and children coming from an outpatient program.

Faustino said students are falling into three categories: Those who need a place to vent about the added stress and anxiety; students who have developed bad habits, such as a lack of sleep, a lack of movement, or increased isolation; and students who struggled with mental health prior to the pandemic and are struggling much more now.

“I’m kind of an optimist and I try to think positively, but I’m really concerned that this is going to have a lasting impact on the students,” Faustino said. “I think it’s going to take a while before we can get back to normal and students really start to feel better. And in the interim we are going to need more mental health support for students.”

Students’ behavior changes

Jacqueline Herriman was blindsided when her 17-year-old daughter said she was considering dropping out of Spackenkill High School.

Her daughter was a straight-A student, a senior on track to graduate with honors. But remote learning was creating anxiety, and she was having trouble keeping up with the online workload.

“Coming down to her mental health, I thought about the suicide rates and all that is up, so I had to think about that and just be realistic about it and say is it worth her mental health? Maybe she should drop out,” Herriman said.

She and her daughter worked together with her school guidance counselor and principal to make her remote learning experience more manageable. Through increased communication with her counselor and open and honest talks with her parents, Herriman said her daughter decided to stay in school.

While her daughter is on track to graduate at the end of the year, Herriman has seen a change in her personality with heightened anxiety and depression.

to provide the services to the students that we work with, without being confined by the four walls around us,” she said.

Statewide, Rizzi said many districts have put mental health at the forefront of their plans moving forward in the pandemic. She said Wappingers included her in all its reopening committees and continues to use her guidance as it plans the next steps in returning to more in-person instruction.

“I think certain districts are doing an incredible job with engagement and social emotional learning, and I think that others are just trying to keep their heads above water. It varies across the state,” Rizzi said.

She noted virtual counseling has its challenges, but there are some positives to take away from the pandemic.

“We’ve all learned how to be more flexible and how to do the job with whatever resources are available to us,” Rizzi added.

“That’s something I look at as a positive, we have learned to do things differently and I think we’ve learned that different isn’t always bad.”

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Stissing Mountain High School social worker, Brittany Cruickshank in her office on Feb. 4. PATRICK OEHLER/POUGHKEEPSIE

School psychologists are seeing similar changes in behavior in students across the state, Rizzi said, including those with whom she works in the Wappingers Central School District.

“Many students are struggling with lack of engagement and a feeling of being overwhelmed,” she said. “They feel that the current workload during hybrid learning is more than when they were in a more traditional school model.”

Rizzi said her biggest concern is that students are feeling supported and feel that their engagement and academic achievement is sufficient.

“There has been somewhat of an uptick of students

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