

At summit, leaders confront school mental health crisis

On Board Online • May 29, 2017

By Alan Wechsler

Special Correspondent

All school districts in New York State will have to provide instruction regarding mental health as part of health classes beginning July 1, 2018. It's an opportunity for schools to address a disturbing pattern - a rising number of mental health diagnoses in school-age children.

That was one of the messages experts delivered at a one-day summit that NYSSBA held on May 20 in Albany. Entitled "Your Role in Addressing the Growing Mental Health Crisis among Students," the event attracted more than 100 school leaders and educators from across the state.

The purpose, according to Executive Director Timothy G. Kremer, was "to address the issue in a comprehensive and powerful way, to make a real difference in the lives of young people." The day included breakout sessions on topics including professional development and partnership strategies to deal with widespread occurrence of depression, anxiety and other disorders.

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, about 3 million children ages 12 to 17 had at least one major depressive episode in 2015. About 30 percent of girls and 20 percent of boys - a total of 6.3 million teens - have had an anxiety disorder, according to data from the National Institute of Mental Health. Both figures were reported in a 2016 Time magazine cover story on the topic.

How can schools best respond to this growing problem? Speaker Katharine Briar-Lawson, professor and dean emeritus at the University at Albany's School of Social Welfare, said a good starting point is improving school districts' level of awareness of the trauma in the lives of their students. One tool for this is a questionnaire called the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) checklist, which asks questions such as: "Was a household member depressed or mentally ill or did a household member attempt suicide?" The more questions that a child answers "yes," the greater the risk to their mental health.

School staff and district leaders have to try to maintain a healthy school environment no matter what happens in the community, including teen suicides. That's why training is needed for everyone in the school community, she said. "Helping the helpers may be as critical as getting help to the students and the parents themselves," she said.

Also presenting at the event was UAlbany professor Hal Lawson, husband of Briar-Lawson. Together and separately, they devote themselves to a variety of social programs that help school districts across the country. They are currently working with the group Mobilizing Action for Resilient Communities, or MARC, to provide services to districts and other child and family helping systems. Over the years they estimate that they have visited well over a hundred school districts in 45 different states.

One example of their work involved a high number of violent incidents in Schulyer Elementary School in Albany. They helped the school create strategies to change the school's culture. That included setting up a "Time Dollar Store," where kids could earn credit for buying school supplies and other goods based on volunteering in the school and nearby community. Along with getting parents more involved in the school, the programs and interventions succeeded in reducing not only violent incidents, but also the number of students removed from classes due to misbehavior.

In a presentation about how school districts can get started developing support systems for students, educators and families, Hal Lawson said that mental health issues affect more than students. For instance, if teachers feel the need to take a sick day as a "mental health day," that cost also adds up.

Lawson stressed the need for communities, parents, governments and schools to work together and create formal, detailed relationships to handle students with mental health issues with a minimum of disruption to the students and their families.

"You've got to have the structure to make that happen, and that will cost money. Educators can't control all of it," he said.

But he also noted that failing to deal with these problems comes with its own costs.

"Because we lack a formal system, we waste money - and kids don't get the help they need," he said. "Untreated kids create myriad problems and their life course trajectory is suboptimal."

The day included six brainstorming sessions led by facilitators. In one group, NYSSBA Director of Member Relations Barry Entwistle surveyed board members for thoughts and ideas about how to prioritize dealing with mental health at the school level.

Catherine Lewis, president of the Schenectady school board, noted that her district lost four teenage girls to suicide in a four-month period nearly 10 years ago. She talked about a program of "cultural brokers" that the district created to help make connections with students. The brokers are adults who have "street cred" with students due to their background, which could include former membership in gangs. The brokers are able to relate more easily with students, she said, giving them someone they can trust and easily communicate with. "The cultural brokers know more about what's going on than the professionals," she said.

She also said it was important that board members be continually informed about incidents involving students. She recalled an incident where she once indirectly heard about a student who had been killed in an accident a week earlier, and being surprised she hadn't heard through school channels.

"It's a village effort," said Mary Marro-Giroux of the Troy school board. "How do you get everyone involved and see the urgency of it? It's scary."

She referred to the book *American Girls: Social Media and the Secret Lives of Teenagers*, which documents the increasingly stressful lives that adolescent girls lead due to the non-stop and all-pervasive nature of social media. "Nobody's talking about it," she said, saying that students should be held more accountable for taking part in bullying.

Nora Scherer, president of the Kingston school board and a retired special education teacher, said an overhaul of school discipline codes could also help matters. The idea would be to find ways to involve parents more and reduce the amount of student suspensions, she said.

Other ideas included districts doing more to ensure that at-risk students have transportation to make appointments to their private counselors, and that schools promote efforts to reduce bullying.

Anne Helfer, a school therapist from Syracuse, said students she works with have serious problems such as parental loss or incarceration, mental illness, substance abuse and homelessness. "We can't fix society," she said. But she welcomed the start of a new conversation about how schools can help.

Skaneateles Superintendent Kenneth Slentz, formerly a top official at the State Education Department, ended the day with a discussion about next steps to promote children's mental health. He cautioned the audience not to overreact or assign blame when issues occur. The most important step, he said, is to include everyone in the process - even people who might not be seen as a link in the education chain, such as cafeteria workers. It's those front-line employees who might be the first to notice a problem, he said, such as a student who sits alone every day, or who doesn't eat. "They are incredibly valuable," he said.

He suggested a strategic plan of readiness to handle mental health issues should include six areas - the six dimensions of wellness. Those include physical, emotional, spiritual, intellectual, environmental and social. Making sure children's needs are being met in these areas, he said, is as important as making sure they are learning.

Kremer told the group that NYSSBA would be continuing to seek feedback about how the organization can further help board members and other educators to deal with this topic. "We're looking for you to tell us what we should be doing next," he said.