

Treating Mental Health Issues in School: One Size Does Not Fit All

As mental health issues arise earlier and earlier in our student population, schools are faced with the herculean task of tackling these issues as they affect student learning. Every year there is a new program, a new approach, a new intervention touted as the next great solution for addressing this very complex problem. Can one method be used for every problem? What is the most effective approach? What do each of the following interventions bring to the table? Let's take a look at three current trends:

- Having trauma informed schools and understanding the effect that Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) have on a student's ability to function in school as a way of reducing trauma induced anxiety and depression.
- Building community and agency partnerships to better serve our students is a way to avoid duplication of service and a way to better streamline services.
- Implementing restorative justice practices as an approach most often identified as a way of ending the "school to prison pipeline" and as an alternative to long term suspensions.

While all of these interventions have merit on their own, a one-size-fits-all approach will never be effective in addressing the mental health needs of all students. It is only when we combine our efforts, when we embrace multiple approaches, that we truly stand a chance of addressing our students so that they may better access their education. However, understanding each approach is necessary when administrators and staff develop a plan to address mental health issues in their schools.

- **Trauma Informed Schools:** More than 25% of American youth experience a serious traumatic event by their 16th birthday, and many children suffer multiple and repeated traumas according to the National Childhood Traumatic Stress Network. This approach includes teacher and clinician led groups who look at issues such as attendance, academic failure, and behavior from a trauma perspective and utilize empirically based interventions to address trauma and improve academic performance. This approach also includes developing an understanding of the effects of trauma on brain growth and a student's ability to function. It suggests the use of specific trauma focused interventions to address these issues and help students succeed. As a social worker in a suburban school district in Averill Park, NY, I can attest to the need to address traumatic events. Every year, students experience trauma either through the loss of a loved one due to a drug overdose, the death of a parent, removal by Child Protective Services, family substance use, parental suicide attempts, or domestic violence. These are traumatic events that can affect a student's ability to process information. These students need a markedly different approach than those students suffering from moderate to severe

anxiety not related to a traumatic event. Understanding the impact that repeated trauma has on these students is a necessity, and employing a “trauma informed” approach can help schools face the obstacles created by trauma. The Averill Park School School is beginning to develop a professional development program to start looking at the impact of trauma on student learning and to develop trauma informed interventions to improve student success.

- **Building community and agency partnerships:** Embedding a mental health clinic within the school community is one approach that addresses mental health issues that affect a student’s ability to learn. Such a partnership allows families to attend treatment with their children in a familiar and comfortable environment. The service is provided by an outside agency and is a fee-for-service program, paid for by health insurance, with little cost to the school district other than providing a space to house the clinic. For suburban and rural districts without public transportation, it enables families to access mental health treatment that they could not get otherwise. It allows for parents to meet with a therapist every other session so that parents may miss less work. Since it is an on-site service, students also miss less instruction time to attend therapy. The Averill Park School District started its clinic in October 2017, and currently the clinic is serving 30 families. We partnered with Rensselaer County Mental Health and the therapists are a resource to teachers and counselors, providing consultation on difficult situations.. The advantages of this approach are that the therapists are well trained in dealing with trauma as well as general family issues. They can facilitate a plethora of services in the community, including access to Mobile Crisis, and they can access the services of a pediatric psychiatrist or nurse practitioner. Our goal is to help students cope with issues that impact learning and to address issues before they require hospitalization.
- **Restorative Justice Practices:** These are practices that focus on helping students to understand their behavior to prevent it from happening in the future. Restorative justice is implemented in lieu of, or alongside, traditional disciplinary approaches. It is an approach being used by more schools in New York State. The Averill Park High School has begun to implement restorative practices in the classroom to community build and to problem solve situations. Algonquin Middle School in Averill Park utilizes a restorative justice approach to after school detention. Instead of keeping students after school as punishment, we instead keep them after school to process the impact of their actions on others, and to make a plan to repair the harm they have caused. We begin the time with some mindfulness meditation and then proceed with restorative justice questions, restorative justice circles if appropriate, and end with a plan to repair harm. The goal is to help students understand their emotions as they relate to their actions and then

understand the impact of their actions on others. It is our hope that it will help students understand their effect on others and help reduce recidivism.

Since all of the above approaches are valid and useful approaches to many of the issues our students face, how do we choose among them? The complex nature of mental health issues requires complex interventions. If we only use one of the above approaches, we are not serving our community. Some students struggle with trauma, while others struggle with anxiety not related to trauma. Should we use the same program, the same approach, and the same tool box? Obviously, we should not. The answer lies in a multi-pronged, multi-dimensional approach that takes into consideration the many facets of mental health issues. There is no one approach that works for all students and when we buy into canned, dictated approaches that are often declared to be the next great thing, we waste time, money and the opportunity to truly affect change in a student's life. The real answer to this question lies in working with all the resources your community has to offer. It lies in understanding that for some, trauma has had an effect on the way information is processed, and thus, a different approach to learning is required. It lies in placing the need to truly repair harm over the need to punish. It lies in developing close working relationships with county mental health agencies. It lies in having an arsenal of approaches, services and interventions to help each student become successful in their own way. After all, every student deserves all of the very best we have to offer.

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