



## A TALE OF TWO DISTRICTS

# Broad Approaches to Meeting Students' Mental Health Needs

By Kim M. Smithgall

A long line of empty chairs formed a stark backdrop for the 2017 opening day presentation in Cohoes City School District. Twenty-one chairs, each labeled with a first name...

Cohoes Superintendent Jennifer Spring explained:

These empty chairs represent each of our former students who dropped out last year. It is difficult for me to even say that word – dropout. I debated on whether I should include their names on the chairs. But these students have been invisible for far too long. I want you to remember them. I want them to serve as reminders that what we do every day, in every grade, with our students matters.

Please do not misinterpret my attention to this as in some way diminishing or minimizing the amazing work we do with our students each and every day. On the contrary. I congratulate our high school staff for so dramatically improving our graduation rate for the 2016-2017 school year. But this isn't just a high school issue and this shouldn't be about statistics.

Unfortunately, for many of our students, the trajectory to achieving the high school diploma is set at an early age. It is our job to alter these paths when students fall off course. If not us, who? If we don't, we will continue to stare at empty chairs on the stage year after year.

All of these dropouts have something in common. Each one has multiple ACEs (adverse childhood experiences). In their young lives, they have been the innocent victims of unimaginable trauma.

### **NYSED-Supported Practices**

Renee Rider, associate commissioner with the New York State Education Department (NYSED), identified a number of research- and evidence-based practices that can help school districts create safe, responsive, and welcoming school environments. These include focusing on:

- Social-emotional learning
- Restorative practices
- Trauma-sensitivity
- School-community partnerships
- Promoting positive mental, emotional, and behavioral (MEB) health
- Coordinated School Health Model: Whole School, Whole Child, Whole Community (WSCC)
- Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS)
- Safe physical environments
- Supportive academic learning environments

For more information, visit NYSED's Office of Student Support Services webpage at: <http://www.p12.nysed.gov/sss/>.

Listen to some of their stories:

One dropout witnessed his mother being repeatedly beaten by his father and was afraid to leave her alone. One dropout had been in and out of foster care his whole life after his father went to prison. One lost her home and everything she owned in a fire. One was a transgendered student who had a long history of feeling alienated at school.

So what does the future hold for these dropouts? Well, their prospects are very grim. In fact, one of our dropouts is now in prison. A number of them have been in and out of the criminal justice system. And yet another is in a drug rehab program. Countless studies have found that trauma experienced during the early years can tragically rob children of a bright future and deny them health, happiness, and prosperity in their lives. There were 32 dropouts from the 2015-2016 school year and 21 last year. How many will there be this year? I believe the people in this room are in a pivotal position to positively impact this number. So what else can we do to change these unacceptable outcomes?"

This powerful message could have been the theme of opening day for many districts – rural, urban, and suburban – across New York. In fact, an annual survey of district leaders conducted by the New York State Council of School Superintendents (NYSCOSS) in July and August 2017 yielded some dramatic results: 45 percent of respondents identified the capacity to address pupils' nonacademic needs as a significant problem (no other issue ranked higher). In addition, when considering how they would allocate additional funding if it became available, 52 percent of superintendents identified student mental health services as the funding priority – an increase of 17 percentage points over 2016 and 30 percentage points over 2013 responses. While the NYSCOSS survey didn't explore reasons for the shifts in attitudes, the results are similar to those found in

such national surveys as Phi Delta Kappan's "49th Annual Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools."

### **MOVING BEYOND ACADEMIC SUPPORTS**

Basically, there's a new reality for schools as they move beyond supporting students' academic needs to also supporting social and mental health needs.

"One of the biggest challenges is that we know that students often begin presenting with mental illness at an early age, while they're still in school," said Amy Molloy, director of education at the Mental Health Association of New York State (MHANYS).

Molloy serves on her local school board, so she can see the challenges from that perspective as well. "I appreciate that mental health is not what schools are currently measured on and managing mental health is not what they have traditionally been tasked to do," she said. "But, now there's recognition that schools have an important role to play because students spend a lot of their time there and they often connect very closely with trusted adults in a school. So, school staff are sometimes the first ones to see the effects of mental health challenges and they are in a good position to connect students with the resources they need."

### **SCHOOLS USING A VARIETY OF STRATEGIES**

Recognizing this and understanding the connection between pupils' overall wellness and their academic success, school districts like Cohoes and its rural upstate neighbor Berne-Knox-Westerlo (BKW) are approaching student mental health from many different angles – which may seem like random and disparate sets of initiatives in the districts, but they blend together in powerful ways for students.

Both districts started with an initial needs assessment – a first step that Molloy and the BKW and Cohoes superintendents recommend for districts in the beginning stages of formalizing mental health initiatives. "It could be a review of what they're

already doing and what is working well. They could also send out a survey to ask about staff concerns, what strategies are working and what they think students should know about mental health," Molloy suggested. "Knowing what you already have and what works is the first step."

"Be open to hearing the feedback, too, whether it's positive or negative," suggested Annette Landry, principal of BKW Elementary School. "You need to see and hear where the gaps are and then collect your team to sit at the table and identify what can be implemented, when it can be implemented, and how to get everyone on board."

Both districts determined it was vital to provide information to all staff members on adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). "We did a presentation to the entire staff on ACEs," said BKW Secondary School Principal Mark A. Pitterson. "We were identifying a lot of issues that we realized had to do with students having traumatic experiences at home or outside of school. It was important for our entire staff to hear this and to understand that carrying around ACEs can affect students' ability to achieve in school."

Susan Sloma, BKW's director of pupil personnel services, agreed, adding that learning about ACEs leads to a paradigm shift in the district. "The response was really positive. Staff members were able to see and frame students who were having difficulties in a different way than they might have in the past," she said.

Educators in Cohoes City School District formed an ACEs committee to study childhood trauma and its effects on student learning and behavior. "We really looked across the district for a framework of common language related to childhood trauma," said Cohoes Assistant Superintendent Peggy O'Shea. "As part of that process, we read the book, *Fostering Resilient Learners*. Our committee brought back the information to all of the buildings and to all of the staff meetings, so there was a consistent message to everyone. We started with the teachers and then realized that the support staff — cafeteria workers and playground staff, for example — are with students in blocks of

unstructured time. So, our emphasis this year is on working with them."

### ABCs IN COHOES

From those common starting points, BKW and Cohoes took some different, but equally effective, approaches. "When we were looking at our student readiness-to-learn data — what we call our ABCs, or attendance, behavior, and coursework — we had a lot of concerns," said Spring. "We had chronic absenteeism, an increase in the number of homeless students, significant numbers of students misbehaving, and an unacceptable number of non-completers."

This, combined with staff reporting increased mental health needs among students, promoted educators to consider numerous ways to establish mental health support networks. The district started by developing the "Every Minute Matters" attendance campaign.

"Just making everyone in the community aware of our chronic absenteeism was enough to improve attendance," Spring said. "We established an early warning system for student absences. We also added pre-K and kindergarten parent liaisons to ensure young parents are supported and that we get our students off on the right foot since chronic absenteeism in kindergartners tends to follow students through their whole school career."

Spring also held parent meetings, making a conscious decision to hold them in the community rather than in the schools. "We called them parent cafes. They were on Saturday mornings and we went to areas where we were having the most chronic rates of absenteeism," Spring explained. "We talked about the absenteeism issue, the programs we were putting in place and how parents could help their children. We also discussed the impacts of trauma on children."

In addition, Cohoes worked with Capital District Transportation Authority (CDTA) to provide bus passes to all students in grades 6-12 so they can take a shuttle to and from school. The district also partnered with Waterliet City School District and local and

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state politicians to enact a law that requires school attendance for 5-year-olds in the two cities.

At the secondary level, the in-school suspension room was changed into an in-school support room, where students go to regroup, think about their actions, and interact with a supportive adult. This focus on improving attendance and keeping kids in school is a positive move on its own, but the impact likely multiplies, considering data from the National Center for Children in Poverty that shows children with mental illness can miss between 18 and 22 days of school.

"In looking at student behaviors, we are also focusing on reframing our buildings into a growth mindset," O'Shea said.

This philosophy is based on Carol Dweck's research related to students' attitudes about failure. Simply put, people with a growth mindset believe their talents can be developed through hard work and perseverance, and those with a fixed mindset believe talents are innate. "We feel this really fits into working with students who have experienced trauma because we can show them that anything is possible if teachers have a growth mindset and promote a growth mindset with their students," O'Shea explained. This has become a common discussion topic with the ACEs committee.

### ADDITIONAL INITIATIVES TO SUPPORT OVERALL STUDENT WELLNESS AND SUCCESS

The ACEs committee also brought in trauma expert Allison Sampson-Jackson to speak to the staff during the 2017 opening day activities. "She is an expert on ACEs and how schools can really transform into trauma-sensitive schools," Spring said.



After the large-group presentation, Sampson-Jackson worked with parents, teachers, and others who are on the district’s building-level teams to identify ways to increase student resiliency (tying in nicely with the growth mindset).

“At the elementary level, the team collaboratively decided to focus on mindfulness, teaching empathy, and teaching children to express their feelings,” O’Shea commented. “At the secondary level, there were discussions on student behaviors and promoting empathy and resiliency in students. Because the building-level teams have members who are also on the ACEs committee, there’s always a systematic flow-through of information between all of the groups and then during staff and faculty meetings. You have to have consistent messages spread to everyone in order to get buy-in.”

**BEHAVIORAL HEALTH CLINIC**

To further support students, Cohoes leaders formed new partnerships to establish a behavioral health center to be located in the district’s middle

school after a community-based clinic serving 70 families closed its doors.

“That closing left a huge void in our community,” Spring said. “We appealed to Northern Rivers, to Albany County, to Assemblyman John McDonald, and Senator Neil Breslin because the need was there and we wanted people to know that. We also worked with our school physician, who is a pediatrician here in town, and she was on board to help. So, we all worked together and we established the need and we were lucky that everybody agreed with us and promoted services here in Cohoes.”

Northern Rivers (parent organization to Parsons Child & Family Center) opened a Parsons satellite clinic this school year. The center has a full-time clinical social worker (a Parsons employee) who is supervised by the director of the Parsons Clinic in Albany. Cohoes isn’t required to provide additional staff, though the middle school receptionist welcomes the students and families who receive services.

To initiate service at the Cohoes satellite clinic, parents/guardians call

the Albany Parsons location and then complete and return a referral packet. “Some parents request referral information from school personnel and make the contact. Others are more comfortable making the call with support from district staff, including social workers and our school psychologist,” Spring explained.

The clinic has provided student-focused counseling to 79 pupils so far. If parents feel medication may be an appropriate addition to counseling, they are able to discuss this option with the clinician, and the student can be referred to a psychiatrist at the Albany location.

Cohoes joined the ranks of eight other districts and one charter school in the Capital Region area that have partnered with Northern Rivers to open school-based behavioral health centers. The Cohoes center accepts Medicaid and also has a sliding fee scale — a great benefit, as at least 65 percent of district families qualify for free and reduced-priced lunch, an indicator of poverty.

“The partnership with Northern Rivers was a proactive approach to



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help address misbehaviors," Spring said. "So far, it's been hugely successful."

One small bump in the road occurred when community members expressed concern about locating the center right in a school. "They were concerned about student and staff safety. But, we stressed that these are our students and we're with them every day," O'Shea said. "We also talked about the barriers that many of our families face in terms of accessing outside resources. How many buses would they have to take to go to Albany for services? That could be several hours of missed time at school versus going to our middle school for a half-hour appointment."

### CREATIVE PUPIL INPUTS AND LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

At Cohoes High School, students are using restorative justice techniques. With this approach, students resolve their own conflicts by working in small, peer-mediated groups. Secondary pupils can also participate in Cohoes' student ambassador program, which gives them an opportunity to identify and voice concerns and become part of the solutions.

To address the "C" in Cohoes' ABCs, educators focused on coursework. "High expectations are really important. Engaging our learners and motivating and inspiring them is our duty and we need to do more of that," Spring said. "So, we've transitioned to a Google environment. Also, we are a 'Teach Like a Champion' school district. This is based on a book with 64 techniques that are pretty simple

to implement but go a long way toward supporting students' needs."

Taken together, all of the activities and initiatives support students' overall wellness and, by extension, their academic achievement. "It's all interconnected," O'Shea said.

### BKW's BROAD REACHING TEAM

In Berne-Knox-Westerlo, one overarching, culturally responsive district philosophy is at the heart of all programs related to children.

"We have 800 students in our district and the vision, which starts with the superintendent, is that they are all ours and with that comes all of their needs," said Landry.

On a day-to-day basis, this vision is carried out through a laser focus on collaboration and communication. "We're a very strong team, constantly working together to support and problem-solve," Sloma said. "This trickles down to our staff because they see the unity."

"We joke about having no egos here," Landry said. "If there is a counselor or a teacher who has connected with a student, they're more than willing to work with that student and to make a connection with the family. People are very flexible here and it's all about getting the job done, whatever it takes."

Landry also acknowledged that the district's commitment to students means the BKW team is well staffed to meet student needs. "I feel like we're staffed appropriately in regard to our support and counseling staff," she said. "We have two full-time school psychologists in the district, two school counselors at the high school, one elementary school counselor, and a full-time social worker who works throughout the district and a mental health clinician."

### MENTAL HEALTH PARTNERSHIP

As happened in Cohoes, pro-

viding direct access to a mental health clinic took some legwork and commitment by BKW staff to create community partnerships. "We formed a committee in the district to explore how we could get more services," Sloma said. "Moirra Manning [clinical director for the Albany County Mental Health Center] and some of her staff came out to meet with us and she worked through the county and her own office. We are now a mental health satellite clinic with Albany County."

The mental health clinician is a county employee who works one day per week with district students and families to provide psychotherapy and other support services. Students who receive services at the school-based clinic can also see the Albany County psychiatrist at an Albany office.

BKW sees a distinct advantage to having the clinic right in the school, though, as interventions can be done in the school setting. "The clinician works collaboratively with the school staff right where the students are for a large portion of the day," Sloma commented. "She works with students on coping strategies for a myriad of mental health issues, such as depression, anxiety, behaviors related to ADHD, and diffusing anger to mitigate aggressive behaviors."

"Referrals are made through our pupil personnel counselors, psychologists, and social workers," Sloma added. "It's been a great experience. The clinician has made wonderful connections with our families."

The initiative is going so well that the district has a goal of increasing the services to more than one day per week.

"We're really grateful to Moira Manning because she came to our very rural committee meeting and immediately went to work to get the resources for us," Sloma said. "We can also thank her for doubling a program we have called Connections. This is a family-based after-school program at the elementary and middle schools where clinicians and caseworkers work with students on self-esteem, homework, and academics, and also make home visits. There is also a summer program component. They



really look to support families by giving kids good academic and social-emotional skills.”

### EDUCATING THE WHOLE CHILD

“We’re educating the whole child,” Pitterson said. “That’s why we have been aggressively addressing issues from various perspectives – to make sure we’re not taking care of one aspect of a child’s life, while another one or two are being neglected.”

And while that may sound like things could turn into a mishmash of activities, BKW educators base their programming decisions on data.

“As an administrative team, we’ve done a data analysis so that we can understand our population and get the programming right,” Sloma said. “It’s a systematic approach so we can create an environment where all students can grow socially, emotionally, and academically.”

The district’s Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) program is one initiative that has a long history of success. The general goal of PBIS programs is to improve outcomes (academic, social, and emotional) for all students, including those who are from typically underrepresented groups and/or students with special needs. As the name implies, this is done through positive reinforcement of desired behaviors (rather than punishment for misbehavior).

“At the elementary building, our PBIS program is very strong. People have really bought into it, from kindergarten all the way to sixth grade,” Landry said. “Staff members are reinforcing positive messages throughout the day in various ways so kids are

recognized for positive behaviors in all areas of the building.

Landry hopes the messages will make their way into home settings, as well. “We want students to be intrinsically motivated, but when we’re looking at our whole population, we recognize that some of the messages that students are getting at home are not the same in every house,” she said. “So, we are saying that it is our responsibility to ensure all kids are learning those basic lessons – to be respectful and be responsible and be good citizens and come to school ready to learn – and we’re teaching what that looks like. Our students are hearing that on the announcements, in the classrooms, on the bus...everywhere.”

### PEER MEDIATION AND ADDITIONAL COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

BKW’s peer mediation program grew out of needs identified by school counselors two years ago. “We’re working with Mediation Matters and our high school students are trained, so they’re getting great leadership skills,” Sloma explained. “They work collaboratively across the elementary and high school to develop interpersonal and conflict resolution skills.”

“We realized that some kids who have mental health challenges may struggle with positive relationships with their peers,” Landry said. “We also saw that they could benefit from the ability to communicate effectively and reach agreement in different situations. So students are getting mediation training from their peers or from students who are older than them. The approach is working very well; referrals to the program are increasing.”

“Our next step is to do a train-the-trainer session so our own staff can continue to give kids leadership and conflict resolution skills,” Sloma said.

BKW has also started a backpack program, responding to the district’s high-need population by providing food for students to take home every Friday. This initiative grew out of recognition that hunger is a stressor that affects many BKW children. The community has been very supportive of the initiative, as well; local grocery stores and the Albany County Sheriff’s Office make regular donations.

“Sheriff Apple has really been one of our angels here at school. He has been a tremendous force for bringing in resources to our students and meeting families’ needs,” Sloma commented.

### VITAL ELEMENTS FOR SUCCESS

For both BKW and Cohoes, these broad-based community partnerships and connections with district families have been vital ingredients in successfully implementing programs that support students’ health and well-being. When combined with the state’s new requirement to incorporate mental health topics into school curricula for students, it seems that many, if not all, of the bases are starting to be covered.

Perhaps in the not-too-distant future, there will be no empty chairs on the stage during opening day activities, because even one is too many...

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