



## Signs of Support

School-based programs make mental health a priority

BY ROBIN ROENKER

In April, a student at Discovery Middle School in Vancouver, Wash., approached counselor Megan Bledsoe after the daily dismissal bell to tell her he was having thoughts of suicide.

At schools across the country, similar mental health crisis situations have become all too common. Even before COVID-19 surfaced, rates of teen and preteen suicide, depression and anxiety had been on the rise, and the pandemic only worsened things. Late last year, the American Academy of Pediatrics, along with several partner groups and the U.S. Surgeon General issued declarations calling the situation no less than

a youth mental health crisis.

"It's a tidal wave. We've definitely seen an uptick in mental health needs and suicidal ideation," Bledsoe says. "Throughout my career, there have always been student mental health needs, but the pandemic really exacerbated a lot of those because students were so isolated and routines were so disrupted. We're still picking up the pieces from that disruption to try to help rebuild the supports students need in their lives."

### COUNSELORS AS FIRST RESPONDERS

To address the youth mental health emergency, many

school counselors are actively embracing their role as — in Bledsoe's words — "mental health first responders." She credits her school's Signs of Suicide prevention lessons for helping students know to speak up when they're having suicidal thoughts so they can be connected to counseling and other mental health supports.

Discovery Middle School also asks that every student complete an online mental health screening questionnaire at the beginning and end of each school year. Data from these assessments helps identify students who may need additional support. Bledsoe has also fostered small lunch >



**Counselor Megan Bledsoe** supervises a Dungeons & Dragons club at Discovery Middle School in Vancouver, Wash. She says the club helps students feel involved and connected.

groups for students with common interests to help them feel more connected and comfortable at school.

John Crocker, director of school mental health and behavioral services for Methuen public schools in Methuen, Mass., also believes strongly in the power of universal mental health screening for students — especially as a tool for early detection of emerging concerns.

Crocker's district provides in-school group counseling to students on topics that emerge as priorities based on screening data. And schoolwide, students learn emotional wellness strategies through a cognitive behavioral therapy-informed curriculum created by researchers at the University of Michigan.

"One thing we really champion

is not waiting for diagnosis of a mental health crisis (within a student)," Crocker says. "We enact prevention. We look for problems when they're smaller, and we get ahead of them and provide proactive, preventive care."

#### STUDENT-LED SUPPORT

Every morning, the pre-K through fourth graders entering Bradley Elementary in Spring, Texas, are greeted with waves and smiles by members of the student leadership team holding signs with positive affirmations such as: "You are awesome." "You are special." "You will have a great day!"

"At our campus, we want students greeted each day by an experience so they know that inside they are safe ... and to make sure they feel valued,

respected and loved," says Bradley guidance counselor Ashley Wright.

Leaning in to students' potential to positively shape their schools' mental health climate, many K-12 administrators across the U.S. are embracing peer-led programming. For example, Sources of Strength is a suicide prevention program driven by student peer leaders that helps kids learn to spot and lean on support systems in their lives including family, mentors and friends.

The 24-year-old nationwide program, originally created for middle and high schools, unveiled curricula for grades three through five in fall 2020, and will soon offer programs for kindergarten through third grade, says support coordinator Cody Sletton. >



# 70%

of teens say anxiety and depression are “major problems” among their peers

SOURCE: New Research Center 2020 teen survey

Noticing a need in late 2020 for more peer-driven mental health support at American Canyon High School in Napa County, Calif., student Ishi Saborriddo launched a chapter of Active Minds. The organization has advocated for mental health awareness on college campuses for nearly two decades, and expanded its programming to younger students three years ago.

The group began meeting in January 2021 via Zoom during the pandemic, with guest speakers

discussing depression, anxiety, eating disorders and other student mental health concerns. Once students returned to on-campus learning, Saborriddo's chapter grew quickly, hosting events like Stress Less week before finals — with games, crafts and meditation sessions — as well as suicide prevention campaigns. The chapter now often packs classrooms for its after-school meetings.

“It’s a room filled with love where everyone can feel safe to be vulnerable and share their experiences, and it’s helped me a lot to deal with my own mental health,” says Saborriddo, who graduated high school in 2022 with plans to major in psychobiology at UCLA. Her career goal is to become a psychiatrist to serve others in the BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and people of color) communities.

“Mental health has really become a passion of mine,” she says. ■



## How to spot red flags

Dr. Gonzalo Laje, a psychiatrist and director of Washington Behavioral Medicine Associates in Chevy Chase, Md., says parents should watch for these signs that their child may be struggling with a mental health issue:

- ▶ Lack of interest in former hobbies or activities
- ▶ Withdrawal from family and friends
- ▶ Changes in sleep or appetite
- ▶ Changes in energy

“Often, if you ask kids how they’re doing, they’re going to say, ‘I’m fine’ and try to brush it under the rug,” Laje says. He advises parents to use observations to open the window to conversations about mental health. “You can say, ‘I’ve noticed you’re having trouble sleeping,’ and that might give kids an opening to talk about how they’re really feeling,” he suggests.

— Robin Roenker