



Student mental health and wellness: BEST PRACTICES FOR EDUCATIONAL LEADERS

Mental health concerns of anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation are present among students in low performing schools, but the risk factors are significantly different within high-performing schools.

What is the role of K-12 educational leaders in addressing the mental health crisis that is currently sweeping our nation? One of the most alarming statistics found in current literature notes that adolescent suicide rates have tripled over the past 60 years, making suicide the second leading cause of death among young people aged 10-24 (Kruisselbrink, 2013). In a typical high school in the United States, it is estimated that three students attempt suicide each year (The Trevor Project, 2016). With roughly 1,500 high schools in California, protecting the health and well-being of young people is an ethical imperative for all professionals working with students. It is important that educators consider the role of public services in addressing mental health, including education, prevention and intervention.

The National Institute on Mental Health (2005) has described mental disorders as chronic diseases of the young, yet there is a long delay between the onset of the disorder and treatment, with a median delay of a decade. Thus, it is critical to implement programs in schools that help students develop

self-efficacy, coping strategies, and mental health and wellness literacy. K-12 school enrollment is the one constant in the life of youth, making it the logical place to implement a preventative, education-based program to address student mental health and wellness. This type of program would help students to understand when to ask for help for themselves or others.

Although we recognize that all students can suffer from mental health concerns, an often overlooked group of students in the research are those from high-performing school districts, where mental health issues are often rooted in academic achievement, demands for excellence and pressure to perform. Students within high-performing school districts often experience a significant amount of success, yet along with this comes tremendous pressure and stress for students to excel and thrive in all areas of academics, athletics and extracurricular activities. We conducted research in California

By: Dr. Jeremy Meadows and Dr. Trista Ramirez

high performing school districts regarding mental health, wellness and best practices for educational leaders.

The California Healthy Kids Survey was the catalyst for this research. From the most recent survey in the state of California, data was collected from 13,859 11th grade students in more than 40 school districts. The results of this survey indicated that the 11th grade state average for students that have seriously considered suicide in the prior 12 months is 17.8percent (2013-2015; Austin, Polik, Hanson, & Zheng, 2016). Another important statistic from the California Healthy Kids Survey showed that 33.8percent of 11th grade students in California reported experiencing chronic feelings of hopelessness and sadness. Given these statistics, it is clear the youth in California are being affected by various social emotional concerns, which in turn can influence their academic achievement in school.

Research shows these mental health issues are impacting student learning as displayed in attendance patterns, focus issues, withdrawal from extracurricular activities, and limited classroom engagement, thereby resulting in reduced academic achievement. This is pertinent to the work of educators on school campuses as a survey conducted by the Jason Foundation showed that students stated that a teacher or counselor was the number one person to whom they would turn for helping a suicidal friend (O'Donnell, n.d.). Thus, it is imperative that schools are prepared to address the mental health and wellness of their students.

Purpose of the Study

At the beginning of the 2017 school year, Assembly Bill 2246 took full effect, requiring schools to address mental health, specifically suicide prevention, in grades 7-12 in California schools. A policy in each school district must be developed in consultation with school and community stakeholders, school-employed mental health professionals, and suicide prevention experts to address procedures relating to suicide prevention, intervention and postvention (O'Donnell, n.d.). More and more frequently, students with mental health issues are requesting help from support services in their educa-



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tional setting. These problems have reached the point that student mental health is considered one of the top five critical issues on high school and college campuses nationwide. The JED Foundation (2015) reported that, based on reports from first year college freshman, emotional preparedness is critical for college success, and thus must be integrated into the work of the high school communities in preparing their students for post-secondary education.

While the same mental health concerns of anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation are present among students in low performing schools, the risk factors are significantly different within high-performing schools, including high levels of perfectionism, intense pressure to perform, and lack of parental connectedness. Our research showed that mental health issues (i.e., suicidal ideation, hopelessness/sadness, and alcohol and drug use) in high school students are significant within high-performing schools districts in California. There was clear connection between the influence of mental health and student achievement, showing it is critical for school leaders to understand the importance of focusing on student wellness to support school wide achievement. Finally, and most importantly, we were able to investigate best practices in the field of education, focusing on mental health and wellness pro-

grams in high-performing school districts that are effectively addressing prevention, intervention, and postvention within their school district.

Results and Findings

We conducted a mixed-methods study which included surveying 56 high school principals, assistant principals and counselors about student mental health and wellness in their respective school districts. Ten current California superintendents were interviewed as well. Survey results and superintendents' interviews provided a number of strategies their school/district utilize to support student mental health and wellness. More specifically, the findings highlighted best practices regarding student mental health and wellness in relationship to the themes of professional development, staffing, budget and programs/services.

Manifestation of mental health issues within high-performing school districts was the starting place for study. Common themes from both survey data and interview responses emerged regarding the high level of concerns surrounding the issues of stress, depression, and anxiety. There were reported increased levels of frequency regarding the impact on students across all school districts. Both school site personnel and superintendents reported that high expectations,

pressure to succeed, and fierce competition were impacting the students in high-performing school systems, causing extreme levels of stress and anxiety. Both district and site personnel expressed difficulty with meeting community expectations regarding academic excellence while also having a positive approach to student wellness.

With the development of AB 2246, suicide prevention and interventions are the new mandate for all California school districts as of the 2017-18 school year. The data from this study regarding suicidal ideation were aligned with the current literature, and superintendents interviewed expressed their significant concern regarding the effect a student suicide can have on a school and district. Early identification, parent education and prevention programs were described as the key to limiting the influence of mental health concerns on student achievement.

The data also suggested that given the increased demands on schools regarding student mental health, there have been changes to the role of the school counselor. Thus,

school districts interviewed were using their money creatively for new staff positions that may not have been present previously. Superintendents indicated allocation of additional counseling resources and therapists to school sites as a critical part of addressing stress, anxiety and depression among students. Survey data and interviews showed that additional counseling personnel was a focus of funding for some of these districts. Mental health and wellness appear to now account for a major portion of the spending allocation for high-performing school districts.

A critical key to the research conducted was understanding how high-performing school districts in California were addressing student mental health and wellness issues on their campuses. Our study found four main themes in high-performing school districts' approach to addressing student wellness: professional development, staffing, programs and policy changes. Prevention and intervention were the foundation of these four areas of addressing student mental health and wellness. The intended

outcome by school districts was to reduce stress and create opportunities for support, which in turn would decrease the anxiety and depression seen in their students and ultimately reduce the number of students expressing suicidal ideation.

A robust professional development program for staff is one of the main ways school districts are increasing awareness and highlighting warning signs for teachers and staff. With the demands on school sites due to the increased frequency of mental health issues, staffing was an integral outcome of the survey and interview data. Although not all school districts interviewed had been able to increase their counseling staff, it was the most common need expressed by both school site personnel and superintendents. It was clearly recognized that there is an increased need for on-site therapy and counseling to support student wellness, and this need can only be met through an increase in support providers to students.

Another common theme amongst those surveyed was some type of program to ad-



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dress student mental health and wellness on campus. Although the types of programs varied, common themes included parent education programs, peer-to-peer support programs, and comprehensive wellness programs. Yet, it was the creation of policy that seemed to solidify the student mental health and wellness programs within a school district. By creating broad policy change, superintendents have worked to adjust calendars, bell schedules, and homework policies in an effort to reduce student stress and maintain a healthy approach to academic achievement. Ultimately, it is a combination of measures including programming, education, and policy change being implemented by the school district that will truly combat mental health and wellness concerns in a lasting, meaningful way.

Implications and Conclusion

The results and findings of our research emphasizes the importance of the specific role that high-performing school districts play in addressing students' mental health and wellness in high schools. Overwhelmingly, all school districts in our study noted elevated student mental health concerns and a sharp rise in pressure and stress in schools. In school districts with well established programs, there is a deep rooted belief that student mental health and wellness must be an integral part of the district's mission. They have made this an extensive focus with goals and objectives to address student wellness in their board goals, district road maps, and site planning. These districts have been addressing this issue with the same dedication as new academic standards or a textbook adoption. Student wellness is treated as an integral part of learning programs on each school campus; it is not considered an add-on program or a week-long spirit ribbon week. Instead, it is a team effort from the superintendent and board to site administration to school staff, not a charge being led by a single individual or a parent group hiring a guest speaker. Rather, it is a comprehensive approach with sustainable, financial backing that is a vital part of the district's decision making and core values.

Although there is no one way to solve this growing epidemic in high achieving com-

munities, school districts must move aggressively to create policy change that is student centered and aimed at reducing stress. School districts must make student mental health and wellness a main priority and focus for the district, adopting a multifaceted approach to professional development, parent education, and student awareness. Prevention, intervention, and postvention programming must also be included in the approach, as well as having staffing in place to increase the needed mental health support on school campuses.

Educators want all students to come to school each day ready to engage in the learning process. Yet, it is important to remember that students must be emotionally available in order to engage successfully in the classroom curriculum. If the culture of a school and community is unhealthy, learning will become secondary. Students in high-performing school districts are under extraordinary, unprecedented amounts of stress and pressure to succeed and this crisis is erupting throughout our state. Students are battling mental health issues of anxiety, depression, substance use, and suicidal ideation in record numbers, and these issues are manifesting in classrooms and on school campuses. It is part of educators' moral imperative to develop programs to address students' mental health needs in these high-performing school districts. Programs must address students' needs from all angles, including preventative education, intervention during crises, and postvention support to ensure smooth and continual access to curriculum.

Educational leaders must start an honest dialogue in schools with all stakeholders to ratchet down the intense pressure that students feel to achieve. All stakeholders must stop focusing on college acceptance rates, GPAs, and excessive expectations in student achievement, athletics, and extracurricular activities. Without these changes, students will continually fail to meet unrealistic expectations leading to alarming mental health issues that will alter their lives. Educational leaders can change the tenor of the conversation surrounding student wellness and mental health and explore how everyone can begin to make meaningful changes that puts students and their mental wellness first.

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Dr. Trista Ramirez is the principal at Palos Verdes Intermediate School. Dr. Jeremy Meadows is the assistant principal at La Costa Canyon High School.