

## **Mellen School District Accomplishments and Projects 9/5/23**

### **What are some accomplishments or projects that you are exceptionally proud of as a district?**

Cabarrus County Schools has enduring and nascent partnerships with a variety of agencies to support the mental health and wellness of our students and families. The work we have done this year leveraging grant funds and a variety of resources for students, staff, and families have positioned us to offer an immediate response to needs in the here and now while building the district's capacity to respond to social emotional concerns in the future. For example, all participants in NC-PAL reported having multiple students with a high level of emotional dysregulation at their schools. Our focus on internal skill-building helped ensure our staff were better prepared to offer responsive services or make informed referrals in support of our students and families.

### **Are there resources, partnerships, or people that you have collaborated with that helped you achieve these accomplishments?**

This year our capacity building partnerships have included NC-PAL, DBT in Schools, Resources for Resilience, the QPR Institute, and Eli Lebowitz of Yale University whose SPACE (Supportive Parenting for Anxious Childhood Emotions) program can serve to empower parents of students struggling with anxiety. Each of the organizations above provided critical training, technical assistance, and/or consultation to expand the ability of our counselors, social workers, psychologists, and nurses to appropriately respond to the needs of students and families. Our local health department, the Cabarrus Health Alliance, has been a vital partner in coordinating many of these efforts. One of the predictable benefits of the NC-PAL project was the opportunity to have access to a child/adolescent psychiatrist. The demands and limited availability of psychiatrists make such connections a rarity. At the same time, many participants expressed the value of connecting with other schools with similar challenges and had the opportunity to focus on compassion fatigue and burnout.

We worked closely with local agencies to support the mental health of students through school-based mental health services through a grant designed to create greater accessibility to care and treatment. Our participating staff also cited the benefits of collaborating with other schools and the focus on burn-out prevention.

### **What is something that you have struggled with as a district?**

Staffing concerns are a source of ongoing struggle. For example, the ratios of students to counselors in CCS is well-above the national recommendation. In addition, many pre-service programs don't equip staff with the knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to effectively respond to student mental health concerns. As a result, we need to ensure that we train staff in the trauma-responsive best-practices to support student emotional regulation. This, of course, takes time. The struggle then becomes getting staff time away from school to address the needs, yet we need the staff to be in the schools to serve the students.

### **What is a lesson you wish you knew sooner?**

I've talked with other directors of student services throughout the state and country and all of us have similar struggles with mental health concerns for our students. We are no different and none of us are equipped to face these challenges alone. We need to be able to engage our community providers and collaborators within the clinical sphere of work in an organized fashion to support student needs while maintaining our focus on efficient operations of schools. None of us are immune to these challenges and we can't do the work alone.

Given the limited resources (time and human capital) it is challenging to conduct robust program evaluation. For example, if we were given one additional staff position we would be more apt to engage a professional to do the work of meeting students needs as opposed to an evaluator to measure the impact of services. This year I started going with a "less is more" approach to our evaluation of capacity building through simple and specific post training surveys of staff member self-efficacy in addressing student emotional dysregulation. What we found was that our staff left these trainings with a very high level of confidence in addressing emotional dysregulation and mental health needs in students, including but not limited to suicide prevention. In addition, they left with a high level of confidence in addressing these areas with staff and parents.