

Good morning, I am the principal of Heights-Murray Elementary School in the Wilkes-Barre Area School District. Our school hosts approximately 900 children who attend kindergarten through 6th grade, 93% of which are economically disadvantaged. Our students represent diverse backgrounds and represent a variety of cultures and languages.

In a traditional school year, about 700 of our students walk to and from school each day due to the location of our school within the community and close access to their homes.

Typically, we have about 40-50 students who participate in our school-based behavioral health program, which is located within our building, facilitated by the Children's Service Center of Wyoming Valley. Prior to the pandemic, the center also facilitated in-person monthly counseling group therapy sessions for children and on-site medication management for children, during which parents/guardians were able to come to school for their child's medication management. Our school is closer and more accessible to their home than the center, especially when a family does not have a personal vehicle to travel.

In addition, we have multiple children and families who utilize the Children's Service Center for mental health services such as out-patient counseling, family based therapy, trauma counseling, medication management, and more. The center has been an extreme source of support for children in crisis as well. In addition to the Children's Service Center, we also have mental healthcare support available to students through our local intermediate unit and other local agencies. Unfortunately, we have had multiple crisis referrals for elementary aged children who have experienced extreme depression and suicidal thoughts, who are referred to the Children's Service Center and are afforded the opportunity to receive immediate mental health support. The pandemic has intensified the need for the available mental health services that are available due to increased social anxiety in our students, domestic situations that initiate more immediate care for mental health, trauma events, and much more.

Our students must have access to mental health services at a young age as this is critical to develop their coping skills through the mental health disorder or life experiences they are working through. By having immediate or planned access to services, children and families are enabled to acquire long-term skills and improved mental health in order to become well-functioning, successful adults and contribute to our society.

Early recognition of mental health in our children is vital. By having mental health care professionals available in our school, on-site, we are able to establish a rapport with the parents/guardians and work to build their understanding and cooperation to help their children; thereby, implement proper mental health care in the young stages of children's lives.

The pandemic has significantly impacted how we systematically address mental health in our schools since we have been limited to provide in-person services on our school site due to following the CDC's recommendations for health and safety of our children. Many parents/guardians do not have a personal vehicle, making it difficult for them to coordinate visits to the center for services. Although virtual appointments have occurred, the effectiveness of the level of support has been noted to be a challenge since as we know, internet connectivity may

not always be functioning properly, thereby compromising the integrity of the service provided. We anticipate there will be a significant increase in mental health concerns for our youth once all students are able to return to in-person learning. Currently, there are approximately 220 students out of 900 students who attend in-person learning. All other students are virtual and have not interacted with staff or peers much at all since March 2020, when the pandemic began.

We must be prepared to address and handle the mental health issues that will be presented to us post-pandemic when all students return to schools, and even now-why wait!? Parents/Guardians see my school is a community center to which they come for support, referrals for assistance, a sense of care and teamwork for their children. In order to strengthen our community overall, providing access to mental health care for our students on-site is the most effective. By identifying mental health in children at an early age, we can provide support to not only the child, but the parent as well in order to equip them with effective skills and understanding of how to support their child through life.

Providing mental health within the schools not only increases availability to services, but works to decrease the stigma through psycho-education. Not only is it able to increase the education for those who are coping with the need, but also those around them, including teachers, staff, and peers. Viewing mental health access as a prerequisite to overall wellness and the ability to function in the educational and home environment ultimately will increase the child's ability to focus upon academics as well as, in the long-term perspective, work to overcome poverty, reduce incarceration, decrease substance abuse, and increase physical well being as well.

While most programs have a family component, which research suggests, there is the alternate side to the coin as well, in which guardians/parents are resistant to become involved with treatment for their children. This by no means decreases the child's present need. By having mental health care services available and provided within the school setting, the barrier of uninvolved guardians/parents is reduced, which allows for treatment to be provided and reduces the likelihood of a child's mental health needs being overlooked and untreated.

Thank you.