

Mental Health Hearing

August 25th, 2021

10:00 a.m.

Sharon City School District

LaReina George, Supervisor of Student Services

The Sharon City School District, located in Sharon, Pennsylvania, educates approximately 1850 students each year between 3 elementary schools and 1 middle school/high school. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, we have seen a significant amount of students who are in need of more intensive mental health services. We also project that the amount of students who are in need of these services will increase in the coming year as we continue to feel the effects of the pandemic.

In Sharon, we have implemented different ways to identify students who may be in need of mental health services. First, if teachers and staff working with a child, feel as though the child is struggling, he/she will refer the child to our Student Assistance Program. With parent permission, the Student Assistance Team discusses the needs of the students and make recommendations for the student's success. As a district, we also work in collaboration with the Mercer County Behavior Health Commission with a district liaison who helps work with families in getting counseling as well as other mental health services. Our one to one initiative through technology and Chromebooks has allowed our IT department to be alerted when students are typing alarming ideas or visiting various websites of self harm, etc.

Many different services are provided by the district for students and their mental health needs. In our middle school and high school, we have implemented a Social Emotional Learning curriculum that was developed by our school guidance counselors. This instruction is provided to students once per week in their homeroom period. We have seen a lot of success with the students really enjoying the lessons and applying the lessons to their real lives. In addition, school based counseling is also provided within the school buildings during the school days for students who may need intensive support. We also give training to the middle and high school students about Safe2Say. Sometimes, students want to remain confidential and need to let someone know about their feelings or another friend's feelings. This safe, confidential hotline helps our students to cope with their feelings by simply making a phone call and getting assistance. Also, during the 2020-2021 school year, our district hired a trauma counselor as part of the Significant Disproportionality funding. The trauma counselor works in collaboration with our guidance counselors to create a caseload of students who have experienced trauma and are in need of support. With the participation in this program, students are given trauma

therapy and guided through a curriculum of research based lessons that focus on ways to understand and cope with trauma.

Sometimes, students have more intensive needs that cannot be met through the district services or resources. When a student threatens to hurt themselves in any way, a school psychologist is called in to work with the student to assess the threat. The parents are also contacted at that point and notified of the threat to harm themselves. The student is then referred to the Sharon Regional hospital to have an evaluation done. Based upon the results of the evaluation, a student could be admitted to the pediatric psychiatric unit of the hospital where medical, psychiatric, and educational resources are provided. After a stay in the hospital, the district may be provided with discharge recommendations.

Moreover, at times, students need the support of a partial hospitalization program. We have used outside placements such as Kitestrings/Pathfinders (through Sharon Regional), Bethesda, Belmont Pines, as well as Brighter Visions to provide these supports. When a student is referred by the hospital to a residential treatment facility, the district works with the team to help get the student the help he/she may need.

Barriers and challenges consistently exist when it comes to the mental health for all students. At times, there are not enough resources locally for our students to participate in. Agency support is sometimes based upon insurance of the individual and can exclude individuals who are in need of services. Partial hospitalization programs fill up quickly, especially recently due to COVID-19. This leaves some students unable to get the help that they so desperately need. We would definitely benefit from more resources available for youth in our local area.

However, there have been many successes that we have seen in the mental health services that are provided for students. Our SAP program allows for all district staff to be able to identify students who need help and get them the help they need. Our SEL program in the middle school and high school has been beneficial for students throughout the school year. In addition, students who are provided with school based counseling or are referred for family based counseling have spoken about the success they feel and consistently look forward to meeting with their counselor on a weekly basis. They feel safe in this environment because of the trust that is formed and the confidentiality that they know exists in this environment. In addition, through our one to one initiative, our IT department has been able to receive alerts when students are typing things that warrant help or are looking at sites that alert that they are in need of help. We have been able to identify several students through the initiative. Moreover, mental health concerns for our youth is increasing at an alarming rate and we need to make sure that we have resources in place to help them with any issues they may be experiencing.