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TWO DOLLARS

BofE seeks vote to expand mental health services

\$700,000 ballot measure would address needs at all four schools

■ **By CASSANDRA ETIENNE**
SPECIAL TO THE MIRROR

The Metuchen Board of Education plans to seek voter approval in November to raise an additional \$700,000 in tax revenue to expand mental health support services for district students.

The move would raise local property taxes that fund schools by 2 percent.

Board officials said the increase would amount to \$152 for the owner of a home assessed at the borough's aver-

age of \$207,000. More expensive homes would be taxed more, and owners of less expensive ones would be charged less.

Part of the services would be provided by an outside company, Effective School Solutions of Summit, which recently began work onsite at Metuchen High School. Under the board proposal, ESS would also provide therapeutic interventions at Campbell Elementary School and Edgar Middle School.

The proposal also includes expanded school psychologist services at those three schools and Moss School, expanded behavior intervention services by board certified behavior analysts, and academic support in reading and math.

ESS also offers daily group, weekly individual and biweekly family therapy sessions, as well as parent support groups, district-wide professional development for teachers and monitoring

for quality assurance.

The 10-year-old company works with 89 schools in four dozen districts in the Northeast.

Dr. Tania Herzog, director of special services, presented the mental health proposal at the April 16 school board meeting, highlighting statistics that underscore the increasing mental health needs of Metuchen students.

For instance, according to the National Institute of Mental Health, 20 percent of children ages 13 to 18 have or will have a serious mental illness. In addition, 50 percent of all mental health

cases begin by age 14, with an average delay of eight to 10 years between the onset of symptoms and intervention.

In the Metuchen district, 27 percent of referrals for special education services in the current school year were mainly to address emotional concerns, and according to Herzog many other referrals cite social and emotional issues as secondary concerns.

In the past five years, five students were placed out of district for therapeutic services and several more students have been identified with a similar lev-

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Mental health: Proposal would provide treatment within borough schools

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el of need, she said. Fourteen students were placed on home instruction this school year due to psychiatric hospitalizations or participation in short-term therapeutic day programs for crisis situations, she added.

In addition, counselors and child study teams have provided mental health referrals to families of more than 50 district students so far this school year, said Herzog, adding that those affected include high-performing students as well as struggling learners.

She called expanding services "an amazing first step," noting that the ESS program surpasses most out-of-district offerings and would support instead of replace district staff.

Board President Justin Manley explained that the current contract with ESS at MHS is "funded through the immediate budget we're operating under" using money that otherwise would be used for

out-of-district placements.

With ESS doing the work at MHS, "the money will not be flowing out," he said. "It'll stay within the district."

Because the state's cap law limits the school board's ability to raise taxes, it must seek voter approval of the proposal on Nov. 5, he said.

Michael Harvier, district business administrator and board secretary, said if the referendum passes, taxes will increase by \$152 per year for a house assessed at \$207,000 - \$19 for the general fund and \$133 for the separate mental health proposal.

Manley said that the benefits of establishing mental health programs for all Metuchen schools far outweigh the cost.

He said that for more than 20 years the school



HERZOG



MANLEY

district has focused on serving special needs students within the district as much as possible. "We want our kids home if we can provide them the services they need in-district," he said.

With mental health programming, "the challenge is different and bigger than just the students who may be served out-of-district," Man-

ley said. "Metuchen is no different than the communities around us or the country at large. With one in five students facing a mental health challenge, simple math tells me that that could be 460 students across Metuchen."

During the board meeting, he called the topic near to his heart. "All around us, our children are struggling with these challenges," he said. "I know

this because it has touched my family." He talked about the learning and emotional challenges his son and daughter faced when they were younger, and how they overcame those hurdles with the support and advocacy of their parents.

"I tell their story to help slowly erase the stigma that comes with mental illness," Manley said while acknowledging that many children may not have adequate support or access to mental health services.

He urged local taxpayers to think of the proposal as an investment in those students' future.

He added, "It remains possible that by putting this program in place, we may actually reduce some of our out-of-district costs longterm. We can't bank on that, and as such are asking the public for permission to add to the budget for these costs."

Nevertheless, he said, "this program is the right thing to do if we never save a nickel."