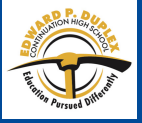


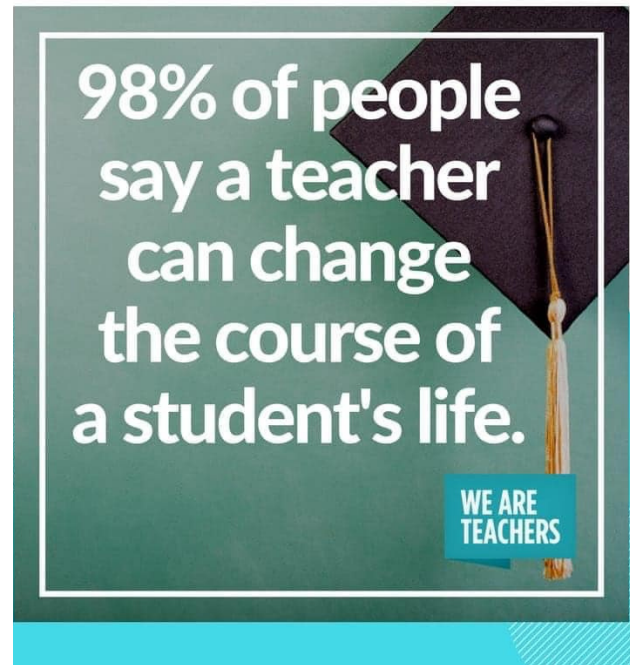
Learning by Heart

Nicole Newman, Superintendent



Tackling Trauma When Life is Bigger than School

Samantha came to class like any other day. She was texting up a storm, fingers moving so fast sparks were flying off her acrylic nails. When I asked her to get off the phone, she became defiant. The most common next steps for a teacher in this scenario are to either take the phone away or send the student to the office with a compounded behavior referral for texting in class and defiance of authority. The trauma informed approach calls for giving the student a little space while determining the cause of the behavior. One call home was all it took. There had been a recent death in the family. Instead of a referral to the office for punishment, a referral to a counselor for support was what she really needed, and it helped build a relationship between student and teacher.



We know kids don't learn anything if their mental health is suffering. It doesn't take years of research or a doctorate in education to recognize that. When a student must spend all their energy focusing on an empty, rumbling stomach, or they are too tired to keep their head up and pay attention to the quadratic equation, we must address those basic human needs before we can move on to the business of school. According to the CDC, before we were even dealing with the pandemic, 1 in 5 school-aged children had some form of mental, emotional, or behavioral disorder varying from anxiety, depression, ADHD, and other disruptive behavior disorders, and only 20% received treatment from a qualified medical provider. The pandemic has dramatically compounded the mental health crisis already happening. Parental stress, as a result of economic instability, health crises, isolation, and increased responsibilities are only a few of the more obvious factors that have had a direct impact on the children. The disruption of their own routines and denial of peer interaction adds another level of stress creating a situation that contributes to trauma.

Trauma continued

“Many happy and successful students started out as a work in progress. They just had the good fortune of having a teacher who cared, saw their potential, and embraced the challenge!”

-Dr. Bryan Pearman (MostValuablePD.com)



Teachers and other school personnel are on the front line of kids' mental health whether we want to accept that role or not. Dr. Bruce Perry is a renowned child psychiatrist and leading researcher in the field of childhood trauma. From his clinical experience and what scientists know about the brain, he explains that “healthy relational interactions are at the core of the protective mechanisms that help us survive and thrive following trauma and loss.

Individuals who have few positive relational interactions during or after trauma have a much more difficult time decreasing the effects of said trauma.” In other words, positive, healthy interaction with adults is very effective in healing trauma. If those positive interactions are absent, the trauma is more damaging long-term. Those of us in education have the most obvious and frequent opportunities to be that positive adult who can buffer the impact of childhood trauma. School is often the safest, most predictable environment kids have. Now, it is time for schools to take a more proactive role in developing the mental health of our students, just as we have always developed physical health.

If we don't address this, then the best lesson planning by the most effective teachers in the country is useless. Leaders in government are aware of this as well, and billions of dollars are being earmarked for Social Emotional Learning (SEL) in schools across the country.

In the WUHSD, we are tackling it head-on with an emphasis on hiring high quality staff who focus on prioritizing students' mental health.

- In administration, Ms. Link, one of our newest Assistant Principals, is a licensed school counselor with extensive training in SEL. Her knowledge and passion for improving students' mental health is essential to showing staff this is a top priority for the district.
- Restorative Justice is a fundamental shift in thinking about crime and our response to it. In the context of the education system, administration focuses on repairing the harm caused by conflict like fights or bullying. This requires both parties involved in the conflict to reach some mutual resolution which ideally results in the transformation of the relationship and builds a safer community. Whenever possible, this less punitive, more positive method is used with students in these situations.
- We have doubled our counseling staff as enrollment continues to grow, maintaining the Association of California School Administrators' (ACSA) recommended ratio of one counselor for every 250 students.
- Adding a mental health clinician during the pandemic has been one of the most effective uses of funding, providing therapy to students who otherwise would not have access. Mrs. O'Neal, Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist (LMFT), sees students one on one for free therapy sessions; she also runs a group therapy session set-up exclusively for Edward P. Duplex Continuation High School students. For teachers, she provides tools of her trade, such as de-escalation techniques and insight on managing troublesome behaviors in the classroom and at home that are trauma induced.

- A Department of Justice grant was written in the winter that has allowed the District to partner with Wheatland Police Department and hire a School Resource Officer. The SRO will provide valuable outreach to families who have struggled the most. Officer Campos, a WUHS graduate, is familiar with and vested in our community. His presence will help educate students in the areas of crime prevention and personal safety, providing positive interaction with law enforcement that looks like support rather than punishment.
- Acquisition of the *Leaning Communities for School Success Program* Grant will allow the district to employ a school-based Therapist/Social Worker who will work with entire families focusing on crisis intervention, referrals for expanded services, monitoring Educationally Related Mental Health Services, and provide staff with professional development in the area of behavioral health interventions.
- Required professional development for certificated staff (held during contracted collaboration time) will be heavily centered on SEL components such as positive de-escalation techniques and recognizing when a student needs empathy and understanding rather than criticism and punishment.
- Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS) is a method of directly teaching appropriate behavior school wide using a tiered system of interventions aimed at intervening before unwanted behaviors escalate. A few examples of lower-tier PBIS strategies used could be a strategically designed classroom environment with predictable routines and expectations that are specifically taught, moving around the classroom while students are working, and using plenty of effective praise. If we keep telling kids what they're doing right, they will start using that behavior more often. More intensive tiers involve individualized plans for those students who may need mental health support.
- The National School Lunch Program is now accessible for all K-12 students, hopefully alleviating one family stressor and possible barrier to learning. All students are provided free breakfast and lunch on a daily basis.
- To start the year building a culture of school connectedness and positive relationships, students will participate in *Day of Understanding/Unity Day*, led by motivational speaker and facilitator Keith Hawkins. Mr. Hawkins will first present an all school assembly to set the tone for the program, emphasizing empathy, success, inclusiveness, appreciation and respect. He then will train small groups to be student group facilitators, and give students room and power to be themselves through communication and activities. (Keithhawkins.com)
- The establishment of Link Crew will help our incoming ninth graders with their transition from middle school. "Built on the belief that students can help students succeed, Boomerang Project's proven high school transition program trains mentors from your junior and senior classes to be Link Crew Leaders. As positive role models, Link Crew Leaders are mentors and student leaders who guide the freshmen to discover what it takes to be successful during the transition to high school and help facilitate freshman success. More and more studies show that if students have a positive experience their first year in high school, their chance for success increases dramatically. Link Crew provides the structure for freshmen to receive support and guidance from juniors and seniors who have been through the challenges that high school poses, and understand that the transition to a larger school can sometimes be overwhelming." (boomerangproject.com)

Moving forward as educators, we must address the shift in society and provide what our students really need from us. Reading, writing, and arithmetic are still the ultimate goal of school, but mental health must come first, or the "three R's" will end up being remediate, retain, and reform. As Rita Pierson says, "every child needs a champion." We are the champions!

