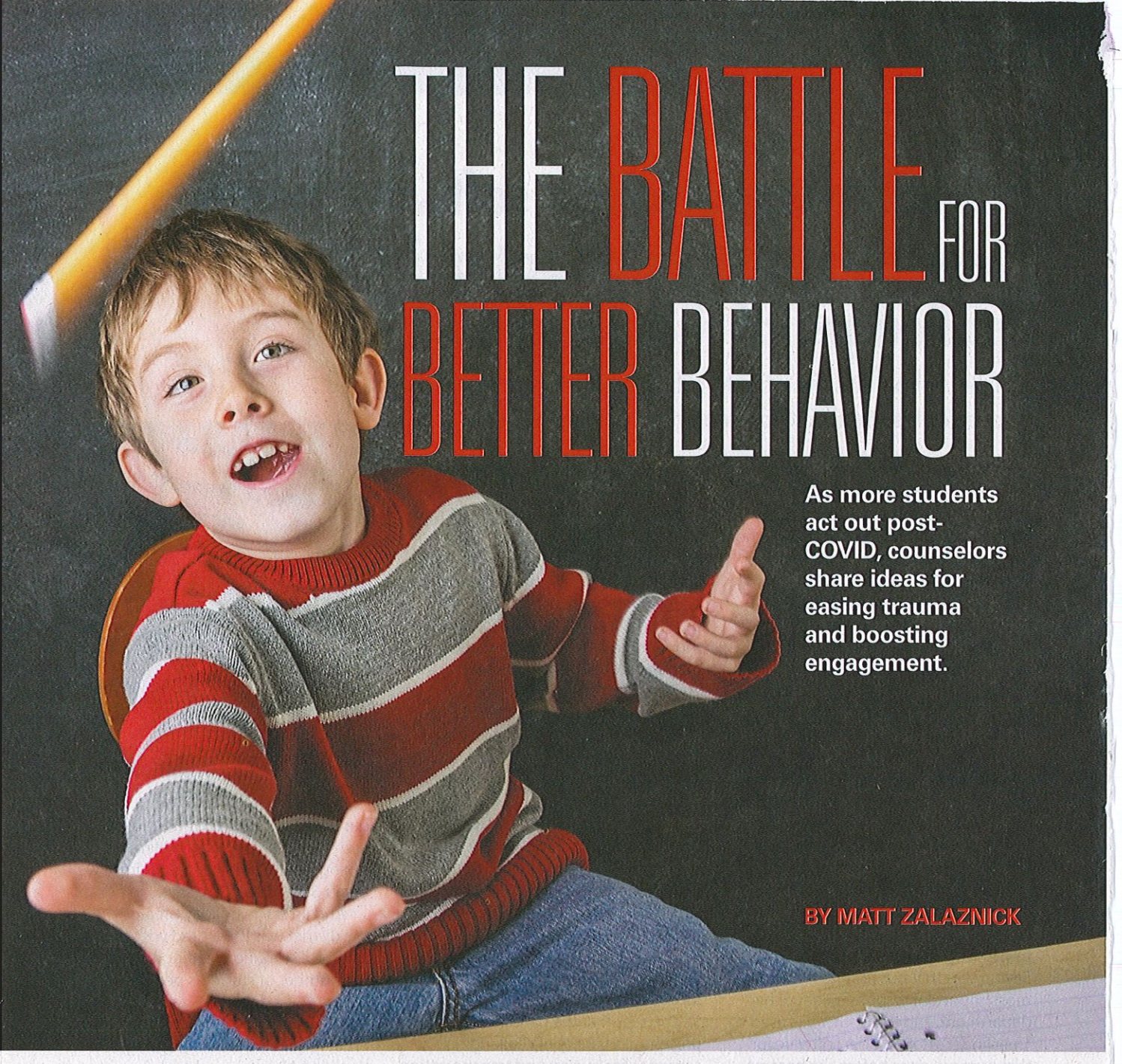

THE BATTLE FOR BETTER BEHAVIOR

As more students act out post-COVID, counselors share ideas for easing trauma and boosting engagement.

BY MATT ZALAZNICK

Many kindergarteners and first-graders at Willow River Elementary School in Wisconsin simply cannot make it through the school day, counselor Sarah Flier says.

Because of parents' COVID concerns, many of these students were held out of preschool and childcare last year and started school this year lacking key social skills. "We have students who don't know how to do school for an entire day," says Flier. "We are seeing a lot of low stamina. We are seeing a lot of refusal—5-year-olds are telling teachers 'No,' which is not typical."

Even older students have shown signs of separation anxiety, grabbing their parents' legs when they are dropped off at school, which is part of Hudson Schools in western Wisconsin. Flier says there has been a 53% increase in students being referred to the principal's office for behavior compared to two years ago.

"Third- and fourth-graders are struggling to come into the buildings," Flier says. "These are things I haven't seen before, and I think it's a result of kids constantly not knowing what's going to happen."

Starting over

The behavioral issues are largely driven by anxiety over the pandemic's constant disruptions and restrictions on community-building activities such as schoolwide meetings, holiday sing-alongs and buddy programs for the oldest and youngest students.

Last year, COVID restrictions on

the playground prevented students from getting to interact with students outside their grade. "All that lost social time has really chipped away at their enjoyment of school," Flier says.

Since the beginning of this school year, Flier has been gathering students to participate in far more social skills groups than they would in a typical year. And she checks in with individual students far more often to gauge their stress and anxiety levels.

Teachers have also received "sensory packs" so they can set up small obstacle courses in their classrooms to allow students to take breaks to do squats and lunges during the day.

Flier has also launched a parent book club to help families learn how to help children suffering with anxiety. She urges administrators to resist the urge to focus too heavily on academic recovery because teachers also need time to rebuild trusting relationships with students.

"When students get into the routine of day, they're often OK—students want to get into a groove," she says. "But then, as soon as we gain some ground, they have to quarantine again, and we have to start over."

"How to be a servant leader"

COVID's ongoing uncertainties have dented students' resilience, convincing some to give up on school while leading to increased outbursts and thoughts of self-harm and suicide among young people, says Ashley Wright, a counselor at Bradley Elementary School in Texas' Conroe ISD.

Some of the anxiety is being caused by academic struggles as students have fallen behind grade-level expectations over the last few school years. "Every month, every week, something new is happening, something is changing," Wright says. "For them, it's like drowning or dog-paddling—they're trying to be successful and win the hearts of teachers and win the hearts of parents and they're being torn in a lot of different directions."

To solve this problem, Wright has invited parents and students to meetings with educators when behavioral issues arise.

"It's about making sure these crucial conversations are not only very intentional but also intimate," she says. "We find it's important that when we have teacher, student and parent conferences that everybody is in the same room."

This strategy better ensures that educators and parents are collaborating in trying to help a student redirect their behavior. Throughout the process, it is also important to give students a voice by asking questions, rather than just punishing or scolding them.

"What I've been digging in deep with students is, 'Tell me how that behavior is working for you,'" Wright says. "I ask them what they see happening each time they make that choice and whether it leads to positive or negative consequences."

This can lead a student to start thinking about how they can change the situation. But it's also essential to identify the sources of a student's distress. "We want to find out if a teacher may need to slow down or if a student is afraid to ask questions," she says. "That is how to be a servant leader—asking students what they need rather than be reactive or punitive." **DA**

Matt Zalaznick is DA's senior writer.

YOU CAN'T FIX KIDS

3 keys to becoming trauma-informed

Trauma suffered over the past two years is one of the leading causes of the recent rise in behavioral problems. At this year's Future of Education Technology Conference (FETC), Jethro Jones, a former principal who consults with schools adopting trauma-informed practices, detailed 3 steps to understanding why students are acting out and how to better support them:

1. **Don't try to "fix" students:** Students will push away when they feel like teachers or other staff are somehow trying to change who they are. Jones shared an example of a struggling student who began to make progress when administrators told her they wanted to help her "win" at the game of school and focus on the subjects about which she was passionate.

2. **Teachers aren't counselors:** Classroom teachers shouldn't be conducting one-on-one mental health counseling but should be referring students to staff and services where they can get help.

3. **Don't ask "questions of condemnation":** Rather than punish a child for running in a hallway, for example, educators should be asking questions along the lines of "Help me understand why you're running in the hallway." "You want to get at the 'why' of their behavior," Jones said. "We automatically assume kids are doing something wrong when they're not."