

# HEALTHY YOUNG MINDS

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## Have you noticed any change in the way students, families and schools talk about youth mental health over the last few years?

Yes, mental health is being acknowledged and more families are feeling safe to reach out for help. When I started over 20 years ago as a School Counselor, mental health was not discussed and if it was, it was rare. Now many schools are acknowledging and embracing the impact of SEL (Social Emotional Learning). Bottom line, people are seeing that if a student is not emotionally available to learn, they will not. We have a lot of work to still do in breaking down the stigma that prevents those struggling from speaking out. But I am confident with the empowerment and education of our students we can only move forward.

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### Student Mental Health Task Force at Lake George Central School District

Q & A with Kemm Wilson, Director of Student Support Services and Club Advisor

## Can you tell us a little about the Student Mental Health Task Force? How did it start and what kinds of activities are students involved with?

The Mental Health Student Task Force took root last year before the school closure due to COVID-19. Conversations about mental health and well-being between myself, our Superintendent, Lynne Ritnik, and a handful of very special passionate young leaders in our school gave way to the inception of creating a student-led group that could give voice to all young people who suffer in silence and shame and create an environment based on our five principles: safety, connectedness, calm, efficacy and hope. The founding students, three exceptionally brave upperclassmen, met with me virtually several times from March to September to brainstorm what our ultimate mission and vision looks like. We created this mission statement to guide our good work:

To empower students to educate themselves and others in order to create a culture of mutual support and empathy and to eliminate the stigma associated with mental health. Together we will work to normalize mental health concerns by prioritizing awareness, education, open discussion, relationship building and social emotional learning. Together, we can make a difference.

This statement set the direction for actions in pursuit of achieving our mission. When school resumed in September, we expanded our group by personal invitation offered to those recommended by teachers and counselors. The expanded group of students worked to prioritize initiatives:

1. openly tell their own stories by hosting a panel discussion;
2. raise awareness and educate by displaying information about mental health and resources for getting help around the school, offering units of study and reading on mental health in our library media center,
3. raise staff awareness of the prevalence of mental health concerns among children and adolescents and how to best address, interact and support them by surveying students as a needs assessment and providing resources to teachers (Students Teaching Teachers),
4. establish an anonymous concerns platform where students can submit referrals for classmates who may be in need of support
5. design and implement a district-wide Empathy Project in which students k-12 have an opportunity to create items of self-expression (drawings, paintings, stories, poetry, etc.) around the topic of mental health and well-being to be shared in a digital art exhibition.

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The closure has made movement in these initiatives slower than we would like, but nothing will stop these students now that they have been empowered to make a change, have developed a sense of agency in this movement, feel connected to each other and this mission, feel emotionally and physically safe in our group environment, and have a strong sense of hope that they together we CAN make a difference.

### **What have you learned as the advisor to this group?**

So many of us in these times spend a large part of our day sitting behind our desk and reading research articles & practitioner magazines written by adults and watching webinars presented by adults; and a great deal of time has been lost connecting with the faces and voices of the kids impacted by this other global pandemic: childhood mental health disorders. Advising this group has opened my eyes to the depths and breadth of anxiety and depression, among others, that our kids are trying to manage everyday. It has truly illuminated the social struggles, the stigma associated with mental health concerns. There is a mental picture in our society of adolescents with mental health disorders. And we often view certain kids, the popular athletic guy, the rich beautiful girl, the high achieving scholar, etc. as impervious or immune to such difficulties. This is simply not the case. I have also learned of the incredible resilience of these kids and I am, each day, overcome with admiration of their tremendous bravery and unwavering perseverance.

### **Have you noticed any change in the way students, families and schools talk about youth mental health over the last few years?**



Absolutely! For many years now we have talked about educating the whole child. But what did that really mean? What did that really look like? In recent years, we have seen, more than ever before, the prevalence of anxiety and depression in school skyrocket. These disorders impede a student's ability to be successful in school. Attendance, concentration, relationships, behavior, work production & more...all suffer. So now when we talk about educating the whole child, we have a better understanding of what that really means. We know that supporting kids' mental health and social emotional well-being is a foundational necessary component of their education and it must be a priority.

We know it is a community effort, not just something that occurs in a counselor's office. Schools are working with outside providers, teaming and collaborating with them and with parents like never before. We are talking about trauma-informed environments, therapeutic crisis intervention, ACEs, MTSS that provide interventions within the school that look beyond academics, and social emotional learning. We have SEL standards that consider the layers of students' lives, from classrooms to communities, and promote competencies that support mental health and well-being. We are moving from "what's wrong with you?" to "what happened to you?" AND even more important, "How can we help you?"

We are headed in the right direction and need to maintain momentum. Supporting our young people in initiatives like the Mental Health Student Task Force is vital for the sustainability of these efforts.