

NBC26 Special Assignment: PATH Program Changing Lives for Students

<http://www.jrn.com/nbc26/news/Therapy-Changing-Lives-for-Some-Local-Public-Schools-294581441.html>

By Eric Crest. CREATED Mar 1, 2015

Just 10 years ago about one in four Fox Valley kids reported experiencing depression. But perhaps even more alarming is that one in ten of those kids had attempted suicide. It's with these numbers that one school district in our area decided to start taking action.

Those troubling trends led the Menasha Joint School District to start bringing therapists into the school setting. The results were just as interesting as the unique program that started it all.

At Menasha High School, much like all high schools across the United States, the anxiety of life can feel intolerable for a teen. But that's not to say it can't be managed. For Rocky Kerswill, a counselor at Menasha High School three days a week, he doesn't have to see the issues to know they're there.

"I'm a guy who lost my vision early on and I switched into this profession and so I've got a heart for the underdog or someone who fell through the cracks," says Kerswill.

With a pilot project called the PATH program, started here in 2006, the United Way now brings in therapists to help as many as 20 kids a day at the high school level.

"Maybe an analogy would be just as we have coaches for athletes we have coaches for some of our kids with mental health issues," says Menasha High School's principle Larry Haase.

"If we can't bring the kids to the community appointments lets bring the appointments to the kids," adds Mary Wisnet a program officer at the United Way who organizes the effort.

Mental health discussions can be taboo in grade school and even high school. That's why normalizing mental health professionals in schools can be so impacting.

"A lot of the kids probably should have had services a long time ago but they had barriers," says Wisnet.

When a study in 2005 found that nearly 14 percent of 10th graders here had attempted suicide, they knew they had to find help for the kids. By simply making therapists more accessible to youth, organizers knew they could make progress.

"It may not be that they wouldn't seek it. They may not have access to it for a variety of reasons," says Kerswill.

Lack of insurance, homework, transportation costs or even getting a ride in the first place are sometimes road blocks that can keep our most vulnerable from getting the care they truly need.

"By having it in our building we removed all of these barriers for our kids," says Haase.

"In the first year that we were in Menasha high school over half the kids self referred to the program," says Wisnet.

But the results were more than anyone bargained for.

"Increased attendance for our students, increased learning documented through grades in the classroom and a reduction in the amount of suspensions or inappropriate behavior," says Haase.

"Some of the students that he specifically refers to me wouldn't have graduated if they didn't get into counseling. Behaviorally they would have been kicked out of school," adds Kerswill.

Many schools just don't have the resources that the United Way provides here, but that is slowly changing through the help of generous donors.

"We are now in ten school districts in the Fox Cities," says Wisnet.

In the state of Wisconsin school therapists can't provide mental health therapy and that's why counselors are brought in through a third party.

"There was a huge need for mental health services in our community," says Haase.

So nearly ten years after it's inception the United Way's PATH program continues to change attitudes and contribute to the well being of our leaders of tomorrow.

"I just help bring out what they already have within them. It's nothing magical they all have it. They just need the opportunity for it to blossom," says Kerswill.

Eight out of ten students who utilized therapy at the Menasha Joint School District improved their overall academic performance and 3/4ths of the kids that have been through the therapy say they feel better afterwards.

The cost of such a program is estimated to be about 17-hundred dollars per student. But the outcome as we just heard is considered by those involved to be well worth it. Make sure to check out more details about the PATH program by clicking on the link below.

<http://www.unitedwayfoxcities.org/community-dev/initiatives/united-way%27s-path-for-students>