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Attitudes In Reverse® and West Windsor-Plainsboro Superintendent Partner to Improve Youths' Mental Health and Prevent Suicide

PLAINSBORO, NEW JERSEY (May 29, 2018) – Nine years ago, Kurt, Tricia and Katelyn Baker of Plainsboro lost their son/brother to suicide and soon after embarked on a mission to educate the public about mental health, related disorders and suicide prevention. They founded Attitudes In Reverse® (AIR™) to achieve this goal. Also nine years ago, the Bakers met David Aderhold, EdD, West Windsor-Plainsboro (WW-P) Regional School District Superintendent (at that time, the district's new Deputy Superintendent). They have since built a strong partnership to improve youths' mental health and save their lives.

"We started discussions right away about how AIR can fit in the schools. Once we saw how students reacted to AIR's presentation and the benefits of it, we definitely wanted to fit it into schools' schedules," Dr. Aderhold said. "I've seen the power of AIR's work, and I've been a huge supporter ever since."

"I've seen the organization grow in its impact and reach, and their refinement of the presentation over time. I can't understate the importance of the work. People personally touched by tragedy willing to speak out – this is incredibly courageous. It lends a face to trauma and tragedy. When we talk about suicide, it's often from a distance. The Bakers and others have been courageous in sharing their stories. It gives a deeper understanding of the importance of the issue and their work," Dr. Aderhold added.

"AIR as an organization is doing tremendous work and I hope to continue to see their expansion. There's a gap in the field that they stepped into and I hope others see that. Their impact will grow. I strongly encourage other schools and districts to learn about them," Dr. Aderhold said.

"Dr. Aderhold is a truly inspirational leader and we are honored to have him as one of our strongest supporters," said Tricia Baker. In fact, the Bakers selected Dr. Aderhold as Honorary Chair of their recent Seventh Annual Miki & Friends 5K Walk & Run event, which is geared towards families, including their dogs, and builds awareness about mental health and AIR's mission and programs.

"Being named Honorary Chair of the walk event was truly an honor. After attending the event and gaining a better understanding of it, I walked away with a sense of pride in the partnership that AIR and the school district have established and the work we're doing with students and staff, especially around suicide prevention and self-care. It validates and recognizes the work and inspires you to keep moving forward," Dr. Aderhold said.

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“We admire Dr. Aderhold for the initiatives he is undertaking in the school district to give students, faculty, staff and parents the support they need to strengthen their mental health and help prevent the feeling of hopelessness that too often leads to suicide,” Kurt Baker added. “Our partnership with him means a lot to us, and we believe we will save many more lives by working together.”

Leading the Charge to Build Mental Health Awareness and Save Lives in Mercer County

“In Mercer County, we are in the middle of an alarming trend regarding teenage mental health concerns. The superintendents have initiated a Call to Action that has helped to raise awareness and connect partners in this fight,” Dr. Aderhold said. “The work of this initiative has brought two presentations to date and multiple training opportunities for county staff members in mindfulness and self-care strategies for educators.”

Partners on this initiative are superintendents from Hamilton and Hopewell, AIR, the Mercer County chapter of the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), Effective School Solutions (ESS), the Traumatic Loss Coalition, The College of New Jersey and Rider University.

Of course, Dr. Aderhold’s initiatives are also directly aimed at students. For example, he has instituted homework-free nights, structural changes, and curricular changes. “The specific goal is the whole child and social and emotional learning,” Dr. Aderhold said. “We’ve initiated a wellness room at Community Middle School, engaged in mindfulness and self-care training for our staff, and we have established Culture and Climate Committees in the middle and high schools.”

Dr. Aderhold continues to plan for more services and supports in the future. “The district is hiring two full-time mental health clinicians to be on staff next year. They will provide therapeutic assessments on site. Our students will have access to medical facilities if needed and ongoing counseling until a facility becomes available. The clinicians will also help parents navigate the system and the insurance world,” he said.

To help strengthen parents’ understanding of mental health and how they can support their children, the WW-P district created a series of evening programs called Parent University.

“This comprehensive, multipronged approach should be replicated in all other school districts,” the Bakers said. “Everyone needs to be educated and actively involved to strengthen our youths’ mental and emotional health.”

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Attitudes In Reverse® (AIR™) was established by Tricia, Kurt and Katelyn Baker of Plainsboro, NJ, in 2010, soon after their son/brother Kenny died by suicide following a long battle against severe depression and anxiety. Their mission is to save lives by educating students about mental health, related disorders and suicide prevention. Since January 2011, they have presented to more than 70,000 students in middle and high schools and colleges in New Jersey, New York, Vermont, Missouri, Texas and Arizona. AIR also offers Youth Mental Health First Aid instruction and includes the AIR Dogs: Paws for Minds™ program, bringing dogs into schools to help students de-stress and engage in the conversation about mental health. In addition, AIR trains and certifies Emotional Support Animals and offers a lunch-and-learn program for businesses. For more information about AIR™, please visit www.attitudesinreverse.org or call 609-945-3200.