



From canines to counselors: How NJ schools are trying to tame COVID mental health crisis

By Gene Myers

In Lyndhurst, Schools Superintendent Joseph DeCorso sees hallways filled with tension. More arguments in the Bergen County district escalate, and there are more times when adults have to step in. The number of students reporting anxiety or depression has doubled since the COVID pandemic started, DeCorso said.

"It is bigger than the pandemic, quite frankly," the superintendent said. "It's the climate that the country is facing, coupled with the pandemic, that has increased the need for mental health services."

More than two years of isolation and worry on a mass scale are taking their toll on kids in New Jersey and across the nation, school officials say. As children head back to class for yet another academic year in the virus's shadow, it's not clear how much better schools are prepared to deal with what many call a mental health crisis, even with a massive infusion of federal aid.

Tensions are high and easy to spot, educators say, in students who are keeping to themselves and less likely to mix with their peers. More children than ever are asking for help from a safety net of counselors and school staff that was already spread too thin before the current problems, according to administrators.

"The wait list to have a kid evaluated or seen by a psychologist is months," said Maria Petsos, special education supervisor for the Ewing Public School District, outside Trenton. "We've got kids in crisis, and we can't even find professionals to see them."

In February, a nationwide study of school counseling resources from 2015 to the present concluded that all 50 states are failing students in some way.

"Children and youth are experiencing soaring rates of anxiety, depression, trauma, loneliness, and suicidality," says an online summary of the study by the Hopeful Futures Campaign, a joint venture of some of the nation's biggest mental health advocacy groups. "Mental health challenges can affect success at school and in life, yet few students get the help they need to thrive."



Director of Student Services Jamie Stevens, Paraprofessional Janice Koehne, Superintendent, Joseph DeCorso, and therapy dog-in-training Finn, outside the Lyndhurst Board of Education building on Tuesday, September 6, 2022

According to the report, 86,000 of New Jersey's 1.3 million K-12 students have dealt with major depression in recent years; only 42,000 have received treatment, says Hopeful Futures, which mined national education data for the study.

New Jersey averages one school psychologist for every 731 students, one school social worker for every 655 kids and one school counselor for every 358, Hopeful Futures found. In a sign of how far the nation lags, the psychologist ratio is actually one of the best in the nation: New Jersey ranked seventh in the U.S. this year, up from 22nd in 2015, the coalition reported.

The groups recommend that schools provide a psychologist for every 500 kids and one social worker and one counselor each per 250 students.



Attitudes In Reverse therapy dog Goober spreads love at Red Bank Regional High School.

“Students that had symptoms before COVID are seeing more exacerbated symptoms now,” said Sonia Rodrigues-Martó, director of child and adolescent services at Rutgers University Behavioral Health Care, which trains and places counseling staff in schools. During two stressful, lockdown-filled years, kids “saw a lot at home,” she said. “There were increases in domestic violence and increases in divorce because of COVID.”

U.S. Surgeon General Vivek H. Murthy issued a 53-page report last year that warned of “unprecedented” challenges brought on by the pandemic and advised schools to make more resources available.

Some help has arrived from Washington. The federal government has provided \$4 billion in coronavirus relief payments to local schools, and districts up and down the state have taken advantage of the money to find creative ways to help students.

Lyndhurst used some of its \$90,000 in federal funding to add a middle school counselor, giving the K-12 district 11 counselors for 2,661 pupils, DeCorso said. Two of those staff members rotate throughout its nine buildings. The district also started a peer-counseling program that trains children on how to look out for fellow students who need assistance. The district plans to host mental health fairs to showcase resources available to students, the superintendent said.

Schools across the state are adding to staff — and also turning to less traditional methods to help students.

Tricia Baker said there’s more demand than ever for her Princeton-based therapy dog program, Attitudes In Reverse. She started the service in 2011, two years after her son Kenny took his own life at 19 after struggling with depression and anxiety. Baker, a former marketing vice president at Merrill Lynch, said canine visits relax students and make it easier for them to talk about their feelings.

She’s taken her certified dogs to see 170,000 students, from kindergartens to colleges. The pups bring the smiles to students and staff while Baker slips in advice about mental health.

“One in five of our young people are struggling with something, but less than 33% of them are actually asking for help,” Baker said.

Baker visited Lyndhurst and inspired the district to start building its own therapy dog program this summer. The district hopes to have five employees’ personal dogs certified by the spring.

“I loved the therapy dog program idea so much I am training my own personal dog,” DeCorso said.

Gene Myers covers disability and mental health for NorthJersey.com and the USA TODAY Network.

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