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Tackling Teen Suicide

How one district prioritized student mental health and wellness



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Tackling Teen Suicide

No school is suicide-proof.

The Ocean City School District has learned this first-hand.

The district lost two students to suicide in a relatively short time frame: a female senior in December 2014 and a male sophomore in October 2015.

"Most of us had never experienced a student suicide before, let alone two back-to-back," said Matt Carey, director of student services at OCSD. "It took a toll on the staff, and for me personally, it was the most difficult thing I had ever been through as a school administrator."

Ocean City Board of Education President Joe Clark says that the tragedies motivated the board and administration to unite in the bold decision to address youth mental health head-on, rather than sweep it under the rug, which would further perpetuate the stigma surrounding it.

"I knew we had to come up with ways to let our young people know that we are here, that we care and that we can and will support them," said Clark. "I never want to see another child in a funeral home or church again."

Under the leadership of the board, led by Clark, and the school administration, led by Superintendent Dr. Kathleen Taylor, the Ocean City School District has taken significant steps to focus on students' mental health and wellness. The overarching goal is to help empower students to cope with life stressors and to provide the students' friends and family members, and all school staff,

with resources to support youth in need.

"We delved into the research around teen suicide and teen health and wellness, and we learned that there is no surefire way to prevent suicide," said Taylor. "So, while we can never be immune from another student suicide in our district, we can take steps to better protect our students," she said. "And, that's what we've done and continue to do."

Carey urges schools to follow Ocean City's lead by addressing mental health as a standard component of the student learning experience. He points out that schools have had driver's education built into their curriculum for years, yet they often shy away from discussing mental health and wellness. The statistics on teen suicide in the U.S. support his appeal.

In 2015, suicide was the third-leading cause of death in children between the ages of 10 and 14, after accidental death and cancer, the National Institute of Mental Health reports. Among teenagers to 24-year-olds across the nation, it is the second-leading cause of death after accidents.

"We send over 80 percent of our student population to two- and four-year colleges, where there are new life stressors to face," said Carey.

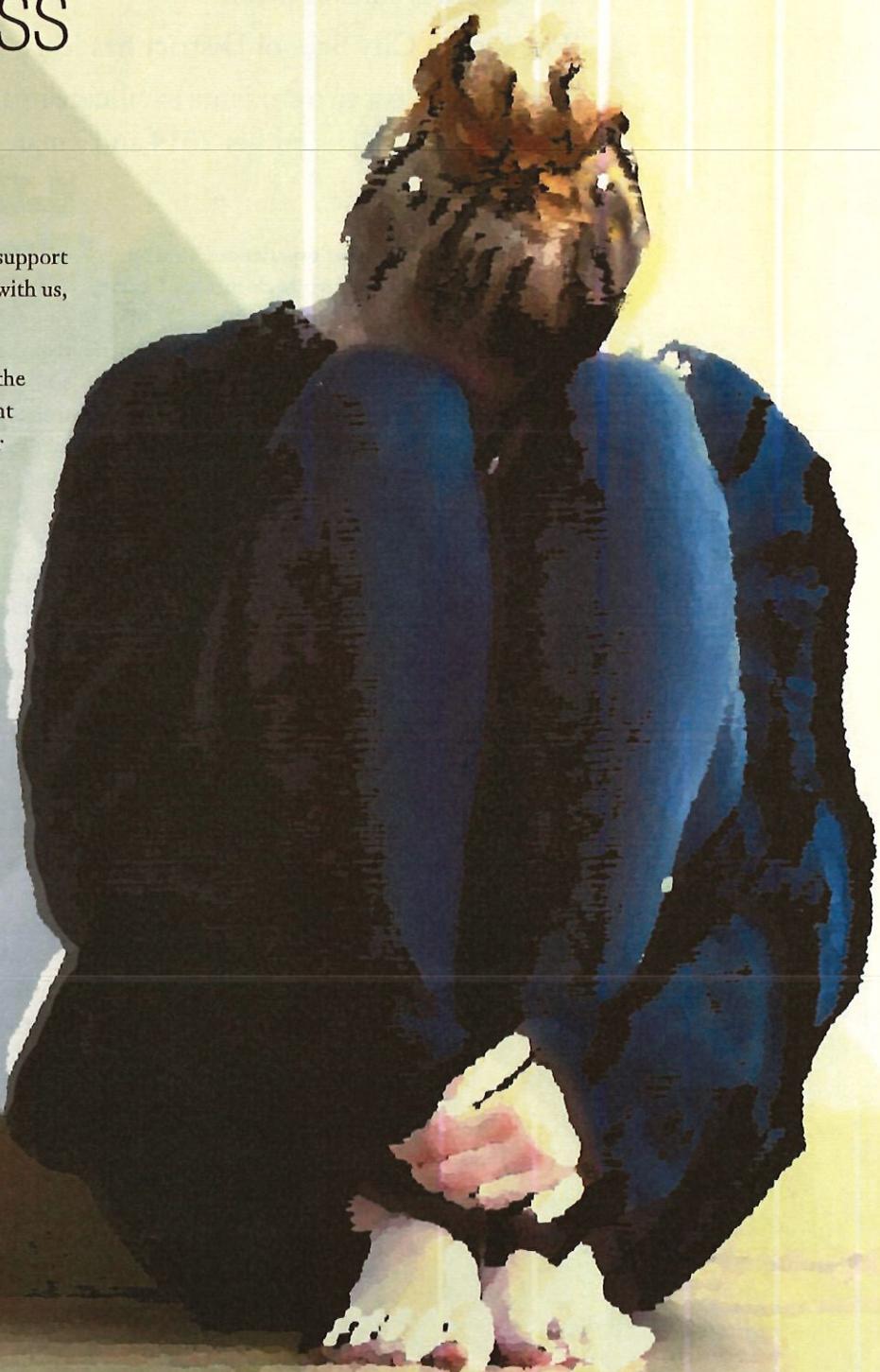
How the Ocean City School District Prioritized Student Mental Health and Wellness

BY ALLYSON ROBERTS

"That's why we need to give our students support to face challenges not only while they are with us, but also after they leave us."

Putting Mental Health on the Radar During the summer of 2014, before the first suicide at Ocean City High School, Kathleen Taylor read a reflection piece in *The Philadelphia Inquirer* about the Sandy Hook shootings. The author said that these horrific scenes would continue to unfold if society did not make mental health a priority. Shortly after, Taylor's sister told her about a Mental Health First Aid training administered by the Red Cross. Feeling a sense of urgency, Taylor approached her board about hiring a social worker with a mental health counseling background and scheduled Mental Health First Aid training for staff at the start of 2015. But, before either came to fruition, the first tragedy struck.

"The timing was unfortunate, but it reinforced for me, and the board, that we needed to do more to address teen



Youth who abuse drugs, attempt suicide, experience abuse, are anorexic or bulimic, and suffer from anxiety, obsessions, or compulsions have something in common: They all go to school.

Kappan magazine,
Dec. 2014

mental health and wellness," Taylor said.

Taylor says that they also reviewed the district's crisis and emergency plans at this time. While essential personnel knew their individual and team-member roles, the non-essential personnel did not necessarily know who was involved in executing the plans and in what capacity. The district also had not previously included communicating with parents or community members in the plans.

"We spent the summer of 2015 getting the right people at the table to create better coordinated plans and made a commitment to communicate more efficiently and consistently about what we were doing post-tragedy and what we would do in response to future red flags," Taylor explained. "We agreed that everyone should have a role. It just had to be everyone."

Also over the summer, the district hired social worker Tifaya-Nazja Noble to focus on mental health at the high school.

"I was encouraged to enter a district where both the board and administration were committed to addressing mental health," Noble said. "You don't see a social worker dedicated to mental health in many districts. Most schools want to focus on academics, but when a student is hungry, tired or stressed, that student is not going to do well in the classroom."

With Noble's hiring, the Ocean City School District was making progress to address students' mental health and wellness. Then came another harsh dose of reality. The high school lost its second student to suicide at the start of the 2015-2016 school year.

"At that point, we realized that this is more than us. We couldn't address suicide on our own," Taylor said. "We needed to collaborate. And so, "Communicate, Collaborate and Consistency" emerged as our three main goals in an action plan to address youth mental health and wellness in Ocean City."

Reaching Out for Help To develop the action plan, Taylor and Board President Joe Clark led the formation of an Ad-Hoc Committee on Youth Mental Health and Suicide.

In deciding to meet and frankly discuss the issue of suicide, the district grappled with a common worry that adults sometimes have: If we talk about teen suicide, will that introduce the

idea to young people or somehow encourage it?

"I'm not an expert in teen suicide, so initially I too was concerned, as were many district staff, board members and parents, about the repercussions of openly talking about suicide," said Taylor. "That's why we turned to experts in the field, the Society for the Prevention of Teenage Suicide, for professional guidance. From my perspective as a superintendent, and more important, as the parent of four children - I knew this was probably the most difficult issue we would deal with as a district and a community. Teen suicide is difficult, frightening and very, very sad. But not talking about it, doesn't mean that suicide doesn't exist or won't happen again. By being open with students about anxiety, depression, sadness, or despair, we can help students who are struggling with those issues and their families get the support they need. By talking about it, we make sure that every student knows that a 'bad day' is not a 'bad life.' There is always hope."

The district approached the Ad-Hoc Committee strategically to maximize its effectiveness. First, Taylor and other administrators collaborated with Clark to develop the idea, and Clark's involvement helped the Ad-Hoc Committee receive full board support. Second, the district opened up membership to anyone who expressed an interest, which helped put parents and community members on its team.

When they opened up membership to anyone from the school or surrounding communities who wanted to participate, the response was overwhelming. Teachers, retirees, administrators, board members, parents, police officers, clinicians and more turned out to four meetings held between December 2015 and March 2016. About 50 individuals signed up, and interest remained strong with about 40 people in attendance at each meeting.

"After the second suicide, the community came forward, and we listened," said Clark. "After two and a half hours of comments in a public forum, it became clear that there was anger and frustration – a lot directed toward the district. It was also clear that there was a desire in the community to be involved in a solution."

Following that meeting, Clark joined Taylor and other administrators for a debriefing, and the specifics for the Ad-Hoc Committee were devel-

oped. Parents and community members became involved in the district's efforts to address mental health and wellness. They helped craft the message, and therefore, took ownership of it. The first committee meeting also began, rather intentionally, with a presentation about what the school had already done to support students' mental health and wellness. It helped convey the genuine concern the district has for its students' well-being.

"It's not unusual after a teen suicide for the institution to become the scapegoat," said Taylor. "That was difficult for us because all of us in the school district are here for the children. We wanted an opportunity to communicate that."

A third strategic move made by the district regarding the Ad-Hoc Committee was to enlist the help of a trusted third party to facilitate the meetings. The district partnered with representatives from NJSBA's field service department, specifically Jane Kershner, director of field services; and Charlene Zoerb and Terri Lewis, NJSBA field service representatives, to facilitate the meetings and to work closely with Dr. Taylor and Clark to set meeting agendas, organize working groups and keep participants on task and on topic.

Formalizing a Plan In the end, the committee produced three defined goals:

- **GOAL 1: Communication in Addressing Youth Mental Health Awareness:** Define, develop and promote a culture of awareness and acceptance of youth mental health and wellness.
- **Goal 2: Collaboration in Addressing Youth Mental Health Awareness:** Develop a coordinated roadmap for parents, students and school community stakeholders to address youth mental health and wellness concerns.
- **Goal 3: Consistency in Addressing Youth Mental Health Awareness:** Use common language and coordinated actions to promote the importance of youth mental health and wellness awareness and acceptance throughout the school community and with its stakeholders.

Once the Ad-Hoc Committee completed its task of developing the goals and recommending some action steps to accomplish them, Carey took the reins, along with Ocean City High School Principal Dr. Matthew Jamison, and Director of Academic Services Curt Nath, to finalize action plans for each goal.

With board approval, the district hit the ground running to begin implementing the plans. An initial step, and one that impacted all goals, was to collaborate with the Society for the Prevention of Teen Suicide (SPTS) for the implementation of its Lifelines program.

Ocean City is now in its second year of implementing Lifelines, which has three main components: prevention, intervention and postvention. SPTS offered training to district administrators and staff on running the comprehensive program, and the district extended the invitation for training to its largest sending district and school-choice feeder schools. It bought additional sets of the curriculum for them to use as well.

The district has been teaching the Lifelines curriculum extensively in high school health and physical education classes to ensure that every student graduating after this year has been exposed to it. Then, it will move to consistently offering it in ninth and 11th grades. The curriculum also suggests activities for kindergarten through eighth grades.

Encouraging Friends to Help Friends Carey says that at the heart of the curriculum is one simple concept: Friends Helping Friends.

"The students know each other better than we do," he said. "They know before us if a friend is having trouble."

Noble, who teaches the Lifelines curriculum at the high school, says that students are responding to the messaging.

"We talk about, and show through video, scenarios that may relate to the students' lives," said Noble. "Then, we discuss how students would help a friend – or even themselves – in these scenarios. The students are paying attention. I've had students come to see me to discuss something that has happened to them that is 'just like in the video.' Students are bringing other students by to talk to me, or they are coming by to ask for advice on how to help a friend."

Noble stresses to students that they can only help a friend to a certain extent before they need to seek out a professional. "We try to convey to them the importance of getting help, even if a friend makes them promise not to involve anyone else. It's better to have a mad friend than one who is no longer around."

To further empower students to reach out for

Behind every student dealing with mental health issues is a family trying to grasp what's happening to their child and struggling to do their best.

Kappan magazine,
Dec. 2014

We are willing
to share our
journey to help
other schools
think about this
before it's
too late.

Dr. Kathleen Taylor,
Superintendent,
Ocean City School
District

help, the district is implementing the STOPit app this year, which allows students to anonymously ask questions of professionals or report a friend in need of intervention. It is also painting phone numbers in restrooms with notes asking students to call in if they have questions or concerns about their own or another student's wellbeing.

Promoting Wellness Among all Students Taylor describes the district's overall effort to address youth mental health and wellness as "multi-dimensional." She says that while some action steps are more obvious in their attempts to address teens and families in need of intervention, others satisfy what she calls the "first level" in wellness promotion and primary prevention.

Examples include a collaboration with the Ocean City Fire Department to train all staff and high school seniors in CPR/AED, and another with the Ocean City Police Department (OCPD) to meet with students to discuss community issues, offer support and discuss the consequences of illegal activity. The OCPD and the city of Ocean City also partner with the school district to offer Friday Night with Friends, which gives students fun, supervised, healthy activities to participate in.

The district also conducts a presentation for student athletes at the start of each season about making healthy choices and looks for opportunities to address a range of topics, from making sober choices to dealing with stress, through student clubs and activities.

New this year, the high school will use a renovated classroom as a safe space for students to focus on reducing stress and anxiety, develop healthy coping strategies and self-care.

The younger students in the district also have their own programming to foster healthy habits and coping mechanisms. One new opportunity this year at the Intermediate School is a Student Yoga Program, which will offer one to two after-school yoga lessons per month to students in fourth through eighth grades. The aim is to provide students with techniques that are not only beneficial for stress relief, but also relaxation and mental focus. The program is funded by a Sustainable Jersey for Schools Health and Wellness Grant.

Dedicating Resources for Focused Interventions

To hone in on the student population, and even

families, in need of more focused intervention, the Ocean City Board of Education proactively hired not only Noble, who has the mental health background, but also another high school guidance counselor and a student assistance coordinator. Furthermore, the Sea Isle City Board of Education, whose students feed into Ocean City High School, provided funding to supplement the addition of another social worker with trauma clinical experience.

"We now have a social worker at every school," said Taylor. "We asked ourselves, 'Why not provide services where our students are rather than send them and their families out into the community, especially when they are in the midst of a crisis?'"

Taylor wants schools to lobby to allow costs for mental health services and personnel to fall outside of the 2 percent cap. Then, she said, schools could decide what to fund within their communities. However, she warns that both securing resources and overcoming stigma present significant challenges in addressing mental health and wellness.

"We were determined not to let either get in our way," she said. "We are still working to overcome the stigma of mental health by talking about it openly and often with students, their parents, the community and our board. The board's support and the connections we have made through the Ad-Hoc Committee have been huge in helping us move forward with plans and obtain key resources like the addition of our social workers."

Noble's experience thus far working in the Ocean City School District is a testament to the impact a social worker can have within a school. Not only does she help run Lifelines, but she manages a full caseload, helping students and parents connect with service providers in the community. She meets families at their homes when necessary to maintain open lines of communication and to help them follow through with recommendations.

Noble, Carey and the rest of the Student Services Department at Ocean City often take the lead on the action steps under the district's communication and collaboration goals. They link the district to professionals and agencies in the community, and they are responsible for parent programs throughout the year on topics including suicide prevention and community resources. The

district has also put a list of community services on its website and will introduce this year the Evolution Labs' Suite 360 platform for use by students and parents who may need additional help navigating a range of issues.

Living a New Reality Despite these developments, as Matt Carey crosses the bridge daily into Ocean City, he can't help but feel a bit uneasy as he enters the idyllic beach community.

"We walked on eggshells a lot last year, praying that we could get through a year without another tragedy," he said. "Even with more resources and programs in place, we know that we are dealing with a very complicated subject matter. We know that we will never be suicide-proof."

Nevertheless, Carey says that Ocean City will continue to evolve its action plans to support students' mental health and wellness, and he encourages other schools to do the same. "My recommendation for any school district would be to get a curriculum in place now. Do not be reactive."

Carey has joined Taylor, Clark, Noble and others from the Ocean City School District to present on the district's mental health and wellness action plan to colleagues throughout the state.

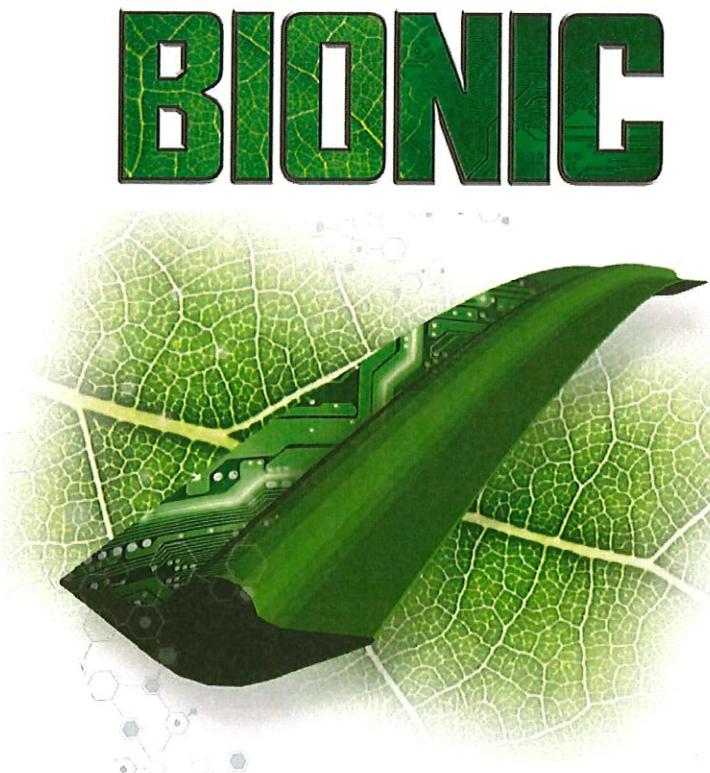
"We are willing to share our journey to help other schools think about this before it's too late," said Taylor. "We never want another school to go through what we went through."

To learn more about the Ocean City School District's efforts, contact Dr. Kathleen Taylor, superintendent, at ktaylor@ocsdnj.org.

Allyson Roberts is an account manager at Laura Bishop Communications. She can be reached at allyson@laura-bishop.com.

POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

NJSBA has a sample policy on the topic of student suicide, Policy # 5141.6. For a copy of that policy contact the NJSBA Policy Services unit at policy@njsba.org.



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