Tifaya-Nazja Noble, MSW, CSSW, has more than 10 years of experience working in the Social Work field. As her professional career progressed, she realized a passion for working with individuals who struggle with mental illness. She began her current role as a Mental Health School Social Worker with the Ocean City School District in Ocean City, NJ, in September 2015. The district dedicated resources toward the hiring of a fulltime social worker focused on mental illness following a student suicide in December 2014.

Shortly after Noble joined the OCSD, the district experienced a second student suicide in October 2015. This prompted the district to take a strategic approach to promoting student mental health and wellness, and Noble took on a leading role. She continued to carry a caseload of referred students, but she also became an important member of the district’s team to create an Action Plan to promote student health and wellness from Kindergarten through 12th grades. And once the plan was in place, she became crucial to the success of many of the tactics.

Noble and other OCSD professionals first connected with the [Society for the Prevention of Teen Suicide](http://www.sptsusa.org/) out of Freehold, N.J., after researching programs to assist the school in the immediate aftermath of coping with suicide. The SPTS introduced the district to its [Lifelines Curriculum](http://www.sptsusa.org/store/#lifelines-series), which eventually became an important part of the district’s final Action Plan to address youth mental health and wellness. Noble currently teaches the Lifelines Curriculum to Ocean City High School students during health and physical education classes to ensure that every student graduating after this year has been exposed to it. Then, she will move to consistently offering it in ninth and 11th grades. At the heart of the curriculum is the message that friends should help friends. Noble talks about, and shows videos of, scenarios that may relate to the students’ lives, and then she and the students discuss how students would help a friend – or even themselves – in these scenarios. She encourages students who experience similar issues in their own lives to visit her for additional advice/support. Since beginning the curriculum, she has seen an increase in visits from any and all students who need help coping with life stressors. By establishing a highly visible school-wide presence and an open door policy for students, parents, teachers and community professionals, she helps students find solutions to assist them in achieving their goals and de-escalating crisis situations.

To develop the district’s Action Plan to address youth mental health and wellness, Noble also participated in an Ad-Hoc Committee led by OCSD’s superintendent and board president. They opened up membership to anyone from the school or surrounding communities who wanted to participate, and 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. The goal was to use the information learned in committee meetings, in addition to specific ideas generated by members, to construct the Action Plan to address youth mental health and wellness.

The committee helped guide the development of three goals for the Action Plan: 1) Define, develop and promote a culture of awareness and acceptance of youth mental health and wellness; 2) Develop a coordinated roadmap for parents, students and school community stakeholders to address youth mental health and wellness concerns; and 3) 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. The committee also generated ideas for tactics to support these goals that aimed to reach students at varying tiers: 1) the promotion of overall positive mental health and wellness strategies; 2) universal prevention programs or activities that are geared toward every student; 3) support for students who have been identified as having risk factors and/or being at risk; and 4) support for students identified as high risk.

Noble plays a role in executing tactics across all four tiers. In addition to teaching the Lifelines Curriculum, she helps organize and share mental health resources with students and parents on the district website, in school and at informational nights for parents. She developed a Parent Resource Guide for Mental Health, Substance Abuse, and Support Group Services. At the nighttime gatherings, Noble has offered advice and answered questions to help parents support the mental health of their children. Recent topics that she presented on with OCSD’s Social Work team include: High Anxiety in Children and Adolescents; Teen Depression, Asking the Tough Questions; Cyber Bullying and Sexting – What Every Parent Should Know; and Cape May County Community-Based Services and Low-Cost Family Activities.

Noble has taken on these tasks while continuing to support students who have been identified as having risk factors or at risk. She conducts assessments and determines appropriate programs and placements for at risk students. She serves on the Intervention and Referral Services and the 504 committees. To serve students in need, she provides direct service through individual and group counseling with students and their families and offers mental health/ behavioral consultation to teachers for general and special education students. She serves as a liaison between the home and community agencies that provide supportive resources to students. She often goes the extra mile by assisting parents with making initial appointments for their child to see a therapist and/or psychiatrist, and with parent or child permission, she maintains contact with the therapist/psychiatrist/counselor to ensure continuity of care. She also develops transition plans for returning students and acts both as a case manager and a liaison for students in educational settings outside of the Ocean City School District. For those students struggling to return to a school setting, she visits them at home to provide services.

Noble has taken on the additional responsibilities that have come with the adoption of the district’s Action Plan with an enthusiasm and energy that match her genuine passion for helping each and every student thrive. Her dedication to her field is also evident in her commitment to professional development. She has recently attended trainings, classes and workshops on topics related to mental health, attachment, adverse childhood experiences, suicide prevention and NASW code of ethics and best practices.

Noble also regularly shares her own ideas with peers through presentations. In an effort to help other districts, while also obtaining feedback on its tactics to support youth mental health and wellness, Noble and her colleagues at OCSD have [presented](https://drive.google.com/open?id=1Fd8EdBW6VwG4NlSv9ufY_oHQ1VKlCbpY) on the district’s mental health and wellness Action Plan to colleagues throughout the state. They presented at the Cape May County PRIDE Committee to school and district leaders in their own county. They presented to the New Jersey School Boards Association (NJSBA) and the New Jersey Association of School Administrators (NJASA). As a follow-up to the NJSBA presentation, the association’s magazine, School Leader, responded to a pitch by the district to share its journey and evolving Action Plan in a [cover story](https://www.njsba.org/category/news-publications/school-leader/november-december-2017-volume-48-no-3/). Noble is interviewed and featured in the story.

Noble also serves as a repeat presenter to students in the Inclusive Learning in Education class at Stockton University. Past topics have included “The Role of a School Social Worker,” “Stress and Early Brain Growth,” and “NASW Confidentiality and Code of Ethics.”

Noble holds a bachelor’s degree in psychology from Bowie State University, May 2006, and a master’s degree in Social Work, which she obtained from Rutgers University Camden Campus, May 2009. During her time at Rutgers University, her concentration was direct practice with children and families, and all of her research studies focused on gangs and youth human trafficking. She was also inducted into the Phi Alpha Honor Society for Social Workers and graduated with honors, cumulative 3.8 GPA. Noble has a school social worker certification issued through the State of New Jersey.

Noble has said that her own personal obstacles have made her determined to become a social worker and use her own experiences to help others facing similar adversities. This has helped her develop empathy and sensitivity towards others, which are essential skills that a social worker must possess. The students at Ocean City High School have built a strong rapport with Noble, and her presence alone has been significant in the district’s attempt to get mental health out from behind a curtain, to get rid of the stigma surrounding it and to truly identify student mental health needs and address them in meaningful and impactful ways.

Noble also extends her passion to help young people reach their fullest potential outside of the school district. She runs the nonprofit Saul to Paul Dance Ministry and School of Unlimited Movement to give all interested youth the opportunity to engage in a healthy extracurricular activity and to build confidence while doing so.