

Mental Health 101: A crash course of current support resources in Providence Public Schools

According to the National Alliance on Mental Health (NAMI), one in five young people in RI is affected by mental illness. Sometimes instead of getting treatment, they deal with it themselves or even take their own lives: like 10-year-old Isabella “Izzy” Tichenor from Utah, who died of suicide in November 2021 as a result of incessant bullying.

Out of 211,453 children in RI, 9,000 of them aged 6-17 have depression. High school students with depression are more than twice as likely to drop out as their peers. And seven in ten youth in the juvenile justice system have a mental health condition.

It’s clear that mental illness has become a serious problem and is hitting school-aged kids now more than ever.

Being a kid in school is tough enough already. Along with bullying, identity crisis, and academic pressure, the past two-plus years of the pandemic have interdicted the social interaction that kids need to thrive.

Thanks to recent grant funding, schools in the Providence Public School District currently have support resources available to make sure students with mental and emotional issues are being attended to.

Beefing up Mental Health Staff in Schools

As reported by the National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments, the Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Education along with five other state agencies received a 5-year School-Based Mental Health Services grant in 2020. The purpose of the grant is to “increase the number of qualified mental health service providers that provide school-based mental health services to students in local educational agencies (LEAs).”

With the grant, the selected state education agencies (SEAs) work with LEAs to mainly provide telehealth services, hiring incentives (including pay increases and creation of hybrid roles), and the support of “cross-state licensing and certification reciprocity for service providers.”

Gaining Awareness on Mental Health through Project Aware

Project Aware is a 5-year grant awarded to the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) in two parts —the first was granted in 2018 for pilot school districts in Providence, Pawtucket, and Woonsocket, and the second in 2021 for the Cranston, West Warwick, and Westerly school districts.

The goal of the grant is for RIDE and the Rhode Island Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) to “work with districts and community partners to increase awareness of mental health issues, provide training for school personnel, and connect students and families with the mental and behavioral services they need.”

While the first grant was awarded pre-COVID-19, it was delivered on the heels of a homicide that occurred in the city of Providence in 2018.

Amy Messenger, a Licensed Independent Clinical Social Worker (LICSW) in the Providence Public School District, coordinates Project Aware and the School-Based Mental Health Services Program to support social-emotional learning and mental health and wellness.

“Through Project Aware, there are pilot schools within the district to implement and promote sustainable changes related to social-emotional learning and mental health and wellness,” Messenger said.

One of those schools is the Alfred Lima Elementary School in Providence, where Messenger serves as a mentor by working directly with the mental health team, which includes school counselors and psychologists. “Beginning last school year and throughout the current school year, I worked directly with [them] to look at the current practices, the needs of the school, and address those needs through the support of the grant,” she added.

To address those needs in the PPSD, professional development was provided to staff, along with an “evidence-based social-emotional curriculum for students.” Collaborations were also formed with other existing district initiatives in the realm of mental and emotional health.

According to RIDE, the social and emotional learning curriculum for students includes “recognizing and managing emotions, developing care and concern for others, establishing positive relationships, making responsible decisions, and handling challenging situations constructively and ethically.”

Resources like the virtual wellness room, developed for Narragansett School District by Social-Emotional Learning Coordinator **Karen Festa**, help students regain control over their emotions by clicking through relaxing images or participating in breathing exercises. In the wake of the COVID-19 lockdown, having resources and safe spaces for students to cope with mental and emotional issues is a must, and student assessments are a necessary component to help develop them.

Diagnostic and Support Resources to Assist Students

In accordance with guidance from RIDE, PPSD uses universal behavioral and social-emotional screeners to “produce student outcome data that informs decisions on school-wide and classroom practices, strategies and program structures, and student groups in need of targeted interventions.”

“Those screeners can give school-based mental health teams’ data to guide support that our students may need,” Messenger said.

These assessments, which are easily scorable, are administered to students quickly and easily throughout the school year. The results broadly evaluate the progress of social, emotional, mental, and behavioral skills and abilities they’ve developed, to paint a picture of their overall health and well-being.

Current assessments that are administered include RIDE’s Early Warning System tool, which helps identify and intervene on 6th-12th graders at risk of not graduating high school; Youth Risk Behavior Survey, which measures behavioral health risks of 6th-12th grade public school students (including depression, violence, and drug use); and Attendance/Chronic Absence to identify attendance issues

early on and regularly.

Once the data is obtained through the assessments, district and school leadership teams use it to support student mental health by “improving school climate, promoting student and staff well-being, and addressing individual students’ strengths and needs.”

Other measures to directly support students who are struggling mentally and emotionally, include having “school-based mental health staff in every school,” as funded by the School-Based Mental Health Services Program grant. “Some of these supports include individual check-ins or counseling, group counseling, or referrals to outside agencies,” Messenger said.

And with the grant funding in place, the Providence Public School District (PPSD) can partner with community agencies like Family Service of RI, the Providence Center, Children’s Youth Cabinet, and RI Student Assistance Services, which operate within schools to provide resources to students and families.

Another agency doing important work for student mental health in the state is NAMI RI, which gives regular mental health-related presentations at schools for students and staff.

“NAMI is not a clinical agency but provides support and education. We talk about different mental illnesses, stigma, and young people share stories, in conjunction with [school] health classes,” said **Penny Ferrara**, manager of School and Public Education at NAMI RI.

The organization recruits college students dealing with mental illness to share their stories, so younger students can identify with them and see what their experience is like. “They talk about what it is like for them and [students] can see that treatment works after talking about how difficult it is,” Ferrara said. “It gives a piece of hope, which is best shown by those that go through it.”

NAMI gets regular requests for mental health presentations, which have been recently conducted via Zoom. “We’ve gone to a few schools, up to 6 classes per day, with the 9th and 10th graders doing mental health in their curriculum,” said Ferrara. The goal is to “create an atmosphere that is supportive,” where students are sensitive to the struggles others face and those in distress can feel open to tell someone about their struggles.

Ferrara also explained that the key to helping students is to normalize mental illness like any physical illness or ailment, such as breaking your leg. “Mental illness is an illness you can’t see,” she said. And the impact is astounding. Ferrara has seen more kids involved or asking questions than ever in her 12-14 years with NAMI.

Presentation topics include anxiety, depression, suicide and others that focus on a specific mental illness or disorder (such as *What is Bipolar Disorder?*). Ferrara said that the rate of kids experiencing issues at school is growing, due to the lack of social interaction that comes from social distancing and remote learning during this pandemic.

“A lot of teachers report that socially, kids are having a hard time. Teachers are good at noticing and can refer students to social workers while at school but not when kids are at home. School is a good resource when they can’t turn to parents,” she said.

NAMI RI is always looking for speakers aged 18 or older who that have dealt with and overcome mental

health issues to present at schools. To advocate for public policy, share your story, or take the 'Stigma Free' pledge, visit NAMI RI's Advocacy Page. Anyone experiencing a crisis or in need of group support can call (800) 950-NAMI or sign up for virtual peer support groups and social gatherings. "It's a good feeling to know you've shared, and you are teaching by sharing," Ferrara said. "We're no different from them except that we got help."

While information about mental illness and getting help for it is vital, prevention is also key. Messenger spoke about a Prevention Education series that plans to lead monthly visits to Juanita Sanchez Educational Complex health classes in Providence, in conjunction with the school's Rhode Island Student Assistance Services (RISAS) counselor.

"Rose Molina, school social worker at Juanita Sanchez, has led a mental health awareness week in the month of May (which is Mental Health Awareness Month) that brought much attention to preventative work in the area of student mental health," Messenger said. As far as the Prevention Education series, Messenger noted that it is "the first year in piloting such an approach with mental health awareness practices."

Another effort overseen by Molina includes running the **Kindness Crew**, "a non-profit student-led initiative around spreading kindness and linking it to the mental health of students."

"The Kindness Crew was founded in 2016 and has since grown into its own non-profit organization assisting elementary schools in creating their own Kindness Crews, kindness reading partnerships, and spreading kindness throughout Providence," said Molina.

Through the crew, students learn the power of coping strategies to overcome health challenges, while bringing mental health awareness to Juanita Sanchez. 9th-12th grade students from Juanita Sanchez participate and are required to apply by teacher recommendation and personal statement.

Initiatives led by The Kindness Crew in 2021 include buying and delivering groceries to community members in need and reading books about kindness to students at other elementary and middle schools across RI. The website also has a shop which sells graphic t-shirts, face masks, and stickers, as well as opportunities to buy an act of kindness for someone in the community.

Teachers, on the other hand, are being armed with tools through professional development, as Messenger mentioned before.

"These professional development sessions have included topics on trauma-responsive educational practices, positive behavioral interventions, empathy mapping, and relationship building during a pandemic, as well as suicide prevention training," she continued.

Addressing Mental Health During the Pandemic

It's apparent to teachers and staff that students are struggling, especially amid the pandemic.

"Our students' mental health needs are more noticeable now and prevalent now more than ever," Messenger said. "There is a rise in the amount of risk assessments social workers and school psychologists are completing."

In addition to students needing more attention, structure, and problem-solving support, Messenger

noted an increase in anxiety, which affects attendance and classroom engagement. “Students returning after long absences or having been away from school during the pandemic are overwhelmed, stressed, worried, or disengaged in the academic process as well as the workload involved to catch up,” Messenger added.

Advocating for mental and emotional wellness is a community effort, which includes showing students that it is appropriate to reach out for help when needed. Ferrara said she noticed that students want to talk about tough topics such as suicide and she explained how NAMI strives to convey the message that help is available when needed.

After completing a presentation at a school on one occasion, she recalls five students coming up to their teacher while another student made an appointment with a counselor. Teachers have told Ferrara that more kids have been seeing the guidance counselor or social worker after the presentations and fellow students have become involved with supporting classmates who are struggling.

“We provide good information to kids that don’t have mental health issues, for them to notice a classmate that may need help,” she said. “We teach them that if someone they know is trying to get treatment or if they feel there is stigma, to include them in plans and let them know you care enough to think of them. Knowing someone is there, helps.”

For Messenger, partnerships with community-based agencies, parents, families, and community members are necessary with the surge in social, emotional, and behavioral challenges of our current pandemic-ravaged landscape.

“I hope that from this article, we can come together as a community and focus on healing-centered engagement,” she said.

“We have to take into account that the trauma did not just happen to our students, it happened to our entire community. My hope from this article would be that we ask ourselves each day what each one of us can do to promote the health and healing of our community.”