



EGSC Health and Wellness Subcommittee Minutes January 29, 2024

Attendees

Attendees Andrea Coelho, Lisa Perry, Brian Ricca, Neil Marcaccio, Molly Sylvia, Karin Wetherill, Matt Willis, Clare Cecil-Karb, Kevin Murphy

Reports

Mental Health Needs and Social Work Staff:

Presentation by school social worker Andrea Coelho regarding the need for more mental health staff within the district. Ms. Coelho reported that, although the needs of the students in the district are being met by current social work staff, there are many areas where staff are unable to be proactive because they are constantly required to respond to crises.

Ms. Coelho provided context that during the Covid-19 pandemic the SW staff was unable to provide preventative work and during lockdown periods were further occupied by needing to drive to families' houses to provide basic needs and services.

Shifts in workforce participation by parents also impacted the district's needs because loss of one parent income results in the possibility of increased financial needs.

School Psychologists also report that pandemic work was difficult for staff because they had to make difficult care decisions and – although they were able to meet their ethical and workplace obligations there was a lot of mortal injury as a result of what help they were unable to provide.

Staff commented that there is limited ability to coordinate care when limited staff has to cover up to six buildings (2 lower, 2 upper, 1 middle, 1 High School) and dealing with multiple concurrent challenges.

Mental health staff are routinely called away from daily work to complete risk assessments during time when they have arranged to fulfill other duties.

School Counselors, per Ms. Flaherty, switch between mental health work and academic counseling. These mental health challenges are also a contributing factor to academic concerns.

Dr Willis noted that as a pediatrician he has noticed a significant number of students coming to the ED because they are unable to access preventative or non-emergency care. This results in days away from school (sometimes spent in the ED waiting for placement to become available.)

Members also identified needs within the teaching and learning staff – noting that teachers also rely on mental health staff for support and guidance. It was noted that EG hires and retains talented staff and are in a better position than some other districts but that lack of substitute staff and the increase in needs of students are both factors that put teachers at risk of “burnout.”

Per NASW guidelines, EG would ideally have 9 social workers within the district. An ideal distribution would be one professional assigned to each building with dedicated on-call workers available for crises. This would allow building staff to develop preventative programs and interventions like social skills and support groups.

The SW staff is developing a way to capture time and illustrate the need for increased staff. The group identifies the need to report the challenges of triage work interfering with longitudinal work.

Disordered Eating Concerns and School Programming:

Report on ongoing work of aligning food/exercise/nutrition education with best practices. Dr. Willis states that while the focus of much of the country is on anti-obesity programming, in East Greenwich the challenge is with restricted eating and undereating.

School staff identify that weight and undereating are specifically a concern in certain sports such as wrestling and long distance running and gymnastics. Work should be done to have coaches address issues within these sports.

Dr. Willis highlighted the importance of delivering messages that identify food and exercise as morally neutral with minimal screen time and maximum outdoor time. Shocking information such as videos and focusing on reading food labels can be deleterious to student health.

Dr. Willis also identified concerns about managing the needs of students with restrictive eating disorders so that they can be in school. As students are covered under ADA, the school is responsible for providing appropriate support. The committee agrees that this should not involve eating in a nurse office. The possibility of having students eat in the office of a school counselor highlights the need for increased staff.

Ms. Wetherill identified a program called “Be Real” which may be a resource for those working with students.

Health Schools Collaboration:

Ms. Wetherill also highlighted other programs within the area. The group discussed the program “Get the Foam Out” which may have EPA funding available. The district should be planning for a January 2025 ban on styrofoam. A challenge to this is

that Hanaford School does not have a dishwasher. The program may also provide support to encourage dividing waste into compost recycling etc.

The Rhode Island Student Survey is another planned initiative – a survey administered to youth with a wide variety of questions. More information will be provided about how the survey will be normed and how we will receive feedback.

Future Topics

Ms. Sylvia suggests that the group add adolescent vaping as a topic for future discussion. A conference is planned that will be attended by Ms. Sylvia and member(s) of the student community.

Minutes submitted by Clare Cecil-Karb, Subcommittee Chair