



GAWHARA ABOU-EID/THE STANDARD-JOURNAL

From left, Mifflinburg Area High School students Mckenzy Yoakam, Dakota Conterman and Natalie Gemberling partake in an icebreaker at the Youth Mental Health Club Fall Event.

Uniting to strengthen school mental health support

Youth Mental Health Fall Club Event held at The Well

BY GAWHARA ABOU-EID

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MILTON — More than 100 high school students from across Central Pennsylvania gathered Tuesday at The Well in Milton for the Youth Mental Health Club Fall Event, a regional training that emphasized empathy, connection and peer leadership in supporting mental well-being.

Hosted by the Central Susquehanna Intermediate Unit (CSIU), the event brought together student leaders and advisors from nine school districts to participate in “story circles” — a model for open conversation designed to build trust and understanding.

“This year is more like a training,” said Jestine Myers, a Multi-Tiered System of Supports coach in CSIU’s behavioral health department. “How do we train the students to be able to be peer leaders and to go back into their schools, develop relation-

ships, develop empathy, consider how to build relationships to help for mental health supports?”

Myers noted the fall gathering built upon last year’s kickoff, which launched local mental health clubs modeled after Aavidum, a Pennsylvania-based initiative meaning “I’ve got your back.” What began as small groups in a few districts has now grown into a regional network.

Nine districts participated this year, Myers said, with several others sending advisors as they prepare to launch new student clubs. Participating school districts included Mifflinburg, Warrior Run, Shikellamy, Central Columbia, Southern Columbia, Millville, Benton, Columbia Montour Vo-Tech and Danville.

“We also support the adults,” she noted. “We have an advisor meeting about three times a year that everybody can Zoom and hear ideas from different groups.”

The half-day event ran from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. and included activities such as icebreakers, storytelling games and facilitated

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discussion circles. Susan Jordan, executive director of Susquehanna Valley Mediation, led the sessions, encouraging students to share personal stories and listen actively to one another.

Myers said the focus was intentionally hands-on.

“Last year was really a kickoff... Whereas this year is more like actually interacting amongst schools,” she said.

A partner organization, UPMC’s Health Resources and Services Administration – Growing Resilience and Connection through Empathy Project (HRSA GRACE) project, also presented materials from its Beyond the Hype campaign, which raises awareness around vaping and healthy decision-making.

“It’s not necessarily an anti-vaping campaign,” Myers said, “You choose — here’s some information to help you hopefully make the healthy choice.”

Students were able to take home informational items and QR codes linking to resources.

Funding for the event came through a combination of the AWARE grant — awarded to the CSIU by the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) — and support from HRSA. Myers said both grants are in their final year.

“We’re hoping to maybe scale it down but still continue the work next year or find some sponsorship or outside funding,” she said. “How often do you get over 100 high schoolers in a room together and paying attention, listening, focused on what’s going on?”

Among those students were Natalie Gemberling, a senior at Mifflinburg Area High School, and Triston Alexander, a sophomore at Warrior Run Junior/Senior High School. Both participate in Aevidium

clubs founded last year.

“For me, it just made sense,” Gemberling said. “It’s fun to be able to help people and make sure that everybody’s doing okay and have that smiling face in the hallway.”

Alexander echoed the sentiment.

“I’d like to help people, so I decided this would be a good opportunity too,” he said.

At Mifflinburg, Gemberling’s club recently hosted a football game fundraiser featuring painted handprints on a banner, later hung in the cafeteria.

“There were a lot of younger students at the football game that participated,” she said. “Just that participation of more than just the club at the high school was cool to see.”

Both students said the Milton event exceeded their expectations.

“It was really cool to meet other students from other schools that are also kind of in a similar club and be able to see what they’re doing,” Gemberling said.

Alexander described the atmosphere as unexpectedly open.

“I actually expected something a lot more formal... but yes, it’s been a very well-inviting experience for me,” he said.

“I never knew about story circles before, and now that I do, I like them. I think it’s a great way to explain our problems, get out there and boost the community more.”

Both plan to bring lessons back to their clubs.

“Even if it’s not a circle, just communicating about stories that have happened to us — even if they aren’t deep — can feel good,” Gemberling said. “Just having it in the club and even in my life, that’s kind of a big takeaway I’m going to definitely use after this.”

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From left, Warrior Run Junior/Senior High School students Jackson Stevens, Triston Alexander, counselor Yami Melton, and students Thomas Miller and Malory Bryan take part in an icebreaker at the Youth Mental Health Club Fall Event.