

Where We Stand

District Initiatives: Prevention and Intervention

Youth suicide is a growing public health concern. According to the Centers for Disease Control, suicide is the second leading cause of death for young people ages 10-24. A recent Daily Record article by Sigrid Reinert noted that suicide risk is greater among individuals living in rural areas due to factors associated with infrastructure and environment, the availability of resources, and cultural expectations. Youth suicide is one of the most compelling challenges faced by school districts around the country.

Ellensburg School District is well-positioned to address this critical public health issue and to support student learning and promote healthy youth development. Children and teens spend a significant amount of their young lives at school, making school personnel critical partners with families and the community to support students and their continued academic and behavioral growth. Ellensburg schools and community organizations have embraced an ecological approach to building and supporting a competent school community, where all members share responsibility for the welfare of our students. Our competent school community has established numerous strategies and initiatives that have been integrated into our prevention and early intervention systems.

In October 2018, Ellensburg School District was awarded a Mental Health Awareness Training (MHAT) grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. This grant funds key personnel and programs in the district intended to foster integration between behavioral health and other systems, prevent or delay the onset of complications from mental illness, and to disseminate education tools to address behavioral health issues.

One of the programs supported by MHAT is the Hope Squad class at EHS. The Hope Squad program is a school-based peer support team that partners with local mental health agencies. Peers select students who are trustworthy and caring individuals to join the Hope Squad. Squad members are trained to watch for at-risk students, provide friendship, identify suicide-warning signs, and seek help from adults. Hope Squad members are NOT taught to act as counselors, but are educated on recognizing suicide warning signs and how to properly and respectfully report concerns to an adult, including school counselors, teachers, and the referral coordinator.

The referral coordinator position is also funded through the MHAT grant. The referral coordinator works closely with school counselors to identify students needing additional community support programs. In addition to managing and coordinating referrals to community organizations, this position also provides education to students and families related to community behavioral and mental health resources. School counselors, in collaboration with the referral coordinator, will be monitoring mental health assessments administered to strategically identified student populations. Using data and other feedback gathered from this process, the district plans to implement universal mental health screening consistent with other innovative districts around the state. Additional information regarding this important and powerful prevention tool will be shared soon as the district works to identify a practical process and considers the capacity for treatment, crisis intervention and referrals for intensive supports.

School counselors are an important human protective factor in our schools. Protective factors are the people and things that buffer students from the stresses in life and protect them from suicide risk. School counselors at Ellensburg work with students, parents, other school staff, and community organizations to raise awareness of suicide and identify available resources. Our counselors maintain current training in the signs of suicidal thoughts, are knowledgeable about available resources, prepare students, staff, colleagues, and parents to recognize warning symptoms for suicidal behavior, and refer students who demonstrate signs of suicidal thoughts to local community agencies.

Ellensburg School District has partnered with Comprehensive Healthcare to provide a full-time behavioral health counselor in our district. Comprehensive Healthcare is a nonprofit organization providing a wide range of behavioral healthcare services to meet the individual needs of our students. This partnership is designed to promote the optimal physical, emotional, social, and educational development of our students. This partnership is a promising approach for addressing the many health-related problems experienced by students.

The district has an additional partnership with OSPI, ESD105, The Community Prevention and Wellness Initiative (CPWI), and Merit Resources to provide a Student Assistance Prevention-Intervention Services Professional (SAPISP). SAPISPs are trained to provide education, screening, referral, and support services to students who are at high risk for substance use or who have been impacted by substance abuse. Our SAPISP leads educational support groups, works with community agencies to develop services for students, provides early substance prevention and intervention services to students and their families, and strengthens the transition back to school for students who have had substance use issues. This comprehensive, integrated model of services fosters safer school environments, promotes healthy childhood development, and prevents alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use by our students.

As part of the MHAT grant, Ellensburg schools have sponsored community trainings in Youth Mental Health First Aid (YMHFA) and Question, Persuade, Refer (QPR) in association with Comprehensive Healthcare. YMHFA is a public education program that introduces participants to the unique risk factors and warning signs of mental health problems common among adolescents. Our partnership with Comprehensive Healthcare has already provided nine YMHFA/QPR trainings and will continue to support monthly trainings through September 2021. YMHFA is designed for adults who regularly interact with adolescents and has been provided to teachers, hospital staff, employers and business leaders, faith communities, law enforcement, and families in our community.

QPR training is currently being provided to all teachers and staff working with students in our schools. Our commitment to the program is based on the QPR mission to reduce suicidal behaviors and save lives by providing innovative, practical and proven suicide prevention training. QPR training is helping school staff and faculty learn when and how to engage youth who may be considering suicide, and is the most widely taught gatekeeper training in the world. In addition to being trained in QPR, our staff are experts at fostering feelings of connection and belonging in the school community. Research has shown that school connectedness based on trusting relationships is related to reductions in suicidal thoughts and is an additional protective factor for our students.

Ellensburg School District recognizes the association between academic outcomes, school connectedness, and healthy formative development. Data from the 2017 national Youth Risk Behavior Survey indicates that students with higher grades are less likely to consider or attempt suicide.

Academic programs and initiatives at EHS designed to improve learning and increase behavioral wellbeing include the 9th Grade Success Team, Student Success Team (SST), and the PEP Squad. The 9th Grade Success Team is based on compelling evidence from University of Chicago research that relates 9th grade success to high school graduation. Our SST meets weekly to discuss academic and behavioral interventions for students who have been identified by staff members as needing additional supports. The PEP (Personalized Education Program) Squad connects students with vocational mentors through a partnership with Youth Services of Kittitas County. This program is aligned with High School and Beyond Plan requirements and is an exciting opportunity for students to gain real-life job experiences in an occupation of their choice. While not an exhaustive list of programs and interventions, these three programs highlight our commitment to increasing student engagement, academic success, and school connectedness.

Academic supports and interventions in Ellensburg schools are guided by Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) frameworks using a multi-tiered approach to improving behavioral and academic outcomes for our students. The implementation of Restorative Practices and Community Circles at Morgan Middle School and EHS as part of this framework foster respect, responsibility, relationship-building, and relationship-repairing in our school community. Trauma-informed practices and supports like these are essential to stopping the spread of emotional and physical violence in our schools. They provide individual and community-level accountability and protective factors to support healing and resilience among our students.

In addition to targeted approaches to identifying and intervening with youth suicide, Ellensburg schools are also broadly focused on upstream approaches to prevention. We recognize that social-emotional learning in primary grades teaches our students more effective problem-solving skills to address the personal and life challenges they face as they progress into adolescence. Our elementary schools are implementing evidence-based organizational programs to increase protective factors and reduce risk factors for our students.

Protecting our students is a responsibility we all share. We are proud of our work with our community partners and the relationships we enjoy with our families and school community that enable us to provide comprehensive academic, behavioral, and emotional programs for our students. While we continue to focus on data-informed improvement efforts, it is important to recognize that our schools are not mental health centers. We are, however, highly prepared to notice and respond to behavioral changes and signs of distress. Working together as a competent school community, we can overcome stigma and misperceptions about student behavior, mental health, and suicide. Prevention efforts cannot be done in isolation. To address this profound challenge, we must continue to work collaboratively in our community. Ellensburg schools are committed to protecting the safety and wellbeing of all of our students. This is where we stand.