

Opinion Exchange

MENTAL HEALTH

The kids are not OK; they need more help

Policymakers and health care executives need to consider placing intensive mental health programming in our schools.

By SANDY LEWANDOWSKI

On a recent weekend morning, I woke up to an alarming text message from a school staff member. It read: "Good morning, Ms. Sandy. I hope you are doing well outside of this unfortunate news I have: One of the individuals killed in downtown Minneapolis was a former student. I'm sorry to have to share this news with you."

As a superintendent, my worst fear is waking up to a phone call or text message that a student was killed. Since January, I have received eight such messages about the death of a student or former student.

Whether by suicide, drug overdose or community violence, their deaths point back to one thing: Our young people are not OK, and their mental health is severely at risk.

Getting students back in school is the tip of the iceberg for our communities "returning to normal." Yet for our students, there likely will not be a "return to normal."

2020-21 was a school year where race, trauma and the pandemic collided. A year ago, George Floyd was murdered. Students, especially Black students, needed connection and support to process all that would transpire in the year since, but staying home and safe during the pandemic took precedence. This meant little to no regular connection to their school community for over 11 months for many.

We all knew that students would return to school with exponentially more trauma, and we are now beginning to understand exactly what this means for students' mental health. In the past three months of in-person school, we have experienced 150 critical incidents in my school district, which serves the top 1% of highest-needs students in the west metro.

Critical incidents are things like suicide attempts, assaults on staff requiring hospital treatment, or a student engaged in self-injurious behavior so severe that emergency medical services considered using ketamine to sedate them.

In Minnesota, almost twice as many Black children (58%) experience trauma than their white peers (31%), and suicide attempts among Black adolescents increased 73% in the past 30 years. I hear stories from families

turned away by emergency departments with no inpatient beds and mental health treatment programs with monthslong waiting lists.

Schools, without the appropriate funding or staff to treat our students' mental health needs, have become the front line of the children's mental health system.

I urge our policymakers and health care executives to consider placing intensive mental health programming in our schools. Why wait for beds to open up when innovative partnerships with a school district which serves this population could help? Does this emergency situation not call for new models and joint funding?

One would think that of the millions of dollars coming to Minnesota in aid and funding, a portion would be dedicated to serving the severe mental health needs of struggling students, like those in my schools. I wish I had better news; that is not happening. As in past years, structural efforts to recognize that intermediate districts, charged with serving our state's most complex students, are a part of the mental health system of care have fallen short, and our specialized districts will receive an inequitable allocation compared to traditional K-12 districts.

Our state is dedicated to closing racial education gaps, and I am confident that the inequitable distribution of resources to Minnesota school districts is not intentional discrimination. But that is the result.

As a society, we can't yet fully grasp the impact of this past year, but we see the consequences every day in our schools, communities and neighborhoods. I see it firsthand in the increase and severity of critical incidents in schools, and I see it in the number of the recent deaths of young people connected to my school district.

To policymakers who are responsible for deciding who gets what: Place the needs of students with the most challenges in the forefront with more funding and more flexibility, not less.

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