

Laconia school tackling challenges of childhood trauma

- Michael Mortensen
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Laconia School Superintendent Brendan Minnihan

LACONIA — Traumatic stress early in life can significantly affect a child's health, happiness and future.

Studies show children who have gone through what are formally known as adverse childhood experiences — or ACEs — are more likely to develop diseases and adopt risky behaviors, ultimately shortening their life, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Those same experiences can also derail a child's education and put that child at a steep disadvantage compared to peers.

That's why educators at Pleasant Street School have instituted initiatives — both in and out of the classroom — to help students deal with the strain, and thereby become better learners.

ACEs can include divorce, a death in the family, poverty, or witnessing drug overdoses or incidents of domestic violence, explained Pleasant Street Principal David Levesque.

Parents have been asked to fill out questionnaires on what potentially traumatic events their child may have been exposed to even before they enter school.

With the incidence of ACEs among Pleasant Street students increasing, "We're relying on parents to help by helping their child ahead of time," Levesque said.

Other traumatic events which affect children's learning potential are homelessness and hunger.

"If we find a student who's homeless then we try to put the family in touch with resources that can help find them a place to stay, and we can help provide clothes and toiletries," Levesque said.

But a big part of the pilot program at Pleasant Street has been instituting a better support system within the school for students who are struggling with problems outside of school.

Some time during the school week groups of eight to 10 students will gather with a teacher or other school staff member to share what's bothering them, or on their minds. The pupils look forward to these informal "We Connect" sessions, Levesque said, who explained that they are especially helpful for students who have problems interacting with teachers or even other children. We Connect session help young students to get to the root of what's making them feel anxious or upset and what they can do when they feel that way.

In cases where a student becomes extremely disruptive, rather than sending that child to the school office, the teacher will take the student outside the classroom to find what the problem is. Meanwhile, Levesque or another staff member takes over the class while the teacher has one-to-one time with the troubled student.

This effort at relationship-building has cut down significantly on discipline and behavioral problems, Levesque said. “When you see a 65 percent drop in (school) office visits, you’re doing something right,” he pointed out.

A big part of taking a trauma-informed approach is identifying behaviors not as willful misbehavior, but rather as a symptom of need.

Educators at Pleasant Street were also noticing a significant increase in behavioral problems with some students at the start of each school week.

“When they come back on Monday, their behavior is off the chart,” remarked McKenzie Harrington-Bacote, program director of the Office of School Wellness for the Laconia School District.

School officials concluded that a big reason for difference in behavior was that some children had not had a good meal since the lunch they ate in the school cafeteria the previous Friday.

With 60 to 65 percent of Pleasant Street students qualified for free or reduced school lunches, and 5 to 7 percent classified as homeless, the school initiated program to provide needy students with enough nutritious food for weekend meals.

Teaming up with GOT LUNCH! Laconia and the Boys & Girls Club of the Lakes Region and with the help of grants and donations, the school was able to purchase food through the New Hampshire Food Bank, which students then helped pack into bags which were given to needy students. Levesque said this past school year more than 60

students — about one-fifth of Pleasant Street’s enrollment — were able to take advantage of this program which provided enough food for 2,100 meals.

Laconia Superintendent Dr. Brendan Minnihhan is watching the trauma-informed approach at Pleasant Street closely in order to see what impact it has on children’s behavior and ability to learn over time.

“If we found that the efforts were beneficial, then I would want to look into replicating or tweaking what they’re doing at Pleasant Street for our other schools,” said Minnihhan, who also noted that other schools have also taken steps to better address the issue of trauma among students.

Levesque said it will probably take another five to seven years before educators will be able to accurately gauge the impact of Pleasant Street’s initiative. “We’ll know once they’re in high school, when they can make (more of) their own decisions.

But Levesque said the early signs he’s seen are encouraging. He told of one girl who when she started at Pleasant Street was extremely withdrawn and a loner. Now because of the school’s emphasis on support structures and teacher-student interaction, she “went from being quiet to advocating for herself.”

“We are trying to personalize the learning experience,” Minnihhan explained. “Youngsters not only need to learn, but also need to be provided the supports they need as individuals.”

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