

HASSAN HEARS OF CHALLENGES STUDENTS FACE IN AGE OF OPIOIDS

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LACONIA — Sen. Maggie Hassan met with local school officials Friday to hear stories that will arm her for debates in Washington over support for public education and the fight against the opioid epidemic.

“It’s really important that we be able to bring real facts and narratives to the table,” the Democratic senator said. “I think too often political discourse has devolved into highly ideological sparring matches.”

She got an earful in a meeting with educators at the Huot Career and Technical Center, including accounts of children facing traumatic events.

Woodland Heights Elementary School Principal Eric Johnson said a fourth-grader’s father was incarcerated because of a drug offense.

“The system worked in a way to get him out of that situation, so he is with a family member, but it’s an everyday struggle with this kid trying to learn and manage his life,” Johnson said.

“When there is this sort of trauma, multiplication tables aren’t that important when he is trying to find out why his dad is in jail.”

Johnson said a kindergartener was in the arms of his father when the man died of an overdose. Despite this horrific event, the child is happy to come to a school where adults are looking out for him.

“That kid comes to school with a smile on his face because somebody cares for him,” the principal said.

All five Laconia schools are considered high-poverty institutions, with about 60 percent of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunches. About 90 students are homeless. Drug dependency and alcoholism are significant problems in the community. Many students aren’t getting enough food at home.

The district utilizes government grants and community help to feed, counsel and support the mental health of young people so they are in a better position to learn.

There are two part-time school-based mental health clinicians at the middle school and high school.

The two schools share a licensed alcohol and drug counselor. There are three full-time school-based social workers.

Superintendent Dr. Brendan Minnihhan said federal support is a key to these efforts. The district faces funding reductions at the state level and is subject to a local property tax cap.

He listed three priorities for decision-makers: “Stability in funding, being a proponent of public education and being supportive of teachers and kids as our future.”

Hassan said she appreciates what the district is trying to do.

“It’s been really impressive to see how federal dollars are being used wisely and creatively in

Laconia to help our kids, who are facing a lot of different kinds of challenges in this generation, everything from economic instability in their families to maybe families being impacted by the opioid crisis," she said.

She learned as a youngster the main component for educational success.

"My mom was a teacher in the public high school I went to and I once asked her, 'How come some kids seem to do well and some kids just don't?'" Hassan said.

"She said to me, 'Kids need to know they have a grown-up in their corner.'"



Sen. Maggie Hassan chats with kindergartners Ameyiah Leclerc (center) and Isabella Ancora during a visit to Pleasant Street School in Laconia on Friday. (Adam Drapcho/Laconia Daily Sun)