

# Changing the Conversation About Student Mental Health

Developing a multi-tiered approach that addresses the “whole needs” of students



Statistics show that 20 percent of youth ages 13-18 are living with a mental health issue.

**SESSION** Youth Mental Health Training Needs and Solutions | **Presenters** Green Schools Network: Erin Green, treasurer; DPI Student Services/Prevention and Wellness: Christie Gause-Bemis, consultant; Waupaca: Gregory Nyen, superintendent

**M**ental health issues, like anxiety and mood disorders, present big barriers to student learning. And the first step towards breaking down those barriers is to change the way we talk about them.

That was the recommendation of Greg Nyen, superintendent of the Waupaca School District, one of a trio of speakers who discussed the

need for new ways to help students with mental health issues.

“There’s a stigma around the words ‘mental health’ that comes from the words we use,” Nyen said. “We don’t need our students to feel ashamed.”

Instead of ‘mental health,’ he suggested schools should talk about ‘brain health,’ a term that carries a less negative connotation and could

make it easier for students to seek help when they need it.

Statistics show that 20 percent of youth ages 13-18 are living with a mental health issue, with over-third

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in danger of dropping out of school. Nyen, who worked as a psychologist before going into education administration, suggested that schools should use a multi-tiered system of support for students with mental health issues rather than focus on a more traditional response-intervention method.

The multi-tiered approach addresses the “whole needs” of the child, academic and behavioral. Instead of automatically responding with discipline to a child swearing in class, a teacher can learn to recognize the trigger behind the behavior. A child who can’t read would rather act out and get thrown out of class before admitting the real problem — his lack of literacy skills, Nyen said.

Erin Green, a retired business official from the Greendale School District, discussed the effect of trauma on students’ mental health. More and more students today are exposed to daily trauma such as physical, mental or emotional abuse by a parent or bullying by peers. The trauma physically affects the students’ brains,

causing anxiety, depression, eating disorders and other symptoms and interferes with learning.

Helping students with mental health issues is expensive and many school districts have found it increasingly difficult to do so given budget constraints.

In the Stevens Point Area Public School District, where Nyen served as director of student services, there was staff training to help teachers learn to focus less on the behavior of students and more on the mental health needs triggering the behavior. School counselors and pupil service staff provide direct services although positions are often reduced during budget cuts.

A teacher was placed at a day treatment center so a student with severe issues could receive medical attention and academic instruction in the same facility. The district also set up satellite clinics at all schools so students could receive services there. Additionally, there was a cost-sharing arrangement with a local mental health provider.

Green shared the Greendale model where the district partnered with Aurora Health Care to provide mental health services for students and staff through an extended Employee Assistance Program. The district pays for up to six sessions per issue per year for a student or family member. Aurora also provides training for staff on a range of issues.

Because physical and mental health are linked, Greendale has also arranged with Aurora to provide an on-site clinic for student and staff medical needs. The clinic is staffed by a nurse practitioner and open three days a week.

Christie Gause-Bemis, from the Department of Public Instruction’s Student Services/Prevention and Wellness team, shared the many resources available to districts through the department. ■

**DPI School Mental Health Resources**  
[dpi.gov/sspw/mental-health](http://dpi.gov/sspw/mental-health)

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