

What we are doing for students' mental health

Have you ever been in a school fire drill?

Most people have. Everyone needs to participate because we all need to know that the alarm will work, that fire extinguishers are nearby, that students can find the exits and that the fire department will hear the call when there is a real emergency.

Even though fires sometimes start, schools rarely burn to the ground because there is a system in place to stop fires before they do too much damage.

When something goes wrong with the mental health and well-being of our students, we need to do something before it gets out of control. That is why this is the year that we are going to tackle these hard issues.

The reality is that many of our students struggle with stress, anxiety, and depression. They don't always know how to get help and so they deal with it by abusing drugs or alcohol, isolating themselves from their loved ones, letting their grades suffer, doing things to hurt themselves and others, and even attempting suicide or committing suicide.

If a mental health issue becomes an emergency, the results are devastating.

It is the responsibility of the Los Alamos Public Schools to make substantial changes to ensure that students achieve optimal and emotional health well-being.

The Healthy Schools and Community Initiative began in the fall of 2015 when the Mental Health Design Team worked together to create a list of long-term and short term recommendations and are now in the process of implementing those recommendations.

The group is made up of people who represent the school and community. Part of their job was to find gaps, areas where we are not doing enough or where we don't currently have enough resources. Once gaps are identified we can focus on solving those problems.

They are now connecting with different community organizations to find out how people can contribute, start an honest dialogue about possible roadblocks within the community, and a build a strategy for the community to move forward.

You can view the Powerpoint presentations from those meetings on the Los Alamos Public Schools website. Follow this link (<http://laschools.net/domain/1161>) or click on "Committees" on the right side of the homepage and then scroll down to "Mental Health Design Team."

The short term projects that we are working on between now and June include mental health first aid training, launching a website with resources for kids who are in crisis, recruiting youth resources advocates, clarifying how councilors and school staff members can provide help, develop systems so that we will know what to do when there is a child in crisis or if there is a death, and allocating part of the budget to hiring a mental health coordinator who can ensure that everyone works together.

The long term goal is that we are striving for a grassroots cultural shift where students can be comfortable reaching out when they need help, and where students can easily cope with everyday issues and stress and have the tools and support they need to be resilient in the face of more traumatic events, where parents know how to be the best advocate for their child and can make sure that their needs are met, and where there is no stigma attached to getting mental health help.

I'm contacting other superintendents from schools with similar demographics across the country to see what works for them and working with the county to set up a joint resolution so that we can have resources to meet our goals.

We're looking for input and support from parents and the community and we welcome you to get involved.

Students are our priority. Everything we do is for the benefit of our kids.