

# One District's Action Plan to Systematically Combat a Mental Health Crisis in Our Schools

By Kathleen Coulter and Dr. Steve Werner



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544 students. That is how many students expressed a concern significant enough to prompt a Suicide Risk Assessment (SRA) during the 2021-22 school year within the West Chester Area School District (WCASD). The rate of SRA referrals this school year is easily on track to eclipse that number. The mental health crises our students are facing feels almost insurmountable – almost, but not quite. While 544 SRAs are 544 too many, each and every one of them is an opportunity for staff to reach out to those students and their families with the mental support, assistance and resources they require.

According to the WCASD's Director of Pupil Services, Melissa Kleiman, "We want our students to feel like our schools are safe spaces for them to express their thoughts and feelings to trusted and trained adults. Our fear was, prior to our current level of supports being in place, we may not have fully captured the daily struggles our students were going through." Facing rising student mental health needs along with the potential for staff burnout, District leaders recognized the urgency of the mental health crisis for students well before COVID-19. Students and staff were struggling, and change wasn't an option, it was a necessity.

With an increase in mental health staff, a clear intervention pathway with tiered levels of support and an overall prioritization of student wellness, students in the WCASD are now able to experience mental health support that makes this crisis surmountable. For the purposes of this publication, the focus will be on how tiered levels of mental health interventions have made it possible to best utilize mental health staff and supports in a wide reaching and equitable manner.

Located in southeastern Pennsylvania, the WCASD serves nearly 13,000 students in 17 school buildings spread out across a 75-square mile footprint. The student demographic consists of 76.6% White, 9.1% Asian/Pacific Islander, 6.9% Hispanic, 4.5% Black and 2.9% Multi-Racial. An academic and mental health leader within Chester County, the district is consistently listed among the best on state and national reports such as *U.S. News and World Report*, *Newsweek* and *Niche*. Our mission statement is "to educate and inspire our students to achieve their personal best." Academically, we are achieving our mission. It is time to put equal emphasis on our social, emotional and mental health goals.

The WCASD uses a Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) to address the needs of its students. The source document, *Advancing Comprehensive School Mental Health Systems: Guidance from the Field*, states that, "Many schools deliver instructional

or behavioral intervention to students in varying intensities, also known as a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS), to address the academic needs of the larger student body, including (but not limited to) students with identified disabilities" (National Center for School Mental Health, 2020). These approaches focus first on interventions for the good of all students, often implemented in a classroom or large group setting. Then, using data to make informed decisions, it applies evidence-based approaches to the continuing, possibly more intensive needs, of smaller groups of students. For individual students with the most significant needs, even more intensive and one-on-one interventions are utilized. At the WCASD, MTSS has, for years, been an extremely effective means of academic and behavioral support. Within the past few years, the district has developed an MTSS model with a mental health

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framework that concentrates on tiered levels of staff support, interventions and focused mental health processes.

Tier I supports generally focus on teaching and reinforcing positive social, emotional and behavioral skill sets. These school and classwide activities are proactive and preventative. For nearly 10 years, the WCASD has implemented the Second Step curriculum in our kindergarten through fifth-grade classrooms (Classroom for Children, 2017). Second Step follows the five CASEL social and emotional learning competencies of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, responsible decision making and relationship skills. These competencies lay the groundwork for strengthening our students' continued social and emotional learning at the secondary level.

In addition, most of our elementary schools are trained in Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports (PBIS). This is an evidence-based, tiered framework for supporting all students' behavioral, academic, social, emotional and mental health (Center on PBIS, n.d.). At the secondary level, the skills taught in elementary grades are reinforced further by classroom meetings, restorative practice circles and school-wide assemblies on topics such as suicide prevention or Question, Persuade, Refer (QPR Institute, n.d.), drug and alcohol awareness and prevention and social media savvy, just to name a few. It is critical that parents and families are as educated and comfortable with these topics as their children. To that end, the WCASD provides coordinated monthly parent workshops on complementary topics and many others. To reach as many parents as possible, these workshops are offered in English with simultaneous interpretation in Spanish.

Tier II supports are provided for students who have been identified through self, teacher or parent referral, needs assessments and the MTSS process. They may be experiencing less severe mental health challenges or mild distress that is causing academic, social or emotional impairment. These students may be seen in groups or possibly individually, depending on their needs. Thankfully, the WCASD has a robust mental health staff that can identify issues early and put appropriate mental health supports in place.

At the Tier II level of intervention, school counselors and intervention specialists are generally the first layer of support. Individual and group counseling, student check-ins, implementation of motivational behavior plans and "flash passes" are some of the more common strategies utilized to



support students. Schools have recently begun teaming with their safety personnel in order to encourage "mentoring" relationships that foster healthy and positive interaction with law enforcement in and out of the school setting. The WCASD is extremely fortunate to have several other area partners that team with our staff to bolster positive mental health, as well. This past year, the district partnered with West Chester University's (WCU) PsyD program. Their students completed needs assessments to determine what types of groups will be beneficial for Tier II

high school students. They found that improving executive functioning and increasing anxiety reduction strategies were two areas where students could benefit from group work. The groups were quite successful and during the 2023-24 school year, the district is planning to utilize these WCU students in the three middle schools, as well.

One of the most important and influential factors affecting Tier II mental health supports is consistent, positive and authentic interaction with students' family and outside of school support systems. The WCASD staff, including counselors, intervention specialists, psychologists, case-workers and administration, build and maintain relationships that allow school and home to come together in support of students.

Of course, there are times when whole-class or even small-group intervention may not be specialized or intensive enough to address the mental health concerns of students who need individualized interventions for the significant distress and functional impairment they are experiencing. Tier III interventions allow staff to determine the level of this need and then implement appropriate mediation.

The WCASD employs several methods of assessing need. Again, the most personal and immediate data collection comes from either the student's own report, parent input or staff observations. In addition to this, the WCASD uses several mental and behavioral health screeners to assess challenging areas more accurately. At the secondary level, Behavioral Health Works (BHW) is provided to students for self-administration and staff scoring (BHW, n.d.). The results of this screener drive the possible need for a greater level (Tier III) of intercession. One example of Tier III interventions provided by the WCASD includes the opportunity to recover academic credits in a small, supportive setting within each high school. In this special program called APT (Achieve, Progress, Transition), students meet with trained academic staff and have ready access to mental health support. In

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addition to credit recovery, students who may be transitioning in or out of mental health placement are able to transition back into the school setting with a smaller class size and more one on one attention.

Another Tier III intervention available to students with more intensive mental health needs is the opportunity to see a mental health specialist. The WCASD partners with the Chester County Intermediate Unit (CCIU) to provide licensed counselors at all 17 of the district's schools. This supportive school counseling typically occurs once a week and is goal driven and needs based. Mental health specialists, although employed by the CCIU, work closely with our schools' MTSS and Individualized Education Program (IEP) teams to coordinate cohesive services for our neediest students.

In many school districts across America, the MTSS model of tiered supports has been proven successful in academic achievement and remediation. At the WCASD, this model is proving to be just as effective at allowing students to thrive socially and emotionally at school. Again, the WCASD's mission statement is "to educate and inspire students to achieve their personal best" – that includes the entire student...their academic best, their personal best and their emotional best.

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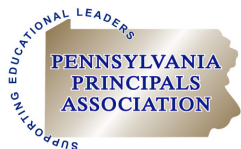
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