**Michigan lacks much-needed mental-health support for K-12 students**

Updated Apr 11; Posted Apr 10



**By**[**Monica Scott**](http://connect.mlive.com/staff/mlscott/posts.html)

mscott2@mlive.com

GRANDVILLE, MI - In a dimly lit classroom, seven kids struggling with mental-health conditions sit in a circle on the carpet.

The discussion among the students inside the Grandville elementary classroom is focused on coping with feeling overwhelmed.

"I went outside because I wasn't feeling good because of my anxiety and took my blanket,'' a fidgeting fifth-grade girl, struggling with social anxiety disorder and depression, told her classmates.

"I watched the clouds and looked for shapes in them. It made me feel better.''

Other students, as young as a second-grader, were battling various types of anxiety, depression, attention-deficit and hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), or behavior disorder, in the mindful group session.

The Grandville students battling mental-health conditions are far from alone.

Students with mental-health issues are walking the halls of schools throughout West Michigan and the United States.

One in five children in the country ages 3 through 17 have a diagnosable mental, emotional or behavioral disorder in a given year, but only 20 percent of those children are ever diagnosed and receive treatment. If they get help at all, it is usually at school.

Grandville teachers can refer children to one of the district's mental-health clinicians for support, when student disorders manifest in classroom behavior, academic performance or absenteeism.

"The reason we are focusing on this issue is because we know that kids can't learn when they are dealing with emotional and mental-health issues,'' said Grandville mental health clinician Anyssa Grendel.

Some school districts, like Grandville, are taking more of an aggressive approach.

But that isn't always the case. Due to financial constraints from academic needs, mental-health support is limited in many cash-strapped school districts. The amount of licensed, trained psychologists, counselors and/or social workers in-house is insufficient at most districts.

Michigan is third worst in the country when it comes to the ratio of students to counselors at 729 to 1, according to the American School Counselor Association. A ratio of 250 to 1 is recommended.

And a school counselor's job extends well beyond just college and career guidance by including referrals to mental-health professionals and short-term counseling. Counselors and social workers already have heavy caseloads on top of the need to provide mental support.

Michigan lawmakers on the House Mental Health Task Force, who recently introduced a bill offering mental-health first aid to teachers, admit some schools don't have the mental-health support they need.

"While it is helpful to have social workers and psychological professionals in a school, for areas that cannot afford these professionals, mental-health crisis and mental-health first aid training for teachers and other school staff will better serve these students,'' according to the bipartisan task force.

Amy Campbell, president of the Michigan Association of School Psychologists, said almost no school comes close to meeting the recommended ratios for school psychologists. While the recommended ratio is one psychologist per 500 to 700 students, she said the range in Michigan is estimated to be from 1 to 800 all the way up to 1 to 4,000.

To successfully support children's mental health, experts and advocates say, it not only takes money to hire knowledgeable professionals but the proper framework to deliver the services effectively. Everyone points to one model - "multi-tiered system of supports."

In a nutshell, it's a layering of supports that allows schools to respond to the academic, behavioral, mental-health and emotional needs of every student with tiers of increasingly intensive interventions.

"Certain behaviors can be very disruptive to the classroom, but it is a cry for help," said Grendel, who has been teaching students emotional resiliency.

**'An uphill battle'**

Experts say a good school program has mental-health professionals working as a team with campus social workers, counselors and teachers for the early identification and treatment of children with mental-health conditions.

Rebecca Stevens, school-based services program manager for Grand Rapids-based Family Outreach Center, said districts that understand the need for a comprehensive approach have hired mental-health clinicians and/or psychologists to help tackle emotional and behavioral health.

"The entire school population has to work to reduce the stigma around mental health, so they are not fighting an uphill battle," said Stevens, who said services are never forced on families.

"Districts have to educate to take away the stigma from receiving services and support. You can have the best clinician in the world but if there is the stigma of being crazy, families are less likely to access services."

**More than headline-grabbing incidents**

Youth mental illness only seems to capture local and national attention, educators say, when there is a mass shooting, public suicide or extreme bullying incident.

The national dialogue currently revolves around the 19-year-old who allegedly returned to the Florida high school that expelled him and killed 17 students and educators on Valentine's Day. In addition to calls from some for stiffer gun-control laws, others point to the gunman's alleged mental health.

"There are a lot of kids and adults who struggle with small things and if we could give them the attention they need early on, I believe we could prevent suicide, bullying and other issues,'' said Grandville's Central Elementary Principal Angie Thornburg.

Thornburg said she hopes people come to realize mental health and the social and emotional well-being of children and adolescents start long before the incidents lead the local and national news.

Schools have often become the de facto mental health care system for many children and adolescents.

But many public schools in the state and across the nation aren't as prepared as they should be to deal with the problem.

Mental-health disorders are affecting students of all races and socio-economic backgrounds from urban, suburban and rural schools.

Grandville, for example, is a predominately white suburb of Grand Rapids with nearly 52,000 residents. Economically disadvantaged students represent more than 30 percent of the 5,600 students in the school district, according to state data.

"This is not relegated to the inner city or poor areas,'' said Olga Acosta Price, director of the Center for Health and Health Care in Schools, at George Washington University.

"We're seeing mental health issues in all areas across the United States. It's pretty pervasive.''

**Efforts in the Grand Rapids area**

The Kent Intermediate School District consists of 20 districts that serve 94,458 students. School districts are at different levels in terms of the mental help they can provide students but they share best practices.

They've embraced new initiatives, sought grant money and connected with providers in their community to serve students struggling with a range of mental-health issues.

Kent County is part of a federal initiative. In 2014, Michigan was among 20 states to receive a five-year Project AWARE Grant and the School Climate Transformation Grant for nearly $13 million. Pilot programs are in Kent, Jackson and Oakland counties.

Kentwood, Godwin Heights, Godfrey-Lee, Sparta and Grandville school districts are part of the pilot.

"As educators, we need to remove the barriers to learning and the barriers are not always academic,'' said Grandville Public Schools Superintendent Roger Bearup, whose district has been among the most aggressive by providing additional staff focused on mental-health support for the 5,646 students in all buildings.

"When you talk about being proactive, you really need to focus your efforts on intervening early to help kids and their families. This helps improve the learning environment for other students as well.''

The goals of the grant project are to increase awareness of mental-health issues among school-age youth, train educators and other staff to detect and respond to mental-health issues and connect student families to appropriate services.

"Students with mental-health needs are more likely to get evaluated and treated if mental-health workers are on school grounds,'' said Christy Buck, Grandville school board member and executive director of the Mental Health Foundation of West Michigan.

"We know that 50 percent of mental-health conditions come on before age 14, so we have a window of opportunity to recognize the onset and get students the care they need before things get too bad. Mental health must start in elementary school."

Left untreated, mental-health disorders can lead to failure in school, behavioral problems, truancy, substance abuse and, in the most extreme cases, suicide, Buck said.

Districts are urging their staff - from teachers to bus drivers - to undergo eight hours of Mental Health First Aid Training. Employees are learning how to identify, understand and respond to signs of mental illness for referrals or to help someone in crisis such as contemplating suicide.

"This is CPR for the brain that gives school employees the tools to recognize and respond to students who might be in crisis," said Karyll Russell, a Mental Health First Aid instructor and counselor at Sparta Middle School.

"They're learning the ability to see beyond behaviors to what might be an underlying trauma, mental illness or emotional problem."

More than 165 Grandville employees, including 130 teachers, have completed Mental Health First Aid Training. Buck said the district has been actively working to help students with mental-health issues for over a dozen years, after being engaged and motivated by the parent of suicide victim.

**People, programs and money**

For more than a decade, educators nationwide have reported the increased need for mental-health services, but decreased or same-level funding has been a barrier to delivering more support.

Even those districts shifting resources and sacrificing other positions still don't believe they are doing enough. However, school leaders say doing nothing is not an option.

"Without our program, there would be more students in a greater state of crisis, more acute issues, more disruptions at younger grade levels, and more older students with greater rates of absenteeism and withdrawing from school," Forest Hills Superintendent Dan Behm said about the 9,850-student district's mental-health support.

"The issue and the needs around mental health are nested within our larger challenges with inadequate state funding. The needs around mental health are highly people and time intensive."

Behm said districts need trained professionals to work with students and families but funding from the state doesn't even keep pace with inflation. He said Forest Hills has three behavioral health liaisons working with social workers and counselors to support kids.

This year, Grandville invested approximately $350,000 to have mental-health support in all district schools.

Bearup said that would have been impossible if residents had not previously approved a 10-year, $19.9 million regional enhancement millage for Kent County schools to prevent programming and staffing cuts.

Bearup said districts are forced to decide where to place resources - students social and emotional needs or instructional needs, when both are a necessity for students to learn. He said often districts attempt to stretch funding to do a little of both because of their importance.

"While I think it is far from enough, I know the connections that our people have made with kids and their parents and they are having a huge impact," he said.

**Making a difference**

Partnerships between community groups and schools are one way to help offset the financial constraints.

In Kent County, school leaders say they work to weave together a network of district resources and those in the broader community to ensure students who need additional supports receive services.

"Several districts have been providing clinical therapists through the Kent School Services Network, on their own, or through community providers, but funding is really a challenge,'' said Kent ISD Assistant Superintendent Ron Koehler.

The Kent School Services Network created the "community school" model which brings health and human services into the school building, including mental-health clinicians, to serve students and families.

Placing services at school is intended to remove barriers that families have and help keep students in class learning. There is a $35,000 fee per building. The agency seeks grants to keep the cost down.

KSSN serves 44 schools in nine districts, including the largest districts in the county and those with some of the highest poverty levels such as Grand Rapids, Kentwood and Wyoming schools.

In 2016-17, 14,434 students and 5,784 families were seen by KSSN site team clinicians for mental-health services - many more than once. Clinicians are from Arbor Circle, D.A. Blodgett/St. John's or Family Outreach Center.

Even with the school resources and training in place, parents are considered the best advocate for recognizing a change in their child that's an indicator of a mental-health issue.

Backing up parents now are teachers and support staff trained to identify kids in trouble early and flag them for support from mental-health clinicians and/or referrals to community providers.

"Now that we are being taught to see those early signs of trouble that a child may need help, it is so nice to be able to have the district support to refer them before things reach a significant level," said Stephanie Lancto, who teaches Young Kindergarten at South Elementary in Grandville.

Lancto said mental illness is an issue people haven't wanted to talk about openly. She said Grandville and other school districts investing in mental-health support are encouraging meaningful community conversations that is taking away the stigma that can be a barrier to getting help.