

School District of New Berlin's Mental Health Advisory Committee Working to Identify, Alleviate Mental Health Barriers in Schools

New Berlin, Wis. – At a time when concerns and awareness about mental health in schools and society are more prevalent than ever, the School District of New Berlin is proud to have available the joint resources provided by the cooperative partners involved with the SDNB's Mental Health Advisory Committee.

This unique committee is comprised of school staff and officials, mental health professionals and parents with a collaborative focus on developing proactive strategies to identify potential mental health-related barriers to academic success in a safe environment. This committee works to provide learning to students, staff and parents around social emotional learning (SEL) and mental health issues.

"We are coming together from different disciplines with one goal: protecting the health of our children," said Debra Cesario, a School Psychotherapist with Family Service of Waukesha and committee member. "Students can't leave their trauma 'at the door'. Identifying trauma early and building effective methods to improve resiliency along with social and emotional development is critical to insulating our children from mental illness."

The committee, founded in 2018, meets at least four times a year to discuss current social emotional and mental health initiatives that are occurring within the SDNB and to learn about new ideas and practices from the committee's parents and mental health partners. Several great ideas have come from this advisory committee such as increased suicide awareness, SEL parent university events, improved professional learning for staff and more.

Over the summer, with the help of the Education Foundation of New Berlin and as a result of the work of the Mental Health Advisory Committee, the SDNB received a mental health grant from the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. The district will receive \$53,700 in both 2019-20 and 2020-21 to expand school-based mental healthcare counseling services provided within the district through a partnership with Family Service of Waukesha.

"There is so much that goes into educating students today. It's not as simple as getting them in a classroom, testing their knowledge and then sending them on their way," said SDNB Chief Academic Officer Dr. Kellie Sanders. "There's student anxiety, depression, stress and a plethora of other social and emotional issues, which is why the hard work and dedication of this committee is so invaluable."

Tiffany Mercer is a parent representative on the committee. She has two students in the district.

"I am proud to be a part of the work that the School District of New Berlin is doing to identify children at risk, improve social and emotional health, and to promote positive mental health and wellbeing for our community," Mercer said. "The time has come to bring mental health out into the open, start talking about these issues as a community and educating people that taking care of one's mental health is no different than taking care of one's physical health."

Mercer said the committee strives to break down the stigmas surrounding mental health.

“Part of the work that we're doing on this committee is to make these topics more accessible to the parents and youth of our community so we can support each child's journey to a higher level of wellness overall,” she added.

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