

Student mental-health issues can be serious

By Erin Borla
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While it may be difficult to glide through school unnoticed here in Sisters, there are real issues facing teens today. Managing stress levels in a healthy way is very important.

According to an anonymous survey of Sisters High School students last school year, 41 percent of juniors and seniors had contemplated suicide. On the same survey 49 percent of juniors and seniors said they were not at all or slightly comfortable talking with their parents or guardians about life issues.

Those numbers showcase how important it is to have services available within the school.

“Winter term I worked with several students (at the middle school) with varying degrees of concerns from relationship problems to having suicidal thoughts,” says Brook Jackson, contract mental-health professional at Sisters Middle School.

It’s not uncommon during times of intense stress for young people to feel like they have no way out and share suicidal ideation with a teacher or friend. Jackson and Sisters High School counselor Charlie Kanzig work together to provide parent-education classes. They have tools to help students and families normalize feeling overwhelmed or learn healthy ways to handle extreme stress. There are tools, websites, books and support groups available at each school as well.

“This is the reality in any community — not just Sisters,” says Jackson.

While families may have other avenues of support through friends, churches and working together as a family unit, the mental-health support and counselors at the schools should be thought of as another tool in the toolbox.

Working with school

counselors should be a collaborative effort.

“Some of these issues are not going to go away,” says Wendy Vernon, who works in the field at Sisters Elementary School. “It helps to talk about it.”

“It’s about increasing communication and awareness,” says Jackson. “Just as I would reach out to the families — I want families to reach out to me and have an alliance at the school. It’s a relationship. If parents don’t like me and if the kids don’t like me, it’s not going to go very well.”

Community members may remember their school counselors helping with scheduling or testing, as well as offering a bit of advice

here and there. The “new school of counseling” is so much more.

“It’s far from sitting in an office and waiting for students to come to the door,” says Jackson. “I have been co-teaching classes, working with teaching staff providing trainings and leading group therapy sessions.”

All of the staff and contractors have spoken similarly about how they would prefer to have a certified counselor in each building, coupled with mental-health support. Mental-health professionals often come in and assist in times of crisis, whereas counselors are focused more on preventative work. With few counselors, preventative

in-class work does not happen as frequently as desired. Both services can complement each other and help students flourish even through difficult times.

While the district is trying to move in that direction, it will take them some time to get to that point.

In the meantime, various additional strategies are in place to further support students’ emotional and mental development. Last year, staff training was important at all three schools. The Mind-Up curriculum was used at both the Sisters Elementary School as well as the middle school and Mental Health First Aid was used at the high school to train all staff.

Each school also developed a Student Effectiveness Team (SET) comprised of a counselor (or mental-health provider), school nurse, special-education teacher, school-administrator and general education teacher that meet weekly to review centralized referral forms and come up with a plan for each student as needed. Each plan consists of both emotional and behavioral interventions as well as academic support.

Regardless of how funding has come together and how it will continue to shake out throughout the coming years, each provider has shared the same sentiment — they are here to support the kids in Sisters.



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