

YOUTH: Counselors are one layer of mental health services

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the counseling role this year.

When asked to define their professional roles, all four agreed that they are advocates, listeners, problem-solvers, teachers, encouragers, planners and facilitators — among other things.

The American School Counselor's Association (ASCA) has a well-developed model of standards for school counselors. Even a cursory look at the comprehensive model helps to illustrate the depth and breadth of what school counselors are tasked with.

Counselors can be viewed as one of the first layers of support for students in the school setting. They are available to consult on academic, behavioral, and emotional issues. They can serve as mediators in cases of conflict and misunderstanding, whether that is student to student or student to staff member.

Kuinert added, "School counselors are part of the education team. We work to help students reach their academic goals, we provide social and emotional support and teaching, as well as postsecondary planning. School counselors provide services in a variety of ways. We collaborate with teachers, administrators, parents, and the community. School counselors may teach lessons in classrooms (mainly K-8) as a way to support all students, run small groups that focus on building certain skills and/or provide support, or work with students individually on a short-term basis."

Kuinert says that the most common issues that are addressed at the elementary level have to do with self-regulation and being able to identify feelings.

"We teach students tools and coping skills to address these issues," she said.

Jackson says that at the middle school level there tends to be a notable number of students grappling with a feeling of being overwhelmed, which stems from a variety of factors.

"Just being of middle school age can be challenging because of rapid brain and body development, but other factors play a part as well," he said. "Social issues, family stress, trying to do well in school — any number of environmental factors — contribute to kids' emotional well-being."

According to Jackson, kids often feel overwhelmed because they really want to

do well, but other things in their lives are impacting their emotional well-being, and they don't yet have the experience and coping skills to manage it all. Jackson agrees that phone usage and social media certainly play a role in the prevalence of stress and anxiety in students.

"These kids don't know a world without all the social media stimulus," he said, "and that can make it hard for parents to even recognize how different things are from when they were kids."

He noted, "Everything is fast and crazy for many adults as well, which is a significant environmental factor for families."

The counselors are all concerned that kids and adults seldom have quiet reflection time.

"Research is indicating that not having reflection time — allowing our brains to sort of rest and renew — is affecting brain maturation and can lead to not developing social skills such as empathy," said Weddel.

Jackson believes that the impact from overuse of smartphones with all of its trappings may lead to a health crisis as impactful as cigarette smoking was years ago.

"America ended up changing rules and laws to help eradicate smoking, and we may have to do the same, at least in some settings, with smartphones," he said. "Phones are a game-changer. The way we consume information is totally different than when parents were kids, so they can no longer refer back and say 'When I was a kid...' because it's so different."

Jackson is also concerned about students not sleeping well.

"We hear this more and more, and although we don't know all the causes we are actually talking to parents frequently about 'sleep hygiene,' which is a whole science now."

Sleep hygiene means having a nightly routine, including what time a person goes to bed, how comfortable the bed is, hydration, having gotten exercise during the day, eliminating emotionally stimulating activities (including phone use) in the two hours before bedtime, and more.

A bulk of Rick Kroytz's role is to assist high school students in being successful while in school and formulating plans for the future. According to Kroytz, students with some idea about what they are aiming for after graduation feel more secure and remain more focused. School counselors at all levels do work with students in goal-setting and looking into the future.

Kuinert added that school counselors are collaborators within the school system.

"School counselors do not work alone," she said "We collaborate and depend on other school staff so we can meet the needs of our students. We often work with our school nurses to provide the social/emotional support that students with medical needs also have. We consult with our school psychologist on the needs of students and what interventions may be necessary. Our teachers see their students every day and are often the ones who will refer a student to the school counselor."

Counselors are often called upon to respond to issues that crop up for students and families.

"We are often

first-responders to a crisis to help mitigate issues that need immediate attention," said Jackson. "We can listen and provide immediate support and then help make referrals for further care as needed. While we can't do long-term therapy, we are often the starting place for addressing concerns students and families have."

Ultimately, school counselors are all operating within an educational setting and the healthier students are, the better they learn.

thinking, they will learn better," said Jackson.

School counselors in Sisters want families to be aware that there is access in Sisters to Deschutes County Behavioral Health, as well as a number of private practitioners who specialize in children and adolescents that include licensed social workers, licensed professional counselors, family therapists, psychologists and a psychiatrist.

A counselor from The Child Center, James Janoski, recently became available during the school week in Sisters and will be more established for services in the new year.

The school counselors say they work hard to make themselves available to kids and families.

"Students should be able to access us by dropping by, sending a message, catching us in the hallway, or letting a trusted adult know they want to see us," said Jackson. "We encourage parents to call us as well when they have concerns."

“When kids feel safe and secure and are able to manage their own emotions and thinking, they will learn better — Brook Jackson

“When kids feel safe and secure and are able to manage their own emotions and

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