

Mental health

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Freshmen are one of the age groups that have had the most issues coming back, mental health professionals said.

“There’s a lot of room to grow, that’s loud and clear,” Moore said. “The data has told us that kids are struggling.”

Support is hard to access

Providing comprehensive mental health services any time is difficult, especially for those with acute mental health needs, as psychiatric support for young people is drastically underfunded across the state, Moore said. During the height of the pandemic, it was even more challenging.

One of the biggest struggles was reaching students virtually, Rivera said.

Even if counselors could get in touch with a student, it was harder to read their emotions online and the students were often more hesitant to share.

Rivera said it was also harder for students to seek help outside of the school counseling department, with many professional therapists going virtual.

Students were not diagnosed with disabilities as early as is ideal because of a shortage of doctors, appointments and access, which created a ripple effect. There were students in general education classes who shouldn’t be, or who needed accommodations and didn’t have them, which negatively affected their health and self-esteem, Strouse said.

All these barriers have made it hard for the district to provide the comprehensive, multi-tiered support they aim to. They don’t just want to be helping kids in crisis and mitigating worst-case scenarios, but the pandemic and an increase in those struggling with acute conditions has made their goal of proactiveness difficult at times, Moore said.

“What we need to be looking at is some of those upstream issues and it starts with safe and welcoming schools where every student feels a favorable sense of belonging and receives the right support at the right time,” Moore said. “But right now, that’s aspirational.”

Students at the forefront

In 2018, students at Florida’s Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School raised the profile of conversations around student mental health to a national level as they talked candidly about the PTSD, anxiety and depression that came from surviving the shooting that killed 17 of their classmates.

Since then, middle school, high school and college students across the country have had increasingly active roles in ensuring that they are safe and have their mental health needs supported.

It was around this time that Salem-Keizer began prioritizing student voices around various aspects of education, from equity to mental health, Moore said. Now, young people throughout Salem are starting organizations, advocating to the district and working with mental health providers in schools to improve services.

With the return to in-person schooling, the district has seen student interest in mental health increase even further, Moore said.

Mohindra is the president of a student-led suicide prevention non-profit called Live to Tell.

“The whole purpose of the nonprofit is ‘by students, for students,’” Mohindra said. “As students that have experienced suicidal ideation or have family or friends who have, no one can tell us our needs better than ourselves.”

Recently, they collected and shared their peers’ stories — anonymously — in a mental health resource guide the group created and distributed around the district. They wanted students to know there were other people who had struggled or were struggling.

One student wrote, “I didn’t want to let my little brother down,” when asked why they decided not to take their life.

Another wrote that they didn’t seek help because they “didn’t want to worry others.”

And several detailed how people didn’t recognize their cries for help, or didn’t take them seriously.

Along with these stories, the guide tells students how to help someone or get help during a mental health crisis, how to identify signs of suicidal ideation and how to help improve mental well-being.

They’re working on adapting a version for parents now, Neha Srinivasan, the nonprofit’s secretary and a South Salem High junior,

said.

Giving students the tools to succeed

Members of Live to Tell believe it’s not only important to have kids in these conversations about mental health, it’s also important that students are given the tools to help in a crisis — because it could mean the difference between life and death.

“A lot of times students are the first ones to see mental health crises in their peers. They aren’t always going to go to adults first,” Mohindra said.

Mohindra has been trained by his counselor in Question, Persuade, Respond, which teaches people how to identify someone in crisis, start conversations about suicide and connect them with resources. Almost all district staff are trained in it, as well as some students.

Mohindra has used his twice.

Both times he had friends who were actively considering self-harm. Using his training, he sat down and had long conversations with them, after which he was able to help them get professional support.

He’s not sure they’d still be alive if he hadn’t been able to help them.

Blueprint schools

Centering student opinions in conversations around mental health is a priority and many of the systems being implemented by the district are based on requests from students, Moore said.

“Superintendent Perry has really leaned into student voice as a critical part of the work that we do. We should be listening to students frequently and incorporating their feedback into how we care for each other,” Moore said.

This year, South Salem High School added a calm room, with help from their mental health advocacy club Saxon Strong. The calm room serves as a safe space for students, where they can “take a breath and slow down,” Srinivasan said.

The room is a repurposed classroom, hosting couches, padded chairs, tables, fidget toys, books, pillows and blankets, along with words of encouragement adorning the walls.

It is also a place counselors can take students in crisis, outside of their offices, Mohindra said.

When one of Mohindra’s friends was struggling with her mental health, she would go to the counseling center and they would sit her in the calm room.

Before the pandemic, members of Saxon Strong also worked with the counseling department to modernize how students can sign up for counseling appointments — making it all online.

Two other schools stand at the forefront of the district’s mental health investments: North Salem and McKay high schools.

The district is investing more than \$400,000 to improve resources at these schools, with the ideas coming directly from students and staff, Moore said.

McKay will receive its own Community Wellness Center, or calm room. Moore said they’re working on getting a “highly trained” person specifically to staff that space.

North already has a calm room, Paul Quach, a senior at North, said. Their money from the district will be invested in the counseling programs, as well as in improving family outreach. They’ll be creating a long-term, mental health awareness plan for the school too.

The school is also creating a self-efficacy course students can take online for credit. The students will go through modules and be connected with a clinician for support at the end of the course.

The district aims to increase the number of clinicians in both of these schools, specifically recruiting bilingual and bicultural ones from private practice.

Districtwide, officials are working to increase the number of staff to support behavioral and mental health, particularly at schools with larger staff-to-student ratios. The proposed additions in this year’s budget would bring the total number of school counselors to 123 and psychologists to 15, Moore said.

Salem-Keizer’s average ratio of counselors to students is 1-321, compared to 1-255 in Portland Public Schools, Moore said. Salem-Keizer’s ratio also lags the 1-250 recommended by the American School Counselor Association.

And the difference between Salem-Keizer’s ratio and the recommended numbers grows even more when looking at social workers and psychologists.

The School Social Work Association of

and 22.

The work began in response to an executive order Gov. Kate Brown issued in March 2020, within which she directed state agencies to work toward reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Brown issued her order shortly after an ambitious yet controversial greenhouse gas emissions cap-and-trade bill died in the Legislature for the second consecutive year.

Land Conservation and Development Commission Vice-Chair Anyeley Hallová described the rules as “98% there” after the May 20 meeting. With dozens of pieces of testimony already introduced, staff will review feedback until the July 21 meeting. Any new written testimony on the temporary rules will be accepted through July 1.

Local leaders respond

Stakeholders responded during Thursday’s meeting and in written testimony with

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America recommends a ratio of one school social worker to every 250 students, while Salem-Keizer’s social workers serve an average of 1,795 students. The National Association of School Psychologists recommends a ratio of 1-500. Portland Public Schools has a ratio of 1-845, while Salem-Keizer’s numbers will sit at 1-2,630 when all positions are filled, Moore said.

Increasing staff wellness

In 2016, the district began increasing the social-emotional and behavioral health supports available in school, as well as the amount of money dedicated to it in their yearly budget. That year, a combination of “broad recognition of students with acute mental health needs,” along with a number of completed suicides, made mental health a priority, Moore said.

Now, the district spends approximately \$38 million paying support staff — counselors, psychologists, social workers, instructional support assistants and behavior specialists — and increasing partnerships, staff trainings and other services.

One of the district’s goals going forward is to focus on staff wellness and mental health training, Moore said. When staff lack support, they are more likely to leave, be unable to provide proper care to students or resort to their biases.

So, the district aims to provide staff with more tools to address their own mental health, from outside help to in-school systems.

“When adults are not doing well, we unintentionally engage in behavior that contributes to negative outcomes,” Moore said.

The students agreed that it was also important that teachers have mental health support training. More than 4,700 of Salem-Keizer’s approximately 5,650 staff are currently Question, Persuade, Respond trained, Aaron Harada, Salem-Keizer’s communications project manager, said.

Teachers are often the frontline. They’re the adults that students will reach out to first for help, so they need to be equipped to support the mental health of the youth, Srinivasan said. And teachers who are well-versed in mental health matters can also help themselves if they’re struggling, creating a positive cycle of support.

“If they know how to help students with mental health, they know how to help themselves too,” Mohindra said.

Diversifying support staff

Another priority for student advocates and the district is increasing the cultural competency and diversity of mental health staff.

Quach struggled with mental health his freshman year. He thinks if there had been an Asian-American counselor available, that would have changed a lot of his experience early in high school. It’s one of the reasons he’s so passionate about advocacy work now.

A lack of cultural diversity in staff tasked with addressing mental health has a litany of consequences for students, Quach said.

Counselors of color understand cultural expectations because they’ve lived through

a range of perspectives, from fully in support, to recommending postponement, to strong opposition.

Even within the Salem and Eugene regions, city, transportation and business groups were split on the efficacy of the rules.

Ian Davidson, president of the board of directors of the Salem Area Mass Transit District (a.k.a. Cherriots), expressed the board’s “full support” for the rules in written comments. He said building better infrastructure for pedestrians and bicyclists, changing vehicle parking availability and creating housing and job density would work together to improve mass transit.

“High quality transit services relies on precisely the outcomes that the CFEC rules seek to accomplish,” Davidson’s May 19 letter read, in part.

On the other hand, six Oregon Democratic lawmakers representing the Eugene region sent a letter to the commission May 16 summing up the concerns the cities raised and

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them, and they can help connect students with culturally appropriate resources, Srinivasan and Mohindra emphasized.

“I’m constantly balancing finding my own identity and my parent’s expectations,” Srinivasan said.

The district has made some strides here, increasing the number of counselors, social workers and psychologists who are bilingual and people of color. However, both students and the district say there’s more to be done.

Of Salem-Keizer’s current 12.5 psychologists, four are bilingual and two are bicultural as well. Of the 22 social workers, four speak two or more languages. And there are 14 bilingual counselors among the 123 district-wide.

Looking to the future

Increasing the accessibility of resources in the future — so that they’re not just available to kids when they are in the building — is also important to Mohindra.

“Most of the resources that are currently available are only accessible at schools. But how do we help people who can’t show up to school every day?” Mohindra asked.

Another issue he pointed to was the massive caseloads counselors have. Counselors work on everything from changing class schedules to helping students in mental health crises. When they’re assigned to 350 students, that’s a huge job, Mohindra said.

Moore agreed that staff is spread thin, which is why the district has prioritized community partnerships. These partnerships, with community health groups like Trillium, provide students and family with access to counseling services that in-school counselors cannot provide.

But even this has its challenges, especially with the pandemic, as the need for clinicians is high while the availability is low, Moore said.

Rivera hopes to continue to make sure students know what supports are available to them — partnerships with outside mental health providers, resources in both English and Spanish and more.

And the students agree with that. Quach said schools can offer all these resources, but if students don’t know about them or don’t feel comfortable using them, there is no benefit.

“We can provide all these resources, but it doesn’t do anything if we don’t change the school culture,” Quach said.

How to get help

The National Suicide Prevention Line offers free, confidential support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress. A skilled, trained crisis worker provides assistance and resource referrals.

Call 1-800-273-8255 for help 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year. For assistance in Spanish, call 1-888-628-9454.

For the Youth Line, call 877-968-8491 or text ‘teen2teen’ to 839863.

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Rules

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canopy for shade and cooling. Reliance on trips requiring personal vehicles would be reduced and these areas would not typically contain large parking lots. At least 30% of current and projected housing needs would need to be contained within these climate-friendly zones.

Years of planning

The Climate Friendly and Equitable Communities temporary rules are the product of two years of work, including 160 meetings within Oregon’s Land Conservation and Development Department. The rule-making commission itself held 12 meetings.

Adoption of permanent rules is expected at the commission’s next meetings on July 21

and 22.

The work began in response to an executive order Gov. Kate Brown issued in March 2020, within which she directed state agencies to work toward reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Brown issued her order shortly after an ambitious yet controversial greenhouse gas emissions cap-and-trade bill died in the Legislature for the second consecutive year.

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asking the commissioners to delay implementation of the rules.

The cities of Springfield and Eugene filed letters 22 pages and 41 pages long, respectively, raising a variety of concerns about the rules and the language used. While the lawmakers acknowledged that some of these issues were addressed, “many of the significant issues raised ... have not actually been resolved,” according to their letter.

The lawmakers urged the commission not to move forward with the rules until these outstanding questions were settled. They additionally raised concerns about the costs the new rules would have for local jurisdictions; Springfield estimated its costs at \$5 million to \$7 million to undertake the initial work required by the new rules.

“It does not behoove anyone if technical elements remain in the rule that are problematic to implement, leaving space for confusion, delay and possible challenges,” the lawmakers wrote.