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Series *from A1*

While sitting in his office during spring break he describes “a continuum of care” that he wants each of his students to experience. This includes not only getting help with something such as algebra homework but, more importantly, getting the assistance they need with issues concerning mental health. As mental health issues in teenagers increase across the country, high-school aged students in small communities are no exception.

According to recent data, one out of every five students at Cottage Grove High School has had suicidal thoughts. This staggering statistic mirrors data from the Oregon Healthy Teen Survey in 2017, which shows that across the state 19 percent of juniors in high school have considered taking their own life.

In 2003, that figure in Lane County students was at 10 percent. Suicide is the second-leading cause of death for individuals between ages 10 and 24 according to the report.

And the amount of suicide deaths has been on the rise.

Throughout the opening two decades of the 21st century, young people across the country have faced more suicidal thoughts. In Cottage Grove, South Lane School District (SLSLD) has responded with various programs and resources to help students not just cope with the day-to-day anxieties they are facing but, ultimately, help these students survive.

For the Cottage Grove High School administration to understand what students are going through, they first

need to understand who their students are. In a recent presentation to staff and administrators at the school, a group of educators from around the state expanded on what they call “adverse childhood experiences,” or ACEs. These experiences run a wide range of events that “create stress beyond the level a child has the ability to effectively cope with.”

This includes everything from physical abuse and neglect, to dealing with a divorce. The report notes that the more ACEs a student has, the more likely they are to experience a variety of issues including poor health, academic failure and general behavioral issues.

One out of three students is believed to have at least one ACE which, in Cottage Grove alone, translates to about 250 students, according to Ingman. While having an ACE does not translate directly to suicidal thoughts,

one suicide risk factor,” says San Diego State University psychology professor Dr. Jean Twenge in the book “iGen”. The book takes a hard look at the rise of new technology and depression have grown together and are hitting a generation born after 1995 especially hard.

For Cottage Grove Dean of Students and teacher Chris Wells, this information rings true. As he sees students putting seemingly every interaction they have on Snapchat or Instagram, he has also seen a decline in meaningful face-to-face connections.

“I think we’ve also seen a lack of human connection even between kids and their families where it’s all electronics. We spend so much time TVs, computers, phones — stuff causing a degradation of human to human contact,” said Wells, who notes he is also guilty of this behavior. “We’re so-

kid, I have to get after the parents sometimes — but there are good relationships that are born out of that. There are kids that have a problem and they come to me.”

When a student is missing more school than normal or even approaching the dreaded level of chronic absenteeism (defined as missing at least 10 percent of the school year), they will most certainly here from Wells. In addition, so will the student’s family — in the form of a letter — explaining the situation and what missing days can mean for the student. Ultimately, high absenteeism can even result in going to court and a fine for parents.

But Wells works with all his resources to avoid this scenario. Sometimes it means getting a student an alarm clock, coffee in the morning or bribing them with a reward for a span of a few weeks of perfect attendance. It can also mean pairing these students with programs that can lift them up. Maybe they should join a team or club, or are in need of assistance from the McKinney Vento program. The goal is to give the student the necessary tools they need to succeed.

“I feel like we’re getting a really good view on how we see kids and how we can help kids. Because we’re doing a lot more work in trauma-informed care and in recognizing that many kids come to school with trauma from whatever,” said Wells. “It’s a spectrum and just how to best help kids with that. We’re working on how we can be a more welcoming and understanding place.”

With Wells often working as a first-line of defense at the high school, there are more systems set up to assist students. One intervention system that CGHS has installed this year has been a program that has teachers identify students they believe might be dealing with one or more ACE issues.

The teachers submit a form identifying what they believe might be an issue and there are conversations around what needs to be done next.

“We’ll get information from teachers and stuff like that and then try to get some quick interventions back to kids,” said Wells. “It’s a better way to recognize kids who might be in crisis. It’s also another way for us to get them referrals for some other service if need be. We’ve done stuff from counseling to ‘Hey, that kid needs glasses.’ The program is just another way for us to get a pulse of what’s going on with our kids.”

A key program at CGHS — and across South Lane School District as a whole — is South Lane

See **TEENS 8A**

“That’s the beauty of working with youth in general — to able to really provide them with the awareness that they have their own power... so much of our society sort of says: ‘You’re lesser than.’”

— Valeria Clarke, South Lane Mental health

the risk of facing these traumatic experiences is tied to an increase in mental health issues.

In addition to these ACEs, a different factor to the degradation of mental health in teenagers might be one that is sitting in their pockets: their cell phones. Recent research indicates that the rise in mental health issues may be tied to a rise in a growing attachment to smart phones and how these devices — with hours of screen time a day and a barrage of social media interaction — can actually increase a sense of isolation and feelings of depression.

“The link between screen time and mental health issues is distressingly clear: teens who spend more than three hours a day on electronic devices are 35 percent more likely to have at least

cial beings but we’re doing it through a different way.”

With students facing challenges that are hurting mental well-being, CGHS is interested in looking in how to help its students across the board. The school has a number of programs in place that, while not explicitly focused on stemming suicide, look to make students feel a little bit better at a time when it could have the biggest impact.

For the school to be effective in this role, the first step is getting students to show up. And for that job, Wells was put into his role as Dean of Students in which he deals with “all things attendance.”

“The problem with my attendance position is it seems inherently negative,” said Wells. “I have to get after a

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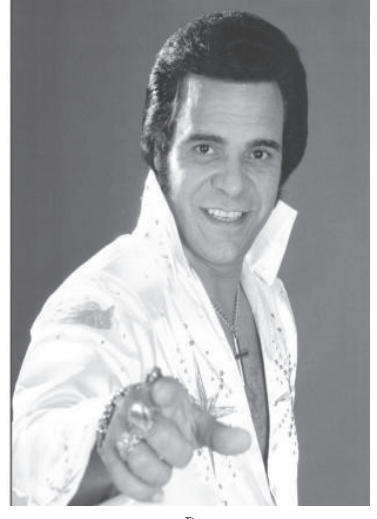

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