

Social workers aid Hermiston School District students

Moore, Medina and Smith meet with youngsters, seek solutions to problems

By ERICK PETERSON
Hermiston Herald

For more than a year, Hermiston School District social workers have been meeting with students and their families. Meeting one-on-one with students, the social workers counsel young people about mental health. Also, the social workers meet with the students and their families about resources to improve their lives.

Tricia Mooney, Hermiston School District superintendent, said the addition of these social workers is helpful, as they provide a higher level of service than school counselors. That is, they have sessions with students who need extra help, she said. This help, Mooney added, could even involve crisis situations.

The social worker's presence at the schools is especially necessary these days, the superintendent said, as many students are having difficulty transitioning from at-home studies to in-person schools.

Mooney said the district was able to hire these social workers thanks to 2019 Oregon legislation, the Student Success Act, which provided additional funds for Oregon schools.

During a recent interview at Hermiston High School, the social workers expressed satisfaction that they are bringing value to Hermiston schools. This value is especially high right now as these days are particularly stressful, they said.

Omar Medina at the high school

Omar Medina, who has an office at Hermiston High School, is the longest-serving social worker at the district. He was hired midway through last year. As is true for the social workers who



Ben Lonergan/Hermiston Herald

Students depart Hermiston High School at the start of winter break Dec. 17, 2021.

were hired later, he serves under the district's student services department. Prior to taking the position of social worker, however, he was a graduation coach at the high school.

There are some similarities between his work as a graduation coach and as a social worker, he said, as both positions involve one-on-one meetings with high school students. Nowadays, though, he does a more mental health work.

He said students are having a tough time. He sees teenagers who are suffering depression, anxiety, grief, loss and more. Also, many families are dealing with problems resulting from poverty. As such, he meets with families to direct them to resources, including food stamps

Since he has a master's degree in social work from George Fox University, he expressed confidence in his ability to help people. And, he said, his work is supported by the district. The district had long wanted to hire a social worker, Medina said. After hiring him, his employers saw fit to hire two more social workers

and are likely to hire more in the future, he said.

Sydney Moore at the elementary schools

Sydney Moore, who obtained her master's degree at Boise State University, is enjoying her first year as a social worker for the district, serving elementary students.

She said young children are facing a lot of hardships. Problems relating to the coronavirus pandemic are part of the problem, but they are not everything, she said. At the elementary level, according to Moore, students are dealing with many changes, including divorce.

These kids, she said, inspire her with their resilience. She said she sees many students who face serious problems, and yet they are still able to laugh at recess and communicate the best part of their day.

Moore pointed out some of the most serious problems, which includes suicidal ideation. She said there are children who think about suicide. There are also children, mostly in the fourth and fifth grades, who engage in self harm, she stated.

These kids, according to the social worker, sometimes injure themselves. By giving themselves physical pain, they mask the emotional pain they are suffering, Moore said. She addresses self-harm by helping students reduce stress or increase stress tolerance. It is also important to remove harmful objects and to develop coping skills, she said.

It is common for parents to not know the problems young people are having, she said. She expressed the need for parents to engage their children and be on the lookout for problems. If, for instance, a child is often isolating himself in a dark room, the child might have additional problems, she said.

Josefina Smith at the middle schools

Josefina Smith, social worker for Hermiston middle schools, agreed with the need for parents to watch out for signs that something might be wrong with their children. Smith, Moore and Medina all suggested that parents find new ways to speak to their kids.

Go to the internet, they said. Pinterest has many lists for different ways to say "How was your day?" By using different expressions to greet children, parents can get fuller answers from their children.

Smith said she is always on the lookout for new and better ways to speak to students, and this has good results. She serves students at the middle schools. Also, she helps kids and their families at the district's Newcomer Program, which offers lessons in language and culture to students who are new to this country. She said, by thoughtfully greeting students and showing them she cares, she gains their affection and their trust.

Many students are facing problems with depression, she said. Often, they choose to skip school. If they have a friendly person at the school, however, they may choose otherwise, Smith said. She added that many students have told her that, on difficult days, they decided to go to school just because they knew they would see her.

These students are sweet, and it warms her "mom

heart," she said. "When kids get excited to see you, you see that you are doing something right," she said. Smith expressed hope that she was helping them by creating connections that lead to them building better relationships with other people, too.

She said parents can sometimes feel scared to ask about their children's feelings, especially if they suspect depression. Still, she insisted, communication is important. Middle school students in particular are facing hormonal changes that they may not understand.

"It's not the happiest time," Smith said. Still, if they can talk with trusted individuals, they can be helped.

Smith stated that she is helping to provide a safe space at the schools, so young people can talk about their problems. This is great, she said, because mental health assistance can be difficult to acquire. Local providers, she said, are all booked, and the wait list to get help can be three months long. Also, therapy can be expensive. At the schools, however, students can meet with social workers with little wait, and there is no financial cost.

The social workers all expressed that they are happy for the safe spaces they are creating. Their worries are, now that winter break coming, students are losing the comfort of schools.

Some students have chaotic home lives, the social workers said. Such students see school as an escape, and they are troubled with having to stay home.

To these students, the social workers suggest getting as much sun as possible. Also, they should engage in hobbies and find methods to keep themselves active. This could also be a good time to develop relationships.

The winter break can be tough, the social workers said. Still, it will not last forever, and school will be there for the students when the break is over.

BRIEFS



Erick Peterson/Hermiston Herald

Ken Matlack receives an award Dec. 21, 2021, from Irrigon Mayor Margaret Anderson for 20 years of service on the Irrigon City Council. Matlack, Morrow County sheriff, stepped down from the council in October.

Irrigon City Council honors Matlack for service

The Irrigon City Council during its meeting Dec. 21 honored Ken Matlack for 20 years of service on the council.

Matlack, Morrow County sheriff, stepped down from the council in October. He appeared at the meeting with his wife, Shirley Matlack, and said the move freed up time for other interests.

Irrigon Mayor Margaret Anderson praised Matlack for his service.

"Ken has done a lot for this community," she said. "We appreciate him."

Anderson, who has worked with Matlack since 2012, credited Matlack's ability for critical thinking. Also, she said he will be missed on the council.

Irrigon City Manager Aaron Palmquist wished Matlack well and said the city has yet to advertise the opening.

Whoever the council selects will serve the remaining three years of Matlack's four-year term, ending with the next election.

Affordable Family Eyewear has new owner

Affordable Family Eyewear, 298 E. Gladys Ave., Suite B, Hermiston, has changed hands. The downtown Hermiston eyewear seller, formerly owned by Marcia Lambert, is now owned by Nick Page. Lambert had owned the business for 14 years.

According to Affordable Family Eyewear's website, Page is a Washington state licensed dispensing optician. Certified by the American Board of Opticianry and certified by the National Contact Lens Examiners, Page also is an Oregon State University graduate.

In addition to giving Page's credentials, the web-

site lists the company's history with local causes. Area school districts, Lions clubs and CAPECO are mentioned. The business works with those organizations and others to provide inexpensive or free eye exams and eyeglasses to people in need, the site states.

On Thursday, Dec. 23, Page said business has been very busy. These days, as people are trying to use the last of their 2021 insurance benefits, they are visiting him more than they might otherwise, he said.

Services at Family Eyewear include safety glasses, repairs and eye exam appointments. The company offers same day service on prescription lenses.

Affordable Family Eyewear's office hours are Monday and Tuesday 8 a.m. to 6 p.m., Wednesday and Thursday 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., Friday 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Saturday 8 a.m. to 2 p.m.

—Hermiston Herald

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