
EDITORIAL

Find way to fund health professionals in schools

As The Daily item continues its year-long look at mental health in the region — with a report on seniors this past weekend and a look at veterans this coming Sunday — we were reminded this week of the devastating shortage of mental health professionals for students.

In a hearing this week of the Center for Rural Pennsylvania, Bernadette Boerckel, the chief outreach officer for the Central Susquehanna Intermediate Unit based in Montandon, said a lack of behavioral health specialists is hurting Valley students and it doesn't seem to be getting any better.

The IU has a wide reach, covering 17 school districts in five counties. It covers 69 public schools and three technical schools. The total number of students at those schools is about 37,000.

In the CSIU region, Boerckel said there is one school psychologist for every 1,659 students. The National Association of School Psychologists recommends a ratio of 1 to 500.

“We just don't have the number of behavioral health practitioners that we need,” Boerckel said.

The state's 2021 Pennsylvania Youth Survey (PAYS) — a review of anonymous thoughts of more than 246,000 students in about 450 public and private schools — presented some troubling but not surprising data. According to the PAYS survey, 40 percent of students said they are sad or depressed on most days and more than 1 in 10 students have attempted suicide.

The need for professionals in schools has been growing for several years and was accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic, officials said this week.

There are a thousand ways to try to manage the issue and nothing should be off the table. Certainly, teachers, already tasked with countless classroom duties, will have a role. But it is worth wondering how much more they can put on their shoulders.

Bottom line is schools of all sizes and of all grades need more mental health care professionals. As leaders said during the hearing, individuals seeking help don't necessarily have to be mental or behavioral health experts, but many should be. A student-to-counselor ratio three times higher than recommended is not sustainable, so more people — which means more dedicated funding — are needed.

“There's really no substitute for caring people who are on-site to listen to kids,” Erich May, superintendent at the Brookville Area School District said at the hearing.

Investment will be required, in terms of funding and people and time. In the end, we believe it will be money well spent.

■ *NOTE: Opinions expressed in The Daily Item's editorials are the consensus of the publisher, top newsroom executives and community members of the editorial board. Today's was written by Editor William Bowman.*