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Mental health crisis affects Lamorinda schools

By Sora O'Doherty

At the last Orinda Mayor's Liaison Meeting, a report on a new mental health initiative by Contra County sparked an unexpectedly intense discussion. Although the introduction of a new program to help schools access mental health care for students will largely not affect Lamorinda schools, because the program is aimed at the uninsured, representatives of schools in Orinda wished that it would.

According to Jill Ray, Community Liaison for Canyon, Moraga, and Orinda for Supervisor Candace Andersen, the goal of the Student Behavioral Health Incentive Program (SBHIP) is to bring mental health services into the school districts and, secondly, to enable the school districts to bill private and public insurance for services that they deliver to their students. SBHIP moves mental health therapy into the schools by providing therapy at school sites and billing insurers directly for the therapy.

SBHIP is funded by a \$400 million, 3-year grant running through December 2024. It is distributed across the state, with Contra Costa County receiving a budget of \$9 million and is being rolled out as a pilot program in the school districts Antioch, Pittsburg, John Swett and West County.

Orinda Union School District Superintendent Aida Glimme said, "We have become the mental health hub and it is like playing Whack-A-Mole." She explained that the need is so big, but appointments with mental health providers are hard to find. OUSD schools do provide some group therapy, but it is not appropriate for all situations.

OUSD board member and former Orinda mayor Eve Phillips spoke about the Healthy Kids survey, which she reported underscores persistent sadness at alarming levels. "Things have really changed since COVID," she said, citing incidents of suicidal ideation, bullying and cyber bullying.

Miramonte High School Principal Ben Campopiano spoke of the challenges faced at the high school level. He spoke of the stressors and pressures experienced by the area's super high achieving students. Miramonte is constantly dealing with the "very real mental health problems," he said, adding that the school had recently received an anonymous report of a student self-harming by cutting.

Moraga School District Superintendent Julie Parks, who did not attend the Orinda meeting, echoed the wishes of the Orinda educators that the county would provide more help to schools dealing with mental health issues. She stated that there is a statewide mental health initiative, which is being rolled out in phases, with some schools being in the first phase, which seeks to merge resources to expand mental health services.

It is a more efficient and effective way of getting resources to students, Parks explained. It can be very difficult for families to access the health care system and people are finding that there are not enough mental health professionals to cover the needs. Moraga does contract with Care Solace, which provides more wrap-around services. "This is a great asset for us," she noted.

Although mental health issues are not as prominent in elementary schools as in high schools, Parks added that she and her staff do a lot of training to understand the signs of distress and to work on strategies for intervention. Suicide prevention training is required annually. They also work with middle school students to help them understand what chronic sadness or suicidal ideation can look like. Moraga also partners with Sandy Hook Promise on anonymous reporting of any concerns about threats to themselves or others, which was just rolled out this year.

In addition, wellness centers are in elementary schools this year and Joaquin Moraga Intermediate School has had a wellness center for many years, since well before the pandemic, Parks added. Now, they've been able to expand staffing to have a full-time intake person to meet student needs. "Wellness is a human right," Parks affirmed, and student safety is always the top priority. "We know that young people can be at risk, and that doesn't look the same for every individual," she said.

Miramonte Principal Campopiano holds a master's degree in adolescent mental health. He agreed with Glimme and Parks, saying, "We appreciate all the help we get from the state, county, local and private resources, but it is still not enough to meet the crisis we are now facing." He believes that things are much worse now than they used to be, and he blames several factors, such as the more competitive environment that now exists, pointing out that it is much harder to get into college than ever before, harder to make school sports teams, harder to get into the play or the musical on campus, harder to be the starting quarterback. "Everybody has elevated so much, academically, socially, and extracurricularly. This has created a huge industry of tutors, private organizations, teams and clubs, he added. What was once recreational has been replaced by private coaches, for example, or travel soccer teams. "All these have skyrocketed because of the competitive nature of today's adolescent world."

Campopiano spoke about the social changes that affect adolescents, including social media and what he sees as overscheduling of kids. "When I was 10 or 15, I wasn't scheduled every second, my mom or my coach weren't texting me all the time, telling me what I had to be and what I had to do." Overscheduling has taken away those chances for stress relief and joy, to have down time that isn't screen time. And this is coupled with social media and the 24/7 news cycle where kids are bombarded with hate online. "Everywhere in the whole country," Campopiano noted, "kids are flooded with it and they are not mentally ready for it. But they hear about it all, experience it all."

The Wellness Center at Miramonte is funded by the Orinda Network for Education (ONE) and is now up and running. Funds from parents and the community help support the Wellness Center, in addition to the school district. Miramonte now has a full-time wellness coordinator and a full-time intake specialist, in addition to wellness interns, adults who are going through programs at Saint Mary's and other colleges to get their licenses and who need hours working with clients.

Campopiano spoke about the team of people, including academic counselors, teachers, and other amazing staff, who triage mental health situations. He noted that some kids come into the wellness center and maybe they just need some quiet time. They relax for 20 minutes, and they are good to go. The next step is when a student wants to talk to someone about a one-time issue. Other cases escalate to ongoing support, perhaps once a week for a couple of weeks. After that, staff needs to tell parents that their child needs private professional services.

Miramonte does offer group therapy and counseling, along with programs directed to such issues as vaping or phone use, sleep, screen time, nutrition and hydration. Information is posted on the school's social media, in newsletter to parents, and at lunchtime booths. Information is pushed out to staff, who try to focus on it in the classroom. Within a very small budget, the school also provides fun activities, including therapy dogs, guest speakers, art therapy and so on.

But in the end, Campopiano concluded, "We're not properly equipped to deal with mental health issues, and even when we deal with it well, it takes us away from doing educational services. Every minute we spend on mental health is a minute not spent on education."

The Lamorinda Weekly reached out to the Lafayette and Acalanes Union High School districts for comment, but was unable to connect with anyone prior to the deadline.

If you or a loved one is experiencing a mental health crisis call 911. For non-emergency care, call the Contra Costa County access line at (888) 678-7277 or the Contra Costa Crisis Center at (800) 833-2900.

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