

Stop the fights: How schools aim to help students amid tumultuous mental health crisis



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Poughkeepsie Journal

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School psychologists talk about nearing the end of their first year back following COVID-19

Two of Brinckerhoff Elementary School's psychologists talk about their experiences after a year being back in person with students following COVID-19. Patrick Oehler, Poughkeepsie Journal

Walk into a high school on any given day and it's not uncommon to find students dancing.

With a phone propped up and recording, students emulate the latest Tik Tok trend to post for all to see.

When the dancing is over, they return to their social media feed.

The feed is always there, inside and outside of the school.

It's filled with other goofy dances and friends. It's also filled with quarrels over ex-girlfriends or perceived slights, amplified, circulated and public for others to comment and judge.

Small arguments simmer quickly in the absence of face-to-face communication.

It was a lot for students to navigate even before March 2020. Months of isolation and arguments regarding safe activities exacerbated the tension.

And, walk into a high school on any given day, it's not uncommon to find students fighting.

"Since we were locked up in the house over time it created so much violence over the internet because all we had was social media," Poughkeepsie High School Senior Kerena Rattray said. "So, kids were like, 'Okay, we're bored lets start problems.'

"It could be over the most littlest thing and they make it into something so big," she said. "I don't understand why, but with social media it became so big."

More than two years after the circumstances surrounding COVID-19 upended the usual classroom experience, students are struggling to readjust to what would otherwise be considered as a normal in-person schedule. School leaders and mental health professionals are working with students who they say are returning without the necessary social skills to navigate conflict.



Conflicts born on social media have been erupting in hallways in schools across the region. *Patrick Oehler/Poughkeepsie Journal*

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The pandemic did not start the problem. Experts say youth in the region were already on the precipice of a mental health crisis. But, months spent in isolation during remote learning, in what were sometimes stressful home environments, accelerated and exacerbated that trajectory.

Dutchess County Director of Community Services Jean-Marie Niebuhr said she is seeing increased anxiety, conflict, depression, and refusal to attend or participate in school among young people in the county.

More than a quarter of the residents who visited the Dutchess County Stabilization Center for aid in the first quarter of this year, she said, were under the age of 21.

"Things were already headed in a not great direction for our young people, and there's probably a million reasons why that is. It would be speculation to try and guess," Niebuhr said. "But when kids went virtual some kids really flourished, and some kids didn't. And for the kids who didn't... to come out of that (time of isolation) and then just be expected to come back to school and do it the way you've always done it (was too much)."

It's not just at the secondary level. Jessica Corcoran a school psychologist at Brinckerhoff Elementary School in Fishkill said this year many students and families are exhibiting trauma, heightened anxiety and an inability to function within a school setting.



From left, Bridget Lander and Jessica Corcoran, school psychologists at Brinckerhoff Elementary School in Fishkill on April 22, 2022. The pair are going over a binder full of mindfulness activities compiled by Corcoran. *Patrick Oehler/Poughkeepsie Journal*

Corcoran says a lot of her day includes little moments of making students feel seen and heard.

That's still the case nearly eight months into the academic year. Time is not going to make the problem go away, experts say. But, district officials and mental health professionals say there are steps that must be taken:

- lower school counselor ratios to decrease caseloads and allow for more one-to-one time with students;
- allow mental health professionals to step into classrooms or conduct assemblies to reach students in groups;
- put an emphasis on mental wellness with times and days dedicated to taking breaks after traumatic events;
- Pour resources into preventative measures;
- Create a team of mental health professionals to serve students in the long-term.

Most districts in the region have made social and emotional wellbeing, and school safety, a cornerstone of their 2022-23 budgets. With upticks in physical conflicts in several districts, and higher needs for mental health, districts are expanding social emotional resources that are hard to find or costly in the private sector.

Astor Services, a mental health service provider in the Hudson Valley, has seen a rise in the number of districts requesting school-based contracts, and an increase in students requiring hospitalization for mental health needs.

Hudson Valley School-Based Program Director, Lynn Gillard said the program was in Pine Plains for 25 years, but in the past three years expanded to Millbrook, New Paltz, and Kingston. She said she has three contracts pending for the 2022-23 school year including in Poughkeepsie and Onteora. The contract with Poughkeepsie will create a mental health clinic at its middle and high schools.

"There are kids that are bouncing back from being socially isolated and there are issues, whether that be anxiety and depression, being back in has exacerbated that," she said. "The kids that didn't have these issues before are oftentimes now in that same boat."



School districts are putting money into programs and professionals who can aid the emotional health of their students.
Patrick Oehler/Poughkeepsie Journal

"It's not just based out of mental health issues, it also comes from the academic pressures, some of the kids that struggle academically are having a really hard time catching up, because they lost some of that from being remote," she added.

'You just get used to seeing it'

Jonathan Scimeca opens his phone and within seconds pulls up a video of a group of students punching and kicking another student in a hallway.

The fight turned into a spectacle, with dozens crowding the Arlington High School hall, several with their phones out recording the conflict. He said there are times when students would like to intervene, but with a zero tolerance policy for fighting, they are fearful that getting involved will lead to repercussions.

The short video is one of many that circulates social media and text chains regularly at Arlington.

"It's normalized," Scimeca, a sophomore at the Freedom Plains school, said. "You just get used to seeing it and hearing about it. Everyone just wants to see the video and hear the reason, that's it."

His girlfriend, sophomore Kaylee Soricelli, said she feels anxious and afraid walking through the halls. The 16-year-old said tensions are high this year.

"With all the fights going on, it's always a question of, 'Am I going to accidentally get involved in it? Is someone even going to fight me for some reason?'" she said. "You can get into a conflict with someone and it's not even that you're trying to offend them or get into a fight with them, it's just taken the wrong way. They take it personally and they will come at you and attack you. So it's always that you're watching what you're saying."

Arlington experienced tragedy early in the school year, when a student was fatally stabbed in the chest after a home football game on Sept. 17. Rather than teach the student body a lesson, though, parents and students say the school has seen sporadic altercations inside the school for months, including a set of incidents in March that were dubbed "fight week."



Beth-El Church in Poughkeepsie filled with love and prayers for Quraan Smith

Tuesday's funeral service for Quraan Smith filled Beth-El Church in Poughkeepsie. Mourners found prayer, songs and support through a trying time. *Patrick Oehler, Poughkeepsie Journal*

But, Arlington is not alone. The tone for Poughkeepsie High School's year was set in the first hour of the first day, when police were called to break up a fight, and several more followed over the next week.

Wappingers has seen four threats against the school building this year, and an uptick in conflicts from the 2018-19 school year, prior to the pandemic.

Earlier this month Hyde Park called law enforcement when a student walked onto campus with an airsoft pistol.

This year, Poughkeepsie beefed up its safety staff, brought in a team of crisis intervention professionals and is working with local community organizations to add mental health resources to serve its students who are at the highest risk of conflict.

In December, weeks after shots were fired outside Poughkeepsie High School, senior and student body President Harrison Brisbon-McKinnon said he spoke with students at the time to understand how they were feeling. Many noted the tension.



Poughkeepsie High School senior Harrison Brisbon-McKinnon talks about his experience during the current school year on December 3, 2021. *Patrick Oehler/Poughkeepsie Journal*

The high school conducted a building-wide "reset" in which the students were given several mental wellness days, followed by assemblies addressing issues among the school community in which students and staff were encouraged to interact openly. The teen said prior to the reset, there was fear moving from one class the to next careful not to bump into another student.

"With COVID, all our support fell away, and we had to learn to find our own coping mechanism, many of them being unhealthy," Brisbon-McKinnon, 17, said. "Now that we finally have a world to release all of that into, we are getting these supports back but we don't know how to release all of that anger in a mature environment.

"So now we are out of practice and rusty with our skills so a lot of us are reacting in an immature way," he said.

Arguments on social media are trickling into the school building. Parents say they are concerned with what they are finding on their children's phones. Everything in the school building is being documented and posted online, and often leads to conflict.

Scimeca said fights are often the result of pictures or posts online that can get misinterpreted. He said one fight he witnessed was over an a picture posted online of a student walking next to another student's ex-girlfriend.

This is has become the norm; professionals from the elementary through high school levels say many conflicts are relating to friendships and relationships.

"There's eyes all over the school, you can't do anything without someone knowing and it getting back to someone you know," Scimeca said. "It's a giant game of telephone and the story gets twisted and changed and it escalates."

'Help me, I'm struggling'

While parents, school staff and students have witnessed first hand a change in mental health amid the pandemic, the numbers show students are also seeking out resources at a higher rate than before the pandemic started.

Astor Services provides an outpatient youth program that serves more than 3,000 clients each year.

The number of active clients in the Hudson Valley program reached its height in 2019 with 3,610, but it expects to surpass that number this year. As of March, the program served 2,256 clients. The number of clients experiencing a mental health crisis severe enough to require hospitalization through the program nearly doubled from 2020 to 2021, jumping from 148 to 237.

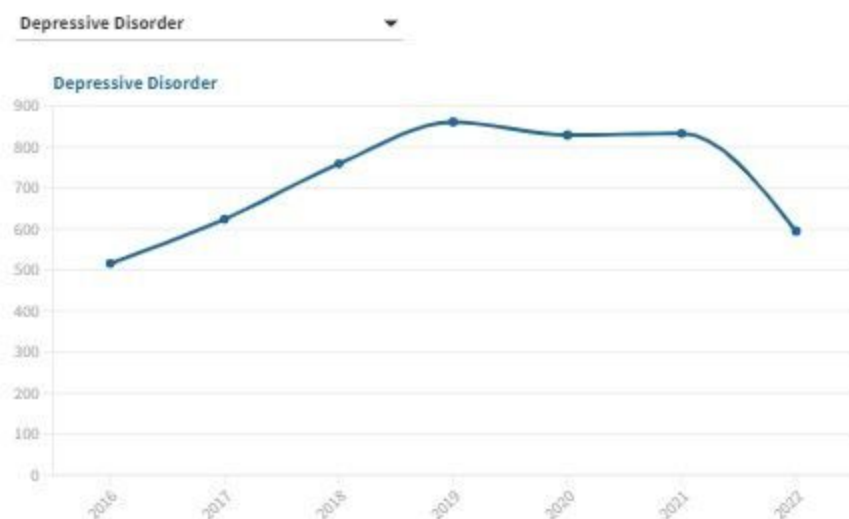
Gillard noted diagnoses for anxiety, depression, trauma, eating disorders and substance use are on the rise from previous years.

In 2021, Astor's outpatient program served 638 clients with anxiety; in the past three months it's served 489. Last year, 833 clients received services for depressive disorder, compared to 585 this year as of March.

Below is a chart showing clients diagnosed and treated by Astor in the Hudson Valley. By clicking on the dropdown menu you can access several line charts showing how the percentage of patients diagnosed with each condition has changed over time.

Astor Services Diagnosis Data

This data reflects the number of clients diagnosed with each disorder through Astor's Hudson Valley Out Patient program between Jan. 2016 and March 2022.

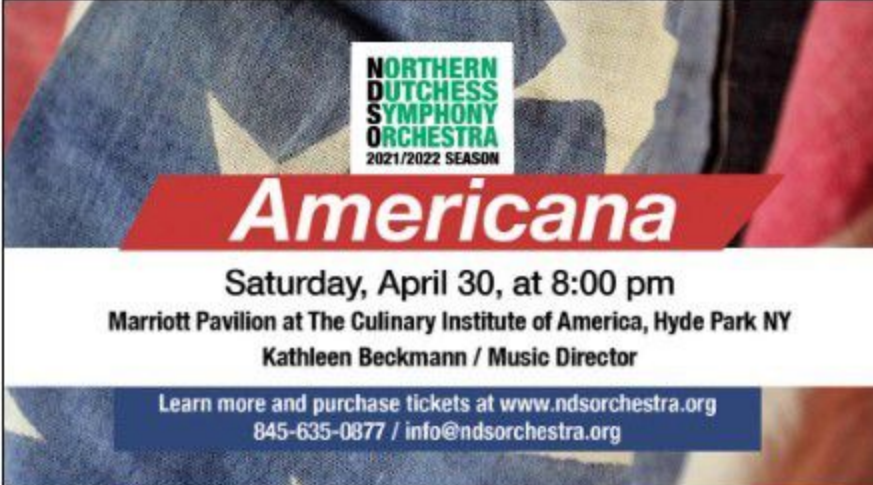


Source: Astor Services For Children & Families • It should be noted, the year 2022 reflects the number of clients served from Jan. through March.

At the county-run Stabilization Center, which serves individuals in mental health and substance abuse crisis, Niebuhr said the data shows issues have been "accelerated" by the pandemic.

Of the 2,955 served by the center in 2021, 19% were under the age of 21. That number rose to 27% in the first quarter of 2022. Of that group, 17% presented with suicidal ideation. Niebuhr said she's never seen those numbers as high as they are now.

Advertisement

A poster for the Northern Dutchess Symphony Orchestra's 2021/2022 season. The top half features a close-up of an American flag. A white box in the upper center contains the text "NORTHERN DUTCHESS SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA" in green and black, with "2021/2022 SEASON" in smaller black text below it. A red banner across the middle contains the word "Americana" in white script. Below the banner, on a white background, is the text "Saturday, April 30, at 8:00 pm", "Marriott Pavilion at The Culinary Institute of America, Hyde Park NY", and "Kathleen Beckmann / Music Director". At the bottom, a dark blue banner contains the text "Learn more and purchase tickets at www.ndsorchestra.org" and "845-635-0877 / info@ndsorchestra.org".

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"It's just an indicator of how bad things are right now," Niebuhr said. "But, what I would say is that when I look at those numbers, I think to myself, 'Thank God, they're coming to the Stabilization Center.'"

"These are young people who have said to someone in their life, 'Help me, I'm struggling,' which is exactly what we want them to do," she added.

Wappingers Superintendent Dwight Bonk said his staff is noticing an uptick in conflict within peer relationships. The district has seen an increase in the number of violent and disruptive incidents reported from 40 in the 2018-19 school year to 48 incidents so far this year.



Wappingers Central School District Superintendent Dwight Bonk Patrick Oehler/Poughkeepsie Journal

"There are conflicts and oftentimes someone felt that they were treated disrespectful, someone felt that they weren't heard. It's almost trying to get back to where we were back to before COVID," he said. "Is it the pandemic? Nobody knows the answers, but certainly it's been challenging for many of our families for the past two years."

326 students per counselor

Bridget Lander, a school psychologist at Brinckerhoff Elementary School in Fishkill, said she often leaves work with a heavy heart.

"This year has been a challenging year and there have been plenty of days where we go home upset, because either we feel that we are not able to reach that student or reach that parent. But, we trying our best," she said. "(Our) team is one that wears our heart on our sleeve, we take things home and we are talking at night and texting like what do we do what are some interventions."

School mental health staff are getting creative with a larger amount of students and families requesting services. Lander and Corcoran are teaming up to conduct mindful announcements every morning over the loudspeaker in their school. And they've been working with teachers who've requested assistance in classrooms where students are struggling.



Bridget Lander, one of the school psychologists at Brinckerhoff Elementary School in Fishkill talks about how her students have fared during this school year on April 22, 2022. *Patrick Oehler/Poughkeepsie Journal*

At the younger levels she said the challenge is teaching students grades K-2 classroom etiquette.

"The biggest thing is just working with them and having them be a student so that for the rest of their career they know how to come in and learn," she said. "If they don't really know how to follow the rules or come in with a friend or get close to the other teachers then they are not going to be ready."

Beth Rizzi, president of the New York State Association of School Psychologists, said her organization is advocating for an increase in staff. It's the same thing Executive Director of the New York State School Counselors Association Bob Rotunda said his organization is seeking across the state.

Both commented on heavy workloads, that in some districts across the state vary greatly.

The recommended ratio for schools at the secondary level is 250 students per school counselor. Rotunda said he's hearing from counselors with ratios as high as 400 students at the high school level and 1,000 students per counselor at the elementary level.

At a time where students are requiring more one-to-one services and more conflicts, Rotunda said it hinders support available for the others.

"When a (conflict) happens everything stops, the normal day that's going on at that time comes to a screeching halt all the kids get interested all the staff is involved with dealing with the incident right then," he said. "Once that's all happening, everything else stops so the other 250 to 300 kids in your caseload, the services are being used up by those in conflict."

In New York public schools, 7,700 school counselors serve roughly 2.5 million students, equating to an average ratio of 326 students per counselor. Rotunda said in lower-incomes districts and in the northern, more rural parts of the state the ratio is higher due to lack of funding or shortages in available candidates.

In this year's budget, the state allocated \$100 million to school districts and BOCES to use over the next two years, but many fear the issues students are facing will require a long-term investment.

In Wappingers, Bonk said mental health and safety was a focus of the budget. The district added 10 positions related to mental health and wellness between this year and last, but he laments it's not enough.

"We are in the process of looking at our mental health and wellness plan. We hope that we are at the end of a pandemic," he said. "What we are hoping to do is to evaluate for the remainder of the school year and with the data that is presented to us we hope to have lively discussion over the summer and come up with some creative ways to try and resolve some of these issues so that we can be more proactive rather than reactive."

Poughkeepsie created a framework dedicated to students struggling with social and emotional health. The district created a crisis intervention team with staff at the high and middle schools, in addition to adding safety staff, an elementary school counselor and behavioral specialist.



Poughkeepsie City School District Superintendent Eric Rosser speaks at Mayor Rob Rolison's State of the City address. Katelyn Cordero/Poughkeepsie Journal

"There has been an uptick in unwanted student behaviors that have resulted in periodic and isolated disruptions to the learning process," Poughkeepsie Superintendent Eric Rosser said. "Crisis intervention team members and other social emotional staff have been extremely instrumental in working with students who are presenting elevated levels of social and emotional needs and helping those students resolve their need either through direct intervention or the referral to other school or community partners."

The county worked with the district to provide trauma-informed care to school staff to give teachers the tools to assist students that may be struggling and learn how to de-escalate situations as they arise. Additionally the district is working with several community organizations, such as Family Services, and Astor to create mental health resources and extra-curricular activities to deter students from negative activities and seek to heal trauma they may be experiencing.

"(The district) will continue to adapt it's approach and delivery of services for students exhibiting high needs," Rosser said. "This work will continue through a schools, home, and community approach to addressing student needs."

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