


Speranza wows teammates with four-seamers, freestyles

SPORTS, 1B

Poughkeepsie Journal

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A TODAY NETWORK



SCHOOL LEADERS SEEK ANSWERS FOR

HOW TO STOP THE FIGHTING

As students' mental health needs spike, officials set path forward

Katelyn Cordero
Poughkeepsie Journal | USA TODAY NETWORK

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 TikTok 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.

Actionable Steps

- 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

Conflicts migrate from social media to school hallways across region.

PATRICK OEHLEK
POUGHKEEPSIE JOURNAL

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NEW YORK STATE ASSEMBLY

Bill allows abuse survivors to sue

Legislation is similar to the Child Victims Act passed in 2019

Sarah Taddeo

New York State Team | USA TODAY NETWORK

A measure to allow adult survivors of sexual abuse to sue their abusers is gaining momentum in New York for the second year in a row.

The Senate passed the legislation Tuesday, leaving it in the hands of the Assembly. The bill would allow a one-year window for survivors of sexual abuse as adults to sue their abusers, regardless of when the abuse occurred.

The legislation traveled a similar path last year but fizzled out in the Assembly, with Assembly Majority Leader Crystal Peoples-Stokes questioning whether adults needed extra time to report abuse in their past.

"Survivors of sexual assault and abuse in New York

are subject to an unjust, restrictive statute of limitations that, for far too long, has prevented them from pursuing the justice they deserve," said New York State Trial Lawyers president Halina Radchenko this week.

What would the legislation do?

The bill is similar to the Child Victims Act, which passed in 2019 and gave adults a one-year window to sue those who allegedly abused them as children. That window was extended due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and ultimately, the law paved the way for more than 10,000 lawsuits in New York.

If the Adults Survivors Act is enacted as law, adult abuse survivors would have one year to launch a civil claim.

"Everyone deserves their chance at justice," said

See ADULT SURVIVORS, Page 2A



The BEAST (battery electric automotive student transportation) from GreenPower Motors Company gives school administrators, state leaders and advocacy groups a ride during an informational event. **TANIA SARAVAN/THE JOURNAL NEWS**

Going green with state's fleet of buses

What is the cost of converting the entire line to electric?

Thomas C. Zambito

New York State Team | USA TODAY NETWORK

Sixty electric buses will be deployed to parts of New York City with high rates of asthma and air pollution in the coming months amid a statewide push to get more green vehicles on the road.

"We know that buses are engines of equity and it is an MTA priority to bring electric buses to environmental justice communities most impacted by climate change and pollution," MTA chairman and CEO Janno Lieber said last week.

They will join 15 electric buses already cruising city streets, becoming the second installment in the MTA's commitment to transform its 5,800-bus fleet to zero emissions by 2040.

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USA TODAY

GOP raises midterm stakes: Trump endorses election-deniers in secretary of state races. 12A

Saying goodbye

Schlesinger's steakhouse closed after 28 years. **3A**

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Police: Officer shoots, kills Hyde Park woman

Poughkeepsie Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

State police indicated Friday an officer shot and killed a woman at a home on North Cross Road in Hyde Park.

State police said it and Hyde Park police are investigating "an officer involved shooting." It also said "one female subject is deceased," and "the Attorney General's Office has been notified."

Under state law 70-b, "any incident in which the death of a person" occurs

during interaction with law enforcement is to be investigated by the state Attorney General's Office.

State police in its release did not outright say an officer had fired and killed the woman or for what agency the officer involved works.

The agency also didn't provide information as to why police were at the residence, how many officers and civilians were involved, how many officers discharged weapons, the nature of the interaction or the identities of any parties involved.

State police responded to the Journal Friday but did not answer any question posed.

The agency in its release said there was "no threat to the public," and said the investigation is ongoing.

Earlier this month the Dutchess County District Attorney's Office announced a grand jury would be investigating a Feb. 27 shooting of a man and woman during a struggle with Fishkill town police officers who responded to a domestic dispute. Neither civilian was fatally wounded.

Two months after that incident, which was also investigated by state police, much remains unknown including how many police officers fired their weapons and who was responsible for shooting the woman.

Some details have also not been shared, including the identity of the officer involved, about a September incident in which a pedestrian was fatally struck by a Dutchess County Sheriff's Office vehicle.

Schools

Continued from Page 1A

"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 let's 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.

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.

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 school 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 mandatory 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



From left, Bridget Lander and Jessica Corcoran, school psychologists at Brinckerhoff Elementary School in Fishkill, go over a binder full of mindfulness activities compiled by Corcoran. PATRICK OEHLE/POUGHKEEPSIE JOURNAL

said she has three contracts pending for the 2022-23 school year including in Poughkeepsie and Ontario. 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."

"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."

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.

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 to the 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 re-acting 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 a picture posted online of a student walking next to another student's ex-girlfriend.

This has become the norm, profes-

sions from the elementary through high school levels say many conflicts are related 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 firsthand 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 3,630, 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.

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.

"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.

Continued on next page

Jurors weigh self-defense claim in Capitol riot trial

Michael Kunzelman
ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — Federal prosecutors on Friday urged a jury to reject a retired New York City police officer's argument that he was acting in self-defense when he swung a flagpole at police officers and tackled one of them during the U.S. Capitol riot.

Thomas Webster, a 20-year NYPD veteran, is the first Capitol riot defendant to be tried on an assault charge and the first to present a jury with a self-defense argument.

Jurors went home for the weekend about 30 minutes after getting the case. They're due back Monday for deliberations.

During the trial's closing arguments, Assistant U.S. Attorney Brian Kelly urged jurors to use their common sense and trust what they saw on several videos that captured the confrontation. Kelly said the videos show Webster swing his metal flagpole like a club, "bull rush" Metropolitan Police Department officer Noah Rathbun and then grab the officer's gas mask with both hands.

"Don't let the defendant off the hook for what he did that day," Kelly said.

Webster, 56, testified Thursday that he was trying to protect himself from a "rogue cop" who punched him in the face. He also accused Rathbun of instigating the confrontation.

Rathbun testified that he didn't punch or pick a fight with Webster as a mob attacked the Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021, disrupting Congress from certifying President Joe Biden's electoral victory.

Defense attorney James Monroe said Webster had a right to defend himself against a "bad cop" who was using excessive force.

"Acquit this man. Send him back to New York," Monroe told jurors. "Get behind the truth. And I'm talking about the whole truth."

Webster's jury trial is the fourth for a Capitol riot case. The first three defendants to get a jury trial were convicted of all charges in their respective indictments. A judge decided two other cases without a jury, acquitting one of the defendants and partially acquitting the other.

A grand jury indicted Webster on six counts, including a charge that he assaulted Rathbun with a dangerous



FILE - This still frame from Metropolitan Police Department body worn camera video shows Thomas Webster, in red jacket, at a barricade line at the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021, in Washington. Jury weighs his self-defense claim. AP

weapon, a metal flagpole. He wasn't accused of entering the Capitol on Jan. 6.

Webster drove alone to Washington, D.C., from his home near Goshen, New York, on the eve of the Jan. 6 "Stop the Steal" rally. He was wearing a bulletproof vest and carrying a U.S. Marine Corps flag on a metal pole when he approached the Capitol, after listening to then-President Donald Trump address thousands of supporters.

Webster said he went to the Capitol to "petition" lawmakers to "relook" at the results of the 2020 presidential election. But he testified that he didn't intend to interfere with Congress' joint session to certify the Electoral College vote.

Rathbun's body camera captured Webster shouting profanities and insults before they made any physical contact. Webster said he was attending his first political protest as a civilian and expressing his free speech rights when he yelled at officers behind a row of bike racks.

The body camera video shows that Webster slammed one of the bike racks at Rathbun before the officer reached out with an open left hand and struck the right side of Webster's face. Webster said it felt like he had been hit by a freight train.

Rathbun said he was trying to move Webster back from a security perimeter that he and other officers were

struggling to maintain.

After Rathbun struck his face, Webster swung a metal flagpole at the officer in a downward chopping motion, striking a bike rack.

Rathbun grabbed the broken pole from Webster, who charged at the officer, tackled him to the ground and grabbed his gas mask.

Rathbun testified that he started choking as the chinstrap on his gas mask pressed against his throat.

Webster said he grabbed Rathbun by the gas mask because he wanted the officer to see his hands and know that he didn't pose a threat.

"Does that make any amount of sense to any of you?" Kelly asked jurors.

Rathbun reported a hand injury from a separate encounter with a rioter inside the Capitol. He didn't report any injuries caused by Webster, but jurors saw photos of leg bruises that Rathbun attributed to his confrontation with the retired officer.

Webster faces six counts: assaulting, resisting or impeding an officer using a dangerous weapon; civil disorder; entering and remaining in restricted grounds with a dangerous weapon; disorderly and disruptive conduct in restricted grounds with a dangerous weapon; engaging in physical violence in restricted grounds with a dangerous weapon; and engaging in an act of physical violence on Capitol grounds.

Breeze Airways to service Westchester County airport

Asher Stockler
Poughkeepsie Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

Breeze Airways, the budget airline newcomer helmed by JetBlue founder David Neeleman, will service the Westchester County Airport, the company announced on Facebook.

Westchester County Executive George Latimer said at a recent press conference he was "pleased to have a new airline come in to provide some service."

Latimer said there would be eight routes departing from the county for Los Angeles, San Francisco, Las Vegas, Charleston, Norfolk, Jacksonville, Savannah and New Orleans.

Breeze, headquartered in Darien, Connecticut, bills itself as an equity-focused airline, designed to service "neglected, forgotten markets" such as smaller cities that have seen reduced service by major carriers.

The company has said "bringing and increasing service to underserved communities is an important part of Breeze's business plan during its first year and beyond."

This is notable for an airline that will service Westchester County, which is more widely known as a hub for private jet service that is less accessible to the general public.

"By flying a smaller plane with a lower trip cost, Breeze believes there are hundreds and hundreds of city pairs crying out for nonstop flights," the company said in a regulatory filing. "Each market Breeze serves will realize significant public interest benefits from the introduction of its low-fare, high-quality service."

Breeze previously said it intends on obtaining 60 Airbus A220 aircraft to meet its plans for nonstop service.

The county airport is serviced by seven other airlines, including popular carriers such as American Airlines, Delta and JetBlue.

Latimer clarified that Breeze's entrance is "not an expansion" of the airport's existing capacity.

"This airline will be using existing, available slots that are currently unused," he explained. "So it doesn't add to the total extent of the airport."

Continued from previous page

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.

"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 try 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.

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



Poughkeepsie High School senior Harrison Brisbon-McKinnon. Conflicts have migrated from social media to school hallways. PATRICK OEHLE/POUGHKEEPSIE JOURNAL



Poughkeepsie City School District Superintendent Eric Rosser. KATELYN CORDERO/POUGHKEEPSIE JOURNAL

thing Executive Director of the New York State School Counselors Association Bob Rotunda said his organization is seeking across the state.

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 when 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, 7700 school counselors serve roughly 2.5 million students, equating to an average ratio of 326 students per counselor. Rotunda said in lower-income 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 lamented 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.

"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 its 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."

Katelyn Cordero is the education reporter for the Poughkeepsie Journal. kordero@poughkeepsiejournal.com; Twitter: @KatelynCordero.