

Call to Action

In Mercer County, we are in the middle of an alarming trend regarding teenage mental health concerns. During the last 20 months there have been seven confirmed suicides of teenagers who were residents of, or students attending, schools in Mercer County. These deaths are not always attributed to our county because of the way in which deaths are recorded, but make no mistake these are our students. We write this letter jointly as superintendents representing every public school in Mercer County because we are heartbroken by the senseless loss of our children. No town is immune from suicide. We have lost students and graduates from almost every town across our county. These deaths have been violent, sudden and tragic. To all of us, one death is too many. What should further concern us all is the alarming number of students who are referred for mental health services, sent to crisis centers, or hospitalized for self-harming acts or ideations.

Further evidence of this trend is found in the 2016 New Jersey Suicide Report published by the Department of Children and Family:

Suicide Attempts/Self-Inflicted Injuries, Age 10-24, 2013 -2015

- 2,731 youth treated by hospital emergency room
- 1660 (61%) female
- 1,071 (39%) male
- Mercer, Warren, and Ocean counties have the three highest rates of suicide attempts/self-inflicted injuries seen by emergency rooms.

Suicide Deaths, Age 10-24, 2013 -2015

- 269 youth
- 196 (73%) male
- 73 (27%) female
- Bergen County has the highest number of completions (26).
- Salem County has the lowest number of completions (4).

Discussions of mental health and suicide often bring blame and shame. As a society we must stop this fruitless finger pointing and work together for the benefit of our children. Our public schools offer counseling services and provide proactive parent and student programming. Further, our health curricula review suicide, depression, anxiety, stress and mental health. Our staffs are trained, but we can always do more. The solution must be holistic, inclusive, and all encompassing. The concerns are complex and multifaceted. Each tragedy is unique in its own right. We must rise together to acknowledge that we all have a role to play in building resilience, creating

connections with kids, and making it safe for students to ask for help. Partnerships in raising awareness and providing systems of support and care are critical.

So what can we do in the short-term? We can listen, we can provide guidance and assistance to one another, and we can provide environments of love and support. Students must know that they are not alone; families must know that they are not alone; mental health providers and educators need your support. We must be willing to acknowledge that depression, anxiety and stress exist and that gone unchecked can have destructive and toxic impacts.

With the above in mind, we are raising this Call for Action by creating the opportunity for continued dialogue among mental health providers, educators, and members of the community. On Tuesday, January 9th representatives from the Traumatic Loss Coalition will present a program at Rider University. The presentation will take place from 7PM - 9PM. This evening will serve as a first step in raising a countywide focus on mental health. Furthermore, a list of trauma and supportive resources can also be found at <https://goo.gl/Jok7Xi>. Through our collective effort and willingness to combat the stigma associated with mental health we can provide a network of care and support for our students.

Thomas Smith, Superintendent of Hopewell Valley

David M. Aderhold, Superintendent of West Windsor – Plainsboro

Crystal Edwards, Superintendent of Lawrence

Steve Cochrane, Superintendent of Princeton

Kathleen Foster, Superintendent Robbinsville

Richard Katz, Superintendent of East Windsor Regional

Fredrick McDowell, Superintendent of Trenton

Michael Nitti, Superintendent of Ewing

Scott Rocco, Superintendent of Hamilton

Kimberly Schneider, Superintendent Mercer County Special Services School District and Mercer County Technical Schools