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Silvis part of new mental health program

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Silvis School District will pilot a comprehensive new program focused on proactive mental health programming for PreK-12 students.

The District Comprehensive Approach (DCA) pilot program aims to help participating school districts develop a strategic plan for student mental health and suicide prevention programming. The program is organized through the Jed Foundation (JED) and AASA, The School Superintendents Association.

Silvis is one of 15 districts nationwide selected for the pilot.

Here, participating school districts will receive a local “district strategic plan” as a guide for building comprehensive student mental health and suicide prevention programming, along with two years of technical assistance from JED experts.

The DCA pilot will also provide school staff with new professional learning opportunities.

Silvis Superintendent Terri VandeWiele, who is also an AASA member, said the opportunity to apply for the DCA pilot was too good to pass up.



Vanderweile

“As a school district (a major) focus for us is making sure we educate the whole child,” she said. “We believe that if a student’s basic needs aren’t met, including their mental health needs, that it’s going to be hard for them to learn that at high level.”

The pilot will include a comprehensive needs assessment, VandeWiele said, which will help the district identify its strengths and areas for improvement.

“The beauty of this is that there are 14 other (participating) school districts nationwide, and we are going to be able to collaborate with them,” she said. “They might be doing something new and innovative that we can learn from.”

Silvis

From A1

On this front, Vandewiele is thankful to see school districts of varied sizes and communities participating in the DCA pilot.

"Sometimes, my experience has been that smaller districts don't always have the same opportunities as maybe a larger school district would," she said. "So I appreciate that (a diverse cohort) was a priority ... because our needs are very different."

Other pilot participants include Chandler Unified School District in Arizona, Kuspuk School District in Aniak, Alaska, and Washington Local Schools in Toledo, Ohio.

Regardless, Vandewiele hopes the DCA pilot reaps benefits for all participants and said Silvis' work with student mental health could serve as a model for other smaller school districts.

Amber Sensabaugh, principal of Northeast Junior High School, thinks the DCA pilot could be especially impactful for students at the junior high level.

"We have more and more students coming to us with a variety of mental health needs and significant trauma, which obviously impacts every portion of their time here," she said.

Another common issue

junior high counselors deal with, Sensabaugh said, is conflict resolution — an issue she says social media often exacerbates.

While Silvis schools already leverage existing mental health supports and community partnerships, she looks forward to the DCA pilot's "comprehensive" piece.

"... You know, making sure that all of our bases are covered, because our needs are continuing to grow from our student population," Sensabaugh said. "We just want to make sure there's nobody that slips through the cracks."

Tackling the social-emotional needs of students and their families — as the two play hand-in-hand, she said — is a complex task the DCA pilot will likely help Silvis school leaders navigate.

"So, it's exciting to be able to delve into that a little bit more and really try to come up with some outside-of-the-box thinking that we maybe haven't had so far," Sensabaugh said. "Regardless, the (mental health) need is there — and it's not just us."

While she's not exactly sure how the DCA program will work for Silvis schools, Vandewiele looks forward to exploring "all sorts of different opportunities" to support students' mental health.

"I don't have a crystal ball, but I do think we may find that we need more social work help; it may be more counseling," or something like a school-based health clinic, she said. "We're going to be looking at all (aspects of) a school district ... all the way down to what happens in an individual classroom."

The inaugural DCA cohort will serve more than 356,000 students from 480 schools across 14 states.

Tony Walker, senior vice president of academic programs at JED, said the organization primarily worked in higher education prior to launching the DCA pilot. The continued, nationwide youth mental health crisis, however, caused JED to shift its focus to the K-12 level.

"Even in the 10 years leading up to the COVID-19 pandemic, youth rates of depression and suicidal ideation were an all-time high. And of course, COVID-19 only exacerbated those those statistics," Walker said. "We know (K-12 school district leaders) are eager for additional help and support."

Partnering with AASA for the program, he said, made sense.

"...They really bring incredible perspective and expertise from the superintendent's level," Walker said. "(JED) really brings that deep mental health

content expertise and expertise around (building) comprehensive systems of support for young people."

With JED's expertise on best practices, combined with data-driven guidance, he said the DCA program will create a framework to "protect the mental health and prevent suicide for millions of students."

This work is especially important since some areas lack adequate, community-based mental health services, said Ann Levett, assistant executive director of the AASA Learning Network.

"So, a natural place for us to try and build that capacity, is in schools," she said. "That's where children are five days a week, 180 days a year."

Levett looks forward to "strengthening the capacity" of both students and staff to address their own mental wellness.

This could mean building new connections between school districts and outside organizations, increasing access to mental health resources, she said.

"So many times, people are having (mental health) difficulties but won't ask for help. Or, they don't know where to go for help," she said. "That would be the second core (goal) for us, as superintendents. We want people to know where to go for help."