



Mental health to be added to New Jersey school curriculum



PHOTO COURTESY GABE ZIMMERMAN Gabe Zimmerman, accompanied by his parents, Jackie Baillargeon and Ken Zimmerman, speaks at Montclair High School on April 15. That day, the family announced a mental health fellowship for high school students in memory of their son and brother, Jared Zimmerman.

By ERIN ROLL

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Beginning next school year, New Jersey schoolchildren will learn about topics like stress, anxiety, depression and self-esteem as part of their lessons.

State legislators passed a law requiring schools to include mental health as part of their health and physical education curricula, beginning with the 2020-2021 school year.

“I think it’s incredible,” said Gabe Zimmerman, a Montclair High School graduate.

Zimmerman’s older brother Jared, a 2015 MHS graduate, died in 2016 after a long battle with mental illness. The family established Jared’s Fund in their son’s memory, to help encourage schools to have a discussion about mental health.

Gabe Zimmerman also dealt with anxiety. When he was in middle school in the Montclair school system, there was no discussion about mental health issues in the curriculum. To have in-classroom discussions about anxiety and other topics would have been a big help to him, he said.

“This is something that needs to be talked about and de-stigmatized from a young age,” Gabe Zimmerman said. Middle school is a difficult time for many students, he said, which makes mental health discussions all the more crucial for that age group.

A curriculum might also have helped Jared as well, he said.

“If his mental health had been de-stigmatized from an early age, we might not be in this situation today,” Gabe Zimmerman said.

A study by the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry found that among a sample group of 10,123 children and teens, about 22 percent had a significant mental illness. The American Psychiatric Association has also found that 50 percent of cases of mental illness begin around the age of 14, and 75 percent of cases begin before the age of 24.

In her years as a district parent, Colleen Daly Martinez, a licensed clinical social worker and a play therapist, has noticed an increase in anxiety and depression among students in the Montclair schools, as well as self-injuring behavior. The schools are currently not equipped to address these issues, she said.

WHAT’S NEXT

The law, which was signed by Gov. Phil Murphy on Aug. 16, was penned by Assembly members Gary Schaer, John McKeon, Joann Downey, Raj Mukherki and Daniel Benson, and senators Kristin Corrado, Richard Codey and Joseph Vitale.

It will require health education programs in New Jersey to include age-appropriate instruction on mental

health, including information on substance abuse.

“It’s incredibly important that students understand the many implications of health, from exercise to mental health and wellness,” said Schaer. “Educating children about these issues from a young age will help them gain a deeper understanding of how to care for their mental health as they get older.”

One in five children ages 13 to 18 have, or will have, a serious mental illness in their lives, McKeon said.

“In any given classroom, there’s bound to be students living with a mental health issue, from ADHD to depression to anxiety. Some may not have been diagnosed or treated. Through lessons on mental health, we may help some youth feel less alone or be encouraged to seek the help they need,” he said.

The state Board of Education will review and update the state’s standards in health and physical education, in consultation with mental health experts, including experts from the Division of Mental Health and Addiction Services.

New Jersey is now one of at least two states that require schools to teach about mental health-related subjects. New York signed its own curriculum into law in 2016.

New York’s curriculum has a series of mental health topics arranged by kindergarten through second grade; third grade through fifth grade; middle school, and high school.

At the elementary school level, the curriculum includes learning the importance of healthy food, good hygiene habits, exercise and sleep; how to ask for help; how to express gratitude and empathy; the meaning of self-esteem; and how failure can be a learning experience.

In middle school and high school, the covered topics include specific mental conditions; how society views the concept of mental health; social media use; healthy relationships; substance abuse; and conflict resolution.

The New York State Education Department also recommends that classes be taught by certified instructors, and that teachers and staff receive training in how to respond when a student is having a mental health-related issue.

GOOD FIRST STEP

“I think it’s an important step, because you can’t have overall good health without overall mental health,” said Robert Davidson, the CEO of the Mental Health Association of Essex and Morris. Davidson said he was optimistic about the law, but said he would have to see more of the details on what it would encompass. A curriculum has to be age-appropriate for each grade level, he said.

Thirty years ago, Davidson said, when he started practicing in mental health, there was little to no discussion

of mental health in society, including in schools.

“Schools have to become a trauma-informed system of education,” Davidson said.

Many mental health issues in children are due to abuse in the home, the loss of a parent or other caregiver, or some form of violence occurring close to the child’s home, he said.

Teacher and staff training on how to identify and address mental health issues is crucial, agreed Tim Purnell, a former science teacher at Renaissance Middle School and a former schools superintendent in Somerville. He is now an adjunct professor at Montclair State University with a specialty in public health, including health issues that may be present in students.

During his time in Somerville, the district was designated as New Jersey’s first trauma-informed district in 2014. Teachers and staff received training and instruction on how adverse situations, such as a death in the family, violence, abuse and other situations can affect a student’s mental health.

Davidson also concurred that academic pressure is also a key contributor, adding that children today are under significantly more pressure than they were as recently as 10 years ago. And social media and its role is not a positive one. Schools are taking steps that include having students keep their phones away during class. “Even after school, anyone, much less a child, shouldn’t have their faces buried in their phones.”

Pamela Goldsteen, Montclair parents and a therapist, she has “hopeful optimism” about the idea of a mental health curriculum.

“I don’t think it will be a magic bullet,” she said.

Martinez agrees and said the state also needs to provide school districts with the resources to hire more mental health professionals, such as counselors and social workers, who actually work with children. “Generally, school social workers and school counselors, they’re paperwork people,” she said.

But talking about mental illness is a good first step. Mental health and mental illness are “part of the human experience,” Davidson said.

WHAT’S BEING DONE NOW

At Montclair High School, Jared’s Fund has provided fellowship grants to groups of students so they can study mental health issues or work on projects related to mental health.

One of the groups developed sample mental health curriculum for middle school students. The fellows also took workshop training in New York this summer on mental health “first aid:” how to respond when a friend or loved one is in a crisis.

Jared's Fund has also established Jared's Club, a student group at Montclair High School.

The Montclair Board of Education also gave permission for the club to start planting a garden, both to honor people who experience, or have experienced, issues with mental health, and to provide students with a quiet place to study or meditate if they wish.