

Mental Health in Schools Community Partnership

Youth Focus Group Agenda:

- 1. Purpose of focus group** To find out what students think about what schools and other places in your community are doing to help kids who are in need of some kind of counseling. Your answers will be used to help students who struggle in school because they need some kind of counseling. Your answers will be shared with other schools in Michigan, to help their students.
- 2. Introductions**
- 3. Ground rules**
 - a. Use first names only
 - b. Everybody gets a chance to talk
 - c. It's OK to not talk – just say “pass”
 - d. Don't judge
 - e. Don't interrupt
 - f. Don't talk about the focus group when it's over
 - g. Other rules?
- 4. Group Discussion: Answer Three Questions (20 minutes each)**
 - a. Question #1: How can adults at your school make all students feel supported, both in school and in other areas of their lives?
 - b. Question #2: How well do you think adults in your school respond to students with mental health problems?
 - c. Question #3: If a student had a problem that was serious enough to need some kind of counseling, who in the school would be the best person to give the student this kind of help? Why?

d.

Youth Focus Group Results

The focus group questions were developed by the National Assembly on School-Based Health Care (NASBHC) as part of a study of what students in several other states say about mental health issues in schools. See attached for that report. The following results are from focus groups of middle school, high school, and alternative school students conducted in Alcona (n = 19), Beecher (n = 8), and Waterford (n = 11) school districts in December 2008 and January 2009. For each question, the students' responses are organized by common themes that emerged from a content analysis, with examples listed under each theme.

1. How can adults at your school make all students feel supported (in school and other areas of life)?

Treat all students fairly and equally

- Give every kid an equal chance (not just smart kids)
- Don't make fun of kids with disabilities/disorders
- Use appropriate discipline (not too harsh or too lenient)
- At assemblies, don't dismiss classes based upon their behavior
- Don't put kids on the spot-in front of class (with personal questions)
- No public punishments
- Teachers should clarify situations before punishing – know what students are going through
- School administrators – listen to students
- Give privacy to students (if they have to leave class for a mental health or medical reason)

Provide support and encouragement with trust, patience, and respect

- Encourage kids when aren't doing well
- Show patience – give time for students to explain their situation (when not doing well)
- Give 2nd chances – clarify why is homework late before punishing
- They should ask if you need help; sit next to you, take time to help
- Give students time to think (and finish work)
- Don't tell the class they are bad
- Show mutual respect (so kids feel OK to go to a teacher)
- Teachers should trust students more. Ex. Turning in work and borrowing materials

Have high expectations for students

- Have clear rules
- Give students a fresh start each year (don't rely on previous years)
- No one-on-one personal discussions in front of whole class

- Don't overly praise students
- Treat students at the age they are at
- Everybody should believe in students
- Follow through with promises

Make learning challenging and fun

- Make lessons fun, so they don't drag on (classes are long 1.5 hrs long)
- More active learning
- Don't ignore slackers (involve them more)
- Use different teaching styles
- Teachers should smile more
- I trust some adults in school... we do fun things with them, like "disco dancing"
- Don't take bad mood out on kids

2. How well do you think adults in your school respond to students with mental health problems?

A lot don't (respond well), some do

- Teachers don't know what students are going through – students feel like they have nobody to talk to
- They get angry or punish, so students shut down
- Stress – homework – teachers don't know what students are dealing with
- Teachers don't get to know/relate to students

Some kids get positive response; others don't

- Teachers respond well to mental retardation, but not to less obvious illness (e.g., depression)
- They only help the students they like
- More support/inclusion those with disabilities
 - For students with good grades, don't assume everything is OK
- Find a way to involve/not lose troubled students
- Teachers shouldn't say, "that's not my fault" if students don't understand

Find a balance between compassion and structure/limits

- Teachers don't know who is trying to get sympathy vs. those who have real issues
- Help students with work if struggling, but don't do it for them
- Find ways to make things easier for students with MH issues, but don't allow them to slack off
- Support kids with issues, but don't let students have their way
- If students are having personal problems, help them get their work done (e.g., at study hour)
- Be fair with homework

- Understand what is going on with students
- Troubled students can't always be expected to perform (e.g., don't just say, "suck it up!")
- Teachers shouldn't encourage bad behavior
- Teachers shouldn't join in making fun of students
- Don't dismiss students' feelings or what they're going through
- They should know that you're not doing things just to get in trouble...there's a good reason

Adults and students should know what to do

- Students should take more responsibility and tell adults if something's wrong
- Teachers – know limits – refer
- Sometimes teachers can't help (e.g., sleeping problems)
- Counselors/admin should help more – get appropriate MH
- Teachers need to be more aware of MH issues
- Easier to talk to a counselor closer to their age
- Counselor – deals with academics (high school), too busy to deal with MH issues
- Explain/educate about disorders – teacher to class. (but don't identify which students)
- Don't make fun of students (e.g., if pet dies), including when they aren't there

3. If a student had a problem that needed some kind of counseling, who in the school would be the best person to give this kind of help?

Friends/Peers

- Friends (closer in age) should be a close friend – trust; but not a counselor
- Don't want students to be a counselor – but possibly if they are trained
- Issues with telling friends – can spread rumors if they become enemies
- Peer mediation (PM) – didn't work due to lack of authority; didn't want to tell a peer what to do; there's a stigma to using it (feels like I don't have friends to help if I have to go to PM)

Parents/Relatives

- Parents – groups (parents/friends) for some things, but they can't help if the problem is serious (e.g., depression).
- Talk to older brother or sister – they have just gone through it
- Should be allowed to call a family member without being questioned

School Personnel

- Teachers/counselor around their age – similar experiences, just went through what they are.
- Admin – (principal/superintendent) – authority/security

- The Dean of Students really listens; a lot of students know they can go to him and he'll help
- Student support person is really nice and listens to me

Mental Health Professionals

- The school psychologist
- Should have a school therapist or psychologist instead of a counselor. The counselor has too many roles other than helping with mental health issues
- Trust a counselor – private, won't get in trouble – job is to help students – principals job is to protect school
- A school counselor visits the school, but there should be someone full time at school
- A therapist would help; getting help early is better (than later); helps understand problems and give ways to deal with them

Make sure all students have somebody who can help in some way

- Could be a lot of people, but should be confidential/private
- Should have options depending on comfort level and who the student trusts
- Wouldn't talk to teacher or principal – couldn't relate, hard to understand
- What if you don't feel like you can talk to anyone at school? (hotline or general doctor)
- Example: drug/alcohol problems...don't talk to admin because they may get in trouble
 - o D.A.R.E. – message was too much; many ignored it (including parents and school)
 - o Parents – could talk to someone at school and get help
 - o ATOD – psychiatrist – need more than what school offers
- Example: Divorce...talk to friends that went through the same thing.
 - o Wouldn't go to parents (big trouble)
 - o Teachers don't have time to talk – need a designated therapist
 - o Small community – confidentiality issues

Qualities of somebody who can help

- Need to understand importance of academics early
- Adults should give focused attention when youth are talking
- Don't want to hear "I was young once" (that minimizes student's feelings)
- Someone in the 40s can't relate
- Recent college grad (20s)

Miscellaneous

- Money issues (can't afford clinic) – would talk to someone at school if there was somebody