



What Steps Can The Appleton Area School District Take To Involve Staff, Parents, Students, And The Community In Providing More Inclusive Mental Health Services to High School Students?

Mental Health From The Perspective Of Students and Staff.

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INDEX

INTRODUCTION (2)

BACKGROUND (3)

METHODOLOGY (3)

FINDINGS (4)

RECOMMENDATIONS (5)

RESEARCHER REFLECTIONS (6)

IMPLICATIONS (7)

APPENDIX (8)

INTRODUCTION

We are team I.V.A.A.S, and our main goal was finding solutions to mental health in our schools. We started this study on July 9, 2024, at Fox Valley Technical College, and from our studies, we would like to inform the Appleton Area School District (AASD) about mental health through our survey responses from staff and students' points of view. We believe it is very important to be informed about students' mental health, especially among high school students. According to one staff member's response, "Once you build a bond/relationship with students, you start to recognize their normal patterns vs. odd patterns, which usually is a way of them trying to ask for help."

We know that mental health is essential to students in schools and that teachers and staff can help those students. However, we wanted to know what steps or improvements the AASD can provide for all students.

What Do We Want to Learn Regarding Mental Health in Schools?

Through our survey questions, we wanted to learn from students and staff whether they think students often show signs of mental health issues in school. We also wanted to know if staff members have dealt with students experiencing any mental health issues. Additionally, we need to know if our schools provide a supportive environment for students with mental health issues and if students know where to go when facing a mental health crisis.

We wanted to learn more about this topic from students' and staff's perspectives, specifically regarding mental health and how it affects high school students in the Appleton Area School District and their everyday lives. We also wanted to know what students and staff would suggest the AASD do to improve mental health in schools.

BACKGROUND

Critical participatory action research (CPAR) is a form of critical, collective inquiry that provides youth and adults with opportunities to identify concerns that impact their lives, to gather and analyze data about these issues, and to take collective action to create more just communities (Brion-Meisels & Alter, 2019; Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Mirra, Garcia & Morrell, 2016). Described by Michelle Fine & Maria Torre (2019) as "research rooted in politics, power, participation, and a deep appreciation of knowledge, created in conditions of oppression and mobilized for social action," CPAR projects are grounded in the teachings of popular education, democratic participation, and critical/feminist theories. Coming together around a common concern, CPAR researchers strive to name and explore the different ways in which positionality, context, and power impact their findings. There is growing evidence that schools, community-based organizations, educators, and adolescents are nurtured by and benefit from this form of inquiry.

How does CARES Fox Cities utilize CPAR?

CARES Fox Cities is a non-profit organization located in Appleton, WI. CARES stands for Community-based Advocacy and Research for Equity in Schools. Our organization is a network of students, caregivers, educators, and community members who work together to understand and redress systemic inequities in our schools. A core component evident in the work completed during this student research institute is the idea that those individuals closest to issues or opportunities in our society should have a primary seat at the table to make changes. In the case of the studies completed in July of 2024, we employed Black, Indigenous, and Multilingual Students of Color to study a topic around equity in schooling that matters to them.

We engage in the work using Participatory Action Research projects, which begin by forming a team, learning about a common issue or idea, and culminating by generating actionable solutions that impact our community. Projects are designed in partnership with those experiencing that inequity, elevating and validating their lived experiences. An additional integral function of the nonprofit is our partnership with the AASD leadership team, which has committed to funding and implementing the findings and recommendations that evolve from our research projects.

METHODOLOGY

Before starting our research, we decided on our topic. We all had an equal passion and determination for finding solutions to mental health issues in schools. We all shared the same idea/question on what schools can do to improve the mental health of high school students.

We created two separate surveys for students and school staff. We wrote questions that give students, teachers, and staff their points of view on this topic and, more importantly, find solutions they think could help improve mental health. After finalizing the surveys, we sent them to students and school staff in the AASD. We received a total of 17 responses; then, we went over the data as a team. We then categorized the responses into groups by codes. After looking at our data, we compared all survey questions to those of students and teachers/staff. We found out that most answers had a similar response.

FINDINGS

Every staff member who responded to our survey indicated that they had dealt with a student experiencing mental health issues (*Figure 2*). This is a clear indication that mental health is currently a big challenge for students in our schools, and it needs immediate serious attention. To find solutions to mental health issues in schools, we must be aware of the variable causes and effects of mental health issues in our students and the various steps we can take to improve their daily lives. From the surveys we shared, we all came up with valuable results that would be meaningful to all staff, parents, and students in the Appleton Area School District.

The Causes and Effects of Mental Health Issues in Students

Many students agree that families can be a cause of mental health issues. Students who grow up in abusive and dysfunctional homes and have a bad relationship or connection with their family. They often face traumas that can affect their mental health and their mindset negatively. Students say that some parents' idea of mental health usually implies that they are “just being lazy,” and this goes a long way in making a lot of students feel afraid, unsafe, and uncomfortable when reaching out to a parent/guardian for support.

There are some cases of bullying and racism at school, which could also make the school environment unsafe for students experiencing mental health challenges. Although some staff members have noticed that students often show signs of bad mental health (*see Figure 1*), some have reported that most students usually hide it pretty well. Students going through mental health issues frequently find it challenging to attend school or engage in school activities regularly, preventing them from learning and focusing on their goals.

Our findings were also broken into the following categories:

- 1. Providing Breaks:** Many students mentioned that they were not offered adequate breaks during the school day. They suggested that schools should provide break sessions and encourage students to take breaks after they have been involved in many activities. To do that, the lunch hours and recess should be expanded further so students can get enough time to rest and regain strength\energy even at school. This could help reduce the problem of mental health issues in schools.
- 2. Total support and Engagement:** Both staff and students responded that some students experiencing mental health challenges do not have a reliable adult to talk to sometimes. It was suggested that staff, parents, and other school professionals should be more attentive and available because some students just need people to listen to them while they talk about their problems. This will eventually encourage a more reliable/supportive school environment where students will feel valued and heard.
- 3. Anonymity:** Although schools have done a great job creating surveys to check in on students' well-being, students have raised concerns that the surveys are not anonymous and could hinder the effectiveness of survey results. The appropriate mental health staff should reassure students that information shared in surveys remains confidential. Teachers should also take time to check on students' well-being daily and keep their responses confidential. This could help teachers better understand what is happening in their students' lives and refer them to appropriate professionals as needed.
- 4. Creating Awareness:** Some students report that they have no idea how or whom to reach out to for help regarding their mental health issues. It should be made compulsory for schools to provide training programs for teachers/staff on how to recognize and help students who struggle with mental health issues. This training should involve parents/guardians, if necessary.
- 5. Limiting the Use of Devices:** Limiting the use of personal devices can allow students to focus on their school work instead of being distracted and losing focus. Taking away their

devices is not a good option because most students find comfort and relaxation while using them. Still, instead, staff and parents should encourage the students to limit the use of social media and focus on achieving more meaningful life goals.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on our survey findings the responses we got were similar and all had the same goal to better the lives of students with mental health issues. One staff member suggested there needs to be more training on what teachers can do to help students struggling with mental health. Another suggested that they need lower class sizes so that teachers can build better relationships with students and provide students with better access to mental health professionals.

The Following are Some Resources That are Needed to Improve Students Mental Health in our Schools:

- Our findings show that most AASD schools do not have full-time pupil services professionals, so high schools should employ full-time counselors, social workers, and psychologists willing and readily available to assist students with their mental health needs. This will help create accessibility to the needed mental health services for the students in our schools. Additionally, mental health wellness programs should be made a priority, and it should be made a compulsory topic that should be added to the schools' curriculum, so all students and staff (irrespective of their grades) are aware of the importance of mental health.
- Teachers play a massive role in supporting students with mental health issues, but knowing their needs and wants matters because this can help improve their relationships with students. Creating lower class sizes would allow teachers to learn more about their students, build positive relationships, and give them more attention if needed. This could also benefit both parties.
- The district should create and support school clubs to ensure that they provide a supportive environment for students struggling with mental health issues. Clubs should be involved in activities that make every member feel supported, loved, and recognized regardless of gender, race, or ability.
- The school should reach out to organizations and institutions for support and funding so that several resources are provided for teachers so that they would be able to properly handle several cases of mental health crises without running out of resources.

RESEARCHER REFLECTIONS

Ivan- “I joined the institute because I thought it would be a good experience for me, and I was right. I also wanted there to be a big awareness about mental health, as I feel it is overlooked at times. During my time, I have met great people who I am glad to call my team. I also got to meet

and listen to daily guest speakers who gave us their life stories and journeys. I'm also glad to have met the facilitators who encouraged all of us to speak up and be proud.”

Vivy- “I joined this program because it benefited me, and I enjoyed my time here. Learning about mental health generally is a huge and sensitive topic, but all I can say is that knowing nothing or some of it makes me more curious about a topic like this. As a student with a mental health issue, I can relate so much to this topic and would love to help others who can relate. I am glad to be part of this program and to appreciate my group’s effort to do this research. Helping and sharing the ideas I have with my team makes me happy. I think that from this program, I have learned so much, socialized, and improved my goals from the moment I came here.”

Abigail- “During the three-week program, I had the opportunity to meet and collaborate with incredible teammates and participants. We engaged in meaningful discussions on mental health and had the privilege of learning from speakers who talked to us about their experiences and diversity. Outside of our sessions, we enjoyed meals together and played games, which helped build a sense of community. Overall, I am very grateful for this experience and the connections I made.”

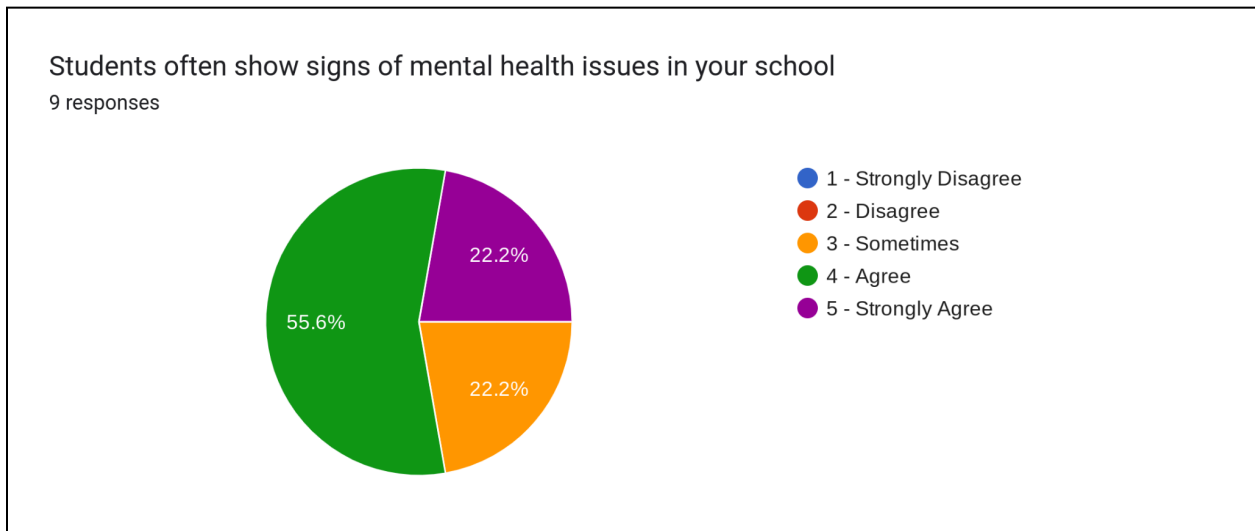
Andii- “I joined this institute to try out something new and learn new things about myself and the problems of the community. Joining this program taught me a lot about Mental Health, the topic we were working on. I learned about different mental health struggles in the AASD that aren’t being taken seriously and need to be paid more attention to. Also, while being in this program I learned a lot from the guest speakers that would come and talk to us. They gave me a lot of hope and confidence that I can reach my goals as long as I work hard for them and to count on myself. I’m grateful to have joined this program and thankful for what it’s done for me.”

Sayvon- “This program helped me find a purpose for myself this summer. I met a lot of incredible people inside and outside of the institute during these last few weeks. Our overarching topic was research about mental health, and I have found that our research was very beneficial to not only myself but to the community. I enjoyed learning the information that we did, and I hope that it continues to make a difference in the lives of students in the AASD.”

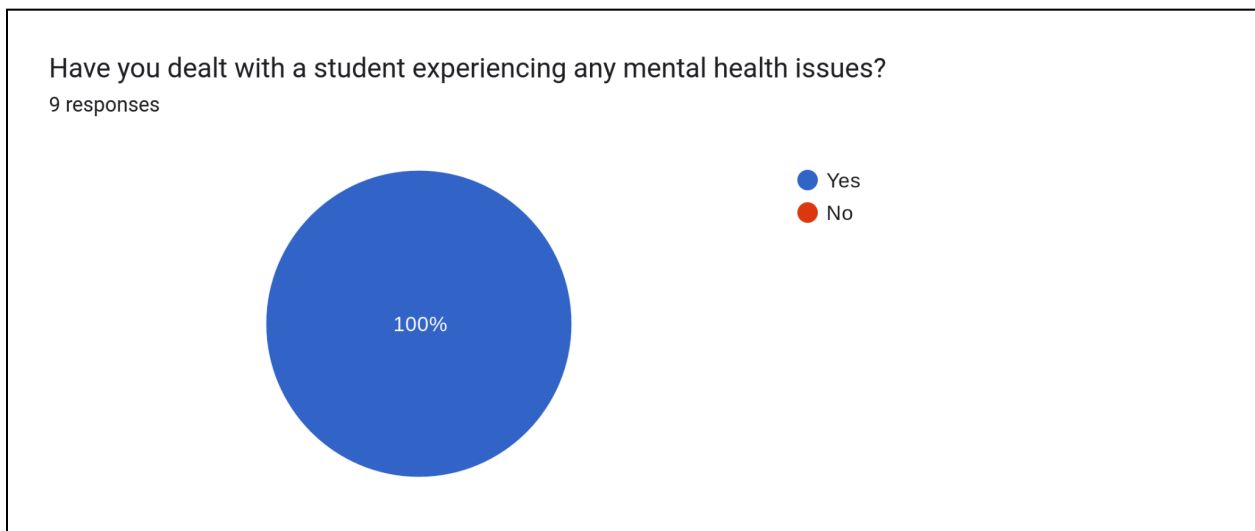
IMPLICATIONS

This institute has made us feel like family. Being part of this was a huge opportunity to learn about mental health and to meet new students here. Even with our facilitators, they were amazing people, and we were glad to have them. Their guidance and strong opinions have motivated us to be engaged more than ever before. As this program continued, our group conducted a vast study about mental health. Working in teams about mental health has also increased our sociability towards each other. We believe this institute is beneficial and hope that more students in the AASD could soon be involved, too. As for our study, we also hope that the AASD will improve its providence of resources and support to all students. We also enjoyed listening to our guest

speakers during lunch, as each individual has given us beautiful motivations about our path to take in the future; we are so grateful for them as well.

APPENDIX**Figure 1:**

** This result obtained from the staff survey shows that the majority of staff have noticed that students often show signs of mental health issues in schools. With 55.6% agreeing and 22.2% of staff strongly agreeing to the question above, 22.2% show that students sometimes show signs of mental health issues.*

Figure 2:

Staff Research Questions:

1. The AASD provides inclusive mental health services to high school students.
2. Students struggling with mental health issues get equal treatment regardless of race, or gender.
3. Your school is informed about mental health awareness.
4. Mental health can be used to justify discrimination.
5. You received professional training on supporting students with all kinds of mental health issues.
6. Have you dealt with a student experiencing any mental health issues? Yes or No? Follow up: If so, how did you support the student?
7. Students often show signs of mental health issues in your school. Follow up: Explain your answer to the question above
8. Mental health affects students' school work. Follow up: Explain your answer to the question above
9. What kind of mental health coping skills/resources do you think students need in an academic setting?
10. What steps could the AASD take to improve the mental health of all students?

Student Research Questions:

1. You feel comfortable talking to people about your mental health struggles.
2. There are enough counselors to help students with mental health issues at your school.
3. The AASD has provided all the required mental health services to high school students.
4. Students of color struggling with mental health issues get equal treatment regardless of race or gender.
5. Mental health can be used to justify discrimination.
6. Childhood trauma affects mental health.
7. Mental health affects students during school.

Follow up: Explain your answer to the question above.

8. Students should reach out to parents/guardians about their mental health condition.

Follow up: Explain your answer to the question above.

9. Your school provides a supportive environment for students with mental health issues.

Follow up: Explain your answer to the question above.

10. One of the causes of mental illness is families.

Follow up: Explain your answer to the question above.

11. Do you know where to go when facing a mental health crisis?
12. Do you know any students with mental health issues (optional).
13. You relate to students with mental health issues (optional).