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ALERT

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Schools eye trauma-informed training

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Cumberland County Director of Schools William Stepp knows students in the county are struggling.

When students are dealing with concerns and issues at home or outside the school day, it impacts their ability to be successful at school.

“Mental health is an issue. We’re seeing more threats from kids. We have more kids participating in illegal substances. We’ve got kids who just have anger issues from their past,” Stepp said.

“We’ve got children who just can’t do the work until we provide some sort of intervention or outlet for them to become functional during the school day.”

Cumberland County Schools are working to provide training and resources to serve students who have experienced trauma.

Trauma can stem from a number of sources, including being the victim of violence or abuse, suffering from hunger or food insecurity, or encountering family challenges like divorce or the death of a close family member.

These types of experiences are often referred to as Adverse Childhood Experiences, ACEs. The 2022 State of the Child report found Tennessee children report adverse experience more than children in other states, with 41% of Tennessee children reporting at least one adverse experience. One in three children living below the poverty line in Tennessee reports two or more adverse experiences.

Adverse childhood experiences bring both immediate and long-term consequences. Research has found children who experience trauma or multiple adverse experiences can be at greater risk for multiple health conditions, like depression, heart disease and cancer later in life. These children may also be more likely to participate in risky behaviors and achieve lower levels of education than their peers.

“It’s another student intervention that we want all the employees to understand so that we can react in real time to the needs of the children,” said Stepp.

The goal is to establish Cumberland County Schools as a trauma-informed school system. That effort is in tandem with the Trauma-Informed Community Alliance.

“We’re closely partnered with Cumberland County schools because a lot of the programs that we’re building do involve the schools,” said Colleen Mall with the alliance. “It’s innovative. I can’t say it’s never been done before, but in this county, it’s unprecedented to have that close of a relationship with the community.”

The school system started its training during the Aug. 1 county-wide convocation with a 90-minute session with a trauma-informed expert providing training to all 1,100 employees of the school system.

“Not many school systems have gone through the extensive training,” Stepp said.

Moving forward, the effort will include needs analysis in areas of staff development and training, policy and advocacy, data, collaboration with stakeholders, physical and emotional safe and supportive environments, and student programming.

“We want the whole county working as one so we can provide interventions to the whole county, whatever those interventions are,” Stepp said.

That will include integrating school services with afterschool or summer programs, to provide continuity for children and their families.

Those programs were identified along with early intervention efforts during community discussions about how to use opioid abatement funds.

“That came up in every committee,” Stepp said of the community planning sessions for the opioid abatement grant applications.

Tennessee is making the grants available with the proceeds of settlements paid by drug manufacturers and distributors following multiple lawsuits related to the opioid epidemic. The state’s Opioid Abatement Trust Fund paid \$31.4 million to county governments in February. Nearly \$80 million remains available for community funding.

Mall said, “It’s important that there’s a seamless transition from school to after-school and summer programs. That’s what the alliance is focused on for this year’s grant.

“It’s critical that our shared outcomes are the same and that we really work together because the kids go back into the communities. Our effort is to be in their community as much as we can.”

Stepp said it was important for all agencies to work together.

“If we do it as a team, we’re more likely to provide more seamless interventions from agency to agency,” he said.

Mall added, “We’re not going to take that trauma away, but at least if you’re present in that community, then you’ve got the opportunity to develop that relationship and ... trust.

“Then we have programming that will help with decision-making and self-esteem, things like that.”

Those programs would not only work with the children, but their parents, as well, she said.

The school system has implemented some programs including training on adverse childhood experiences at several schools.

The schools also expanded its team of safe school counselors in recent years and have social workers to help provide student services.

Last year, the schools launched a Handle With Care program that enables communication between law enforcement and the school system. Law enforcement can report children they encounter at the scene of a crime or who have been exposed to

violence or trauma to the school system with a simple “Handle With Care.” No further information is provided to protect the privacy of the child.

And, the school system has hired a general education behavioralist. The position was approved in the 2022-'23 budget, but went unfilled last year.

Stepp said the position works with teachers to develop strategies and best practices for children with behavioral issues.

But the trauma-informed schools initiative goes beyond that, Stepp said.

“We’re hoping to go beyond that with early identification so we can provide those supports as quickly as possible,” he said.

Each school will have its own plan based on the specific needs of that community.

“Every school may be different, but we’ll have that same umbrella,” Mall said.

She said the community resource database at ucassist.org the alliance helped compile over the past several years will continue to grow, identifying new resources, particularly in areas of mental health and substance abuse.

Mall said, “It’s going to be piece-by-piece. But we should be able to see some changes over time.”

Opioid grants are due by Oct. 9, with funding expected later in the year.

“The opioid grant is one grant. It’s not the only one we’re looking at. The education system has grants that can funnel into this project,” Mall said. “But the opioid money will be available every year.”

Those grants are also for a three-year project, Mall said, giving time to get programs up and running.

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