**Headline:** Why Some Schools Are a Step Ahead in Addressing Student Mental Health Needs

**Teaser:** Educators—from big-city districts to rural America—credit the community schools approach for helping them take on a growing national crisis.

By Jeff Bryant

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**[Article Body:]**

It seems that no community may be immune to what many are calling a [national mental health crisis](https://www.apa.org/monitor/2022/01/special-childrens-mental-health) among children and teens.

“We needed a lot more mental and behavioral help after COVID,” Meredith Mullen told Our Schools. Mullen is the community school director for [Mahatma K. Gandhi Community School](https://ps23.jcboe.org/) (PS 23) in Jersey City, New Jersey. “During the lockdown and transition back to school, people had traumatic experiences. They were experiencing grief. They weren’t being socialized. Coming back into the school setting was hard for many students. Behavior also became more of an issue. Teachers reported higher numbers of students who were withdrawn, or not participating, or they were sleeping in class.”

More than 1,300 miles away in the North Woods of the Upper Midwest, public school educators face a similar situation.

“Many of our families are experiencing grief,” said Deanna Hron, community school coordinator at [King Elementary School](https://isd317.org/en-US/king-elementary-aac9d578) in Deer River, Minnesota. “Even before the pandemic, a lot of our students were affected by primary caregivers passing away,” she said, “but since COVID, it’s been like an epidemic.”

Other sources of trauma that are affecting student mental health, according to Hron, include parent incarceration, suicide, substance abuse, homelessness, and divorce. One student’s family called the school looking for sleeping bags. They had become unhoused and were living in a tent in the woods. Another student started missing school regularly after her mother committed suicide.

Although each of these schools is having a shared experience of widespread mental trauma among their students, the schools serve strikingly different communities.

Jersey City Public Schools is a [highly diverse](https://nces.ed.gov/Programs/Edge/ACSDashboard/3407830) urban school district consisting of [39 schools](https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/districtsearch/district_detail.asp?Search=2&details=1&DistrictID=3407830&ID2=3407830) located across from Lower Manhattan in New York. Mahatma K. Gandhi Community School, a Pre-K through grade eight school, is in a neighborhood people call “Little India,” according to Mullen, due to the high percentage of first-generation immigrant families from India and south-central Asia. There is also a large population of families from Middle Eastern and North African countries, she said. “We are one of the most diverse schools in Jersey City. We have families that come from, I think, 59 countries.”

In contrast, Deer River Public Schools is a rural district serving about 900 students, according to Hron, drawn from an area of more than 500 square miles that includes the tiny town of Deer River—with a population of 900 people—and other surrounding small towns. About half of the students in King Elementary identify as white, according to Hron, and the rest are mostly Native American, including families from the [Leech Lake Reservation](https://www.llojibwe.org/aboutUs/demographics.html), which is home to around 10,000 members of the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe.

Mahatma K. Gandhi Community School and King Elementary are far from being alone in their endeavor to address the rising mental health needs of their students. “A national survey of 3,300 high schoolers conducted in spring 2020 found close to a third of students felt unhappy and depressed much more than usual,” according to a 2022 [report](https://www.apa.org/monitor/2022/01/special-childrens-mental-health) by the American Psychological Association.

As the 2022 school year drew to a close, the Washington Post [reported](https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2022/05/31/schools-mental-health-covid-students/) the results of a survey that found 70 percent of schools saw a rise in the number of students wanting mental health services. “Even more, 76 percent,” according to the Post, “said faculty and staff members have expressed concerns about depression, anxiety, and trauma in students since the start of the pandemic.”

When the 2023 school year opened, [an analysis](https://mhanational.org/issues/state-mental-health-america) by Mental Health America found, “[More than] 1 in 10 youth in the U.S. are experiencing depression that is severely impairing their ability to function at school or work, at home, with family, or in their social life.” Yet, a significant majority, 59.8 percent, who reported having major depression do not receive any mental health treatment.

Press reports about how schools are trying to address their student’s mental health needs often frame the story as a matter of educators [improvising](https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2023/04/28/school-mental-health-crisis-ohio/), with [each school or district essentially cobbling together its own strategy rather than relying on a structured response that is replicable at a wider scale](https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2022/12/05/crisis-student-mental-health-is-much-vaster-than-we-realize/). However, Mullen and Hron spoke of taking a systematic approach to the problem and using a method that can be implemented in any school.

Their schools practice an educational approach that is commonly called [community schools](https://www.nea.org/student-success/great-public-schools/community-schools/what-are-they), whereby the school positions itself as a community hub for providing programs and services that are reflective of what students and families say they need.

Essential to the community schools approach is to have a staff person, like Mullen and Hron, whose sole responsibility is to act as a go-between among school staff, families, and the surrounding community to identify overlooked needs of students and families and then locate assets, both within and outside the school, to address those needs.

In no way do proponents of the community schools approach suggest that schools have to practice this approach in order to address the mental health needs of students. But, as Mullen and Hron explained, schools that do practice this approach are a step ahead when students’ mental health problems become widespread.

**‘Really Listening to Each Stakeholder’**

Mullen is not an educator per se, as she works for the [Center for Supportive Schools](https://www.supportiveschools.org/), a nonprofit that, according to its website, partners with Jersey City Public Schools to implement a community schools strategy. (Prior to her move to Jersey City, Mullen was a [community school coordinator](https://www.supportiveschools.org/staff-bios-meredith-mullen) in Tampa Bay, Florida, where she was an employee of the district.)

There are five schools in Jersey City using the community schools approach, according to Mullen, and all of them work with the Center for Supportive Schools to help [put into place](https://www.supportiveschools.org/community-schools) programs and partnerships to address the specialized needs of each school, whether the needs are for a food pantry, an after-school program, or vision and dental care.

The approach, according to Mullen, is about “really listening to each stakeholder to determine what their critical needs are and then purposefully putting plans and programs into place to meet those needs. This is more effective than just assuming what people want or just plopping down initiatives because they sound pretty.”

“And it’s not about meeting the needs of just the students but of all the stakeholders, including school staff, parents, and the surrounding community,” she said.

One of Mullen’s primary tasks as a community school director is to conduct an annual assessment of the school and the community. A consistent finding over the past three years has been that the number of parents and students wanting mental and behavioral care has been “astounding,” she said.

Consequently, she collaborated with colleagues and outside partners to put into place new systems and structures to make sure students who might be struggling with their mental health weren’t being overlooked. This included creating a data-informed teacher referral system and a student support team.

Anytime a teacher notices a student is struggling with behavior, attendance, or academics, the teacher puts a referral into the system that gets passed on to the student support team. In biweekly meetings, the team pulls up all the data that’s been gathered about each student. Then team members decide if there needs to be an intervention.

Interventions could be an academic pull out with one-on-one instruction or a push in of mental health staff to work directly with the student in the classroom. Or the student may need to be part of the caseload for a social worker. Other options could be to contact the family or to make a referral to an outside clinic for behavioral and mental health services.

Beginning in 2023, the school also opened a full-service health center with full-time licensed clinical social workers to help with mental services for students and their families. Part of the health clinic’s program is reserved for parents to be part of the caseloads for the social workers. This often involves a lot of grief counseling or help with housing problems and employment, according to Mullen.

**‘Teachers and Administrative Staff Don’t Have Time to Do This’**

Similarly, at King Elementary, Hron and her colleagues have also created new systems and structures focused on student mental health. Although Hron, unlike Mullen, is an employee of the school, she works with an outside partner, [North Homes Children and Family Services](https://www.northhomes.org/), to provide the school’s students and families with access to mental health services.

In a rural school district like the one King Elementary serves, which stretches for more than 500 square miles, access is a big problem.

“One of the biggest barriers for families needing to access mental health is getting through the paperwork,” Hron said, “especially with families that live in remote places like many of our families do. So one of our advantages in having the community schools approach is we have someone who can bring families into the school or take the paperwork to the families’ homes and help with filling it out. This step alone has greatly increased participation in [our mental health services].”

“Another challenge is keeping the lines of communication open,” Hron said. Families generally live more than 30 or 40 miles from the school, and the only other options for mental health services are hours away in Grand Rapids or Bemidji.

“If we didn’t have the full-service model of the community schools approach, we wouldn’t be as readily able to check up on our families and make sure they’re doing okay,” she said.

Brittany Sutherland, a mental health professional at North Homes Children and Family Services, explained how the partnership arrangement between her nonprofit provider and the school works.

“I talk with [Hron] multiple times a week,” Sutherland said. “She helps with getting services to kids more quickly. She provides us with insights about the child and the family and what their needs might be. She fosters relationships with families and brings in other school staff to help when needed.”

According to Sutherland, because the families know Hron, it’s much easier for North Homes to start developing a relationship with the family. In other schools Sutherland works with that don’t use the community schools approach, she has to “cold call” the family, which can be awkward. Often those families are experiencing a crisis and may not be ready to start a conversation about mental health with a stranger.

“Without a [community school coordinator], it takes longer and it’s much harder to establish a relationship with a family,” Sutherland said.

In fact, among the schools she works with, King Elementary is the only one that uses the community schools approach, Sutherland said, and having a community school coordinator to work with makes a “huge difference.” In the schools that do not have a coordinator, she said, there’s a greater likelihood that children will “fall through the cracks.”

“I can’t emphasize enough how much more impactful it is to have someone on the school staff who is specifically dedicated to supporting families and checking up on them,” Hron said. “Teachers and administrative staff don’t have time to do this.”

For instance, in the case of the unhoused family sleeping in the woods, Hron found them donated sleeping bags and camping equipment.

For the student whose mother had committed suicide, Hron found that she was living with her grandfather who did not have reliable phone service or transportation. Hron arranged for the installation of a low-cost landline in her grandfather’s home so the student could call the school on days when she needed a ride to school.

**‘They Aren’t Just Going to Drop All of Those Feelings and Suddenly Learn’**

While it’s difficult for Mullen and Hron to draw a straight line from their use of the community schools approach to its impact on students and families, they both see signs of their efforts yielding positive results.

One of the signs Mullen pointed to comes from the results of a periodic school climate survey the school sends to students. According to Mullen, more students say they want to come to school, that they’re happy to be there, and that they are engaging in class when they’re there.

Attendance data have also improved. According to Mullen, Mahatma K. Gandhi Community School’s attendance is 93 percent in 2023, and the percentage of chronically absent students has decreased from 41 percent to 21 percent in just one school year.

Also, out-of-school suspensions have decreased, and bullying incident reports have decreased “significantly,” she said.

Hron pointed to similar evidence that the community schools approach is making a positive difference to her students’ mental health.

“Since we shifted to the approach,” she said, “I see kids getting a lot more support both in [school] and in their homes. I see more kids having lunch groups. I also see more teachers who are relieved of not having to do the work of teaching students how to interact with their peers now that we have experienced mental health practitioners doing that work.”

Nevertheless, some question the need for schools to even provide mental health services to students.

Many states are considering and passing so-called parents bill of rights laws that, like the one in [Florida](https://dailyfreepress.com/2022/03/31/highway-to-health-floridas-parental-rights-in-education-bill-endangers-health-well-being-of-lgbtq-youth/), may restrict schools from providing students access to these services.

A similar law in [Arizona](https://apnews.com/article/education-arizona-phoenix-legislature-doug-ducey-27b6ddf53cb9b8429d292b30c8878476) compels schools to disclose to parents anything relevant to the emotional and mental health of students, which could discourage students from discussing their feelings and will likely put school staff in an awkward and potentially contentious position between children and their parents.

On the national stage, right-wing advocacy organizations have attacked the idea that public schools should adopt an education approach that is designed to help schools address the range of issues that affect students and families, including [mental](https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/parents-protesting-critical-race-theory-identify-new-target-mental-hea-rcna4991) and [social-emotional health](https://thefederalist.com/2023/03/22/new-video-shows-socio-emotional-learning-fanatics-confirming-this-popular-school-tool-is-a-leftist-trojan-horse/).

In 2022, a majority of Republicans in the U.S. House of Representatives [voted against](https://thehill.com/homenews/house/3667508-house-passes-bill-addressing-mental-health-concerns-among-students-families-educators/) a bill to provide grants from the federal government for school-based mental health services.

When President Joe Biden [posted](https://twitter.com/POTUS/status/1683574022473121795) on social media that “Mental health care is health care,” the account for Moms for Liberty, a Florida-based pressure group that calls for [book banning](https://www.tallahassee.com/story/news/politics/2023/07/11/moms-for-liberty-leads-florida-school-district-to-pull-five-books/70397263007/) and [restrictions](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/06/28/arts/design/moms-liberty-museum-american-revolution.html) on how schools teach history, [replied](https://twitter.com/Moms4Liberty/status/1683658282987053059) that mental health care “has NO place in public schools.”

The controversy is not lost on educators who are implementing the community school approach.

“We’re in a very rural and conservative community, and I get pushback from people, including some of our school staff, who feel mental health problems are best left up to families,” said Hron.

“What I say is that it would be ideal if mental health were left up to families to address, but that’s not how it works in many families, so it’s up to us to provide what our students need in order to be able to learn,” she said.

As Hron sees it, providing students with access to mental health services also makes it easier for teachers and other school staff to do their jobs.

“If a kid comes into school after having had a rough night, they aren’t just going to drop all of those feelings and suddenly learn,” she said.

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