

# Learning Journey: Stories from the DC CoP

#2 In an Ongoing Series

## Theodore Roosevelt High School: Leading the Way in Prioritizing School Behavioral Health

A strong and effective school behavioral health program is a vital component of a healthy, thriving school environment. This was the tenet that Justin Ralston brought with him when he became principal of Theodore Roosevelt High School in Northwest Washington, DC in 2019. He continues to build on the good work of his predecessor, made possible by DC's Comprehensive School-Based Behavioral Health Expansion. One of his first acts was to ask for a full review of the school's behavioral health supports and services to ensure that the needs of every student in the school were being met.

Roosevelt High School is organized into learning academies: Culinary Arts, Global Service and Diplomacy, General Studies, and International (a special program designed especially for students who have recently immigrated to the U.S.). At the time Mr. Ralston took over leadership of the school, there was a distinctive behavioral health referral system in place in each academy. Mr. Ralston worried that differing systems were inefficient and could mean that some students were not receiving the behavioral health support they needed.

Consequently, he determined to work collaboratively with the school's Intervention Coaches, Nailah Cook, LICSW, and Maurice Butler, LICSW, along with the school's Mental Health Team, to enhance protocols and processes that would streamline an effective approach for submitting and tracking referrals. The school's Mental Health Team is primarily composed of staff members with clinical licensure (e.g., social workers, psychologist, etc.).

The school also has a Wellness Team that includes the Mental Health Team as well as five grade-level deans, five grade-level counselors, the school nurse, MedStar staff, and the 15 staff members employed by the seven partnering agencies that are embedded in the school. The seven agencies are Mary's Center, Liberty's Promise, Latin American Youth Center (LAYC) Promoters, Latin American Youth Center (LAYC) 21st Century Tutoring Support, One Common Unity (OCU), Fly By Light (a program with OCU), Georgia Avenue Collaborative, Novelteens,



Pictured: Roosevelt's Mental Health Team with Principal Ralston during Social Work Week in 2019. Back row (L-R): Maurice Butler, James Taylor, Justin Ralston, and Devon Wade Front row: Erica Cartledge, Nailah Cook, and Quinn Flowers, Not pictured: Henrietta Bush-Sawyer, Marcela Medina, Andrea Roberson, Emanuel Salazar.

University of District of Columbia Upward Bound, and the Just Keep Living program. Bringing all these teams together into a cohesive group ensured that supports were aligned and coordinated across the different academies.

Each referral submitted by teachers, parents, and staff goes to the smaller Mental Health Team first. If it is determined by this team that the referral needs to be escalated to a community partner, the referrals are sent to the Wellness Team. The Wellness Team meets every week to discuss and review all referrals submitted through this universal referral process. Wellness Team members also provide progress updates each week regarding outreach made with students and families through use of a shared tracker. Additionally, the Wellness Team collaborates to provide students and staff with an array of social-emotional learning (SEL) initiatives, teacher training, and parent training opportunities.

Roosevelt's Mental Health Team followed what they have dubbed "The DCPS Five Core Standards When Building a Strong Wellness Team" when developing their team:

- **Shared leadership and vision.** The Wellness Team prides itself on its interconnectedness and ability to work together. Even though there are many groups and agencies on the team, they don't see themselves as competing, but instead as a unified team. Team members are regularly encouraged to share ideas and offer solutions to better serve students and their caregivers and to more effectively support teacher needs.
- **Stringent processes and protocols with buy-in from staff and school-based partners.** The Mental Health Team developed the plan in an iterative process bringing in partners and school staff at each step of the process.
- **Effective and regular communication.** For example, the Mental Health Team meets every Wednesday to discuss each new referral. The Mental Health team then confers every Friday with the Wellness Team to discuss the best ways to support each student referral.
- **Training opportunities for teaching staff.** For example, the Mental Health Team has developed easy-to-access trainings on subjects such as how to recognize the signs of trauma in students and how to implement effective SEL practices in classrooms.
- **Responsiveness, adaptability, and flexibility.** The goal of the plan was to respond to each referral quickly while also being able to address the unique needs of each student. For example, if a therapist on the team feels they are unable to support a student or are not connecting, the team works together to identify who might be a better fit with the student.

"We've built a team that is Roosevelt, not this group or that agency, and this means that we built a high-functioning team that serves the students. We value each other. We rely on each other and we are constantly reaching out to each other," Ms. Cook said.

Roosevelt's Mental Health Team also serves as its Crisis Response Team and is charged with ensuring the school has a [crisis response plan](#) for the school community. The crisis plan is very detailed and is updated on a yearly basis and shared with school personnel.

"We host a training at the start of every school year with our greater school community to take them step-by-step through Roosevelt's crisis plan," said Ms. Cook. "We educate them on how

various crises should be addressed. We make sure they know who the members of the crisis team are and how to contact them. Most important, we give them the steps to follow when responding to a crisis. We do this at the start of the year so everyone in our school is ready when and if we face a crisis.”

The school’s work to build strong behavioral, wellness, and crisis teams has not gone unnoticed. The school often serves as a model that other schools can follow when developing or updating their intervention teams. The school also often pilots new programs introduced by the DCPS and/or the Department of Behavioral Health to improve behavioral health services in schools.

If you would like more information on Roosevelt’s behavioral health work, please email the school’s behavioral health coordinators: Nailah.Cook@k12.dc.gov, Maurice.Butler2@k12.dc.gov, or Erica.Cartledge@k12.dc.gov.