

Hendley Elementary School: A Crisis-Ready School

While most days at Hendley Elementary School are filled with learning and fun, the school is ready to respond should a crisis or emergency arise. The school has about 330 students in grades pre-K through fifth grade and is in Washington, DC's Highlands neighborhood. According to school social worker Patty Ansani, the school has had an effective crisis plan in place ever since Dr. Sundai Riggins took over as principal six years ago.

"We definitely are a well-oiled machine when it comes to dealing with crises," Ms. Ansani said. "We have strong teams in place at our school and we are all in constant communication so when an issue arises, we are ready."

The school's crisis planning is led by its four-person Mental Health Team and its four-person Student Success Team. The Mental Health Team is composed of two social workers (Ms. Ansani and Lori Craig), the school psychologist (Rachel Kengle), and the social worker (Karen Jones) from the community-based organization (CBO), Catholic Charities, made possible in 2019 through the District of Columbia's School Behavioral Health Expansion.

"In the past, we had high-turnover rates in the CBOs working in our school making it difficult to build relationships with our students and their families," Ms. Ansani said. "But this year the stars just seemed to align for us. We are thrilled to have Miss Jones from Catholic Charities on our team. We treat her like she's one of us. We've really tried to include her in everything that we do. And it's working really well."

The school's Student Success Team is composed of the Dean of Students and four behavior technicians. Their role within the school, in addition to helping in crises or emergency situations, is to serve as a mentor to the school's scholars, support school enrollment and attendance efforts, address Tier 2 and Tier 3 behaviors and provide interventions, and many other duties.

The school has had to put its crisis planning in place several times over the years. This has occurred when students brought weapons to school, students threatened suicide, there were neighborhood shootings, and students committed violent acts. When a crisis occurs, teachers and staff know to first ensure student safety and then contact a member of the Mental Health Team or Student Success Team. Typically, whichever team member is in closest proximity to the situation responds first, assesses the situation and calls for any needed backup or additional support. Team members are connected via walkie-talkies and group texts.

After any crisis, the Mental Health Team debriefs with all staff who are involved in supporting the behavioral health needs of the school's students to review the effectiveness of the crisis response and to determine if changes or improvements need to be made to their crisis planning. Teachers are trained in crisis response at the start of every school year.

While crises are inevitable at any school, Hendley staff work hard to mitigate these situations by ensuring strong behavioral health supports are in place for its students and their caregivers. In addition to managing crisis planning, the school's Mental Health Team manages all students referred for behavioral health services. The team meets weekly to review each referral and works together to determine how best to serve the needs of each student.

Additional work to lessen the chances of emergencies or crises arising is accomplished through the school's overarching Behavioral Health Team that includes the Mental Health Team, the Student Success Team, Principal Riggins, two assistant principals Taci Shaw and Anna Katt, the dean Alphonso Franklin, as well as a few teachers who have interest in student behavioral health and want to learn how to better support families.

At the Behavioral Health Team's weekly meetings, the Mental Health Team seeks and shares ideas on the services that they will be deploying to the school community such as trainings and workshops for students, caregivers, and/or teachers. During these meetings, the Behavioral Health Team also discusses students of concern. This could be a student who may have recently become displaced from their home or a family experiencing food insecurity and/or other issues that negatively impact a child's ability to be successful in school. The team triages a student's needs and staff members are assigned to ensure students receive services.

"The Behavioral Health Team essentially takes the temperature of the entire school to see how everyone is doing," Ms. Ansani said. "We use these meetings to generate ideas for what we can do as a team to serve the needs of our students and families. There is great stuff happening in our school every day. That's what we are here to support and that's why we are ready for any situation."

If you would like to learn more about Hendley Elementary School's crisis plan, please email Patty Ansani at patty.ansani@k12.dc.gov.