

Going the Extra Mile to Connect with the School Community

Clinicians from Hillcrest Children and Family Center (Hillcrest) are engaging with their school communities in numerous ways. To learn more about the types of activities they are conducting, we spoke with Syerita Morris, Clinical Manager.

When Hillcrest became part of the DC School-based Behavioral Health Expansion in 2019, they recognized that embedding their therapists fully into schools should be their number one priority. While there is an overwhelming consensus that clinicians who are visible in the school are more effective at delivering Tier 1, 2, and 3 services, Hillcrest clinicians take it a step further and become part of the school community. In doing so, they have the opportunity to develop authentic and trusting relationships.



Clinician Nahima Saleem at J.O. Wilson

“It’s easier to connect directly with the kids if you are integrated into a school,” said Ms. Morris. “You know more about the child based on your own relationship, not based on what someone else has told you. This is important especially if you begin to provide services to that child.”

Since each school environment is unique, clinicians are encouraged to join their own school communities in numerous ways. For example, to get to know school staff, clinicians can participate in staff events (e.g., white elephant sales), wear school colors, host a game night as a stress reliever and team building activity, and/or host professional development sessions on topics such as resocialization or how mental health displays in the classroom. “Our goal is to connect with the school so they may see us as a support,” said Ms. Morris.

Caregiver engagement is also a priority for the Hillcrest clinicians. They are expected (whenever possible) to be present during school arrivals and departures to say hello and goodbye to students and caregivers. They are also encouraged to know the name of every child, and expect every child and every caregiver to know the name of the clinician and their role in the school. They believe that knowing and acknowledging student and caregiver names is at the heart of increasing caregiver participation in school meetings and events since it makes them feel known and more connected to the school.

"If a parent — especially of an elementary school student — sees one of our clinicians interacting with their child, they will want to know who that person is and what role they play at the school. That brings us one step closer to building a strong relationship with that caregiver," said Ms. Morris.

Clinicians are asked to be creative in encouraging caregivers to visit the school. Activities with caregivers have ranged from offering gift cards to holding events featuring food. For example, this school year Hillcrest clinicians hosted "Light up the Tree" with parents writing holiday traditions on a cut out light bulb to place on the tree, or hot chocolate or hot cider stands at school drop off.

"We know food works," said Ms. Morris. "We are handing out hot chocolate, but we are also meeting caregivers, and we ask our clinicians to have resources on hand for caregivers on a variety of issues from seasonal affective disorder to food needs to gifts needed for the holidays."

To keep the importance of building relationships top of mind, clinicians have a weekly calendar of activities to hold. For example, one week it may be completing a Tier 1 activity with both students and families and the next week it could be conducting an engagement activity with teachers as well as conducting a Tier 2 activity with a small group of students.

In addition to the work clinicians are doing at their schools, Hillcrest conducts a weekly parenting psychoeducation group that is open to all caregivers with students in the 30 schools they support. Each week the group discusses a new topic focusing on child-rearing issues including race inequity, health and nutrition, and how to praise your child.

All these efforts are part of a system-oriented process to support clinicians in developing relationships with the school and the community. Each year, the Hillcrest team adopts a theme to serve as the guiding principles for the work they provide in schools. In the 2020-2021 school year, their theme was "Compassion and Grace," to remind the team of what was most needed during the height of the pandemic. For the 2021-2022 school year, Hillcrest adopted the theme "Bridging the Gap" to encompass the challenges related to transitioning back to in-person school and the accompanying social and emotional challenges that students, caregivers, and teachers would be experiencing.

Everyone on the Hillcrest team meets monthly to review how things are going. The team then breaks into smaller groups with their supervisors to further team learning, share practices that are working in one school that could be replicated in others, review clinical interventions, and troubleshoot any issues clinicians may be experiencing. The Hillcrest School Based Team also hosts a weekly group, "Unplugged," to support clinicians with any challenges they may be facing. "Each school is unique so we try to create viable solutions for the success of everyone, our mission to serve our schools and communities and that takes thinking outside the box at times," said Ms. Morris.

If you would like to learn more about Hillcrest, please contact Syerita Morris at 202.820.1192.