

Well Aware

Volume I | Issue 1
SPRING 2008

Devoted To:

- Improving academics
- Deterring violence
- Fostering resiliency
- Enhancing coping skills
- Reducing risk
- Preventing suicide

School success

[enhancing academics through prevention]

It's a troubling thought, one that adults may have a tough time comprehending. The idea that a young person, supposedly in the "prime of their life," could end that life with deliberation, is disturbing to consider—and even worse to endure, say school personnel and communities that have experienced firsthand the loss of vulnerable adolescents to suicide.

The potential to intervene proactively, in the best interests of students and staff, is spurring school districts throughout Wyoming to integrate suicide-prevention awareness programs. The



[take note]

WHAT: Increasing goal setting and anger management skills in students
HOW: "American Indian Life Skills Development," an Evidence-Based Program and Practice by U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services
MORE: See page 4

timing couldn't be better, say state and national leaders in education and at-risk youth.

"Wyoming's young people are engaging in risky behaviors that demand a coordinated response from families, schools and communities," notes Jim McBride, Ed.D., Superintendent of Public Instruction for the Wyoming Dept. of Education. "It is evident that if students are to master Wyoming academic standards and reach their full potential as productive citizens, we must work to reduce risk behaviors and help students make positive life choices."

The good news? Despite school resources and staff often stretched thin, evidence-based risk prevention programs

not only exist, but can be integrated into existing curricula with little additional resource allocation. Moreover, implementing a sound school-based suicide-prevention program can **actually reduce a school district's risk exposure** to potential for legal action (see companion story "Legal Lessons" on page 3).

Yet are schools a fitting place for suicide prevention? Absolutely, say experts in education, pediatrics, child psychiatry and violence prevention.

"Schools have a mandate to educate and protect students. It's in the legislation state by state," notes Columbia University researcher Madelyn Gould, PhD, MPH, a national expert on youth suicide prevention and school-based programs (see page 2 for more on Dr. Gould's work).

But mandates aside, school suicide-prevention programs can enhance help-seeking behaviors while curbing risk behaviors among youngsters that can adversely impact academic achievement, such as promiscuity, drug and alcohol use, and violent behaviors including potential for harm against self or others.

Academic success of Wyoming students can be enhanced by proven suicide-prevention programs for school settings.



A policy bulletin for WYOMING EDUCATION LEADERS

- School Board Members
- Superintendents & Principals
- Curriculum Committees
- Student Services Directors
- Central Office Administration
- Wyoming Policymakers

inside

WEIGHING IN ON Well Aware



"... WORKING TOGETHER, WE WILL CONTINUE TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE ..."

2 A message from Wyoming Superintendent of Public Instruction Dr. Jim McBride.

[it doesn't add up]

1 in 6

High-school students in Wyoming who reported making suicidal plans within the previous year; this is 13 percent higher than prior year data, showing a trend on the rise.

SOURCE: Wyoming 2007 Youth Risk Behavior Survey (CONFIRM)

2nd

Leading cause of death for youths ages 10-24 in Wyoming is suicide.

SOURCE: Wyoming Dept. of Health and Vital Statistics, 200X

480%

Higher rate of suicide versus homicide in Wyoming residents; that is, nearly five times as many suicides annually as homicides.

SOURCE: U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 1999-2005

WELCOME TO Well Aware

*A message from Wyoming Superintendent
of Public Instruction Jim McBride*

It is my pleasure to help introduce this first issue of the Well Aware™ bulletin to you. The purpose of the Well Aware program is to inform the



actions and decisions of Wyoming leaders in education and youth-relevant policy regarding the wellbeing of youngsters. Our goal is to support high academic achievement by fostering students' resiliency and reducing risky behaviors that, at their extreme, can lead to self-harm and potential for suicide.

In our roles as leaders in schools and communities statewide, we touch the lives of countless others. Through student-centered programs, policies and supportive school environments, we enhance academics and help to ensure that children can grow to achieve their full potential.

We are pleased to partner with the Wyoming Dept. of Health to bring you this and future issues of *Well Aware*. We hope that it is a practical resource for you. Please review this bulletin and share it with your colleagues. Working together, we will continue to make a difference in the academic growth and the physical and emotional health of Wyoming's children and adolescents.

Dr. Jim McBride

Wyoming Superintendent of Public Instruction

“Our goal is to **SUPPORT HIGH ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT** by fostering students' resiliency and reducing risky behaviors that, **AT THEIR EXTREME, CAN LEAD TO SELF-HARM** and potential for suicide.”

— DR. JIM McBRIDE, Wyoming Superintendent of Public Instruction

Well Aware [talk back]

What does the research say about a link between bullying and potential for suicidal thoughts in youngsters?

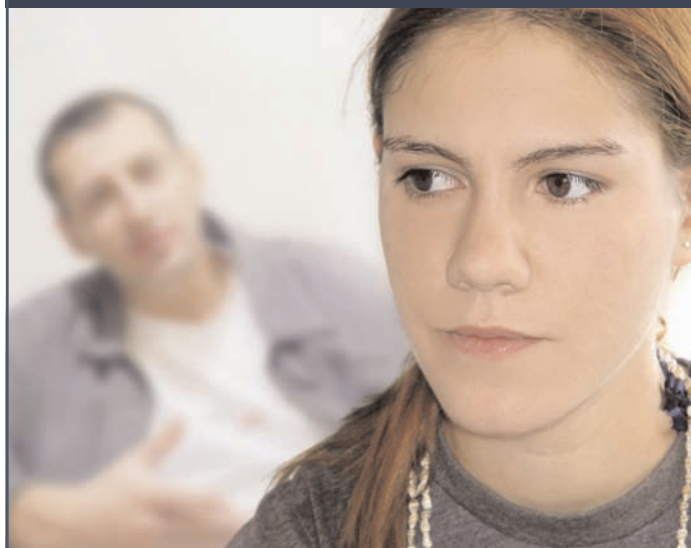
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Recent research* from suggests that victimization and bullying are potential risk factors for adolescent depression and suicidality. Researchers recommend evaluating students involved in bullying behavior for depression and suicidality.

*Bullying, Depression and Suicidality in Adolescents. Brunstein KA, et al., Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry 2007 Jan;46(1):40-9.

GOT A QUESTION FOR WELL AWARE? SUBMIT YOUR INQUIRY TO TALKBACK@WELLAWARESP.ORG. IF WE PRINT YOUR QUESTION IN OUR NEXT ISSUE, YOU'LL RECEIVE A COMPLIMENTARY SOS® SIGNS OF SUICIDE® KIT (\$300 VALUE), THAT INCLUDES AN IMPLEMENTATION MANUAL, DVD, DISCUSSION GUIDE AND EDUCATIONAL MATERIALS FOR STUDENTS, STAFF AND PARENTS.

ASKING STUDENTS ABOUT SUICIDE



Asking teens about suicide. It's something many adults fear. Yet research has shown that being open about suicide with high-school students can be beneficial in easing distress. Here Columbia University researcher and mother of three sons Madelyn Gould, Ph.D., weighs in on saying the word “suicide” to teenagers:

UNFOUNDED FEAR

“Many adults—including school administrators—fear that asking teens about thoughts of suicide may put the idea of self-harm in their minds and potentially spur them to act on these thoughts.”

RESEARCH* FINDINGS

“Our research showed that asking high-school students about suicide clearly didn't induce stress, but can relieve somebody in distress.”

HIGH PRICE OF MISINFORMATION

“I believe that this unfounded fear of asking about suicide is an astounding impediment to suicide-prevention programs.”

STUDENTS ARE “GOING IT ALONE”

“Research shows youth at most serious risk for depression and suicidal ideation are the ones with the most distressing attitudes toward help-seeking. They really feel they can handle this on their own. They keep issues and feelings to themselves, and can think that alcohol or drugs are a good way to help themselves. They have this attitude of self-efficacy when they are not in a position to handle it on their own. ... They may use the Internet, may go to chat rooms—but these can reinforce harmful attitudes about help-seeking behaviors.”



She's a mother of three boys and a researcher who has studied youth suicide for more than 20 years. Does Dr. Madelyn Gould talk to her sons about thoughts of suicide and self-harm? You bet. Read her groundbreaking research, published in 2005 in the esteemed Journal of the American Medical Association, available online at PubMed:

*Evaluating Iatrogenic Risk of Youth Suicide Screening Programs: A Randomized Controlled Trial. Gould MS, et al., Journal of the American Medical Association 2005; 293: 1635-1643.

Info? Feedback? Contact Dr. Gould at talkback@wellaware.org.

Legal lessons [minimizing risk to districts]

The numbers are troubling. In a typical high school classroom, it's likely that two to three students have made a suicide attempt in the past year (200X Wyoming Youth Risk Behavior Survey). What's more, a prior suicide attempt is one of the strongest indicators for dying by suicide. So when vulnerable students ponder



death as a way out of their problems, you need to act—quickly and decisively—to protect students and districts.

The Federal Safe and Drug-Free Schools Act mandates:

“PREVENTION ACTIVITIES designed to create and maintain safe, disciplined and drug-free environments.”

“A CRISIS-MANAGEMENT PLAN for responding to violent or traumatic incidents on school grounds.”

To fulfill these directives and protect their districts from liability, school administrators must be proactive in identifying and instituting programs that are sound and sustainable. And they must see to it that staff follow policies and understand procedures to protect students and districts from harm.

Key issues for schools are foreseeability and negligence. These were the pivotal considerations in federal court rulings against school districts in landmark civil cases (see right). In

the Eisel case, the school did not notify parents that their child was suicidal. In Wyke, the district was also negligent in not supervising a suicidal student who later died by suicide.

“Districts have a responsibility for providing adequate staff training in suicide prevention,” notes national school crisis specialist Richard Lieberman, MA, NCSP. He is co-chair of the National Emergency Assistance Team (NEAT), which participated in crisis interventions at Columbine (Littleton, Colo.) and Paducah, Ky. Lieberman also co-authored important books for schools including Best Practices in School Crisis Prevention (2002) and a chapter on suicide intervention in Best Practices in School Psychology IV (2002).

“While most courts recognize that schools are not equipped to provide in-depth counseling of children, courts hold that school personnel are in a position to make referrals—and have a duty to secure assistance from others, including parents, when a child is at risk,” adds Lieberman. “They have a duty to warn, and duty to refer.”



Landmark Court Cases

Eisel v. Board of Education of Montgomery County 2nd Federal Circuit Court, 1991 determined that even when a student denies suicidal intent (as can often occur), a collaborative school team has an obligation to notify parents if the team suspects the child to be suicidal.

Wyke v. Polk County School Board 11th Federal Circuit Court, 1997 found the school district liable for not offering suicide-prevention programs, providing inadequate supervision of a suicidal student, and failing to notify parents when their children were suicidal. Parents elected not to seek punitive damages from the district but wanted a policy shift to include provisions for suicide prevention, intervention and postvention; the school district complied.

Although school district personnel should intervene whenever a child threatens suicide or manifests signs of intent to complete suicide, most courts recognize that schools are not equipped to do necessary in-depth counseling and treatment of children. Rather, courts hold that school personnel are in a position to make referrals and have a duty to secure assistance from others, with parent involvement, when a child is at risk (Davis and Sandoval, 1991).

FEEDBACK? QUESTIONS? Contact Richard Lieberman at talkback@wellaware.org.

Community commitment [a sampling of Wyoming suicide prevention efforts]

CAMPBELL COUNTY

First pilot site in Wyoming for The Columbia University TeenScreen® Program, a research-based, award-winning initiative to identify vulnerable youths at risk for emotional disorders that could lead to of self-harm.

INFO: talkback@wellaware.org

CONVERSE COUNTY

Forged alliance with schools and primary-care physicians to improve screening and referral protocols for at-risk youths. Also, suicide-prevention training delivered to youth providers, law enforcement officers and first responders.

INFO: talkback@wellaware.org

LARAMIE COUNTY

Delivered SOS® Signs of Suicide Program to high-school students ages 14-18; this model program combines four strategies: curriculum and screening for youth, educational materials for school staff and parents.

INFO: talkback@wellaware.org

NATRONA COUNTY

Youth Empowerment Council trains students in peer-based suicide-prevention education to enhance awareness and understanding of suicidal ideation, acts and potential for completion in adolescents.

INFO: talkback@wellaware.org

FREMONT COUNTY

Collaborated with Wind River Reservation's INSPIRE Initiative to provide intervention skills training to community members. Also, providing “postvention” support to assist families in the aftermath of a suicide death.

INFO: talkback@wellaware.org

Be well aware [resources and help]

Being proactive in suicide prevention can reap real rewards for schools. The Wyoming Dept. of Health is here to help. We're partnering with the Wyoming Dept. of Education to bring you tools to make your school a safer, healthier place for all, and to offer resources to address unmet staff development needs. Contact Keith Hotle, JD, MPA at the Dept. of Health at 307-777-3318 or khotle@state.wy.us.

AFFIRMING LIFE SKILLS FOR STUDENTS

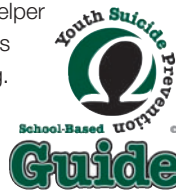


A culturally tailored intervention for at-risk youths is the "American Indian Life Skills Development Curriculum." Developed by Teresa LaFromboise, PhD at Stanford University, this community-based participatory intervention targets specific skills to reduce risk for suicide in vulnerable ethnic populations. These skills include managing stress, anger and depression; improving communications; increasing goal setting; and boosting ability to refer an at-risk friend for help. To learn more, contact Dr. LaFromboise at talkback@wellaware.org.



GUIDING YOUR EFFORTS

School-based suicide prevention programs can include suicide-awareness curricula, screening, gatekeeper training, peer helper programs, postvention/crisis intervention or skills training. Care should be taken



when selecting a program because some have not been shown to be effective.

This comprehensive and evidence-based tool kit can help guide school administrators; download it at <http://theguide.fmhi.usf.edu>.

FREE TRAINING AND ASSISTANCE

Is funding a barrier to implementing suicide-prevention training that could protect both students and staff? The Wyoming Dept. of Health provides free training for school personnel including QPR, a program listed in a Best Practices Registry for Suicide Prevention (www.sprc.org). WDH personnel can also provide presentations for your student body to encourage help-seeking behaviors. To tap, contact Keith Hotle, JD, MPA at the Dept. of Health at 307-777-3318 or khotle@state.wy.us.

[talk back]



What is your biggest barrier to addressing suicide prevention in your school? Time ... resources ... training ... comfort level ... support from supervisors, policymakers or parents? Let us know at talkback@wellaware.org. And tell us what you think of the **Well Aware** bulletin, a suicide-prevention information resource

for Wyoming school leaders, administrators and policymakers.

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Well Aware

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for School Administrators*

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A Suicide Prevention Policy Bulletin for WYOMING EDUCATION LEADERS

- School Board Members ■ Superintendents
- Principals ■ Student Services Directors ■ Central Office Administration ■ Deans of Students

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