

## **Joint Hearing Testimony (August 25, 2021)**

Thank for the opportunity to present this morning on this important topic...that being supporting and assuring our youth thrive in school.

My name is Gerard Mike. I am Beaver County's MH/ID and Drug and Alcohol Administrator. I have had the pleasure, the honor, of working in Beaver County's behavioral health system for 38 years. The first 18 years in various roles primarily surrounding the behavioral health needs of families and youth...and the last 20 years as Administrator.

I think it goes without saying that the pandemic has taken its toll in so many ways and on every facet of our society. But specific to our youth, even in pre-pandemic times, a significant number experience behavioral health challenges. Some studies indicate that one in five youth experience a diagnosable behavioral health concern, and that half of all mental health issues begin by age 14. For youth experiencing a mental health concerns, early identification and intervention is critical to improved health and well-being. Given that the pandemic has, and for the foreseeable future will continue to exacerbate youth mental health needs we must be as creative and proactive as possible in how these needs are met.

Today I would like to share with you programs implemented in Beaver County that address stigma and diversity that help our youth feel accepted and welcomed regardless of the personal or societal challenges they may face...which is a critical foundation for meaningful learning and academic success. These programs are our Youth Ambassador Program, and a training program designed for school administrators to explore and develop cultural competency titled Preparing Educational Leaders for Equity in Cultural Competency: Connecting Across Cultures.

The Youth Ambassador program in Beaver County works to promote awareness and understanding of the issues youth are facing today. Student to student this program creates an atmosphere where individual differences are respected and conversations about diversity, inclusion and cultural competence can occur. Youth Ambassadors promote awareness of behavioral health and wellness, decrease the stigma associated with mental health and substance use, promote leadership and self-advocacy among youth, and build relationships with other youth within their own school districts and across the county.

The primary goals of the program are to:

- increase awareness of mental health and wellness
- decrease stigma associated with mental illness and substance use
- promote leadership and self-advocacy among youth, and
- build relationships with other youth in their districts and across the county

The Youth Ambassador Program (YAP) began in Beaver County in 2016 with grant dollars. Five school districts were originally involved with the common goal of increasing knowledge and understanding of mental illness, reducing the stigma surrounding mental illness, and encouraging youth and family involvement in the Beaver County System of Care (SOC)...Beaver County's service system and support network. In the beginning, students from grades 8-12 were selected by the schools to reflect a wide representation of the population, including students who had lived experience with mental illness. The inaugural event was held in recognition of Suicide Awareness month. The program involved primarily educating students about the System of Care and how they could be involved in positively influencing youth services and supports. The Youth Ambassador Program has continued to grow and now includes all 15 Beaver County school districts, two charter schools and two private schools.

The YAP is currently comprised of a diverse group of students; male and female with diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, sexual orientations, and those with and without knowledge or experience with mental illness. Currently, any youth who resides in Beaver County from grades 7 through 12 are eligible to become a Youth Ambassador by contacting their district representatives. Each district has a Youth Ambassador group comprised of a staff leader and students grades 7-12.

Pre-pandemic, three county-wide events were held each school year, with schools sending staff representatives and Youth Ambassadors to participate. Every event has averaged approximately 200 students in attendance. Students are surveyed at the end of these events and consistently report increased awareness about mental illnesses, increased knowledge of

available resources, feeling welcomed and welcoming of individuals with behavioral health challenges. In addition to county-wide events, many districts sponsor individual, school district specific projects that their Youth Ambassadors work on throughout the school year. Some school districts have expanded the program further to include Youth Ambassador clubs and after school activities that help raise money for the annual Youth Mental Health Awareness Day events. The Youth Ambassadors were invited to represent Pennsylvania youth at a statewide Suicide Prevention Task Force Listening Session in December 2019. More than 40 students participated in this event.

Even though in person events were cancelled during the pandemic, the Youth Ambassador program remained active enabling student interaction and socialization. The planning committee continued to share resources, and schedule virtual meetings and groups to provide support to students and sponsors. In addition to virtual meetings a series of infomercials were created by students to raise awareness about racial and ethnic disparities, the warning signs of mental illness, and suicide prevention. In May, when many students were able to return to school, several Youth Ambassador clubs sponsored health and wellness fairs that highlighted stress reducing activities.

Other recent events included Youth Ambassadors teaching kindness lessons to kindergarten and first grade students and “chalk talk” activities that involve writing positive inspiring messages on sidewalks. Also in May, five school districts attended the Beaver County Commissioners Public Hearing for a Mental Health Awareness Proclamation. Afterward, the students participated in a listening session with county leadership, discussing the current mental health and pandemic challenges youth are facing.

A number of County-wide and local school district events are in the planning process for the 21/22 school year...and are being planned in accordance with CDC guidelines.

### **Preparing Educational Leaders for Equity in Cultural Competency: Connecting Across Cultures**

Building on the work and success of the Youth Ambassadors and the recommendation of the County’s Inclusion, Diversity and Awareness Council (formed to bring together community and business partners to create an awareness of the value of diversity, inclusion, and cultural competency throughout all of Beaver County), a school-based curriculum in cultural competency was needed to ensure inclusion and acceptance.

After a rigorous design and application process (lead by a local leader in the field, Dr. Don Sheffield) a training program, Preparing Educational Leaders for Equity in Cultural Competency: Connecting Across Cultures, was created for school administrators to explore and develop cultural competency for their curriculums. This course provides superintendents, principals, and Intermediate Unit leadership an understanding of cultural competency, and how it connects to high performing schools, as well as create a district-wide plan to embed cultural competency into the curriculum.

In February of 2020 the Pennsylvania Department of Education approved a course for professional development credit for school administrators. Four Beaver County school districts were selected for the first pilot program funded jointly with grants and participating school district dollars. (Currently multiple other school districts, both within and outside of Beaver County, have scheduled the course to be offered in their districts.)

In the first pilot group eighteen school leaders participated in the course that was written to encompass the following learning objectives:

- Awareness of the role of culture in leading in diverse societies and school systems
- Knowledge of the role of the brain in teaching and learning
- Understanding of cultural competency and how it relates to valuing diversity and differences among diverse student populations
- Knowledge of self-reflection and assessment as a means to lead and manage school improvement strategies and plans
- Understanding of the 4 A’s of differences (accept, appreciate, acknowledge, attention) that support the environmental inclusion and achievement of students from diverse racial, ethnic, religious, gender, LGBT, socioeconomic, and homeless backgrounds

- Ability to engage in critical self-reflection of one's own attitudes, behaviors, and practices (strengths and weaknesses) that may positively impact or negatively impede leadership and decision-making across and within diverse student cultures and groups
- Ability to change and shift one's own attitudes, values, and practices in ways that support the maximization of the teaching and learning of all students in one's own school or district
- Skills in communicating and leading cultural competency strategies and practices that integrate the values of diversity, equity, and inclusion across all cultures and groups

Throughout the course, participants discussed how teachers should teach with the brain in mind and the students need to gain cultural sensitivity.

Upon course conclusion key points collected from post-surveys indicated:

- All would recommend the training to other school districts.
- By the end of the training, the vast majority of respondents reported understanding the concepts of diversity, inclusion, cultural competency and pluralism.
- Understanding of the relationship between cultural competency and high performance was expressed.

One important requirement of the course is the formation of a community based cultural competency advisory council (similar to Beaver County's Inclusion, Diversity and Awareness Council), to ensure input from school district stakeholders. It is encouraged that Council memberships include: representatives from law enforcement, social service, businesses, faith-based organizations, education, health care, and housing at a minimum. The council should also be trained on the basic principles of equality and its role in supporting a high performing school.

Much work still needs done, but it is clear that students who feel safe and valued in school are more likely to overcome whatever challenges they may face....and are more likely to experience personal and academic success.