Bringing Mental Health to the Forefront of Education

By Paniz Meradji

America has been recognizing May as Mental Health Month since 1949. During the month of May, mental health organizations work together with other community members to raise awareness about mental health issues. But the question remains: What else can be done to raise much-needed mental health awareness?

While a month dedicated to mental health is a nice start, it’s a start that occurred in 1949. In any given day, our children, grandchildren, nieces, nephews, sisters and brothers may be suffering from mental health challenges of which they are unaware. As a result, the nation is in a crisis due to the numerous tragedies occurring in school settings. Parents are dropping off their children at school with the increasing fear that it may be the last time they will kiss their children goodbye.

A total of 14 school shootings occurred on school campuses around the nation within the first two weeks of the new year. Undiagnosed and untreated mental health issues are frequently the number

http://psychcentral.com/blog/archives/2014/05/05/bringing-mental-health-to-the-forefront-of-education/#at_pco=smlrebh-1.0&at_si=552d1655ed58f350&at_ab=per-12&at_pos=1&at_tot=4
one speculation as to why these bloody crimes are committed. Suspects of these crimes have been noted to be between 12 and 23 years old.

With mental illness making up approximately one-third of disease among the adolescent population, mental health continues to be an increasingly urgent issue that needs to be addressed in the United States. Similar to holding the responsibility of teaching younger generations about the importance of health in terms of nutrition and exercise, it is also our responsibility to teach our children about their mental health.

In an attempt to increase knowledge about mental health issues among today’s youth, California passed a new law in 2013 requiring the addition of age-appropriate mental health curriculum to the Education Code. This law specifically states that all public schools within the state of California need to revise their Health Framework to include the integration of mental health education for grades K-12.

Some of the topics that will be covered in the new curriculum include warning signs, symptoms, and definitions of common disorders, how to obtain mental health services and insight to overcoming stigma. Furthermore, the promotion of mental health wellness, such as social connectedness, importance of supportive relationships and cognitive skills, will also be included.

As a result of the new law, the California State Board of Education and Instructional Quality Commission are now required to develop a mental health curriculum for implementation into the next revision of the Health Framework for California Public Schools. However, revision of the Health Framework has been postponed twice since it was published, pushing the next revision date to the 2015-2016 academic year.

Since mental health has become such an urgent matter, Master of Social Work (MSW) students from the University of Southern California worked together with high school instructors in Orange County and Los Angeles County to create and implement a curriculum for mental health education for a ninth grade health class.

The proposed mental health curriculum consists of four learning modules that can be integrated into the existing health curriculum. Learning modules followed the guidelines set forth by the new law —
covering topics on mental health, Internet safety, and a list of community mental health resources for students.

MSW students also provided the health instructor with a Mental Health Month pamphlet to distribute to students during the month of May. The high school health instructor plans on incorporating the learning modules into her lesson plan during Mental Health Month.

Our hope is that other local schools take the initiative to incorporate mental health issues into their classrooms. We also hope that other states recognize the importance of mental health education for youth and consider implementation of this new law. Let’s work together to better the future generations of America!

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