

Call for mental health support across grades

Staff Editorial

*name changed for confidentiality

Almost a year ago, junior *Nova Walsh received an email from her counselor. After experiencing continuous cyberbullying and a fall out with friends, she was going through severe anxiety that caused her counselor to reach out to her via email.

Throughout the years, Walsh has worked with professionals to manage her mental health. Walsh has been in therapy since she was 12 years old, seeking professional help after having suicidal thoughts, and urged by her mother due to a lineage of mental health issues in the family. She was later diagnosed with both anxiety and depression.

When her counselor reached out to her, Walsh didn't know that everyone at Prospect has a team of professionals — made up of a counselor, school psychologist and social worker — there to support them. Nevertheless, she is thankful that her counselor reached out to her and has since been able to cultivate a relationship with her.

"Just talking through stuff ... having those talks and communication is just really important to building a relationship with anyone, but especially your counselor," Walsh said. "They are there to help you, but I don't think people really know that."

Walsh says that the communication goes both ways; her counselor reaches out to her, and Walsh responds back, utilizing the office hours. With this in mind, she says that she wishes more students knew about the important resources Prospect has to offer.

According to the CDC, the number of suicides in Illinois among 10-24 year-olds increased by 152 per 100,000 population from 2007-2009 to 2016-2018. Youth mental health has been on the decline for the last several years, a fact that has only been compounded by the pandemic and other stressful circumstances in the last few years.

In fact, according to 2021 data from the CDC, more than a third of high school students reported experiencing poor mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, 44% reported feeling persistently sad or hopeless during the past year.

With this in mind, it is important to note that suicide is preventable. According to the CDC, there is evidence regarding the impact of many practices, programs and policies that currently exist which are ready to be implemented.

Similarly to how suicide is not caused by one single factor, there is research suggesting that no one strategy can be a guaranteed fail-safe approach. Instead, suicide prevention is best achieved with programming catered to each specific demographic in which it has an effect.

At the latest President's Student Advisory Council meeting with Superintendent David Schuler and a senior and junior representative from each school in District 214, attendees voiced a need for more support when it came to suicide prevention programming. Assistant Superintendent for Student Services Marni Johnson says that key points of the meeting included having programming for all ages of high school students as well as more support when it comes to students helping their

friends.

"Kids aren't feeling like they have exactly enough of that," Johnson said. "There is some [discussion of supporting friends with mental health issues] in the Signs of Suicide (S.O.S.) prevention program, but kids are wanting more. If our students are saying, 'We want more of that,' then we are going to respond to that and figure out how to do that."

When it comes to suicide prevention programming at Prospect, Student Services is able to get in touch with all incoming freshmen, according to Associate Principal of Student Services Kara Kendrick. However, due to the fact that Kendrick was unsure if the staff could provide meaningful support to students while remote, there was a gap in suicide prevention programming during the 2020-21 school year.

At Prospect, implementing suicide prevention programming for all ages would be extremely beneficial. Currently, there is a S.O.S. program that targets freshmen and aims to educate students on the relationship between depression and suicide.

This program has been in place for many years and has been widely successful when it comes to student interaction and evaluating the need for support, according to Kendrick.

"I have to say, I've been really shocked and impressed with how impactful the program is," Kendrick said.

Additionally, during health class — which all sophomores are required to take for one semester — teachers discuss Erika's Lighthouse with students. The mission of this program is to make sure no young person feels alone in their depression, which is accomplished through the creation of depression and suicide awareness programs that ensure educators, families and teens can have a safe space to learn about mental health, according to their website. Prospect began using this program some seven or eight years ago and has continued to be highly effective, according to health teacher Aaron Marnstein.

Alongside Erika's Lighthouse, health courses also cover a social and emotional well-being unit. Marnstein also says he does his best to casually incorporate mental health resources for students into his classes by having links for help on his Schoology page, and he applies the themes of mental health into various topics taught throughout the semester.

With this in mind, both Marnstein and Walsh believe that it is important to have a balance. Marnstein says that having resources available is key; however, teaching students the same programs over and over again isn't the best way to have an impact.

We, Knight Media, appreciate the efforts that Prospect has put into implementing these programs and supporting students, especially with the ongoing impacts of the pandemic. The QR codes in the hallways that provide a direct link to set up a meeting with Student Services as well as the constant availability of counselors have also been useful tools for students to use. The continuation of availability of these resources as well as making sure they are well-known to students is key.

However, these current programs and systems shouldn't be the only options. Making re-



SUPPORT: Friends stand together, raising awareness and destigmatizing mental health. (cartoon by Whitney Madler)

sources and curriculum more widely available and implemented to all students at Prospect, not only freshman and sophomores, would be a strong first step in improving the school's support for those struggling.

While there are not currently any curriculum-based suicide prevention teachings going on for upperclassmen, that isn't to say that resources are not available.

Depending on the nature of the situation, Kendrick says there are multiple channels in which students can reach out for help. For less timely matters, she recommends that students utilize QR codes — either to schedule a meeting with a counselor, contact UKnight For Minds or report suspicious occurrences on the tip line — that are posted around the school.

That being said, if there is ever a time when students require immediate assistance, the facilities in Student Services are there to support those in need.

"If they are feeling like they really need to talk to someone right now, they should always go to Student Services. Always," Kendrick said. "Even if a counselor is busy, every student has a team, so there is also a specialist attached to the person."

Walsh appreciates the availability of these resources, she wishes that there also was direct communication from counselors to supplement it. Having the support of her counselor has been invaluable to her, and she thinks that more can be done to bridge the gap between students and Student Services. An email check-in, Walsh suggests, meant to spark the beginnings of a relationship with counselors, could be beneficial to tailoring resources to specific students.

While Prospect utilizing programs and having resources, similar to what is in place today but targeting a wider age category of students, is an important part of a solution, there is also action that can be taken by the average student to help support mental health-oriented organizations and create awareness. For sophomore Kelsey Bellows, this action comes in the form of supporting The Happiness Project.

The Happiness Project is an organization founded after a student from Hersey took their own life. According to their website,

the mission of The Happiness Project is to "elevate happiness throughout the world, while supporting those impacted by mental health problems."

Other than spreading awareness, they donate 15% of their profits to mental health and suicide prevention projects.

Once discovering the company, Bellows took it upon herself to look up the organization. Ultimately, she decided to support the cause.

Bellows urges other students to purchase merchandise from The Happiness Project because it not only allows people to support suicide prevention causes financially, but it also opens a potential dialogue.

Obviously, this is not a solution for anyone seriously struggling by any stretch of the imagination, but it is still a small yet meaningful action that individual students at Prospect can take.

In addition to this, Bellows would like to see a day set out once a year or so to have conversations with

class about reaching out or obtaining more information. Targeting this instruction beyond only freshmen and sophomores is vital to reaching as many students as possible.

Furthermore, Bellows believes that being there to support your friends is important.

Johnson says in order to fill the need when it comes to supporting friends, implementing "refreshers," that are run by the same part of the S.O.S. prevention program is something under consideration. She has heard the need from students and says it could possibly be put into action in the coming school year.

In addition to these potential updates, Bellows thinks that having links and resources available or in places beyond the QR codes, such as on Schoology similarly to Marnstein would also be a beneficial addition. She thinks it is a discrete way to make the options available to students and also provides a healthy balance between active teaching of materials and having resources readily available.

"Mental illness doesn't choose what age it wants to affect," Bellows said. "It is really important that [mental health resources] are available to everyone, not just specific people, not just specific grades." **JP**



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