

“IN ORDER FOR SCHOOLS TO BE A PLACE OF LEARNING, THEY MUST ALSO BE A PLACE OF HEALING”

Advancing holistic youth wellbeing and safety in Multnomah County schools

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In the greater Portland, Oregon area, Multnomah Education Service District (MESD) and Centennial School District (CSD) demonstrate the power of partnership to advance holistic wellbeing and safety for youth, including preventing sexual and domestic violence. As a county-wide educational cooperative, MESD provides programs and services to Multnomah County's eight school districts to create safe and supportive learning environments. The diverse county, with culturally rich communities and unrivaled natural beauty, spans urban and suburban areas, each with unique features like a high percentage of English learners or a majority of students who qualify for free and reduced lunch. MESD provides tailored supports by working closely with educational staff, like the dedicated team of teachers and administrators at CSD who have confronted tremendous challenges to their students' mental wellbeing and safety throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. With CSD's direct connection to students and MESD's vision for enriching schools, educators and advocates are collaborating to support holistic wellbeing and safety from violence for young people.



DEEPENING AN UNDERSTANDING OF HOW COVID-19 EXACERBATES EXISTING TRAUMA AND CHALLENGES FOR MULTNOMAH COUNTY STUDENTS

Leaders at MESD and CSD make it clear: student success is built on a foundation of thriving mental wellbeing and a safe environment, both of which have been overwhelmed by the pandemic's extreme circumstances. The mounting difficulties since 2020 have been layered on top of historic injustices across the county and country. In facing these enormous issues, MESD and CSD recognize that barriers to student health, safety, and wellbeing are bigger than any one organization can confront on its own. With a county-wide systemic lens, MESD assesses the swirling factors impacting students inside and outside of school. For example, this school year overlaps with the most violent calendar year on record for Multnomah County with upticks in multiple forms of violence including gun violence, domestic violence, and child abuse. MESD ensures that Multnomah County's collaborative actions for student wellbeing reflect students' experiences inside and outside of school. Across campuses, CSD educators note major disruptions to normalcy due to classmate absences, substitute teacher turnover, and diminished social opportunities. For students, this has meant extreme levels of stress and strain without the consistent relationships and environments that nurture them. MESD's broad view of community and county experiences helps contextualize what CSD sees in school buildings.

Together, MESD and CSD create a more complete picture of how trauma impacts the wellbeing of young people in their community. CSD's student Service Director Denise Wright notes that high stress levels activate trauma responses, often resulting in a quickness across



Image provided by Centennial School District.

campus for physical and verbal outbursts by students. Traditionally, the education system responds to trauma on an individual level, supporting students through behavioral health services and classroom accommodations. The pandemic has created high demand for CSD's behavioral health offerings, and the situation is dire with staff spread thin and increased complexity of student needs. With remote learning, educators did their best to recreate the closeness and trust found in classrooms which normally would help them mitigate challenges and identify supportive services. However, with each home environment being so different, CSD felt underprepared to support myriad needs. Once students returned to school, Denise noticed a wide spectrum of reactions, ranging from glee to complete overwhelm. Nothing could prepare schools for the unanticipated challenges they'd have to face. For example, some sixth graders had spent most of their final two years in elementary school online, so age-appropriate behavioral norms around personal space and expected classroom behavior had not been fully developed. MESD and CSD are committed to holistic wellbeing and safety, so they knew a strong prevention mindset would integrate immediate needs within a comprehensive approach.

CENTERING HEALING AND COMMUNITY PRIORITIES IN COUNTY-WIDE COLLABORATION TO ADVANCE STUDENT WELLBEING AND SAFETY

Shared values are the key to successful partnerships. Marcia Perez, Mental & Behavioral Health Systems Strategist at MESD, says “in order for schools to be a place of learning they must also be a place of healing.” To unify organizational partners across the district, MESD has advocated for healing as a central pillar in its Safe and Connected Schools program. The program centers equity to structurally transform school environments away from punitive responses to harm and toward campus culture, policies, and practices that prioritize student wellbeing as a necessary element for academic success. MESD guides school administrators and educators in creating supportive programming, but moreover, Safe and Connected Schools encourages school-wide upstream prevention strategies. On CSD campuses, a multi-tiered social-emotional support system ensures that every student benefits from a school culture that promotes wellbeing and safety while students with specific needs can access tailored services.

SAFE & CONNECTED SCHOOLS GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Connection through authentic relationship

Physical and psychological safety

Transparency and accountability

Equity, inclusion, and justice

The co-creation of transformative responses to systemic and individual harm, ensuring that power is shared with those most impacted

Graphic provided by Multnomah Education Service District.

MESD has the spaciousness and perspective to see the big picture which CSD sees as a critical asset given how overburdened campus staff and supports are. Even so, Marcia encourages other advocates who want to transform systems to have reliable feedback loops with community members and those closest to the challenges, like teachers and students. MESD collaborates with humility, bringing their ideas and research to Centennial's schools while relying on students' and staff's expertise of their own experience. Following this same value, Denise recently convened the Gay-Straight Alliances across the district to share ideas, build comradery, and uplift student-led strategies. Blending MESD's pathway towards Safe and Connected Schools with CSD's community-defined priorities has invigorated strong multisector collaboration between the county health department, local community-based organizations, mental health practitioners, and violence prevention advocates. For Denise, these partnerships must be rooted in sharing power with and honoring the communities they serve, which for her means earnestly demonstrating to families that “we're open and available and willing to learn a different way of doing school.”

CONTINUED DEDICATION TO HOLISTIC APPROACHES FOR MENTAL HEALTH AND VIOLENCE PREVENTION

Transforming school environments to prioritize mental wellbeing and safety has felt insurmountable for many educators taking the pandemic one day at a time. Denise encourages everyone to “find your team” to stay fortified in this long-haul work. This sentiment felt especially resonant when over 400 CSD staff came together for a system-wide anti-racism training which was educational, inspirational, and energizing

– Denise and her colleagues were reminded how entrenched inequities are and how fortunate her team is to be collaborating to create the schools they want to see. Marcia knows that transforming policies and systems takes a coalition of advocates, so breaking down silos within mental health advocacy and violence prevention remains a top priority. Reflecting on the interconnectedness of various forms of and solutions to trauma, Marcia asserts that “when we work together our impact is much greater and so all of this work matters.”

ADVOCATE BIOGRAPHY

Denise Wright is a friend, mother, wife, sister, daughter, aunt, colleague, educator, and the Student Service Director at Centennial School District in Multnomah County, Oregon. She has worked in education for over 26 years as an educational assistant, special education teacher, district consultant, and administrator. Denise is energized and inspired to work with others who are willing to examine and take action against systemic racism and oppression.

Marcia Perez, Mental & Behavioral Health Systems Strategist at Multnomah Education Service District, helps to coordinate regional systems across eight school districts as they implement mental and behavioral health priorities in their Student Investment Account plans. Having worked in a local juvenile department, she brings a decade of experience working with justice involved individuals and serving as a sexual assault and domestic violence victim advocate.