



Waterloo Schools: Supporting Student Behavior and Mental Health

The reality is that mental health is among the top barriers to student achievement. Waterloo Community Schools is working to tackle this barrier by providing in-school counseling and mental health resources to further support the emotional wellbeing of students, families and staff. By enhancing staff mental health knowledge through training addressing suicide prevention, social emotional learning and more, the overall community culture has shifted both in and out of the classroom. At the Summit on Student Success on April 28, Waterloo Schools shared with board members how they built their mental health training and support system from the bottom up.



Board members discuss mental and behavioral health needs in their home districts

Steps Taken by the Board

The first task was to have an open and honest conversation surrounding the current state of mental and behavioral health amongst students in the district. It is crucial to consider your district's specific needs and move toward developing a reasonable plan. Waterloo Schools determined that staffing was the solution, as they looked to increase the number of school counselors, mental health therapists, campus safety monitors and family support workers. This required entering a new era of employee recruitment. Waterloo Schools adopted the following process:

- Start at the lowest level and work your way up—all voices matter when determining the correct course of action, as mental and behavioral health is a delicate issue.
- Collect data



Waterloo Schools shares their mental health support journey with attendees

- Report and discuss said data with the superintendent, human resources and the chief financial officer.
- Coordinate with the finance committee to determine costs and budget impact.
- Seek school board approval

In adopting a thorough candidate approval process to fill these roles, Waterloo Schools welcomed effective, ready-to-serve community members to their staff. Although trained mental health professionals were essential, Waterloo’s efforts did not stop there. New district partnerships and staff training further expanded the support and resources available to students in K-12.

Partnerships

For early intervention, Waterloo Schools partnered with Success Street to provide school-based mental health services to students of all ages. Success Street offers a full range of therapeutic modalities, all available to students through the school-based mental health clinic. Waterloo Schools and Success Street both believe in the importance of student achievement and, in building this partnership, Waterloo students have the assistance they need to focus on school and their future, both physically and mentally.

The onsite mental health therapists work collaboratively with parents, school staff and other professionals to ensure that students receive the appropriate care. In addition to Success Street, Waterloo Schools shared that partnering with Leader in Me transformed the district’s overall culture. Leader in Me lays the foundation for academic achievement by creating a culture of trust and building upon student leadership and life skills. The Leader in Me-provided framework empowers all students to find the leader within themselves and encourage greatness in others. Waterloo Schools pushed their students to develop the following seven habits:

1. Be proactive.
2. Begin with the end in mind.
3. Put first things first—plan weekly and act daily. Focus on the important tasks first.
4. Think win-win.
5. Seek first to understand, then to be understood.
6. Synergize—work collaboratively for the best possible result.
7. Sharpen the saw—discover your greatest asset, then preserve and enhance it.

Focusing on these habits not only prepares students to succeed academically but encourages a supportive school environment by pushing students to work collaboratively and understand one another on a deeper level.

Training

To date, Waterloo Schools has trained nearly 1,000 staff and community members in Youth Mental Health First Aid, a public education program that introduces participants to the various unique risk factors and warning signs of mental health in adolescents. Early intervention is so important, and this program has taught individuals across Waterloo Schools how to best assist students in a crisis or facing mental health challenges.

Waterloo Schools' staff continues to enhance their mental health knowledge through additional training, addressing suicide prevention, handling adverse childhood experiences and social-emotional learning. Thanks to these trainings, Waterloo Schools is equipped to support the emotional wellbeing of children and youth in the classroom and beyond.

Key Takeaways

- Behavior and mental health affect ALL districts.
- Be creative in addressing the issue—each district comes with its own unique needs.
- Boards and district communication is key.
- Create clear processes for decision-making.

Thank you to Waterloo Schools for sharing their journey to support students and fuel student achievement at the Summit on Student Success on April 28. For more information regarding Waterloo's strategy, partnerships or training, email:

- Superintendent, Dr. Jared Smith—smithjr@waterlooschools.org
- Board Vice President, Endya Johnson—johnsone4@waterlooschools.org
- Board Member, Stacie Mills—millss@waterlooschools.org