

Inside the \$43M fight to solve N.J.'s youth mental health crisis. 'You are not alone.'

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Taisha Mathieu with the Mental Health Association of Essex and Morris Counties, Inc. works with 8th grade students at Halsted Middle School in Newton on Monday, June 3, 2024. The students participate in the Teen Outreach Program, a weekly workshop that focuses on mental health. Daniel J. Hoffman | For NJ Advance Media



By [Susan K. Livio](#) | [NJ Advance Media for NJ.com](#)

The school year is nearly over and summer vacation beckons, but a group of 8th graders at Halsted Middle School in Newton spent part of Monday morning pondering why “the road to success is paved with failure.”

The most iconic public figures have failed spectacularly before they succeeded, Taisha Mathieu, behavioral health educator, told the class. Abraham Lincoln lost eight elections before he was became president. NBA great Michael Jordan didn't make the cut for the varsity team in high school. Peanuts creator Charles Schulz couldn't get his cartoons published in his own high school yearbook.

Now imagine you want to go to college, but “no one in your family has gone, and you are worried there is too much you don’t know,” said Ashley Cirone, a behavioral health educator. Faced with a complicated college application process, “you start to feel tense and overwhelmed.”

Cirone and her colleague asked the class to choose from a list of strategies that could help them, in the moment, move beyond their anxiety. *Try again. Get connected. Calm down. One step at a time. Do you. Safety first. Learn from it. Be Healthy.*

“One step at a time!” one student called out.

“Why?” Mathieu shot back.

“To break it down into smaller pieces,” the student replied.

“In these situations, who can we ask for help?” Mathieu asked.

“A trusted adult!” another student shouted.

The takeaway from the 45-minute exercise is “resiliency can be learned and practiced,” Cirone said.

This is the same message behind the mission of [the New Jersey Statewide Student Support Services](#), an ambitious \$43 million investment by Gov. [Phil Murphy's](#) administration to respond to a mental health crisis among the nation’s youth.

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Suicide was the second leading causes of death for youth 10-to-24-years old in 2021, [according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#). The percent of teens coming to emergency room with suicidal thoughts rose by more than 10% in 2021 and again in 2022, heightened by the isolation of the pandemic, [New Jersey hospital networks reported last year](#). A 2023 survey by The Trevor Project [found 41% of LGBTQ+ young people seriously considered attempting suicide in the past year](#).

The initiative pays nonprofits — such as the Mental Health Association of Morris and Essex Counties, Inc., which employs Cirone and Mathieu — to lead group discussions on mental health, resiliency and positive program solving for students, parents and educators inside and outside the classroom.

The program is a cornerstone of Murphy’s [playbook](#) to attack the mental health crisis among kids that he shared with a dozen other governors [when he chaired the National Governors Association last year](#).

The program cost \$43 million to launch this fiscal year and the governor has requested another \$43 million to keep going and expand it in the new fiscal year that begins in July. There are many multi-million-dollar requests in Murphy’s Children and Families’ budget, but this is the most expensive initiative, according to budget documents.

While it’s too early to measure success, the preliminary enrollment numbers show there is an intense interest.

Launched at the beginning of the academic year in September by the Department of Children and Families, the program has led 3,390 group events at high schools, middle schools and elementary schools through the month of May, state spokesman Jason Butkowski said. They’ve been attended by 136,500 students, educators and parents, he said.

Another 2,947 middle school and high school students participated in more intensive, evidence-tested prevention group programs tackling issues like bullying and substance abuse. The third component provided short-term therapy sessions with 314 students while they awaited private psychiatric treatment, Butkowski said.

Monday's lesson in resiliency won't show up on a final exam. It's not technically a part of the Sussex County's school's curriculum. But the 45-minute exercise is a vitally important one educators are hoping sticks with the students as they enter high school and make important decisions about their future.

The self-imposed and external pressure to succeed is very intense, said Alexandra Zaki, a licensed clinical social worker from the Mental Health Association who was visiting Halsted that day to meet privately with a student.

"It's not just good enough to get good grades anymore. You need to stand out, you need to be in clubs, you need to be in sports. You have to be that overachiever," Zaki said. "Then you mix in with the social pressures with social media because all these kids have it, I'd say there is a lot of anxiety."

The residual angst around COVID is still present, Zaki added. "The idea of being in school is still a lot for a lot of these kids. We see a lot of school absenteeism."

Absenteeism, bullying and suicide prevention were identified as key concerns for youth in Morris and Sussex counties based on a needs assessment and the perspective of community and school leaders who serve on an advisory group, said Tracy Cappicille, director for the program in Morris and Sussex Counties.

A data analyst creates surveys students complete measuring whether they are getting the messages in each lesson and what other topics they'd like to explore, Cappicille said.

The same structure exists in 15 regional hubs across the state so programs can be tailored to kids' needs based on where they live, according to the state website. The state has [created a podcast](#) to promote the program.



Halsted Middle School students Julien Berrios, 14, left and Alterique Lesaine, 15, right, participate in the weekly Teen Outreach Program in Newton on Monday, June 3, 2024. The program is a weekly workshop led by social workers that focuses on mental health. Daniel J. Hoffman | For NJ Advance Media

Children and Families Commissioner Christine Norbut Beyer said the early feedback across the state is very encouraging.

“We hear about success stories every week – high school students in Mercer County are processing their emotions while learning to write personal memoirs. School leaders in Camden County say (the program) has increased equitable access to care, crossing barriers of insurance, location, waitlists, and language,” Norbut Beyer told NJ Advance Media.

“Every community is different with different needs...” the commissioner said, saying the program has “advisory boards comprised of local students, parents, clergy, and community leaders. The hubs are paying attention to what is affecting youth and offering programs to help address those issues.”

So far, students are receptive and school guidance counselors are grateful, Cappicille said. “Guidance counselors and administrators can only do so much. We can take some of that off their plate,” she said. “I appreciate the state recognizes that our students are in a mental health crisis.”

The students they’ve encountered represent a new generation of thinking around mental health and wellness, said Carrie Parmelee, a supervising prevention consultant with the Mental Health Association who also works in Morris and Sussex counties.

“They already have a lot of awareness. The stigma is a lot less now than it was during our generation,” Parmelee said. Their mission is to reinforce the message they can ask for help and “you are not alone.”

Cappicille, who is 45, agreed. “When I was school, I don’t think they spoke about mental health. Maybe we talked about eating disorders.”

Through group activities and discussions, the students have learned what empathy means – “what does your friend feel like?” and how important it is to have at least one “trusted adult” to confide in, Parmelee said. These are important coping skills that could prevent a student from sliding into a dark and isolated place.

There is so much work to do, but approaching mental wellness as a prevention strategy makes Parmelee feel there is “a lot of hope.”

“It is really hard to know – are our youth ok? I don’t think so, but they will be,” she said.

Suicidal thoughts and behaviors can be reduced with the proper mental health support and treatment. If you are in crisis, please call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 988 or contact the Crisis Text Line by texting TALK to 741741.



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