

ESM highlights programs to state



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Earlier this month, East Syracuse Minoa staff and students presented about their school district to members of the New York State Senate Education Committee.

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East Syracuse Minoa Central School District administrators, counselors and students presented about the district's mental health support systems, gap-closing strategies and other in-school programs to members of the New York State Senate Education Committee Thursday, Jan. 4.

The staff and high schoolers addressed the visiting committee chairwoman, 37th District Senator Shelley Mayer, who was seated next to senators John Mannion of the 50th District and John Liu of the 16th District to her right and Onondaga County Executive Ryan McMahon to her left.

In the library of Pine Grove Middle School on Spartan Way, a point of note was that the district's strategic plan is focused around student-centered learning, wellness, and the creation of a safe and well-coming environment.

Tom Sweeney, the principal of East Syracuse Elementary, went up to the front of the room during the talk to highlight PBIS, a framework standing for "positive behavior intervention and support" that has been implemented across the entire district.

Sweeney said PBIS, which is based on incentives, involves the teaching and reinforcement of responsible and respectful behavior. At East Syracuse Elementary for example, students are rewarded with "Cheetah Bucks" if they meet and exceed the expectations of their teachers, and they can later turn in that currency for either tangible prizes pulled from the Cheetah Chest or, if they save up, anything from guitar lessons given by their music teacher to a chance to sit in one of the brand new booths in the cafeteria.

Another district-wide initiative is Second Step, a social-emotional curriculum broken up into four units that overall fosters students' skills and understanding when it comes to decision-making, empathy, emotion management and problem solving. Starting with kids in pre-K, the 20-week program is tailored to the maturity and learning competencies of each grade level.

Second Step additionally includes a family engagement component in that flyers will be sent home addressing the specifics of the lesson plans week to week.

In all four of its elementary schools, ESM showcases a program called Primary

Project that's been designed by Children's Institute in Rochester to directly help children having difficulties adjusting to school.

Shelly Chizzonite, the school counselor at Woodland Elementary, said the Primary Project endeavor at ESM uses playroom toys that engage kids' minds and ongoing one-on-one evaluations while relying on trained professionals as supervisors, including Bonnie Bayly, a child associate with Contact Community Services. Chizzonite said the district observes kindergarten through third grade students for the county-funded program.

Bayly said last year about 40 students were selected for ESM's Primary Project after being screened to see if they "fit the profile" in the sense that they would noticeably benefit from the program's methods. At the end of the program, it was found that social skills improved among the group, as did signs of emotional intelligence, school attendance levels, and participation in the classroom, she said.

The presentation also discussed the district's relationship with community or-

ganizations like ARISE, a social services nonprofit with satellite clinics instituted in every one of ESM's school buildings.

As part of that mental health program, the different clinicians taking on caseloads work with social workers and school counselors who determine which students would gain the most benefit from the care.

McMahon said that after years of COVID-related social restrictions and the developmental setbacks that resulted, there was an even greater need to incorporate such mental health resources in schools. He said these supportive programs have been "effective" in the county but that they should be merged with schools statewide.

As an extra layer of support, ESM has Promise Zone specialists stationed at its buildings to identify student struggles and where to appropriately intervene. In doing so, those specialists organize lunch groups and perform daily check-ins with students.

At ESM Central High School, students have also taken it upon themselves as peer leaders to coordinate a suicide prevention program in partnership with the University of Rochester called Sources of Strength, which encourages students to fill out jour-

nals by jotting down what they're thankful for day to day.

"These services being in the school system take away a lot of stigmas, a lot of barriers, a lot of disruptions and for the family they're easy access," ESM Superintendent Dr. Donna DeSiato said. "Ultimately the results I think prove that the investment is well worth it."

For students falling behind, there's also the Good Life One M.I.C. program at ESM that continues its work through summer vacation and other school breaks.

Named after a 2001 song by Nas and standing for "One Mission Impossible Completed," that program centers on goal setting, after-school help, the removal of barriers and assistance to families as a way to tackle the external variables hindering academic performance.

By leveraging community backing, taking its kids on outings, and being there to connect with them around the clock if there's ever a crisis situation, One M.I.C. has brought about decreases in the amount of discipline referrals and suspensions within the district, all while propelling students to success by teaching them entrepreneurial skill sets and weaving in the

pro-education, anti-violence foundations of old-school hip-hop culture.

"For children who traditionally have not seen success in school, if we can show them one success and repeat the pattern, we'll create a future," said Hassan Stephens, the founder and CEO of the Good Life Youth Foundation, which runs the One M.I.C. program.

The ESM school district also makes room for a 20-minute block called Spartan Achievement Learning Time, or S.A.L.T. Each student remains in the same S.A.L.T. group for the duration of their high school career as they take part in Mindful Mondays to learn how to deal with stress, What's Up Wednesdays to stay connected to what's happening in their school building and what courses they can sign up for, and Screen-Free Fridays to take a breath and put their attention to puzzles or other activities away from their phones and computers.

Deputy Superintendent Greg Avellino concluded the presentation by sharing different data points, like the fact that the district's sixth graders achieved the highest English Language Arts scores in the region.