

Mental Health In Schools

By Emily Hawari-Grieder

I believe that schools need to do a better job supporting their students' mental health.

I have been in four different school districts in Minnesota and only one of them (a day treatment program) gave me adequate mental health support. It's not for lack of trying, I have experienced first hand that schools don't have the right resources to support their students who struggle with mental health.

I received my first official diagnosis when I was in seventh grade, but I've been dealing with anxiety, depression, and trauma my whole schooling career- practically my whole life. The best way to describe what a panic attack in school is like for me is the story of how I was diagnosed with anxiety. I was in 7th grade at North Junior High. I was at a lab in science class, and I had pulled up my grades online and was looking at my science grade. I saw that I had a 'C' and that one of my assignments that I vividly remembered handing in was marked missing. My stomach sank - like how you feel when you're a little kid and you lose your family out in public. I got dizzy, and nauseous and another kid had to walk with me down to the nurse's office because I couldn't feel anything from my knees down. My hands were tingling, and I felt like I was going to pass out. It was so intense and I felt so alone and scared, and all my teacher could do for me was send me to the nurse, because he didn't know what else to do. Unfortunately, neither my teacher nor the school nurse were trained to recognize the signs of my anxiety attack.

I was diagnosed with PTSD - Post Traumatic Stress Disorder - (this is in addition to my diagnosis of anxiety and depression, both of which was also contributing symptoms that worked negatively together) my freshman year, meaning I suffer from nightmares, hallucinations, and dissociation. It was frustrating to have teachers reach out and tell me that it's okay that I'm dealing with that, but then to have those same

teachers marking me absent when I would fall asleep in class after not sleeping for nights on end because I had nightmares about losing my family, or being killed and not being able to fight back. It was frustrating when I would get in trouble with teachers after walking out of class without saying anything because my PTSD had been triggered and I couldn't handle being there. I knew if I tried to talk I would start crying, and I can't do that in a room of 30+ teens that don't know me. It was frustrating when teachers would lecture me for how I "space out" and refuse to do my work, when I was just dissociating and trying to figure out why I couldn't feel anything and how to make it stop.

I know from personal experience that it is painful to try to do *anything* with all that going on, and it's even worse when the adults that are supposed to be helping you are blowing you off and treating you like you can't have these problems because '*you're just a kid (and that doesn't fit into my ideals so it can't be true) so it's just hormones and growing up*'. It's unbelievably hard to solve for 'X' when you feel like someone is grabbing at your neck, near impossible to memorize the Gettysburg address when you've gotten four hours of sleep in three days, and exhausting to give a speech when you are having an anxiety attack.

Not all teachers do that of course, but the counselors tend to be more geared more towards college and usually understaffed. The social workers are also understaffed, which means that all the kids in the school have to share a handful of people that aren't always trained or specialized in mental health, the kids are spread too thick and the counselors/social workers too thin.

There is research today that indicates that students have greater difficulty learning when struggling with their mental health. A peer-reviewed study article on Biomedcentral reports that in a group of tenth graders, the ones that were taking the time, and given the space to address their mental wellness did better in school (Heyerdahl, Lien, Sagatun, Wentzel-Larsen, 2014). Another study in the Journal of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology states; "School connectedness has been found to correlate strongly and positively with student's academic motivation and with

indexes of school performances and adjustments” (Dadds, Ham, Montague, Shochet et. al. 2010).

At my school there is 1,000+ students and six counselors; that’s too few.

In my ideal school, money would be set aside for mental health services, leading to mental health training for teachers and showing the students that there is no shame in asking for help. There would be more of a focus on mental wellness, and there would be therapists that are specialized in different aspects (like trauma, addiction, anxiety, ect.), and teachers, counselors, and therapists would be getting paid more because what they’re doing is important to making the world a better and brighter place. They’re around the next generation for 40+ hours a week, with about four months off a year, school is a big factor in their lives. And if students are going through school feeling unsafe, they aren’t learning or growing which negatively impacts society as a whole.