

Standing-Room-Only Community Discussion Focuses on How Adults Can Help Students Exposed to Trauma

More than 200 educators, advocates, and community members participated in a four-hour session today to learn what role trauma plays in the lives of Monroe County school students and how they can help students succeed.

Data and analysis from the most recent Monroe County Youth Risk Behavior Survey helped set the stage for the morning's discussion. This local survey, completed 11 times since 1992 by students ages 13 and older, has typically measured youth risk behavior, which includes drug use, violence, and sexual risk behaviors. For the first time, questions were included to assess the exposure to trauma – such as abuse, neglect, witnessing violence – enabling the connection to be made between traumatic life events and risky behavior.

The latest survey found that 70% of students in Monroe County reported experiencing one or more traumatic events, with 28% indicating that they had directly encountered three or more instances of trauma.

“These numbers indicate that far too many of our school children are being adversely affected by traumatic events. This means we need to raise awareness about trauma and to help adults working directly with young people to think differently about how to address it,” says Mary Hartstein, program associate at Rochester Area Community Foundation and co-founder of the Trauma-Informed Care Network in Rochester.

National research has demonstrated that experiencing or witnessing traumatic events before age 18 can create dangerous

levels of stress and derail healthy brain development if there is no intervention or support. As these students get older, this exposure can increase the likelihood they will engage in risky behaviors and have more incidents of poor mental and physical health outcomes in later years. An accumulation of these adverse childhood experiences compounds these risks.

“The Monroe County data is a game-changer,” says Elizabeth Meeker, director of training and practice transformation for Coordinated Care Services, Inc.

“Like many communities, we have traditionally focused on reducing high-risk behavior and indicators, such as violence, substance use, suicide ideation or attempts, and poor academic outcomes without understanding what may be driving those behaviors. If we continue to focus on ‘What is wrong with you?’ instead of asking ‘What has happened to you?’ we are missing the opportunity to address the underlying issue of trauma,” Meeker adds.

The event at Monroe Community College also featured clips from *Paper Tigers*, an evocative documentary that chronicled a year in the life of an alternative high school that has radically changed its approach to educating students. The school in rural Walla, Walla, Wash., has become a promising model for how to break the cycles of poverty, violence, and disease that affect families.

Since its premiere at the Seattle Film Festival in May 2015, *Paper Tigers* has been screened in more than 250 venues across the United States, including its premiere in Rochester today. The film was incorporated into the session to illustrate how tenets of trauma-informed care can be, and have been, applied with the hopes of inspiring more local buy-in.

A panel discussion included Denise Quamina of the Rochester City School District and Jessie Joy of the Jamestown City School District, who have introduced trauma-informed care into

their schools. They shared their successes and challenges, as well as practical steps to be more responsive to all students, while particularly helping those who have experienced or witnessed traumatic events.

“Implementing trauma-informed care in our community is not adding to the workload of teachers, social workers, and other adults who work with children. It’s about adopting a new approach, a new way of thinking to better serve our youth,” says Hartstein.

Participants represented school districts from throughout Monroe County – East and West Irondequoit, Webster, Brockport, Greece, Spencerport, Rush Henrietta, Rochester, Pittsford, Penfield, Hilton, Honeoye Falls-Lima, Gates Chili, Fairport, East Rochester, and Brighton – and multiple community-based and government agencies.

“We were thrilled with the enthusiasm surrounding this event, and the fact that an extensive wait list was formed proves that our community is ready to get involved in this important work,” says Megan Bell, executive director at The Wilson Foundation, which co-sponsored the session.

Other sponsors included Coordinated Care Services, Inc., the Consortium on Trauma, Illness and Grief in Schools, Monroe County Office of Mental Health, and Rochester Area Community Foundation.

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