

South Shore educators grapple with mental health issues throughout K-12 spectrum

Publisher's note: *This is one of several stories about mental health issues in the Lake Tahoe Basin that will be running through October.*

By Terra Breeden

In Lake Tahoe Unified School District, 42 children were taken to Barton Memorial Hospital for suicidal tendencies this past school year.

The growing problem of mental health-related issues in children and teens has education officials on both sides of the state line scrambling to become de facto experts in a field that until a few years ago was not on anyone's radar.

"In my experience there has been an increase in mental illness," Nancy Cauley, principal of Zephyr Cove Elementary, told *Lake Tahoe News*. "There needs to be more time taken to examine what we need to do as a community to support these students."

According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), 20 percent of children ages 13-18 live with a mental health condition. These conditions include mood disorders, depression, and anxiety disorders. Although the South Shore is a small community, the wave of mental health problems affecting youth is a big concern.

At South Tahoe High School, Nicole Bergner works as an intervention counselor and gives extra support to higher needs students.

"I see a lot of students with anxiety, depression and trauma-

related fallout from family issues,” Bergner said.

Even with the increasing awareness, figuring out the cause of mental health problems in youngsters is tough. Cauley speculates that the recent economic recession may have affected children as much as adults.

“The economic downturn of 2008 had a huge impact on the emotional well-being of children,” Cauley said. “When a parent loses their house, job or income it affects the child. Stability is important and it plays a big part in a child’s emotional well-being and how they respond in the classroom.”



“Teachers and counselors do what they can to support students and families, but it’s hard in a rural community with limited resources and social workers.”

– Teri White, Douglas County School District superintendent

Nicole Zunino, the intervention counselor at South Tahoe Middle School, told *Lake Tahoe News* that social media is also a cause of mental health issues in youngsters. On social networking sites such as Facebook and Instagram, impressionable children are hit with a barrage of images and advertisements, coercing them to compare themselves to others and influencing their self-esteem.

The rise in school shootings nationwide has created fear on

campuses and contributes to student mental health issues such as anxiety disorders, as well.

“I wonder why we are seeing so much anxiety and what comes to mind is that this generation is seeing school shootings regularly and we are living in this time of fear,” alternative education counselor for LTUSD Amy Jackson said.

Jackson told *Lake Tahoe News* that after her young son experienced a school shooting drill, which is now a commonly practiced training drill at schools, he was fearful, and later, wanted to talk about it.

The reasons for mental health issues are vast and they effect children differently depending on the child’s age.

“With younger children, there might be more issues with their family environment and with older children it tends to be more peer-related,” Terri White, superintendent of Douglas County School District, told *Lake Tahoe News*.

Lake Tahoe teachers and faculty are trying to identify the problems that arise at different ages. But in elementary schools, recognizing a mental health issue can be especially difficult.

“Elementary kids hide it pretty darn good,” Jackson said. “The little guys need counseling, but these mental issues can be hard to identify. You don’t see the symptoms until middle school or high school.”

Identifying a mental health problem is much easier when the child is an adolescent. However, by this age, the perils of anxiety or depression can be far greater.

“For us, the thing we see with adolescents is suicidal tendencies and trying to deal with their problems by turning to risky behavior,” White said.

Lake Tahoe education officials are doing whatever they can to

combat mental health problems in schools. At STMS, faculty members conduct six prevention groups a week to help students cope with anxiety and depression. In the weekly meetings, students are taught to regulate their emotions instead of acting out. Relaxation techniques, deep breathing exercises and "I"-statements are utilized to assist children in dealing with their mental health issues.

"Teachers are the first line of defense," Nicole Zunino, intervention counselor at STMS, said. "They are the eyes and ears of the school. We pick students with patterns of behavior and academics to place in these groups"



10 warning signs of mental health issues in teens

- Being sad or withdrawn for more than two weeks
- Severe mood swings that cause problems in relationships
- Intense worries or fears that get in the way of daily activities
- Drastic change in behavior or sleep habits
- Repeated use of drugs or alcohol
- Extreme difficulty concentrating or staying

still

- Seriously wanting to harm or kill oneself
- Not eating, throwing up or using laxatives to lose weight
- Significant weight loss or weight gain
- Sudden overwhelming fear for no reason.

Source: *NAMI*

For children with mental health problems, it's important for parents to be involved. Recognizing their child's harmful behavior and providing support is the first step. LTUSD education officials work closely with students, but stress the importance of parental participation.

"We try to get parents involved because the outcome will be better," Zunino said. "We also work really closely with agencies in town like Barton Health.

LTUSD students with known mental health problems are given personalized counseling and support from intervention counselors like Bergner and Zunino. LTUSD also provides specialized education programs to ignite their interest in school subjects and divert them away from harmful behavior.

"We are very good at customizing a student's education," Jim Tarwater, superintendent of LTUSD, said. "We have certain programs that will hook a kid and have stories where kids have had 180 degree turn-a-rounds."

In Douglas County, schools have a hard time providing counseling for students with mental health issues. Currently, there are no mental health counselors on staff. There simply aren't enough resources available for DCSD schools to provide

on-campus counseling.

“If we have children who are struggling with mental health, we refer them out and connect them with outside agencies like the Tahoe Youth & Family Services,” White said. “But that can be difficult because of health insurance.”

White hopes to rectify the lack of support and provide more in-depth care to students with mental health problems. DCSD has applied for a social worker grant through the Department of Education and has plans to work with Project AWARE, which provides social workers to schools through a partnership with UNR and the Department of Education.

“Teachers and counselors do what they can to support students and families, but it’s hard in a rural community with limited resources and social workers,” White said.

At Zephyr Cove Elementary, Principal Cauley says that regardless of limited resources, children with mental health-related problems are given individualized support at the school.

“When we are made aware that a child needs mental health support we work with the parents and community to help that child,” Cauley said. “No matter what a child has, we always work with every possible team member to ensure that student is successful in school.”