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The Voice of Public School Leadership

February 19, 2018

NEW YORK STATE SCHOOL BOARDS ASSOCIATION • www.nyssba.org

Vol. 19, No. 3

Hoosick Falls helps students overcome hidden hindrances of stress, depression

By **Pauline Liu**
SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

What a difference a year has made for Nina Lawrence, a high school sophomore in Rensselaer County's Hoosick Falls Central School District. Last year, she was failing most of her classes. She suffers from depression and was hospitalized in the past, when her symptoms were at their worst.

Now the 15-year-old has an upbeat attitude, and her grades are soaring. That includes a 98 in Introductory Spanish and a 95 in Studio Art, which she earned during the first quarter marking period.

She credits her school district's social-emotional development program with helping her turn her life around.

Hoosick Falls' multi-faceted program is an example of how school districts in New York State are getting more sophisticated at identifying students who need emotional support as well as academic support. About 20 percent of Americans between the ages of 13 and 18 live with a mental health condition,

according to health experts.

New York will become the first state in the nation to require all schools to incorporate mental health education into their curricula by July 1. Education officials hope it will lead to some early detection or prevention of mental illness.

State Education Commissioner MaryEllen Elia has also asked all districts to prepare to give their students annual school climate surveys.

Hoosick Falls Superintendent Kenneth Facin said his 1,150-student district is on track to add mental health to its curriculum and prepared to administer climate surveys, which typically record attendance and mental health data, disciplinary referrals as well as self-reported feelings on safety and security.

But the rural, high-poverty district began a more ambitious series of mental health initiatives seven years ago.

"We're leading the way for rural schools," said school board President Greg Laurin. "I don't know of any other schools that are doing as much as ours."

District leaders say one strategy that seems to be paying off involves question-



Nina Lawrence, a 10th grader at Hoosick Falls High School, says her school's support programs have helped her rebound from depression. "She has just been amazing for the past year, and I'm so just so proud," said her grandmother and legal guardian, Cher Sharkey. ♦ Photo by Pauline Liu

naires that are designed to identify students with depression and other mental health issues.

The district is using "Holistic

Student Assessments" supplied by the Massachusetts-based PEAR Institute

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Quoted

"They're making a difference."

— Education Commissioner MaryEllen Elia on Yonkers schools' work with minority boys (page 3)

Herkimer Co. school is fan central for Olympian Maddie Phaneuf

By **Cathy Woodruff**
SENIOR WRITER

A robust roster of alumni from New York schools is competing at the Olympic Winter Games in South Korea this month. One athlete closely watched and supported by her school community back home is biathlete Maddie Phaneuf, a 2013 graduate of Town of Webb Union Free School District in the Herkimer County hamlet of Old Forge.

Phaneuf, 22, is the daughter of Town of Webb school board President Joseph Phaneuf and his wife, Janine, who works as a teacher's aide.

A banner proclaiming "Way to go Maddie!" hangs over the main entrance of the Town of Webb UFSD school building, which serves 250 K-12 students. Students and faculty sport T-shirts declaring themselves members of Maddie's "Phan Club." (Her last name is pronounced 'Fan-iff'.)



Town of Webb students watch Maddie Phaneuf, an alumna of their school, compete in the 2018 Women's Open European Championships in Italy in January.

♦ Photo courtesy of the Town of Webb Union Free School District

"We've got the place all decked out," Principal John Swick told *On Board*. "We are all so excited for Maddie."

According to the governor's office, 22 New York athletes are competing in

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(Partnerships in Education and Resilience). The non-profit is affiliated with McLean Hospital, a Harvard University affiliate.

According to PEAR founder and clinical psychologist Gil Noam, who was a speaker at NYSSBA's 2014 Annual Convention, students are rarely asked to evaluate their own mental health. More common are anonymous surveys.

In Hoosick Falls, students in grades 5-12 are given about 20 minutes to complete the 83 multiple choice questions. Noam said that he and his staff can generally tell when students are lying based on their answers. He believes that in about 95 percent of the assessments, students answer truthfully.

Since creating the assessments a decade ago, PEAR has gathered data from about 100,000 students in school districts and youth groups across the country.

"It allows us to compare schools, and students in different regions, and spot trends," Noam said.

As a result of the students' self-reporting, PEAR groups them into three tiers: Tier 1 students do not require intervention, Tier 2 students are identified as "subclinical" with emerging issues, while Tier 3 students are identified as having clinical depression and in need of immediate help.

Students in Tier 3 are immediately referred to counselors, while students in all tiers are assigned to participate in specific activities, such as mindful reflection every afternoon, group meetings with adult advisors in a "Restorative Homeroom," and/or equine-assisted learning.

"We use the survey results to address the immediate individual as well as the collective needs of students," Facin said. "Our approaches are based on Dr. Noam's theory that four things are needed for healthy adolescent growth and development: active engagement, assertiveness, belonging and reflection."

The effort to improve the mental health of its students appears to be paying off, according to district officials.

Crisis intervention calls, which often involve students having emotional meltdowns, are down 34 percent from a year ago. Even more dramatic is a 56 percent reduction in disciplinary referrals among at-risk high school students.

Getting such results requires commitment of time and resources, according to Facin. When the district began work on students' emotional health seven years ago, it spent only a few thousand dollars on consultants and curriculum development. In the current school year, the district expects to spend nearly \$190,000 on social-emotional development.

Those costs include about \$36,000 for crisis therapy aide Mike Manning, who walks the hallways and visits classrooms accompanied by Kady, his nine-year-old Newfoundland dog. They are called into classrooms



Aubrey Maher, a high performing student in Hoosick Falls, says yoga and mindful breathing helped her to cope with anxiety created by the demands of her senior year. ➤ Photo by Pauline Liu

when students have meltdowns.

"It never fails, when we show up in a room where a child is having a crisis, the kid will go straight to the dog and some of the tension seems to melt away," Manning said.

Another cost is a new "Restore U" program headed by teacher John Jennings, which targets high school students at risk of dropping out for emotional or academic reasons. Jennings' goal is to guide students as they make up missed coursework needed to graduate. "The biggest change that I've seen is their increased confidence," Jennings said.

Also new this school year is an equine-assisted learning program for more than 100 students who have been diagnosed with clinical depression or emerging issues. It's aimed at helping

those students build connections with the horses on the 80-acre Higher Ground farm in Hoosick Falls by brushing, walking and talking to the animals. The cost is \$90,000 for the year, but the district expects the program will soon be taken over by a newly established nonprofit.



Mikaleh Pelton, a sophomore at Hoosick Falls High School, is responsible for brushing, walking and talking with Ringo, a Welsh pony gelding at Higher Ground farm in Hoosick Falls. ➤ Photo courtesy of Mikaleh Pelton

One fan of the equine program is Nina Lawrence's grandmother and legal guardian, Cher Sharkey. She noted that Nina has worked with a blue-eyed quarter horse called Snake.

"That horse does not care what color her hair is or what kind of clothes she wears or that she didn't put on mascara, because that horse loves her for the way she is," Sharkey said.

Another equine program participant is sophomore Mikaleh Pelton, 16, who has a history of missed coursework. He said the district's programs have helped him to "deal with things."

He said he didn't think he learned much from working with horses, but school psychologist Corie Rushman said that Pelton was "noticeably calmer and more at ease" around the therapy animals.

"Last year, I got suspended for about half the year because I got in trouble for fighting, which I started," Pelton said.

Now Pelton is putting his energy into athletics. Thanks to his academic good standing, he's on the junior varsity basketball, varsity lacrosse and varsity football teams. His mother called his turnaround nothing short of remarkable.

"This district has helped him, and I'm just so proud of him; he used to get (grades that were) 30s and 40s and now he gets 80s and 90s," according to Andrea Pelton, who is a single mom.

The district's social-emotional development plan includes engaging all students, faculty and staff in two daily five-minute breaks for "mindfulness" or meditative breathing led by members of the faculty. Teachers have been leading breathing exercises and yoga for three years; the practice has been written into the teachers' contract.

Four teachers trained to become certified yoga instructors at a cost of \$10,000 to the district. The certified instructors have taught other faculty members about classroom yoga techniques. They've also launched yoga courses, clubs and electives.

Fourth grader Emma Waugh said she has been learning to focus on breathing, which has helped her avoid the feeling of "always rushing." She's had help from her teacher Katie Brownell, who is a certified yoga instructor.

Superintendent Facin said the district's emphasis on mindfulness and yoga is rooted in "brain science, not fluff." One of the district's trainers has been Robert Bennett, a retired board certified psychiatrist and neurologist based in Bennington, Vt.

"You can throw all sorts of money at a great curriculum, but if students are not open to learning because they're too stressed out, then you're just throwing money away," Bennett said.

News about Hoosick Falls' initiatives has spread to other school districts.

"Other districts have called up and asked, 'How do we do it?'" Hoosick Falls High School Principal Patrick Dailey said.

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subgroups tracked by the state. That dropout rate grew to 29.7 percent in 2017, up 6.8 points from the rate for ELLs two years earlier. Yet, Yonkers and Rochester both bucked that trend and saw their ELL dropout rates decline.

Graduation rates for ELLs improve significantly when they remain in high school beyond four years, Elia noted. For those who were in ninth grade in 2011, the grad rate grew from 33.8 percent after four years to 44.9 percent with five years and to 48.3 percent with six years.

She said state education officials will intensify their focus on helping districts with large numbers of students learning English develop strategies to help

those students remain in school.

Achievement gaps

New York's graduation rates continue to vary widely among students in rich and poor districts and among students of differing racial and ethnic backgrounds. Elia said those gaps remain troubling but help to identify areas where the state and local districts need to target their work to improve.

The four-year graduation rate for districts classified as "low need," meaning they tend to be located in more affluent communities, was 94.8

percent. But for "high need" large city districts, the rate was 63.9 percent – a gap of nearly 31 points.

The four-year grad rates for black students (69.3 percent) and Hispanic students (68.4 percent), while slightly improved, remain far behind the rate for white students (89 percent).

"The Regents and the (state education) department will continue their efforts to close this gap through the implementation of the state's ESSA plan and the My Brother's Keeper initiative, aimed at bringing greater fairness throughout the education system," department officials said in a statement.