



Health and wellness programs in Island schools need better coordination, researchers from Georgetown University found.
Mark Alan Lovewell

Experts Outline Strategy to Improve Health Education in Island Schools

Holly Pretsky Monday, September 17, 2018 - 2:53pm

Islandwide collaboration is crucial to improve health education and mental health support at Vineyard public schools, experts from Georgetown University Hospital told school leaders last week.

“We think it’s critical that the curricula be mutually relevant and consistent,” Dr. Matthew Biel of MedStar Georgetown University Hospital said during a presentation last week.

In 2014 (<https://vineyardgazette.com/news/2014/03/20/counselors-see-rise-student-stress>) and again in 2015 (<https://vineyardgazette.com/news/2015/12/10/island-not-immune-anxiety-issues-increase-among-students-all-ages>) guidance counselors in Island public schools reported rising anxiety and other mental health concerns among their students.

Last year at the request of superintendent of schools Dr. Matthew D’Andrea, Dr. Biel and three other MedStar experts conducted a comprehensive study of Island school wellness programs that included hundreds of interviews and surveys of school staff, students, parents and community members.

The study found that health education and mental health support vary widely among the Island's five school districts.

Though they acknowledged the distinctive identity of each Island school, the consultants called for universal, consistent health education as a top priority, beginning with the hiring of an all-Island health education coordinator within the next year.

"This is an ambitious first year, but these are things we feel like need to happen," Dr. Biel said, outlining the recommended five-year plan. "Year one, by the way, starts today," he said.

The coordinator would be charged with overseeing health and wellness curricula in all schools and potentially with teaching health classes in schools that don't have a designated health teacher. The researchers said ideally all Island students will enter the high school with comparable health education backgrounds. To standardize curriculum throughout schools, the researchers suggested three educational programs: Botvin LifeSkills, HealthSmart from the nonprofit ETR, and the Michigan Model for Health. They said all three programs were endorsed by the Centers for Disease Control.

"What we're concerned with is we don't want you to use a curriculum that's going to be obsolete in a few years," said Dr. Jeff Bostic. He said some of the programs are already in use at some schools, while other schools use programs that are not on the list. The team recommended adopting the new curricula in year two.

For mental health support, the team recommended the schools hire another all-Island coordinator in the next year to organize resources and services and identify gaps.

"Early on, there's a lot of work to do around mapping, de-siloing and coordinating [services]," Dr. Biel said. He said the all-Island mental health coordinator could work with the Island Wide Youth Collaborative and other community organizations to ensure all Island students have access to mental health counseling resources. Dr. Biel said in some schools there is a perception that guidance counselors don't have enough time for all students, and said there should be on-site treatment services available in all schools.

"There was almost universal acclaim for the skill of guidance counselors and almost universal claim that . . . they are too busy," he said. He added that increased availability of resources also helps to make mental health care more mainstream.

"It's a stigma-reducing intervention in and of itself," he said.

To further reduce stigma, the team recommended a public information campaign about mental health and about resources available on the Island.

Researchers devoted much of their time to evaluation of school climates, and said while there were no serious concerns, schools should take action to support teachers and staff and conduct an annual climate survey in each school. He said teaching is generally a challenging profession for mental health.

"There are really, really high rates of stress and strain and burnout among teachers," Dr. Biel said.

In the longer term, the regional high school could also host a school-based health center, researchers said, where students could receive immunizations, get checkups, and go for sick visits.

“We see Martha’s Vineyard as a potentially optimal place for a school-based health center,” Dr. Biel said.

Some school committee members acknowledged the challenges when it comes to Islandwide collaboration, and briefly discussed how the two new Islandwide positions would be funded, including whether they would fall under the superintendent’s office.

“By creating two cabinet level positions there’s already a rub because we’re not a district,” said up-Island school committee member Robert Lionette. “We don’t always act as a district.”

Fellow up-Island school committee member Michael Marcus agreed, and said that Islandwide issues should be addressed with Islandwide solutions.

“Drug and alcohol and health and wellness issues don’t vary that much one town to the next,” Mr. Marcus said.

The full MedStar report is available here (<http://www.mvyps.org/superintendent/index.html>):
<http://www.mvyps.org/superintendent/index.html>

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