

ROTARY CLUB

RE-1 Valley has strong focus on social emotional learning

Student Support Services team works to meet student needs

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RE-1 Valley School District is committed to providing social emotional learning opportunities for students. Members of the district's student support services team spoke about some of the social emotional learning services RE-1 offers at a Rotary Club meeting Wednesday.

"We know that achievement is raised by social emotional learning," said Dr. Lois Christiansen, district psychologist.

She explained that social emotional learning focuses on important areas such as social awareness, relationship skills, self awareness, responsible decision making and self management.

To help address student needs, about three years ago the district started an electronic referral process, which Christiansen said has really helped. Referrals are primarily submitted by student support services staff, teachers, parents/guardians and school counselors. Through these referrals the support services team gathers information about concerns at school, at home, with behavior, with friends, with health, with emotional function and with substance use/abuse.

In looking at concerns related to substance use/abuse, the district applied for and was awarded a grant from the Colorado Department of Education, funded by the state's marijuana revenue, to develop a HEADS UP (Higher Educational Adolescent Development Substance Use Prevention) program.

Led by Ryan Einspahr, the program is offered to students at Sterling High School, Sterling Middle School and Caliche School, and focuses on prevention. He leads substance prevention groups and provides one-on-one substance education using Botvin LifeSkills Training curriculum. The grant has also allowed for community partnerships, trainings for staff and community speakers, such as the recent guest speaker Doc Brown.

Allie Miller is a district wide family support specialist.

"I'm the liaison between the family and the school," she said.

As part of her work, recently she's been working with second graders at Ayres Elementary, having them read the book "Simon's Hook," by Karen Gedig Burnett, which provides strategies for dealing with teasing and put-downs.

Also, Anita Scarbrough, one of the district's social emotional learning specialists, works with students at both Ayres and Caliche Elementary Schools, providing friendship groups and social emotional learning groups.

Another social emotional learning specialist, Kathleen Murray, is at Campbell Elementary and SHS, providing universal character lessons, friendship groups, individual support as needed, and the Campbell Culture of Kindness program.

One of the character lessons is on empathy — the antidote to bullying. This lesson teaches students not to focus on who's a victim and who's a bully, but instead to realize "we're all people and one person is having a bad day," Murray said. She also pointed out that a lot of research shows that empathy can be learned but it is difficult to learn.

Other character lessons focus on: friendship skills, impulse control, how to resolve conflict, personal space, playing fair, responsibility and effective communication and coping skills.

At SHS, one of the newest things they've started is lunch groups. Murray was hesitant to start offering them, because she didn't think very many students would show up, but they've proved to be quite successful.

Murray, Einspahr and another social emotional learning specialist, Michelle Long, also help with the Sources of Strength program at SHS, do check-ins with students, provide crisis intervention, partner with academic counselors and other staff to address student needs as they arise, provide individual support as needed and universal presentations as needed.

Long, who is at both SMS and SHS, leads programs called Girl Talk and Tiger Talk, which bring SHS students to the middle school to mentor students there. The way the program works, high school freshman will mentor sixth grade students and those high school

students will follow the sixth grader all the way through middle school, so that by the time the sixth graders reach high school they have developed a relationship with someone there.

"We target lots of topics and those topics really come from the kids," Long said.

Some of the topics they've discussed this year include: friendship, self image and self esteem, peer pressure, kindness and gratitude, anti-bullying, goal setting, conflict resolution, transitions, positive health activity, and gossip, rumors and drama.

Long pointed out that a lot of topics they're discussing at the middle school level are things students have already delved into during elementary, but now it's just being taken to a higher level.

Besides Girl Talk and Tiger Talk, Long has also offered an Organizational Boot Camp, for students who have trouble with that skill; a "Stirring the Drama Pot" universal presentation; social thing groups; lunch bunch groups, which are drop-in voluntary groups; and a social emotional learning presentation.

She also has a high school student who is doing some mentoring and an intern from Northeastern Junior College, who is providing some one-on-one organizational support for struggling students.

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