

Educators focus on trauma's effect on learning



*The third annual Western Sussex Summit held at **Woodbridge High School** earlier this month provided an opportunity for educators, service providers and other community members to focus on the social and emotional needs of students ([more photos](#)).*

"If you have a fixed mindset, there's a ceiling on everything you do," Patti Albright explained to a packed auditorium at the third annual Western Sussex Summit held at **Woodbridge School District's Woodbridge High School** earlier this month. Teachers and administrators passed packs of tissues to their seat neighbors as they learned about the centrality of instilling hope and so-called "future stories" in the minds of their students.

Albright, a former elementary teacher who earned accolades in Texas, shared stories and evidence-based research to illustrate that "seeking first to understand" and using that understanding to support the whole child is key to closing achievement gaps between under-resourced and middle class kids. Albright's presentation is part of a national movement toward trauma-informed or trauma-sensitive practice, an evidence-based approach that has been quietly spreading across the state.

Trauma-informed practice is at the center of the Woodbridge School District, where all schools implement the Compassionate Schools framework, a model developed by the state of Washington's Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction and Western

Washington University staff. The model is spreading statewide through districts and the Delaware Department of Education and is supported by a Casey Family Foundation grant secured and managed by the Delaware Office of the Child Advocate.

Compassionate Schools is not a program but rather a framework that can be adapted to the unique needs and strengths of schools and the communities they serve. The goal is to ensure students social and emotional needs are met by creating and supporting a healthy climate and culture within the school. Dr. Amelia Hodges, the Department of Education's Associate Secretary of Adult Education and School Supports, praised Woodbridge's innovative decision to take the model districtwide, because, "while the approach focuses on students chronically exposed to stress and trauma in their lives, it benefits every student in a school."

Woodbridge Director of School Services Dr. Michele Marinucci, who chairs the summit each year, decided to keep presenters and attendees focused on a strong theme within the district: "If not you, who? If not now, when?" She praised her school board, superintendent, and colleagues for their dedication and support: "Because of our focused, districtwide approach, we have been able to bring our team together to regularly collaborate with other school districts, state and local agencies, and community organizations to continually improve our ability to meet the social and emotional needs of the children we serve."

More than 450 educators, administrators, and community members were in attendance at the day-long summit, representing not only Woodbridge but also **Brandywine School District, Caesar Rodney School District, Cape Henlopen School District, Capital School District, Christina School District, Indian River School District, Lake Forest School District, Milford School District, Seaford School District, and Smyrna School District**, as well as staff from the Delaware Department of Education, the Center for Disabilities Studies, Children and Families First, Children's Beach House, Delaware Guidance Service, Delaware Division of Public Health - DPH, State of Delaware Youth Rehabilitative Services Division, Jewish Family Service of Delaware, La Esperanza, Mental Health Association of Delaware, Office of the Child Advocate of Delaware, SPARK University and Wilmington University.

"Our students are more than a test score" has been a theme of the Woodbridge School District for years, Woodbridge Superintendent Heath Chasanov said. "The main goal of our schools is to educate our students, but we also must recognize the barriers that exist in the lives of so many of our students. The Western Sussex Summit has been an excellent vehicle over the years to frame the conversations around the social and emotional needs of our students."

School districts as far north as **Colonial**, Brandywine, and **Red Clay Consolidated** school districts, to name a few, are actively piloting a trauma-informed approach in some of their schools. In fact, just two hours away on that same day, the Red Clay Consolidated School District hosted its first annual Poverty and Trauma Conference at **Thomas McKean High School** in an effort to provide teachers, administrators and community members with ideas, resources and information about the effects of trauma and poverty on student learning.

Keynote speaker Frank Kros talked to an audience of more than 300 about the complexities of trauma, and encouraged increased support and training for teachers of

traumatized students. He explained that “poverty is a chronic trauma” and that one of the biggest obstacles in closing achievement gaps for students living in poverty is the gap in educator and administrator training and supports related to trauma.

The conference, organized by April Anderson, Red Clay drop-out prevention liaison, under the direction of Ted Boyer, director of district and school services, was attended by educators, administrators, and state agency employees from across the state. The conference workshops provided resources, ideas and information about how trauma and poverty impact learning, and how educators and community members can strengthen and expand supports for students. Educators from districts as far away as Milford came to the conference to learn how to work toward building school climates that support the social and emotional health and development of all students.

To learn more about Compassionate Schools in Delaware or to get in contact with schools and districts that have implemented trauma-informed practice or to share stories from your school’s trauma-sensitive work, please contact Melissa Froemming, education associate for Title I family and community engagement in DOE’s Adult Education and School Supports Branch, at engagement@doe.k12.de.us.

Dedicated partners who support statewide collaboration toward meeting the social and emotional needs of Delaware’s children include:

- PIC - Parent Information Center
- Communities In Schools of Delaware
- Delaware CORE Psychotherapeutic Services
- Dover Behavioral Health System
- Family Court of Delaware, Office of the Child Advocate
- Delaware Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS)
- Delaware Division of Public Health
- Children and Families First
- REL Mid-Atlantic
- Casey Family Programs
- Delaware Community Foundation
- US Department of Health and Social Services
- Jewish Family Services of Delaware
- Division of Substance Abuse and Mental Health
- High Road School Of Delaware
- Brandywine Counseling & Community Services
- Rockford Center
- United Way of Delaware
- Delaware Department of Education