

As a NAMI NH volunteer, I was fortunate to attend the Dartmouth-Hitchcock Youth Summit on April 5<sup>th</sup> to hear what our youth are most concerned with. I was able to sit in on seminars to hear their thoughts and concerns. The first topic I'd like to report on is of great importance for me as I had a son that died by suicide.

**SUICIDE/SELF HARM:** Mental illness in this generation has a huge stigma. Kids make fun of mental illness, so it makes it harder to discuss. Some discussed that they no longer even have a health class, and others said in four years of high school you only take one quarter of health. Another group talked about how health class spent either no time discussing mental illness or skimming right over the topic of mental illness, and felt more time needs to be spent on discussing it.

All agreed that cyber bullying is an epidemic leading to more hospitalizations and suicides. Students felt that guidance departments need to be more responsive and attuned to mental health issues. Some expressed feeling "brushed off". Others said they were sent home or told sit in guidance by themselves with your head down on the table. Some felt as though the guidance department is simply there to help select classes, or help with college searches and prep. Some of the suggestions included feeling the need for a section in the guidance department to deal solely with mental health issues, and a crisis specialist. We need daily mental health check ins. Boys are expected to be "macho" and not discuss their feelings, and often they are pushed to the limit from holding all of their stressors in. Since *13 Reasons Why* was aired, kids feel suicide will gratify their deaths. Parents and teachers need to be more supportive on self-care for kids instead of putting all their focus on grades and deadlines.

Adults in the group, including guidance counselors, feel overwhelmed that there are so many more students and so few resources, including not enough staff or trained adults to help. We need to figure out how we can help support each other.

**SCHOOL VIOLENCE:** A lot of time was spent discussing how many physical fights there are on any given day. The larger high schools reported there can be upwards of ten fights a day, while some of the smaller high schools report they don't really see fighting taking place. It was also noted that many fights take place in bathrooms, where teachers and other staff members are less likely to see them.

Again, cyber bullying was brought up in this session. The discussion was about how most often that is where all the fights are generated from, and eventually trickle into the school. It starts on social media where someone will make negative comments toward another or make threats, and then they will harm another. The kids feel better protocols should be put into place prior to a fight breaking out. After the fight, bystanders can be left feeling very anxious and unsettled. Students are expected to go back to class and forget about it, and just move on instead of having a discussion on what you just witnessed. This session sparked a discussion on how many students just stand around watching and videotaping the fight to add to their Snapchat stories instead of trying to break it up or even prevent it from starting. The students know it's not right, but everyone does it.

Another school was discussing how a threat was made to their school, so the pep rally was cancelled, and kids were more bothered by the pep rally being cancelled than the actual threat.

Some students spoke about a new lock system that had been recently updated but no one even bothers to check. You just ring the bell and you get in. There was concern that vapes are being snuck in, so what else might be brought into the school? Some high school students say they feel very safe, and others

feel nothing would ever happen here. Then there was the majority, who said the fear of shootings is always present. Some of the kids discussed the empathy they have for teachers knowing when you chose your career this wasn't something you signed up for. They said for expecting small petite teachers to break up fights between two 6' plus athletic boys and possibly getting punched is unreasonable, as well as having to be trained on lock downs and what to do in the event of one.

The conversation then moved to the positive side. If you see something say something is the protocol but following through in doing this is the challenge. Another school talked about how they are in the process of instituting the Alice model instituted by the Waltham, MA school district. You can view these videos online at YouTube.

Some districts have an adult mentoring system where each student is assigned to an adult they're comfortable with who they can check in with daily or weekly. The kids would like to see more pep rallies to improve the unity of the school body. A smaller school purchased 1,000 gift cards to be randomly passed out by teachers to students to improve their day. If the student didn't want it they could forward it on to another student.

**DRUG/SUBSTANCE ABUSE:** We need to educate teachers on how to deal with kids affected by substance use disorders. Teachers either won't interact with these kids or they don't know how to do so. They should be asking them why they are using drugs instead of labeling them. Some of these kids have no homes, and they couch hop or sleep in shelters. We need to help build them up and give them a second chance, instead of just punishing them we should be mentoring them. Students suggested in school suspensions so they still can be learning, and the need for more peer support outreach programs. Some of our districts use them while others don't.

There are agencies in the state of New Hampshire to help teens seek treatment with or without parent's knowledge.

**EATING DISORDERS:** Body issues aren't discussed by friends. Students noted that if their friend has an eating disorder they don't say anything because they don't know how to help. We need more resources to educate people on these issues. Too much pressure is put on youth by self-image and body image. A surprising statistic to many was 40% of males struggle with eating disorders; it's not just a one gender issue.

**RACE/ETHNICITY:** While New Hampshire doesn't have a lot of diversity it needs to be talked about and it should start with youth. One high school student talked about as a senior having his first teacher ever of ethnicity. Another student was passionately talking about how his dad is a principal at a school, so he knows all staff including janitors. He was thinking as they were speaking and not one employee was of any ethnic group. It was surprising to hear. Some kids of ethnicity discussed how hard it was to grow up in this state with so few like them. They got made fun of, people wouldn't talk to them, or sit near them. It was very hard to listen to these stories that are taking place.

**Bullying:** We need to have more respect for one another, and we are so quick to label individuals. Students need more adults in the building to support them. An adult in the group pointed out there are different stages and levels of bullying. These days the word bully is used too widely.

There is a lot of pressure for success and different types of pressure were discussed. Students noted the importance of stress and a balanced life, and how much a place like the student resource center, where

you can get help organizing your binder, tutor help, if you just need a minute, can help. It's important to encourage your siblings, but don't compare yourself. Focus on what you can control, not what you can't.

ROAD TRIPS: texting and driving is not safe. We must get out of that mindset that it won't be me that crashes. Youth need to feel empowered to speak up and tell their friends not to use their phone while driving, as they are putting themselves and others in jeopardy. Youth need to think about the consequences of one split second bad decision that could ruin your entire future. Educate peers on good positive things. Be upstanders not bystanders.

Although I didn't attend all the groups, the ones I did were so amazing. It was wonderful to hear how these young adults are being proactive in their schools, and how important it is for them to make positive change in their communities.

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