



# Santa Barbara County Education Office

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## **Addressing mental health for the sake of our youth**

*By Susan Salcido, Santa Barbara County Superintendent of Schools*

When it comes to mental health, speaking up can be an act of courage. Several prominent individuals have taken that public step and have helped young and old alike by sharing their personal challenges. It has helped catalyze a conversation about the very real mental health issues many in our community face every day.

Our youth, in particular, need this conversation to take place. Mental health issues like depression, anxiety disorders, and behavioral disorders are well documented among young people locally and statewide. Thankfully, local alliances are tackling this critical area for the sake of our students and families. This work deserves our collective support.

Research shows that our mental health affects how we think, feel, and behave, and it helps determine how we handle stress, relate to others, process information, and make choices. Mental health issues can significantly disrupt a person's life. Further, these issues seldom affect a single victim. Quite often, friends and family members can feel the impact acutely.

Although it isn't easy to pinpoint the triggers for mental health issues among young people, we know we must take action. Many of us, including teachers and counselors who work with students daily, have observed some of the symptoms: an increase in stress, anxiety, and panic attacks among students, and a rise in depression and self-harm.

One major challenge facing those trying to help is the fact that some consider the subject "taboo" — but, together, we can change the discourse. We can be proactive rather than reactive, helping head off issues before they reach a critical mass. We can focus on awareness. We can listen closely and communicate carefully.

While challenges are significant, local efforts are helping make a real difference. The Student Mental Wellness Coalition (SMWC), for example, works to support community efforts in partnership with schools, the private sector, and public agencies to improve student wellbeing. The coalition focuses

on prevention, early intervention, and support strategies that connect students and families to needed resources. Another resource is the Mental Wellness Center (MWC), which offers a Mental Health Matters program and an online Education Portal serving students at all levels. Support provided by the MWC is open to all Santa Barbara County residents. These examples are representative of many efforts taking place countywide.

There are no simple solutions. Experts in the field recommend that people start talking about mental health the same way they talk about physical education or healthy eating. Research shows that when schools adopt a comprehensive approach to talking about these issues, that effort supports all students.

Schools are already making important progress. School staff often serve as mentors for vulnerable students. Peer mentors also help many young people, and extra-curricular clubs provide space for students to work through emotions and develop coping strategies.

However, schools are only one piece of the puzzle. The issue must be tackled on a larger, collective scale. This involves the community working together to support the mental health of our youth.

It is helpful to know that support is readily available from those in the best position to provide what is needed. Considerable work remains as we help students in this very critical area, but thanks to coalitions, organizations, and school districts, courageous conversations have already begun.

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