

EXCERPTS FROM CHAT

YHS PTA STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH PRESENTATION, 1/21/21

PRESENTERS: Christine Marchetti and Roslyn Henderson, therapists with Arlington's Department of Human Services; and Cara Abernathy and Natalie Edwards, APS Social Workers (Yorktown).

125-150 attendees included parents, students, & staff from middle and high schools across Arlington.

QUESTIONS ABOUT APS AND ARLINGTON DHS RESOURCES AVAILABLE TO PARENTS/STUDENTS, NEEDING HELP/FINDING HELP:

1. New Middle School Parent here and I'm not totally familiar with how I should be using the school resources. Should we be letting our counselors know if our kids have an ongoing anxiety disorder or depression?
2. Could someone describe the difference between the school social/guidance team versus the Arl DHS team and why you would call one over the other?
3. Is the school board concerned about our children's mental health and will it affect the decision to open schools soon?
4. When we come to the school counselor to address anxiety about pressure to succeed in school - what are the tools at the counselor's disposal to help address that anxiety? (And the child already has a private counselor.)
5. So how much do we say, once COVID is over these triggers will be over vs getting extra help now if things seem mildly bad for mental health?
6. We're finding that lot of counselors/therapists are booked up with the increased load of COVID-related mental health patients - any suggestions for finding therapists with openings?
7. When looking for a therapist, it is hard to find some that takes insurance and who specialize in teenagers. Is that normal for a therapist to have clients of all ages or should we focus on a teen specific therapist? Are there resources to help interview therapists?
8. Do you know if, as we go back to school, there will be any additional mental health assistance associated with the stress of return to school? One of my children is very, very concerned about being in school with his peers - having seen how challenging proper behavior can be for his peer group, he doesn't trust his colleagues to behave according to the "rules" and follow the guidelines. We're sticking with 100% virtual because the idea of being back with his peers is so anxiety producing, but someday he'll need to go back...
9. Just so you have the on-the-ground info. We reached out to our high school after our child had a D and an E in the first quarter. The counselor said she was still working her way through the list of contacting families of students with two Es.
10. Thank you for making this information available. As a new APS family, we have been feeling pretty lost.
11. Arlington DHS does not have a wait time for therapy.

GRADES/APS EXPECTATIONS AND STRESS/MENTAL HEALTH CONCERNS:

12. ...the common theme of so many of these comments is that APS has taken vulnerable youngsters and young adults and told them to sit all alone on a couch for hours and hours and days, and then loading them with more online time homework, with no one knowing what the effects would be. And with no one seemingly doing a comprehensive study of the potential damage of all this isolation. This forum tonight is kind and helpful, but it is not a comprehensive psychological study about all of this.
13. Is that true the 40-50% are outright failing?
14. That is a country-wide average, not APS. Counselors are very sympathetic and say they will talk to the individual teachers, but the teachers do not seem to be accommodating. Sorry to say it, but there's a disconnect there.
15. Actually, seconding the last three questions: device addiction, how APS will handle class issues, how to deal with relationship versus school performance
16. Wash Post: "The percentage of middle and high school students earning E's in Arlington, which serves 26,000 students in Northern Virginia, increased by about three percentage points in the first quarter as

compared with last year, according to an internal report published online Thursday evening. E's, the lowest grade given, rose to account for 4.6 percent of all middle school grades and 8.5 percent of all high school grades, according to the report.

17. Do you know how APS is going to handle kids who are failing one or more subjects during the pandemic? Mandated summer school? Or just hope they catch up when we get back to in person?
 - Seconding how APS will handle class issues
 - Is it better to let your child fail classes versus ruining your relationship because all you do is hound him about schoolwork?
 - Seconding that last question.
 - Seconding how to deal with relationship versus school performance
18. These last two questions that you've tried to answer have at their heart, the issue of failing classes during COVID. We're talking about kids going from straight As to hoping to just pass everything.
 - Yep.
 - Second the Q about straight-A students going to failure or barely passing. Across the country, 40-50% of students are outright failing. Is there any discussion within APS about how to handle this?
19. Also, it would be great to hear from the school that it is OK not to be doing OK on grades. We are blue in the face telling our kids that everyone is struggling right now and then APS has the graph that says some kids are doing better in grades than last year. Just hearing the message from someone other than us would be helpful.

EL STUDENTS, SWD, AND STUDENTS WITH MENTAL HEALTH DIAGNOSES:

1. Any thoughts on differentiating between anxiety and performance issues related to depression and anxiety related to learning differences?
2. What kinds of accommodations are generally available for high school students who have been diagnosed with depression?
3. The increase in E's [reported by WaPo] was highest by far for students with disabilities, students whose first language is not English, known as "English Learners," and in particular for English Learners who are Black or Hispanic.

CONCERNS FOR AND FROM STAFF:

1. Thanks so much for organizing all of this. I teach at one of the high schools and it has been a challenge trying to not overwhelm students with workload virtually while still providing a quality rigorous curriculum. When balancing this challenge what advice would you offer to teachers who want to be mindful of mental health while still challenging kids and making students feel like this year is not lost.
2. Is there anyone making sure the counselors are not overloaded?
3. Second [the above] comment. This is a HUGE ask of a fairly small staff.
4. Given the number of us whose students are having performance issues, are counselors working with teachers overall to see this and address it?
5. Disconnected manually reconciled systems is a stressor on our teachers. If no plan, there needs to be, to integrate them
6. Could you please share this recording with all of the high school and middle school principals, plus all of the guidance counselors and social workers?
7. Removing the stressors, like the ones I mentioned [teachers struggling with manually reconciling two systems, for instance], is a key to reducing stress on teachers, and therefore, on students. There is IT work to do to help that happen.

SCREEN TIME/NEED FOR MOVEMENT TIME

1. The CEO of Microsoft said recently that Microsoft employees have a tolerance of thirty minutes tops for Zoom before they zone out. and yet we've been asking our children to sit indoors in front of a tiny laptop for seven hours each day, with no one telling them to get up and walk around the house or block. Because of muting, the environment is silent. There's no laughter, no nothing. all of these things are recipes for

depression. How is APS studying the effects of this isolated, unhealthy, non-physical learning on students? (And to be clearer, what kind of long-term studies are being done to gauge the effect of this year of totally isolated learning?)

2. Again, how is the school board evaluating the impacts of online learning and potential health issues? Will this impact when schools might open?
3. Have you dealt with the dependence on tech electronics? e.g. sadness, anxiety irritability when separated from devices, inability to reduce time spent using technology despite problems caused by it, loss of interest in offline activities, lying to family about amount of time spent on computer gaming, using technology to relieve negative moods, ignoring personal hygiene, eating, and other self-care, etc.
4. Computer gaming has definitely increased in my home and it appears to be a way for my students to connect with classmates. This is a distraction from virtual school. Any thoughts on how we support keeping our students connected with each other, and balancing schoolwork?
5. As you reiterate how important being outside and getting exercise is for our children, I am baffled at why my child is doing online classwork in PE and not physical exercise. Anyone know why?
6. It would be great if physical activity were part of the day for the older grades that no longer have PE. If it is so important for mental health, then it would be great for it to be part of the school day
7. I am seconding the question re written work during Phys Ed. you have an entire class wasting away on the couch and no one seems to be stepping in during the school day to encourage blood flow and exercise.
8. The gaming happens during school, on the same PCs removing the stressors, like the ones I mentioned [. that they should be in class using Teams.

VIRTUAL SCHOOL'S LOGISTICS AND ADDITIONAL CHALLENGES TO EXECUTIVE FUNCTION SKILLS:

1. I was surprised that there was little guidance for helping the kids manage all of their schedules, calendars and work online. That doesn't seem developmentally appropriate (especially in middle school) and stress inducing. Can guidance counselors step in and provide support with executive functioning skills? This seems as important as the other SEL modules kids are getting.
2. it does not help that data in parentvue/studentvue vs canvas seems disconnected. teachers struggling with manually reconciling two systems (as I understand it). Makes it enormously stressful for parents who are trying to provide guidance to their kids, when data on their performance is not a real-time reflection of where they are.
3. Given the number of us whose students are having performance issues, are counselors working with teachers overall to see this and address it?
 - a. I second Greg's comment about the disconnect with parentvue and canvas.
 - b. Yes, Greg. For real. Even figuring out what is due across platforms is so time-consuming.
 - c. is there an effort to integrate those platforms? if so, who can we reach out to for status of that project?
 - d. I agree with that. You have to open every module in every class and compare with parentvue to figure it out.
4. There is no consistency about how teachers are asking them to submit - the burden is entirely on the students to figure it out for each class.
5. Think about it. We are requiring executive functioning skills in excess of those for some college students' classes that meet twice a week, they've never met the teachers, and they're taking 6 or 7 classes instead of 4 or 5.
6. disconnected manually reconciled systems is a stressor on our teachers. If no plan, there needs to be, to integrate them
7. Totally agree - I teach graduate students and they are struggling at their age.
8. Could you please share this recording with all of the high school and middle school principals, plus all of the guidance counselors and social workers?
9. Very useful book we used w/ our child in middle school - "The Organized Student", Donna Goldberg.
10. Much interest in announcement of upcoming (3/3) YHS PTA Executive Function Skills Event, to which all who registered for this event were invited, and for which approximately 500 parents/staff registered.