

PERSPECTIVES



LUKE LOFGREN

BOARD TREASURER,
GENERAL MCLANE SCHOOL DISTRICT

Everything that a Pennsylvania public school district does should be evaluated to ensure that it connects directly to its academic mission. Already in 2024, the General McLane (GM) School District Board has been presented with two items that relate to mental health, and in both situations, the case for pursuing them is based on improving educational outcomes.

This year the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency's (PCCD) School Mental Health Grant opened for school districts to apply for funds to address these needs. Statistics have shown that pandemic disruption correlates to increased mental health issues in our schools. Additionally, PSBA's 2024 *State of Education* report identified student mental health needs as the biggest challenge reported by school districts. GM has applied for the PCCD grant to add another full-time psychologist at the elementary level for almost two years. To be proactive about potential long-term spending on the position, the board was presented with data on the benefit of having a psychologist at the elementary level.

At its own cost, GM had added an elementary psychologist at the beginning of the school year. The number of mid-year referrals for the Student Assistance Program (SAP) had been reduced by half. By having a professional meet with students before an SAP referral, our district can provide interventions and build relationships/connections. This ensures that SAP referrals are targeted to the highest-need students and they get the necessary attention and prioritization of outside services.

Anecdotally, the administration communicated to the board that the enhanced resources provide a positive improvement for all students. By being able to effectively address individual needs, it creates a benefit not only for those

individuals but also reduced disruptions in the classroom. We expect to see improved educational outcomes overall.

Based on approaching the new position this way, the intention is to make the case over the next two years that continuing the position is the best use of district resources. The district will evaluate if there are less costly ways to achieve similar outcomes. Using the grant money to start with a highly credentialed approach shows that GM is working to do the best for all students.

Additionally, in February, the GM school board received a presentation on the Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) in place at the elementary level for English language arts (ELA). This program rigorously uses testing and data to objectively allow measurement and targeting, and to identify the progress of interventions. Starting with proactive measurement of ELA progress allows for resources to be targeted to elevate academic attainment.

MTSS is a proactive process that identifies students who are performing below their academic level or not making progress. It starts with initial interventions and then uses repeated measurement to ensure that the interventions are having an impact. By focusing on the academic outcome, the system ensures that issues affecting mental health are identified and addressed.

In general, schools support positive mental health in other ways as well. With my own children, I've seen how being challenged by teachers to meet a rigorous academic bar has helped them build mental fortitude and confidence. Challenging students generates discomfort, but receiving grades that accurately reflect their work encourages them to strive to improve.

Evidence has also shown that pushing athletes to excel in sports has both mental health benefits as well as improvements in academic achievement and accomplishment. One outstanding illustration of this is the educational background of our current commonwealth education secretary. In his book, *Problem Child: Leading Students Living in Poverty Towards Infinite Possibilities of Success*, he said basketball was a big motivator for him: the necessity of keeping his grades up in order to play mattered, and the mentoring from coaches was significant to where he is today.

There are many things that our districts can do to improve mental health for our students. Along with that, we need to remember that our core mission is academic outcomes, and our resources should be clearly measured as to their effectiveness against our core mission. Even the time spent in board meetings needs to be carefully considered to ensure it is balanced and prioritizes discussion of our academic mission. ❖