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Northfield High selected for Allina Health program combatting student anxiety

By SAM WILMES swilmes@northfieldnews.com 18 hrs ago

According to a Pew Research Center survey, 70 percent of teenagers say anxiety and depression are major problems among their peers.

Northfield High School has been selected as one of 16 high schools in Minnesota and Wisconsin to participate in Change to Chill, an Allina Health program to combat student anxiety.

The initiative helps teenagers identify stressors and gives them tools and resources to care for their mental well-being. The program is seen as offering three components: free online mental well-being resources, community train-the-trainer sessions and the Change To Chill school partnership.

Northfield High School will have yearlong support from Allina Health, including the train-the-trainer session tailored to school staff, outreach and engagement with parents and \$1,000 to create a "Chill Zone," a designated student space to de-stress.

Allina Health is selecting two teens from each of the high schools for a paid internship this summer. The students will then implement the program next school year.

"Reaching more than 100,000 teens, Change To Chill is helping teens learn how to stress less and be well," a press release states.

Northfield Superintendent Matt Hillmann said the program will support the Northfield Students Supporting Students initiative, which includes 20 to 30 students trained through the Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation to address adolescent problems that, if left untreated, could turn into mental health problems. The mental health program, in its second year, was an outreach of a similar academic program introduced three years ago.

Hillmann said he is proud of students for knowing mental health is as important as physical well-being and for looking out for fellow students.

He said he is pleased to lead a school in a community like Northfield that values students' overall health.

Northfield school psychologist Carrie Duba noted students often speak to their peers first when experiencing stress. She said when students listen to their peers who are dealing with stress they become stabilizing friend groups.

To her, anxiety experienced by Northfield students likely corresponds with increased reported instances of anxiety by students across the U.S. She said professionals and students are de-stigmatizing anxiety and depression, noting the rise of social media use by high-school students has been cited as a contributing factor to increased anxiety levels.

At Northfield High School, therapy dogs now come in nearly every day during flex hours to visit with students when they are de-stressing. Staff have been trained in mindfulness strategies to reduce student anxiety.

Last winter, there was a community screening of the documentary "Angst," chronicling teenage anxiety. Students and mental health professionals then had panel discussions. In the community, adults who have contact with students are encouraged to access free training in youth mental health first aid, meant to provide tools on how to support and listen to youth.

The school plans to share mental health information and available mental health resources in May, recognized as Mental Health Awareness Month.

"We're just trying to get the word out there," Duba said.

The Change to Chill initiative took place in nine area schools this year. In a press release, Allina Health states participating schools had "chill weeks" and created designated de-stress places.

"Based on preliminary program evaluation data, Allina Health is optimistic the Change To Chill school partnership positively impacts student well-being, including their knowledge of the topics presented on CTC and their confidence in coping with life stressors," the release states.

According to Susan Nygaard, manager of Allina Health's Community Health Improvement Initiative, "we know when teens have the resources and support to stress less, they are more resilient and able to live fuller and happier lives. Change to Chill works as a preventative measure to equip teens with tools and resources to better manage stress and anxiety."

Twelve other Minnesota high schools are set to participate next year in the program, as well as three in Wisconsin.

"During the first year of the Change To Chill school partnership, we saw that engaging and supporting students to play a leadership role in creatively implementing Change To Chill was key for school-wide success," said Kalia Lillehei, Allina Health's community health program coordinator who oversees the partnership, in the release.

"Interns from each of the 2019-20 partnership schools will become champions of Change to Chill in their school, research and present recommendations for a Chill Zone and develop an implementation plan to support their school's unique community and culture. We've been so impressed with what teens have done so far, and we're excited to see what new and creative ideas emerge with our 16 new partnership schools."

Reach Associate Editor Sam Wilmes at 507-645-1115.

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