



# NEWSLETTER

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## RESPECTING ALL, INCLUDING ALL: A LOOK AT THE DEPARTMENT OF EQUITY AND DIVERSITY AT BROWARD COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Broward County is one of the most diverse school districts in the entire country, and more diverse than almost all other counties in Florida. More than 70% of students identify as black or brown (non-white) with a rainbow of racial, ethnic, national, and religious identities folded into these broader categories. Each student, teacher, and staff member within this system is valued and worthy of care and respect.

To enshrine these values of equality into every aspect of its operations, Broward County Public Schools has developed an extensive non-discrimination policy that forms the bedrock of its approach to inclusion. The policy covers issues of race, religion, national origin, sexual orientation, and gender identity; it exists to protect all and to ensure that all are treated with dignity and respect.

"I always stress that our students are our greatest asset," says Marion Williams, Instructional Facilitator with Broward County Public Schools Equity and

Diversity Department. "We only have one chance to get it right with them, to interact with them properly. We can create an environment that's safe and healthy for learning or we can create barriers to their success with our attitudes. You might be the best teacher in the world, but if you're not truly connecting with your students as individuals, you're not giving them the secure space they need to receive knowledge."

Over the past three years, the Department of Equity and Diversity has run a conference on issues affecting teachers and staff. The conference is usually held in person, but during the COVID-19 pandemic it has shifted online with some 1,000 participants taking part. The conference is open to teachers and non-instructional staff -- anyone who touches the lives of students in the Broward County Public Schools system. Modules include cultural competency, helping students of high need, effective security management within schools,

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and countless other relevant topics. Of course, these issues are sensitive and complex and cannot be solved in a matter of hours. For this reason, additional courses on various topics are provided free (or with a stipend) throughout the year and are always fully subscribed.

One of the benefits of promoting a formal anti-discrimination policy is that it allows all employees and students to “talk with one voice”. There are very clear protections outlined in the policy and any violation of someone from a protected group is taken very seriously. The policy is a living document that has been vetted and approved by the school board and it grows and evolves to meet the needs of students and staff as issues arise. “We’re always working to break down barriers and meet our students where they are, and work with them for who they really are,” explains Williams. “It goes far beyond some pre-conceived racial construct; we want to meet and know our students and colleagues as valued, unique individuals.”

The policy and discussions on issues of diversity and inclusion are reviewed with all new hires and

existing staff as it changes and grows to meet the needs of the times and the District.

To ensure discussions are thoughtful and in-depth, trainings are often broken into smaller groups conducted by experienced facilitators who ensure robust discussion and engagement.

“ Our goal is to always help our staff make those real, sincere connections with each student,” says Williams. “Our students aren’t just labeled as belonging to one race or one gender based on their appearance. Every staff member has the opportunity to take a sincere interest in our diverse students and build real relationships that help educate students in their studies and for life. ”

*Marion Williams*



# SUPPORTING ACADEMIC GROWTH

## WITH SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING

Imagine the environment in which you lived and learned was like a beautiful garden, thriving in the sunshine. By weaving Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) into the lives of children at school and at home, we can provide the foundation for growth in the same way healthy soil, sunlight, and enough water can support a blooming garden. A rich and nurturing environment that blends and integrates SEL and academics can allow our children to flourish, develop, and mature.

Social and Emotional Learning and Academic Learning are partner approaches in the development of children. Students can really only prosper and reach their full potential when their life skills (such as resilience, self-management, empathy, and confidence) progress, allowing them to overcome life's obstacles. If the home and school environments are nurturing and provide a safe opportunity for learning, children feel safer and more supported even through severe challenges.

One of the foundations of facilitating learning is to ensure that students feel safe and connected. When students (or adults) feel overwhelmed, their brains can go into a primitive state of "fight or flight" which makes successful learning almost impossible. It is the role of adults, who have greater perspective and more wisdom due to their life experiences, to nurture the right balance for a student's growth within any given challenging situation. Integrating SEL with traditional academic pursuits gives students resources that can assist them and their families with this essential balancing act.

The AmeriCorp Ambassadors supporting Broward County Public Schools take their organization's pledge, which includes the phrase: "Faced with adversity, I will persevere." This pledge embodies the idea that

grit and perseverance are critical for students. These attributes help them realize that when mistakes and obstacles arise (as they inevitably will), they can pause and identify choices before proceeding.

Thoughtful decision-making and responses are better than simply reacting on instinct or impulse. This kind of weighing up of all available options is a necessary life skill which students need to cultivate in order to bloom and thrive. There are other strengths they can develop, too, like problem solving, resiliency, and autonomy or agency which are a part of growing independence. Along with self-awareness, self-management, empathy, social awareness, and responsible decision-making, these inner strengths are valuable tools that help plant the seeds of well-being from childhood to adulthood.

In today's world, helping students manage stress and cultivate their own well-being can increase their connection to school while assisting them in understanding the importance of academics and seeing the benefits of a growth mindset.

In addition to fostering non-cognitive skills, SEL supports students' academic progress because it improves their ability to relate to their teachers and peers while boosting their capacity to focus and concentrate. Research continues to support findings that incorporating SEL into traditional academic pursuits results in up to an 11% academic gain. When students grow and develop these SEL skills during their day, it plants the seeds for real-world skills they will use throughout their lives.



# DISTRICT SUPPORT COUNSELORS HELP ELEMENTARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN TRYING TIMES



The School Counseling and BRACE department provides District Support Counselors to all the schools in the Marjory Stoneman Douglas (MSD) zone. Assigned to the elementary schools are Christine Ross, Arlene Kall, Wendy Soto, and Lynn Henschel. The focus of the Elementary Support Counselors is on supplementing the work provided by school-based counselors through individual counseling, small group counseling, classroom school counseling lessons, schoolwide initiatives, and community initiatives. In addition, the District Support Counselors collaborate with administration, teachers, and support staff to assist in meeting students' academic, social-emotional, and college/career-life readiness needs.

Classroom school counseling lessons are one of the most efficient ways of engaging with the majority of the students. Counselors often provide lessons to students, covering a variety of topics, including goal setting, self-awareness, emotional management, character development, career education, growth mindset, comprehensive mental health mandates, and mindfulness. "I've noticed that students returning to classrooms are struggling with separation anxiety and transitioning," says Wendy Soto. "Teachers are needing to show so much patience, find one-on-one time for affected students, and do a lot of calming and comforting. We can help them with all that."

District Support Counselors will also be providing Center for Mind Body Medicine groups for the elementary-aged level as part of a Broward County Public School initiative. These groups are designed to help reduce stress, increase self-awareness, stimulate creativity, develop effective coping skills, and cultivate

emotional and mental balance. "Our main goal is to equip children to help themselves, to recognize when they feel anxious or fearful and know that it's normal and okay. But we also want to provide them with self-regulation and mindfulness skills, so they can practice their own self-care. We're there to support them but they need to know they have the power within them to also help themselves."

The counselors also assist students who are transitioning into middle school by participating in the MSD zone meetings, which provide insight into what middle schools expect from the elementary students through collaborative planning. This helps to facilitate a smoother transition with clearly set expectations, a process that helps to reduce anxiety among students during a time of change.

As a welcome support to staff at each school they serve, Elementary District Support Counselors facilitate "mental health services meetings" on a regular basis. These meetings allow counselors the opportunity to coordinate services and monitor students' progress, performance, and specific needs. In this way, the counselors can help the whole child through active collaboration with other stakeholders including students, parents, staff, District departments, and community partners. "We strive to reach all students through either face-to-face learning or e-learning," explains Christine Ross. "We are grateful for the opportunity to serve our school community as we continue working together to ensure a successful and productive school year for all students."

## BROWARD DISTRICT SUPPORT COUNSELORS

### **Arlene Kall, District Support Counselor**

Country Hills Elementary School & Heron Heights Elementary School

### **Lynn Henschel, District Support Counselor**

Park Trails Elementary School & Heron Heights Elementary School

### **Wendy Soto, District Support Counselor**

Riverglades Elementary School & Heron Heights Elementary School

### **Christine Ross, MSD Zone Support Counselor Team Lead and District Support Counselor**

Eagle Ridge Elementary School



# ADDRESSING ACADEMIC CONCERNS WITH INNOVATION AND OPTIONS

There is no doubt that students have been dramatically affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and the rapid switch to distance learning. Children are facing a host of mental health concerns such as dealing with isolation, loss and grief over lost milestones like proms, graduation ceremonies, and big games, and general stress and anxiety over their health or possibly changing family circumstances. Along with these issues come very real academic challenges and concerns. Some students coped well with the switch to remote lessons; others found it almost impossible to focus and fell behind. The District has responded quickly to address students' changing needs, both emotionally and academically.

Ralph Aiello, Director of School Counseling at Broward County Public Schools, says that students' responses to the virtual learning environment are as varied and diverse as the student body itself.

"It's clear some students have adapted naturally to the new mode of instruction," he says. "But it's also evident that many students are not engaging properly. We have to make every effort to support them in as many innovative ways as possible. We want to set every individual student up to succeed academically and as resilient young people enduring challenging times."

Standardized state testing in English, Math, and Science is required for promotion and graduation. These tests must be conducted in person, which brings its own set of anxiety-inducing health concerns. The apprehension is two-fold. One: Fears over the COVID-19 virus makes some students concerned for their physical safety. They may feel they are leaving the relative security of their homes for the uncertainty of a new physical environment in order to sit the tests. Two: Many students have not adapted well to virtual learning and don't feel

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ready to take the tests and do well in them. This means they may not qualify for advanced courses.

To address health concerns, the District has undertaken every possible precaution recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) by deep cleaning facilities and ensuring social distancing, mask wearing, and hand washing throughout its facilities. Dates for testing will also be spread out to reduce campus traffic and mitigate against too many students in close proximity.

To assist with academic readiness, the District has mobilized a plan to support students who are not meeting Adequate Academic Progress (AAP). Each school has completed a plan for academic enrichment which will roll out from Spring Break through the Summer when supplemental academic boot camps will be set up for those who

may feel they are falling behind. Virtual tutoring is also available through the Ask Bria portal. Of course, the District's dedicated teachers are offering everyday help with homework and test prep to help ease the concerns of students facing major testing milestones.

“ There's not one solution or one approach,” explains Aiello. “We want to reach each student where they are and see how best we can help them meet their own academic and personal goals.”

*Ralph Aiello*

