

Pathways a “soft landing” for teens with mental health needs

For teens battling mental illness, getting prepped for their Biology Regents exams tends to rank pretty low on the “to-do” list. However, providing a sense of “normal,” whether academic or social, is what teachers and staff in the BOCES special education Pathways Adolescent Day Treatment Program housed at the Capital District Psychiatric Center believe these teens need.

Pathways is a program for children and adolescents from Albany, Schenectady and Schoharie counties who have significant mental health issues that can require psychiatric hospitalization or make learning in a traditional school setting impossible. These issues range from verbal aggression and obsessive compulsive behavior to depression, bipolar disorder, even suicidal ideas or actions.

Jan Silverman-Pollow, the program’s social worker and one of its founders (the program has been in existence since 1986), says that the ultimate goal of the program is to minimize or eliminate student’s symptoms of mental illness in order to help them function better overall.

“Pathways was created as a soft landing space for kids who were ready to leave the hospital, but not quite ready to go back into their middle schools or high schools,” says Pollow. “Here we have an environment where kids can feel safe and supported by people who truly care about them.”

The goals of the Pathways program are many, and based on student’s individual needs, but in general they include stabilizing students through the intensive and therapeutic services and helping keep them on track academically.

Working with both BOCES special

education teachers, teaching assistants and social workers, as well as staff from the state Office of Mental Health (OMH), students learn positive social skills and techniques (such as maintaining self-control, ignoring distractions, appropriate responses to situations) that help them better interact with others, deal with conflicts, frustrations and other life challenges that might otherwise overwhelm them.

Regarding academics, veteran Pathways teacher John Fitzpatrick says that the philosophy has long been that kids should not be penalized because of their mental illness.

“Over the course of years, we’ve raised the academic expectations for our students at Pathways,” says Fitzpatrick, who has been with the program for 18 years. “Our goal is to keep kids on track and achieving, in a school-like environment.”

“Despite their mental health issues, many of the students in our program are very capable of handling a full academic load. We all believe that there are a lot of therapeutic benefits that kids can experience from academic success,” he adds.

So, in addition to their clinical services, students work on their reading, writing and math skills. They take part in hands-on science and go on field trips that help further their learning in ways similar to what they would experience in their home schools.

“All of us have helped prepare kids for their Regents exams. Several kids have even passed their exams in spite of needing to be hospitalized during exam week!” says Fitzpatrick, who co-teaches with BOCES colleague Rose Gigliello and teaching assistants Dennis Edney and Maureen Klemek.

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“The higher the academic standards we set, the more we help kids understand their capabilities. This helps the kids aim higher and allows us to better shape their behavior,” he concludes.

Currently, there are twelve students enrolled in the year-round Pathways program. After successfully completing the Pathways program, (the average student stay is 9-11 months,) most students are able to return to a less restrictive special education setting within BOCES or their home districts with the help and guidance of Silverman-Pollow and fellow social worker Gwyn Hook. Family therapy sessions that are built into the Pathways program are designed to create an additional layer of support for kids to rely on once they leave the program. Silverman-Pollow also provides post-Pathways visits and follow-up services.

Admission to the year-round Pathways program is on-going. For more information about the Pathways program, please contact Carol d’Estienne, BOCES special education principal, at (518) 464-6305 or cdestienne@gw.neric.org.

Photos were not taken to protect the privacy of the students enrolled in the Pathways program.