Inclusivity for Transgender and Nonconforming Youth

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Faculty and Administrators Are the Front Line to Providing Mental Health Services

By Sarah Edwards
The rise in mental health concerns among young people often positions teachers and school administrators as first responders. In an effort to address these growing issues, independent schools are increasingly adopting innovative wellness and mental health programs that promote mindfulness, self-awareness, and multicultural understanding. Such programs proactively address mental health by giving students the tools to cope with difficult feelings and experiences.

Offner attributes the increase to a number of factors, including widening economic disparities and instability, which create stressors for adults as well as children. Escalating racial tensions and growing academic pressure also contribute to feelings of anxiety and depression.

At St. Andrew’s Episcopal School in Austin, Texas, mindfulness practices are a key part of the curriculum. In the four years since the program’s launch, mindfulness has become a valued aspect of the school’s culture and community, with training extended to faculty and parents, and lessons offered both inside and outside the classroom.

Adam Ortman, mindfulness director at St. Andrew’s, says the prevalence of technology can have a negative impact on self-esteem.

“One source for a lot of [students] is the disembodiment that arrives from consistent use of technology,” says Ortman. “Which is to say the loss of (a), an ability to feel anchored in their own embodied experience and feel comfortable in their bodies and (b), having to experience challenging emotions without recourse to an immediate technological distraction.”

As young people turn increasingly to technology to avoid feelings of loneliness, boredom, and anxiety, the harder it is to learn to cope with unhealthy aspects of their lives, Ortman says.

Four years ago, teachers at St. Andrew’s requested mindfulness training after seeing modest success with informal practices in their classrooms. Ortman launched a pilot program that has since become an integral part of the curriculum across the Lower, Middle, and Upper Schools.

“One of the most natural things we do is breathe and relax in our bodies,” Ortman says. “If we can offer these sorts of tools to young people, I think that it makes them feel more empowered to take care of themselves and work with their own experiences.”

Over the next year, Ortman plans to develop programming at the intersection of mindfulness, diversity, and inclusion. The lessons will focus on mindful communication practices to reduce bias and tribalism and enable students, their families, and faculty to “speak and listen with a sense of compassion, openness, authenticity and presence,” Ortman says.

Providing the tools is only half of the equation. Charisse Minerva Spencer, mindfulness coordinator at the Friends School of Virginia Beach in Virginia Beach, Va., says it is also important for instructors to use cultural competency when teaching mindfulness. Earning students’ trust is key, she says.

“That is where the cultural competency comes into play,” Spencer says. By making students of all backgrounds and identities feel seen and heard in the classroom, instructors create a sense of equanimity that builds respect and openness, she says.

Like Ortman, Spencer says the most successful programs engage the entire school community and earn buy-in for “the long haul.”

“It’s not a quick fix. It’s a process of transformation,” she says.

Independent schools also adopt multicultural and anti-bias programs to promote a positive sense of self and well-being.

“Educators cannot ignore student identity development and the momentous impact the intersections of these identities have for each student in the classroom,” says Julie Parsons, kindergarten teacher at the Gordon School in East Providence, R.I.

The Gordon School started the Common Ground affinity group 12 years ago for students of color in the Lower School to “recognize shared experiences and promote cross-cultural dialogue,” according to its website. The group “facilitates positive racial identity exploration, self-awareness, and connection for students whose racial group is
underrepresented in the school.”

Common Ground now welcomes more than 50 students who “meet after school to play, deepen relationships and engage in positive social identity work,” Parsons says.

The Middle School at Gordon is home to the Gender Sexuality Alliance and a student group committed to exploring equity and justice outside of the classroom, Parsons says.

In her work with children, Parsons uses four anti-bias goals outlined in *Anti-Bias Education for Young Children and Ourselves* by Louise Derman-Sparks and Julie Olsen Edwards. The goals touch on self-awareness and confidence, comfort with diversity, understanding of unfairness, and feeling empowered to act against prejudice. The lessons allow pupils to build connections and learn to respect themselves and others, Parsons says.

“Time and time again in the safe space setting that an affinity group can provide for young children of color, I have witnessed children sharing feelings and experiences that may have gone unsaid in the classroom environment,” Parsons says.

Mindfulness, self-awareness, and multicultural understanding help students address mental health issues, but clinical psychologist Offner says independent schools hire counselors and other mental health professionals to provide them with real-time support.

“Kids are going to look to [teachers and staff]. Parents are going to them, as experts not just in academics, but in life and emotional well-being,” Offner says. “The most important thing they can learn to do is listen.”

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