



NYSIR 2020 SYMPOSIUM

Six Feet? Try Hundreds of Miles...



Nearly 150 teachers and school administrators from across New York

practiced extreme social distancing in August, coming together virtually to attend a two-day NYSIR symposium on the importance of strengthening mental health in the classroom.

This year's session, *Destigmatizing Mental Health – Best Practices for Creating a Comforting School Environment*, was originally scheduled

as an in-person forum to be held in Westchester County, but was reformulated in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic to be conducted online as a series

of six in-depth presentations by experts in their fields.

The subject matter was structured to help address solutions to the increasingly apparent problem of public-school students with mental-health-related challenges.

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING

The conclave was opened by Amy Malloy, director of the of the Mental Health

Association of New York State's School Mental Health Resource Center, who told attendees that 48 percent of school kids aged 13-18 have demonstrated some criteria related to mental



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health issues. Those signs “could be mild,” she advised, “or almost unrecognizable at times.” Malloy pointed out, as well, that trauma often associated with the onset of mental health issues “is disproportionately experienced in the Black community.”

RESTORATION

Day One of the online symposium was closed out by Bonnie Kane, Ph.D., Krissy Hill and Courtney Santasero, co-founders of the Niagara Alliance for Restorative Practices,

an organization that emphasizes the use of circles – literally, circles of individuals in need of restorative help who share comments and

communicate with each other in a respectful and caring way.



Best Practices for Creating a Comforting School Environment

Educators, she said, can begin to address the problem by initiating school-wide strategies built on data – surveys that target behavioral referrals, absenteeism and potential exposure to trauma. Students, she reminded symposium attendees, “want to tell their story. That’s part of their healing process.”

Educators then heard from Scarlett Lewis, the mother of a Sandy Hook school shooting victim who founded the *Jessie Lewis Choose Love Movement*, named after her son. Picking up on the social-emotional learning theme, Lewis told rapt Zoom® viewers that “When we choose love, we take

our power back.” To do that, she said, teachers as well as students need to follow a basic formula that couples courage with gratitude, forgiveness and compassion in action.

Circles – in-person and virtual – can be formed for schools, families, community-building, general support and even to encourage racial justice, according to Kane. The alliance co-founders emphasized that a successful circle acknowledges that everyone is in need of help, and is formed in a way that is understanding of trauma, culturally inclusive and accountable to every participant.

“There is room to adapt,” added Kane, “and make the circles what you need them to be.”

Day Two opened with a presentation by Angelina Maloney, Ph.D., superintendent of schools at Rensselaer County’s Brunswick Central School District and a member of NYSIR’s Board of Governors, who spoke about best practices and innovative mental health methods in the school community.

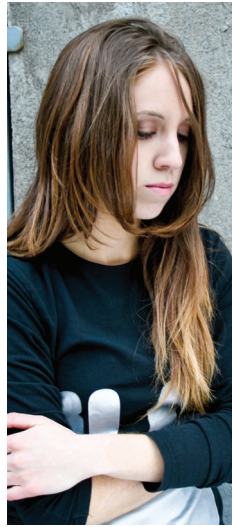
“Mental health is in the forefront of issues in many of our schools,” she affirmed,

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NYSIR 2020 SYMPOSIUM ...CONTINUED

recommending that schools and districts start with a baseline assessment of mental health support systems, and then formulate a response from the standpoint of strategic planning, problem-solving, communication and collaboration.

"Districts can't solve these problems alone," Maloney advised, pointing out the necessity of collaboration with parents, caregivers, boards of education, students and teachers. Her tips for eventual success included assigning a designated mental health program coordinator, working with community partners, applying for available grants and regularly reviewing the district's policies and goals.



in dozens of other states, including New York.

The symposium's final session, titled *Creating Suicide-Safer Schools: Building Social-Emotional Wellness and Resiliency in Schools*, featured a wide-ranging discussion by Alec L. Miller, Psy.D, a co-founder and clinical director of Cognitive and Behavioral Consultants of Westchester

and Manhattan.

Miller told attendees that in any given year in the U.S., at least one in five children and adolescents suffer from an anxiety disorder, depression, non-suicidal self-injury or thoughts of suicide. The causes, he said, can range from busier, digitally distracted lives to overuse of social media, over-protective parenting, and the perception of dangers such as school shootings, terrorism and, now, COVID-19.

School-based dialectical behavior therapy (DBT), which can help build social-emotional learning skills, has been shown to reduce thoughts of suicide in students, decrease symptoms of depression and alleviate feelings of hopelessness, according to Miller.

To download complete versions of the 2020 NYSIR symposium sessions, go to <https://www.nysir.org/page/2020-symposium> ■

"Mental health," Maloney affirmed, "is in the forefront of issues in many of our schools." But too often teachers and administrators find themselves so busy reacting, that they never get a chance to put in place a plan for prevention.

ERIN'S LAW

Erin Merryn, president of a social welfare organization called Erin's Law, followed with a discussion about legislation in her home state of Illinois that requires all public schools to implement a prevention-oriented child sexual abuse program that helps students to recognize sexual abuse and tell a trusted adult, and teaches school personnel and parents about warning signs that may suggest abuse.

Merryn, herself abused as a child, noted that, on average, one in four girls and one in six boys have been sexually abused by the time they turn 18. Advocacy by her organization has led to the passage of similar 'Erin's Law' legislation

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Charles Chafee in AED Role

NYSIR knows a thing or two about risk management, right?

So it's no surprise that the reciprocal's choice for new assistant executive director is about as close to a sure thing as you can get.



CHARLES 'CHUCK' CHAFEE

Longtime school administrator Charles 'Chuck' Chafee brings over 40 years of private and public-sector experience to NYSIR, most recently as superintendent of Waterville Central School District. And while a decades-long career in education is no accident, Chafee said his entry into the field wasn't exactly the result

of a long-term plan, either.

I thought there had to be a way I could support my family and spend time with them, too, so I went back to school and got my teaching certification. I haven't looked back since.

What inspired you to choose a career in education?

To be honest, it really happened by chance. I was working in the food service industry, putting in 70, 80 and often 90 hours a week, which was causing me to miss out on the life experiences of my growing family. I thought there had to be a way I could support my family and spend time with them, too, so I went back to school and got my teaching certification. I haven't looked back since.

What aspects of your past professional experience do you think will give you an edge in your new role at NYSIR?

I love talking to and listening to people. And my professional experience as a school superintendent at two small

districts has provided me firsthand knowledge of what administrators have to deal with on an ongoing basis. Simply said, I've walked in their shoes, and I know the struggles they deal with every single day.

Do you think your former role as chair of the Rural Schools Association of New York will offer insight as you work with NYSIR's association partners?



I think it will. That role, as well as the relationships I've built

with school superintendents, business officials and other school administrators over my 27 years in education, I believe, will provide me with valuable insight into the issues our education-related association partners have. The bottom line is that I'm willing to listen to what they're asking for, and I'll do my best to provide excellent customer service to each and every one of them.

How are schools in New York state responding to COVID-19?

Given CDC, state and local health regulations for school districts and the very short time frame they had for developing opening plans, school district administrators have done a tremendous job providing a safe and

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CHAFEE... CONTINUED

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academically sound environment for students and staff. It truly is nothing short of amazing. School administrators have an incredible knack for solving problems that most people don't realize exist.

How has NYSIR adapted its engagement with subscriber schools during the pandemic?

I'm still learning the ropes, but I can say that remote engagement technology has been crucial during the pandemic. And while I

understand the necessity for that, I really hope we can get back to more socially interactive and personable one-on-one relationships in the very near future.

Do you think the fact that COVID-19 was largely unanticipated could initiate new conversations about risk management?

Without a doubt. NYSIR already is having conversations about potential programs and supports that could help its member owners.

Earlier this year, for instance, we announced a program to return portions of subscriber insurance premiums related to the reduced use of district and BOCES vehicles brought on by mandated school closings. While the pandemic may have been unanticipated, NYSIR's commitment to protecting subscriber districts and BOCES has never been stronger.

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How do you spend your spare time? Do you have any hobbies?

Six months ago my wife and I were blessed with our first grandchild, so we're always looking forward to spending time with him. Once we get past COVID-19, I'm also counting on visiting the great variety of street fairs and sporting events New York has to offer.

When in your career did you first learn about NYSIR, and what was it about the organization that appealed to you so much that you eventually joined the team?

I've been aware of NYSIR for several years. The organization is very visible at superintendent conferences and board of education events. But until I interviewed for this position, I didn't fully understand the depth of services it offers to members to help minimize claims. And since we are member-owned, that can help save school districts money they can use to support valuable instructional programs.

Where do you see NYSIR in five years?

I firmly believe that NYSIR will continue to be viewed as the leader in school property and casualty insurance in New York. My goal is to bring additional members from the upstate area into the NYSIR family. But no matter what the future brings, I do know that NYSIR will continue to be a strong partner for our many fine, statewide education-related associations. ■

Education.

It's a complicated enterprise. Faculty. Staff. Students. Supplies. Transportation. Buildings and grounds. With seemingly a thousand things demanding attention all at once, risk management is bound to slip to the bottom of the list every once in a while, right? Here's why it shouldn't, and why it's important to remember...

It Could Happen to You.

Chaos on a school bus rarely reaches levels of reckless abandon. Raised voices? Sure. Dropped books, seating arguments and heated lunch-trade negotiations? It wouldn't be a bus ride without them. But

what if a series of incidents involving a school-employed bus monitor and students leads not only to criminal charges against the employee, but a subsequent lawsuit by the same person against the district, alleging that she had been taken for a ride by malicious prosecution? Buckle up.

As detailed in an actual

NYSIR Claims Department case file, the employee was working as a bus monitor for two special-needs students with behavioral disorders. Security camera footage taken during an afternoon drop-off and the following morning's pick-up

showed what the school's transportation director believed to be inappropriate conduct by the monitor, including slanderous language, arm-twisting and hitting. The monitor was placed on administrative leave and, under obligation as mandatory reporters, district officials contacted local authorities.

THE WHEELS OF JUSTICE

Within days, New York State Police began an investigation. An officer visited the bus monitor at her home and took a statement, and later that same day she voluntarily resigned, subsequently claiming that her decision was made under duress and that she was essentially forced out by the district. After taking the monitor's statement, the police officer stopped by the school to view surveillance footage with the transportation director and an assistant superintendent. When the video ended, the officer told the

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school officials that he would issue two appearance tickets to the bus monitor in connection with the incidents. Soon afterward, the monitor was arrested and charged with two counts of endangering the welfare of a child.

The monitor eventually was acquitted on both charges, but that wasn't the end of the ride. She then filed a suit against the district, transportation director and assistant superintendent for abuse of process and

malicious prosecution, claiming the police officer told her the transportation director had requested that charges be filed. She sought damages totaling \$375,000.

RUNNING OUT OF GAS

During testimony in that trial, the bus monitor could not offer evidence that district administrators played any role in bringing the endangerment charges against her following the original incident, other than 30 minutes of trial testimony provided by the transportation director. Additionally, clarifying testimony by the plaintiff revealed that she was confusing criminal charges with temporary orders of protection issued against her on behalf of the two students. It turns

out that the police officer did, in fact,

inform her that the transportation director had asked for the orders of protection, and she simply assumed the protection orders and criminal charges were connected.



The attorney for the district, transportation director and assistant superintendent, hoping to bring the trial to a full and complete stop, filed a motion for summary judgment. Counsel reiterated that district personnel contacted the authorities only after viewing the surveillance video and determining that the state's mandatory reporting directive required them to do so. There was no evidence that anyone from the district was involved in charges being filed.

The judge agreed with the district's argument and granted the motion, dismissing the bus monitor's case.

THE LESSON?

Without any evidence to fuel it, a malicious prosecution suit against a defendant school district may have a hard time getting out of first gear.

It could happen to you. ■

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DRIVING FORCE:

Three New NYOU Courses on School Buses

School buses are still the safest vehicles

on the road, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. But that doesn't mean there isn't room for improvement.

spots, fundamentals of operating large vehicles, and techniques behind executing precision driving maneuvers.

SHARE AND SHARE ALIKE



Module two, *Sharing the Road*, reviews risks and procedures at railroad crossings and addresses driver concerns about pedestrians in the vicinity of their vehicles. It also delves into the potential danger posed by bicyclists and offers drivers tips for safely parking their buses. Videos reinforce training concepts and deal with real-life consequences.

THE PTSI CONNECTION

Which is why NYSIR recently partnered with the Pupil Transportation Safety Institute to develop three new NYSIR Online University (NYOU) courses to help school



bus drivers hone their skills and, hopefully, relegate bus accident loss leaders to more of a backseat.

The trio of interactive training sessions each last about 45 minutes, and focus on driving fundamentals, sharing the road and avoiding distracted driving.

The first module reviews the basics of safely handling a school bus. The course highlights methods to correctly adjust driver's seats and mirrors to reduce blind

The third module, *Distracted Driving*, teaches bus drivers that constant awareness is key to preventing accidents. Sub-texts deal with the importance of knowing bus routes in detail, recognizing when other drivers may be distracted and concentrating on safety.

In addition to videos, each course includes relevant diagrams, pictures, graphic scenarios, pertinent questions and a short quiz to verify understanding.

Subscribers interested in taking advantage of the training can contact Connie Wallis at cwallis@nysir.org and 1-315-317-2631, or Brett Carruthers at bcarruthers@nysir.org and 1-716-282-4890. ■

