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Centering Mental Wellness

The Covid Impact

During the Covid pandemic our students suffered trauma and loss. In 2021 we asked them, “How are you doing?” We heard things like: “My mental health is not doing well with this type of remote learning, I’m stressed, my parents want me to pass when I’m not mentally able to focus. I lose sleep thinking about school. I hate online learning with a passion. Keep checking in on me and making sure I’m on the right track in school. Try to help me so I can move forward and be where I need to be.”

In 2022 we asked, “How has Covid impacted your time at school?” Changed me in general - Made me have a lack of motivation for school - Made me appreciate my friends more – Confusing - Damn near missed all 11th grade - Lost motivation and didn’t try my hardest to fix myself - It really didn’t impact much - Took away the experiences - Lost my motivation for school - affected how I felt towards school mentally – I had to step it up after covid and get back into the student mentality - Made it less memorable - Made me unmotivated to do any work - Made me a better person but I still got bad traits – Made my freshman year very difficult - Last year was a disaster – GPA went down.

How we responded

We noticed a lack of stamina in our young men, reduced focus, and a questioning of everything, including the meaning of school and college. One of the ways we responded was by centering mental wellness:

1) We employed more of what we called “intrusive advising/coaching” and checked in with more frequency outside of weekly groups – How was their home life? School life? Relationships? Health in general?
2) Check-ins during weekly group, always important, took on more significance as an opportunity for every young man to share how he was feeling with us and his brothers
3) We normalized talk of mental health, serotonin levels, depression and anxiety, and therapy. We discussed activities and choices that can help--like working out, eating well, talking to someone
4) We connected with school guidance counselors and social workers, made referrals to outside therapists
5) We made sure our weekly groups provided young men with opportunities to relax, laugh, be kids, and have fun. This week’s 9th grade meeting had 30 kids singing along (very loudly) to R&B music for nearly 2 hours
6) All YMWAP staff created Mental Wellness Plans in which they identified ways achieve life/work balance

We’re proud of kids’ 2022 survey responses collected through Boston After School & Beyond (highest = 4):
3.8/4 “Adults care about what I think”
3.8/4 “If I have a problem an adult here can help me”
3.8/4 “Other students listen to me here”
3.7/4 “Coming here has helped me feel good about myself”

“It’s like a weekly family reunion so when I get there, I’m always excited to see everyone and catch up.”

9th grade recruiting is going extremely well, and our 11th and 12th graders are making their plans for this academic year and beyond. Our NH Brotherhood Weekend is December 2-4.

Please reach out with any questions. Respectfully, Jaykyri Simpson, Ed.D., Executive Director
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