



Update from the Superintendent

To: Parents and Guardians
From: Bill Husfelt, Superintendent
Date: December 10, 2021

Our children need your help!

I can't think of a more candid attention getter than those five words. I hope you'll stop and take a minute to read about what's going on and how you can help.

Our children are in crisis and by "our" I really mean children across the country and even the world. But *our* children, those who live in Bay County, are in need of even more assistance and support than their peers because our children lived through a Category Five hurricane just three years ago and they've not had a "normal" school year since. Many of them have yet to even return to "normal" home lives let alone school years.

We're all watching and reading the same news stories ... children across the country are crying out for help in a number of different ways and tragedies lead the broadcasts more often than not. It's easy, however, to dismiss those stories because they aren't happening here.

Except they are happening here.

You may not hear about all of the local tragedies, and those we averted through targeted interventions, because student information is confidential and we don't share any details. We do, of course, communicate as transparently as the law allows and as often as possible during any sort of crisis and parents who have phone numbers on file with us know we make LOTS of calls.

So, here are a few sobering statistics to illustrate the kind of crisis we're in as a community:

1. As of mid-November, our schools have made **626 Community of Care referrals**. Those referrals are made because someone at the school, or the child's parent, believes the child is in danger of hurting himself/herself/others or is in need of additional, immediate, mental health support.
2. Of those 626, about 40 percent of the referrals were retained by BDS for in-house services through our federally-funded Triad Team members and another approximately 40 percent were referred to outside providers.

3. Staggeringly, though, the parents of about 20 percent of those students declined services.

As a result of those mental health needs, home stressors and other mitigating factors, our schools are dealing with crisis situations every single day. Many of them you'll never hear about because our BDS Wellness Team works to prevent the sorts of tragedies that dominate the news cycles. Unfortunately, though, those same team members have also been supporting our district through the tragic loss of five students thus far this school year. Additionally, our Triad Team members are supporting students who have experienced loss in their own families as a result of Covid-19 and other situations.

We're stretched beyond capacity and we're being asked to do more than is possible.

For example, recently parents were called to a school to deal with two students who were fighting. Rather than support the school in their efforts to de-escalate and correct the behavior, one of the parents stormed off campus shouting "we will just take care of this on the street."

How can we hope to change students' behavior when we only have them for less than 10 percent of their lives from birth to graduation? How can we be expected to compensate for what they see in "real life" on the media, social media and in their own homes and neighborhoods? How can we overcome all of the shortcomings in society and make sure the violence that's pervasive "out there" doesn't infiltrate our schools? How can we help those students whose parents decline services or those whose parents offer to settle differences on the street?

To be candid ... we can't.

We're bathing, clothing and doing laundry for hundreds of students right now. We're providing weekend food for those who need it and our schools provide two free meals a day. We've got mental health teams on campus ready to support students who need that help. Our school staff members are working as hard as they can during the holiday season to make sure each child has something under the tree. Many of our schools and organizations are providing those trees and holiday meals.

Every day, in every way, we're also trying to implement research-based best practices, mandated curriculum and access to state-of-the-art resources while dealing with the same staffing shortages plaguing every business and organization right now. Our teachers, support staff members and administrators are working 10- and 12-hour days trying to get it all done and we just can't sustain this effort alone.

Before I go any further, though, let me be clear that I know we have many, many parents who are doing their best to support our schools. I know we have *many* parents who are working two and three jobs just to get by and they don't have time to support our schools. I know we have hundreds, if not thousands, of grandparents, great grandparents and others doing their best to

raise children who are not their own. Nationally, more than three million children are being raised by grandparents and even great grandparents.

But I know our children need, and deserve, more.

We need mentors, I've written about that before, and if you or your organization can help (minimum commitment is 30 minutes twice a month) you can reach out to Elevate Bay or Bay Education Foundation at 850-767-4100. New Horizons also has their own mentoring program and you can call the same number to be connected with them.

Parents in our community also clearly need our help. If there's a family you know that's struggling NOW is the time to reach out to provide whatever support you can. An offer of babysitting so a parent can attend a conference could literally be a game changer for a student who is struggling. An offer to take something off the plate of one of our hard-working teachers could make a world of difference in his/her day. If we, as a society, invested in the lives of our children as diligently as some invest in the latest "get rich quick schemes" we would live in a very different community.

Ultimately, imagine what we could accomplish if we all could be as quick to help and support as some people are to criticize and blame!

Social media is full of blame, hate and vitriol these days and that's why I don't spend much time on those platforms at all. Incredibly, one commenter on a law enforcement thread about a local murder involving young people recently wrote that the situation "may or may not be the fault of the parents" and suggested others "look into blaming the school system that completely takes over once the child enters it."

I just can't understand that kind of thinking. The school system is responsible for students for about 1/3 of their day, five days a week, for about half of the days of the year. The school system is responsible for teaching academics, for trying to infuse some character education and for ensuring students have access to the academic and extra-curricular activities they choose.

We cannot be the parents for our students and we shouldn't be expected to be their parents. We are not responsible for the moral upbringing of our students. We want to do our part, we're willing to do more than our part but we can't do it alone and we can't meet all of the needs through the school system.

I've been in education for more than 40 years and the pressure we're under right now is unlike anything I've ever experienced before. We're losing valued educators because of it, we're having trouble attracting new employees because of it and it's taking a terrible toll on those who are still committed to the mission and vision.

Last week I encouraged you to reach out to those in your circle who may not be “doing okay.” This week, I am here to tell you that it’s our children who are really most in need of help and we need to band together, like never before, to take care of them, to guide and nurture them and to love them into adulthood.

Stay safe and God Bless!