

By Bill Husfelt

Superintendent, Bay District Schools

We are always concerned about the mental and physical wellbeing of our students but rarely more so than right now. Between local wildfires and global unrest with the war in Ukraine, our kids are being bombarded with disconcerting images, bad news and stress.

Before going any further, however, I must commend and applaud the heroic efforts of our firefighters, first responders, county and state leaders and community members. The work that is being done to save our homes is amazing and I am so very grateful to every single person playing a role in those efforts.

Without even talking about the devastating impacts of Hurricane Michael three years ago, our children have been exposed to one terrible thing after another for going on four years now. The pandemic certainly took its toll emotionally, financially and physically for many. And now ... wildfires.

Our students, our employees and their families faced evacuation from the impending fire with so much uncertainty about the safety of their own homes. Many of those who evacuated have first responders in their families so there's even more added stress. According to quick surveys we did, more than 400 area children and 200 employees were impacted and displaced by the fire zone evacuations. And yet, as much as possible, we've managed to keep the school schedule "normal" to give our kids the routines and structures that help settle them each day. My heart goes out to everyone who has been impacted by the wildfires and I hope that we've had nothing but rain by the time you read this!

Some of our students are also being affected by the situation overseas. We have a handful of Ukrainian students in our schools and some employees with relatives literally in the line of fire right now. Our students are hearing snippets of conversations at home, or news segments, and they are understandably concerned.

Recently, I had the opportunity to sit down with one of our Ukrainian employees and a few of our Ukrainian students. I was so very impressed that the middle- and high-school students can communicate in multiple languages. They speak English very well and most speak at least three other languages fluently which is incredible. They all talked about the sense of urgency they feel when it comes to helping their friends and family members and how helpless they feel at times because they are so far away. We are working to support them in their fundraising efforts and will share more about those in the near future.

All this stress definitely shows up in our classrooms every day in the form of students suffering from anxiety, depression, concern, anger and emotional outbursts. Some just quietly withdraw from activities and conversations because they feel overwhelmed.

We're certainly not mental health experts (but we do employ some) but we are doing what we can to help our employees work with students who are traumatized by the wildfires or the situation overseas. We have mental health support staff members in our schools who are doing what they can to support students in need but there are also a plethora of resources online for parents who want to do more at home.

Here are two links we think are particularly helpful:

https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/parents_guidelines_for_helping_children_impacted_by_wildfires.pdf

<https://www.verywellmind.com/how-to-talk-to-your-kids-about-ukraine-5220914>

Those of us who lived through the devastation of Hurricane Michael knew our wildfire risk was elevated but that doesn't make this any less frightening for our community. According to the Florida Forestry Service, the hurricane destroyed 2.8 MILLION acres of trees and much of that is just dry timber waiting for a spark. Our hearts and prayers are with all of those who lost their homes to the fires and with all of those who were, and still are, displaced.

We cannot protect our children from the bad things in life no matter how hard we try but we can continue to model good problem-solving skills for them and we can demonstrate calm and cool responses to crisis situations. And, of course, we can teach our children to be grateful for those men and women who go into the military to protect our freedoms and those who choose to become first responders to protect our communities, our homes and our families.

God Bless and stay safe!