

University of Missouri program helps teachers prevent teen suicides

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Parkway School District in Chesterfield, Mo., was once like many other school districts when it came to suicide prevention. With a minimal amount of guidance, educators within each building would decide what the next steps should be after a tragic incident had occurred. Now, thanks to the training efforts of the MU College of Education's Missouri Partnership for Educational Renewal (MPER), Parkway is one of many Missouri schools that have a standardized response to address suicidal students before a tragedy occurs – a paradigm shift for education leaders and organizations throughout the country.

"Teenage suicide and other [mental health](#) issues are still the 'elephant in the room' for many school districts," said Julie Harrison, the coordinator of [guidance](#) and counseling for the Parkway School District. "MPER encouraged us to examine mental health issues in every school. As a result of the training MPER provided, we developed a systemized suicide prevention program and plans following a tragedy as well as policies and support for 3,000 employees and 17,000 students. Our comprehensive approach now includes more emphasis on awareness, education and support."

Administered by MU education experts and located at MU, MPER is a unique collaboration of 22 school districts representing 178,000 students. The organization is charged with improving education throughout the state. After recognizing a growing need for student mental health training, MPER administrators developed "The Mental Health Leadership Academy" as a low-cost method to educate and train

educators. James Koller, professor emeritus in the College of Education, worked with the Missouri Department of Mental Health on [suicide prevention](#).

Parkway teachers now have specialized training to differentiate between normal adolescent behavior and potential suicidal actions. Teachers learn how to approach students, parents, school administrators and other teachers regarding suicidal concerns. In addition, Parkway's student suicide policy now clarifies the process any school in the district would take in the event of a student suicide. Steps include:

- The principal verifies the suicide and obtains parental permission to release information. The principal contacts school administrators, the school's crisis team members and each social worker within the district. The school's crisis team then determines the specific plan.
- Each teacher is notified and answers for potential student questions are circulated.
- Friends of the deceased are notified in person and are allowed to call parents for immediate plans. An announcement is made via the school intercom. Grieving students are encouraged to talk to counselors.
- A crisis room is established for students. Counselors help each student process feelings according to the five stages of grief. Counselors also visit any class the deceased attended to offer counseling.
- Other follow ups include outside counseling referrals, reviewing the curriculum for topics that may recall the suicide, and ongoing staff development for student suicide and depression.

"Education in the United States has undergone a dramatic shift throughout the last 40 years," said Dan Lowry, co-director of MPER. "A

school counselor once talked to students about their career options. Today, [school](#) counselors must treat an array of student mental health issues and be aware of legal requirements concerning how to handle problems such as depression, over-medicated students and student [suicide](#). MPER did the background work and research on the policies that work, so the [school districts](#) could focus on safety and the total needs of their students."

The Mental Health Leadership Academy was presented with the "Michelli Award for Promoting Social Justice" from The National Network for Educational Renewal on Oct. 20. The award letter notes that MPER "provided multiple levels and domains of support for vulnerable students and staff who too often have few options or resources that promote their holistic wellbeing." Lowry accepted the award on behalf of MPER.

"To have MPER's work in mental health be recognized with this national award is quite an achievement," Lowry said. "Additionally, we've helped Missouri [students](#) receive a better education, and education translates into a better job, higher earnings, better health and a longer life. That's the ultimate mission of MPER."

More information: For more information on MPER, visit education.missouri.edu/orgs/mper/index.php

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