

Support needed for student mental health, officials say

Editor's note: This story first appeared in the Tuesday, Feb. 15, e-edition of the Telegram.

By Maria Lockwood
Superior Telegram

SUPERIOR — Two years of disrupted learning caused by the COVID-19 pandemic have left an impact on the Superior School District that can be measured in rising levels of truancy and increased illegal behavior among younger students, officials said.

District Administrator Amy Starzecki shared a presentation about the issue and the need for local support for students' social, emotional, behavioral and mental health needs with the school board on Feb. 7. It's a message she wants to share with the community.

"This increase in more serious behavior is not unique to Superior. Districts around the country are all experiencing the same situation," Starzecki said. "What I believe is unique to Superior is the lack of community resources to address many of these needs. This concern existed prior to the pandemic and is now even more magnified."

Criminal behavior

Illegal behavior at Superior Middle School among students ages 11-14 has skyrocketed this year, according to information provided to the Telegram.

From Sept. 1 to Feb. 8 of this school year, the number of incidents at SMS involving alcohol, tobacco, illegal substances or weapons increased substantially compared to the same time frame in the previous school year, according to information provided to the

Telegram. Starzecki declined to provide the number of incidents due to concerns about identifying students.

"It's not that these have never happened. I think we're just seeing a significant increase in the amount," Starzecki said.

Middle school Principal David Jensen said vaping is the biggest concern. A few of the vaping devices found at the middle school contained marijuana. Vaping is also a concern at the high school, where monitors sweep the bathrooms every hour.

"Vaping was an issue before the pandemic; it feels worse than it did before," Starzecki said.

Despite the rise in incidents, Jensen said only a small percentage of the school population is engaging in these behaviors. Jensen told the school board that 84% of middle schoolers — more than 900 students — have exhibited tier one behavior, which means they have one or fewer behavior referrals this school year.

But the incidents are a big draw on staff time, attention and resources, which ends up affecting all students, Starzecki said.

Holding students accountable for the behaviors can lead to suspension. That time out of the classroom impacts learning, academics and graduation rates, she said.

Truancy

Chronic absenteeism has risen in the younger grades, as well.

The number of elementary school students who were absent 10 or more days through Dec. 31 was 99, com-

pared to 84 in 2019. The number of middle school students absent 10 or more days was 117, compared to 72 in 2019.

In a reversal, the number of high school students absent 10 or more days was down this year, 87, compared to 109 in 2019.

Absences due to COVID-19 were not factored into the figures, according to the information presented to the board.

Students had class 73 days in that time period.

Starzecki said missing 10% or more of school days due to absence for any reason — excused, unexcused absences and suspensions — can lead to students having difficulty learning to read by third grade, achieving in middle school, and graduating from high school.

Graduation rates

Superior's graduation rate for the 2019-2020 school year was 84.3%, according to information Starzecki presented to the board. The district ranked 316 out of 331 districts in the state, putting it in the bottom 5%.

The district graduation rate has trailed the state average for the last five years, but that gap increased in the 2020-2021 school year, 85.5% to 90.5%. The number of students identified with special needs who graduated from Superior in 2020-2021 was 48.6%, down from 62.1% in 2019-2020 and 75.8% in 2018-2019, according to information provided to the Telegram.

Searching for solutions

School-based mental health counseling services are currently full, with long waiting

lists, Starzecki told the board. The district has allocated federal COVID-19 funding into short-term solutions, she told the board. That includes adding principals, deans, counselors, social workers, mentors and an at-risk coordinator; implementing restorative practices, social emotional learning curriculum and supports; and lowering class sizes, particularly at the elementary schools.

"We have tried to everything research said to do in these matters," Starzecki said. That funding, however, runs out in 2024.

Students need long-term supports, Starzecki said. Those include family wrap-around services, alcohol and other drug abuse treatment programs, more school-based mental health services, a juvenile detention center that is closer than Eau Claire, and a continuum of mental health services that includes outpatient, residential and day treatment options.

The Superior School Board lobbied for changes to state statute that in September widened the pool of school social worker candidates. Prior to that, only social workers who received a master's degree from a trio of colleges in Milwaukee, Madison and Green Bay could work directly with students.

"One of the things that people, I think, thought we were trying to advocate for was lowering the bar and that's not what we were advocating for," Starzecki said. "We were advocating that regardless of where you got your master's degree, you were able to apply for a school social worker

license." Now regional graduates from the College of St. Scholastica and University of Minnesota Duluth are eligible to work in schools.

"And that's the people we've attracted. The three people we have, we have as graduates in our region, not from other parts of the state," Starzecki said.

She aims to partner with the community to promote additional changes that could ease the strained mental health support system in Douglas County.

Board member Mike Meyer brought up one factor that is preventing some providers from bringing services to Superior, services that are available in Duluth: Medicaid reimbursement rates differ from state to state.

"Our state pays someone with my licensure, LICSW, about \$35 a contact, compared to around \$80-\$120 in Duluth," said Meyer, a licensed independent clinical social worker and school social worker in Minnesota. "If I was a business person looking to come into the community to provide services ... I wouldn't venture over here because it doesn't make financial sense."

The reimbursement rate imbalance has been a problem for years, Starzecki said.

"We can't just be held hostage to that."

She plans to bring her presentation to the city and county boards, and ask them a question: What's the next step for the community?

"I think it needs to be really a comprehensive community response," the district administrator said.

COVID-19 cases falling, yet infection rates remain high

By Shelley Nelson
Superior Telegram

SUPERIOR — As new cases of COVID-19 continue to drop across the state, most counties in the state continue to have very high rates of infection, the Wisconsin Department of Health Services reported Wednesday, Feb. 16.

Only Douglas County continued to have critically high rates of infection, with more than 1,000 new cases per 100,000, DHS reported.

The seven-day average of new cases in Wisconsin was 1,629 on Wednesday, down from 2,864 on Feb. 9. The figure measures the average number of new cases per day over the previous week. A decrease indicates the number of confirmed COVID-19 infec-

tions in the state is going down, according to DHS.

Hospitalizations as a result of COVID-19 went down to 994 people from 1,314 for the week ending Tuesday, Feb. 15, based on a rolling seven-day average.

Among the people hospitalized, 197 were being treated in intensive care units, down from 266 the previous week. For the two-week period ending Tuesday, 87% of the ICU beds in Wisconsin were in use, DHS said.

An additional 171 people died from complications related to COVID-19 statewide since Feb. 9, the data showed, bringing the total to 11,654. Among those who died were two people in Burnett County, and one person each in Ashland,

Rusk, Sawyer and Washburn counties.

Statewide, an additional 11,191 new cases were reported since Feb. 9. The total number of cases across the state was 1,371,694 Wednesday.

Closer to home, an additional 362 people in Northwestern Wisconsin tested positive for COVID-19 since Feb. 9, DHS said.

They were reported as follows: 112 in Douglas County; 51 in Washburn County; 41 in Price County; 36 in Burnett County; 35 in Bayfield County; 31 in Sawyer County; 28 in Ashland County; 20 in Rusk County; and eight in Taylor County. The total number of confirmed cases in Iron County was reduced by two.

Since vaccines became available, 9,229,292 vaccines have been administered, and 1,891,711 booster shots have been administered. About 60.1% of Wisconsin's population is fully vaccinated.

Here's the breakdown in the 10-county region:

Ashland County

- ▶ Total cases: 2,391
- ▶ Hospitalized: 112
- ▶ Deaths: 27
- ▶ Probable deaths: 6
- ▶ Vaccinated: 67.1%

Bayfield County

- ▶ Total cases: 2,278
- ▶ Hospitalized: 137
- ▶ Deaths: 28
- ▶ Probable deaths: 10
- ▶ Vaccinated: 69.6%

Burnett County

- ▶ Total cases: 3,462
- ▶ Hospitalized: 224

- ▶ Deaths: 40
- ▶ Probable deaths: 1
- ▶ Vaccinated: 53.1%

Douglas County

- ▶ Total cases: 7,754
- ▶ Hospitalized: 306
- ▶ Deaths: 50
- ▶ Probable deaths: 22
- ▶ Vaccinated: 62.3%

Iron County

- ▶ Total cases: 1,195
- ▶ Hospitalized: 77
- ▶ Deaths: 24
- ▶ Probable deaths: 21
- ▶ Vaccinated: 62.4%

Price County

- ▶ Total cases: 2,960
- ▶ Hospitalized: 229
- ▶ Deaths: 27
- ▶ Probable deaths: 1
- ▶ Vaccinated: 56.4%

Rusk County

- ▶ Total cases: 3,212
- ▶ Hospitalized: 207
- ▶ Deaths: 48

- ▶ Probable deaths: 0
- ▶ Vaccinated: 41.1%

Sawyer County

- ▶ Total cases: 3,929
- ▶ Hospitalized: 199
- ▶ Deaths: 51
- ▶ Probable deaths: 6
- ▶ Vaccinated: 54.7%

Taylor County

- ▶ Total cases: 4,244
- ▶ Hospitalized: 263
- ▶ Deaths: 51
- ▶ Probable deaths: 15
- ▶ Vaccinated: 34.3%

Washburn County

- ▶ Total cases: 3,622
- ▶ Hospitalized: 221
- ▶ Deaths: 39
- ▶ Probable deaths: 4
- ▶ Vaccinated: 62.7%

Visit the Douglas County COVID-19 dashboard or Wisconsin Department of Health Services COVID-19 page for updates.

EMPLOYEE SPOTLIGHT

Megan focuses on building strong employee and client relationships in her role as publisher for the Cloquet Pine Journal and advertising director for the Duluth News Tribune, Superior Telegram and The Woman Today. Community engagement and building benefit-based marketing campaigns is top of mind. Megan has been in her role since 2017 and her favorite part of her job is getting out and visiting with the community, partnering up with her team and building plans where our community and businesses can benefit. Megan spends a lot of time with her husband Richard on their hobby farm in Esko. When Megan isn't at the farm, her true passion is hitting the road with her horse Herb, barrel racing in the Midwest region.

My own quote that follows me everywhere: *"The way we influence people through our whole career - is carried with them throughout theirs. How are you being influential today?"*

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