

A State-wide High School Suicide Prevention Education Program

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Purpose:

This paper proposes youth suicide prevention education for PA high school staff and students.

Background:

In 2006-2008, there were 154 suicides in PA in which the victim was under age 20, and nearly 80% were age 15 or older (PDOH). In 2006, almost 1100 PA youths 15-19 made a suicide attempt that required hospitalization. Suicide is the third leading cause of death for youths 10-24 in the Commonwealth. The CDC's Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Survey in 2009 found that in the previous twelve months 13.5% of PA high school students seriously considered suicide, 9.6% planned suicide, and 5.7% made a suicide attempt.

Presently, suicide prevention education for high school faculty and students is not consistently offered in the Commonwealth:

- The Student Assistance Program (SAP) serves at-risk students but does not train school personnel or educate students in suicide prevention.
- The Pittsburgh-based STAR (Services for Teens at Risk) Center offers periodic teacher trainings in suicide prevention.
- County suicide prevention task forces sponsor teacher trainings in some areas.
- Individual schools, school districts, and Intermediate Units occasionally hold trainings.
- Individual teachers may address suicide prevention in their classes.

The PA Youth Suicide Prevention Task Force's "Five Year Action Plan" calls for suicide prevention education for teachers and students by July 2012.

Twenty-six states, including MD and NJ, have school staff and/or student suicide prevention education programs.

Free on-line suicide prevention CE courses are available for teachers.

Proposal:

The PA Department of Education will require:

- 1) All personnel subject to PA Act 48 certification (i.e., PA Instructional Specialist I/II, Educational Specialist I/II or Administrative or Supervisory certification, and all vocational certificates) to complete ongoing professional education of three clock hours of continuing education in DOE approved programs, activities or learning experiences in suicide prevention yearly; and

- 2) All 11th and 12th grade students in PA public and private high schools to receive instruction on suicide prevention as part of the health curriculum. This instruction will cover the risk and protective factors of suicide, the warning and danger signs of suicide, common myths of suicide, school and community resources offering assistance to suicidal individuals

Advantages:

- Increased in-school awareness of suicide as a preventable community health problem.
- Increased ability to identify possible signs of suicide risk in students.
- Increased availability of basic skills for use when a student at risk is identified.
- Increased familiarity with school and community resources that can help a student at risk of suicide.
- Increased likelihood of self-disclosure of suicidality and help-seeking on the part of at-risk students.

Disadvantages:

- Some parents and community groups may object to suicide prevention education. *This may be offset by including educational sessions for parents in any program.*
- Health teachers may be uncomfortable with instruction on suicide prevention. *This appears to relate to a lack of behavioral health training.*
- Some school administrators believe that information about suicide may precipitate suicidal behavior in vulnerable students. *Studies do not support this belief.*
- School districts may oppose a state-mandated suicide prevention program.
- The high school health curriculum has little room for suicide prevention. *Suicide prevention will fit with discussions of depressing, bullying, cutting, etc.*

Concluding Comments:

There is, on average, one suicide every week in Pennsylvania involving a high school age victim. Many take place during the school year and some on school premises.

There are, on average, three older teens hospitalized because of a suicide attempt every day in Pennsylvania. Several times as many may go untreated or do not require medical attention.

A student suicide is the most devastating tragedy that a school community can experience. It affects faculty and students and may increase both short and long-term suicide risk in some.

Student suicides already exact a significant financial cost in terms of postvention after a loss, disrupted classes, liability claims, and other expenses.

School suicide prevention will lessen the lifelong risk arising from suicidal behavior during teen years and create a constituency that can carry the message of suicide prevention into adulthood.

Tentative Action Plan:

- A. Introduce a House Resolution during Suicide Prevention Week (September 5-11, 2010) encouraging all public and private high schools in Pennsylvania to offer a staff suicide prevention training and a suicide prevention educational event for students during the 2010-2011 school year.
- B. Host a forum of prospective stakeholders to discuss the need for a statewide school-based suicide prevention education program. Participants may include:
- PA Department of Education
 - PA Youth Suicide Prevention Task Force
 - PA Association of School Administrators
 - PA Association of Intermediate Units
 - PA Association of Independent Schools
 - PA Association of School Social Work Personnel
 - PA Parent Teacher Association
 - PA School Boards Association
 - PA School Counselors Association
 - PA State Education Association
 - PA Association of Elementary and Secondary School Principals
 - American Federation of Teachers – PA
 - Association of School Psychologists of PA
- C. Introduce House Bill

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