

The Wayne RESA Roundtable S2.E2: Hope in Action - Strengthening Suicide Prevention Together

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SPEAKERS

Jason Hesch, Beth Santer, Regan Cowger, Mimi Higgins

Beth Santer 00:13

Welcome to the Wayne RESA roundtable podcast, a space dedicated to sharing valuable resources and insights with our educators and families. I'm Beth Santer, one of the Wayne resa facilitators who will be joining you for this conversation. Today, I am honored to welcome Brian Galdes, a former superintendent of schools and a dedicated leader in the community of well being. Today he serves as the lead of the hope Empowerment Coalition, which is formally known as the Suicide Prevention Coalition, and is CO lead of students versus stigma, a youth driven coalition. Both coalitions operate through growth works, where Brian's leadership is helping to foster awareness, empowerment and positive change for young people and the broader community. He's also been recently appointed to head up the state level Suicide Prevention Coalition, and he can talk more about that later. Welcome to the show, Brian.

Brian Galdes 01:06

Thank you, Beth, and I really appreciate you inviting me here to have this most important conversation.

Beth Santer 01:12

Yeah, absolutely. So let's get right into it. Let's start with the beginning. What inspired you to get involved in suicide prevention and mental health work after your time as a superintendent of schools.

Brian Galdes 01:24

Well, there's, there's several reasons why I am so passionate about this work. The first one is and very personal. I lost a stepdaughter to depression and suicide, and so that certainly is a driving force for me

to move forward with with you know, this work, and I just couldn't ignore the mental health issues and the mental health crisis that we have with youth right now. If you look at the CDC statistics and even some local Michigan statistics, it points out that 10% of our high school students who are sitting in our classrooms today have attempted a suicide in the last 12 months, and that is just really unacceptable for me, and I think for our society. And so I think we need to do everything in our power to to look at that, address that and and make a difference there. I also have some lived experience as a superintendent. While I was superintendent of South Redford schools. We did lose a wonderful young man to to suicide, and so, so I understand what the suicides and this, this crisis means to a school community.

Beth Santer 02:42

Yeah, I really appreciate you sharing your personal story and describing how that and these other incidents and statistics have propelled you to work in this space. Can you share the mission of the hope Empowerment Coalition?

Brian Galdes 02:59

Sure, it's, it's, it's really simple, it is. Our goal is to reduce and eliminate student suicide, you know, put in as many protective practices and supports for students as we can. You know, we, we want to break down silos between schools and school districts. We want to break down the stigma that gets in the way of students getting the help that they need. When you look at again statistics, the number of attempted suicides spike during stressful times during the school year, the beginning of the school year, exam time, prom time, those are all times when we see upticks in attempts and completed suicides, and then we see suicides and attempted suicides spike down during vacation periods and times when we're not at school. And so we really need to look at that and know that these stressful times of the school year, you know, really impact students mental health and and I can tell you Beth that I interact with a lot of high schools. We have 19 high schools in our coalition and 28 middle schools, and I can tell you that they are working really, really hard to address this, but we can't continue to operate in silos. It's too big of a problem. It's too deep and too tall to operate in silos, and think we're going to make a difference and so, so the mission is to is to eliminate adolescent suicide.

Beth Santer 04:33

Yeah, right. I..full disclosure, I have been lucky enough to serve on the coalition, both as a local director and now as a RESA rep. And I think it'd be great for our audience, for you, to share a little bit of the timeline, because this isn't something that was just created yesterday. This started in 2017, correct?

Brian Galdes 04:58

It did. And it started as a survey that went out to the community of St Mary's Hospital, Trinity health now, but it was St Mary's of Livonia put out a health needs assessment to the community, and the number one thing that came back was the community wanted St Mary's to help in mental health. And so because I was a superintendent at the time, I gravitated toward the adolescent side. So we we got together, and we looked at the school districts around St Mary's Hospital, and we brought together all the social workers, all the counselors, and asked them, How can we support them. How can we, you know, meet their needs? And so we continue to do that. We continue to do the things they asked us to do. And then growth work stepped in, and they identified the fact that we needed some leadership that

could be just focused on this issue. It's a big enough issue. And so they created a position, two positions really, that support this mission in this work. And so, yeah, we've been working together as a coalition with Corewell Health, Trinity Health, and the seven school districts to battle adolescent depression and suicide.

Beth Santer 06:18

Yeah, it's great work. And earlier in the year, we had Tom Watkins, who spoke with Kevin Fisher on one of our podcasts, and he mentioned all of the things that Growth Works is doing in this space too, including the coalition, so it's definitely getting a lot of attention. Okay, so I also understand that you have formed a Students Versus Stigma group, which is the youth coalition, version of the adult coalition. Tell us a little bit about how that came to be.

Brian Galdes 06:49

So the adult coalition is a group of administrators and social workers from the school districts and representatives from the emergency rooms of the hospitals and some private providers, and as we were talking about how we're going to make a difference, we realize that we're not going to move the needle. We're not going to move that needle back from 10% of our students attempting to take their lives to zero without bringing student voice in and centering their leadership. You know, they know what it's like to be a high schooler now it's far different than when I was a high schooler, you know, I remember the angst, you know, and the difficulty, the difficult times that adolescence can bring, and the pressures and the stresses and all that. I imagine nowadays, it's just that much worse with social media and everything that our youth are facing today, and so we really need to hear from them. What is it that they believe is going to make a difference and...and I think also centering their leadership. Students listen to their peers far earlier than they listen or far easier than they listen to the adults. And so, so bringing their leadership in and listening to the students, and listening to what they believe is going to make a difference and what their challenges are today, I think, is instrumental and absolutely essential for us to move forward.

Beth Santer 08:13

You're right. I mean, kids definitely talk to kids. So what are some of the biggest challenges you see in supporting youth mental health and suicide prevention in our communities today.

Brian Galdes 08:25

Probably the biggest challenge that we have right now is the stigma around mental health. You know, it is, and it really, it's really more the stigma that sits with the adults, not so much with the students. When I sit and listen to the students talk about mental health, they are more comfortable with having the conversation, certainly amongst themselves, but even with adults, unfortunately, we have adults who are still so afraid to talk about it and worry about it. It's sad. I have some students that I've talked to who said they really believe that they need to talk to someone that they're really struggling, but their parents won't let them, you know, get the help that they feel, that they need. And again, I think that all revolves around stigma. I'm sure that their parents love them and want them to have the best, but they don't believe that getting mental health help is the best, and that is solely, you know, solely sits with, with stigma, I think, also access to care. And I think, as you know, Beth, the insurance companies and the way that the financial reimbursement works with mental health isn't the same

as as it is with physical health, and so a lot of our families are strapped or limited in terms of how they can access help, and so, so that's that's a real barrier, and just. The number of social workers and counselors out there that there are available to work with some of our youth is as a limiting factor also. So I think those are probably the biggest challenges that we face.

Beth Santer 10:10

So along with those challenges, those are opportunities to form some strategies to make a difference. So what strategies have you found most effective in reducing stigma around mental health and suicide, especially amongst young people,

Brian Galdes 10:24

That's a great question. Beth, currently, we have peer to peer programs in most or all of our coalition school districts, and these programs help to come in and build supports around within the schools coming from peers. Now it doesn't ...we're not making peers social workers or anything along the likes of that, but what we are doing is we're using student leadership and student voice within the schools through these programs to create the supports that students need during those stressful, stressful times of the school year. I mean, I think that's probably one of our largest initiatives in terms of breaking stigma currently. And I really want to acknowledge growth works in this because they understand the importance of these programs and they are providing the resources for 19 high schools and 28 middle schools to have these programs for three years, and so it's at no cost to the school districts. And so, you know, I really appreciate everything that growth works does, including that,

Beth Santer 11:35

Yeah, that's great. That definitely takes some of that burden of the financials from those local school districts to have growth work support with that, I know you also do a lot of community outreach with leaders in different cities that represent our locals about reducing stigma. Is that correct?

Brian Galdes 11:55

I do. I try to get out there as often as I can, because I believe that if we're going to reduce stigma, we really need to be talking about it. We need to be talking about mental health and in what a crisis it is. So I meet annually with each of the school boards in the coalition. I've met with every single community leader, most of the elected officials. We do a lot of legislative advocacy. We've We've brought legislators into emergency rooms, and we've and we've talked about the challenges and some of the successes that we've had in the emergency rooms with with as it applies to mental health, with adolescents, and so getting out there, talking to the community is so important, and as the students versus stigma program grows, you know, part of our plan is to get those students out there in the public to be talking about the crisis that they're in. Who better to hear about it than from our students?

Beth Santer 12:59

100% So one of the structures and processes that you put in place in the adult coalition that I've really appreciated is you've had each district send two representatives, and one of those representatives has been an administrator who can make those decisions and work through what they need to to get things implemented at a district level. But also having a mental health provider that works directly with kids,

and that work has been discovered by the state. And so why don't you tell us a little bit about the state level group that you're going to be leading?

Brian Galdes 13:36

Yes, I'm very excited about this work that's going to be coming up the Department of Health and Human Services and Department of Education really want to make a difference in in this work. The problem is, there's not a lot of models out there. And so they did. They have heard about our coalition and the coalition work, and so they approached me to have conversations about, what do I think it would look like? You know, what do we need to do to make a difference? And so we talked about the importance of having regional coalitions, and why I think that our coalition is being as effective as it is. You know, I think that as we, as we look at what works in western Wayne County, what kind of programs, how we can include a community those kinds of things. I'm not so sure it would work in other parts of the state. And so we were creating a model that that has a framework that each region or each regional coalition could apply different programming to that, to that, to that model or to that framework, and then move forward. And so we're putting together a team of representatives from everywhere, from Ironwood, Michigan to down to Monroe, and we're going to we're going to tackle this. And. And we're going to look at at how to best approach the crisis that we have, you know, with mental health, with students. And I truly believe that the outcome will be regional coalition's, you know, across the state, doing...doing work regionally, I think would be the most effective way to approach it.

Beth Santer 15:20

Yeah, it sounds like that will yield sustainability, which is fantastic, and collaboration across the state. So is there a moment or success story from your coalition work that stands out to you as especially meaningful?

Brian Galdes 15:37

That's a great question. We have...one of the things we've done as a coalition is we've trained about 6500 adults in QPR, which is a which is a method of identifying red flags for someone who might be in crisis, and then when you identify someone in crisis, or someone approaches you who's in crisis, giving you the tools to be able to work with that person, to get them the help that they need. Again, not making you a counselor or crisis worker, it's really just helping them to find the help that they need. And so after a training, about a week later, we received a call from a teacher from one of our districts who was pretty emotional, and she had indicated that her daughter was in a very, a very dark place, and she started to recognize the signs because of the training, and was able to to get her daughter the help that she needs.

Beth Santer
Hm.

Brian Galdes

And she really, really believes that her daughter might not be alive had she not had that training and was able to apply it to her own family. And so that was just such...a such a moving and meaningful moment for me in time. And I think I also think that just listening to our students in the students versus stigma group, listening to their conversations, is just amazing. And I think that's probably also one of the

more meaningful things, and it's ongoing, of course, but you know, we I hear often here, especially being an educator, I often hear about, you know, the you know, troubled youth, and you know kids today, all those kinds of things. I'm telling you, our kids today are really outstanding, and I really believe that our future is...is in good hands with the students, at least the students that we're working with. And so makes me very optimistic. You know....

Beth Santer

Absolutely

Brian Galdes
...looking forward

Beth Santer 17:29

Yeah, absolutely. I was fortunate enough to attend some of the youth coalition meetings, and the students definitely want to be a part of that solution, and are very engaged in the process, which is fantastic. So looking ahead, what are the priorities for the Hope Empowerment Coalition and the students versus stigma in the next few years?

Brian Galdes 17:50

Yeah, I think both groups are looking at the same, you know, the same hopes, but, you know, really eliminating mental health stigma in our schools, I think that's a huge that will be a huge step forward, both with the students as well as the adults in those school communities. You know, certainly will be a big challenge for us, but it's something that we need to do if we're going to move that needle, also looking at creating the strongest possible supports for for students, especially during those more difficult times during this school year. And again, I've been in high schools. I've been in middle schools and looked at their their the work that they're doing, and they're all working so hard, and they really want to do this, but I believe that if we're if we're working together, we're going to be able to empower schools, to be able to to do it more effectively and and really meet the needs of our kids better. And so, you know, really looking forward to that, and also really would love to see regional coalitions across the state. I think that if we can look back five years from now and say, you know, that we now can look out across the state of Michigan, and we have this emphasis on student mental health, I believe we're going to see that needle move down from 10% and hopefully we get it to zero.

Beth Santer 19:11

Absolutely. So I know that the Hope Empowerment Coalition also has a conference that they do every November, and that's coming up. So how many years have you done that conference?

Brian Galdes
This is our fourth annual conference.

Beth Santer

It's always on election day, right?

Brian Galdes

Always on election day, because that's the day that students aren't in schools and teachers are kind of required to do professional development across the county.

Beth Santer
Yeah.

Brian Galdes

And this is something I'm very proud of. The Coalition and the work that they're doing. We bring it together. We're looking at probably 450 school based mental health professionals that will come together for one day and get real quality professional development. They'll do networking. We're going to be doing some things to help them, you know, meet some of their needs, their mental health needs also. And so that's coming up again on election day. And. Yeah, yeah. I think it's a it's a wonderful thing that growth Works has created and wonderful support for the local school based professional mental health workers.

Beth Santer 20:11

Yeah, I agree. It gives all of those mental health providers that opportunity, as you said, to network, which moves that needle from a local level to more of a societal level, which is pretty powerful.

Brian Galdes 20:26

Yeah, it's breaking down those...those silos. It's, you know, again, we we operate so much in silos, and that's one of the problems and and the work, like the annual conference, we also do mini series conferences for, again, school based mental health professionals throughout the school year, and the networking that happens in the support that I'm seeing that's bridging schools and that's bridging school districts, has been really amazing. And again, those are the things are going to that are going to move the needle from 10% to zero, so and, you know, moving forward.

Beth Santer 20:57

So last question-for families, educators and community members listening today, what's one step they can take to support youth mental health and help prevent suicide?

Brian Galdes 21:10

Really, it's all about stigma. I think the community can help out by by having community, by having conversations regarding mental health and acknowledging the the crisis that we have, people are so shocked when I when I talk about the statistics, and as they reflect on it, they are also not surprised when they think about it, because most people I talk To have dealt with some level of mental health issues within their own families or their friend group and so...so I think having the conversation, acknowledging the crisis and moving forward, also advocating with legislators, I think that's important

Beth Santer
yep

Brian Galdes

you know. And again, that comes through having community conversations, you know for sure so well,

Beth Santer 22:00

I've been truly honored to have you Brian on our podcast today, as well as having the opportunity to work alongside you through the adult and the youth coalitions. As I mentioned before, I've personally witnessed the deep dedication and passion that Brian brings to this movement, along with the time and effort and structures he's developed to support mental health and well being of our students, on behalf of myself and the entire resa community. Thank you, Brian, for sharing your insight and for joining us today and to our listeners, thank you for tuning in. We hope that you'll join us again for the next episode of the Wayne RESA roundtable podcast. Thanks so much, Brian.

Brian Galdes

Thank you. Beth.