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Somerville launches “Together” public engagement campaign to support student mental and social-emotional health

*New study highlights the significant impact of the Covid-19 pandemic
on the district’s middle and high school students*

SOMERVILLE, MA – City and Somerville Public Schools officials today announced the launch of a public engagement campaign to bring greater attention to the challenges facing Somerville children and adolescents in mental health and social-emotional wellness, in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Somerville Mayor Joseph A. Curtatone joined Mayor-Elect Katjana Ballantyne, Superintendent of Schools Mary Skipper, and the Somerville School Committee in launching the [“Together” campaign](#). Officials said the campaign is designed to build awareness about the additional pressures and risk behaviors among Somerville youth today, to highlight the City’s new investments in targeted strategies and interventions, and to bring the community together in support of young people.

The situation in Somerville is consistent with growing mental health issues among children and teens across the Commonwealth and around the country. Last week, U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy issued an [advisory](#) citing significant increases nationwide in anxiety, depression, and other mental health concerns among young people since the pandemic began.

Earlier this year, the City’s Office of Prevention in the Health and Human Services Department commissioned an independent survey to assess the health, wellness, and behaviors of middle and high school students in the Somerville Public Schools. The [“Pulse Check,”](#) conducted by JSI Research & Training Institute, surveyed more than 1,400 SPS students in grades 6 through 12, including a series of questions related to the impact of Covid-19.



Among the findings of the study:

- While the majority of students did not experience adverse financial or health-related effects of Covid-19, **about one in five middle or high school students in the Somerville Public Schools reported having a family member or close friend who died from the disease.**
- More than half of high school students and almost one-quarter of middle school students in SPS reported that they struggled with their mental health “most of the time” or “always” during the coronavirus pandemic.
- Genderqueer students were significantly more likely to report struggling with their mental health (88% at the high school level), and rates also were higher among multi-racial students (52% at the high school level).
- Among high school students, 47% of females reported struggling with their mental health, compared to 15% of males.

Officials noted that a broad array of personnel, programs, and services are available in schools and in the community to help meet students’ mental and social-emotional needs, including support from counselors, social workers, case managers, and other clinicians. The district also leverages partnerships with the City’s Health and Human Services Department, Riverside Community Health, The Home for Little Wanderers, and other external providers.

To help meet the significant increase in demand for services during the pandemic, the City and the school district have made additional investments in student supports, funded in part by federal Covid-19 relief programs for schools, including:

- two new Deans of Students (Capuano and Winter Hill)
- a Guidance Counselor at Somerville High School
- 2 district-wide Social Workers and a district-wide Adjustment Counselor to provide additional support where most needed
- a Multilingual Education (MLE) Social/Emotional Counselor at Winter Hill; and
- 2 new vendor direct-service contracts, allowing the district to double its capacity to provide mental health counseling support.

Officials estimate an additional \$800,000 has been allocated over the last year two years specifically to address students’ mental health and social-emotional needs, and additional investments are planned in the coming months. They stressed, however, that the increased demand continues to outpace the supply of services, particularly [services that are targeted to students and families from immigrant communities and whose primary language may be one other than English.](#)

The “Together” campaign, they said, is intended to promote conversation among young people and adults about feelings of stress, anxiety, and other mental, social, and emotional difficulties, particularly so that students feel more comfortable seeking help from their peers, family members, educators, and others. Campaign messaging will urge young people to confide in a trusted adult about their struggles and help adults listen to students’ needs and, if necessary, direct them to the appropriate resources for follow-up support.

“Throughout the pandemic, the people of Somerville have come together to support one another and help keep our community safe and healthy,” said Mayor Curtatone. “The ‘Together’ campaign will further focus that support on the urgent mental health needs of our young people. The City and the schools are making important investments to increase services for children and teens, but we need everyone in Somerville to do their part, particularly by reaching out to young people who are struggling and connecting them with the help they need.”

“Supporting mental health and wellness – a need that is far too often overlooked – is critical to ensuring all our students have the tools they need to progress and succeed during this challenging time, and always. We must ensure our students, especially those facing the greatest stresses, have access to resources that can help them build both immediate and lifelong resiliency,” said Mayor-Elect Ballantyne. “I want to thank the Schools and the Curtatone Administration for their important data gathering and work in this area, and I assure you my administration will remain focused on this vital effort.”

Superintendent Skipper said, “The health survey affirms what we’ve been seeing in our schools: that students of all ages, from preschool through high school, are experiencing profound levels of stress and anxiety. We are fortunate to have great teams of counselors, social workers, nurses, and other staff, as well as external partners, working closely with families on student health and wellness. Now, more than ever, we must leverage all of the available resources to address these significant barriers to student learning and success.”

“We know that particular student groups have been deeply affected by both the pandemic and by the growing national divide on issues of race and racism, especially students who are genderqueer, multi-racial, or members of immigrant communities,” said Andre L. Green, Chair of the Somerville School Committee. “It is critical that we connect families with services that address the full range of student concerns and that are tailored to what students are experiencing, especially students who are being disproportionately impacted.”

The multi-lingual “Together” campaign will include:

- A section on the Somerville Public Schools website – www.somerville.k12.ma.us/together -- with information and resources for students, families, and educators;
- Community events beginning in January to foster dialogue about social-emotional wellness and mental health in our community and best ways to support students in and out of school;
- Continuing training for teachers, administrators, and other school-based staff about recognizing and responding to signs of distress among students;
- Activities and events designed by and for students; and
- Social media content on the district’s and city’s accounts, using the hashtag #SomervilleTogether.

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