

I want to first extend my thanks and gratitude to each of you. who committed time to be here today. It means a lot to me personally that each of you made time in your busy schedules to commit to being here today. Looking around, it warms my heart to see so many people showing up for our youth.

I'd like to share a little with all of you about how this work came about and why I am so passionate about it.

Almost a year ago, we lost one of our students to suicide. I remember receiving the call during the week of Thanksgiving break. A time when traditionally, families and friends gather together, enjoy good food, watch football, and spend quality time together. It was a somber week for me as I could not get out of my head visions of this family, instead of spending time with their child, they were burying them. This was the first time I had ever experienced a student suicide and I spent the next few months frozen, paralyzed in how to respond, knowing I was not leaning into the situation and providing the support needed to staff, leadership, the family, and our other students in processing the grief that comes with this type of loss. I had failed. Failed in my response, failed in my leadership, failed as a person. I continue to carry a lot of guilt about this and am still working to process those feelings.

During my own grief, Joe and I connected through a mutual person who knew the struggles I was going through. Joe is a mental health consultant with many years of experience doing this work and who like me cares deeply for our youth. Joe and I have had many conversations since our first meeting about the many great things that are happening in this community for our youth. Yet, a lot of the time, it feels like this work is happening in our own silos and we aren't necessarily connected to each other through the work or seeing the good work we all are doing. North Wasco needs your help. We have students who are struggling everyday - struggling to come to school, struggling with their own mental health or that of a loved one in their family, struggling with substance abuse, struggling with access to basic needs such as food, shelter, or

transportation, and struggling to feel like they belong or that they are safe at school when schools should be one of the safest places to be.

We are going to talk about school attendance and student engagement. You may be asking yourselves, what does my organization have to do with school attendance and student engagement? Currently, only approximately 62% of our students attend school at a rate of 90% or higher of the school days available on an annual basis. This means over 1000 of our students do not attend school regularly. Absenteeism has a major impact on student and family mental health. It can cause a decline in school performance, falling behind and repeating grades, loneliness, low self-worth, increased mental health problems, potential increase in risky behaviors, and conflict among family. This is not just a school issue, this is a community issue and we should all be concerned that our youth are not attending school regularly and we should all be working together to understand why.

We are going to talk about mental health services and substance abuse prevention. Currently, our schools serve many students who are showing up with invisible backpacks. What we can't see in those invisible backpacks is their lived experiences that may include high trauma from situations such as psychological, physical, or sexual abuse, community or school violence, witnessing or experiencing domestic violence, a sudden or violent loss of a loved one, a life threatening accident or injury, serious and untreated parental mental illness, loss of or separation from a parent or other loved one, discrimination, and poverty. The trauma is showing up through a variety of actions, communications, and behaviors from our students such as intense and ongoing emotional upset, depressive symptoms or anxiety, sudden behavioral changes, difficulties with self-regulation, problems relating to others or forming attachments, regression or loss of previously acquired skills, attention and academic difficulties, nightmares, difficulty sleeping and eating, and physical symptoms, such as aches and pains. In older students we are seeing drugs or alcohol use, behaving in risky ways, or engaging in unhealthy sexual activity. Left unaddressed, our students are at risk of long term learning problems, and behavioral issues, emotional distress, long term

health issues, and increased involvement with the juvenile justice system. Left unaddressed, many of our students will grow up without the ability to navigate an already complex world.

We are going to talk about our students who identify as LGBTQ+ not for political reasons or to examine anyone's belief systems. We want to talk about it because the data and research shows our LGBTQ+ students are at a significantly higher risk than other kids for developing mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, and substance abuse. They are at higher risk for social isolation which can lead to unhealthy use of substances including alcohol, marijuana and other drugs. They are at higher risk for experiencing a hostile learning environment due to bullying, uninvited physical, mental, or sexual abuse, and targeted aggression. But perhaps of most significance is our LGBTQ+ students are at higher risk and have higher rates of contemplating, attempting, and dying by suicide. Some of our students are open and vocal about who they are and others are not. Regardless, we hold responsibility in ensuring all students feel safe, both physically and social-emotionally at school.

We are going to talk about transportation and community access. Transportation and community access are crucial for our students because they directly impact a student's ability to attend school consistently, access educational opportunities, participate in extracurricular activities, and overall contribute to their academic success, especially for families without reliable personal transportation, ensuring equitable access to education regardless of their location within a community; a lack of transportation can significantly hinder a child's educational journey. Lack of access to these resources can lead to educational inequity, low attendance rates, inability to participate in diverse learning opportunities, safety concerns, social development, and mental health impacts. We hope to work together to examine factors related to transportation and community access such as distance to school, public transportation availability, safe walking and cycling routes, and school bus services.

Prioritizing transportation and community access for our students is essential for creating an equitable educational environment where all students have the opportunity to reach their full potential regardless of their geographic location or family circumstances.

We are going to talk about some hard things today and I am hoping we can have honest and respectful dialogue around things that are impacting our youth and their mental health. As stated in the invitation I sent to each of you, we are hoping to explore and enhance how community agencies are currently involved with our students, families, schools and district, and to identify key strengths and areas of improvement in the service network. By gathering this input from our community partners, we hope to assess the capacity for meaningful collaboration to improve, enhance, and streamline systems, communications, and services for our youth and families.

I hope you will join us with open minds and hearts as we engage in conversation and rally around one of our most precious assets - our youth.

I want you to know that I am fully committed to this work because everyday as I see and interact with our students walking to school, riding the bus, entering and exiting our school buildings, in our classrooms, and on our playgrounds, our students with their invisible backpacks, I think back to last November and that phone call and I say to myself, never again, not on my watch.

I will end with North Wasco's why for community collaboration:

Our Why For Community Collaboration

Many of our youth are facing significant challenges in their mental and emotional well-being, as evidenced these past few years.

We believe our schools are the heart of the community where education is seen as central, recognizing that this often takes us beyond academics, encompassing the holistic development of our students.

By partnering with community organizations, we aim to provide comprehensive support aimed at supporting our youth in their pursuits of educational excellence while also being emotionally and socially resilient.

When our youth succeed, we all succeed.