

How a team of navigators are helping Escambia County students overcome barriers

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In a year when health issues, financial woes, and instability are distracting many students from their schoolwork, the Escambia County School District is responding by expanding a program that stations social worker-type professionals in schools to fill in the gaps.

The 32 navigators are working across 34 schools this academic year in a partnership with the Children's Home Society of Florida to identify and fulfill needs students may have ranging from food to clothing to school supplies to even helping parents with job resources.

“What it really did was speak to the need of our families in the community and their need to connect with someone they feel is safe and trustworthy,” Children's Home Society Executive Director Lindsey Cannon said. “They know kids are safe in their schools and have connectivity to their teachers, sometimes it's humbling and embarrassing to ask for help but it creates a network within the school. ... It helps the whole family unit.”

The school district started the partnership two years ago, focusing only on six schools that the state deemed needed intervention. It was such a success that it's been expanding ever since, and the current two-year, \$2 million Family and Educational Rights Act grant has allowed the Navigator Program to expand to 34 schools.

While it's only a few weeks into the 2021-2022 school year and data is hard to track, school district officials say that anecdotally, the program's expansion has helped re-enroll students who fell through the cracks in the shift to virtual schooling last year, and it has helped alleviate some of the social work-type burden often put on teachers.

It's helped steer back toward some normalcy, they say, and support families who are increasingly needing access to mental health services.

“Some of the students coming back, even the adults ... we've seen more people affected by personal loss and vicarious loss and it's just a lot that people are still working through, it's overwhelming,” said Lisa Joyner, the school district's student services director.

“Here we thought this school year was going to be a back to normal, if you will, school year, then all of a sudden, COVID has a big surge again and it's still here. ... We're trying to manage the stress and deal with some of the issues that are there.”

In the 2020-2021 school year, serving only six schools in the district, the navigators fielded 5,012 student resource referrals and 2,771 parent resource referrals. That number includes requests for resources like vision and dental services, afterschool programming, mentorship, counseling, weekend food programs, shelter, transportation, and mental health.

The pandemic has also created issues in students who traditionally wouldn't need social worker help, Joyner said. There are some who thrived in the remote learning environment and now struggle to go back and others whose mental health has suffered throughout the pandemic.

"The students who, for all intents and purposes, are the ones who typically would never be on our radar just struggled with the adjustment and the loss of social interaction," she said. "It really has affected even students and families we thought would never be impacted or who in any other year wouldn't need assistance."

Cannon said although the navigators are contractors through the school district, they all work full-time on their campus and have integrated as part of the faculty at each site to build the relationships and trust needed in a role like a navigator. Currently, she said teachers have a referral form they fill out when they identify a student with a need, but Children's Home Society is working on expanding and streamlining the referral process.

"Our teachers work all day long, they're exhausted by the end of the day. ... When they know a child is going home to an upsetting situation, for them to instead be able to say to a navigator, 'I'm worried about this kid,' it's some very grassroots social work that we do," Cannon said. "A lot of times educators feel obligated to handle it all. I don't know how to teach, that's not our expertise, but what we do know is how to keep families together and keep them connected with services."

The navigators and school district officials are in the process now of sitting down with administration from each site to determine their primary need and set up initiatives tailored to that need, such as food pantries on site or backpack drives, for example.

Cannon said the hope is to continue the program indefinitely, depending on future funding.