

Bernards Township School District
Board of Education Committee Meeting: Wellness
December 21, 2023

Minutes

In Attendance: Kristin Fox, Karen Hudock, Julia Kotch, Russ Lazovick, Nick Markarian, Robin McKeon, Jean O'Connell, Tim Salmon, Stephanie Smith, Sean Siet, Stephanie Smith, Jen White

- 1. Ridge Gives back:** Julia Koch, the lead coordinator of Ridge Gives back provided an update on the status of RGB. She shared copies of the monthly newsletters that have gone out to the Ridge community. Last year 112 organizations, primarily off campus ones participated in the day. Ms. Koch along with the other 3 advisors are busy getting all their ducks in a row and will be reaching out to organizations who participated in the past as well as new ones in January and February. They are busy getting supplies, crafts and kits that will be needed for RGB on June 4th. Community support is needed. She expressed the need to spread the word that this is not just a one day event but rather a year long project. To help with this, new this year will be RGB yard signs available.

- 2. ESS Program Presentation by ESS Staff:** Melissa DeLucia (Regional Director) and Duncan Young (CEO) presented to us an update on the program. Currently they work with 120 districts throughout the states and reported many are still seeing issues socially and academically post Covid. Students are still presenting with anxiety, depression and behavior issues. They shared a few startling overall data points:
 - 22% of high school students seriously considered attempting suicide up from 16% in 2011.
 - Increased bullying and associated mental health issues
 - 30% of youth hospital admissions from 2016 to 2020 were linked to mental health needs
 - School refusal affects up to 15% of youth
 - 70% of teachers, principals and district leaders said students are misbehaving more now than in 2019.

ESS uses a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS-aligned approach) to complement and strengthen district mental health efforts. Tier 3 is what ESS provides at Ridge and WAMS Programming for students with intensive mental health challenges. It is highly structured, longer in duration and “wrap-around” in nature. It is meant to return students from outside therapeutic placements, avoid outside therapeutic placements or serve as a preventative support for students. It is a boots on the ground approach that provides clinicians at school to offer support with daily group, individual and family

therapy. Students have been identified as at risk or at risk of an out of district placement and we want to keep students in district.

Questions have been asked as to how success is measured and what data metrics are used. 6 domains are used to do so.

1. Census and Service Delivery - The census gradually increased since the beginning of the school year, particularly after receiving several referrals at WAMS by the end of MP1. Weekly contact continues to exceed the benchmark of 3X/week for a Tier 3 program, at 6.2 contacts per student weekly, suggesting strong working relationships between students and clinicians. Group therapy is the most frequent service modality as group is typically 2-5X/week for students and individual sessions are weekly to twice weekly depending on student need.

2. Clinical Progress - Students periodically receive the GAD-7 and PHQ-9 assessments to monitor clinical progress. Upon initial assessment, students reported varying degrees of depression and anxiety symptoms, such that some students might present with one or the other or might be referred for reasons other than depression/anxiety if their ratings were lower at initial assessment. By the end of the first marking period, students rated their wellness overall as more positive than in the beginning of the MP, and clinicians also recognized those positive changes with some minimal variations from the beginning.

3. Administrator and Internal Stakeholder Support- ESS works closely with district case managers, staff who engage with students. The quality of the partnership between the ESS team and school staff continues to be healthy and strong. They will be conducting parent presentations during the upcoming marking period on Depression in Children and Adolescents (12/21/23), and Supporting Students with Stress and Excessive Worry (1/23/24).

4. Academic Impact- Data from 9/3/23-11/11/23 (marking period 1) shows solid improvement including better attendance and increased GPA. Hoping to see this trend continue but ESS acknowledged that it is important to give students new to the program time to stabilize. In fact, Students in the ESS program have shown significant academic improvement with an average of 65% of students improving or maintaining in GPA or grade performance, 75% of students improving or maintaining in attendance and 100% of students improving or maintaining in discipline.

5. Parent Support- Parents reported that this program has played an essential role in keeping their children in the district.

6. Financial Stability - Total estimated savings and avoidance for 2023-24 school year \$200,000. (This equates to keeping just 2 students in the district) Thus ESS program is making a critical impact on mental health outcomes for the district, while also creating a cost savings for district financial health.

ESS has been in an intensive planning phase since August 2023 to develop a plan to

activate commercial reimbursement for services delivered in the school setting. Their analysis shows that over time commercial reimbursement could help to decrease contracted fees for Tier 3 services by up to 20-30%; variables include licensure mix of clinicians, parent opt-in rate, and mix of services. They are in discussions with various insurance carriers as to whether school-based services should be funded and expressed they will continue to advocate that they should and are hoping to pilot a reimbursement program in the fall of 2024.

ESS reported what is working well. ESS and school staff are collaborating regularly and holding bi-weekly meetings to collaborate regarding current students for stronger outcomes, and appropriately identify and refer new students to the program, leading to the ability to serve more students in need. The high utilization of services by students weekly are building strong relationships with clinicians, leading to overall decreased safety screenings, higher level of care referrals, and maintaining students in their home district. Consistently scheduled monthly parent presentations for district and monthly parent support groups for parents of students in the program are an additional supportive resource. Clinicians having strong relationships with outside providers, has led to effective treatment collaboration for students and families, and overall better outcomes.

Ess will continue to identify and refer students eligible to return from ODP, to increase the ability to return students to their home district and provide additional district cost savings. They will continue building strong working relationships with all ESS and school staff, particularly considering some recent staff changes in ESS. Student schedules will be adjusted as needed, to ensure use of group therapy several times per week to support improving overall student outcomes. They will transition new staff at RHS upon hiring and starting and will communicate key next steps and target dates for a commercial insurance pilot.

Link to presentation is [here](#).

3. Half The Story Update: Following last month's Wellness meeting, it was shared that utilizing Half the Story was being explored. A decision has been made to move forward with this program at the middle school (all grade levels). Counselors will be handling this project and will be working on lessons, content that include learning about the design of social media and why teens are targeted by social media as well as coping skills and how to take social media breaks. Digital wellness will be a focus. Grant money of \$8,000 will cover this expense. This will be rolled out in the fall of 2024.

4. Software Proposals for SEL Data Tracking:

- a. [Aperture Quote](#)
- b. [Aperture Overview](#)
- c. [Satchel Pulse Quote](#)
- d. [Satchel Pulse Overview](#)
- e. [Panorama Quote \(Option 4\)](#)
- f. [Panorama - Sample Surveys](#)

After a thorough review of software proposals for SEL Data tracking, Panorama, option

4 has been selected as it is the best fit for our k-12 district and the data integration it will allow. It was chosen because the capabilities of the dashboard are the most robust, the surveys are research based and tied to Casel. Questions can be edited, customized for ESL and special education students. The timeline is to administer surveys at the end of January in 6th-12th grade. Other districts that use this software have been very complimentary as to its benefits.

5. WAM School Spirit: A discussion was held as to how to go about building spirit at WAMS. One idea includes rebranding the school to tie it to community spirit that already exists for Ridge. Questions arose as to is it even possible to rename it Ridge Middle School and what would the next step be in order to do this, is there interest, what would associated costs be? Discussion entailed that students are all excited to be a part of Ridge, many play sports for Ridge youth travel and all wear Ridge logo rather than WAMS. The committee suggested before getting too far into this discussion, to first explore whether this is even a possibility.

Our next meeting will be January 25th.

Respectfully submitted,

Jennifer White