

it takes a village

After the deaths of three students at Hopkins West Junior High, students, staff, and the WJH community join together to support one another.

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On Feb. 22, Dr. Rhoda Mhiripiri-Reed, Superintendent, was preparing for a full-day leadership retreat with students when she got a phone call.

It was WJH principal Dr. Leanne Kampfe, urgently asking for more assistance from the district. Another student had tragically died, the second in two weeks.

In response, Mhiripiri-Reed and about 37 employees from throughout the district dropped everything and headed to WJH, all between 9 and 10 a.m. The group set up a command center and quickly established plans for staffing, district wide communication with families, and most importantly, a support plan for students.

This proved the heart of WJH's efforts to help students cope with the ramifications of the tragedies. Between Feb. 15 and March 9, three WJH students would tragically and unexpectedly pass away.

According to Mhiripiri-Reed, developing a plan to handle student's grief after each death changed with the unique circumstances. Preceding the second death, the district simply offered additional aid if Kampfe deemed it necessary.

With two deaths following, however, it became clear that the message and intention of the district had to shift.

"What we learned from the suicide professionals is that once you have two suicides within a very short period of time, then you're talking potential contagion. You have to put some conditions in place to make sure that it doesn't continue," Mhiripiri-Reed said. "So you take a firmer approach— your messages are different— because it's a different set of circumstances."

The Hopkins School District worked with Suicide Awareness Voices of Education (SAVE) to develop a plan for working with students and staff to cope with grief. Mhiripiri-Reed said that SAVE professionals emphasized the idea of com-

pounding loss, as the three deaths occurred in such close proximity.

"In our partnership with SAVE, he was coaching us through how you deal with second or third loss of life is different than how you deal with the first or second because of the complexity of compounding impact on the brain, on the mindset, on the psyche," Mhiripiri-Reed said. "And you don't want to provide the same support you did before, because kids are going to feel like 'Oh, this is how it's going to be every time,' thinking that it's gonna be a pattern."

It took a village to unite and provide WJH students with the backing they needed. More than 50 mental health professionals from Hopkins, neighboring districts, Park Nicollet, and Jewish Family and Children's Services (JFCS) came to WJH to help students cope. Even 10 therapy dogs were stationed at the school to relieve students' grief.

In only her first year as principal at WJH, Kampfe said that assistance from staff and providers outside of WJH was crucial to helping students heal.

"We had amazing support from the schools in the district, from the district office, from the families in the community, from outside service providers for mental health, just incredible help," Kampfe said. "If something that awful had to happen, I could not have imagined a better response from the outside world in terms of helping us get through it. Everything that you would hope people would do, they did."

Though much of the counseling and support came from staff, many students around WJH found ways to unite the student body during difficult times. The annual Variety Show fell on March 15, and in the wake of tragedy, Student Council used the event as a way to create unity within the student body while remembering the classmates that passed.

Linda Nyakundi, WJH freshman, has been on the Student



Council since seventh grade, and each year she has helped make the Variety Show happen.

"This year we incorporated poems and performances that were directed towards what happened because we didn't want to completely shy away from it and move on," Nyakundi said. "We had the orchestra play a piece for [their former classmates]. We also had some other students read poems, just to continue the theme of remembrance."

Emerson VanWiele Nolan, WJH freshman, first auditioned for the variety show as a seventh grader. Every year she played the guitar and sang, but when the tragedies occurred she decided to write a song about everything that has been going on.

"I wanted to write a song, but I couldn't figure out what to write it about and I had writer's block for almost a year and then after hearing about everything that day at school, I went home and wrote the song," VanWiele Nolan said. "I thought it would be good for people to hear what I have to say and what the perspective is from other people."

As students have begun to heal, some think the process has been rushed. Though WJH has followed the advice of SAVE in dealing with the trauma students are enduring, students say overarching conversations about mental health have been rare.

"They took down the posters we made and put them in a secluded place in the office and basically tried to tell us to stop and act normal and push it down, so I think everyone was trying to go about their day even if they were not ready to do so," VanWiele Nolan said. "They still haven't talked about suicide prevention at all or mental health....but so many people who have had experiences with the mental health and illnesses think that we should be talking about it."

Student Council hopes to replace the posters, which were signed by North Junior High students showing their support for their WJH counterparts, with something more permanent. Plans are already underway to purchase benches with the students' names as a lasting memorial.

On a day-to-day basis, each student is recovering and healing at a different pace. Kampfe noted that these differences have impacted staff's roles— changing from merely instruction to caring about students' overall wellness.

"The staff has been really great about being responsive to what students need. If students needed to not be focused on content, then they took a break from it; they spent time being more concerned about who we are as people," Kampfe said.

Mhiripiri-Reed says that prioritizing student wellness is paramount to improving mental health in the longer term.

"I think it would be better if we didn't have a school system where in math class you walk in, sit down, and the teacher says, 'Open your math books.' How about a system where the math teacher spends the first few minutes saying, 'How's everybody doing? Is everybody feeling good today?'" Mhiripiri-Reed said. "How about we have a system where there's an observable, measurable recognition— we're paying attention to kids as people first and students second?"

As WJH, and especially the freshman class, moves forward, their classmates' legacy will stay with them, through their memories, and new ones forged after their passings.

"I've gone to Hopkins since kindergarten, and this is the first time that the people I go to school with have been hit with something this big. We've seen it happen to grades above us and grades below us, but never to us," Nyakundi said. "It will always stay with us, and it makes us a lot stronger than we were before. It's cool to see everyone bonding again. As horrible as it was, there has been a positive outcome."

**national suicide
prevention hotline**

1-800-273-8255