

To: Coordinating Council on Mental Health in Schools
From: Natalie Zuravleff, Teacher, Woodrow Wilson High School
RE: Mental Health Awareness Club
Date: July 3, 2019

Club History

The Mental Health Awareness Club (MHAC) rose out of a need for additional mental health support for students at Wilson High School. The 2018-19 school year was my second at Wilson, and in developing deeper relationships with my students, this need became more and more apparent. The instances in which students were reporting self harm, eating disorders, general anxiety, and depression to me seemed reason enough to create additional time and space for them and those like them to process the trauma and stress they often carry around with them daily. And, while Wilson's social workers are an integral part of many students' support systems, there is only one of them per grade. Pair this lack of human capital with the social pressures of high school and the tragic loss of a student life that Wilson experienced this year, and it is no wonder that so many students are left feeling isolated and unsupported.

Out of this need, the Mental Health Awareness Club was born in March of 2019. A student of mine, who had bravely confided in me throughout the year about her struggles with mental health, brought the idea of starting a club to me and asked me to sponsor. We looped in the mental health team at Wilson as well, who agreed to have at least one social worker present at each of our weekly meetings. At our first meeting, we hosted roughly 20 students and, by our last meeting in May, had gained the participation of 50+ students

Goals and Logistics

The goal of the MHAC was never to act as a therapy session for its members. Many of the students who attended were already involved in therapy of some kind and expressed a desire, instead to focus their time in two primary ways:

1. Create and maintain judgement-free meetings to decompress and hang out in the company of peers with similar struggles. As a result of this desire, we often spent time in meetings doing crafts, listening to music, watching TEDTalks, and sometimes lending support to a member who may have had a rough day.
2. Advocate for mental health awareness and work towards breaking the silence and stigma surrounding mental health in the Wilson community. As a result of this desire, we spent time in and out of meetings planning school-wide activities to engage the community in discussions around mental health. Our biggest accomplishment in this regard were our Mental Health Awareness Month initiatives in May.

With these goals in mind, the MHAC met every Thursday in my classroom and advertised through word of mouth, by hanging posters in the hallways, and by reserving a spot on the morning announcements. There were no requirements for gaining membership; meetings were open to anyone, so long as they agreed to maintain the confidentiality of discussions in the meetings. Due to the need for this type of space, our group crossed many lines of difference. By our final meetings, we had gained the participation of girls, boys, white students, students of color, athletes, AP students, and all sorts of combinations in between.

Additional Supports and Needs to Improvement

Because social workers agreed to be present at any meeting the MHAC held, the proper supports to link students with resources was always taken care of. However, because there are only 4 social workers at Wilson, all of whom have families and responsibilities after school, we did have to cancel a couple of meetings when one of them were not able to attend. In this same vein, the lack of staff support, outside of the mental health team, was an obstacle for me, as the sponsor. Because I was primarily in charge of logistics and planning, there were times when the MHAC felt like a burden. I, of course, do not want to insinuate that other Wilson staff was not supportive or interested; however, it can be difficult to gain buy-in for after-school activities when a club is in its messy, beginning stages, and when there is no monetary incentive. Additionally, many teachers do not feel comfortable dealing with the subject matter of mental health-- not because they do not care, but because they do not feel equipped to appropriately support students.

From a leadership standpoint, I can attest to the fact that these informal, supportive spaces for students struggling with mental health can be transformative. But, in order to increase staff participation and preparedness, incentives and additional training are necessary. Though mental health clinicians are an *invaluable* and *necessary* resource for mental health in schools, hiring more of them is not the only solution that exists. When social workers are able to work in tandem with teachers that commit themselves to supporting the mental health of students, those students feel safe and supported, not only in the social workers' offices, but in the school at large.