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## Advocate for Student Mental Health

Educator turns pain into passion to help young people's mental health



Third grade teacher Caroline Wiseman, like many educators, is seeing higher than ever levels of stress, anxiety and depression among her students. Some of this, of course, is due to the pandemic and the challenges of the past year and a half. But much is the result of children and youth experiencing difficulties as they navigate the increasingly complex social and emotional environment around them.

Caroline Wiseman

Wiseman and her husband Graham know this all too well. In 2013, they lost their 15-year-old son Colin to depression and suicide. Since then, the Wisemans have actively supported mental health in schools across California. In 2019, they and friend Gail Miller founded BeingwellCA, a nonprofit based in Lafayette that raises the visibility of young people's mental health, and provides schools, parents, students and communities with workshops, toolkits and trainings to improve mental health support.

A key component of BeingwellCA's work is helping establish and fund school wellness centers. After seeing the benefits of a small wellness center at her school, Caroline Wiseman felt such a resource should be available to all children. To date, BeingwellCA has been instrumental in the creation of dozens of school wellness centers in multiple districts.

But with 1,000 school districts in California, there are many campuses that still need them. BeingwellCA is behind Senate Bill 21 by Sen. Steve Glazer (D-Contra Costa), which would establish a California mental health awareness license plate program to help the California Department of Education fund school wellness centers. If it is approved, the DMV will be authorized to issue the special license plate.

"The proceeds from the purchase of the plate will fund wellness Advocate for Student Wellness Educator turns pain into passion to help young people's mental health centers on high school campuses throughout California," says Wiseman, a 33-year teaching veteran and Mt. Diablo

Education Association member. “Mental health affects 1 in 4 people. Let’s bring mental health to light, even if it’s a traffic light.”

BeingwellCA held a contest for the license plate design, which was won by a high school student in San Ramon. Wiseman is urging the public to show support for SB 21, currently under consideration in the Senate Appropriations Committee, at [BeingwellCA.org](http://BeingwellCA.org).

Setting up a wellness center on campus requires a multipronged approach. The Wisemans and Miller spend a lot of time speaking with parent groups and PTAs, making them aware of the need. Parent foundations often donate money and help convince the school to fund a center, and sometimes funds come through grants and special programs.

“We start by informing parents,” Wiseman says. “The vast majority of schools need help with funding. We need funds from the license plate.”

While a major focus is on high school wellness centers, BeingwellCA also does outreach to elementary and middle school communities. Wiseman is happy that talking about mental health has become more acceptable.

“No one eight years ago wanted us to come on campus to talk suicide,” she says. “Now everyone agrees that elementary kids need to know how to talk about not feeling well.” Social-emotional learning (SEL) is now part of the school curriculum, though Wiseman believes it should be every day and not just every five days. “Students practice deep breathing, and the words and methods to express themselves with the person they’re angry with,” she says. “They’re learning the tools and learning about mental health. I am so thankful.”

Learn more, and show your support for SB 21, at [BeingwellCA.org](http://BeingwellCA.org).