



**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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## **CHESTNUT RIDGE PARTNERS WITH SCHOOLS TO IMPROVE YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH**

**Uniontown, PA** – Dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic, along with subsequent stay-at-home and masking orders, brought some unforeseen effects for adults and youth alike. The pandemic seemed especially hard on children, who had to deal with a number of changes in their everyday lives, including adjusting to online learning and then readjusting to in-person school.

Chestnut Ridge Counseling Services, Inc., reported that its 24/7 Mental Health CRISIS telephone line has seen an 85% increase in calls regarding children and adolescents during the pandemic. According to research compiled by Chestnut Ridge, educators ranked anxiety and academic loss as the two most concerning issues since students' return to school.

Local school officials seem to agree with that assessment.

"One of the things, through this whole pandemic, that we have learned is that a large, extra amount of time needs to be spent on mental health issues - anxiety, time with teachers, structure," Brownsville Area School District Superintendent Dr. Keith Hartbauer said.

He said Brownsville has been focused on helping students adjust to the difficulties that come with being back in the classroom.

Connellsville Area School District Director of Special Education and Pupil Services Nick Damico said he has noticed both academic loss and anxiety in the district and noted that Connellsville has some programs in place to help combat it.

"Currently, the special education office is seeing a significant amount of students in grade 1, 2 and 3 being referred for a full-scale evaluation, and they are qualifying for learning support service under Chapter 14," Damico said. "Our elementary buildings are responding to academic loss by incorporating W.I.N. (What I Need) periods that are designed to close academic gaps and build on academic areas for students that are weak."

Damico said a new program called Zones of Regulation has been implemented at the elementary level.

"This program creates a systematic approach to teach regulation by categorizing all the different ways we feel and states of alertness we experience into four concrete, colored zones. Integrating in cognitive behavior therapy, students build skills in emotional and sensory regulation, executive functioning, and social cognition," he said. "The framework is designed to help move students toward more independent regulation while also honoring and respecting each student and their unique self. The Zones of Regulation curriculum incorporates social thinking concepts and numerous printable visuals to support

students in identifying their feelings/level of alertness, understanding how their behavior impacts outcomes, problem-solving conflicts and learning what tools they can use to regulate their zones.”

In the midst of dealing with COVID-19, Brownsville was invited to take part in a project striving to revamp the public school system.

“At the same time that this was all going on, our school district was asked to be a part of the Learning 2025 Initiative,” Hartbauer said.

Learning 2025 is an American Association of School Administrators initiative calling for the holistic redesign of public schools by the year 2025.

“The focus of this is how do we create a student-centered, equity-based and future-driven district,” Hartbauer said, noting “the initiative focuses on the whole child: both the academic part and the mental health part.

Both districts have utilized federal COVID-related funding to partner with Chestnut Ridge in an effort to get mental health back on track for both students and staff members.

“We’re seeing a lot of anxiety, but we’re also seeing mental exhaustion among the staff,” Hartbauer said. “We’re asking them to do things they’ve never done before, and we’re asking them to be flexible.”

That flexibility is important, he said, because teachers today are dealing with such things as fluctuations in the number of students in class caused by COVID-19 quarantines, as well as varying levels of learning in the wake of so much time spent out of the classroom.

Chestnut Ridge provides in-school mental health therapy and support services in all Fayette County school districts, as well as the South Allegheny School District, but Brownsville and Connellsville have strengthened that connection.

Hartbauer said Brownsville has put some of its Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds toward a multi-year, nearly \$1 million contract with Chestnut Ridge to provide specialized therapists for the district’s schools. He explained that the main goal of one therapist will be to focus on restorative practices - figuring out why behaviors are happening and how to modify them. The second will focus on attendance and truancy, finding out why students are not in school and also finding ways to help bring them back.

Connellsville has contracted three counselors, Damico said.

“We have partnered with Chestnut Ridge and have contracted three elementary behavior technicians that primarily focus on our emotional support programs and students that are out in the general education setting who may need that additional support to be successful. The three technicians collaborate with both the general and special education teachers to assist with mental health support needs in their classrooms,” he said. “We have a K-12 Resource Specialist that works with families to assist them in getting mental health services. She also offers whole group lessons to our students on social skills. All seven of our buildings have at least one counselor from Chestnut Ridge that provides sessions for students on a weekly basis.”

Though the programs haven’t been in place long, administrators and educators are optimistic about their success, as is Chestnut Ridge Director of Outpatient Services David Artis.

“It’s obviously early in this process, but we are absolutely excited for the opportunity to work with Connellsville and Brownsville school districts the rest of this year and next year to provide mental health resources to meet the needs of their students,” Artis said.

There are some things parents can do at home to promote better mental health.

“I think the biggest thing we can ask parents is to continue to provide structure and accountability at home and to reinforce positive behaviors,” Hartbauer said.

Artis said observing their children and any changes is another key.

“I think being aware of changes in their kids’ behavior is first and foremost,” Artis said, explaining that parents need to pay attention to what is happening in their children’s lives and how they react to it. “I think (it’s important) to not be afraid to reach out for help, whether through the school district or another mental health professional, if they do notice changes.”

“It’s important to really kind of emphasize that the level of acuity, specifically with children and their mental health, has intensified with the pandemic.”

To learn more about Chestnut Ridge Counseling Services, visit [www.crcsi.org](http://www.crcsi.org).

To learn more about Fayette County, visit [www.FayetteCountyPA.org](http://www.FayetteCountyPA.org).

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