

## Mental health matters: empower emotional development

Mental health matters. Millions of Americans are pleading for peace, safety, fewer killings and help. Yet, all Americans must do more to have fewer mass shootings, suicides and other traumatic adverse experiences. It starts with all of us taking this task seriously enough to muster the power to:

1. Produce peace at least within (or get the help to do so),
2. Spread safety and vigilance in our homes and communities, and
3. Empower emotional development and healing engagement, somewhere, every day.

At the start of August, I participated in a Peace March. Before this march, someone asked me what are people still marching for? That was a good question.

My reply was threefold. First, I am marching to show love, give hugs and high five's. Secondly, I am mourning with those who mourn and reflecting on a kindergartener of mine who was killed in August of 2018 and other students in my 20 plus years as an education leader. Lastly, I am sharing information about new programs we created for healing engagement in our community to prevent future deaths.

St. Louis is currently the "murder capital" of the United States with over 110 homicides this summer, which is 10 percent more than last year according to the Pew Research Center. In August of 2019, St. Louis had the 11th child to die by gunfire since June. Additionally, suicide is the second leading cause of death for individuals age 10 to 34, nationally. Truly, there is vio-

lence in our silence.

What should individuals do if the problems they face won't come up from the deep, dark place inside them?

In the fall of 2018, a renowned psychiatrist and team from Washington University School of Medicine introduced me to a powerful emerging healing practice called Parent-Child Interaction Therapy for emotional development (PCIT-ED). The timing was perfect. I wanted to empower our community with this helpful practice immediately after just losing a five-year-old kindergartener on the 16th day of school from a tragic domestic violence incident.

To systemically impact change, we raised over \$800,000 and became the first school district in Missouri to make PCIT-ED available to families in the school setting. We call this initiative Families First: Empowering Emotional Development or FEED.

Today, 100 parents and children ages three to eight, across the district, receive life coaches and therapeutic family sessions. Each parent receives \$300 for completing an enlightening 12-week course equipping them to manage the most challenging child behaviors and foster appropriate deep emotional development. The program provides free transportation to all sessions and even to Washington University for EEG Monitoring, if desired, to see the growth and new neuropathways formed from personalized, positive emotional development. Plus, BJC's Raising STL Program is housed at Gore Community Center to provide free resources, class-

es, and parenting mentors for parents with children from prenatal to the cradle.

As one of Missouri's first trauma-informed districts, each school has comfort spaces and therapeutic classrooms. Today, students and staff engage daily in using bio-feedback in classrooms from deep breathing to guided imagery and mindfulness meditation to help with concentration, relaxation, self-control, discipline and peace.

Knowledge is power. We have seen firsthand how enlightening students and stakeholders with a knowledge of self leads to inner peace, academic achievement, personal growth, self-worth, safety and a value of life. As centers of healing engagement, public schools can be lighthouses for needed healing, real help and hope. As Americans, we can ensure life and liberty. This includes empowerment, enlightenment and engagement to live our best life to its fullest.

*In February 2016, Art McCoy, Ph.D. became superintendent elect for the Jennings School District and superintendent of schools as of the 2016-17 school year. Dr. McCoy earned his doctorate of philosophy in education with an emphasis in education leadership and policy studies from the University of Missouri – St. Louis, and is an alumnus of Harvard University's Leadership Institute for Superintendents post-graduate program.*



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