

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Student Mental Health Council promotes mental wellness, supports mental health in schools

In response to feedback from Harford County students and the growing concern for the mental health of youth, Harford County Public Schools (HCPS) Student Board Member Joshua Oltarzewski is leading a movement to address the mental health and wellness of students. Mr. Oltarzewski is seeking students from each middle and high school in Harford County to serve on the new Student Mental Health Council.

The Student Mental Health Council (SMHC) is a group of students dedicated to promoting mental wellness and eliminating the stigma surrounding mental health in schools. The SMHC, with guidance from HCPS Mental Health Specialist Christina Alton, will strive for each student to have access to support for stress, anxiety, depression, and other mental health challenges students are facing each day.

“It is important to take care of our emotional needs just as much as we take care of our physical needs. We will immediately go to the doctor for a physical ailment but won’t always do the same for our mental health,” says Mrs. Alton.

Students on the council will have the opportunity to engage in meaningful dialogue with the student board member, the mental health specialist, and HCPS leadership on student needs and perspectives regarding mental health. The council will also lead in the development of new mental health initiatives in Harford County schools and provide feedback on those currently offered.

To investigate how mental health influences student behavior and success, Mr. Oltarzewski formed an advisory group of high school students who are passionate about mental health. The group identified the mental health challenges students are facing and are introducing new mental health initiatives for the closing months of the 2018-19 school year. These students, along with those who will join the Student Mental Health Council in May, will continue these efforts into next school year.

“Mental health challenges have always existed, but kids are becoming more open about the topic now. That openness gives recognition to the importance of mental health and wellness in our schools,” said Haley Slaughter, a senior at C. Milton Wright High School.

Community Engagement and Social Media Campaigns

Noting the success of Bel Air High School’s Family-Teacher Connection Night (FTCN) in January, the group hopes to spark a discussion on student success and wellness by working to

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bring community engagement nights to schools across the county next school year. These events will feature educational sessions for students and parents on topics such as college planning, time management, study strategies, mental health, and more.

“Our primary goal with this event was to set our students up to be successful – not only in school, but also in life,” stated Andrew Kassouf, math teacher at Bel Air High School, in reference to the FTCN.

To expand community involvement, the group determined that social media is an effective way to engage students, staff, and parents on mental health and wellness across our schools. A system-wide social media campaign promoting mental wellness and support resources is slated to roll out over the coming weeks.

“Our administration uses social media to share school happenings and promote student events. It helps to increase awareness of the participation and enthusiasm our school community has for one another,” Alli Chenworth, junior at Patterson Mill High School shared.

Students currently in grades 6 through 11 who are interested in becoming a part of the Student Mental Health Council for the remainder of this school year and next school year are encouraged to apply now. Applications are available on www.hcps.org under the ‘Communications’ banner and are due no later than Wednesday, May 1, 2019.

Questions regarding the application can be sent to Joshua.Oltarzewski@hcps.org or Christina.Alton@hcps.org.

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