

N.H. school safety recommendations prioritize mental health

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A task force's report on making New Hampshire schools safer includes a strong focus on mental health, though one advocacy group says the suggestions don't go far enough.

After 1,000 hours of work over three months, the task force appointed by Republican Gov. Chris Sununu made 59 recommendations Friday, eight of which relate to mental health. They include a social and emotional learning curriculum in all schools, increased suicide prevention training, and the development of threat assessment task forces that could quickly intervene when students appears to be in trouble. The group also called for programs to reduce the stigma of mental illness and what to do when someone is in crisis, and focusing on supporting students with behavioral problems instead of expelling or suspending them.

Task force Chairman Perry Plummer said the goal is disrupting what's been called a "pathway to violence" that starts with a school shooter feeling aggrieved in some way and ends with an attack.

"We need to disrupt that pathway wherever we can," said Plummer, director of the state office of homeland security and emergency management. "Our biggest success and biggest goal would be to never have an attack happen ... so we quickly turned toward prevention. We did a fair amount of research, and that prevention piece really revolves around mental health services and school culture."

Plummer said he and Sununu were particularly impressed by meeting Scarlett Lewis, whose 6-year-old son was killed in the 2012 school shooting in Newtown, Conn. She created a social and emotional learning curriculum called Choose Love that teaches children how to be connected, resilient and empowered. Sununu said such programs are important not only for violence prevention, but for preventing addiction, suicide and “the toxic anxiety that has plagued our schoolchildren for too long.”

Mental health advocate Ken Norton agreed, saying the emphasis on social and emotional development has the potential to increase the well-being and learning environment of all students.

“We test every student’s ears, we test every student’s eyes, but what do we do relative to their emotional health?” said Norton, who served on the task force and is the director of the state’s chapter of the National Alliance on Mental Illness.

Becky Whitley of the New Hampshire Children’s Behavioral Health Collaborative also praised the task force but said it could have gone further in recommending additional support of the state’s emerging “system of care” approach to children with mental health needs. The state has been trying to develop a comprehensive system that both helps children and reduces reliance on ineffective, expensive interventions. Goals include coordinating care for children across multiple service systems – for example, those in the child protection or juvenile justice systems – and ensuring that services are family-driven and community-based.

“Continuing to examine gaps in the children’s behavioral health system and discuss what changes must be implemented to effect change must be included in any conversation New Hampshire has about school safety,” said Whitley, policy coordinator for the collaborative, which includes 60 organizations and hundreds of families.

The task force report acknowledged the state’s underfunded mental health system, and recommended increasing the availability of service through community mental health centers. Norton said he’s hopeful that changes made in schools could eventually spill over into other areas.

“In many ways for me looking at those mental health recommendations, they are at a micro level focused on schools, but they’re what needs to happen at a macro level in our state,” he said. “As a state we have a mental health system that’s facing a lot of challenges, and we need to address those challenges in terms of people’s ability to access timely care, in terms of discriminatory practices that prevent people from getting care and in terms of our ability as a society to support each other and promote mental well-being.”