

Behavioral health experts help educators spot warning signs for suicide in training program

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The “Signs Matter” training program addresses warning signs that could lead to suicidal thoughts as early as elementary school.

The alarmingly high rate of high school students who contemplate suicide – more than one in six – has prompted a new online training

effort to encourage educators to recognize and react to early warning signs.

Rutgers University Behavioral Health Care (UBHC) has joined with Legal One, which provides [school](#) law training to educators, and the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention to launch "[Signs Matter: Early Detection](#)." The online training course educates K-12 teachers, administrators and support staff on how to identify and address children deemed at risk of suicide and with related mental health issues.

The training examines common [mental health](#) problems and how they could present themselves through three vignettes set in elementary, middle and high schools. The training also includes expert analysis, resources for understanding a school's role in suicide prevention and a review of a school's legal obligations.

Over 40,000 Americans die by suicide each year, and it is the second-leading cause of death for young adults 15 to 24 nationwide. The team of experts that developed the course surveyed educators to determine what was missing from existing training programs.

"We learned that courses were mainly geared toward adolescents and suicide intervention, but there was nothing for younger grades," says Maureen Brogan, a clinician supervisor at UBHC. "In younger grades, the indicators are more subtle; you won't hear things like 'I want to die,' but you see other risk factors that could lead to suicidal thoughts or attempts. We decided to address the entire K-12 community because elementary [school personnel](#) can recognize trouble signs in younger students and mitigate later problems."

UBHC was invited to help develop the course because of its expertise working with children through the Traumatic Loss Coalitions for Youth, and in [suicide prevention](#) through the New Jersey Hopeline. UBHC

solicited feedback from New Jersey schools throughout the development of the program.



'Signs Matter' explores how to identify at-risk students as young as elementary school to prevent more serious issues later. Credit: Legal One

The nationwide "Signs Matter" program offers a New Jersey–specific version, which includes elements required by state law and to fulfill training requirements among school personnel to prevent suicide and bullying. The course can be similarly customized to other states upon request.

Because of the extensive number of personal interactions in a youngster's typical school day, "Signs Matter" casts a wide net. "The audience extends beyond teachers to all school personnel," says Brogan. "Cafeteria

workers, custodial staff, bus drivers, teachers' aids, office secretaries and coaches are in regular contact with students and can recognize changes in behavior. Students often will confide in someone other than a guidance counselor."

The course combines vignettes that point out how to recognize at-risk youth with guidance on how schools should proceed to help students. Each scenario represents a situation that personnel might encounter but have difficulty identifying or addressing.

The [elementary school](#) vignette presents a youngster with generalized anxiety and obsessive-compulsive disorders that manifest in a variety of ways to different school employees. The episode demonstrates how they can work together to understand what these behaviors collectively might mean.

The middle school vignette demonstrates a student struggling with sexual identity, bullying at school and pressures at home. "This vignette straddles school and home," says Brogan. "The young man is targeted at school and has a father who constantly tells him to 'man up.' He feels he has no one to turn to and is thinking about suicide, but has not acted upon those thoughts. We explain how to address this complex situation both at school and with the parents."

In the high school scenario, a high-achieving student exhibits subtle signs of suicidal thoughts. "These types of students are ones in which you don't see overt red flags like bullying or signs of depression," says Brogan. "Rather, they are on track to go to a good school, are active in school and have a lot of friends and a caring family. All these scenes show that we all should be aware that we have children in our midst who have significant problems and that we can make a difference in their lives."

Provided by Rutgers University

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