

Understanding the Toll of Trauma

Building empathy and focusing on trauma and mental health issues

SESSION *Understanding ACES and Trauma-Informed Care in the School Setting*
Presenter Somerset: Patricia Schachtner, board member

Drug addiction, domestic violence and mental illness leave invisible scars but take a real toll on children and teachers every day.

That was the message presenter Patricia Schachtner brought to her audience. She was pleased to find many school board members in attendance and spoke directly to them.

“It’s really important for you to empathize with what’s happening in your community,” Schachtner said. “Because it has a direct impact on your classroom.”

The medical examiner for St. Croix County, Schachtner is also a member of the Somerset School Board.

To learn about what types of challenges are facing students and staff, she suggested calling local law enforcement and getting a copy of the phone calls to the 911 emergency number.

For example, in 2016, there were 94,000 calls to 911 in St. Croix County. That included 873 calls for a domestic violence situation and 171 calls for assault.

If school officials take the 911 information and correlate it with the results of the district’s youth risk behavior study, they can begin to see how traumatic influences are affecting students and staff, Schachtner said.

Because mental health issues often remain hidden due to the stigma attached to them, school officials sometimes don’t understand the burden the issues place on families. Treatment brings expensive medical bills, which is a burden in and of itself.

Schachtner also warned that the state foster care system is becoming overburdened, which means children in foster care don’t always get the help they need.

“Every district has kids in foster care who are not getting all the services,” she said.

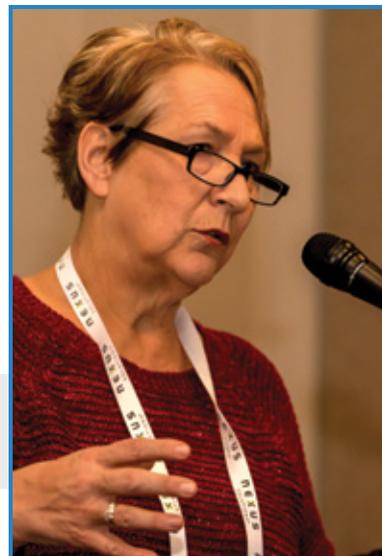
Trauma comes in many forms — for teachers, it could be the death of a student. For students or teachers, it could be the death of a parent or other family member. Such traumas can lead to bad behavior in the classroom or drug or alcohol addiction.

She warned that alcohol remains the number one addiction problem and often leads to hard drug use.

Schachtner reminded attendees that district employees may have addiction problems as well.

“It’s up to board members because you’re the employers here,” Schachtner said. “You need to advocate for Employee Assistance Plan (EAP) programs for employees.”

It is important for board members to be aware of trauma and be empathetic. There is also a need



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School District of Somerset

to teach resilience in schools to help those experiencing trauma develop coping skills, according to Schachtner.

“As we have focused on test scores, we haven’t really focused on resilience,” she said. “When it comes to doing our job, emotional and mental well being should be right up there with test scores. We need to make sure everyone has the right tools to make sure schools are successful.”

She believes a key component to recognizing and dealing with the impact of trauma on students, staff and families is to reduce the stigma around mental illness and addiction. And the place to begin is the classroom.

“It really starts with us,” Schachtner said. “Schools are the pulse of our communities. If your schools are safe, your community is safe.” ■