



## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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## STRONG DISTRICT LEADERSHIP LEADS TO AWARENESS, SUPPORT, AND PREVENTION

(BOISE) – At least a dozen times a year, Matt McCarter cringes at what he considers the most tragic aspect of Idaho public education.

That’s when the director of student engagement for the State Department of Education learns of a student suicide. “When it comes to self-harm, how do we know if our actions to support students are effective? The only thing we know for sure is when we fail to prevent a student suicide,” he said, sadly.

Between 2009 and 2013, Idaho lost 85 school-age children to suicide, of which 15 were age 14 or younger. But in 2013, a concerted effort was made to reduce those numbers. That’s when Idaho was awarded a grant to create the Idaho Lives Project, a collaboration of the State Department of Education (SDE), the Suicide Prevention Action Network of Idaho (SPAN) and other partners.

The project focuses on training school staff and adults in the community to help establish a support structure for kids that encourages them to reach out for help. But “school is not the panacea,” McCarter said. “We try to go beyond the school walls to conduct community training. We train local mental health providers, and we train kids themselves, in addition to what we call ‘gatekeepers,’ such as coaches, parents and advisors.”

Feeling like they don’t belong and being perceived as a burden are common factors that lead to student suicide, McCarter said. “Kids that feel like they don’t belong are at risk. They need to know someone cares, from a teacher to family members to friends.”

As part of the Idaho Lives anti-suicide effort, creating that sense of belonging includes trying to turn students into leaders in order to help fight the problem at a peer-to-peer level, McCarter said. “In one school, where there had been a lot of cliques and harassment issues, the student leaders decided to make sure that no student sat alone at lunch. It’s a small thing, and it didn’t cost anything, but it could make a huge difference.

At this year’s annual Idaho State Prevention and Support Conference, where educators gathered to learn techniques that can, among other things, lead to effective suicide prevention, two individuals were given a special honor for “making a difference in the lives of youth” – Kim Bedke, the federal programs director at the Cassia School District, and Jennifer Anderson, a counselor last year at the Minidoka School District.



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After holding a poorly attended suicide prevention training last fall as part of a larger school staff in-service program, Bedke decided more needed to be done. Having been close to several persons who died at their own hands, “when you see the disastrous effect that has on friends and family, I felt like I had to do something,” she said. “I had to be a part of the solution.”

Working with her superintendent, Dr. Gaylen Smyer, and the Cassia school board, she got them to approve an early release day in January so more staff could attend a second session she organized. Almost all the certified staff, as well as paraprofessionals and technology staff took part. But she also got the bus drivers, custodians and cooks to attend, because they can have great value in providing parts of the support structure students need to turn away from suicide. “Many times they’re the first ones kids turn to when they’re having problems,” she noted.

“It was the largest community training we’ve ever had,” McCarter said. “There were people there from Burley and at least four other surrounding towns. Kim’s tenacity and passion for youth made all that happen.”

Bedke also made arrangements for the media to be there to get the story out to the public, and arranged and advertised for a community training session that evening. A significant portion of that advertising was aimed at the Hispanic community and she made arrangements for translators to be at the town meeting. About half of the 100-150 people who showed up had limited English skills, but their concern for the problem was “clearly evident,” in the questions they asked, she said. Several pastors who attended told her they’d be offering suicide prevention programs in their churches. “Hopefully, we can empower people,” to recognize the symptoms and get those considering suicide the support they need, Bedke said.

Anderson did something similar for the Minidoka School District. “We didn’t do a community training there, but the school training was powerful,” McCarter said. Over 380 Minidoka School District staff attended a 2 ½ hour training on March 17. Minidoka superintendent Dr. Kenneth Cox was also extensively involved. “They truly wanted to see that they didn’t miss anyone with this training and because some of the staff couldn’t attend on March 17, they hosted a second session May 29 to train support staff (cafeteria staff and bus drivers) and anyone else who couldn’t make it in March,” McCarter said.

“These activities don’t organize themselves. It takes someone to go above and beyond,” like Bedke and Anderson, McCarter noted. “Both of these individuals are exuberant supporters of the SDE’s Idaho Lives Project and have gone out of their way to try to make a difference for vulnerable students and the staff who are committed to helping them.” And across Idaho, like Bedke and Anderson, more and more teachers, administrators and districts are taking up the call to emphasize the problem and its solutions.

Within Idaho’s schools, the State Department of Education’s programs offer training for the entire staff, “from the janitor and cafeteria staff to the principals,” McCarter said. “At the end of the day, our goal is for every kid to have a trusted adult they can go to at school or in the community.”

Furthermore, he said, “if you work with youth in any capacity, you should learn how to recognize kids in distress.” That involves not only being able to identify risk factors, but working to mitigate the risks in advance. “Too often, we identify issues after the fact. The trick is to prevent



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those issues in the first place” by promoting programs that help students develop a sense of self-worth and personal value.

“Kids need to know that there is something about them that makes this world better because they are in it. Kids can get the perception that – ‘I get picked on, my parents always yell at me or seem disappointed, I’m always in the principal’s office, clearly my death is more valuable than my existence to those around me’ – so we need to show them their strengths, their capabilities,” McCarter said.

“We need to get kids to understand how important they are, that every one of them has something special to offer, that there is something that makes this world better because they are in it. We need to find opportunities for them to shine. That’s a big change, but it’s what we’re focusing on.”

“We also need to help prevent destructive behaviors. Self-destructive behavior, in its extreme, looks like suicide.” McCarter said. “Our goal is to get students to recognize that there’s a lot of help out there.

“The problem is there’s a stigma attached to seeking help for mental health issues like depression. We come from tough, self-reliant pioneer people. That means there’s a tendency not to reach out in time of need. We are trying to change the stigma associated with seeking help,” he said.

For more information on warning signs, risk factors and sources of help, go to the Suicide Prevention Action Network of Idaho website at <http://www.spanidaho.org/warning-signs>, or contact the Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255).

The SDE and SPAN Idaho also has published a guide for school responses to student suicide issues based on best practice and research. That document can be located at: <https://goo.gl/Ot1Vzg>.

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