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## **To Tackle the Student Mental Health Crisis, We All Need to Step Up**

The statistics for suicide in Idaho are glaring, and when you know that each data point represents a child and a grieving family, they are tragic. Our statewide, open discussions about suicide awareness, prevention and subsequent postvention are ongoing and taking more prominence.

There has been progress in how we have these conversations. Though adults are better than ever at openly talking about mental health and suicide, we are still grappling with who is responsible for how, when and where we help our students.

National statistics depict troubling trends for our youth. Fewer students graduate from high school having obtained a driver's license. Fewer students graduate having worked for pay. More students are delaying life milestones outside of the virtual or online world. Many of our young people, who are in the lowest risk time of their lives, seem to be withdrawing from, well, life.

In addition to the severe mental health issues some teens experience, statistics show that anxiety has increased for some age groups by 92 percent since 2010 and teen depression, especially in our girls, by 145 percent. Teen suicide for boys has gone up 161 percent, nationally.

We talk a lot about the emotional impact Covid had on our youth and yet, stats show this subject has been a brewing problem accelerated and exacerbated by a pandemic, smart phones and gaming.

By any standard, this is a crisis.

I am updated on student deaths as they occur, and since my first week on the job, I have had regular reports. I always pause, say a prayer for the family and then consider the appropriate role for schools.

This is a tricky question to answer.

What *is* the school's role? Teachers don't buy students their cell phones, but parents expect schools to manage them. Teachers aren't trained therapists, but parents look to schools for answers on how to deal with emotional issues.

Schools have also heard very clearly that there are topics and conversations that parents aren't comfortable with the school being involved in. However, this doesn't stop students from approaching teachers, staff and other trusted adults when they need help with complex issues.

So what is the right balance? As a state, we are still trying to figure that out.

Here's what most schools offer: training for staff on early warning signs, cultivating open lines of communication for students and connections for parents to community-based resources and professional help. Even these basic things take time, money and effort.

Ultimately, schools want to support and facilitate close collaboration with the student's main support system - their parents and guardians.

Although this issue comes to school with kids, it's a family issue, and parents are looking for answers too. A recent report highlighted a communication gap between Idaho's parents and kids. When asked if important conversations about drug use had taken place, sixty nine percent of parents said yes, while only twenty eight percent of kids agreed. In many ways, simple communication can be an effective tool for creating powerful connections in homes around important conversations. Oh, how we need more talking and listening in our families.

We believe families are doing their best and not all teens have suicidal ideation. We know that growing up is hard and this generation faces their own unique challenges. There is a place and role for schools, but they can't solve the problem during the school day. Good school policies are needed, but schools aren't an extension of the parent/guardian. Let's have a statewide conversation that honors these roles as the best offense for Idaho's kids.

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