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**Guest opinion: Don't rely on luck to address teens' challenges.
Invest in social-emotional learning**

By Stacie Lawler

Idaho Teacher of the Year 2020

(BOISE) – Our lives are defined by moments, especially the ones we never see coming. My compelling moment – the moment that gave me my mission as an educator -- was on an October afternoon in 2014. I remember putting on my backpack as I watched my athletes load the bus after cross country practice. My phone kept ringing and ringing, and I struggled to find it in my backpack. I had missed three phone calls from my 18-year-old son Keegan, who was a freshman at BSU.

When we connected, Keegan told me he had wrecked his friend's car. He was fine, but there was enough damage that police were involved. I thought about money and how his insurance rates would go up. Bottom line, I did not respond kindly to my son. We hung up and by the time I walked the short distance to the high school to find my husband, Keegan called back. By the end of our conversation Keegan told me he wanted to die. Life gets a little blurry here, but one thing is so very clear looking back: I am one of the lucky ones.

I am one of the lucky ones because:

- My son wanted and finally asked for help.
- Family members quickly stepped in to help. My brother in Boise brought Keegan to his home. My sister, a mental health counselor, told me to find a counselor on BSU's campus and call Keegan's friends to make sure they knew to never let him be alone.
- The counselor knew he needed more help and recommended he go to an inpatient hospital.
- When we brought Keegan home, my dad moved in with us to make sure Keegan had 24-hour supervision.
- We found a psychiatrist immediately, despite warnings that it would be a long wait. The secretary who answered the phone knew us and got him in the next day.
- Keegan had not turned to drugs or alcohol to cope with his depression.

- He was willing to try new meds and deal with all the side effects of the ones that didn't work.
- He is alive!

My daughter, Keelie, has a plaque in her room that reads: "If God brings you to it, He will bring you through it." She had her first panic attack a month and a half after Keegan came home, when she was a sophomore in high school. We were in Salmon for Thanksgiving Break when she woke me in the middle of the night. To be honest, I had no idea what was happening. But once again I am one of the lucky ones.

- My sister understood what had happened and gave me strategies to help her until we could find a counselor.
- When Keelie's anxiety affected her ability to be in the classroom, the office staff at Timberlake made a safe place for her near them. Teachers sent work to the office and worked with her to keep her grades up.
- Basketball coaches worked with our family to come up with a plan that would keep her playing.
- Keelie has a very strong faith and through that faith she found strength.

My kids were lucky. Keegan graduated from U of I, got married this summer and is now pursuing his MFA at Western Washington. Keelie played in four state championship basketball games in high school, graduated valedictorian and is now a junior at Montana Tech studying Data Analytics.

What if:

- All Idaho children were as lucky as mine?
- They had access to all the same resources my children had?
- They weren't afraid to ask a trusted adult for help?
- The adults around them knew what to look for and how to help?
- We could change the stigma associated with mental health?
- We weren't ashamed to raise our hands in a crowded room when asked if we have ever been affected by a mental health problem?
- Everyone knew it is OK to not be OK?
- We have a real chance right now to do something about it?

We do have that chance, throughout Idaho. The State Department of Education plans to establish training for educators and school staff throughout the state in social-emotional learning and the conditions for learning. Superintendent of Public Instruction Sherri Ybarra is asking the Legislature for \$1 million in next year's budget, and that seems a small price to pay.

As Teacher of the Year, I have made it my mission to combat the stigma around mental health. At first, it was hard for me to share my family's personal stories in class and with colleagues, but the response was astounding. Kids were relieved to know they weren't alone. Teachers hungered for the ability to address the growing social and emotional needs of today's students.

By fighting the stigma around mental health and training educators to improve the conditions of learning, we can have an Idaho in which we don't need to be lucky in order to keep our children safe.

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Attached: Photo of Stacie Lawler