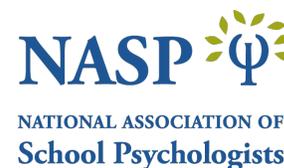


Communiqué

ADVOCACY

By Christina Conolly, Ciara Caprara, Michelle Palmer, Cheree Price, Toria



Virtual Opportunities for Advocating for Mental Health Needs During COVID-19

Simpson, & Julia Fenner

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Each year, Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) in Maryland hosts a mental health awareness fair to promote services, connect families with resources, and destigmatize topics. The event started in 2016 and was hosted by the Montgomery County School Psychologists' Association (MCSPA). Due to the success of the event, MCPS requested to hold this event annually in conjunction with MCSPA. Since then, a variety of mental health professionals within the school district and community have come together to continue the important work of the fair.

MCPS is one of the largest school districts in the nation, with 165,000 students in attendance during the 2019–2020 school year. Each year, the annual mental health awareness fair grows in attendance, with approximately 200 people attending in 2019. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, MCPS and MCSPA decided to host this event virtually for the first time. In the beginning, the planning team felt that having an event virtually may actually be easier than having it in person. The team soon realized that while the work was different, it was equally challenging to accomplish, and collaboration was key. In the end, the planning group determined that the virtual event would not just be one event, but virtual sessions broken up over one week. MCPS Mental Health Awareness Week (www.MCPSmentalhealth.org) was officially a go!

MCPS Mental Health Awareness Week included a mixture of different virtual sessions that were recorded using Zoom. The week started with a keynote speaker on Monday. Tuesday through Friday had breakout sessions that matched the daily theme. The week closed with a live mental health resource fair that featured multiple county agencies and a Q & A session. The event was promoted through social media and emails to families with a "Daily Happenings" video. The videos included an interview of the high ranking school district officials and members of the Board of Education discussing different videos being promoted each day. Over 200 people attended the live virtual resource fair (with over 1,200 YouTube views and counting after the event ended), and the keynote speaker's presentation has had over 1,000 views. The website has had more than 20,000 views. MCPS and MCSPA took the "Power of Possibility" out of the circumstances that this

pandemic has given them. Holding the event virtually has reached more families than ever anticipated. One of the biggest takeaways from having the event virtually was for the student community to feel open to asking questions about sensitive topics and gaining skills about how to recognize red flags and ask for help. Below are some tips for hosting a virtual mental health advocacy event.

Start planning early. Prioritize identifying the presentation topics and securing presenters so that there is plenty of time for the presentations to go through a vetting process by your organization. Our event took us 2 months to plan and we wish that we had 4 months. Think about what topics in your community have a stigma attached to them, or are of most concern to students, staff, and families. We developed a list of topics and then developed themes for each day to organize materials on the website. With an abundance of content available, the daily themes were a way to help participants choose relevant videos.

Determine your recording platform. Use a consistent online platform (e.g., Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Google Meet) for people to record their sessions. Presenters have to be comfortable recording themselves presenting a topic. Provide training to staff members who want to present, but may not be comfortable with the platform. You can use the same platform to record brief daily highlights or promotional materials to highlight to the community videos that will be promoted.

The shorter the video the better. Video presentations should be no more than 10–20 minutes in length. The public tends to watch short videos more frequently than longer ones. These are brief overviews of a topic with practical advice and suggestions for families and are not an in-depth training for professionals. Avoid jargon and terminology that is not student and family friendly when recording.

Vet everything before it goes public. The presentations also need to be recorded ahead of time so that they are ready to upload to the website or social media platform on the designated release day. It can take 2 weeks or longer to vet all submissions.

Collaborate with a variety of professionals. Since mental health includes aspects of physical health, consider asking other professionals to provide sessions related to their expertise, such as yoga, Zumba, or healthy eating. Ask mental health professionals working in colleges and universities to volunteer to provide a session. If you work in a linguistically diverse community, identify professionals who can provide sessions in other languages. Think creatively about whom in your district can develop a session.

Reach out to community partners. It is important to make sure your audience knows what resources are available to them outside the school system, so engage with your local health department, mental health agencies, employee assistance programs, and other community resources. This will help families to know what resources are available to them in the community during their time of need.

Teamwork is key. While everyone may not want to participate in the planning phase, having smaller groups of people available to do some of the leg work will ensure that you meet your deadline. Have a small group of people to vet the videos or edit while others are working on the overall planning.

Know your audience. A virtual platform allows you to reach a wide range of people who can engage in content at their own pace. Clearly identify videos that are for students versus parents so that people, especially students, do not have to search through numerous videos for content that is relevant to them.

Answer people's questions. Have some way for people to get answers to their questions. Whether you set up a live event or a system where people can submit questions to be answered at a later time, people still like to connect and have many questions about how to cope with current struggles.

Organization/project management is critical. Develop a file sharing system and a spreadsheet to keep track of all of the videos coming in, who created them, who vetted them, when they are approved, and when they are uploaded to the website. Having a file sharing system (e.g., Google Drive) can help staff upload the raw videos when the file may be too large to send via email.

Determine the website to host all of the sessions on. Work with your information technology or communications staff to have a dedicated website for your event. Create an easy URL name or use a Bit.ly to create a shorter link. Create a banner on the district homepage to highlight the site during the event period and before the event begins to help promote it. Ensure that the website stays up after the event in order for community members to continue accessing resources and information.

Emergency mental health numbers on the website. Many individuals are coming to your site experiencing a mental health emergency and are looking for how to get help. Include information on any district tip lines, hot lines, and the suicide prevention lifeline phone numbers. Do not ask for anonymous feedback about the event. Always ask for the individual's name and contact information if the feedback or questions look like someone is at risk for suicidal, self-injury, or homicidal ideation.

Capitalize on social media. There are many platforms available to advertise your activities, presentations, and speakers. Consider planning ahead for what you want to say and when or how often to say it in order to promote your event. Consider platforms that will reach the most students and families. Adults and students typically use different social media platforms.

Develop a plan for engaging your student community. For example, we offered Student Service Learning hours, which are a graduation requirement in Maryland, for students who watched some of the video sessions and completed a follow-up activity virtually. Over 800 students participated in this opportunity. A number of students also attended the live virtual fair and asked relevant questions to gather information to help themselves and their classmates.

Advertise the event regularly and often. This includes emails and letters to families, weekly school announcements, email communications to staff, and word of mouth to spread awareness and details of the event.

In the end, make sure to make any event your own and be flexible in developing new strategies for engagement with your community. You never know what opportunities will arise when you open up your mind to new virtual possibilities.

All authors are employed by the Montgomery County Public Schools, Rockville, MD. CHRISTINA CONOLLY, PsyD, is the director of psychological services; MICHELLE PALMER, NCSP, is the coordinator of psychological services; and CIARA CAPRARA, CHEREE PRICE, NCSP, TORIA SIMPSON, PhD, NCSP, and JULIA FENNER, NCSP, are school psychologists.

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4340 East West Highway, Suite 402, Bethesda, MD 20814

P: 301-657-0270 | Toll Free: 866-331-NASP | F: 301-657-0275

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