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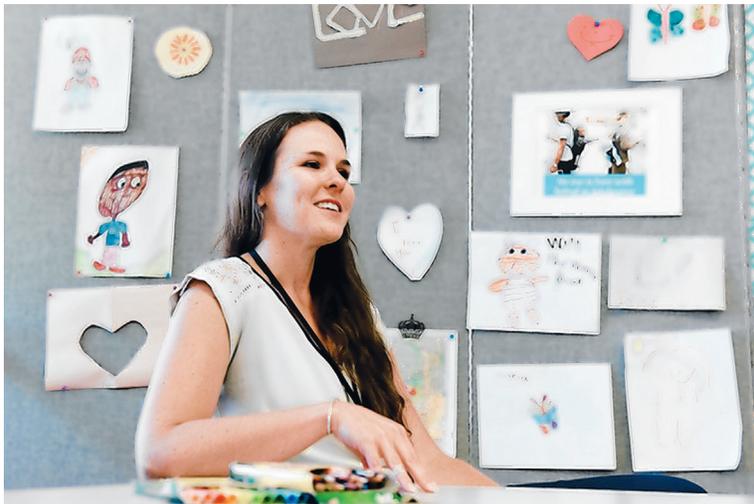
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ERICA MILLER/GAZETTE PHOTOGRAPHER

Julie Lapham, a mental health counselor with Northern Rivers, sits at her desk inside Milton Terrace Elementary in Ballston Spa on Tuesday.

CAPITAL REGION

Districts bringing mental health clinics into schools

BY ZACHARY MATSON
Gazette Reporter

In a large, airy, re-purposed classroom inside Ballston Spa's Milton Terrace Elementary School, behind a set of tall partitions covered in student art, Julie Lapham, a mental health counselor with Northern Rivers, goes to work.

Just like the school's teachers, administrators and social workers, Lapham arrives each morning ready to meet with students. But she brings expertise the educators do

not: As a certified mental health counselor, Lapham focuses on students' mental health needs, treating everything from stress and depression to attention-deficit disorders and disruptive behaviors.

"Being right here in the school allows us to address issues that might be immediate," said Lapham, who grew up in the Lake George area and is in her second year at Milton Terrace. "[A student] can just walk down the hall and come see me."

Lapham has a caseload of around 25 students and families among the district's four elementary schools. The district has a similar clinic for families in the secondary schools, allowing students to stay in school for appointments with counselors and strengthening the ties between mental health providers and educators.

Starting in the fall, more area districts will make space in their schools to house

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Health

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mental health counselors, as Northern Rivers, working with the Capital Region BOCES, looks to expand its services in area schools.

"We are growing because the need is increasing, and so is the realization from the school districts," Northern Rivers Family of Services CEO Bill Gettman said of students' mental health needs.

Gettman said Northern Rivers is in discussion with as many as 10 area districts interested in establishing mental health clinics, which can range from a single counselor making regular visits to a school to space set aside for a full-time counselor, depending on a district's needs and resources. Districts contract with Northern Rivers to provide a base level of services, and Northern Rivers also bills private and public health insurance plans for services they provide students.

Some of the districts, including Niskayuna, Schalmont and Guilderland, included plans to partner with Northern Rivers in their annual budget process. This

year, Capital Region BOCES also took a more active role.

"Pick up a phone and call any district in New York state, and I would be shocked if they didn't see a need for these services," said Capital Region BOCES Senior Executive Joe Dragone, who oversaw school-based mental health services as an administrator in Albany and Ballston Spa school districts.

Dragone said the fundamental part of the Northern Rivers model is locating a mental health specialist directly inside a school. That proximity strengthens connections with teachers and other school staff, eases the difficulty of getting a student to a medical appointment, improves attendance and provides expertise for students' crisis or mental health emergencies.

"You get children and families to participate more frequently; you get kids who do not miss school," Dragone said. "This way you have the services where the children are and where the families are."

Focusing on mental health Schools have increasingly turned their attention to bolstering mental health support in recent years. Nationwide, experts and educators point to supporting mental health as critical in preventing school shootings and other violent outbursts. Teen suicide rates have also climbed in recent years.

"That has put a spotlight on mental health education in the schools," Gettman said

of widely covered school shootings.

In New York, a new requirement that districts include mental health education as part of the curriculum across grade levels takes effect in the fall. The confluence of factors has made the school-based clinic model ripe for expansion, Gettman said. Ramping up the focus on mental health and placing mental health counselors directly in schools can also strengthen awareness among children and families that mental health issues, like any disease, stem from root illnesses, and that those ailments can be diagnosed and treated.

"The stigma [around mental health diagnoses] is still alive, and we need to drive that out," Gettman said. "Mental health issues cross all lines: academic, social, religious, poverty, not poverty, race."

Northern Rivers, an umbrella organization that includes Parsons and Northeast Parent and Child centers, has been in the school-based mental health business since establishing a clinic in Albany in the 1990s. Nine districts have since partnered with Northern Rivers to create school-based clinics, including Schenectady, South Colonie, Ballston Spa and Saratoga Springs. Cohoes opened a clinic in November and is considering expanding it in the fall. Dragone said he knew of eight school districts that were looking to work with

Northern Rivers, though he did not list the districts that are still hashing out the details.

Each district's partnership with Northern Rivers will look different, depending on the district's needs, Gettman said. Northern Rivers, however, is preparing for a broad expansion. This school year, the organization's nine school-based clinics served between 300 and 400 students. Next school year, Gettman expects to serve twice as many across the region, resulting in at least a dozen new positions. In Ballston Spa and other districts, the mental health services are offered throughout the school year and summer.

Niskayuna, which set aside about \$30,000 to establish a mental health clinic next school year, plans to host a mental health counselor at Craig Elementary School. That clinic will serve students in all of the district's schools, including the middle schools and high school. The new mental health counselor will serve an initial caseload of about 25 students, drawn from schools and grades across the district.

John Moskov, Niskayuna's director of pupil personnel services, said district officials have seen a spike in student mental health needs in the past five years, with such issues as stress and anxiety, depression and other needs both diagnosed and undiagnosed. When students struggle with mental health issues, Moskov said, they may disengage from academic work or cause disruptions in class. They also struggle to build relationships with classmates and teachers.

"They are struggling to access their education because of a variety of mental health reasons," Moskov said of the students. "It is definitely a little bit of catch up; I will fully admit we were caught off guard with the pace and number of students with needs."