

Merrimack schools implementing system based on social and emotional learning

New curriculum:

It teaches skills such as empathy, emotional management and problem-solving.

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MERRIMACK — A new curriculum focused on social and emotional learning will soon be implemented at the local elementary schools — an initiative that has been several years in the making.

“Our job is to provide the optimal learning conditions and to promote the optimal learning environment for kids,” said Julie DeLuca, assistant principal at Thorntons Ferry Elementary School.

DeLuca, a member of the committee that helped form the new curriculum, described social and emotional learning as the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel empathy for others and establish and maintain positive relationships while making responsible decisions.

“We are a school, and everything we do is purposeful and tied to academics and learning,” she told the school board last week.

The curriculum will include 18 to 20 structured lesson plans that are developmentally appropriate for students in kindergarten through fifth grade. The units of study will address skills for learning, empathy, emotional management, problem-solving and executive functioning.

The lessons will focus on conversations about how students cooperate, problem solve and work as a team, according to DeLuca, who said these skills are also necessary for adults in their working environments.

“It is not mental health

treatment,” she stressed. “There is this misperception, and I know because it is a growing field and I understand, but we are not treating students for mental health. We are not screening students for mental health disorders. This is a skill-based program. Skills that are connected to career and college readiness.”

Shannon Barnes, school board chairman, said school officials are looking forward to implementing the new social and emotional learning curriculum in the fall. She believes it will create a positive learning environment for students while also helping them become well-rounded individuals ready for higher education.

Bill Sawyer, a local teacher, said some of the concepts have already been piloted and the students are making significant strides.

“I don’t have any question at all that this is valuable,” said Sawyer, adding students are now more confident when they become frustrated because they have learned the tools needed to advocate for themselves, whether that is asking a teacher for a break or even asking to go for a quick walk to calm down.

Teachers will soon undergo professional development workshops to prepare for the new curriculum, and local parents will be informed throughout the process, said school administrators.

“We are continuing to grow,” said John Fabrizio, director of student services for the district. “... We need to look at the skills. We need to look at how we get along with each other and how we react to each other.”

All of these changes will attempt to improve the learning environment in the classroom and prepare children for the real world, Fabrizio said.

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