

Trumbull school teaches suicide prevention

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TRUMBULL — Freshmen entering Trumbull High School this fall can expect to study such customary subjects as reading, writing and arithmetic.

They can also expect to study something perhaps even more serious — Signs of Suicide.

Under a plan approved last week by the Board of Education, the roughly 600 students will participate in a state-funded program to decrease the potential of suicide attempts.

As part of health class, the students will learn about warning signs and that it's OK — in fact, important — to bring them to the attention of appropriate adults.

"If you see a kid fall down the steps and twist an ankle, you get help right away," said Chris Brown, the school district's chairman of psychology and social work. But he said an emotional crisis doesn't necessarily elicit the same reaction.

"We hope just a little bit of education will help kids come forward," he said.

The state Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services will provide the materials and training for the educators involved. The University of Connecticut School of Public Health will evaluate its impact.

Under the plan, all ninth-graders this year and next will receive the instruction as part of health class, unless their parents direct their exemption.

But depending on the evaluation, it could be expanded to other grades as well.

"My hope is that it's going to help students to realize if they have concerns about how a friend is doing, there are large numbers of adults in the schools and the community they can go to," he said. He said he wants them to know "that's OK and that they're doing the right thing."

Brown said the schools have had a suicide-prevention policy, calling for personnel to refer students who might have issues — such as exhibiting suicidal thoughts in essays — to counselors' attention.

"What's different about this is, this is educating students about what they might see in their peers," Brown said of the program.

He stressed this was not a program to screen kids, but to educate them.

Brown said that over his first two years in Trumbull, about 10 to 15 students annually have been referred for conferences based on warning signs.

Kids who notice a friend having a problem are sometimes worried about being considered a tattletale, but Brown said that doesn't tend to be what happens.

"In my experience, kids are real grateful their friend came up and said, 'My friend is having a difficult time,' " he said.

Susan Silvers, who covers Trumbull, can be reached at 330-6426.

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