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Ocean City High School Awarded AtlantiCare Grant to Support New Student Club Focused on Mental Health

OCEAN CITY, NJ (Dec. 23, 2020) – Ocean City High School has been awarded a \$1,000 grant through the AtlantiCare Healthy Schools, Healthy Children initiative. The grant will support the high school’s launch of a new student-led club in the new year, focused on mental health. The club will be affiliated with the Our Minds Matter (OMM) movement, which aims to change school culture around mental health and arm youth with tools to build and maintain healthy minds and bodies.

“The Ocean City School District began work in 2014 to take significant steps to address mental health as a standard component of our students’ learning experiences,” said OCSD Superintendent Kathleen Taylor, Ed.D. “However, most of the steps we have taken so far are led by administrators and teachers, and the supports we have introduced are mostly utilized during the school day. The introduction of the Our Minds Matter student club is the district’s next step, and a needed one, to enable students to lead some of the programming into discussions and activities that they will find most beneficial and to do so after school hours and virtually. We know this year more than ever that school-led programming is not bound by space nor time, and neither are the needs of our youth to feel connected and supported.”

Following OCSD Board of Education approval, the OCHS Our Minds Matter club will begin with a small group of student leaders who will organize recruitment efforts. These club leaders will lead weekly meetings either in-person or virtually, depending on the recommended COVID-19 precautions at the time. The club will then move forward, hosting monthly activities to promote mental health and wellness to the entire high school community. The OCHS OMM club also will organize weeklong campaigns a few times throughout the school year focused on one aspect of mental health, such as breaking the stigma around talking about mental health struggles or sharing coping strategies during periods of high stress. The Ocean City School District anticipates this club having longevity, because it has strong support from district and high school administration, as well as the Board of Education.

The AtlantiCare Healthy Schools, Healthy Children grant will support OMM club leaders in planning activities that reinforce healthy behaviors. Club-sponsored activities may include after-school yoga or meditation, as well as guest lectures or workshops to help students develop coping skills to better manage stress and anxiety and to practice self-care. With the grant support, the student leaders now have increased freedom to plan activities that appeal to the whole student body, which will make a greater impact on their school culture around mental health and create an impressive social support system for OCHS students.

“The pandemic has emphasized the need for a student group focused on promoting mental health as many face fear, anxiety, depression and loneliness as a result of the health crisis,” said OCHS Wellness Team Leader Jill Berenato. “The Our Minds Matter club will allow students to gather virtually, if needed, to begin activities immediately after the club is Board approved at the start of 2021.”

OCSD added structure to its mental health programming in 2015, with the formation of an Ad-Hoc committee on Youth Mental Health. The committee developed a formal plan to promote youth mental health awareness, with key action steps including the adoption of the Lifelines curriculum into OCHS health and PE classes and implementation of the STOPit app. This technology enables students to anonymously ask questions of professionals or report a friend in need of intervention. Among the steps most recently taken is the renovation of a classroom into a Wellness Room as a safe space for students to focus on reducing stress and anxiety, healthy coping strategies and self-care. The OCHS Wellness Room is popular with students who are in school in the current hybrid model and will serve as a meeting place after school hours for the new OMM club.

“We look forward to launching our student-led Our Minds Matter club and appreciate the support we have received from AtlantiCare’s Healthy Schools, Healthy Children grant program to help us start strong,” said OCSD Curriculum Coordinator Lauren Gunther, Ed.D. “Our research has shown that this is something our students will certainly benefit from, and this funding will help us move forward quickly, at a time when the need for activities and support systems promoting positive mental health is so great.”

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