

Office of the Superintendent of Schools  
MONTGOMERY COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS  
Rockville, Maryland

June 26, 2019

MEMORANDUM

To: Members of the Board of Education  
From: Jack R. Smith, Superintendent of Schools  
Subject: Be Well 365 (05-14-19-06)

During the *Be Well 365: Physical, Social, and Psychological Well-being of all Students* discussion, Board members requested the following:

**Question A**

Mrs. Evans requested that copies of Ms. Pomper's grief counseling documents be sent to the Board.

**Response**

The requested documents are included as Attachment A and Attachment B.

**Question B**

Ms. Wolff requested information regarding the communication plan for this program.

**Response**

The Be Well 365 Work Group, with direction by staff in the Office of Communications, plans the following methods of informing parents/guardians, students, teachers, school staff, and the community about Be Well 365:

- Ongoing collaboration with employee associations, parents/guardians, and community/stakeholder groups;
- Be Well 365 webpage launch and promotion;
- Ongoing professional learning opportunities;
- Print materials;
- Digital platforms (e.g., *The Bulletin*, *QuickNotes*);
- Social media (Twitter, Facebook); and
- Back-to-School Fair on August 24, 2019.

**Question C**

Ms. Wolff requested the creation of a one-pager “Need Help” flyer listing the available resources for each school, including the names and contact information for the program contacts.

**Response**

The creation of the flyer has been discussed as an option to develop the most effective method to share information with all families with staff in the Office of Communications and the Public Information Office. Staff is considering web-based and electronic options that would be most accessible for families.

**Question D**

Ms. Wolff requested that the new one-page flyer be given to elementary schools for dissemination at the kindergarten orientations in addition to the other entrance materials.

**Response**

Please refer to the response for Question C. Additionally, the suggestion to provide a printed sheet of the resources is one that may be included in suggestions for principals to consider.

**Question E**

Mrs. Smondrowski requested that staff put a link to the student mental health forum that was held at Julius West Middle School on the website for easier access to the information by the community.

**Response**

The Mental Health forum was not filmed by Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) Television in its entirety. Videotaped segments (approximately two minutes in length) of the event may be found as *MCPS Moments* at the following link: <https://youtu.be/QLnYFjfMdgc>.

**Question F**

Mrs. Smondrowski requested that the student action plan document be distributed to the student body.

**Response**

The student action plan is included as Attachment C. Each school’s instructional leadership team will complete the student action plan.

**Question G**

Ms. Wolff requested information regarding the local wellness councils and who their leaders are for each school.

**Response**

Mrs. Marla R. Caplon, director, School Wellness Initiatives, meets with school administrators individually to discuss the creation of local school wellness councils. Together, they review MCPS Regulation, JPG-RA, *Wellness: Physical and Nutritional Health*, discuss compliance assurance, and create an action plan for the wellness council and subsequent goals. The principal identifies the wellness lead at the school. Based on potential wellness goals, the lead may be the physical education teacher. In some schools, the counselor or a teacher may assume the role. The principal or assistant principal may choose to lead the committee. In some cases, a parent/guardian may have the role of committee chair. The committee comprises a variety of stakeholders, including community members, parents/guardians, and students, if available. Once the school is assured that it is compliant with the MCPS wellness regulation, the ultimate goal of the committee is to enhance the health and wellness of the school environment. The school administration always is apprised of decisions and recommendations. Mrs. Caplon is available to provide ongoing assistance to schools as needed.

**Question H**

With respect to the Restorative Justice portion of the presentation, Dr. Docca suggested the hiring of an additional liaison to work with the court system; increased inclusion of “multiculturalism” in the document; and inclusion of more information and written works in the bibliography for and by African Americans.

**Response**

Dr. Docca’s suggestions have been noted.

If you have any questions, please contact Dr. Maria V. Navarro, chief academic officer, Office of the Chief Academic Officer, at 240-740-3040.

JRS:MVN:JTB:ff

Copy to:

Executive Staff  
Ms. Webb

# GRIEF AND HEALING GROUPS

Harley Pomper  
May, 2019  
Office of Student and  
Family Support  
and Engagement

## PROPOSED POLICY

*Hire independent contractors to conduct trauma-informed Grief and Healing Groups, for the further promotion of Restorative Justice practices.*

## ISSUE

- Over the past year, Montgomery County Public Schools has witnessed the loss of three students; each loss heavily affected by the presence of depression, anxiety, and alcohol abuse.
- *Recent suicide prevention projects place the burden of attention and action on students*, as if the prevention of suicide is a child's responsibility.
- If a student does choose to report risky behavior to an adult, they rarely have the infrastructure in place to handle this issue directly with a student at risk.
- As mandated reporters, *teachers and counselors do not have the training or discretion to handle these situations* in a way that truly benefits students.

## BACKGROUND

- *The implementation of Groups resonates with the Restorative Justice practices of community building, self care, and conflict resolution.*
- Restorative circles serve a similar role following cases of misconduct, but Groups would provide long-term emotional support for vulnerable students in crisis.

## RATIONALE - COUNTY BENEFITS

- Groups would serve goals of The Suicide Prevention Project.
- Just last year, Fairfax County Public Schools approved a \$2.3 million addition to their budget for school psychologists. This kind of expenditure is not necessary for the purposes of grief groups, but *their implementation would restore MCPS as a leader of progressive reforms that promote student welfare.*

## RATIONALE - STUDENT BENEFITS

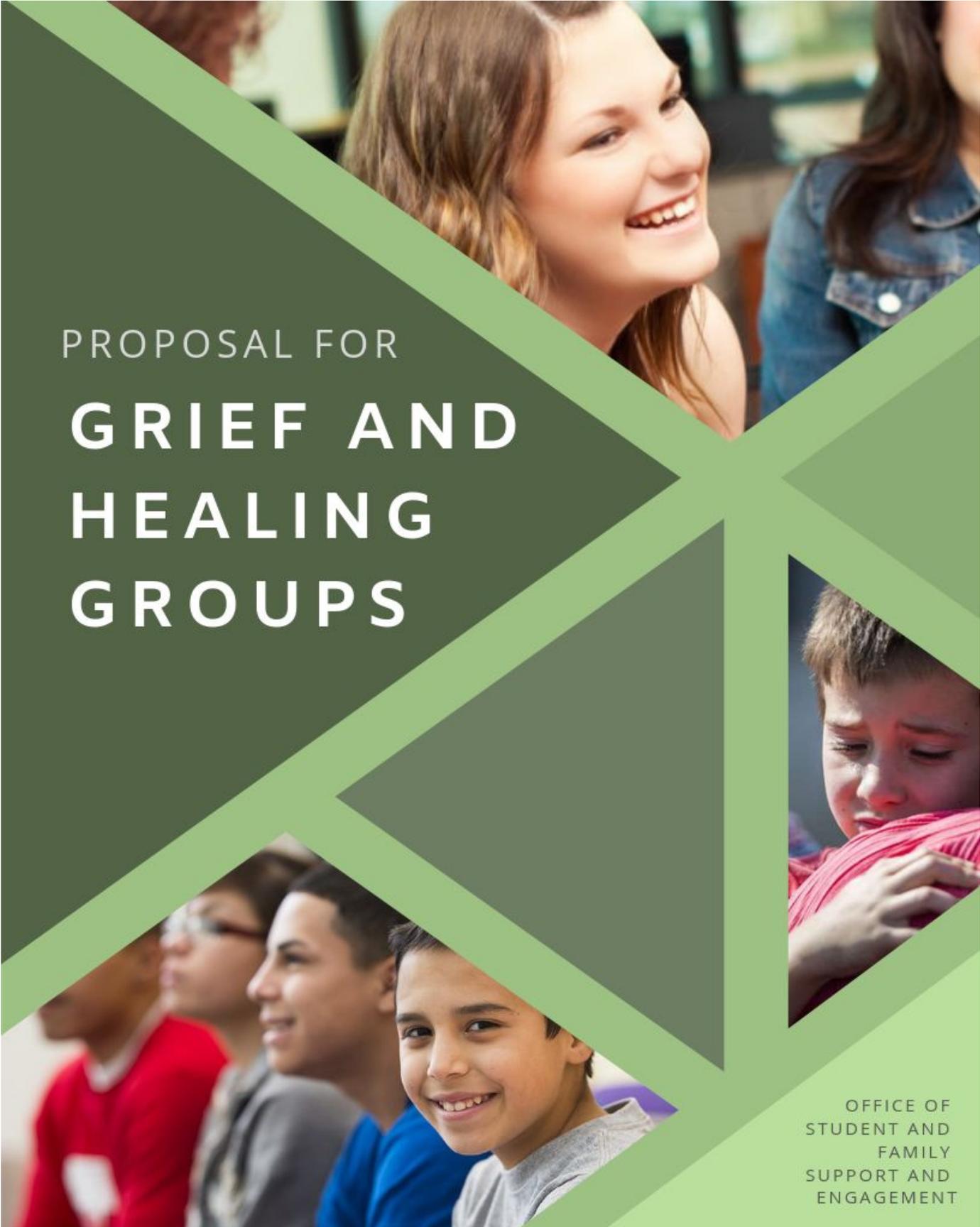
- Therapists (clinical psychologists or social workers) have far more in-depth experience than school counselors in working with students in need.
- **Therapists are trained to discern when they must report risky behaviors and when they can maintain confidentiality.**
- Independent contractors would likely be separate enough from the school to make students more comfortable with sharing.

## RECOMMENDATION

- *Advocate for Grief and Healing Groups in order to support neglected students who have suffered significant emotional loss.*

## CONTACT

- **Ruschelle Reuben**, Director of Restorative Justice and Counseling: [Ruschelle\\_Reuben@mcpsmd.org](mailto:Ruschelle_Reuben@mcpsmd.org)
- **Harley Pomper**, Grief and Healing Groups Developer: [harleypomper@gmail.com](mailto:harleypomper@gmail.com)



PROPOSAL FOR  
**GRIEF AND  
HEALING  
GROUPS**

OFFICE OF  
STUDENT AND  
FAMILY  
SUPPORT AND  
ENGAGEMENT



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 1 POLICY BRIEF
- 5 ACTION STEPS
- 6 PREREQUISITES
- 8 QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS
- 11 OPEN LETTER



# **P O L I C Y B R I E F**

Written and Composed by Harley Pomper

To be Addressed by the Office of Student and Family Support and Engagement

7 February, 2019

## **PROPOSAL FOR POLICY REVISION SURROUNDING GRIEF AND HEALING GROUPS**

### **I. Background/Reason for Proposed Policy**

Over the past year, Montgomery County Public Schools have witnessed the loss of three students; each loss heavily affected by the presence of depression, anxiety, and alcohol abuse. Such tragedies are not foreign to us, but their alarming increase in frequency requires our attention. These losses are not flukes, they are not accidents. The struggle to maintain good mental health in our area is at least, in part, a result of the lack of resources available to most members of our community.

Although recent suicide prevention projects have worked to spread knowledge of signs and symptoms, such presentations place the burden of attention and action on students. In our current system, the prevention of suicide is a child's responsibility. There is merit to this philosophy: Students tend to talk more openly with one another than with adults, and most faculty members have too much on their plates already. But a philosophy is not enough. In practice, students cannot be expected to track these signs; it is easy to feel paralyzed when a friend exhibits an alarming behavior, then asks that their risky behavior be kept secret.

The flaws in our current reporting system, however, do not stop with limited peer-to-peer conversations. If a student does choose to report risky behavior to an adult, a school counselor, for example, that adult rarely has the infrastructure in place to handle this issue directly with a student at risk. As mandated reporters, teachers and counselors do not have the training or discretion to handle the situation in a way that truly benefits students. Furthermore, giving counselors the workload of handling educational, psychological, and emotional matters means that they are often far too overloaded to properly process such conflicts with students.

Depression and anxiety already overwhelm many of our students; these mental health issues only intensify during periods of bereavement. Although school is often seen as an educational environment, the sheer number of hours spent in school could be leveraged into an opportunity for MCPS to help students in a deeper, more substantial way. By providing Grief

and Healing Groups to those who have experienced a recent loss or trauma, Montgomery County could change the lives of hundreds of students for the better.

As it stands, Grief Groups are part of a laundry list of duties to be carried out by guidance counselors. But, as mentioned, carrying the burden of scheduling, college and career preparation, and educational support—counselors are already overwhelmed. Grief Groups, although technically part of MCPS' student support network, are entirely nonexistent in our middle and high schools. Moreover, students tend to have greater difficulty opening up to representatives of MCPS, as opposed to professionals who are only indirectly connected to the academic environment. **Therefore, it would be beneficial to hire psychologists and social workers who are independent contractors to lead these grief groups.**

## **II. Brief of Proposed Policy**

This proposal is a revision of an existing objective—to implement Grief and Healing Groups in each school—which means that the basic tenets of the idea are already in line with Montgomery County ideology and policy. The shift to independent contractors, however, lends itself to a myriad of benefits for both the county and student population.

### **A. County Benefits**

Grief and Healing Groups are a student-oriented and originated policy, but they will also benefit MCPS as a whole. In the wake of recent tragedies, our county has made steps to spread positive messages to members of our community about how to promote good mental health. The Suicide Prevention Project demonstrates that we are committed to making our children feel as calm and safe as possible. Grief and Healing Groups would both serve that goal and promote Montgomery County as a leader in making schools a place for emotional support.

Just last year, Fairfax County Public Schools approved a \$2.3 million addition to their budget for school psychologists. This kind of expenditure is not required nor is it necessary for the purposes of grief groups. Still, a revision to our current policy would restore MCPS as a leader of progressive reforms that promote student welfare.

Additionally, Grief and Healing Groups fit perfectly into our school system's mission for Restorative Justice and Mindfulness, specifically, the principles of self-care and conflict resolution. If received positively, these groups would be a gateway to greater investment into students' psychological well being both in and out of school. MCPS has a duty to pave the way, not only for the children we serve, but for our entire community.

## **B. Student Benefits**

To understand the value of Grief and Healing Groups, one needs to understand the significance of grief itself. Grief ensues after damage or loss of a meaningful attachment, which means that “grief” can result from trauma not necessarily involving death. Children have historically lacked a place within their schools to process grief and distress, as schools rarely saw the provision of this kind of support as their responsibility. However, contemporary thinking values the school as a place for emotional recovery. Groups are not only an intuitive and pragmatic way to facilitate that recovery, but also beneficial for students’ academic and emotional success.

MCPS already supports the underlying principles of Grief and Healing Groups. However, the proposed revision to have mental health professionals who are independently contracted conduct these groups departs from our current system in a few critical ways. First, therapists (clinical psychologists or social workers) have far more in-depth training than school counselors in working with students in need. Group work requires a very particular kind of clinical training, and it is unfair to place that burden on counselors who are not clinicians. Furthermore, hiring professionals who aren’t technically affiliated with the school, such as independent contractors, may also help students be more willing to open up.

Students often resist showing vulnerability to school counselors for two reasons: First, they must report to their counselors on a regular basis for issues that do not pertain to their psychological well being (such as scheduling, obligations, or grades); second, they are concerned about the information they disclose being reported to their parents. Regarding the first issue, independent contractors would likely be separate enough from the school to make students more comfortable with sharing. Regarding the second point, therapists are trained to discern when they must report risky behaviors and when they can maintain confidentiality. Students would feel more comfortable knowing that Grief and Healing Groups could be safe places to be vulnerable.

These groups are not therapy. Although they would ideally be facilitated by a therapist, they would function differently from the traditional notion of group psychotherapy in numerous ways. The main distinction is these Grief and Healing Groups hold the sole purpose of providing a safe place for students to express themselves and recover from trauma, but not necessarily with the goal of changing a student’s social or emotional behavior. The latter is a noble intent, but it noteworthy that some parents do not approve of their children participating in therapeutic activities.

### **III. Costs and Resource Requirements**

First and foremost, this policy should be considered as both pragmatic and necessary for supporting student welfare, regardless of cost. Still, Grief and Healing Groups would cost comparatively little to other systems. An independent contractor, for a one-to three-hour day, would be paid around \$250. If this policy were to be implemented in every high school across the county for 36 weeks of the school year, the total cost would be \$234,000, only 0.0009 percent of the MCPS 2018 fiscal budget. Ideally, this program could be instituted in all middle schools, as well, a total of \$594,000, or 0.0023 percent of our current budget.

Grief and Healing Groups, therefore, are a cost-effective solution to a problem that is neglected within our school system. As a school system of privilege and abundant resources, we have a responsibility to set the standard for the promotion of good mental health treatment within our educational system. Such a program would provide hundreds of students the support they need—and deserve—for an incredibly low cost.

These groups are ultimately not about the cost, the image, or the improvement to Montgomery County's social standing. They are about the students who have no voice, have no way to heal, who need something to hope for. Relief from this problem cannot rest solely on students' shoulders; it is, however, the responsibility of MCPS to relieve that burden. We are in a state of crisis, and crisis cannot afford to be neglected when there are already casualties.



**STEPS  
AND  
STRUCTURE**

Written and Composed by Harley Pomper

To be Addressed by the Office of Student and Family Support and Engagement

7 February, 2019

## **ACTION STEPS TO PROVIDE GRIEF AND HEALING GROUPS**

1. The first step would be to put out an application notice for social workers and psychologists to participate in a student grief healing program. Necessary traits to look for would include: open, friendly, empathic, willing to sacrifice for the good of students, and dedication. The school may consider gathering a list of participants before the hiring process and including those individuals' input in the decision. Considered therapists should be licensed (having earned a PsyD, PhD, or Masters degree in psychology).
1. Of course, successful applicants would have to pass through the fingerprinting and background check process.
2. Once approved, each member can run one grief and trauma group per high school. There may need to be further approval within each administration for the program. The first two months would serve as a trial run for the process. Timing and specifics (such as scheduling or composition) may have to be tailored or adapted to each school.
3. The referral process may vary by school, but generally it would go as follows: student either self-reports or is reported to guidance counselor. The counselor would meet with him/her and assess his/her level of need. If that counselors decided the student would fit the criteria for Group membership (on the basis of need and scheduling), then they will be interviewed by the therapist. If the therapist comes to the same conclusion that the student should be involved with Group, they will be allowed to attend on a trial period. This process may differ in the initial stages depending on the status of hiring and whether a list of participants is decided before or after a therapist has been established. If participants are gathered before the therapist in order to provide input for interviews, then there will be no interview conducted by the therapist, only by the guidance counselor.
4. Each administration would seek feedback from the participants, and if received well, the program could continue or potentially expand to multiple groups per school. At just two groups of seven-person enrollment, they would address the needs of almost 400 kids.
5. A successful turnout and reception may lead to Grief and Healing Groups being implemented in middle schools as well as high schools.

Written and Composed by Harley Pomper

To be Addressed by the Office of Student and Family Support and Engagement

7 February, 2019

## **PREREQUISITES AND COMPOSITION FOR AND OF A GRIEF AND HEALING GROUP**

Although there are specific issues that can be decided per school (such as scheduling and size) there are a few guidelines each Group should meet.

### **1. Groups should be composed of students in all four grade levels.**

This component is justified for a multitude of reasons, The most important is that it maximizes the outreach of group for the student body as a whole. Limiting the composition to one one grade level prevents others from having access to such a beneficial process. Additionally, having members of various ages creates a wealth of experience between participants; older students would come from a more experienced vantage point from which to help underclassmen.

### **2. There should be at least five students per group, but no more than eight.**

Because sessions would generally be 45 minutes long, hosting more than eight prevents many from having the opportunity to vocalize their issues. Ideally, groups would have between four and five students, but this low number may be impractical for MCPS' large student body. With that in mind, enrollment of no less than five would be more feasible. In this range running two groups per school would have an outreach of around 400 children.

### **3. Groups need to be conducted during school hours, for at least one class period.**

Many may ask why Groups cannot be hosted after school? The primary problem with this idea is the scheduling conflicts that comes with. Many students--often those that would need this resource the most--have jobs or families to take care of as soon as school is out. Depriving all children of group simply because they were too busy to come is not just. Hosting Group during school hours provides a reason for students to attend school, and further creates a safe space once they are there.

As far as timing is considered, an adult group therapy session stands at about 90 minutes, but this is understandably too long for an in-school event. One class is the shortest these Groups could comfortably run. Group would remain on the same day every week, but rotate between three periods, which means that a student is only missing one period a week and one specific class every three weeks. Of course, they would have the option to miss Group if they had an

exam or otherwise important event, but those who consistently fail to attend would have their enrollment re-evaluated.

**4. Groups need to be confidential.**

This means that Groups would not be public knowledge for students, and that information shared in Group is kept safe. Individuals would be referred into Group by a guidance counselor, not brought in at will by students. This both limits enrollment to those who most need the resource and maintains confidentiality for those already involved. Privacy is an imperative feature of group therapy as a whole, because it helps participants open up without fear of damage to their reputation or concern surrounding parental judgement.

**5. Each student is required to have their parents sign a permission slip and waiver.**

A Group like this can only function with full parental approval before commencement. This would prevent issues with liability and also make sure that all students attending Group have parental consent.

**6. Students need to remain in the same group for the entire school year.**

Although certain programs rotate members, this would not be beneficial with weekly sessions. Group would meet a maximum of 36 times per school year, which is the same number of sessions that the Resilience Builder Program hosted for its rotating student population. Keeping the same students on a yearly basis allows them to become comfortable within their circle, and gives them an appropriate time to grieve and heal. Additionally, this would ideally limit the amount of people that know about Group, thus upholding confidentiality.



**QUESTIONS  
AND  
ANSWERS**

Written and Composed by Harley Pomper

To be Addressed by the Office of Student and Family Support and Engagement

7 February, 2019

## **POTENTIAL QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS REGARDING GRIEF AND HEALING GROUPS**

### **I. “How do we know groups are effective?”**

Using a group setup has a long history in psychotherapy as a whole. In the last few decades, researchers have looked into applications of this method into our school systems. A push from Catholic University launched the Resilience Builder Program in 2009, which detailed the experience of 30 kids who underwent group therapy in schools in order to heal from trauma and academic difficulties. Participants displayed significant improvements in social skills, communication, emotion regulation, and autism-related symptoms. Finally, when administered to at-risk youth in schools, a randomized-control trial found that compared to youth who did not receive intervention, youth who received the Resilience Builder Program displayed significant improvements in their emotional control and decreases in negative emotion. Overall, research provides preliminary support for the effectiveness of the Resilience Builder Program with children with ADHD, anxiety, and autism for improving social, emotional, and behavioral functioning according to multiple informants and in multiple environments. This study has applications for Grief and Healing Groups because they generally have the same goals and logistical requirements. Additionally, it proves that a school’s intervention can, in a concrete way, improve the lives of its students.

### **II. “Why is this needed now?”**

Anxiety and depression are treatable, but 80 percent of kids with a diagnosable anxiety disorder and 60 percent of kids with diagnosable depression are not getting treatment, according to the 2015 Child Mind Institute Children’s Mental Health Report. In 2017, adolescents and young adults aged 15 to 24 had a suicide rate of 14.46 percent. The suicide rate for white children and teens between 10 and 17 was up 70% between 2006 and 2016, in the latest data analysis available from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Callous statistics, however, cannot explain the effect that each of these events has on a community. The heart of the matter is that teen suicide, depression, and anxiety are all on the rise. You know this--you’ve probably heard that sentence before. But it is much different to actually live in that emotional climate than to list off a few numbers about it. Why is this needed now? Because safe spaces have *always been needed*, we’ve just neglected to create them, and the long-term effects of that negligence are visible today.

### **III. “Don’t we need to address all students equally?”**

Let us pretend that these Groups were meant for the physically ill. No one would pose that *all* students need to attend this group solely so that everyone would receive equal treatment. That group would be reserved for children who were in desperate need of attention. It is true that recent NIH research estimates that almost one third of adolescents have experienced an anxiety disorder. Of course, MCPS does not have the resources to provide groups for one third of its student population. Instead, children need to be enrolled based on severity of their issues and need for treatment. Again, if we pose the same concept with a group for the physically ill, we wouldn’t let in every kid with a cold, right? We would admit only students with severe conditions that need the most attention.

Additionally, in this hypothetical group, what if it was only meant for children with cancer? No one would expect that kids without cancer receive treatment. Grief and Healing Groups focus on adolescents who have dealt with bereavement specifically. This narrower scope allows enrolled students to have specific goals and focused conversations. In that, there should be no expectation for students that do not meet that criteria to participate in Group.

### **IV. “What criteria does a student have to meet in order to attend?”**

As stated above, the main criteria is that the student has experienced grief. However, that does not necessarily mean grief in a traditional sense. Children who have been forced to sever ties with a family member, been abandoned by a parent, or lost a vital connection with a dear friend, have all felt grief in some capacity. Students with this type of emotional loss would still meet the criteria to enter Group, though they may be more of an exception than the rule. Schools may become aware of certain individuals that have severe anxiety or depression (often stemming from grief) that could potentially benefit from a Grief and Healing Group. If the therapist interviews such students and deems them fit to participate, then that is acceptable as well.

Otherwise, attendees will need to be respectful, kind, and good listeners in order to make the experience as welcoming and helpful for everyone involved. Participants who demonstrate a lack of concern for others or general disrespect may be asked to leave the Group.

### **V. “Isn’t this responsibility of parents?”**

This concern is understandable. Historically, education and student well being were kept separate, essentially because administrations wanted to wash their hands of all matters non-academic. The problem with relying on parents to solve these issues is that, in all honesty, many parents today are products of a school system that did not value student emotion. This makes it much more difficult for many parents to be receptive to their children’s emotional needs. Additionally, stigma surrounding therapy had a stronghold on our educational systems over the past century, and though that has lessened over time, persuaded many adults against

therapeutic tools. As such, even though it maybe should be the parents responsibility, it is the responsibility of the school to intervene in their stead. This intervention is not new. Students, for example, can be dealt within a school for bullying that happens outside of school grounds. The school intervenes for disciplinary issues when they could choose to abstain. Why is Restorative Justice any different than restorative mental health practices?

#### **VI. “What is the referral process?”**

The referral process may vary by school, but generally it would go as follows: student either self-reports or is reported to guidance counselor. The counselor would meet with him/her and assess his/her level of need. If that counselors decided the student would fit the criteria for Group membership (on the basis of need and scheduling), then they will be interviewed by the therapist. If the therapist comes to the same conclusion that the student should be involved with Group, they will be allowed to attend on a trial period. This process may differ in the initial stages depending on the status of hiring and whether a list of participants is decided before or after a therapist has been established. If participants are gathered before the therapist in order to provide input for interviews, then there will be no interview conducted by the therapist, only by the guidance counselor.

#### **VII. “Who is paying for it?”**

This would be a Montgomery County run program, which means that they would pay for services, much like other therapeutic practices. To that end, the Groups would be at no cost to students or parents. Having these services be free allows them to maximize reach and become more equitable for families who may not be able to afford mental health treatment or even health insurance.

#### **VIII. “What are the logistics (period rotation, attendance system, permission slip)?”**

Timing and specifics may have to be tailored for each school, but the basic format goes as follows: Group would be held on the same day every week, rotating between three periods. That way students would never miss a class more than once every three weeks. Attendance, aware of the Group, would send out notes and excuse students marked absent for that period by teachers. Once a student has been screened and is ready for their trail run in Group, a parent would immediately sign a permission slip consenting to their participation. Alongside that permission slip would be a waiver that absolves Montgomery County of any liability.



**OPEN  
LETTER**

Written and Composed by Harley Pomper

To be Addressed by the Office of Student and Family Support and Engagement

7 February, 2019

## **AN OPEN LETTER ON GRIEF AND HEALING GROUPS**

Montgomery County Public Schools,

There's a painting on the wall in our conference room. Jewels cascading on a red satin cloth, framed in peeling gold. I've spent hours looking at that piece, listening to the stories of girls with quiet strength and deafening pain.

I remember the first time someone straightened the painting, got out of her seat mid-discussion just to fix it. In that moment, she transgressed the traditional boundaries of school. This wasn't just a conference room, but a familiar place with familiar people. A home.

Our Grief Group is not just a place to air grievances, nor merely a therapy session. It is a family for people who have so many problems with their own. There are people among us who have been abused, raped, threatened, born witness to violence, self-harm, suicide. Some don't have parents who care, or know how to care, and won't get them help independently. People that need scaffolding within their school environment to help them get through the day. Need something constant in a chaotic life.

When we are given a chance to work through these issues it creates positive ripples throughout the community, because we gain the tools with which to help others. Where I used to be at a loss for how to help people through issues similar to my own, I now make one-to-two calls a night talking through social and psychological issues with my peers. This kind of work wouldn't be possible without the guidance and infrastructure that Grief Group provides. Just 36 hours ago, even, I talked a friend out of a panic attack through strategies I learned here.

Moreover, if I can make that many calls, meet that many students who badly need someone to talk to...it makes me wonder how many there are in this school who are desperate for a place to be open? We all struggle under the same weights of loneliness, pressure, and fear; yet we struggle silently and alone. We cannot afford to lose the only safe space left within this school, especially following a year with two student deaths (from substance use and depression, respectively two recurring themes of Grief Group).

I know you weren't there in the days following Jojo's passing, or Navid's. But I was. The air was made heavier by our deep breaths and exhausted tears. Students walked in circles around the hall holding hands. The counselors were unequipped to handle the sheer volume of kids just in need of a place to shut down. We moved on as individuals, learned to walk with another burden on our backs. But in Grief Group, things were different. We felt that loss as a collective, without fear of asking for more tissues. Without going to the bathroom just to cry.

By the time Navid died, we were tired of grieving. Our sadness became anger, and we demanded action. What could have changed his life? What would change ours? In the end, nothing happened. We continued on, grimacing under the weight of these deaths, but continued on nonetheless. The anger became resignation, passionate punctuated breaths in our rhetoric became sighs.

It's been almost a year since their passing. It's time to ask ourselves: what did they die for? I refuse to let their glass legacies become sand. Jojo found a family in Grief Group; if Navid was a part of such a community, he would have the support to help build better habits.

I understand the top-down restrictions on counseling; God knows we've dealt with our fair share of battles. But the reason Dr. Goodwin, our former principal, was so highly regarded during these tragedies is that he prioritized children's needs over bureaucratic irresponsibility. This is a question of absolute vs. moral justice: are you willing to sacrifice your students for an arbitrary policy?

Thank you for your time,

Harley Pomper  
harleypomper@gmail.com

**Climate Action Plan**

The climate action plan is staff member-focused and should use climate survey data and any additional data, as appropriate. The climate action plan is an internal document developed and monitored by school leadership. The climate action plan will be reviewed by the director of learning, achievement, and administration periodically throughout the year.

Areas of Strength		Areas of Focus	
Questions	Category or Theme	Questions	Category or Theme

Area of Focus (Category or Theme)	Action Step (Task or Practice)	Person(s) Responsible	Measure of Success and Artifacts (to demonstrate evidence of growth)	Monitoring Date and Person(s) Responsible (when, how, and by whom this action plan will be reviewed)

**Be Well 365 Climate and Culture Action Plan**

School: \_\_\_\_\_

School climate and culture are essential components for staff members, students, parents, and guardians to thrive. The climate and **Be Well 365** action plans should be developed collaboratively with the school leadership team using several data sources (e.g., employee climate survey; student and parent/guardian surveys; discipline data, including office referrals, suspensions, bullying, intimidation, or harassment reports; counselor visits; referrals to the Montgomery County Crisis Center, etc.). Additional data from students and families may be included, as appropriate. Schools should plan to complete a mid-year survey or review of progress to adjust the plan, as needed.

**Be Well 365**

The **Be Well 365** portion of the action plan is student-focused. Please consider existing programs, practices, and strategies in your school that address the physical, social, and psychological well-being for all students that are reported at <https://www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/departments/studentservices/wellbeing/index-new.aspx>. If there are no existing programs or services that address the 6 Essentials, please indicate the desired, future programs and a timeline for their implementation.

6 Essentials	Existing programs, practices, and strategies in one or more Essential category.	Future programs, practices, and strategies in one or more Essential category (indicate year of planned implementation)	What data will you use to measure success of schoolwide implementation, student perceptions, and student outcomes in each of the 6 Essential areas?
Culturally Responsive Relationship Building			
Mental and Emotional Health			
Trauma-informed Practices			
Restorative Justice and Restorative Practices			
Physical Health and Wellness			
Character Development and Empathy			