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COVID-19, EDUCATION, HEALTH AND WELLNESS, HOMEPAGE FEATURE (TOP BAR), RESOURCES

Pittsburgh kids fight the stigma of mental health with a powerful peer-to-peer program



Photo: Students participate in the Take Down the Stigma event earlier this year at West Allegheny High School.





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As a student, Brendan saw other kids at [Montour High School](#) made fun of because they were depressed. He witnessed kids with mental health issues or substance abuse problems subjected to taunts, hazing and harassment.

Last year, instead of standing on the sidelines, Brendan joined [Stand Together Against the Stigma](#), a program in which kids collaborate to destigmatize mental illness and provide peer-to-peer support when kids are ostracized because of it.

“To see the stigma reduced is a big thing,” says Brendan, a rising senior.

The logo for "Stand Together" features a large, stylized hashtag symbol (#) in blue and green, followed by the words "stand together" in a bold, lowercase, sans-serif font. The word "stand" is purple, and "together" is green.

Part of the [Allegheny County Office of Behavioral Health](#), Stand Together was founded in 2013 to provide middle and high school students with anti-stigma training and to increase awareness. Following intensive training, kids in 26 participating schools meet in groups to develop their own projects to support their peers.

The Stand Together teams were disappointed this spring when, due to the coronavirus pandemic, the year-end Recognition Event was canceled. The event had outgrown its usual Heinz History Center space and was to be held at the David L. Lawrence Convention Center. Instead of the public showcase celebrating students' projects, the year's work was recapped in a [video](#) as part of the program's reaction to school closings this past spring.

Usually, Stand Together efforts conclude with the end of the school year. This year, for the first time in seven years, programming continues through the summer.

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North Allegheny Senior High School incorporated a spinning wheel into its anti-stigma event.

Pandemic increasing the need for help

Soon after schools closed, Stand Together began hearing from school advisors and students that kids were struggling to cope with stressors related to the pandemic. Symptoms included anxiety and depression from distance learning. Kids had problems structuring their days, a sense of social isolation from friends, and intense fears that parents and grandparents could contract the virus and die.

Stand Together organizers saw the need to address these concerns. They thought the program's philosophy of students educating their peers could still work as well virtually as it had within school buildings under normal circumstances.

"What we're hearing from the schools – the principals, Stand Together advisors, the students who participate and students in the general population – is they're seeing the culture of their schools change," says Michael Gruber, systems transformation coordinator for Allegheny County Dept of Human Services Office of Behavioral Health.

"They're telling us that students are more comfortable talking about their mental health challenges," he says. "They're reaching out for help more than they have in the past, and the students are telling us their peers are using less stigmatizing language than they did previously."



Montour High School incorporated a Selfie with a Stranger station to help kids reach out to others they didn't know well.

One in four kids experiences mental health and substance abuse disorders per year, with just one out of three receiving treatment. The stigma surrounding those issues can cause shame and embarrassment, which prevents kids from reaching out for help. Stand Together student teams work to support kids and help develop coping skills to deal with those stressors.

"Overall, the dialogue about mental illness is becoming a little more open," says Aveline, who will be a senior at [North Allegheny High School](#) this fall. "But there are a lot of misconceptions still going around. In our teenage vernacular, a lot of terms people use might be seen in a negative way. Whenever kids mention they're having PTSD taking a hard test, of course, I understand they're joking, but it affects people in real ways."

The [Child Mind Institute](#) estimates that 22.2 percent of children in the United States will have a diagnosable mental illness before they are 18 years old. That figure may rise due to the coronavirus pandemic. Some kids had a hard time coping when schools closed because their eating and wake-and-sleep cycles were disrupted, Gruber says. Other kids did not adapt to online learning and are struggling academically.

As time passes, there may be other unforeseen issues kids will face.

"It's not only dealing with (the pandemic), but the aftermath of the trauma because of it," says Danyelle Borish, a recovery specialist and Stand Together project coordinator. "The mental health effects are going to be long term. A lot of places are really having a hard time thinking about and preparing what could potentially be an escalation in requirements for services and people experiencing these things."



Thomas Jefferson High School's project used popcorn as a theme in their Pop the Stigma project.

Support, hope and encouragement

Kids in the program are provided with a framework to help their peers with mental health or substance disorders. The acronym S.H.E. stands for Support, Hope and Encouragement, the basic principles of the Stand Together program.

"We stress to the youth that they're not counselors and we don't expect them to be," Borish says. "That's not their role. But the peer role, and the support of family and friends, is incredibly important to recovery and wellness."

At West Allegheny High School, for example, Stand Together students recently increased their online presence by creating an Instagram page as a resource for information and to stay connected throughout the summer break.

"We hosted giveaways and gave out lots of resources, especially for people who may be struggling and don't have a chance to leave their homes and meet their friends," says Connor, a rising junior at West Allegheny.

Stand Together participants from other school districts are continuing projects online to maintain contact with and encourage support for those in need. A summer initiative also is being planned that will enable students from Stand Together schools to create projects that will be available via social media platforms and school websites for all kids in the region.

"One of the biggest things we hear from the youth that we continue to work with is that connection is so important to them," Gruber says, "whether it's their team or the interactions they are providing with their peers."

One reason the program succeeds is that Stand Together actively recruits students from a variety of groups and organizations within a school. These students may be athletes or musicians or scholars and often serve as a bridge for their peers who need help.

"It's not uncommon for another student to come up to one of them and say they want to go to the guidance counselor but are afraid to do so, will you go with me," Gruber says. "So, the Stand Together student will go to the guidance office with them and hand them off to the guidance counselor."

While Stand Together is an invaluable tool to combat mental health and substance disorder issues, it is also beneficial for the kids who volunteer for the organization. Brendan, the senior from Montour, says his experience with the group not only made him aware of his peers who may be at risk but boosted his own self-esteem.

"I've had a hard time standing up for myself at times in the past," Brendan says. "I'm starting to be more confident with that and standing up for others as well. That's something I'm definitely going to be using in my life."

Advice from Stand Together Against the Stigma on how kids can help kids

Stigma toward kids with mental and substance abuse disorders causes them to feel ashamed and embarrassed. Many kids react by withdrawing and isolating themselves. Here's how kids can help their peers:

- Treat all people with respect.
- Encourage friends and family to seek professional help.
- Combat myths about mental illness by speaking up when you hear them.
- Include your peers in conversations and other opportunities.
- Stand by your friends who develop mental issues and substance disorders.
- Tell an adult when you are concerned about someone.

This story is part of the Kidsburgh Mental Health Series, funded by a grant from the [Staunton Farm Foundation](#). The Foundation is dedicated to improving the lives of people who live with mental illness and/or substance use disorders. The Foundation's vision is to invest in a future where behavioral health is understood, supported, and accepted.

Other stories in the series include the Kidsburgh [Mental Health Survey](#) report, insight as to how parents can deal with [coronavirus anxiety](#), and advice on [remaining resilient](#) during times that try your family's mental health. Check out the [fascinating look at the teenage brain](#). Other stories include Anchorpoint Counseling Ministry's [hugely successful fundraiser](#), the [secret to happy, successful kids](#), [looking to Fred Rogers for help](#) talking to kids about life's most challenging issues, and how [practicing mindfulness](#) helps kids ease anxiety.

Tags: [Allegheny County Office of Behavioral Health](#), [mental health](#), [Stand Together Against the Stigma](#), [Staunton Farm Foundation](#)