

Letter of Concern

To: ETHS D202 School Board and Administration

May, 2013

May is National Mental Health Awareness Month. Advocates from all over the United States are working to educate their communities about mental illnesses, the concurrent social, emotional and educational implications, and to address the stigma surrounding mental illness in this country. The following is an expression of concern and a request for action regarding mental health services at Evanston Township High School submitted by Evanston CASE.

Evanston Citizens for Appropriate Special Education (CASE), founded in 2007, is a community advocacy organization with over 200 members. Our mission is to advocate for improved special education policies and practices in the Evanston Public School system. CASE provides support and education for parents of children with special needs in Evanston and endeavors to increase disability awareness in the Evanston community.

Over the past several months, many parents have contacted CASE with concerns about inadequacy of mental health services at ETHS for students suffering with mental illness. These parents have described school social workers and psychologists so over-loaded with cases that they cannot offer students sufficient access to emotional support. Others have told us that their teenagers were refused evaluation for special education services, despite evidence of severe and chronic mental health crises (including hospitalization, threats of suicide and self-harm). Other parents have expressed frustration that some ETHS educators lacked an understanding of the impact of mental illness on learning, work production and school attendance. Finally, others have noted the continuing stigma of mental illness among teens and the consequent reluctance of those teens to seek out available supports. Although this information is anecdotal, it is significant enough to cause concern.

In response to these concerns, CASE submits this letter signed by concerned Evanston residents. We are asking that the D202 School Board take action to address the issues listed above. As a first step, we suggest you engage in a comprehensive review of mental health services and supports at ETHS, as well as an assessment of the special education department's practices regarding approval for services when a mental health diagnosis has been provided.

To provide further context for these concerns the following mental health statistics are instructive.

According to SAMHSA (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration), "Research shows that emotional and behavioral health issues present significant barriers to learning, academic achievement, and high standardized test scores. This same research shows that mental health interventions are effective and can significantly improve academic performance scores." (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2009).

According to the Illinois Children's Mental Health Partnership:

- Nationally, over 20% of youth experience a diagnosable mental health problem.
- Nearly one-quarter of Illinois adolescents reported signs of depression severe enough to keep them from doing their usual activities.
- Suicide is the third leading cause of death for adolescents and young adults.

- Students in special education, or those with serious emotional challenges, graduate at lower rates than their peers.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services reports that:

- Less than half of adolescents who need mental health services receive them.
- Ongoing stigma regarding mental health disorders inhibits some adolescents and their families from seeking help.
- Effective treatments for mental health disorders, especially if they begin soon after symptoms appear, can help reduce its impact on an adolescent's life.
- Schools and communities are recognizing the importance of resilience and general "emotional intelligence" in adolescents' lives—a growing number of courses and community programs focus on adolescents' social-emotional learning and coping skills.

In the November/December 2012 issue of Social Work Today, an article entitled "School-Based Adolescent Mental Health Programs" cites the following:

- "The presence of mental illness in children and adolescents, if not properly diagnosed and treated, increases the likelihood of significant health issues for them as adults and greatly limits their ability to become productive members of society" (Wu et al, 2006).
- "For adolescents, **the first signs of mental illness or emotional distress often emerge in the school environment.**

In light of the significant risk of mental health problems in adolescents, and the concerns expressed in this letter, it is imperative that D202 provide an effective and accessible system of services to support students with mental illness. In order to improve mental health services at ETHS, a complete understanding of the accessibility to, availability and effectiveness of services is warranted. In addition, we recommend you improve the ETHS website to ensure its content provides parents and students with easily accessible information about available mental health supports and services. Utilizing the data you collect, we request that you develop and adopt measureable goals and objectives, and create strategies to improve services and supports for students with mental illnesses.

Please accept this letter in the collaborative spirit in which it is intended.

Evanston CASE Board

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