

Devoted To:

- Improving academics
- Deterring violence
- Fostering resiliency
- Enhancing coping skills
- Reducing risk
- Preventing suicide

Strengthening linkages

[building alliances can enhance academics]

Her district is the size of a small city, with 66,600 students and 10,000 staff. Yet Heather Fiorentino, Supt. of Pasco County Schools, sees the district as an integral part of a larger whole.

“We are one very large community, and I truly believe the school system is the hub,” says



[take note]

Fiorentino of Pasco Schools. “That’s our job. If we touch someone (with education or services), then we touch everyone.”

So when three staff members and students died by suicide over a two-year period and others attempted, Fiorentino felt compelled to act.

“If people feel so desperate and alone, we have to do something,” Fiorentino stresses.

Her response? To catalyze a community-based partnership between the school district and multiple health and social service agencies (see page 3 story). The result is a robust, well-integrated program to safeguard students and staff from suicidal thoughts and self-harm. Its three-pronged approach emphasizes awareness, training and crisis prevention/intervention/postvention.

Fiorentino is reticent to accept credit for initiating this noteworthy community prevention partnership. But her staff members are not shy about attributing much of its success to Fiorentino’s tenacious yet sensitized and

collaborative approach to coalition building.

“It took great courage to not hide things under the table. Heather put it out there,” says Lizette Alexander, Pasco Director of Student Services. “That’s what a good leader does—they try to anticipate what’s around the bend. And for us, suicide and factors that can lead to it are always on our radar screen. They have to be—it’s a matter of more than academics and wellness. It’s about the very lifeblood of our schools, our youth and the true future of our community.”



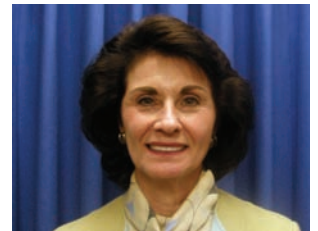
When colleagues and students both attempted and died by suicide, Heather Fiorentino (left), Supt. of Pasco County Schools, felt compelled to act. She engaged community support for a broad prevention program called Pasco Aware: Suicide Prevention Task Force. This initiative has strengthened the safety net for students and personnel—and garnered accolades from staff including District Director of Student Services Lizette Alexander (right).

A policy bulletin for FLORIDA EDUCATION LEADERS

- School Board Members
- Superintendents
- Principals
- Student Services Directors
- Central Office Administration
- Deans of Students

inside

WEIGHING IN ON Well Aware



“OUR CHILDREN—OUR FUTURE—CANNOT GIVE UP ON THEMSELVES.”

2 A special message from Florida Commissioner of Education Jeanine Blomberg.

[it doesn’t add up]

76%

This is the spike in suicide rate among preteen and young girls across the United States, as reported in Sept. 2007 by the CDC. It’s the largest one-year spike in 15 years.

3

Students in a typical high-school classroom who have made a suicide attempt in the past year, according to the American Association of Suicidology.

14.5%

Florida students in grades 9-12 who seriously considered attempting suicide in the past 12 months, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Youth Risk Behavior Survey 2005.

URGING YOU TO BE **Well Aware**

*Message to Florida Education Leaders
from Governor Charlie Crist*

I am delighted to present you with the first issue of the Well Aware™ bulletin, brought to you through collaboration between the Statewide Office of Suicide Prevention and the Florida Department of Education.



This tool is designed to enhance your understanding of the role that education leaders play in this vital arena. The school system is a critical avenue through which we can improve the quality of life for Floridians, in part, by enhancing the emotional well-being of students.

In our state, suicide is tragically the third-leading cause of death for youth. To address this significant public-health threat, the Florida Legislature passed, and I signed into law, a bill establishing the Statewide Office of Suicide Prevention within the Florida Office of Drug Control.

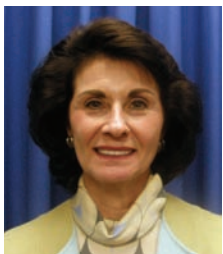
By establishing this office in statute, we have prioritized the protection and welfare of youth in Florida. We look forward to partnering with all Florida stakeholders, including school leaders and administrators, to curb suicide, and thereby, enhance the vitality of our state, our communities and our citizens.

Governor, State of Florida

WELCOME TO **Well Aware**

*A message from Florida Commissioner
of Education Jeanine Blomberg*

It is with great pleasure that I help to introduce the Well Aware™ newsletter to you. This bulletin is to inform your decisions regarding



student well-being—decisions that support high academic achievement by fostering resiliency and reducing risk behaviors that, at their extreme, can contribute to self-harm and suicide. Our children—our future—cannot give up on themselves. It is in our role as school leaders that we make a difference in the lives of countless others. Through our policies

and our performance, we enhance academics and help to ensure our children grow to achieve their full potential. This achievement can be curtailed by circumstances over which youths sometimes have little control—their health, both physical and emotional. That's why we, as Florida education leaders, can and must support policies that enhance academics by improving overall health and well-being. It's the goal of *Well Aware* to help you do just that. This and future issues of *Well Aware* in the current academic year are brought to you by the Statewide Office of Suicide Prevention, an arm of the Florida Office of Drug Control within Governor Charlie Crist's Office, and with support from the the Beth Foundation and the University of South Florida. I encourage you to review this bulletin and pass it along to other school leaders. Working together, we have and will continue to make a marked difference in the lives of our Florida youths.

Florida Commissioner of Education

ASKING STUDENTS ABOUT SUICIDE



Asking teens about suicide. It's something many adults fear. Yet new research has shown that having the courage to ask high-school students about suicide can be beneficial. Here Columbia University researcher and mother of three sons Madelyn Gould, Ph.D., weighs in on saying the word "suicide" to teenagers:

THE COMMON FEAR

"Many adults—including school administrators—fear that asking teens about thoughts of suicide may put the idea of self-harm in their minds and potentially spur them to act on these thoughts."

RESEARCH* FINDINGS

"Our research showed that asking high-school students about suicide clearly didn't induce stress, but can relieve somebody in distress."

PRICE OF MISINFORMATION

"I believe that this unfounded fear of asking about suicide is an astounding impediment to suicide-prevention programs."

STUDENTS ARE GOING IT ALONE

"Research shows youth at most serious risk for depression and suicidal ideation are the ones with the most distressing attitudes toward help-seeking. They really feel they can handle this on their own. They keep issues and feelings to themselves, and can think that alcohol or drugs are a good way to help themselves. They have this attitude of self-efficacy when they are not in a position to handle it on their own. ... They may use the Internet, may go to chat rooms—but these can reinforce harmful attitudes about help-seeking behaviors."



She's a mother of three boys and a researcher who has studied youth suicide for more than 20 years. Does Dr. Madelyn Gould talk to her sons about thoughts of suicide and self-harm? You bet. Read her groundbreaking research, published in 2005 in the esteemed Journal of the American Medical Association, available online at PubMed:

*Evaluating Iatrogenic Risk of Youth Suicide Screening Programs: A Randomized Controlled Trial. Gould MS, et al., Journal of the American Medical Association 2005; 293: 1635-1643.

Info? Feedback? Contact Dr. Gould at talkback@wellaware.org.



FORGING STRONG COMMUNITY ALLIANCES

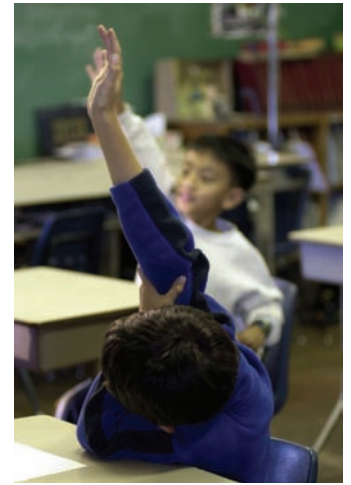
To boost student academics through enhancing emotional health and overall well-being, schools have a host of community resources they can tap into

When Florida Supt. Heather Fiorentino felt compelled to better address emotional health of her students and staff (see cover story), she began by better engaging with the community. Fiorentino spearheaded formation of **Pasco AWARE: Suicide Prevention Task Force**, a project of the county's MACC, or Multi-Agency Coordinating Council of school representatives plus health and human services personnel and community leaders. Convening once a month, **Pasco AWARE** collaboratively addresses what the community-at-large can do to buoy one another emotionally to keep its members from losing hope—and potentially losing their lives to suicide. Key components are:

AWARENESS: Raised to all school stakeholders via posters, PSAs and assemblies positioning suicide as a preventable public health threat.

TRAINING: Including instruction delivered in the classroom—infused in a health curriculum developed by the Pasco County Schools staff.

CRISIS PREVENTION/INTERVENTION/POSTVENTION: Student-services staff were trained as gatekeeper trainers and continue to provide this to all instructional and non-instructional personnel at each of 68 Pasco school sites. About 5000 school personnel have been trained thus far.



An astounding 50 percent of all lifetime cases of mental illness begin by age 14. This is according to the National Institutes of Health, as reported in July 2005. So school systems that educate these children are in a unique position to recognize signs of these emotional disorders—and connect vulnerable youths to support services in the community.



“The community level is where **PUBLIC POLICY IS TRANSFORMED** into public action and **REAL OPPORTUNITIES TO SAVE LIVES OCCUR.**”

— A. KATHRYN POWER, M.Ed., Director, Center for Mental Health Services (CMHS), Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, Oct. 31, 2003

[Orange County spotlight] Proactive engagement

During her son's high school years, Judy Buonauro never suspected that what seemed like typical adolescent angst could one day be life-threatening for her child Michael. That fated day came in 2004 when Michael took his life. He had just turned 25 years of age.

In hindsight, Judy and husband Frank saw that Michael's struggles became evident during his college years. And if a depression-awareness or suicide-prevention program had existed when Michael then or while in high school, perhaps he wouldn't have died. Today the Buonauros are



Teens may confide in friends about thoughts and feelings, including those of suicide. Yet most peers are ill-equipped to deal with these matters of life or death. That's why parents Judy and Frank Buonauro are funding a suicide-prevention program that encourages help-seeking behaviors in youths.

active advocates for helping youth strive for good emotional health, boost resiliency and enhance coping skills. Through a foundation they founded in their son's name, Judy and Frank are underwriting delivery of the SOS Signs of Suicide® program to 55,000 high-school students in Orange County, and have expanded the program to Osceola and Seminole County schools.

“Young people need to know it's not just them, they're not weird,” says Rick Frederick, Orange District Safe and Drug-Free Schools Coordinator. “This program helps them do that. By coming forward, they know that it's okay to talk about it.”

SCHOOL CURRICULA TO CONSIDER FROM THE NATIONAL SUICIDE PREVENTION RESOURCE CENTER (sprc.org)

Lifelines

A curriculum on warning signs of suicide, how to respond to a suicidal peer, help-seeking and school resources
Target ages: 12–17
Info: sprc.org

SOS® Signs of Suicide®

The high-school program combines four prominent strategies into single program: curriculum and screening for youth, educational materials for staff and parents
Target ages: 14–18
Info: SOSinfo@MentalHealthScreening.org

Reconnecting Youth

A semester-long class for youths with at-risk behaviors; teacher and peer group support are core hypotheses
Target ages: 14–18
Info: beth.mcnamara@comcast.net

C-Care/CAST (Coping and Support Training)

This combines one-on-one counseling with small-group training sessions
Target ages: 14–18
Info: elainet@u.washington.edu

Be well aware [resources and help]

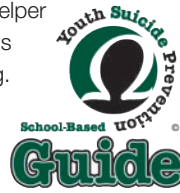
Being proactive in suicide prevention can reap real rewards for schools. The Statewide Office of Suicide Prevention is here to help. We're partnering with the University of South Florida and the Beth Foundation to bring you tools to make your school a safer, healthier place for all, and to offer resources to address unmet needs for staff development.

LOOK TO THE STATEWIDE OFFICE OF SUICIDE PREVENTION FOR ASSISTANCE

Established in 2007 to address the major public-health threat that suicide is in our state, Florida's Statewide Office of Suicide Prevention can support schools in their quest to improve academics and boost overall well-being of staff and students. We've built strong collaborations with communities and state partners, as well as federal organizations that can help implement and sustain programs in schools. We can also direct schools to best practices and programs. Want to learn more? Contact Director Erin MacInnes at 850-922-0498 or Erin.MacInnes@eog.MyFlorida.com.

GUIDING YOUR EFFORTS

School-based suicide prevention programs can include suicide-awareness curricula, screening, gatekeeper training, peer helper programs, postvention/crisis intervention or skills training. Care should be taken when selecting a program because some have not been shown to be effective. To help guide school administrators, researchers at the University of South Florida have released a comprehensive evidence-based tool kit; it is available online at <http://theguide.fmhi.usf.edu>.



EVIDENCE-BASED RESOURCES

Have you checked out the Suicide Prevention Resource Center (SPRC), a federally funded national clearinghouse? Visit sprc.org for prevention basics, national and state data, evidence-based programs, fact sheets specific to age, gender and ethnicity, plus an online library. Also visit the Florida State Coalition for Suicide Prevention at floridasuicideprevention.org.

[talk back]



What is your biggest barrier to implementing a suicide prevention program in your school? Risk and legal concerns ... time ...

resources ... training ... comfort level ... support from school board and parents? Let us know at talkback@wellaware.org.

And tell us what you think of the **Well Aware** newsletter, a

suicide prevention policy resource for Florida school leaders and administrators.

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Well Aware

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- School Board Members ■ Superintendents
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