MOREY
Middle School

Scholars with Heart in the Heart of the City
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Mental Health in Middle School CCI

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As sophomore students in the Pioneer Leadership Program at the University of Denver, we were given the opportunity to pursue a Community Change Initiative targeting any issue that we perceived to be affecting the Denver community. As individuals we had many interests ranging from police brutality to homelessness, and anything in between.

After much deliberation we all came together over what we agreed was a pressing and personal issue: student mental health, specifically in middle schools. We were motivated to address this subject due to our individual passions for mental health education and advocacy, rooted in personal experiences and a drive to improve student understanding around mental health.

We spent the fall extensively researching the area of student mental health in Denver, speaking with various stakeholders to find a project that both fit the needs of the community and our individual goals. Our research led us to Morey Middle School where we spent the rest of the year working with their staff to design a beneficial product for the faculty. Our intent was to help them understand the struggles their students face with regards to mental health and act on this new knowledge.

This report gives an overview of our work throughout the year, following our project from its inception to completion. We appreciate the members of the Denver community working in the area of mental health for collaborating with us on this project.

-Erin Beasley, Jackie English, Kameron Haake, Claire Girardeau, and Charlotte Moxley
Claire Girardeau

B.A. in International Studies and Spanish

I was very excited to have the opportunity to participate in this project as mental health has always been a subject I care deeply about. Mental issues should not be stigmatized to the extent that they are, especially in the school setting. As well as numerous family members have struggled with mental health issues, and in retrospect I can clearly see how an open conversation and early intervention could have made a significant difference in these cases. As teachers have so much access to students in their daily lives, they should be at the front line in getting these students the help they need to succeed socially and academically.

Erin Beasley

Molecular Biology and Psychology

I’ve been volunteering with middle school students since last spring, and it baffles me how much they have to deal with, especially things that middle schoolers shouldn’t have to be dealing with. I wanted to help these students in some capacity realize that things will be alright, and to help them get the support they need.

Jackie English

Public Policy and Economics

Throughout my educational experience, I traditionally was stereotyped as the “A+ student” and therefore my peers and my teachers alike assumed that nothing in my life could be wrong. As a result of this, any mental health needs I had were largely unmet. I became extremely interested in joining this group after reflecting on my education experience and the times that I felt unsupported, especially by teachers and peers who assumed I was always “fine.” This Community Change Initiative ensured that teachers would be equipped to deal with mental health needs of all students, high achieving or otherwise, and therefore make the middle school experience just a bit brighter.
Kameron Haake

Chemistry and Biology

I grew up in an extremely conservative area where any conversation surrounding mental health was considered taboo. As a result, the mental health issues both me and my peers faced were never discussed or addressed. I was interested in joining this specific group because it focused on an issue that was and is very real in schools all over the United States and one that I have personally struggled with.

Charlotte Moxley

Gender and Women's Studies and Psychology

My personal motivation for this project came from my own life growing up with a sister diagnosed with a severe mental illness at age six. My sister's illness has significantly shaped my own life and career path, and I found my focus for this project in one of her school experiences. Throughout her life, her illness has been misunderstood amongst teachers and peers, both socially and academically. After enduring substantial bullying from her peers, my sister expressed to her sixth grade teacher that she wanted to take her own life. She was told “stop being a drama queen, getting attention like this won't help you make friends.” Fortunately, a classroom aid overheard the conversation and referred the sibling to the help she needed. Unfortunately is not an isolated incident, and interactions like this between students and teachers happen everyday in our nation and in the city and county of Denver. Remembering this experience drove me to pursue a Community Change Initiative focused on improving teacher understand and support of student with mental illness both inside and outside the classroom.
Mental health is defined as “emotional, psychological, and social well-being.” Mental health can affect how individuals think, feel, act, handle stress, relate to others, and make choices (“What is Mental Health,” n.d.).

Mental illnesses are disorders that affect an individual’s mental health, most commonly for students: depression, anxiety, eating disorders, and substance abuse disorders. While a specific cause of mental illness is unknown, it can be attributed to genetics, environment, influx of hormones, and/or a traumatic event (Mental Illness).

Mental health support, or lack thereof, is a huge issue facing the Denver community and the U.S. as a whole. The intention of this Community Change Initiative group was to address the lack of support provided to students, a need proven by both research and stakeholder experience.

**Why It Matters**

There is a huge unmet need regarding mental health, especially in middle schools.

49.5% of adolescents met criteria for mental health disorders

21% of low-income children and youth ages 6 to 17 have mental health disorders

59% of Colorado educators and school mental health professionals said they needed assistance with students’ mental health needs.
Our goal as a Community Change Initiative group was to improve teacher’s competence and confidence with student mental health. Working directly with teachers allows our efforts to have a longer term impact and reach more students.

We had the opportunity to work with Morey Middle School. The institution faces a number of challenges such as
- High teacher turnover
- A young staff
- Students from low income families
- Students from historically marginalized communities

Our primary stakeholder at Morey was their social worker John Benyei. He stated the most common mental illnesses affecting students at Morey include disruptive mood dysregulation disorder (DMDD), trauma, anxiety, and depression. Now that we had identified the problem, the next step was to develop a solution that would be beneficial to the Morey community. A survey was distributed in order to address the specific needs of the teachers.

Our final product was behavioral intervention suggestion cards for teachers to be presented at a faculty meeting. These cards consist of
- Examples of internalizing and externalizing behaviors,
- Sentence starters for interacting with these behaviors in the classroom,
- Advice from experts in the field

Our presentation included the survey data we collected from the faculty and staff, background information on the adolescent brain and its functioning capabilities, and mental illnesses commonly seen among Morey students. We then introduced the behavioral intervention suggestion cards and described the different pieces of the cards. The project concluded with a post presentation survey to assess our effectiveness.
We hope to help the teachers at Morey Middle School support the mental health of their students by providing the teachers with a basic understanding of how the adolescent brain functions, strategies for addressing behavioral issues in the classroom, and resources that will spark a conversation on mental health so the issue remains relevant in their community.
Project Timeline

September
- Formed Group
- Decided to focus on Mental Health in Middle Schools

December
- Solidified Relationship with Morey Middle School

January
- Collected data about teacher needs through pre-presentation survey

February
- Met continuously with social worker at Morey
- Continued to solidify project

March
- Finalized project
- Worked with professionals to develop resources

April
- Presented to Morey teachers
- Collected post-presentation data
Key Stakeholders

John Benyei
Social Worker at Morey Middle School

John Benyei is the main contact for the team at Morey Middle School, and he has been fundamental in the development of this project. He worked with the team on creating a final output that would allow us to both adhere to our mission and address a clear need presented by the teachers at Morey.

Raul Galindo
Counselor and Director of mental health initiatives in schools around the Denver area

Raul Galindo provided an external perspective for the team throughout the creation of this project. He has worked on programs related to mental health that were similar to this one, so he could provide advice during our process and highlight the mistakes to avoid based on prior experience.

Cynthia Hazel
Department Chair and Associate Professor in the Morgridge School of Education

Cynthia Hazel provided the team with useful information for the creation of the behavior sheet. She elaborated on the difference between internalizing and externalizing behaviors that could be exhibited by students with mental health issues.
ADDITIONAL STAKEHOLDERS

THE COLORADO EDUCATION INITIATIVE

CREIGHTON COUGARS

YOUNG INVINCIBLES

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university of Denver
We presented to the Morey Middle School teachers at one of their after school staff meetings.

Our presentation consisted of:

- Previous survey data from teachers
- Adolescent brain development and function
- Mental disorders commonly seen among Morey students
- Content and application of behavioral intervention cards

Behavioral Intervention Card
Information and quotes recorded from teachers after presentation. We asked teachers for their opinions on mental health preparedness before and after our presentation, Overall, an increase was seen in how prepared teachers felt to address their students' mental health needs.

“The sheet provided talking/conversation points on how to deal with difficult situations.”

“It was helpful to have the information in an organized, easy-to-use place”

“The information about what is happening in the teenage brain was beneficial to learn about.”
Concluding Remarks

Work on this issue does not end with the conclusion of this project. We hope that we were able to start the conversation on importance of addressing the mental health of middle school students.

Works Cited: