



▲ Art therapy is one method educators in Vidor ISD use in the district's behavioral health program.

## VIDOR ISD

# A mental health lifeline for traumatized students

by Merri Rosenberg

### Vidor ISD

County: Orange

ESC region: 5

Superintendent:  
Dr. Jay Killgo

2019 enrollment: 4,545

Number of schools: 7

**V**After Hurricane Harvey flooded two of the district's seven schools, and three-quarters of the community's homes and businesses in 2017, Vidor ISD developed an initiative to help students better manage their stress and trauma.

Now in its fourth year, the behavioral health program initially targeted students who went through tough times after the storm. About 400 to 500 of the district's 4,200 students are involved with the program at any given time, says Sally Andrews, the district's director of community relations. In Vidor, 67% of students receive free or reduced lunches.

The program offers individual and group sessions to students with the goal of providing strategies to help them learn how to handle their emotions and function better in the classroom. Some students are

referred to the program by their parents, some by teachers or school psychologists, and some students even refer themselves.

The program, which costs \$165,000 a year, was initially launched with financial support from the Meadows Mental Health Institute, using funds received from the American Red Cross. Currently the Southeast Texas Emergency Relief Fund and Hancock Whitney Bank provide financial support. Texas Children's Hospital provided telepsychiatry services, and FirstBooks contributed books.

"It's a blessing to our students and community," says Superintendent Jay Killgo. "Harvey was tremendously difficult for our district. Once we got past the initial storm, there were still residual effects. Families were still sharing housing, living in substandard housing.

The question was, how do we provide for our students? We wanted to show our students that we love them.”

As Amanda Chism, one of the behavioral health specialists, observes: “There were high amounts of stress and trauma. Harvey made it more obvious. Students couldn’t handle it.”

Subsequent blows, such as the repeated flooding during Tropical Storm Imelda in 2019, and COVID-19 this year, only exacerbated these issues. Families were evacuated, or moved in with other family members, parents lost their jobs and couldn’t provide emotional support to their children — resulting in kids suffering from PTSD, according to Chism.

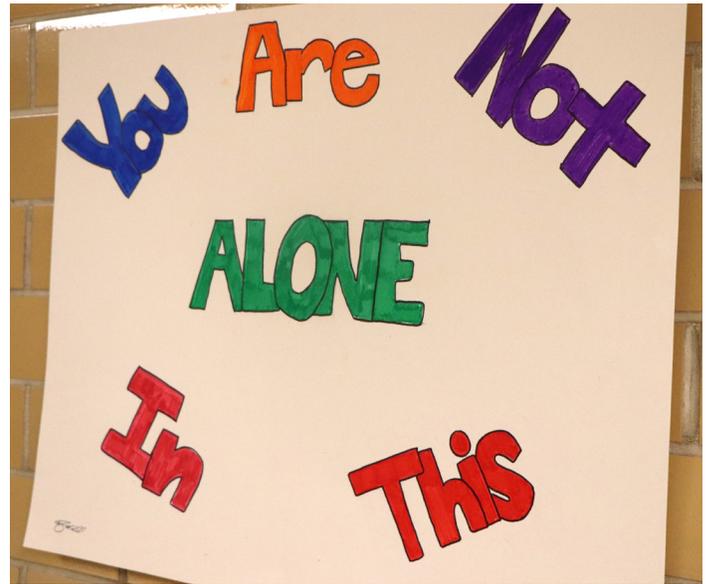
“When the entire community is traumatized, adults aren’t there as support. Students will say, ‘I don’t want to burden my parents.’”

As Devin Wade, a first grade teacher at Vidor Elementary, says, “Some children had damage in their homes after they were flooded with Imelda. They can’t go to sleep, they’re devastated, and still scared.”

The behavioral health program, which continued to deliver services to students remotely during the spring’s COVID-19 shutdown, has expanded since its inception to include students who are dealing with other issues, such as a parent’s divorce, unemployment, or displacement from their home.

Barbara Butler, a counselor at Vidor Elementary School, says, “It started with the traumatic experience of Harvey. There’s also poverty, and violence, and now COVID. Having someone safe to talk to makes it a nurturing, wonderful experience.”

With a focus on offering students techniques and strategies to handle stressful situations, or alter behaviors that are interfering with their ability to learn or manage social interactions, the program is also more palatable to parents.



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– Superintendent Jay Killgo



▲ Behavior health services in Vidor are designed to help students better handle stressful situations.



▲ Since instituting its behavior health program, Vidor ISD has seen a significant reduction in discipline referrals.

“Parents may not be open to the idea of therapy, that ‘there’s something wrong,’ instead of being proactive,” says Wade.

So, what kinds of issues might lead to a referral?

A child who previously behaved appropriately, but now talks back or out of turn in class could be struggling with issues beyond her control. One student, for example, couldn’t sleep because he didn’t have doors on his room after Hurricane Harvey and was frightened by the shadows he saw on his wall. A student may be unnaturally buoyant, hiding what’s troubling her. Some children in Vidor have been so traumatized by storms that they start crying the minute it rains.

Stacey Smith, a third grade teacher at Vidor Elementary School, says she refers students to the program when “the student is having difficulty managing their emotions in the classroom. There might be angry outbursts, or they’re anxious, or having problems getting along with other students.”

“Angry outbursts and defiance are red flags,” Butler adds. “It can also be subtle, like kids who are unmotivated.”

The behavioral management specialists use a variety of techniques to work with students. Students might play games such as Monopoly, Jenga or Mad Dragons with the specialist, build with Lego or work with squeeze balls, whatever helps manage their uncomfortable emotions or behaviors.

“We do a cognitive reframing with students,” Chism says. “The message is, basically, you’re fine. Here’s how to draw boundaries. Parents are going through their own traumatic experiences, and students may take on parents’ emotional dumping. If students have an unhealthy response, I try to give them an alternative. Sometimes kids just want to blow off steam.”

For some students, expressing themselves through an art project is more effective.

“If you try to start a conversation with a 6-year-old, you get zero, nothing,” says Anastasia Jannise, a working artist for 40 years, who has been with the program since its inception. “Art work starts to relax them. You can say, ‘I really like that color,’ and that opens the door to a conversation like, ‘Dad likes this color, but he doesn’t live with us anymore.’”

Besides drawing and painting, students can work with watercolors, clay and collages. Jannise looks for consistent themes that may

emerge in a student’s work, such as angry imagery that might suggest a student’s emotional state. She also provides students with strategies, such as blowing through a straw to regain control if they’re feeling stressed, or doodling in a sketchbook.

Jannise can’t stop thinking about an 8-year-old in one of her classes. When Jannise worked on her birthday, she brought in a cake to share with her students. One child said, “Nobody’s ever made a cake for me. Why would you do this? Everyone knows we’re the bad kids.”



Countering that message, and building self-esteem and confidence, is one of the ways Jannise hopes her art therapy works with these students.

The program has clearly provided benefits, ones that can be measured and others that are less tangible. After Hurricane Harvey, there were 2,131 discipline referrals in the district. Last year, there were 900.

Fourth grade math and science teacher, Ashley Schexnider, who works at Oak Forest Elementary School, attests to the impact of the program. One of her students who’s on the autism spectrum has problems expressing himself when he’s frustrated.

“He’d melt down, scream, cry,” says Schexnider, adding that the student’s home was flooded during Harvey and Imelda. “Since he started going to the program, he could recognize when he was out of control and needed to do something. We didn’t have screaming or loud crying fits as much. He’d come back from art therapy and show his design. It helped with his social skills and gave him a springboard to be social.”

“Going to see [one of the counselors] is the best part of their day,” Smith says of her students who are involved in the program. “They enjoy every bit of it. They come back in a good mood, with their coping abilities greatly improved.”

For one high school student, the program has made a real difference. In an email, she says, “From crippling anxiety and self-doubt to learning how to control my thoughts and having a better mindset, I’d say Mrs. Amanda Chism, my counselor, did a better job than any counselor that I’ve ever met. She has helped me regain the self-confidence I lacked. She has also helped me regain my self-esteem. She has honestly helped me through everything I struggled, and still struggle with.”

When students return to class able to participate in activities and regulate their behaviors with their peers and teachers, it makes things easier for everyone.

“It gives these kids coping strategies to deal with their issues,” Schexnider says. “I can’t stop my class to teach these kids. This has been so helpful.”

Teachers, staff and students hope the behavioral health program remains a distinctive feature in the district.

I hope it doesn’t take a catalyst like Harvey to have a program like this,” says Smith.

**MERRI ROSENBERG** is a freelance writer specializing in education issues, based in a northern suburb of New York City.