

Thrive.

Supporting the whole child—mentally, physically, socially, and emotionally.



While students' mental health has long been on Parker's radar, the stress of the pandemic brought it even further into the spotlight. Thankfully, the School's leadership team has been hard at work establishing and growing an adequate support system of mental health professionals and other resources.

Once a "nice to have" at academic institutions, mental health support is now a "must have," and Parker has risen to the occasion by restructuring and growing its student support network over the past few years.

As part of the Healthy Minds, Healthy Bodies strategic theme, the School deepened its commitment to supporting the whole child—mentally, physically, socially, and emotionally. This aspect of the strategic direction provides Parker students the emotional support they need to concentrate and apply themselves in an academically challenging environment, and assures that age-appropriate support and programming are available to every student.

EVOLVING TO MEET THE NEED

The School's first step in supporting student mental health was hiring a head of student support. Dr. Bridgett Besinger joined Parker as the counselor and program manager for JK-Grade 12 and served in that capacity for a decade. She retired in 2022.

As time went on, it became clear that in order to stay true to Parker's value of putting students first, the School needed to bolster and broaden the structure of its student support services. One person managing a caseload across all divisions and shepherding the administrative side of the program was proving to be a monumental feat, even for someone as dedicated as Dr. Besinger.

"We wanted to separate the responsibilities of overseeing the program and being a direct counselor to the kids," explains Dan Lang, Assistant Head of School for JK-12 Strategic Initiatives. "That meant looking at the staffing structure and asking, 'if we start with students first, what do we really need here?'"

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Head of Student Support and Wellness
Dr. Megan Story Hallam

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In alignment with the new Healthy Minds, Healthy Bodies strategic direction, Parker's leadership team concluded that students would be best supported through an individual counselor for each division in combination with someone to oversee the entire program—growth that would require a large investment of resources to achieve.

"We decided if we really wanted to build a wellness program, we had to first hire professionals who were experts in their area. That was the biggest investment," Head of School Kevin Yaley, Ph.D. reflects. "We invested heavily in people, in terms of time, and we found ways to include this work in the daily schedules of the kids."

True to the strategic direction, the School now offers a mental health counselor at each academic division—Lower, Middle, and Upper School—and the entire program is overseen by a separate staff member. The Parker leadership team looked far and wide for the right person to fill Dr. Besinger's shoes when she retired, someone who could handle the administrative aspect of both the wellness and the academic resource sides of student support while optimizing the entire program.

"We are super lucky because we found that person," Dan says, speaking of Dr. Megan Story Hallam, the new Head

of Student Support and Wellness who joined the School in 2022. A great fit for Parker's needs, Megan had previously created a similar position at two other schools. On arrival, she performed a complete evaluation of the student support program, finding ways to increase its effectiveness and ensure access for all students.

"I've been really excited to do the work in other schools, and Parker has so many amazing resources," Megan testifies. "There is so much collaboration at Parker that no part of our work feels like it's happening by itself. It's really thoughtful and reflective. We're thinking of the whole child."

With Megan's hiring, the restructuring process is complete. Now in alignment with the Healthy Minds, Healthy Bodies strategic direction, the program can focus on fine-tuning its offerings and supporting Parker students across all aspects of their social-emotional growth.

PARENT PARTNERSHIP

It's no secret that student mental health diagnoses have risen, exacerbated by the challenges and difficulties of the pandemic. Thankfully, the stigma around mental health has decreased in recent years. "Students are more likely to self-advocate as well as be open to support," says Megan.

Even in light of this cultural shift, supporting student wellness still requires a collaborative effort between the School and Parker parents. "It's always going to be a collaboration because the School is not in a position to make a diagnosis," Megan reminds the community. "We are always going to be working with families as part of a larger team."

Similarly, if it becomes apparent that a student requires further support, the team maintains many external partnerships. "We can connect parents to different community liaisons, psychologists, or evaluators," Megan explains. "We see connecting parents to external support as part of our role because that can be really challenging to navigate as a parent."

While there are limitations to what Parker can provide for students in terms of mental health and wellness support, the team is available to answer questions and work with parents to guide them on the next best steps.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Now firmly in place, Parker's student support and wellness department will focus on deepening the program's impact on the everyday classroom experience.

"I see the program evolving so that it's not a separate piece that students only come to when they need support," Megan elaborates. "Rather, the team will grow to work closely with faculty at all times and the community at large to really build a culture of wellness at Parker."

Similarly, the program is committed to continuing to decrease the stigma surrounding mental health while simultaneously increasing student-wide understanding. Mental health counselor offices are located in high-traffic areas of each division on both campuses to normalize visiting them. Teachers are educated on how to address issues within their classrooms and how to identify when to bring in support. And the student support team regularly attends faculty meetings to answer questions and provide advice.

"We are going to continue to make sure we have the people, resources, and programming in place to ensure that our students feel well," Megan emphasizes.

The School is fully dedicated to supporting the whole child—mentally, physically, socially, and emotionally—in a collaborative way to allow students to truly thrive. ■

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