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EDUCATION

More mental health support in Boone County schools part of new agreement with Mizzou

Roger McKinney Columbia Daily Tribune

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A new agreement among Boone County school leaders and University of Missouri faculty who direct the Family Access Center of Excellence is designed to better coordinate school-based and community-based mental health services for children.

The agreement was signed Friday by officials at the Boone County Government Center.

"We're hiring 10 family intervention specialists who will be embedded in the schools," said Aaron Thompson, director of the MU School of Social Work and associate director of the Missouri Prevention Sciences Institute.

That is the tangible aspect of the new agreement, he said after the event. The family intervention specialists will be in place for the next school year, with one each in the Hallsville, Harrisburg, Southern Boone and Sturgeon school districts and the remaining six in Columbia schools.

The idea is to streamline the services of the school-based counselors and those at the community-based FACE, he said.

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"We want to break down barriers to make it easier for people to access the supports they need," Thompson said during the event.

The services have improved student attendance and academic achievement and reduced their behavior issues, Thompson said.

"We know the importance of acknowledging teachers, counselors and school psychologists," he said.

Boone County voters in 2012 approved a quarter-cent sales tax that established the Boone County Children's Services Fund, raising around \$6.7 million annually for children's programs. Since it began, \$44 million has been allocated to improve the lives of children and families, said Joanne Nelson, Boone County Community Services director.

In schools, it also provides students with annual mental health screenings.

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"We truly have designed a national model for addressing mental health needs in our community," said Southern Boone Superintendent Chris Felmlee.

A mental health checklist tells school personnel the actions to take when a child is having a mental health crisis, Felmlee said, calling it an important tool.

All the services are important, he said, adding that the need is great as we emerge from a pandemic.

"This has an incredible impact and has made a tremendous difference in the lives of many in Boone County," Felmlee said.

rmckinney@columbiatribune.com

573-815-1719