

By Bill Husfelt

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People often ask me, “what’s wrong with our kids today” and “why do they behave the way they do?”

Well, I can share some of that “why” and I hope it gives you insight into what our children AND our educators are dealing with. I hope this “why” inspires you to help us as well.

One of our mental health triad team members recently got a request from a teacher for “whole group” counseling and support for her elementary class. The children, according to the teacher, were dealing with overwhelming issues at home and needed some support.

The triad team member asked the teacher to email a list of common concerns so she could begin to design sessions that would address the issues. So, here’s what **ONE third grade class** (25 students) in Bay District Schools is dealing with:

1. Parents who are separating
2. Parents who are divorcing
3. Parents who have been caught having affairs
4. Estranged parents suddenly showing up again
5. Homelessness
6. Students who have no idea where they will be sleeping each night because they are shuffled from home to home for a variety of reasons
7. Increased chores and babysitting responsibilities because parents are working more hours
8. Students removed from their homes and placed in foster care
9. Custody changes that result in a child suddenly changing homes
10. New babies at home
11. Parents who have been arrested
12. Loss of a loved one due to Covid-19

I did not editorialize or rank these at all; this is the order in which the teacher emailed them and these are the most challenging things her students are dealing with **RIGHT NOW**. The average age of a third-grade student is nine years old. These students should be thinking about winning a game at recess or mastering a new spelling list, not where they will sleep at night or who they will be living with next week!

In her email, this veteran, respected teacher wrote: “I feel unequipped to talk to the kids about these things and it is so widespread in my class. My heart breaks for the things my kiddos are dealing with.” She asked for, and is receiving, help but I know she’s not alone.

Before Hurricane Michael, I estimated that our teachers interacted with maybe a handful of students who were in crisis. Since the storm, and the pandemic, I “guesstimate” that most of the students our teachers interact with have experienced some sort of trauma. That means most of the

students who work with our paraprofessionals, our bus drivers, our administrators, our custodians and our food service workers are also dealing with some sort of trauma.

This simple fact has changed our schools. It has changed our classroom dynamic and our approach to education and that change is occurring nationwide as a result of the pandemic, not just here. Change is not a bad thing, we must always evolve with the times, but this sort of change has been incredibly challenging and those in education are, quite simply, weary and frustrated.

I've poured through the current legislative agenda and while there's some legislation in there that I agree with (and some that I don't), I don't see ANYTHING in the pipeline that will help our teachers help our students navigate these difficult situations. Nothing short of a MASSIVE mental health outreach (more extensive than the one we already have as a result of the FEMA RESTART grant) can put a dent in both the challenges our children are facing AND the challenges being faced by the educators who are responsible for so much more than the old "reading, writing and 'rithmetic." We need a societal "reset" button to ensure our children are coming to school with firm foundations and strong support systems. Our kids need that stability so they can be ready to learn. Our teachers can teach their hearts out but if the students are hungry, tired, worried, depressed or otherwise unfocused we can't expect learning to happen.

So what can you do? I've taken the liberty to literally make a list of EXACTLY what I think our community could do to help. I fervently pray that even half of you who read this weekly column will step up to do some of these things because we can only tackle a problem this big when we all work together.

1. **MENTOR:** Many of our children need additional trusted adults in their lives and you can be one of those by becoming a mentor. Call Stacey Legg at 850-767-4100 if you'd like to know more about joining Elevate Bay (our mentoring initiative). You can also get more information about that at <https://www.bay.k12.fl.us/elevate-bay>
2. **SUPPORT:** Please think about the families in your own personal network. Is there a single mom who needs a helping hand once a week? Can you babysit for a single dad while he gets some chores done at home? Do you know a young family who could use some assistance in terms of time, groceries, a helping hand? Can you help with the outreach efforts already going on through your church or a non-profit organization?
3. **VOLUNTEER:** Volunteer for your child's school or your neighborhood school, volunteer to help a teacher after school, volunteer to help the custodian ... we need help at EVERY level! You can find a list of our schools, and contact information, at <https://www.bay.k12.fl.us/our-schools-elementary>, <https://www.bay.k12.fl.us/our-schools-middle> and <https://www.bay.k12.fl.us/our-schools-high>
4. **DONATE:** Money doesn't solve all problems BUT it can help some of them. You can donate your child's gently-used clothing to his/her school if they are currently accepting items. You can contribute to the school to help pay field trip costs for a student who can't afford to go. You can donate books or other items a teacher might like. You can donate non-perishable food items for a school's pantry and you can always donate money to the Bay Education Foundation which will then use it to support a plethora of programs in our

schools. You can find out more about Bay Education Foundation at <https://www.bayeducationfoundation.org/>

5. **SIGN UP FOR FOSTER CARE:** There are not enough foster parents in our community. Many times, children, who have already been victims, are further traumatized because they have to move out of our county for a foster placement. Our Support Employee of the Year, Greg Lyon, actually stepped up to do just that for a student he met. The school had become this student's family and she was devastated at having to leave so he and his wife volunteered to take her in after a short-term placement with her teacher (do you see a trend here) came to a close. Being a foster parent is not for everyone BUT it is definitely a life-changing experience for those who are involved. You can find out more about becoming a foster parent at <https://www.myflfamilies.com/service-programs/foster-care/how-do-I.shtml>

The school will NEVER be able to solve all of the problems even though we're doing more than ever before. However, I firmly believe that we can make a serious dent in most of the issues faced by our children if we work together. Whether you have children of your own or not, I am sure you can agree that OUR children are in crisis and OUR children need our help more than they ever have before.

Please choose to get involved in some form or fashion because our children need us! If even half of you will take some action beginning this week I know our children will feel it, notice it and benefit from it.

Thank you. Stay safe and God Bless!