

WHEN TRAUMA GOES TO SCHOOL

A fifth-grade teacher leads a lesson with a mostly engaged class. One student, however, seems disconnected, or “zoned out,” you might say. It’s not the first time this semester, or even this week.

Mental health issues are on the rise among all ages. One study in the *Journal of Children and Adolescent Counseling*, by UNCG’s Dr. Carrie Wachter Morris and Dr. Kelly Wester, found 13% of high school students were at serious risk for suicide.

Professor Wachter Morris and Burlington Industries Excellence Professor L. DiAnne Borders are two of the researchers heading up the School of Education’s new NC Academy for Stress, Trauma, and Resilience, which offers trauma-informed training and services to K-12 schools and the wider community.

Traumatic life events and circumstances – such as poverty, abuse, or loss – can leave survivors struggling. “Your brain shifts to cope,” says Dr. Borders. “You experience ‘fight, flight, or freeze’ because your brain has been retrained to view certain things as threats.”

Young people may hide harmful life experiences and counter them with detrimental behaviors. Disciplinary actions can further isolate them. They are negatively labeled by peers and teachers. They fall behind in – or are even expelled from – school.

One academy focus is breaking this cycle. “We want to evaluate how students are behaving and how teachers are responding, to make the school environment more trauma-sensitive,” says Wachter Morris.

The academy began its work last year with Rockingham County Schools, or RCS, one of just three districts in North Carolina to secure a U.S. Department of Education grant for nearly \$2.6 million to expand mental health services. The funds, secured in collaboration with the UNCG researchers, will put more mental health providers inside schools and pay for teacher and staff training.

“The funds come at a critical time,” says Dr. Stephanie Ellis, RCS executive director of behavioral health, crisis intervention, and student safety and a project partner.

“Thirty-seven percent of students at the county’s four traditional high schools report depression symptoms,” she notes. “North Carolina ranks suicide as the second leading cause of death among young people, ages 14-24.”

With funding from the grant, UNCG counseling master’s students are serving as interns in RCS and offering trauma-informed training to school counselors and educators.

“As more teachers build trauma-informed classrooms, teachers will be able to recognize when a child’s response is less about a discipline issue, and more about a survival issue,” says Borders. “We want to give them ways to cope and manage.”

The researchers are also assessing wellness among RCS teachers and staff, particularly in the context of the pandemic. As Wachter Morris explains, “It’s not just students who need support.”

learn more at go.uncg.edu/nca-star



Last year, Arionna Wilkerson was part of the first cohort of UNCG master’s students placed in Rockingham County Schools to increase trauma-awareness. Now she works at RCS full time as a counselor.

An earlier version of this story, written by Andrea Spencer, appeared in UNCG’s “Transform” Magazine. If you or someone you know is in crisis, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 800.273.8255 or text 741741 to reach a Crisis Text Line to reach a counselor.