

http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/crime/after-woodson-high-suicides-a-search-for-solace-and-answers/2014/04/11/a394dc64-b069-11e3-a49e-76adc9210f19_story.html

After six Woodson High suicides, a search for solace and answers
by Justin Jouvenal and T. Rees Shapiro, WP, April 11, 2014

The final evening of **Jack Chen**'s life was indistinguishable from many others. The sophomore returned home from school, ate dinner with his mother and retired to his room. His mother asked him to turn out his light at midnight.

Inside his bedroom, anguish gnawed at him, a darkness invisible to friends and family: He maintained a 4.3 grade-point average at one of the area's top high schools, was a captain of the junior varsity football team and had never tried drugs or alcohol..

But that hidden pain drove Jack from his Fairfax Station home early the next morning — Wednesday, Feb. 26. The 15-year-old, who pestered his father to quit smoking and wear his safety belt, walked to nearby tracks and stepped between the rails as a commuter train approached.

His death is one of six apparent suicides at Fairfax's W.T. Woodson High School during the past three years, including another student found dead the next day. The toll has left the school community reeling and prompted an urgent question: Why would so many teens from a single suburban school take their lives?

County officials say they do not believe the deaths are directly connected, and experts say that suicides among teens occurring in such a short span are extremely rare.

Students have cried openly in Woodson's hallways while teachers have tried to show resilience. Frustrated parents have asked the Woodson leadership and school system administrators for answers while wondering whether the school's high-pressure, high-achieving culture could be playing a role.

"A loss like this cuts a deep wound. It persists. It lingers. It's very slow to heal," said Steve **Stuban**, whose son attended Woodson and committed

suicide in 2011. “I have no idea what causes this to occur with increased incidence. All I know is it seems it’s occurring more at Woodson than any other place in the county.”

In interviews, parents of five of the six Woodson teens who apparently took their own lives said their search for answers is never-ending. The Washington Post generally does not identify youths suspected of killing themselves, but the families agreed to speak to The Post about their children to illustrate how teen suicide has profoundly affected their lives.

Ivy **Kilby**’s 15-year-old son Cameron committed suicide on Aug. 4, 2012, a month before he was supposed to return to Woodson for his sophomore year. As a mother who has faced the grief that follows the death of a child, she said that parents should talk to their children about suicide and mental health before it’s too late.

“I never had a conversation with my kids until that happened to us,” Ivy Kilby said. “I hope every parent has a conversation with their children to ask them how they are doing mentally.”

A search for answers

Jack Chen spent his final hours writing a note. He loved his family and friends. He had dreams of being a computer science professor and having four children. But at 15, he “couldn’t keep doing this.”

“There is too much stress in my life from school and the environment it creates, expectations for sports, expectations from my friends and expectations from my family,” Jack wrote. He ended with a simple: “Goodbye.”

Jack’s death and the loss of five other students have reverberated within the community; more than 1,000 Woodson parents, teachers and administrators flooded into the school’s auditorium on a recent night trying to make sense of it all. The suicides have been especially baffling because many of the teens did not seem to exhibit the factors that would put them at risk. They had good grades, stable families and excelled at sports.

Fairfax County School Board member Megan McLaughlin, whose Braddock district includes Woodson and whose two sons attend the school, said talking about teen suicide is no longer taboo, and the school has moved quickly to talk to students about depression and self-harm.

“We absolutely have a responsibility to examine this as closely as possible to understand why this has continued to happen in one particular high school at this rate,” McLaughlin said. “It’s simply too high.”

Many wonder if there is a common thread. A number of parents and students said they worry about the fierce competition for limited spots in the state’s prestigious public university system.

Though teen suicide has dropped since its peak in the 1980s, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Fairfax saw 10 youths die by their own hands in 2013, a five-year high. At Woodson, it is an unavoidable subject.

Karen Garza, Fairfax County’s public schools superintendent, said that she encourages students, teachers and parents to talk to one another if they need help. On May 17, the school system plans to host a countywide event that will focus on mental health. “We are all profoundly saddened by the untimely deaths of our students, and our thoughts remain with the families and friends impacted by these losses,” Garza said.

Two suicides at Woodson in 48 hours marked the second time this year that has happened at a Fairfax County school. County officials said two Langley High School students committed suicide in January within a day of each other, though investigators also said those deaths appear unrelated. The Langley suicides deeply affected the close community in McLean, and the recent losses at Woodson stoked old memories among the student body.

In January 2011, 15-year-old Nick Stuban, a sophomore and rising star on the Woodson Cavaliers football team, committed suicide after he became mired in school discipline hearings for buying synthetic marijuana.

“There are many things that play into an individual’s decision to take their

own life, and trying to grasp at understanding that is very difficult,” said his father, Steve Stuban. “You’re left with the why, the why did this occur, and a sense of guilt of ‘what could I have done?’ ”

Cameron Kilby, a Boy Scout, acolyte at his church and sophomore cross-country runner at Woodson, took his life in the late summer of 2012.

A few months later, senior football player Bryan Glenn disappeared one day in October. He planned to attend the upcoming homecoming dance and had ambitions of serving in the military as a helicopter pilot. He was found dead a week later in a Fairfax park a mile and half from Woodson.

Then in April, 17-year-old junior Ethan Griffith jumped off a parking garage at the Annandale campus of Northern Virginia Community College.

Each of those tragedies was reawakened when the public address system at Woodson crackled to life during sixth period on the day Jack Chen died. Senior Killian Rodgers said he and his classmates froze. They sensed the announcement that was coming, after so many other deaths.

“The color just drained out of their faces,” Rodgers said.

There was little respite. Students were notified two days later of the junior who took his life after Jack. Many were attending a region semifinal basketball game in Woodson’s gym. The news rippled through the crowd as students checked their phones.

“Slowly, people just kept breaking down,” said Bailey Bishop, a senior.

Sydni Weissgold, 16, a sophomore, said students and teachers have been reaching out to one another — little acts of reassurance to get through this difficult time and to weave a safety net for any other vulnerable students.

Weissgold said friends are sending texts saying “I love you.” She was approached recently by a boy from her history class she rarely spoke with. He gave her a thumbs up and asked whether she was all right.

“It’s hard to make sense of it all,” Weissgold said. “You try to stay strong

and stay together.”

A knock at the door

Jim Chen is at a loss. When he runs through the events of the days and weeks leading to his son’s death, he finds nothing amiss. No clue to what he overlooked.

There were no signs of depression. No outbursts. No withdrawal. Jack had maintained all A’s, except for a single B-plus in a math class. He rowed on the crew team and was a hurdler on the track team. The father and son had made plans to practice driving.

Then, on that chilly February morning, there was a knock at the door. Jack was dead, a police officer told his parents. “I said, ‘This is impossible,’” Chen recalled. “‘He was a happy boy.’”

Jim Chen speculates that Jack’s skin medication, which can cause depression, might have played a role. “There was something going on in his mind, but he didn’t give me any chance to do anything,” Chen said. “My heart is aching.”

That same anguish has gripped five other Woodson families.

Rosella Glenn, Bryan Glenn’s mother, said Woodson doesn’t have the tools to help students with mental health issues. “How many more need to die before somebody wakes up and realizes there is a situation that warrants bringing in more resources to fight this problem?” Glenn said. “I’m tired of seeing flowers and signs around Woodson.”

The Glenns said that in the weeks before their son died, he was “at the high point” of his life. There was no explanation for his death, the Glenns said, and they find his suicide hard to accept.

“People need to ask more questions about why this is happening,” Rosella Glenn said. “It could be their kids next.”

Gayle Griffith lost her husband, Matthew, in 2011, when he died of a heart

attack. Less than two years later, her son Ethan committed suicide.

The warning signs didn't appear obvious at first, Griffith said. A straight-A student and Woodson track athlete, Ethan's slipping grades appeared to be fallout from his father's death. He was known to help his friends work through math homework assignments in the cafeteria during lunch, and he wore outlandish costumes during spirit days at the school.

"He tried to be friends with everyone," Griffith said.

Ethan attended a suicide prevention seminar at Woodson last April, Griffith said, where he heard a nationally renowned speaker, Jordan Burnham, speak to teens about how he had leaped off a building and survived. Burnham uses his own cautionary tale to promote mental health awareness.

Days later, Ethan climbed to the top of a parking garage in Annandale and jumped to his death.

Griffith had been trying to get her son professional help. The Monday before he died, she arranged for a Woodson psychologist to evaluate him, but the meeting was canceled at the last minute for an emergency, Griffith said. That meeting was rescheduled for Wednesday; Ethan killed himself that Tuesday night.

In January, nine months later, Griffith was rummaging through her son's closet and opened up his backpack. Inside, she found a paper Ethan had written for an Advanced Placement class a few months before he died. He had written that he felt depressed and had suicidal thoughts.

"The teacher didn't follow their protocol," Griffith said. "If a kid says he's thought about it or writes about it in a paper, they are supposed to call their team of counselors. But that never happened."

Griffith said she hopes that her son's writings can serve as a tool to help teachers identify warning signs in students' work.

The county's assistant superintendent for special services, Kim Dockery,

who met with Griffith, declined to comment on Ethan's case but said the administration is planning to have all county teachers review their training for detecting the signs of suicide.

Other families believe the school is doing the best it can. Cameron Kilby's parents credit Woodson Principal Jeff Yost and other school officials for their efforts to promote suicide awareness.

"It's an extremely hard issue," Jim Kilby said. "For folks who aren't affected by it, the tendency is to look for a discrete cause. Having wrestled with this for a while, I don't think it's quite so simple."

The Kilbys said that before their son died, teen suicide had never crossed their minds. Now teen mental health is a subject that the Kilbys think about often.

"For folks that aren't connected to suicide, it is a harsh, jolting fact when this happens. It is for us, too, but it's never too far away from our thoughts," Jim Kilby said. "We never stop thinking about it."

At Woodson, the latest deaths have revamped efforts in the school community to promote well-being. A student group recently started stress-reducing yoga sessions after class, and other teens have been trained as mental health first responders. In recent years, the administration has moved to restore the number of school psychologists and social workers lost during recession-era budget cuts.

Fairfax County high schools have begun posting suicide and depression hotline information on the front pages of their Web sites. School officials said the recent efforts already have had a positive effect: a number of students expressing self-harming feelings have reached out to the school system for help .

Yost said that Woodson's challenges addressing mental health concerns among the student body are not unique.

"Every school has this issue," Yost said. "Every school has to go about fixing it."

Christine Moutier, the chief medical officer for the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, said the number of suicides at Woodson is high, even if there appears to be nothing linking them. She said such suicide clusters could have very real effects on other students.

“The thing we are always concerned about is the phenomenon of suicide contagion,” Moutier said. “Youths are more susceptible to contagion, and research has found that 2 to 5 percent of teen suicides had a possible role of contagion. It is a vast minority, but it doesn’t mean the phenomenon doesn’t exist.”

Experts said the problem is particularly acute in the age of social media. Woodson teachers have observed students retweeting and favoriting the final messages from Jack Chen and the junior who died after him, rapidly exposing hundreds of students to the tragedies in an unfiltered way.

In a 2011 survey of Fairfax County youths, the most recent data available, approximately 16 percent of Fairfax eighth-, 10th- and 12th-graders — a total of 4,840 students — considered suicide. A much smaller percentage of the student population — but more than 1,150 teens — admitted attempting suicide that same year, according to the survey.

But the numbers can’t capture the impact of each death. More than 500 people turned out for Jack Chen’s funeral. Friends produced a video showing old family photos of Chen frolicking with his sister, holding a football and playing piano.

“He was a great guy with all the smarts and talent to have a bright future,” Jim Chen said. “It’s unbelievable.”

Jennifer Jenkins contributed to this report.

=====

http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/md-politics/maryland-bill-would-require-extra-training-for-school-counselors/2015/04/26/a430f28a-e910-11e4-9767-6276fc9b0ada_story.html

Maryland bill would require extra training for school counselors
by Ovetta Wiggins, April 26, 2015

When Lauryn Santiago's grades started to slip two years ago, her mother, Linda Diaz, suspected something was wrong. Diaz called her daughter's high school and asked the counselor to meet with Lauryn. But the meeting never happened.

A month later, Diaz found her 15-year-old daughter hanging from the banister of their home. Lauryn, a freshman at Laurel High School in Prince George's County, had taken her own life.

Diaz told her story to state lawmakers in Annapolis last month as part of a crusade to increase awareness of teen suicide. Her advocacy helped push the General Assembly to approve a bill dubbed "Lauryn's Law," which would require that school counselors undergo regular training to recognize signs that students are dealing with mental illness, are in distress or are contemplating suicide.

"There is an epidemic," Diaz said of teen suicide, the second-leading cause of death among people ages 15 to 24. "This is an issue, almost like a bomb waiting to explode."

If the bill is signed into law, Maryland would become the 23rd state to require suicide prevention training for school employees, according to the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention. Only nine states had such mandates three years ago, the foundation said, although mental-health advocates have been lobbying for such training for years.

"Regular education and training for school personnel in how to recognize and respond to signs of suicide risk is a crucial step toward reducing the rate of youth suicide," said Nicole Gibson, senior manager of state advocacy at the organization. "As children and teens spend a significant amount of their young lives in school, the personnel that interact with them on a daily basis are in a prime position to recognize these signs and make the appropriate referrals for help."

Under the bill, the state's Professional Standards and Teacher Education

Board, which creates standards for teachers and other school personnel, must include mental-health training as a requirement for counselors to maintain their certification. The requirement would take effect in July 2016.

The bill must be signed by Gov. Larry Hogan (R), whose spokeswoman said it is under review.

There were 4,878 suicides by people ages 15 to 24 in the United States in 2013, up from 3,988 a decade earlier, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The Youth Risk Behavior Survey, a nationwide survey of students in grades nine to 12, found that 16 percent of students seriously considered suicide in 2013, and 8 percent tried to take their own lives.

Some school systems such as Fairfax County have revamped their mental-health policies in response to a spate of teen suicides. The school district used a grant to expand its mental-health first-aid program, and all middle school and high school teachers enrolled in mental-health awareness training last year.

Jeremy Goldman, president of the Maryland School Counselor Association, said his organization did not take a position on the legislation in Annapolis but supports any effort to provide counselors with tools to help their students.

At the same time, he said, current ratios of students to counselors are too high in most schools and the legislation would limit the impact of counselors trained to recognize and respond to suicide risks.

“When school counselors have 500 or 700 students each and are assigned to classroom coverage or hall duty, it makes it more difficult for counselors to intervene,” Goldman said.

Del. Joseline A. Peña-Melnyk (D-Prince George’s), who sponsored the legislation, said she recognizes that counselors are overworked. But “if one child is saved because [the training] is fresh on their minds and they can help the parent, to me it is worth it.”

Counselors must have a master's degree to work in Maryland schools, and their graduate studies include training in mental health. The bill would require counselors to receive additional suicide prevention training every five years, when they are recertified. There is no cost to the state for the training, Goldman said, because counselors pay for their own recertification.

Peña-Melnyk said the requirement should keep counselors current on new resources and approaches that can be used to identify a child in crisis. During hearings on the bill, she noted nearly a half-dozen instances from the past year in which teenagers from across the state committed suicide.

"This is a problem," she said. "We cannot ignore it."

The hearing before the House Ways and Means Committee at which Diaz and others testified was emotional at times. Del. Sheila E. Hixson (D-Montgomery) was visibly moved, wiping tears from her eyes, as University of Maryland graduate Meg Kimmel shared her story about attempting suicide.

Hixson later told the panel that her son took his life. Then Del. Eric G. Luedtke (D-Montgomery) said that his brother attempted suicide at age 22. Hixson and Luedtke praised Diaz and Kimmel for testifying and for trying to remove the stigma associated with suicide.

Diaz began volunteering with a suicide prevention group after her daughter's death. It was there that she learned how to spot signs that someone is at risk and realized that her daughter was in crisis for months before her death.

The honor roll student was popular but also painfully shy, Diaz said. She loved selfies, motorcycles and spending time with the family dogs. She also was being criticized by some members of her extended family who had started to question her sexuality.

At school, Lauryn was having trouble concentrating. Doctors told Diaz the girl had anemia. They never suggested a therapist, and Diaz didn't think of

it.

She says she never learned why the school counselor and Lauryn did not meet.

Five weeks after Lauryn's funeral, one of her friends tried to kill himself. Another friend attempted suicide several months later.

Diaz started reading her daughter's Instagram account and seeing comments from other young people who were considering suicide. She reached out to them.

"These were just kids that I knew," Diaz said. She figured there were more.

She urged school officials to hold an assembly focused on suicide prevention. They did. She contacted school district officials about training. Things moved slowly, so she turned to state lawmakers.

Diaz said she wants to expand the bill to include training for teachers and other school employees and will try to do so in a future legislative session.

"Suicide is preventable," she said. "And when the adults interacting with our children are given the knowledge they need to recognize warning signs and act, we can save some of these young lives."

Ovetta Wiggins writes about K-12 education.