

Florham Park schools to roll out mental health training in March

By JESSE WINTER Editor
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Florham Park Public Schools will be launching NextMark in March, an online mental health training program for educators in the district. Showing their support for mental health training for the districts educators, from left, are Superintendent of Schools Steven Caponegro, Florham Park Board of Education President Nicholas Ritri and Director of Special Services Jane Steffen.

FLORHAM PARK – The grades PreK-8 school district will be rolling out a series of mental health classes next month for teachers, administrators and other faculty members in an effort to better support students facing mental health issues.

[NextMark](#), a series of online programs, will equip the district’s educators with the tools necessary to create a learning environment in which students facing mental health issues can be successful in the classroom, Director of Special Services Jane Steffen said Monday.

“We’re seeing more and more of an emphasis placed on teachers being able to recognize when students are in need,” said Steffen. “As a school district we want to be able to provide students with the best academic environment possible, which means students that are struggling with mental health are still able to achieve academically.”

[NextMark](#) classes offers educators tools in identifying areas of need while also providing techniques to help students cope with whatever stressors or symptoms are bearing down on them, Steffen said.

‘Counting Down’

Steffen added that she used her own experience with a Florham Park student dealing with “really intense anxiety in the classroom” to illustrate this point.

Drawing on a recent online resource she viewed through [NextMark](#), Steffen employed a “counting down” exercise she recently learned from a [NextMark](#) online course.

Steffen asked the student a series of questions in an effort to slow down the student’s mind and “reduce the moment of anxiety,” Steffen explained.

“Let’s stop and return to our body,” Steffen said to the student as part of the exercise.

“What are five sounds you hear?” Steffen asked. “What are four things you see in the room?”

Three similar questions followed — all asking about three items, two items and one item respectively in the student’s immediate environment, according to Steffen.

She said this research-based strategy is effective in helping the student “return to a more relaxed state,” or in other terms, “return to the now” where students are “willing and able to learn.”

The idea, she said, is to “support the needs” of those students suffering from mental health issues so they may remain in the classroom and be academically successful.

The exercises taught by [NextMark](#) also are meant to be discreet and not draw attention from other students, noted Steffen.

Teachers will not diagnose children and are in no way a replacement for mental health professionals like a psychiatrist or a psychologist, emphasized Steffen.

She said the district often “collaborates” with parents and mental health professionals when it comes to the mental health needs of its students.

The district, like others throughout the state, also employs a child study team, where the district’s professionals help identify potential mental health issues.

Steffen said the district’s professionals will often go to parents with their own findings in a way to further the collaboration between parents and the district.

It was, however, the word “inclusion” that Steffen most readily associated with the goal of [NextMark](#) and the district in helping students.

For Steffen, the district’s adoption of [NextMark](#) is about “integrating a classroom” in which students feel welcome and can thrive in a learning environment where the focus is “the learning at hand,” said Steffen.

Common Language

Steffen’s experience as an administrator and educator takes her back working in various New York City middle schools as a special education teacher and as an administrator, including serving as an assistant

principal at a middle school in Park Slope in Brooklyn. She made the move to a full-time administrative role in 2010. During this time Steffen began teaching graduate level courses at [Long Island University](#) for teachers pursuing a master's degree in special education.

Now, as Director of Special Services for Florham Park since 2018, she helps oversee school psychologists, nurses and the guidance departments throughout the district's three schools: the Ridgedale Middle School and the Briarwood and Brooklake elementary schools.

Steffen highlighted the need for educators across the district to have a "common language" so teachers, principals, administrators, nurses, guidance counselors, psychologists and speech therapists can all work together. This was a major motivating factor for the district to adopt [NextMark](#), she noted.

"Our teachers are extremely well educated and know a lot of theory, but this is great because it gives them something 'hands-on'," said Steffen.

Teachers will be able to go beyond whatever tools and ideas they learn in online courses and meet directly where they can follow up on what was taught, noted Steffen.

"We don't want to give someone a computer and send them loose; we want to build communication," said Steffen. This will allow techniques and strategies, like the count-down exercise, to be discussed among educators in Florham Park.

Newmark School

It was [NextMark's](#) history of direct involvement with students, specifically [NextMarks'](#) connection with the [Newmark School in Scotch Plains](#) that helped sway the decision to go with [NextMark](#) as the source for the district's mental health professional development.

"They have a school that's designed for high academic achievers, but struggle with behavioral and mental health issues," observed Steffen. "This isn't a group of folks who are not working with students on a daily basis."

The program is designed to help teachers "recognize" a greater range of mental health and behavioral "disorders" in the classroom, according to [NextMark](#) officials.

Moreover, the course subject matter goes beyond anxiety and depression and will include: Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), mood disorders, Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) and Oppositional Defiant Disorders (ODD).

For Steffen, she said [Newmark's](#) "hands-on" approach was a major deciding factor in adopting its program.

"I think for our teachers, for our students, it's important we are learning from people with 'hands-on' knowledge, but who also have 'hands-on' care for people's children everyday," said Steffen.