

Supporting the Mental Health of Bronx Students

When a young child is experiencing severe emotional or psychological difficulties in a school setting, professional intervention is essential. Unfortunately, overburdened school psychologists often lack the bandwidth to treat every troubled student they encounter. In nine elementary and middle schools in the Bronx, however, VNS Health's Promise Zone program is helping to fill that gap.

The program places trained social workers onsite at each school for 1 or 2 days per week, where they engage in one-on-one sessions with distressed students, some as young as four or five. The weekly counseling sessions, which are free and usually go on for 6–8 weeks, focus on cognitive-behavioral techniques and coping strategies – for example, helping children with anger issues identify what's causing them to act out, and then working with child, teacher, and family to neutralize those triggers.

“Students are typically referred to us by one of the school's social workers or guidance counselors, at which point the parents then need to okay the treatment,” explains VNS Health's Patricia Payne-Marsky, Associate Director, Behavioral Health. “The goal is always to stabilize the child so they can participate in normal classroom activities.” Once the 6 to 8 weeks are over, students and their families are connected with ongoing resources as needed – sometimes a behavioral health provider in the community, and in other cases social support systems.

In practice, Promise Zone clinicians act a lot like behavioral health detectives, seeking out underlying causes. “One child was falling asleep at school,” recalls Keshia Lewis, a VNS Health psychiatric social worker who oversees the Promise Zone program. “It turns out his family was living in a shelter and a sibling had autism, all of which was keeping him up at night.” In another case, a child’s withdrawn behavior was traced to deep-seated – but unexpressed – trauma caused by his sister’s death from asthma.

While the program centers on child counseling, Promise Zone clinicians also host in-person and virtual workshops for teachers and parents at participating schools, where behavior management and other skills are taught. The program team includes a family advocate as well, who works with children’s families to address issues related to their living situation.

Last year, the state-funded program, which is part of VNS Health’s behavioral health services, worked with 240 youngsters across its nine Bronx schools. Although each child and family’s case is unique, one common theme linking them is a sense that the Promise Zone has made a significant and lasting difference in their lives.

“Once children finish the program, our door is still always open,” Lewis notes. At its core, she adds, “the Promise Zone is about addressing mental health issues early in life, to prevent more serious problems later on. It’s really a wonderful program. I think it should be in every school!”

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