

Chippewa Falls schools recognized for leading the way



JULY 28, 2015 6:17 AM • [ROD STETZER](#)
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Tackling complicated problems such improving the mental health of students and setting goals so students succeed takes the help of schools and community residents.

That simple conclusion is drawing state and national attention to the Chippewa Falls School District.

The district is one of six from Wisconsin and eight in the country asked to make a

presentation at the Studer Education Group session, "What's Right in Education," at a Hyatt Regency hotel in Chicago on Tuesday, Aug. 4.

"It's a pretty big honor to be asked," said Dr. Heidi Taylor-Eliopoulos, superintendent of the school district.

Other Wisconsin districts making presentations include Stoughton, Sun Prairie, Janesville, Pewaukee and Muskego-Norway, based in Waukesha County.

Taylor-Eliopoulos said the Chippewa Falls district's presentation grew out of the Community Conversation it held in February 2014. From that, the district set measurable goals for each district department and school building.

Then on July 14-15, a group of about 50 people working in the district, including those in administration, maintenance and administrative assistants, came together to create scorecards to measure success.

"They are going to drive our work for a year as a district," said Taylor-Eliopoulos. "The core concept is linking elbows and working together."

She added: "At the end of the day, (the idea is) coming with a plan on how to work together to maximize our efforts to help students grow."

The school district has been one of the leaders in the state in trying to improve the mental health of its students.

Taylor-Eliopoulos said the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction has asked Christine McMasters, executive director of the student services for the district, to write a newsletter article about the district's efforts.

"DPI expressed that we are doing more than (other) school districts across the state," Taylor-Eliopoulos said.

Those efforts included holding, in partnership with HSHS St. Joseph's Hospital and HSHS Sacred Heart Hospital, a Teen Mental Health Summit on June 10.

"What it did show is that the school districts, the community and parents want to partner with each other," she said.

She said what's refreshing is that people aren't just sitting back and pointing at each other, asking what they are doing to solve the problem. Instead, community members are asking how they can help.

"We've made good connections with our own local agencies," Taylor-Eliopoulos said of the mental health summit.

McMasters wrote to the DPI that the district has had two student suicides in the past two school years. That's made it more urgent for the district to reach out to the community for help.

A Children, Youth and Families council has been formed. "Many of the members of this group have connections to other mental health initiatives within the county and the hope is to make a network of connections to improve services to children and families around physical, mental and spiritual well-being," McMasters wrote, adding the district has partnered with the local hospitals to provide training on suicide prevention that's available for all staff and students.