



METROWEST WEATHER

PAGE A15

Mostly sunny, windy, 50s. Clear at night, some frost, 30s.

The METROWEST DAILY NEWS

2004 NEWSPAPER OF THE YEAR ALL MEDIA AVAILABLE

Thursday October 20, 2005

VOL. 7 • NO. 361
60 PAGES
4 SECTIONS
50 CENTS

★★★
CENTRAL EDITION

www.metrowestdailynews.com

LOCAL

Schools take on trauma

New program helps students learn after living through strife

By **Charlie Breitrose**
DAILY NEWS STAFF

FRAMINGHAM — A report, released yesterday, outlining how schools can deal with children who have suffered from trauma in their lives was hailed as a major step forward by Education Commissioner David Driscoll.

"You are at an event that represents a potential breakthrough for schools across the commonwealth of Massachusetts," Driscoll said to those assembled at the former Juniper Hill Elementary School. "Certainly the problem is very widespread and thanks to this support, those children will not have to suffer silently."

Massachusetts Advocates for Children, the group that produced the report, chose to introduce "Helping Traumatized Children Learn" in Framingham because the district is using its ideas as the basis for a district-wide program.

Susan Cole, director of MAC's Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative, said the report represents seven years of work. She first became interested in the subject when she was a school teacher.

"I was a teacher in 1975 dealing with kids staring out the window and falling when they should have been passing," Cole said.

The report found that the number of traumatized children could reach into the tens of thousands. According to the report, 43,000 children in the Bay State were named on restraining orders, the authors wrote, which suggests that they were affected by family violence.

Framingham received a Safe and Supportive Schools grant from the Department of Education to create a program for teachers across the district. Several staff members worked with Jessica Greenwald O'Brien, a psychologist and lawyer who worked as a consultant for MAC, to create the program.

The district took a different course from others in the state, Greenwald O'Brien said.

"They are doing a systematic approach," she said. "It's such a huge district and they are applying it to the whole district, not just a school building."

The group has been working on the program, called the Framingham Flexible Framework, since March, said Greenwald O'Brien and they hope to produce a binder or book of tips by the end of the school year to give to teachers so they can learn to deal with victims of trauma.

Anne Sullivan, literacy specialist at Dunning Elementary School, said many of the most challenging

problems in schools have roots in trauma. The system helps teachers recognize symptoms and deal with the problems. However, Framingham teachers will not be delving into students' personal lives.

"We don't want to know about what happens at home. That is not what this is all about because there is nothing we can do," Sullivan said. "It gives us another lens to see problems and we can identify learn-

"Certainly the problem is very widespread and thanks to this support, those children will not have to suffer silently."

David Driscoll
state education commissioner

ing deficiencies."

Teachers must be sensitive to victims of trauma, said Jacob Bersin, a physical education teacher at Stapleton Elementary School.

"Trauma can result in hyper arousal, withdrawal and aggression toward self and others," Bersin said. "This means that children come to school focused just on surviving, which makes learning academic content difficult."

Traumatized students may struggle with reading or math, Bersin said, but may benefit from activities such as fine arts or gym.

Often the behavior is misunderstood, said Laura Goldman, a fifth-grade teacher at Barbieri Elementary School. Youngsters may be staring off into space, disrupting class or not doing their work. Instead of sending the child to the office for punishment, Goldman now deals with it by speaking privately with the student and setting up their own system.

"Together, the student and I come up with a non-verbal signal so I can tell them they are off track," Goldman said. "I do it nonchalantly, because doing so verbally can cause the student embarrassment or re-traumatize them."

(Charlie Breitrose can be reached at 508-626-4407 or obreitro@cnc.com.)