

Madison County School Safety Summit Covers Mental Health, Cyberbullying and Grooming in Schools

by Sydney Sinks, News Reporter
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EDWARDSVILLE - Educators and law enforcement officers gathered for the annual School Safety Summit for Madison County on Monday, Jan. 29, 2024.

Hosted by Madison County Regional Superintendent of Schools Rob Werden, the summit covered mental health, cyberbullying and grooming in schools. Madison County State's Attorney Tom Haine, Sheriff Marcos Pulido and Mental Health Board Executive Director Deborah Humphrey also led the discussion.

“These issues are often overshadowed by the school shootings, but in reality, they affect more of our students every day across the state and the county,” Werden said.

Mental Health and Substance Use in Schools

Donna Nahlik, Director of Prevention and Community Education for Chestnut Health Systems, began the summit by talking about mental health and substance use in schools. She noted that Chestnut is already in most of the schools in the county, and they host regular training sessions about vaping, problem gambling, opioid education, Naloxone distribution, healthy decision-making and more.

“I was delighted when Rob and Deb asked me to come today and talk about substance use prevention because it is such a critical component to keeping kids safe,” Nahlik said. “We spend a lot of time fishing people out of the water and trying to help people after the fact. What we focus on with our primary prevention project is keeping kids out of the water and keeping people away from some of those unhealthy choices to begin with.”

There were 74 suspected drug overdose deaths in Madison County from January to September 2023. According to the 2022 Illinois Youth Survey, which invites high schoolers to self-report substance use and mental health concerns, 29% of 12th graders used alcohol and 23% used vape products in the last 30 days. These numbers have emphasized the importance of teaching kids about the dangers of substance use.

Nahlik also noted that Chestnut provides free Narcan to anyone over the age of 18. She said it is very easy for kids to access substances over social media, and the ingestion of drugs like fentanyl and xylazine is often unintentional and fatal. Chestnut Health Systems hopes their trainings and presence in schools can dissuade kids from trying substances in the first place.

“Suffice it to say that fentanyl has infiltrated most of the illicit drug supply,” Nahlik added. “If someone in the community is using illicit opioids, they should assume that fentanyl is present...Fentanyl is present and it’s killing people who think that they’re using something else. This can include our kids.”

Cyberbullying and Sexual Abuse Online

Ali Burns and Casey Bloodworth, both Assistant U.S. State’s Attorneys, spoke next about the prevalence of child sexual abuse material (CSAM) online and some of the main ways that children are abused. They said the major trends they have seen include grooming, sexting, sextortion and AI-generated images/deepfakes.

Burns explained that grooming and sextortion normalize sexual topics. People who engage in sextortion will extort money or sexual favors by blackmailing victims with their sexual images or information about their sexual activity. Kids are often ashamed and might not come forward about what's happening to them, which results in high rates of suicide attempts.

Burns said sextortion is usually a fast-paced crime that quickly gets “out of control.” She encouraged parents and educators to spread awareness and let kids know it's not their fault if it happens to them.

Bloodworth spoke about AI technology that manipulates a photo or video to make it look like somebody is doing or saying something that didn't actually happen. This technology is being used to create CSAM that is “incredibly disturbing, incredibly graphic and very realistic,” he said.

Also known as deepfakes, these images often circulate around a school or community and cause great distress to the victim. Bloodworth encouraged educators to outline their policies around AI technology and talk to students about the harm that can be caused with AI, which can help students understand the dangers and consequences of creating deepfakes.

Grooming in the Classroom

Michelle Denault spoke about the prevalence of grooming. Denault herself was groomed by a teacher when she was in high school, and now she regularly gives presentations in schools to raise awareness and keep kids safe.

According to her data, one in ten kids ages K–12 will be abused by a teacher. Denault noted that predators often choose positions of power and groomers will become a child's friend and confidant before the relationship becomes sexual.

“The most sinister aspect of grooming is that it mimics mentoring behaviors,” Denault explained. “Not everybody abuses with fear. Some people use love to abuse. And not everybody rapes with force. Some people can manipulate a kid into consenting to their own sexual violation.”

Denault encouraged parents and educators to talk to their kids about grooming and sexual abuse. She noted that most people will talk to their kids about drunk driving, but few are willing to talk about sexual abuse. By talking about it and teaching kids to respect people, not just titles of authority, you can help prevent sexual abuse in schools.

Ultimately, all of the speakers emphasized prevention and the importance of communication between students, educators and parents.