

New Program Will Alert City Schools To Children With Trauma

By MEGAN WILLIAMS Daily News-Record

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HARRISONBURG — Harrisonburg City Public Schools is launching Handle With Care, a program aimed at ensuring children who are exposed to violence or other traumatic events receive appropriate school-based interventions in order to maximize their academic success, according to a press release.

HCPS is going forward with Handle With Care in partnership with the Harrisonburg Police Department, the Harrisonburg Fire Department and the Harrisonburg-Rockingham Emergency Communications Center.

Trauma-informed care is a push that the school division has been prioritizing for some time now. The Handle With Care program provides the city's police and fire departments the ability to alert appropriate school personnel, without providing details, that a particular child was involved in an incident that may result in academic or behavioral problems the following day at school. When contacting designated school officials, ECC staff will not relay any information except the statement "Handle with Care" and the child's name.

Research shows that trauma can undermine a child's ability to learn, form relationships and function appropriately in the classroom. HCPS, committed to supporting the emotional health of students, is among the first in the Commonwealth of Virginia to implement this program.

Handle With Care will officially launch on Monday at 6 p.m. at the Turner Pavilion in downtown Harrisonburg, during a private welcome back event for HCPS staff.

The program originated in West Virginia and in April of last year U.S. Sens. Tim Kaine, D-Va.; Joe Manchin, D-W.Va.; and Shelley Moore Capito, R-W.Va. introduced the Handle with Care Act to connect children who experience traumatic events, including domestic violence situations, drug raids, overdoses to school resources that are designed to provide the child with trauma-informed care.

April Howard, executive director of psychological and student services for Harrisonburg City Schools, was not immediately available for comment on the new program on Thursday. However, speaking about such efforts in the past, Howard has said that the school division is

continually looking to add more programs and training to meet children's needs — all their needs.

If a student is worried about their home life, or their next meal, they are not prepared to do the classroom work, Howard has said previously.

Teachers are not mental health professionals, and not qualified to address students involved with trauma. However, if there were things in place to get these students to the attention of mental health professionals within the school division, that's the first step in addressing those needs.

Contact Megan Williams at 574-6272 or mwilliams@dnronline.com. Follow Megan on Twitter @DNR_Learn