RSU 14 psychologist wins state honor

By Emily Bader   February 10, 2021

WINDHAM — Maine School Psychologist of the Year Lisa Backman says the pandemic has "changed everything" about her work, from losing an element of "humanness" in her evaluations to struggling with her own productivity.

But Backman, a psychologist with Windham-Raymond schools, says if there's one thing she's taken away from the past year it's this: "I realize how passionate I am for my profession."

She recently received the School Psychologist of the Year honor from the Maine Association of School Psychologists.

Backman, who now has to conduct her evaluations of students either online or with all involved masked or wearing face shields, said the scope of her work has broadened as well. In addition to catching the "red flags or at-risk type of kids," she said, she's also watching out for students who are feeling isolated or depressed and missing those connections with their teachers and peers.

Lisa Backman has worked at Windham-Raymond schools for 20 years and was recently named the Maine School Psychologist of the Year. *Contributed / Windham-Raymond School District*

The lack of socialization and disruptions in routine during the pandemic have taken a toll on youth nationwide. Compared to 2019, the number of mental health-related emergency room visits through October 2020 for children ages 5-11 and children ages 12-17 increased about 24% and 31%, respectively, according to the U.S. Center for Disease Control and Prevention.

"(We're) trying to catch kids proactively and reach out to parents. I think this year I've talked with parents a lot more," Backman said. "It's being sure that we're building relationships with students and not just solely working on the curriculum."

In spite of the problems caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, Backman said she's witnessed many positive outcomes over the past year. She's found that students are more motivated and engaged during evaluations when they're using an iPad. And, with smaller in-person class sizes, she's able to accomplish more during classroom observations.

She described her work over the past 20 years with RSU 14 students, mostly in kindergarten through fifth grade, as being like a "detective," working to fit all of the pieces together to form an "evidence-based plan" to support students.

Manchester School Principal Danielle Donnini wrote in an email that Backman "truly deserves the honor and recognition that she's receiving." Donnini has worked with Backman for 20 years and said her colleague is "student-focused, smart, ethical, resourceful and fun – a unique and wonderful combination."

Kyle Rhoads, principal at Windham Primary School, nominated Backman for the award.

"She approaches her work and her life wanting to better others," he wrote in his nomination letter.

Bachman said that school psychology was an "opportunity that fell into my lap."

While working at the University of Southern Maine's day care center in Gorham in the late 1990s, her roommate suggested that Backman check out USM's master's program.

She describes herself as someone "very empathetic and compassionate" who loves working with children, "but also, I'm really a mathematical logical type of thinker and want to problem solve" and is a "lifelong learner" who loves the diversity of knowledge she gets to draw upon every day.

Working with students one-on-one "usually makes my day," she said, and is the most rewarding part of her job.

Backman said she's unsure if and how her work will change post-pandemic.

"Even though we're looking for a fix that's very quick, because everything's so unpredictable now," the pandemic's impact is "going to be something that we have to keep in mind for a long time," she said.

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