

Sarah Marte

I have been a special education teacher at Milaca Public School for almost 25 years. My own kids are currently 15 and almost 13 years old. Our journey with the mental health system started when my first born was struggling to attend kindergarten. At the time, we thought she just hated school and didn't want to go. We learned that her academic skills were far above her peers (she was reading Harry Potter when her peers were learning sight words). She was not only bored in school, but we learned she had sensory processing disorders that made being in loud, busy environments a challenge. Getting dressed and ready for school in the mornings was an emotional and physical struggle every day. We decided to ask the school for support. At the time, there were no school-linked mental health services. They made accommodations in her school day, but we had to travel twice a week to get to her therapy appointments that were about an hour away. As a teacher, it was difficult to make lesson plans and prepare for a substitute. Finding time in my schedule for school meetings and therapy appointments was challenging. My husband had to alter his work schedule so that he would be available to pick up our other child from daycare. It was stressful and exhausting to access the services that our child needed.

In the last five years, my youngest child has been diagnosed with depression and anxiety and requires therapy to address her mental health needs. However, accessing services is much easier now that there are mental health professionals in our schools. Her therapist has the flexibility to schedule her during a time that worked in my child's schedule. My child feels she has a voice in her therapy plan and was more willing to attend the appointments because she chose the time. My husband and I have not had to take time off work or alter our work day for therapy appointments, and we don't spend hours in the car or pay extra money for gas.

As a special education teacher, I have also seen the benefits of having therapists within the school. I am able to meet with our school-linked mental health professionals to make referrals and help families connect with services. Students are given a pass that looks like all other school passes, so accessing services is confidential. Attendance for appointments is automatically excused in the office, so parents don't need to ask providers for appointment verification letters. When students are in crisis, there are mental health professionals available to help us meet the needs of the students. Because students don't have to travel to appointments, they are able to get back to class quickly. School attendance improves which helps them be more successful in school. In Milaca, we still have students that are placed on waiting lists because we have more mental health needs than we have providers. We need to continue to fund programs so that we can meet the mental health needs of our students.