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REGIONAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION
KANE COUNTY

Patricia Dal Santo, Regional Superintendent

Students advocate, find shared experiences at annual Kane County Youth Voices Forum on Mental Health

ELGIN, III. – Sophie Dado had a message for everyone in the room at Elgin Community College. She had written down a quote that stuck with her, and she wanted the adults in the room to hear.

“Listen to hear, not to respond.”

The sentiment stuck with multiple students in attendance, and helped shape the conversations for both the rest of the day and the future. For Dado, last Friday marked her third time at the Kane County Youth Voices Forum on Mental Health, an annual gathering of high school students, counselors, teachers and Kane County representatives with a focus on student-led conversations on emotional well-being.

Each year has been a unique experience for Dado, a student at Dundee-Crown High School. She started as an attendee before trying her hand at being a student facilitator in 2024. This year, she kicked off the day with a panel discussion alongside her classmate and representatives from the Kane County Regional Office of Education (ROE) and Kane County Health Department (KCHD). The group shared county- and state-level initiatives, resources available to support mental health, and advice for both students and educators.

Dado said the event has grown to mean a great deal to her.

“High school is difficult, and being here surrounded by people that can relate to what I have been through has provided a community,” she said. “Events like this are important because they bring that feeling to people who may not always feel like they have a community.”

The sixth installment of the Youth Voices Forum on Mental Health brought nearly 80 students together to talk through what they experience both inside and outside of school. The event is made possible through the Kane County System of Care, a network of community providers and families. Member organizations include the Kane County ROE, KCHD, Kane County Behavioral Health Council and Juvenile Justice Council, and the All Our Kids Early Childhood Networks.

Alternative Programs staff at the Kane County ROE prepare student facilitators for the event and connect with school counselors to identify other attendees that may have interest in participating. Students that were chosen as facilitators spent a day at the ROE preparing for the event by reflecting and forming the

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topics that would guide discussions at the forum, including how support services could be improved and how adults could best foster environments to support mental health.

After the conversations, attendees gathered to experience a talk from Brandon McCall of Teen Truth, an organization aimed at developing and improving school culture. The presentation emphasized the number of masks people can wear to suit their surroundings that ultimately can lead to people forgetting their true selves.

Many in the crowd resonated with this message as well.

“You can come from a different town, be a certain race or gender, but we are all the same,” said Kate Walls, a student at Geneva High School. “We all go through some mental health struggle and face our own challenges. The number of things shared that I related to was shocking, because when you go through struggles, you feel very isolated. You think you’re the only one that has that problem. In reality, it’s an entire community.”

Staff who attended the event will compile data to produce a [report](#) later this year that will be shared with county and school board members as well as district and school employees. The report is intended to shed light on the largest themes and issues impacting the emotional well-being of Kane County students.

“The student voice has never been more important in shaping their school environment,” said Patricia Dal Santo, Regional Superintendent for Kane County. “Helping facilitate this event has been a tremendous honor and has shined a light on multiple issues we have worked to address. We have increased our counseling services through channels such as our Alternative Learning Opportunities Programs and Regional Safe Schools Programs. We have provided more professional development opportunities to help educators foster these conversations with their students. These efforts would not be possible without students courageously sharing their stories and advocating for their needs.”

More information on Alternative Programs through the Kane County ROE can be found at kaneroe.org/student-services.

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About Kane County Regional Office of Education

Kane County Regional Office of Education serves the residents of Kane County, IL. and assists nine school districts (U-46, Batavia 101, West Aurora 129, East Aurora 131, District 300, Central 301, Kaneland 302, St. Charles 303, and Geneva 304). Located at 28 N. First St., Geneva, IL, Kane ROE serves over 9,831 educators and covers 524 square miles. Kane ROE was recognized, in 2023, by the National Association of Government Communicators (NAGC) with two Blue Pencil & Gold Screen Awards. The awards recognized excellence in government communication & were presented for outstanding work in the Annual Report & Video Education categories.