



On the Path 3.1

Trending Topics in Student Wellness

Welcome to the On the Path podcast. I'm Joyce Sherry, York School Dean of Students.

Each year, the National Association of Independent Schools releases an overview of trends in the world of K-12 education. I'm guessing that you all pay attention to the news, so none of the top trends for the last school year will surprise you. Still, I thought you might like to hear about York School's perspective on them. I do want to note before beginning that these trends, though not surprising, may be uncomfortable for some of you.

Let's look first at what the trend book calls, "Educator Sexual Misconduct." I'm sure you've heard of a number of schools reeling from revelations of sexual abuse of students by faculty, staff, coaches, chaplains, or administrators. The trend, according to NAIS, is for schools to be taking on a more active stance to forestall or avoid such painful episodes. Unsurprisingly, York has been way ahead of this curve. As you know, our primary concern is for the safety and security of our students. It has long been a policy that anyone who comes on campus, from faculty to the individuals who work on our roofs to the members of the cleaning crew, must be fully vetted, even when the chances of student contact are minimal. Even parents who will be transporting or chaperoning children other than their own go through the same process. This is only a first step. All School employees receive careful training each year. Training consists of obvious subjects like what constitutes inappropriate behavior, as well as guidance on how to identify and help potential victims. One of the things we always reiterate with students, parents, and faculty is to speak up if you are concerned. After all, it can take a great deal of courage to report on behalf of yourself or someone you care about. We see this way too often in the news. Please know that we would take seriously and fully investigate any report of sexual misconduct. Anyone with a concern should not wait, but should come immediately to me. Of course, we encourage students to speak with any campus adult with whom they feel comfortable. Ultimately, the report would come to me and I would then follow our protocol. If you have any questions, please let me know at jsherry@york.org or by calling my extension, 138. I'll mention this contact info again later in the podcast.

Trend number 2 is the rise of student-to-student sexual assault. Again, news stories have made us all aware of the challenges in colleges and universities. Alarming, we are now learning that reports of assault in high schools have been on the rise. In fact, in a study published by the Journal of Adolescent Health, over 25% of women say they have experienced rape or attempted rape before starting college. Twenty percent of college-age men acknowledge that they have committed some form of sexual assault between the ages of 14 and 20. The incidence of rape for transgender students is a shocking 40%. According to the survey Independent School Health Check, about a quarter of the participating students in grades 9-12 had had consensual sex; most were 15 or older at the time of their first experience. It's probably not surprising that research shows that comprehensive sex education programs delay onset of sexual activity, promote safer sex, and educate and empower adolescents to prevent sexual assault. So-called comprehensive programs include not just the biological aspects of sex, but the relational and

emotional ones, as well. For several years, on an alternating year schedule, York has asked an alumna to return to campus to share with students her sex and relationships program. The program busts myths about normalcy and expectations, tackles the thorny problems of pornography, addresses the impact of alcohol and other drugs, and clearly details the definition of consent. Our PATH program promotes mutual respect and empowers our students to think deeply about their choices. As you know, this year's program began with the screenings of two powerful films, *Miss Representation* and *The Mask You Live In*, followed by discussions with local therapists. The films raised student awareness about societal expectations for males and females, and informed their conscious reactions and purposeful choices around these stereotypes. Through these programs, as well as daily in-class experiences, students learn to draw healthy boundaries. Of course, as a piece of physical empowerment, I've been coordinating self-defense courses for York's young women for several years now. We strongly recommend that all students, whether through the classes we arrange or elsewhere, become versed in self-defense techniques.

The final trend NAIS reported on was sexuality and technology. The frustrating persistence of sexting can't be ignored, unfortunately. In spite of years of education by both parents and schools, sexting hasn't gone away. In fact, according to the Pew Research Center, we can confidently describe it as "part of the new relationship norm." According to the Trend Book, it is increasingly common for teens, predominantly girls, to text explicit photos. Unfortunately, fully a quarter of recipients admit to sending photos on to others for whom they weren't intended, many of them with full awareness of the potential legal consequences. Even in a tolerant school like York, subjects of explicit photos can face strong social disapproval. Gossip, mockery, exclusion, and shaming are all damaging to the highly socially attuned adolescent mind. Each year in TIL class, Mrs. Torg and I educate and inform 9th graders about the social and legal ramifications of sexting and other sexually explicit communications. In my conversations with students, I reiterate the information at all grade levels. We also address the issue in posters around the school cautioning students to "Think Before You Post." We've been impressed with York students' awareness about the dangers surrounding explicit communications. My belief is that our students tend to be wiser in this arena than adolescents in many other parts of the country. However, my instinct is always to err on the side of hyper-educating rather than complacency. Parents have expressed their agreement with me about this on any number of occasions.

So that's the update on Student Wellness Trends in independent schools from NAIS and York's history of intervention for each of them. As always, if you have questions or comments regarding this podcast, please don't hesitate to contact me at jsherry@york.org.