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## **Mahwah workshop held to help Bergen County teachers respond to crises Sunday, May 16, 2010**

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A teacher dies in the middle of the school term. A natural disaster or terrorist act affects the student body. A student commits suicide or dies in a tragic accident off school grounds.

Flight Team, a group of trained school professionals, is then called on to provide guidance when students, staff and administrators are thrown into the midst of a crisis or trauma.

A two-day workshop was held late last month in Mahwah for 48 new Flight Team members from 18 school districts in Bergen County. The list of attendees and trainees included principals, assistant principals, assistant superintendents, teachers, school psychologists, student assistance counselors, social workers and guidance counselors.

"When a school or school district is faced with a tragedy or crisis, its teachers, staff, students and parents may be emotionally impacted by the incident," said Flight Team coordinator Linda Weber, a school psychologist and principal of Byrd Elementary School in Glen Rock. "The chief school administrator or building principal might call in the Flight Team ... to provide support to the organization."

Flight Team, now in its eighth year, was created by a group of school professionals in the county in response to the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. The group — more than 100 school professionals have been trained — flies into action to support and complement crisis-response personnel already employed by a district.

The team may assist teachers in announcing the tragedy to students and staff or take on the immediate task of organizing safe rooms for direct support to students, teachers and administrators. The crux of their duties is to closely maintain a typical daily school schedule while handling the immediacy of the crisis, Weber said.

The Mahwah workshop — run by Suzanne B. Phillips and Craig Haen of the American Group Psychotherapy Association — covered topics from the nature of trauma and the reactions of students to activities to facilitate mourning and the use of the Internet and social-networking sites to mourn.

"We bring with us experience, knowledge and the organizational structure needed in responding to a crisis or trauma," Weber said of Flight Team members.

"The aim of the workshop is to remind trainees of the skills that they already have and can transport to a situation," Haen said. "What we're trying to give them are the tools so that when these situations come about, they go into it with a set of skills and a sense of how to approach it."

Glen Rock guidance counselor Dan Brodhead was a workshop participant who took on the part of a traumatized student at a role-playing session overseen by the psychotherapists. Brodhead had no trouble playing the role since he has faced such issues. In recent years a Glen Rock student committed suicide on school grounds, and another student died last year after being struck by a train.

"To see the Flight Team in action in our school was remarkable," Brodhead said. "The support they gave students and faculty was tremendous. Every time you turned around there was someone there to lend a hand. I decided I wanted to be a part of it. This reaffirmed how I need to approach a student who is facing a situation. Sometimes as a counselor you have to learn to separate from your own feelings and try to be a caregiver in that situation. The training reminded me of the little things that you can do ... that sometimes the only thing you can do is be supportive."

Melissa Brinton, a social worker at Glen Rock High School, praised the workshop psychotherapists as more than confidence-builders.

"They're validating experiences that have already happened," Brinton said. "That makes you feel even more effective and more empowered as a professional in the field of counseling, psychology or social work."

Weber coordinated the Flight Team concept with Tom Domerski, former vice principal at Northern Valley Regional High School at Demarest, after the attacks on the World Trade Center. Its formation drew the support of 10 northern Bergen County school districts. Domerski has since retired and Cathy Carisi, a psychologist at Ramapo Ridge Middle School in Mahwah, has filled the post as co-coordinator, working yearly with Weber to get the word out that the Flight Team — which is not affiliated with county or state programs — is a growing need.

"I wish there wouldn't be a need for us," Weber said. "But knowing that there will be, I would hope that we are more known in the county, have a wider reach and a larger group of trained and committed professionals who are willing to join us."

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