

# Supporting K-12 Teachers *Post-Pandemic*

The adjustments since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic have taken their toll, especially in elementary and secondary education settings. For the past two years, despite the return to a semblance of normalcy, pressures on schools—initially with the isolation and need to adapt, then with the struggle to transition back to the classroom—have not fully subsided. Schools, as well as the teachers, students and families they serve, are stressed out.

As schools and school professionals are dealing with this long-lasting stress, Mercy College's School of Social and Behavioral Sciences (SSBS) is preparing future school counselors and psychologists with the needed tools to help address these issues. Two graduate degree programs, School



Counseling and School Psychology, train graduates to work in K-12 school settings as counselors and psychologists to help teachers and administrators create safe, healthy, supportive learning environments for all students.

“School psychologists and school counselors play an essential role in helping schools deal with all that’s happened in the past two years,” said Stuart Sidle, Ph.D., dean of SSBS. “Moreover, the stressors common to these schools often extend to the professionals themselves who are trained to help schools cope.”

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“When the pandemic first hit there were no protocols for what we were going through,” said Regina Kaishian, Ed.D., assistant professor, school psychology. “Our graduate students had to stay flexible and learn on the fly. And faculty were learning right along with them.” One small but vital task that had to be addressed immediately: developing ways to adapt crucial services for virtual platforms.

As part of their field experiences, graduate students were placed in situations where they needed to quickly learn new skills and develop expertise in order to address a variety of problems affecting schools including, disruptions to routines, isolation from peers, and lack of access to needed resources. Not surprisingly, the very same issues affecting stressed-out schools affected the school and mental health counselors in training.

“School professionals are in high



demand, and graduate students are dealing with complex issues even during their training,” said Cynthia Walley, Ph.D., associate professor and chair of the Department of Counseling and director of Mercy’s School Counseling Program.

Mercy graduate student Elaine Román ’23 began their studies in the fall of 2019, working toward a master’s in school psychology with a bilingual extension and attending evening classes. Just a few weeks into their classroom studies, the pandemic hit. Roman and their fellow graduate students observed the stresses many teachers felt about their students falling behind, academically, socially and emotionally. To address these issues, the Mercy graduate students brainstormed and planned, along with their Mercy faculty mentors and clinical supervisors to

develop solutions. In one instance, they were able to create a “pandemic break room,” a quiet respite with gift bags and specialty where teachers could go to rest and decompress.

Turning challenges into opportunities for greater learning appears to be one of the hallmarks of a Mercy education. “Whenever I ask new students what made them decide on this career, they often talk about two things: the troubles they themselves have faced, and their desire to help others who may be struggling,” said Jeff Cohen, Ph.D., associate professor and program director for the School Psychology Program. “Our students tend to mirror the population they are most interested in working with, and a lot of them return to their communities to practice. In many ways, our students are the community.”