

‘Students have the capacity and the power:’ Webster man builds teen mental health resources through Safe Schools



*Mark Phillips, a retired lawyer, now runs a non-profit focused on mental health services for teenagers that's expanding rapidly into high schools to provide additional support. ALEXANDER RAPP—
Monitor staff*

Mark Phillips still remembers watching news coverage of the Parkland shooting from his home in Webster back in 2018. He had just retired from a successful career as a lawyer and trial consultant in Boston.

“You’ve got to do something about this,” his wife, Juliana, said to him, nodding towards the TV. Horrified at the tragedy, the two of them sat in silence until she spoke again. “And we can’t be the ones to do it.”

She pointed at the student survivors on the screen and said, “It has to be them, the kids.”

Not confident that he could make sufficient change through legislation on gun laws, Phillips instead started Safe Schools, a nonprofit geared towards teen mental health, later that year.

“Mental health wasn’t political, and everybody was in agreement that it was a huge problem, and that schools didn’t have enough support,” said Phillips.

He started by researching online courses about teen mental health and realized that the student perspective was often missing from these lessons. Whatever programs he developed had to come from his target audience. In 2021, he orchestrated a student-led conference at Saint Anselm College to explore new approaches to cyberbullying and teen mental health. He recruited a group of student leaders and invited seven student participants from five high schools in New Hampshire to attend the conference and share their learnings with their respective schools.

“There was nothing but student speakers,” said Phillips. “I was quietly behind the scenes and gave them all the responsibility.”

The conference occurred a second time the following year. One of the student leaders, Ani Brooks, was a rising senior in high school at the time. She recalls her experience fondly.

“Mark handpicked myself and five other students. Really all the planning he put on us, he just gave us the idea and what we needed from there,” said Brooks.

Student empowerment is half the battle for Safe Schools. Phillips thinks that the best way to see young adults thrive is when they are given the space to have open discussions, try new things and even, at times, fail.

Phillips recalled his own experience being drafted into the army at age 18.

“I was not the smartest, most mature young man, but the army exposed me and taught me about leadership, about fear, about responsibility, and the power of young people to do amazing things, including fighting for their lives on a battlefield at age 18, 19, 20,” said Phillips. “So, I am a huge believer and advocate that students have the capacity and the power to drive important, socially significant change, especially when it's affecting their lives.”

Max Giardi, who went to Falmouth High School in Cape Cod, Massachusetts, met Phillips at a mental health conference in 2024 in Portsmouth, where Giardi was a speaker representing his school.

“When I met him, it didn't feel like your average organizational president who knows that, ‘I can use you for my project.’ It was more like, ‘Let's build a connection,’” said Giardi. “My first impression of him was, wow, this guy runs this whole thing, but he feels more like you've known him all your life.”

Phillips and Giardi connected over their shared passion for uplifting student mental health. Phillips eventually paid out of pocket for Giardi to attend a Dartmouth University event as a speaker.

“He's just always been so great at making sure that we had everything we needed while also still respecting and valuing all of our opinions,” said Brooks, who met Phillips when she was a student at Dover High School.

She already belonged to a group called the Mental Health Initiative, which started in response to multiple suicides in the grade above her.

“There were already a lot of people who really cared about mental health and wanted to see change, but maybe didn't know what they could do in their school,” she added.

For Brooks, the Saint Anselm conference started a lot of conversations at her school about mental health and helped the Mental Health Initiative gain around 20 more students.

“It re-sparked that hope and drive to keep on being vocal about mental health in schools, being vocal about needing change and knowing that there are resources,” said Brooks.

Stigma often prevents students from reaching out for help. Beyond that, Phillips said that even when students can overcome taboos and connect with a therapist, the average wait time for an appointment is 3-6 months.

Phillips discovered Cartwheel, an online therapy service for high school students, thanks to the Dartmouth College conference he helped Giardi attend.

With Cartwheel, all you need is parental permission for easy, free access to an online therapist.

“There's a lot less reasons to talk yourself out of it and give into the stigma when all that you need is a signature from your parents to have access to a free online licensed therapist,” said Brooks.

Optimistic about the idea of Cartwheel and its potential benefits while simultaneously receiving positive feedback from his student interns, Phillips put together a three-year pilot study involving five high school districts in New Hampshire: Lebanon, Claremont, Newport, Kearsarge and Hopkinton.

The pilot study will commence this coming school year, with all three years of the trial funded by Safe Schools.

For the first time in New Hampshire history, there will be guaranteed online access for students in grades 7-12 in the selected districts, and licensed therapists will be online from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m., Phillips said. He hopes the access to quick, easy help will reduce the risk of teen suicide.

“I think 100% my friends would use it. Honestly, I would even be tempted to use it,” said Giardi. “This definitely feels like a place that is aiming to be more comfortable, which is part of its appeal to people who don’t want to make their feelings this big deal where parents get involved or they have to pay for therapy.”

Phillips hopes the trial run will bring in good data to motivate the school districts to continue paying for the online service after the three-year period.

Spearheading a nonprofit during his retirement, Phillips finds deep satisfaction in his ability to touch students’ lives.

“We should banish the idea of retirement,” said Phillips with a laugh. “Nobody should retire. People should be helping kids. Now that the federal government isn’t in the business of helping people, the volunteers have to step up!”

Jane Miller can be reached at @jmillercmonitor.com