

# BUILDING MENTAL HEALTH & RESILIENCE

## *A Path to Student Success in Corning*

Recognizing that positive mental health is strongly linked to improved academic, personal, and professional outcomes, the Paskenta Band of Nomlaki Indian Tribe - Corning Promise (Everett Freeman Promise Neighborhood) initiative invested in building mental fortitude and cultivating resilience in the kindergarten to high school seniors in Corning's schools and educators within the local schools.

The goal of promoting optimal development of children and adolescents included building educators' knowledge on the adverse impact of trauma on children and adolescents. In 2019, a partnership with Tehama County Department of Education, who extended their reach through the Early Language and Literacy Program to area preK programs, and the local elementary district, **was able to offer professional development opportunities to 30+ early childhood and K-8 educators.** The educators learned about the power of trauma-informed practices from Julie Kurtz, the founder of the Center for Optimal Brain Integration® (COBI) and author of multiple books focused on trauma, resilience, and social-emotional resilience. The educators learned many new practical strategies on trauma's effect

on learning, building safe and supportive environments, promoting stronger relationships and shifting the educators' mindset from asking, "What is wrong with you?" to asking, "What happened to you?"



Teresa Manning, the Promise Neighborhood Early Childhood Specialist who coordinated learning opportunities for PreK educators, shares the impact of the professional development: *"Julie's work has been transformational. It helped our educators not just recognize the impact of trauma but also take actionable steps to support children in a way that builds emotional resilience and enhances learning."*

Seeking to build on the 2019 introduction to trauma and social-emotional resilience offered to preK and K-8 educators, Julie Kurtz was invited to continue this learning in a five-part series that explored the science of the brain and the power of neuroplasticity. Early childhood educators who participated in the Early Literacy and Language program, were invited to **learn key strategies to maximize preschool-aged children's potential.** By focusing on adult self-awareness and teaching practices, coupled with the



neurology of the brain and promoting sensory and emotional literacy, the **educators learned strategies to engage with children and create predictable environments.** Subsequent to this professional development, 30 educators received coaching from Julie Kurtz on building nurturing and responsive relationships, creating safe and predictable learning spaces where preschool-age children can grow socially, emotionally, and mentally. As a capstone, Julie Kurtz observed educators' teaching practices and created coaching action plans that included sensory literacy to complement and strengthen emotional literacy. The Early Childhood Specialist supported implementation of the coaching action plans.

Another powerful lever for creating meaningful change in the Pre-K ecosystem was offered through direct counseling of students enrolled in the seven preschool programs that participated in the Early Literacy and Language Program. Corning Promise partnered with River Cities Counseling, a behavioral health organization, to address the mental health needs of young children directly through play therapy. The therapist utilized tailored play and creative approaches to help young children express their emotions and thoughts, and through therapy, addressed social, emotional, and behavioral issues, ensuring that these young children had the support they needed to thrive. The therapy services were optional and offered at no-cost.

*"The investment in wellness and addressing mental health is part of a holistic approach that focuses on the whole child. We want to create the conditions for children to be successful and give every opportunity for them to thrive,"* said Dawna Shchedrov, Project Director at Corning Promise. *"Through partnerships with organizations like River Cities Counseling, we've been able to provide essential mental health services and create an ecosystem of support that complement the educational efforts."*

Beyond the investment in young childrens' well-being, the Paskenta Band of Nomlaki Indian Tribe has supported K-12 students' mental well-being by partnering with the two

Corning school districts to offer school-based therapy services at no cost. Gary Fortenberry, Marriage and Family Therapist, comments: *"There is no way to measure the impact of this investment, it's transformed many lives and has contributed to building a healthier, more resilient community"*. In addition to offering therapy services within the schools, the therapists also take part in the school's crisis response team, helping to address situations involving students experiencing crises.

**"There is no way to measure the impact of this investment, it's transformed many lives and has contributed to building a healthier, more resilient community"**

**GARY FORTENBERRY**

With the groundbreaking investments from the state of CA to four Promise Neighborhood communities, including the Paskenta Band of Nomlaki Indian Tribe, this has allowed Corning Promise to co-design an approach with Corning Union High School District, to engage community-based and regional organizations as powerful partners in the endeavor to change outcomes through community agency integration, coordinated by the new team member, the Wellness Coordinator. The Wellness Coordinator role is to weave together a solid system of support for students, develop youth-led programs that promote healthy lifestyles, and engage in activities to address chronic absenteeism and engage families through outreach activities.

Through strategic partnerships, data-driven actions, and a focus on well-being and resilience, Corning Promise, in partnership with the community partners, are helping create a community where every child, family, and educator can thrive. Leilani Miller, the CUHSD's Wellness Coordinator, an on-the-ground coordinator shared the importance of sustaining programs, *"There is a need. Children and youth are facing a lot, from academic pressures to social challenges and family dynamics, and many other stressors. They need solid resources in schools to help them cope and thrive. It is for this reason that sustainability is important to us."*