

Milton educators learn their lessons...

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Wesson urged educators to create a “risk-free” environment in their classrooms that will allow students to feel safe. Students’ emotions, attention, learning, and memory all need to be connected to how information is integrated into the brain, he explained.

Wesson joked about looking around his classroom for a “victim” when he wants to ask a question. Once he addresses the student, he or she is no longer able to think of an answer since his or her flight or fight response has been activated.

Wesson offered several interactive activities for those in attendance.

One involved having one member of a pair of people spell words and watch for involuntary eye movements. People tend to look to the upper right when creating images, to the upper left when recalling images, and straight ahead when recalling information they know, he explained.

Wesson speaks about the subjects of early brain development, design and engineering, social-emotional learning, and curriculum development. He also promotes interdisciplinary learning efforts such as STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) and ST²REAM (science, technology, thematic instruction, reading/language arts, engineering, art (visual/spatial thinking, and mathematics).

Wesson is a member of Scientists without Borders and can be seen on PBS specials about human learning and the teenage brain.

In another session, Casey Corcoran of the Boston Area Rape Counseling Center spoke about “trauma-informed schools.”

He asked: “What are we talking about when we talk about challenging classroom behavior?”

The answers from the 35 administrators, teachers, and paraprofessionals came from all sides of the classroom at Milton High School: work refusal, putting heads down, attention-seeking behaviors, disrespectful comments, a sense of privilege, anything that compromises the safety of students and teachers, things interfering with learning, and someone flipping their lid.

Then, Corcoran, who was leading the session, asked for whom the behaviors were challenging and why.

Putting up a photo of an iceberg, Corcoran asked the participants to consider the behaviors as the tip of the iceberg.

“We only see the tip of the iceberg,” said Corcoran, who lives in Milton.

The answer, he explained, often lies with what is beneath the surface, and he asked participants to consider what the causes of those behaviors might be.

The school staff were equally quick to come up with answers: trauma, domestic violence, sexual violence, a car crash, no food, a family situation that makes it difficult to sleep, depression, fear, anxiety, sharing a room with lots of people, and illness.

Corcoran said that while trauma is ubiquitous in our lives, not every trauma results in someone being traumatized, but when a person’s ability to cope is overwhelmed, he or she can become dysregulated. It can happen in the home, in the community, at schools, and on social media.

He said that for some people, the impact of witnessing violence can be “just as damaging” as being directly involved.

In the case of some kinds of violence, such as sexual violence, the effects are sometimes delayed for months and even years, Corcoran said.

Corcoran said that a trauma-informed school will acknowledge that students will likely have faced traumatic situations, which he termed adverse childhood experiences or ACEs and it will provide supports for healing and building resiliency.

“It’s not always the big things that help you heal,” Corcoran said. “We don’t want to do harm.”



Keynote speaker Kenneth Wesson addresses a workshop at MHS.



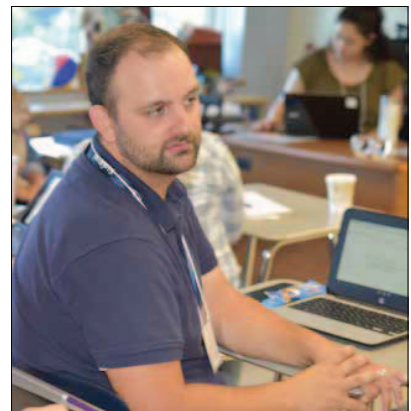
Collicot educator Cassi Driscoll participates in a lesson.



Jennie Beliveau, MHS adjustment counselor, left, and Debra Miller, district-wide strings teacher, play rock, scissors, lose. (Photos by Elaine Cushman Carroll)



Mary-Bianca Mattocks, Pierce adjustment counselor, plays an interactive game.



Jake Smith of Pierce Middle School at a session on trauma.

“We don’t need to know specific details to do the job well,” he added, urging participants not to become “trauma tourists.”

He said that if a grizzly bear were to walk into your classroom and you were a concert pianist you would not be able to sit down and play a piece on the piano.

Instead, Corcoran said, your brain is going to be dealing with flight, fight, or freeze. It may be thinking that there’s a chance to beat this.

“What if that bear lives at home and every day, when you go home, that bear is there?” Corcoran asked.

He said that schools are sometimes asking a child from such a home to go from an elevated level of stress to a zero level, where they can best learn, when they walk through the door of the school.

According to Corcoran, teachers should view themselves as the first responders for giving kids basic tools.

“You don’t have to be the surgeon,” he said.

Being a trauma-sensitive school involves a paradigm shift from: “What’s wrong with you?” to “What

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