

The Regional District 13 Board of Education School District Climate Committee met in regular session on Wednesday, April 22, 2026 at 4:00 p.m. in the library at Coginchaug Regional High School.

Committee Members Present: Dr. Darcy, Mr. Moore, Mrs. Almodovar, Mr. Finch, Mrs. Petrella, and Mr. Roraback

Committee Members Absent: Mrs. Cowan

Administration Present: Dr. Leggett, Superintendent of Schools and Jennifer Keane, Director of Student Services and Special Education

Jade Adalbert, Director of Prevention programs at Durham Middlefield Youth and Family Services

Pledge of Allegiance

The Pledge of Allegiance was recited.

Public Comment

There was no public comment.

Approval of Agenda

Mrs. Petrella made a motion, seconded by Mr. Roraback, to approve the agenda as presented.

All in favor of approving the agenda as presented: Dr. Darcy, Mr. Moore, Mrs. Almodovar, Mr. Finch, Mrs. Petrella, and Mr. Roraback. Motion passed.

DMYFS Video and Discussion

Dr. Leggett welcomed Jade Adalbert from Durham Middlefield Youth and Family Services (DMYFS) to discuss the results of a recent youth wellness survey and highlight the organization's partnership with the district. The survey, which is typically conducted every two years but was delayed due to staffing issues, was administered during advisory periods to students in grades 7–12 in Spring 2025 and examines topics related to mental health, substance use, risk factors, and protective factors. Ms. Adalbert discussed that the results revealed several concerns, particularly high levels of depression, anxiety, and suicide-related issues among students. The survey also introduced questions about disordered eating for the first time, revealing that roughly 22% of high school students reported behaviors such as dieting, laxative use, and other unhealthy eating habits. Additional concerns included bullying and unhealthy romantic relationships. Ms. Adalbert noted that substance use also remained a major focus area, especially because many students reported believing that regular alcohol consumption and marijuana use are not dangerous. One particularly alarming finding was that some students viewed having one or two alcoholic drinks every night as normal and harmless, underscoring the need for continued education and prevention efforts.

Ms. Adalbert added that vaping is also a major concern, noting that students have many ways to access vape products despite efforts to prevent underage sales, making use more widespread than many adults realize. These survey findings help determine Durham Middlefield Youth and Family Services's prevention priorities and shape its programming with the school district. Ms. Adalbert discussed that the organization works closely with schools by delivering classroom lessons, advisory activities, videos, and occasional school-wide presentations focused on identified issues such as mental health, substance use, and healthy relationships. They also provide teachers and administrators with resources and support to ensure everyone is prepared to address student questions or concerns. In addition, DMYFS pairs student programming with parent-focused community conversations, held virtually or in person, so families, educators, and students receive consistent information and messaging. Looking ahead, the organization hopes to shift away from purely informational presentations and incorporate more storytelling from individuals with lived experience, such as people sharing personal stories about vaping, in an effort to build empathy and create more meaningful connections with students.

Mr. Moore questioned if the video was available to the public. Ms. Adalbert reported that the video is accessible on the DMYFS's website under "approach." Committee members also discussed making the video available to parents through ParentSquare.

The discussion also highlighted concerns about survey participation rates, particularly among students who may be most at risk. Ms. Adalbert noted that because the survey is administered during advisory periods, students who skip advisory, are truant, suspended, or otherwise absent may not complete it, creating gaps in the data. Participation among 12th graders was especially low, around 60%, partly because some students were away on a field trip and did not complete make-up surveys. Ms. Keane acknowledged that they are particularly interested in understanding the perspectives of students who choose not to participate or who are frequently absent, since those students may be experiencing the greatest challenges.

Dr. Darcy also asked whether prevention efforts would target specific grade levels where issues such as substance use appear to increase. In response, Ms. Adalbert explained that trends can vary significantly by class and cohort, and that each grade often develops its own unique characteristics. Ms. Adalbert noted that students who showed elevated depression concerns in earlier surveys are now in high school, and anecdotal observations suggest some current grade levels, particularly sophomores, may be struggling more with mental health challenges. While there is typically a noticeable shift between middle school and high school attitudes toward issues like drug use, Ms. Adalbert emphasized that prevention education should occur at every grade level, with messaging tailored to be age-appropriate. Dr. Darcy also praised the shift toward story-telling prevention as a potentially more effective way to connect with students.

The discussion continued to highlight several new prevention and wellness initiatives aimed at supporting students through relationship-building, education, and early intervention. Dr. Leggett reported that next year, the middle school will launch Narrative 4 for all incoming sixth graders, a storytelling-based program designed to build empathy, strengthen communication, and foster relationships, with teachers being trained in-house to ensure the program remains sustainable. The Committee also reflected on the limitations of older drug prevention efforts like DARE, noting that research has shown it to be largely

ineffective and emphasizing the need for a more nuanced, evidence-based prevention approach that acknowledges the realities many students face, including family exposure to substance use and addiction. Rather than relying on fear-based messaging, the committee members discussed focusing on harm prevention, safety, and reducing shame around addiction.

Mr. Roraback expressed concern about the legalization of cannabis in Connecticut and questioned whether there is a way to track its impact on students over time. While acknowledging that legalization was intended to regulate product quality and improve safety, Mr. Roraback shared a personal perception that conditions have worsened since the policy change, particularly within schools, emphasizing the need for students to understand that today's cannabis is far more potent than in the past and may negatively affect brain development.

Mr. Moore also raised concerns about increasing normalization of marijuana and alcohol use among adults and how that influences students. Mr. Moore emphasized that while substance use is challenging to address, schools may have greater influence in areas such as bullying, depression, peer pressure, and mental health, especially given alarming statistics around student suicide attempts.

Dr. Leggett also highlighted strong partnerships with Durham Middlefield Youth and Family Services, including collaboration with Jane Doe No More to provide developmentally appropriate education on healthy relationships, sexual harassment, and sexual assault for students in grades 6–12, as well as work with Dr. Valaida Wise to deepen understanding of bullying, harassment, and discrimination. Dr. Leggett also noted that future discussions will also focus on rising concerns around attendance, tardiness, and truancy.

Mr. Roraback questioned whether the long-discussed “gateway” or “stepping stone” theory of substance use is still relevant, wondering if highlighting the potential progression from early substance use to more serious consequences might resonate with students, particularly since they feel those risks are discussed less frequently today. Mrs. Almodovar, speaking from the perspective of an ER nurse and the spouse of a firefighter, emphasized being very direct with their own children about the real-life consequences of substance use and argued that students may benefit from more candid messaging. Mrs. Almodovar also shared that their children found storytelling-based assemblies to be the most impactful, reinforcing the broader theme that personal stories and lived experiences often resonate more strongly with students than traditional prevention messaging.

Ms. Adalbert spoke about her prior experience working in inpatient drug and alcohol treatment and reflected on how perceptions of cannabis use have shifted over time. Early in her career, Ms. Adalbert noted that cannabis was rarely cited as a primary substance of addiction, but toward the end of her work, she began seeing more young adults, often 18- or 19-year-olds, enter treatment with cannabis as their primary drug of concern, challenging the long-held belief that cannabis is not addictive. Ms. Adalbert also emphasized how significantly the drug itself has changed, pointing to substantial increases in THC potency over time and describing today's cannabis as far stronger and more chemically concentrated than in previous decades. Ms. Adalbert shared an educational approach used in schools, including informational banners and presentations that highlight this shift under the message “Not Your Parents’ Weed,” using data on rising THC levels to illustrate how the substance has evolved. Ms. Adalbert briefly

expanded to emerging substances like kratom, raising concerns about limited public understanding and easy retail access through places like gas stations and vape shops.

Dr. Leggett noted growing concerns about the contamination of illicit substances. Ms. Adalbert emphasized that this “lacing” of substances represents a newer and very real risk, especially for adolescents who are not accessing drugs through legal or regulated sources like pharmacies or dispensaries due to age restrictions. She noted that because students are more likely to obtain substances through informal or unverified networks, there is no way to know what those substances may contain, increasing the risk of overdose. This concern was tied to a broader focus on overdose prevention as a key priority area, along with the importance of providing students and parents with accurate, potentially life-saving information, even if they hope it will never be needed. Ms. Adalbert stressed a harm-reduction perspective, encouraging proactive education so that young people are prepared to respond in emergencies and potentially help save lives.

National Screen Free Week May 4-10/Digital Wellness

Dr. Leggett discussed plans for National Screen Free Week, noting that this would be the first coordinated, district-wide effort of its kind in Region 13. The initiative will primarily focus on raising awareness about reducing excessive screen use among students, encouraging families to engage in alternative activities such as reading and outdoor time, and providing parents with ideas for screen-free engagement at home. Dr. Leggett referenced research suggesting that excessive screen exposure, particularly for younger children, can be harmful, and emphasized the importance of building awareness before considering more intensive restrictions in the future.

In addition to student-facing activities, the initiative will also prompt staff reflection on dependence on digital tools by exploring how school operations would function during a hypothetical technology outage or cyber incident, including tasks such as attendance, lunch counts, transportation coordination, and communication systems. While a full “shutdown simulation” was considered, it was deemed too early to implement this year, though it may be developed further in the future.

The committee members also touched on broader trends and policies, including increased outdoor learning opportunities, international approaches that limit student technology use in classrooms, and growing regulatory actions around youth social media access in some countries.

Dr. Leggett also introduced a new district initiative focused on digital wellness and responsible technology use. A group of five educators currently participating in the ACES Consortium on artificial intelligence has been serving as a “recon team,” collaborating with other districts to study AI policies, practices, and emerging best practices, then bringing that information back to inform local planning. One of their key recommendations is the creation of a district-wide digital wellness team that would span pre-K through transition programming and include the MTA, with a broad focus on student and staff digital well-being. This proposed team would examine a wide range of topics, including appropriate and ethical uses of AI in education, screen time and screen-free practices, and the influence of social media on students. The goal is to help the district better understand when tools like AI enhance learning and when they may be less appropriate, while also supporting healthier technology habits overall.

Dr. Darcy also referenced innovative approaches to screen use management, such as tools that limit screen time while encouraging mindfulness activities, like breathing exercises, to help users regain access to devices. This was noted as an example of how technology itself may be leveraged to promote healthier digital habits rather than simply restricting use.

Mr. Roraback affirmed a connection between mental health challenges in students and the impact of screen time and constant digital engagement. Mr. Roraback highlighted the sheer volume of digital interruptions young people experience, noting that the average child receives more than 34 notifications per day. He explained that this constant stream of alerts makes it difficult for students to maintain focus or follow consistent routines, as they are repeatedly pulled away from tasks and expected to “get it done” while managing nonstop digital demands.

Review of Behavior Data

Dr. Leggett reviewed how the district is refining the way it collects, presents, and interprets behavior and discipline data in an effort to make it more consistent and useful for comparison over time. Dr. Leggett noted that this is still an early stage of experimentation with data formats, and the district is actively seeking feedback to improve clarity and ensure future reports allow for more reliable “apples-to-apples” comparisons.

A brief aside highlighted an AI-generated infographic that unintentionally included inappropriate imagery, which Dr. Leggett acknowledged as an oversight while reviewing content, reinforcing the importance of careful human review when using AI tools.

The committee then reviewed updates to behavior data reporting, which now includes clearer breakdowns by elementary, middle, and high school, as well as added context such as the number of students associated with each category of incidents. This change was intended to help distinguish between overall incident counts and how many students are involved, offering a more nuanced view of behavior trends.

Mr. Finch questioned whether data should be further disaggregated to show repeat incidents by individual students. While Mr. Finch felt this could help identify outliers driving higher incident counts, Dr. Leggett raised concerns about student privacy in a small district and the risk of identifying individuals, referencing FERPA considerations. Mr. Roraback also recognized that over-identifying students could undermine restorative practices and potentially reinforce negative labeling.

Dr. Leggett noted concerns in data about gender disparities in how student behavior is being identified and responded to, noting a need to examine whether current practices may be unintentionally over-or under-responding based on gender. Dr. Darcy expanded on this by suggesting that the same behaviors may be interpreted differently depending on whether they come from boys or girls, with girls sometimes being perceived more leniently while similar behaviors in boys are viewed as more problematic. Dr. Darcy also emphasized that the data does not fully capture the complexity of these patterns, noting that broader cultural and perceptual biases may influence how behavior is labeled and recorded.

Broader concerns were raised about subjectivity in behavior categories such as “disrespect” and “insubordination,” with Mrs. Petrella noting that definitions may vary significantly across staff. In response, Dr. Leggett shared that the district is developing a glossary to better define behavior terms and

improve consistency, though Dr. Leggett acknowledged that interpretation differences will likely remain a challenge, as some educators document all incidents while others document very few.

Dr. Leggett clarified that the data being reviewed consists of office referrals logged into a centralized system, rather than all classroom-managed incidents, which helps define the scope of what the numbers represent.

Ms. Adalbert questioned how and why student behavior is sometimes handled differently at the classroom level versus being referred to the office, and whether those differences may reflect inconsistencies or inequities in practice. Ms. Adalbert raised the possibility that girls and boys may not be treated the same for similar behaviors, suggesting that girls might be more likely to have issues managed in the classroom while boys are more frequently referred to the office, even when the underlying behavior is comparable.

Ms. Adalbert also highlighted concerns about the lack of clear, consistent thresholds for when behavior becomes an office referral versus a classroom-managed incident. This led to questions about whether there should be more standardized procedures, such as clear guidelines for when certain behaviors automatically result in referral to the office or diversion programs, so that responses are not influenced by subjective judgments about the student.

Dr. Darcy cautioned against overly rigid “one-size-fits-all” approaches, noting that applying identical consequences in all cases (an “A equals B” model) could ignore important context about individual students and circumstances. Instead, the conversation leaned toward a more balanced approach that considers consistency in expectations while still allowing for individualized decision-making that takes each student’s history and situation into account.

Mrs. Almodovar, questioned how the district defines when a behavioral incident is escalated versus handled at a lower level. Dr. Leggett explained that there are essentially two categories: a basic office referral and an escalated incident. Escalated incidents are those that involve potential danger or harm to oneself or others, or situations that may require police involvement or indicate a more serious violation.

Mrs. Petrella had questions about other areas in the data, including whether student plagiarism might be connected to the use of AI tools and misunderstandings about academic integrity. Dr. Leggett clarified that once teachers inform students about the use of AI as plagiarism, and students use AI anyway, those acts are considered plagiarism. Mrs. Petrella also questioned early childhood physical aggression. Dr. Leggett clarified that physical aggression in K–1 was described as largely developmentally driven dysregulation rather than intentional harm, typically reflecting young children still learning to manage their bodies and emotions.

Finally, attention turned to substance-related incidents, with Mrs. Petrella asking for more detailed breakdowns of drug-related cases within the broader category of substance and possession incidents (which also include alcohol, tobacco, and weapons). Dr. Leggett identified that there were 2 drug specific incidents and Mrs. Almodovar speculated that drug use in schools may be underrepresented in the data. Mrs. Petrella noted that clearer categorization could provide a more accurate picture of school climate and student behavior trends, particularly at the high school level.

Creation of sub-committee to Develop Climate Survey

Dr. Leggett clarified a procedural requirement related to the district climate work, explaining that the committee is not permitted to independently create a new survey. Instead, district policy and state requirements mandate the use of a research-based, approved instrument for collecting climate data. While a previous survey had been used, the current process is to review and select an approved survey tool for Region 13. A subcommittee will be created to make a selection.

Following this clarification, volunteers were requested and confirmed for the subcommittee, including Dr. Darcy, Mr. Moore, DMYFS, and Ms. Keane who will review available approved survey options and make a recommendation. Dr. Leggett indicated that the subcommittee will receive survey links for review and will work under a set timeline to ensure the selection process is completed in time for implementation.

Ms. Adalbert and Dr. Leggett also reflected on survey scheduling and the potential benefit of alternating survey years to reduce fatigue among students and parents while keeping data fresh and meaningful.

Review Draft of School Climate Handbook

The committee then discussed a draft of the district's school climate handbook, which is being developed in response to new state climate requirements. Dr. Leggett explained that the document is intended to serve as a comprehensive, proactive guide for the entire district, covering expectations, restorative practices, and tiered responses to student behavior, rather than a reactive disciplinary manual. Once finalized, it will be presented to the board for approval.

Committee members discussed how the handbook should be structured and accessed, with several suggesting it would be most useful in a highly organized, user-friendly format (such as a flip chart or clearly sectioned reference tool) so educators can quickly locate guidance in real-time situations. Other committee members emphasized that while the handbook will be broad in scope, most day-to-day interactions are instructional rather than disciplinary, and the most critical sections will likely relate to higher-level or emergency situations. There was also interest in using AI tools to support engagement with the handbook, such as generating quizzes or audio summaries to help staff review the content. At the same time, participants stressed the importance of maintaining a practical, accessible format that supports teachers, substitutes, and staff in quickly finding guidance when needed.

Dr. Leggett noted that the handbook will need to be aligned with other district-level and school-level handbooks over the summer as part of a broader effort to ensure consistency across elementary, middle, and high school expectations

Public Comment

There was no public comment.

Adjournment

Mr. Moore made a motion, seconded by Mrs. Petrella, to adjourn the meeting.

All in favor of adjourning the meeting: Dr. Darcy, Mr. Moore, Mrs. Almodovar, Mr. Finch, Mrs. Petrella, and Mr. Roraback. Motion passed and the meeting adjourned.

Respectfully submitted by Meghan Shortell-Fratantonio