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Since I began teaching alternative education at the secondary level in 2013, I've lost a current or former student to either suicide or self-destructive behavior that has resulted in their death, every single year that I've been teaching.

One student is too many. Four is unbearably painful. I can only wonder how many educators are in my same position.

In the alternative setting, my school is the safest place for roughly half of my students. It's the place they get fed, the place they get clothed; sometimes, it's the place they get parenting and hugs that they're not getting at home. At Albany Options School where I teach, we really try to build a community that provides all of those supports, but I see that other schools aren't able to do what my school does because they don't have the resources.

Simply put: we need a counselor in every school and a social worker in every school. My students thrive because we have wrap-around services and I think we underestimate the importance of those wraparound services for every student.

When we're able to provide those resources, the results can be remarkable. I have a student who has a pretty severe anxiety disorder. She couldn't function in a normal



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school environment because she was having panic attacks almost constantly, so she transferred to our school. In our setting, where we have smaller class sizes, more mental health supports and counseling, that same student is now a leader at our school. Other students look up to her and she's been able to take on special projects at our school because we know she is capable. It's been a joy to see her grow and change and flourish because of the care she's received in our school environment.

Educators bring their best professional selves to the job each day. We work best when we're treated as professionals and given the tools to help our students succeed. **We want to create safe environments where students can realize their full potential. This means we need mental health care in our schools, and we need it now - to save students and teachers alike.**

We have a very real crisis on our hands. We need solutions, not platitudes.

Lives are at stake.



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