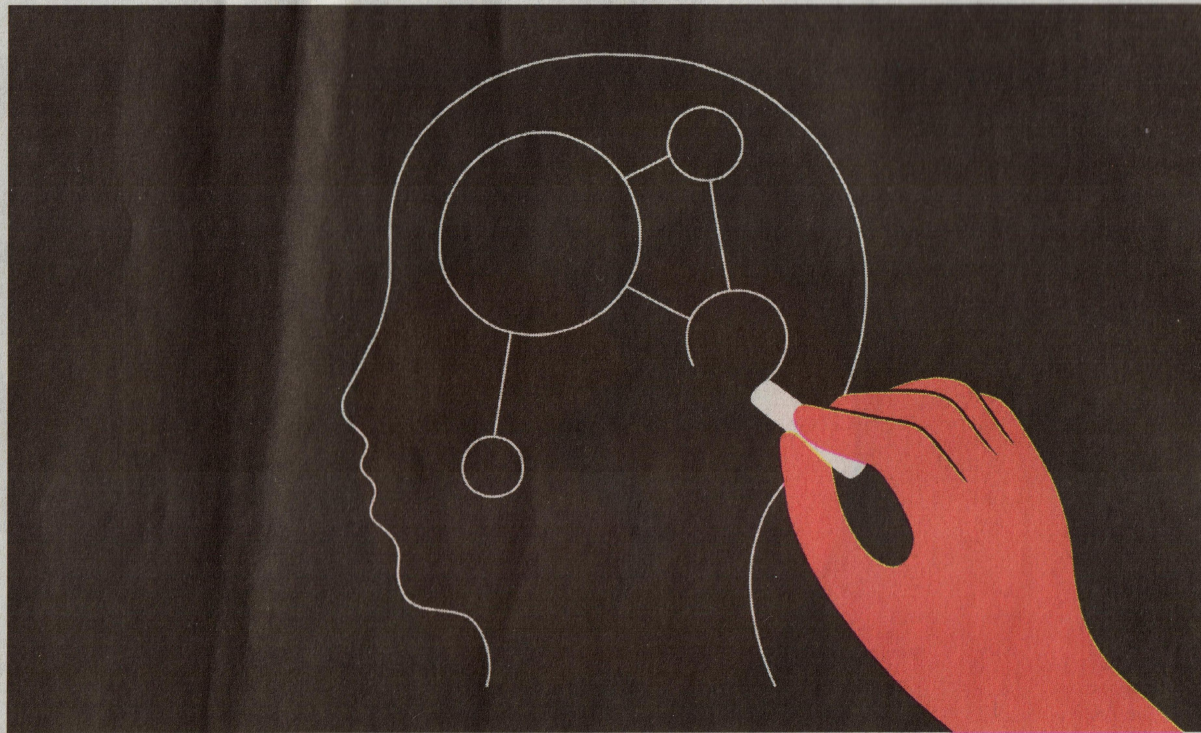




GYM. MATH. THERAPY.

MAKING MENTAL HEALTH A NORMAL PART OF SCHOOL

BY ELIZA FAWCETT • ILLUSTRATION BY DAVID VANADIA



ARIANA, WHO LIVES in New York City, started seeing a therapist about her anxiety when she was in the first grade. She had no trouble making it to her appointments, because the therapist worked right in her school. The office was always open if she needed to talk. It was as easy as visiting the school nurse. “There were mostly games that helped me identify what I was struggling with,” says Ariana, now 14. Her brother Anthony, 12, also benefited from having a school therapist right down the hall. He says therapy encouraged him to reflect on his feelings, which he hadn’t really done before. “It helped me with my mind-set and the way I think,” he says.

Now, perhaps more than ever, kids across the United States are struggling with anxiety, sadness and loneliness. For many, those feelings started or deepened during the pandemic. Last year, the American Academy of Pediatrics even declared a “national emergency” in child and adolescent mental health. But soon, many more kids might get mental health services like the ones in Ariana’s and Anthony’s schools.

Mental health is important, says Angela Kimball, from the nonprofit organization

Inseparable. “We need to help people where they’re at, and that’s in schools.” Many states have been working hard to make mental health a regular part of school. In Delaware, for example, new laws give public elementary and middle schools money to hire more counselors and psychologists. In other states, like Illinois, there are programs in which teachers or therapists regularly check in with students to see how they are feeling. Experts say there should be one school psychologist for every 500 students. Earlier this year, Kimball’s group and others found only two places in the country — Idaho and Washington, D.C. — that met that standard.

In New York, many schools still don’t have enough therapists to meet all students’ needs. But many people want to change that, Kelly Lennon-Martucci says. She works for the nonprofit Henry Street Settlement, which operates mental-health clinics at schools in New York City. She says, “All over the city, principals, teachers, guidance counselors are asking, ‘How do we get a clinic in our school?’”

Ariana thinks that all kids should be able to see a school therapist. “Some people really need someone that they can talk to,” she says. ♦