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Empowering Children

University of Dayton

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Empowering Children

A kindergartener was missing school. That's all Michelle Sherman knew when she contacted the family. "It was a cold call," she said. "I just said: I'm here to help."

Sherman reached out as a family advocate with the University of Dayton's Empowering Children with Hope and Opportunity (ECHO) program. Created 15 years ago, the program now serves 14 Catholic schools with more than 3,600 local children through counseling, crisis intervention, mentoring and curriculum that teaches empathy, emotional management and problem solving.

"We work with schools to create and support a healthy learning environment, so students can focus on their education instead of the stresses of everyday life," said ECHO Director Rhonda Mercs.

For the kindergarten student, that meant visiting her home.

"Her mother was afraid to let her walk to the bus stop," Sherman said. "It was near the spot where the woman's son was shot earlier in the year. So we reached out to the school and together we got the bus stop moved."

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ECHO was created to remove those kind of social and emotional barriers to learning, Mercs said. That could also mean providing donated school uniforms to children whose parents are struggling to pay utility bills and back-to-school expenses that come at the same time. Or offering teachers professional development on how mental health issues impact their classrooms. Or hosting an event for parents to give them information on an important topic, such as the third-grade reading guarantee.

It's also key, Mercs said, to train older students to be role models and mentors to their peers. Called Peacemakers, they demonstrate empathy and respect.

"Maybe there's a fourth-grader struggling with things at home and that student is sitting by himself at lunch. Our counselors will have the Peacemakers sit with that student at lunch so he won't be alone," she said.

Together, ECHO resources help teachers focus on what they're trained to do, said Jacki Loffer, principal at Our Lady of the Rosary School

"Too often, teachers are asked to be counselors, nurses, parents, etc.," Loffer said. "ECHO gives us the expertise needed to deal with social and emotional issues while the teachers focus on instruction. It can be as simple as Ms. Sandy touching base with a student in the hallway to check on a sick parent to something more complex that leads to mental health counseling outside of school. Students know that they always have someone who will listen and acknowledge their feelings and worries."

Karyn Hecker, regional director for Dayton and northern schools for the Archdiocese of Cincinnati, said ECHO counselors have helped school staffs deal with death of a student, the passing of a colleague and the loss of a school.

"They have held the hands of distraught parents and smoothed over the rocky roads that teachers and students sometimes travel," she said. "Their presence in a school makes the school a healthier place for students to learn and to grow."

The work is a direct manifestation of the University's Catholic and Marianist identity, and aligns with its vision to be the university for the

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common good, said Susan Ferguson, director of the University's Center for Catholic Education, which oversees ECHO.

"Catholic education has always been about teaching the whole person," she said. "Catholic schools are here to be certain children grow academically, spiritually, socially and emotionally, and ECHO helps make that happen."

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