

## FREEPORT

# 'CALMING ROOMS' GIVE STUDENTS A PLACE TO UNWIND

All district schools now have spaces to foster well-being

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All eight schools in the Freeport district now have a "calming room" — a safe space where students can go to decompress — spotlighting a growing need among educators to address student mental health and wellness.

The Freeport district is the latest on Long Island to create a designated space for students to relax and work through emotions. Several other schools, including in the Valley Stream 30 and Three Village districts, have created similar rooms in the past few years to promote student wellness.

Freeport officials said they were prompted to create calming rooms in all their schools after they and health care workers noticed what is part of a nationwide uptick in anxiety and stress in children in recent years, even pre-pandemic. Leading pediatric groups have declared a national state of emergency in children's mental health. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, 17% of the country's 12- to 17-year-olds, or about 4.1 million youths, said they had at

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least one major depressive episode in 2020.

"Within the last six years or so, we've seen an increase in the mental health crisis," said Helen Kanellopoulos, assistant superintendent of pupil personnel services and special education for the district. "So, we want to get ahead of it and make sure that we're educating our students, not only in academics, but how to be socially and emotionally ready to learn and be successful in life."

At Freeport schools, students can visit the rooms to manage their emotions, as a reward or for daily breaks, Kanellopoulos said.

The room at Caroline G. Atkinson School, which serves fifth- and sixth-graders, is outfitted with soft lighting, comfy seating and inspirational messages scrawled across the wall. In the rooms, students can listen to calming music or watch a tranquil scene on a computer. The outside of the door is covered with a simple message: "Relax."

The rooms, which the district first started using in the 2021-22 academic year, have "become a space that my students felt comfortable in," said Maria Ngai, a fifth-grade teacher at Atkinson, adding the rooms are another tool for the district to use in helping students prioritize wellness.



The calming room at Freeport's Caroline G. Atkinson School offers soft lighting and comfy seating.

The district, which serves about 6,500 students, added the last room ahead of this academic year and spent \$100,000 on the initiative.

So who can use the rooms? Anyone, officials said. The rooms aren't just for children with an individualized educational plan or who see a social worker or school counselor. Students having a difficult moment or rough day can use the rooms privately under the eye of a school employee. Just as adults get daily breaks, so too should children, Kanellopoulos said.

The rooms, outfitted with calming colors, like glowing blue and red lights, and elements of nature, like a video projected onto the wall of ocean creatures, were created with the guidance of Northwell Health doctors. Dr. Vera Feuer, associate vice president for School Mental Health, told Newsday the coronavirus pandemic has worsened mental health issues among children. She said she finds that academic competition and social media contribute to deteriorat-



The room at the Atkinson school gives fifth- and sixth-graders a safe space where students can go to decompress.

ing student mental health and suicidal thoughts.

"We are definitely seeing a lot more kids struggling with anxiety, depression, school avoidance," Feuer said. "We're seeing, this year in particular, lots of young kids with behavioral problems, having difficulty navigating social situations, managing their behaviors, managing emotions, really learning how to regulate themselves."

To combat this, Freeport also

offers wellness-centered lessons from SKY Schools, which offers breathing techniques, meditation and yoga to help students cope with their mental health. Incorporating it daily helps destigmatize it, school officials told Newsday.

Superintendent Kishore Kuncham said the district is considering the addition of wellness centers on campuses next year.

"This is seen as a welcome change," he said. "Our work continues."

## Bay Shore man arrested in fatal hit and run

Suffolk County police arrested and charged a Bay Shore man late Monday with allegedly leaving the scene of a fatal hit-and-run crash in Patchogue involving two vehicles.

A pedestrian crossing Medford Avenue at Oak Street about 4 a.m. Sunday, Nicholas Puzio, 25, of Farmingville, was

struck by a southbound white sedan traveling on Medford Avenue, according to Suffolk police. About a minute later, police said Sunday, Puzio was struck by a gray Nissan Armada. Both drivers fled.

Puzio was transported to Long Island Community Hospital in Patchogue, where he was pro-

nounced dead, police said.

Suffolk County Major Case Unit detectives later identified Elian Jurado-Zavala, 19, of Bay Shore, as the person allegedly driving a 2014 white Honda Civic that first struck Puzio before failing to stop. Police arrested Jurado-Zavala at his home Monday. He faces a

charge of leaving the scene of an accident with a fatality.

At his arraignment in Central Islip's First District Court on Tuesday, his lawyer, Bob Macedonio, of Islip Terrace, said, "We've entered a plea of not guilty," adding his client would post bail, which was set at \$25,000 cash or a \$50,000 bond.

"At four a.m., the deceased was intoxicated and in the middle of the road when he was hit," Macedonio said, citing the preliminary investigation. This is his client's first contact with the criminal justice system, and he has cooperated fully with investigators, he said.

— NEWSDAY STAFF