

cheered as the Knicks beat the Magic last night.

Speaker to Yonkers principals: New approach needed to deal with traumatized students

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Photo credit: Rory Glaeseman | Lorelei Atalie Vargas, vice president for strategic initiatives Andrus, speaks to principals at the Yonkers School District offices in Yonkers. (March 20, 2013)

The kid who can't sit still.

The girl who just can't seem to make friends with anyone.

The student who makes a teacher pull out her hair and ask, "What is wrong with him?"

Lorelei Vargas told [Yonkers Public Schools](#) principals Wednesday that educators often ask the wrong question about problem kids. What they should be asking, she said, is "What has happened to him?"

Vargas is bringing therapeutic approaches to student problems to Westchester County schools. She's a vice president at Andrus, a Yonkers-based children's service center that has both a residential treatment center and family counseling services. Vargas recently received a fellowship that will support her efforts to explain how the treatment of troubled kids affects the overall health of a community.

In a talk with Yonkers principals, Vargas offered some startling statistics: There are more than 30,000 children in Yonkers who have experienced some form of adversity, whether it's parents divorcing, physical or psychological abuse, having a parent in prison or growing up with a caregiver who has a mental illness.

Research confirms [common](#)-sense expectations, she said. Children who experience multiple traumas not only don't perform well in school but also are far more likely to battle depression, suffer from poor health and use drugs later in life.

What's more, those who experience trauma are likely to die young, she said.

"Of the children we have in Yonkers today, close to 1,600 will ... what?" Vargas asked the Yonkers principals, pausing as they pondered the question in the board room where the group met. She then pushed a button to reveal a slide.

"... Die before the age of 50," she said, finishing the thought. "They won't make it to retirement."

The presentation underlined something many educators experience daily in their schools, said Fred Hernandez, principal of School 13.

"You just confirmed what we feel every day in terms of making children perform academically, and socially and safely in school," Fernandez said. "If you understand the issue in depth, how you struggle within the school, then we can look at how to get the things done."

Vargas suggested that the solution begins with a different point of view, flipping the usual perspective to see troubled children as hurt, rather than as problems.

Some principals shared frustrations about their inability to address family issues as they try to help children. One said that reports to social services agencies go nowhere. Another said that some children find a stable environment during the school year but that such progress is turned back during the summer.

"We only have the child six hours a day," one principal said. "We cannot break the cycle with just the child."

Michelle Yazurlo, the principal at Palisade Preparatory School, said educators have to focus on what they can contribute.

"I'm bringing this to my staff," she said. "It's a simple shift in understanding and then putting something in practice that can make a difference in the life of a child."

Yonkers Public Schools Superintendent Bernard Pierorazio said he's working with SUNY Chancellor [Nancy Zimpher](#) on a program that unites schools and community social service agencies to help heal kids and families.

"We're going to continue to do this work," Pierorazio said.

So are leaders in Mount Vernon, who recently used \$14,000 in federal grant money to hire Andrus for five intensive workshops on childhood trauma.

"Childhood trauma is clearly now in the community," Mount Vernon Assistant Superintendent Gertrude Karabas said, noting that the district serves about 560 homeless children and a "very high number" of kids in foster care.

Leaders in the district are focusing on how to teach the teachers -- as well as social workers and staff -- to help the students overcome and prevent trauma.

"It's a win-win for society if we do this," Karabas said. "Don't wait until the end of the line, when they're dropping out. Don't wait until they finish middle school. Let us get people tackling the fact that these kids come to you and the hurts get in the way of the learning."