

Schools and Mental Health Project

Summary of April 26, 2017 Site Visit to Grant Elementary School

As a part of the Mental Health Services Oversight and Accountability Commission (MHSOAC) Schools and Mental Health Project, subcommittee members, MHSOAC staff, and others affiliated with the project visited Grant Elementary School in Richmond, California, on April 26, 2017. The purpose of the site visit was to observe the implementation and successes associated with Seneca’s “Unconditional Education” (UE) model and other activities designed to support a learning environment that addresses barriers to academic success due to mental health needs. The site visit was hosted by Ken Berrick and his staff from Seneca and School Principal Farnaz Heydari.

The UE model integrates a multi-tiered system of academic, behavioral and social emotional supports into the school environment. All school staff are engaged to provide services to the entire student body and their families. The model relies on data to monitor the student population and identify those students in need of more intensive services.

Program activities of the UE model are in line with the goals of the Schools and Mental Health Project as summarized by Commissioner and Subcommittee Chair David Gordon at the project kick-off meeting in December 2016: to provide innovative services and promote the earliest possible interventions with young people and families to break the “fail first” paradigm. Accordingly, the number of children eventually placed into special education due to emotional and behavior challenges should decrease, along with the resulting individual and societal negative consequences that have been documented in the research literature for these students.

The site visit attendees participated in discussions with Principal Heydari and Ken Berrick before and after touring the school grounds and observing classroom instruction. Principal Heydari summarized the school climate prior to both her tenure as the school principal and the implementation of the UE model. She stated that in the past parents were not involved with school activities, and in fact some had been banned from campus. Teachers were given limited support and were suffering from taking on the trauma of their students. Over 200 elementary school children had been suspended prior to the arrival of Principal Heydari and the UE interventions; suspensions have since dropped to 54.

Engagement and communication among school staff and with community partners has improved with the assistance of a full-time, on-site Seneca staff person (“site coach”) who has assisted in

facilitation of three teams that meet on an ongoing basis at the school: 1) The “Climate and Culture” team involves teachers and parents; 2) the “Care” multi-disciplinary team includes the principal, school psychologist, counselor, and instructional coaches (retired teachers hired on a part-time basis); and 3) the “Community Partnership” team meetings provide opportunities to develop or continue relationships with important partners within

Grant Elementary School Student Body 2015-2016

Enrollment: 563 students

Racial-Ethnic Group: Hispanic (87.6%)

English Learners: 69.0%

Qualify for Free/Reduced Lunch: 97.7%

the community. Principal Heydari emphasized the importance of community partnerships as a core component for transformational change at her school.

Under the direction of the UE staff, intervention activities are employed using a three-tiered approach. “Universal” or Tier 1 activities are directed at all children and include the communication of acceptable behavior, or student expectations, through posters located throughout the school and by staff in and outside of the classroom. Staff reward positive behaviors by giving students tickets that can be redeemed for prizes during school assemblies.

Data cards are created for each student at Grant Elementary School and are organized and displayed on the wall in a room accessible to all school staff. The cards are color-coded to note those students in need of more intensive support or services than are provided in the classroom. This and other information assists the Care team with decision-making as to which students might benefit from Tier 2 (“Targeted”) or Tier 3 (“Intensive”) services, and coordinating those services. For example, 15 students at Grant Elementary School are receiving Tier 2 services, which include the “Check-In Check-Out” (CICO) intervention. The goal of CICO is to prevent students who are acting out from escalation and provide them with more frequent feedback on their behavior to prevent future problem behavior. A limitation of the current data cards is that they contain only academic information. In the future, Grant staff intend to include social, emotional, and behavioral information on the cards for each student.

Discussions with Ken Berrick included how the implementation of the model was supported at Grant Elementary School. During these discussions Mr. Berrick noted that he anticipated that it will take three years or less for the UE activities to be cost-effective.

Next Steps

The Schools and Mental Health Project will eventually include the design, implementation, and evaluation of a pilot study. Many of the approaches and activities of the UE model, as implemented at Grant Elementary School, will be included in the pilot study and presented at the Schools and Mental Health Subcommittee Workgroup Meeting in June 2017. The similarities between the UE model and the proposed pilot study include a multi-tiered approach to identifying and addressing mental health needs among elementary school children. However, the proposed pilot study will include a more systematic collection of emotional and behavioral data and decision-making based on this information. Rather than having a full-time site coach, the proposed intervention will provide an Integrated Intervention Team of school staff, parents, community partners, and others that will be provided with ongoing, in-person coaching and training. If approved by the full Commission in July, the proposed study will include up to 15 California elementary schools with the involvement of the districts of each selected study site. The number of schools to be included in the pilot study, the relatively limited cost of the intervention, the buy-in from schools’ district office, and the planned comprehensive evaluation activities will provide the Commission with information that could lead to a recommendation that similar services be expanded across California with the goal of better addressing students’ mental health needs as early as possible.