...a case study on implementing and sustaining integrated school-based services.

SUSTAINING SCHOOL-BASED SERVICES: INSIGHTS FROM NEW MEXICO'S INTEGRATED SCHOOL-BASED SERVICES

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OVERVIEW

Practitioners, school leaders, and policymakers serving the needs of youth and their families in New Mexico gathered in Albuquerque in June 2009 for four Roundtable discussions on sustaining integrated health, extended learning, and other social services in middle schools across the state that are a part of the Elev8 New Mexico initiative. Elev8 New Mexico sites function as full-service community schools combining educational and youth development best practices with in-house health, extended learning, and social services to assure that young people are prepared to learn and succeed. Roundtable participants cited numerous benefits of integrated school-based services, which they felt contributed to increased school engagement and academic performance among students and enhanced parent and family involvement in the schools. Participants also noted challenges to implementing school-based services, such as managing additional staff responsibilities, addressing high staff turnover, and allowing sufficient time to plan and implement the services. Finally, participants identified several strategies for improving and sustaining integrated school-based services, including sharing success stories and best practices for service integration, improving staff training, and strengthening data collection and evaluation.

BACKGROUND

Offering school-based health, extended learning, and other social services at the traditional school setting can establish strong partnerships between students' families, schools, and communities, and, in turn, can contribute to students' positive development, increased school engagement, academic achievement, and increased family involvement in schools.[1] This *Practitioner Insights* brief builds on three previous Roundtable discussions held on the topic in May 2008 (see the research brief[2] distilling the lessons learned from the first year of service implementation), and nearly two years of planning and implementing school-based services in New Mexico. This brief outlines the benefits, challenges and strategies for implementing school-based services that were discussed in the June 2009 Roundtables and shares the Roundtable participants' suggested improvements for sustaining these services. Each Roundtable discussion included between seven and twelve participants. Several participants were involved in the Elev8 New Mexico initiative organized by the New Mexico Community Foundation. This statewide initiative is part of a larger national effort to bring together middle school students' extended learning, comprehensive school-based health, and direct family supports into a comprehensive and holistic program. Each middle school involved organizes services differently.

WHAT ARE INTEGRATED SCHOOL-BASED SERVICES?

For the purposes of this brief, *integrated school-based services* refer to comprehensive services within a full-service community school setting. These services currently include school-based health care, social

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services, and extended learning opportunities.[3] *Extended learning* generally describes varied and supervised activities designed to promote learning and positive child and youth development beyond the offerings of the traditional school day.[4] This model of co-locating comprehensive services with intentional integration in the school setting is referred to as the *full-service community school* model.

BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES TO IMPLEMENTING INTEGRATED SCHOOL-BASED SERVICES
The New Mexico Community Foundation and Child Trends collaboratively hosted the Roundtable discussions, where participants noted several benefits and challenges to implementing integrated school-based services. Among the benefits identified by the Roundtable participants:

- *Increasing students' school engagement*. Students' involvement in sports, the arts, and other out-of-school activities increased their school engagement as well as extended their learning. Participants also reported that integrated services addressing the students' family housing needs removed barriers to students' school participation. One participant shared that housing support provided through school-based services decreased the student transiency rate from nearly 300 students leaving during the previous school year to 70-80 students leaving in the current year. Another participant thought that the personal relationships cultivated between students and service staff contributed to decreased transiency rates.

- *Improving students' academic performance*. The alignment of out-of-school time programs to in-class content contributed to students' academic success. One participant noted that teachers periodically commented on students' improved mastery of science concepts following outdoor extended learning expeditions and students' strengthened math and reading skills after receiving additional support during out-of-school time.

- *Providing school-based health care*. The benefits of school-based health care, especially in rural areas, were also noted. Such health services served not only students, but their siblings and teachers. One participant felt that "health was a big issue to connect families in our communities even more" to school goals.

- *Contributing to positive child and youth development*. Roundtable participants reported that the integrated services model of working with community partners, such as local community colleges and nonprofit organizations, offered important support students and their families. As a result of activities in conjunction with such partners, participants found that more students planned to attend college; those in need received clothing; and students were engaged in positive out-of-school time activities rather than becoming involved in gang activity. They also noted that as a result of integrated services, students were more academically prepared, more secure in their identity, and healthier (mentally and physically).

- *Enhancing parent involvement*. Increased parent and family involvement was identified as another benefit of integrated school-based services. The goal of one school was to increase parent involvement by 20% the year integrated services were implemented. The school superseded their projected goal by over 300%, attracting 460 families to participate in school activities. Participants felt that the integrated services made parents more comfortable visiting schools, and the service environment offered multiple opportunities for parents to be involved in schools. Parents in one school were given the opportunity to teach courses; at another school, a Parent Ambassador kept parents informed about school happenings; and parents mentored or found other ways to volunteer at out-of-school time programs at another school.

Roundtable participants felt that the benefits of integrated school-based services outweighed the challenges. They did, however, note the following challenges:

- *Managing additional staff responsibilities.* Roundtable participants reported that integrated services increased their job responsibilities. For example, health practitioners struggled to balance time spent providing health care to students and their families with attending integrated service planning meetings. Extended learning practitioners juggled their initial job responsibilities with the added responsibilities of coordinating with other out-of-school time providers in the school and collecting data in a timely fashion.

- *Establishing and maintaining strong partnerships.* The complexity of building and maintaining strong relationships with service partners was also noted. Participants found communicating with school staff, service providers, and the community like "trying to bridge cultures [and] languages." They reported that partnership-building was made more challenging by staff turnover and the occasional school staff members who were disinterested in becoming involved in integrated services, anticipating that services would be a short-term program like some school programs of the past.

- *Addressing high staff turnover.* Frequent staff turnover interfered with service implementation. For instance, some service components were staffed by AmeriCorps members who generally served for a year before moving on. Participants also noted a scarcity of health care providers. Similarly, participants noted that there was frequent turnover in school leadership as well. As a result, new school administrators were often not aware of available integrated services, implementation procedures, or existing service partnerships. Participants expressed frustration over investing time and effort into staff-building and professional development only to experience staff attrition soon after.

- *Allowing sufficient time to implement school-based services.* Participants agreed that effectively implementing an integrated service model requires time. Some participants felt that sites needed a minimum of three years of financial support and time to plan and deliver integrated services and share their outcomes.

STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING AND SUSTAINING INTEGRATED SCHOOL-BASED SERVICES

The Roundtable participants identified several strategies for improving and sustaining integrated school-based services:

- *Share "success stories" for integrated school-based service implementation.* Roundtable participants reported that sharing accounts of the positive effects of integrated services on students, their families, and the greater community strengthened service evaluation data. Policymakers, in particular, found putting a "face" on the students and families behind service evaluation statistics was compelling to the philanthropic, business, and government communities. Additionally, Roundtable participants thought that sharing "success stories" would increase public awareness of the value of integrated services and, in turn, generate support for the continuance of these services.

- *Identify and share best practices regarding service implementation.* While participants noted that they received occasional information-sharing opportunities during leadership meetings, they thought that a more deliberate effort to collect and disseminate service implementation best practices among practitioners would be helpful. Participants anticipated that having access to effective implementation practices would enable service providers to avoid ineffective practices and strengthen their existing implementation strategies.

- *Plan for student, school, and community differences.* Roundtable participants noted that differences in student and community populations across school sites resulted in different service needs. Accordingly, participants felt that school sites and service providers should consider community, school, and student populations when planning and implementing integrated school- based services. For example, participants thought service providers should offer services for siblings, grandparents, and other extended family members where they are actively involved in the students' lives.

- *Improve staff training.* The Roundtable participants felt that service staff could benefit from improved professional development training, including:
  - Training in child and youth development asset-based thinking to help staff view youth positively.
  - Instruction on the effective implementation of integrated services to prepare staff to offer services in collaboration with other integrated service providers.
  - Information on how to obtain student information (such as health records) to improve service delivery without violating student privacy standards.
  - Due to frequent staff turnover, ongoing training to ensure staff members are aware of service offerings, implementation protocols, and program goals.

- *Create a seamless bundling of services.* Participants thought that students and families could benefit from a more "seamless bundling of services," where each service provider was familiar enough with other service offerings to refer students appropriately. For example, one participant shared that the Family Resource Center and school administrative staff worked together to correct a student's attendance records and to refer students with physical impairments that interfered with their school work, such as poor eyesight, to the proper service providers. Participants felt that a seamless integration of services would maximize the use of services and better equip students to focus on school work and meet school goals.

- *Strengthen data collection and evaluation.* Roundtable participants reported that in order to receive support from policymakers, funders, and the community, it was necessary to demonstrate that integrated services resulted in student achievement and community development. Participants felt that sharing the results of service evaluations would be among the best ways to demonstrate positive outcomes. However, participants found it difficult to identify the evaluation data that funders and policymakers may be interested in; collect evaluation data while still implementing services; and ensure that data were finalized and shared with funders and policymakers prior to funding decisions. As a result, the participants requested additional strategies for collecting evaluation data.

CONCLUSION

Practitioners implementing Elev8 integrated school-based services in New Mexico were generally positive about the approach and success so far. They stressed that this is a work in progress and that implementing full-service community schools is an evolutionary process. Their insights can not only inform other integrated school-based services, but also promote awareness and continued discussion on effective strategies for serving children, youth, and their families.

REFERENCES

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