

PARTNERING WITH SKILLED SPECIALISTS

Strengthening Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Supports in Schools



Community Partnerships to Expand Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Supports

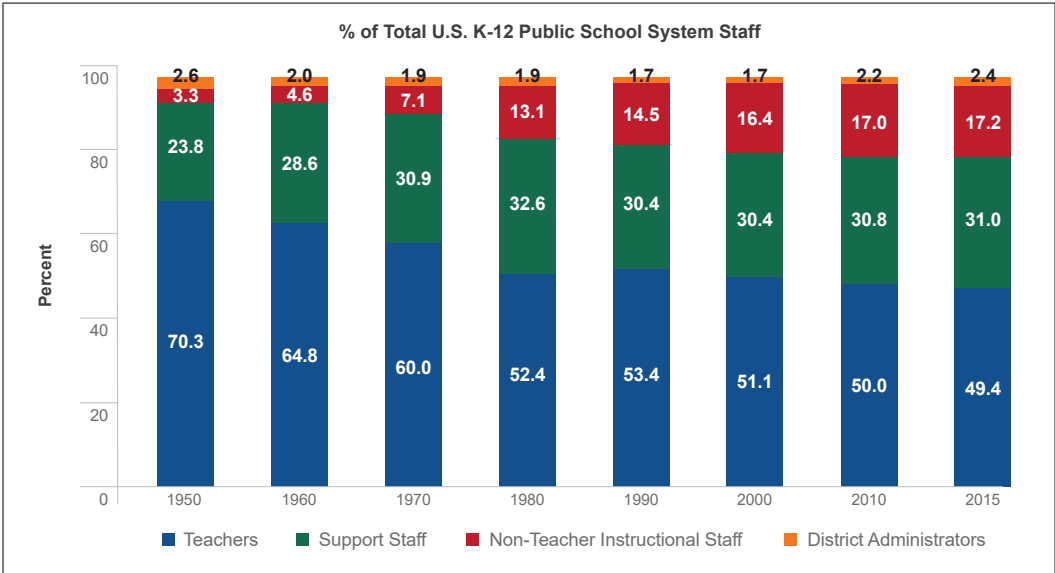
The social, emotional, and behavioral (SEB) needs students experience have been increasing in frequency and severity, and schools have taken on much of the responsibility for providing supports to cope with these challenges. School district leaders and principals have adapted to rising SEB needs by instituting a wide range of programs and hiring more school psychologists, social workers, mental health counselors, substance abuse counselors, certified behaviorists, and other trained, highly skilled staff to augment the efforts of overburdened teachers and school staff (*Exhibit 1*).

These steps have improved schools' ability to meet student SEB needs, but schools and students say it still is not enough. "Social, emotional, mental health, and related behavior issues are relatively new instructional areas in education, and they

involve circumstances of the utmost seriousness," says Hilliard City Schools (OH) Superintendent Dr. John Marschhausen. "Students need to be warm, safe, and loved before they can learn, but we find ourselves supporting students for certain needs not in our wheelhouse or core competencies."

Partnerships with community-based social service providers, clinics, local and state agencies, and other entities are a means for school districts to extend their efforts, often at minimal cost to the district. "Until the district can build capacity to employ specialists and provide services itself—which only districts with the most resources can attempt to do—we look to partner with people who do what we don't," says Marschhausen. Partnerships benefit schools and providers, which often face challenges accessing and servicing the student population.

Exhibit 1: U.S. K-12 Public School System Staff, 1950-2015



Source: National Center for Education Statistics. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d17/tables/dt17_213.10.asp.

Forming Partnerships

The growth in the volume, breadth, and severity of student SEB needs means that there often are simply not enough school resources to provide the right support for every student. Not every person in a district can be an expert in everything, and even the most skilled and devoted school psychologists, social workers, and counselors may or may not have the necessary training in highly specialized domains such as substance abuse, trauma, and suicide counseling. Partnerships in the community help schools offer students the SEB supports they need.



Until the district can build capacity to employ specialists and provide services itself, we look to partner with people who do what we don't.

Dr. John Marschhausen

Superintendent, Hilliard City Schools (OH)



Partnerships may be as simple as inter-agency agreements that offer service providers space in the school building and access to students during the school day. Other partnerships require more purposeful planning and oversight, such as employing mental health or social work graduate students or integrating behaviorists or therapists employed by fee-for-service providers or by non-profit providers into existing school support structures and teams. Some partnerships provide access to specialized supports that districts are not able to provide internally.



Schools Are Facing the Brunt of a National Mental Health Crisis

- **One in five** students need some form of mental health services.¹
- Between **40-80%** of youth who need mental health services do not receive the level of services they need.²
- Of those who receive behavioral and mental health services, **70-80%** receive at least some of those services at school.³
- Nearly **one in three** adolescents have an anxiety disorder.
- **12% of adolescents** experienced a major depressive episode in the past year.⁴
- **Suicide rates doubled** among girls and rose nearly 40% among boys ages 10-24 since 2000.⁵
- Half of all mental illnesses, including anxiety disorders, major depression, and substance abuse, **start by age 14.**⁶
- Nationwide, demand for behavior analyst positions **more than doubled** from 2012 to 2014.⁷
- **14 million students** are in schools with police but no counselor, nurse, psychologist, or social worker.⁸
- Students are **21 times** more likely to visit school-based health centers for mental health needs than community mental health centers.

Community-Based Partnerships

Partnerships with community organizations enhance schools' ability to provide care and often offer a deeper understanding of students' lives outside of school. Jason Hartling, now superintendent of Ledyard Public Schools (CT), recalls partnering with providers when he was principal of a Baltimore, Maryland public high school:

The reality is that community-based providers are sometimes more deeply connected to the lives and realities that students and families are living in. In Baltimore, outside agencies had a level of integration and understanding of particular communities and family struggles that we did not. Their network was profound—they were integrated and enmeshed in the community.

As a school, we leveraged that integration and understanding to serve social-emotional and mental health needs. Partnering helped us find the perspective and approach that works for children, because we had too much one-size-fits-all. Successful programs understand that each individual child needs an intervention that fits for them.

Community-based partnerships frequently take the following forms:

- 1 Extending a district's existing supports at a reduced cost**
- 2 Expanding a district's access to pools of highly skilled specialists**
- 3 Augmenting a district's supports in highly specialized domains such as substance abuse counseling or behavior intervention for children with more severe needs**



Schools are asked to do more and more, responding to many of society's struggles. Yet, our primary purpose is educating young people. We do not possess the staff or expertise for much of what we are asked to now do, such as providing mental health services. So, partnering with another organization to provide those needed services is a win-win.

Dr. Jeff Ronneberg

Superintendent, Spring Lake Park Schools (MN)

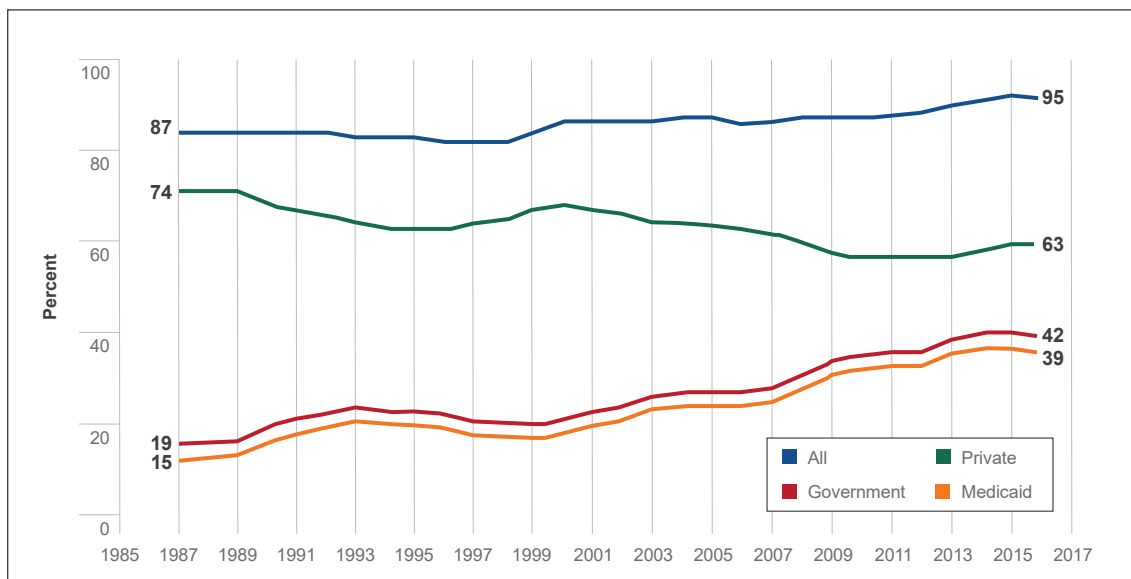


Extending Existing Supports at a Reduced Cost

Overstrained budgets do not allow schools and districts to hire all the staff, provide all the training, and support all the programs they want and know students need. Community-based partnerships are a means to complement and augment existing services and supports, often at a reduced cost. Mental health and other community-based providers enable districts to build capacity within the system. “We bring in partners both to provide the service and to show us how to do it well so we can build our own capacity. Providing training to our professional staff is essential to better serve the students in our buildings,” says Marschhausen.

Many potential partners in the community receive public funding or are underwritten by grants, leaving districts to pay just the overhead associated with making the partnership effective, such as providing space, coordinating schedules, and assigning people to oversee the program and serve as points of contact. Others, such as nonprofit organizations or for-profit fee-for-service providers, are able to bill students’ and families’ private insurance, Medicaid, or Medicare directly. Indeed, most students have some form of insurance, and the proportion of children who had health insurance coverage for any part of the year increased from 89% in 2000 to 95% in 2016 (see *Exhibit 2*).⁹ Hartling says, “Even many students that come from poverty have insurance through the state, and outside providers can often handle the billing.”

Exhibit 2: Percentage of Children Covered by Health Insurance at Any Point in the Past Year, 1987-2016



Note and source: Government health insurance consists primarily of Medicaid, but also includes Medicare, SCHIP, and the Medical Care Program of the Uniformed Services. Data from the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services and U.S. Census Bureau cited in Health Care Coverage for Children, Child Trends, <https://www.childtrends.org/indicators/health-care-coverage>. Data from 2013 onward are not strictly comparable to earlier data.

School-Based Mental Health Supports at No Cost Spring Lake Park Schools (MN)

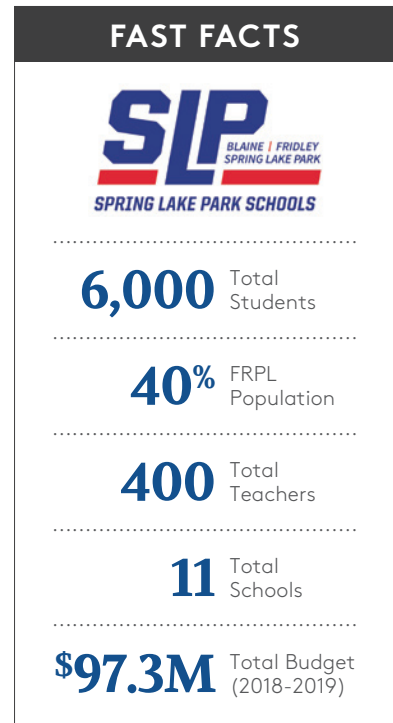
In SY 2018-19, Spring Lake Park Schools is partnering with a local mental health facility, the Lee Carlson Center for Mental Health & Well-Being, to provide in-school mental health services through licensed therapists at no cost.

Director of Student Services Tony Mayer wrote a request for proposals after the district determined students would be best served by an external partner that specializes in providing mental health services. The Lee Carlson Center, which also partners with six other school districts in the area, provides services at no cost to the district, in part underwritten by a three-year grant the Center secured via Minnesota's 2007 School-Linked Mental Health funding law.

The partnership includes half-time therapists, employed by the Lee Carlson Center, in each district school. Therapists provide mental health services in confidential spaces within the school, in addition to in-home and clinical services at one of several Lee Carlson locations. Students can access supports including therapy, mental health assessments and referrals, and resources to develop daily living and social skills. Services are available year round, so as

not to interrupt the students' ongoing relationships with support providers. In addition, therapists train staff members to recognize signs of mental health needs among their students, whom they can then refer to the program; families can also ask for referrals directly.

The Lee Carlson Center partnership is part of a holistic approach at Spring Lake Park Schools to ensure students receive SEB supports and services they need. Each school has a "pit crew" consisting of the principal, assistant principal (for grades 5-12) or dean for student services (for elementary), student and family advocates, who have backgrounds in social work, deans for personalized learning (for grades 5-12), school psychologists, and behavior specialists supported by a district-wide board-certified behavior analyst (BCBA). Pit crews help students and families navigate academic, social-emotional, and mental health resources and supports within the district and broader community. "Pit crews look at what a student is struggling with and which interventions we need to put in place to support the student and their teachers," said Superintendent Dr. Jeff Ronneberg. "The pit crew determines if students



Source: <https://www.springlakeparkschools.org/discover/who-we-are>.

need supports beyond what the school already provides.”

In cases where the family and pit crew determine the student may need additional supports, a Student and Family Advocate, employed by the district, is assigned to represent students' interests and act as a liaison between the family, the district, the school, and other entities such as community partners, including coordinating with Lee Carlson Center therapists. Advocates also help families navigate paperwork, insurance and billing, and other logistics.

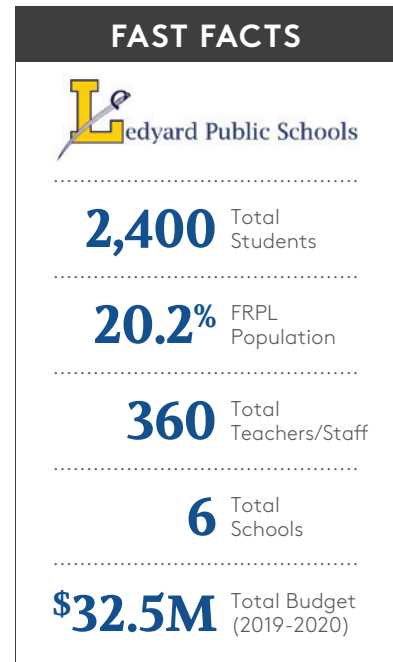
Bringing Students Back in District Helps Fund SEB Supports Ledyard Public Schools (CT)

In SY 2017-18, Ledyard Public Schools Superintendent Jason Hartling contracted with a for-profit mental-health agency to work with students in need. Ledyard reports that 44.8% of students are “at risk,” meaning they are in special education, have 504 plans, are economically disadvantaged, or are medically fragile. With the added capacity from the for-profit partner, Ledyard has been able to welcome back into the district four students who had been in specialized placement (either homebound or in-patient care), generating tens of thousands of dollars in savings for the district. Using these savings, the district then added even more capacity by hiring a board-certified behaviorist onto the district’s own staff beginning in SY 2018-19. The combination of the for-profit agency’s services and the new in-district behaviorist—

with plans to add a second on-staff behaviorist in SY 2019-20’s budget—help maximize the reach of district supports. Says Hartling:

Students should be in district. They should be part of the community. Exceptionalities shouldn’t be placed outside of district. Expanding our own staff and continuing with an outside partnership improves our ability for early intervention and mitigating problems before they escalate, which keeps us from having to refer students outside the district.

We also benefit from “job-embedded professional learning.” The behaviorist observes the classroom triggers, develops a plan, and works with the teacher and staff to build capacity and response. The result is that



Source: Ledyard Public Schools Superintendent’s Budget Report 2019-2020, http://www.ledyard.net/board_of_education/budget.

the student’s well-being and academic performance improve, and the faculty benefits by having a set of strategies that can be applied to other students, benefiting all students in the class.



In many settings I’ve worked in, we needed a force multiplier. We needed to find more services for our students. We approached partnering in two ways: training our counselors and assisting in the development of behavior plans, and working directly with groups of students.

Jason Hartling

Superintendent, Ledyard Public Schools (CT)



New Levy Funds Strengthen SEB Supports Forest Lake Area Schools (MN)

In November 2018, Forest Lake Areas Schools succeeded in levying an incremental \$5.5 million annually for schools, the first operating budget increase in 13 years. “When the levy passed, the district went to the community to find out all sorts of priorities. Social, emotional, and behavior supports were high on the list. We decided to devote some of the new funds to re-start, re-boot, and re-energize our programs and supports,” explains Forest Lake Areas Schools (FLAS) Superintendent Dr. Steve Massey.

FLAS will hire a board-certified behavior analyst (BCBA) in SY 2019-20 to manage four behavior intervention specialists. “The team will study one behavior case at a time in the classroom, looking for triggers, and working with teachers to develop a classroom-level behavior plan. They will also provide support and train classroom teachers, school counselors, special educators, and paraprofessionals in how to best support that student,” explains Massey.

FLAS also plans to deepen an existing partnership with Canvas Health, Inc., a local community-based mental health agency that in SY 2019-20 will provide mental health services to 28 schools across five districts. Canvas Health already serves some individual FLAS students via an inter-agency agreement.

“Until now, Canvas people have come in and provided therapy in the school building, then left without coordinating with our school team, although there is some release of information,” says Kelly Lessman, FLAS director of special education.

In SY 2019-20, FLAS and Canvas Health will move to an embedded school-based model that assigns mental health therapists to schools on a fulltime basis. The model improves the ability of Canvas Health therapists and school-based support teams to collaborate, says Carolyn Felty, a Canvas Health supervisor. “That way, our therapists and counselors become part of the school staff and culture by building relationships and participating in formal and informal consultations with educational staff regarding the unique mental health needs of the students,” says Katie Pape, Canvas Health director of child and family division and adult intensive services.

Fulltime mental health therapists employed by Canvas Health will serve 25-30 FLAS students, with a fulltime therapist at the high school, a therapist shared between the middle and community schools, another therapist shared between two elementary schools whose students have significant mental health needs, and a therapist at FLAS’s other elementary school three days per week. In addition to these 3.6

FAST FACTS



5,800 Total Students

21% FRPL Population

1,200 Total Teachers/Staff

10 Total Schools

\$72.5M Total Budget (2018-2019)

Source: <https://www.flaschools.org/domain/102>.

fulltime therapists, Canvas Health will provide formal and informal teacher consultations and participate in IEP and school reentry meetings.

Canvas Health bills students’ private or public insurance for direct services, when available. The model also requires funding for therapists’ non-billable activities such as participating in student meetings and consultations with educational staff. In addition to direct-billing and levy funds, the model depends on the state’s School-Linked Mental Health Grant, administered through the Minnesota Department of Human Services—“a ‘three-legged stool’ funding model,” says Lessman.

Expanding Access to Pools of Highly Skilled Specialists

Often, districts find that even when they have the budget, they may not be able to access the specific specialists with the expertise and skills needed. In many regions, there are shortages of social workers, skilled therapists, and mental health professionals. Often, private practices or other agencies are better positioned to attract these professionals. For example, school systems sometimes face a hiring disadvantage because, while other organizations may not offer higher total compensation, they pay differently and more attractively. Namely, a significant portion of district compensation comes in the form of generous health and retirement benefits, but skilled professionals may prefer a package with higher take-home components that districts are simply precluded from offering.

Organizations in the community that are dedicated to providing mental health and social services also have access to wider arrays of specialists; partnering with these organizations connects districts to deep networks of specialized resources and expertise that students need. Many times, community-based partners are able to offer services without the district incurring substantial additional costs and may even help generate savings. Partnerships are a way for districts to shortcut the frustrations of posting a job opening and hiring in a specialized domain with which they may not be as familiar. Too often, when districts set out to hire all the specialists they require, they wind up settling for imperfect solutions that do not best serve student needs. In such instances, districts may find it beneficial to find an outside partner with the operating structure and ability to successfully hire and manage these skilled professionals.

Strategies for Successful Partnerships

- 1. Assign a point person to manage SEB partnerships.** Even the smoothest partnerships require some administration to manage relationships, budgets, coordination, and accountability. It can be helpful to assign a specific person, as Hilliard City Schools has done by creating a fulltime director of student well-being position to oversee SEB resources and supports.
- 2. Make schools friendly to outsiders.** “Good schools are a family,” says Hartling. “You have to make your partners feel like part of the family. Be willing to be a partner.” In Hartling’s Baltimore public high school, partners received ID badges to access the building, attended sporting events for free (the same as fulltime faculty), and were included in staff lunches and appropriate team meetings. “They were Wildcats,” Hartling says.
- 3. Provide partners with appropriate space.** Offer private rooms if necessary for confidential sessions and/or an office for partners to store their supplies and belongings.
- 4. Make sure there is a clear point of contact.** “Partners need a point of contact in the school building, not just the central office. They need someone they can reach three minutes before the start of a session to solve a last-minute issue,” says District Management Group Managing Director Nate Levenson.
- 5. Build a compatible schedule.** Partners value schedules that mesh with schedules in the outside world. “When a volunteer or agency comes into your facility, it can’t be an off day or when the child isn’t available,” says Hartling.

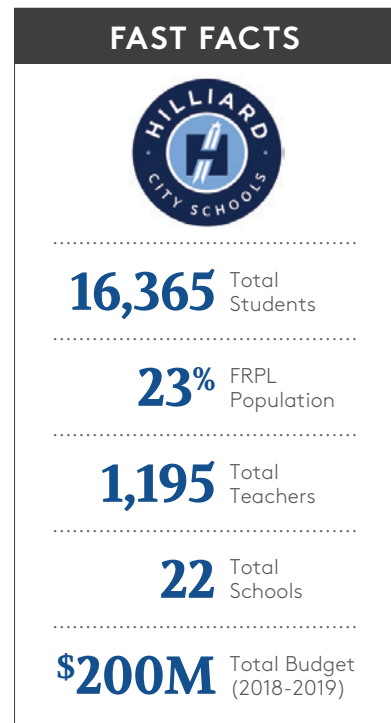
Skilled Behavior and Mental Health Clinicians in Every School Hilliard City Schools (OH)

Hilliard City Schools (HCS) partners with a behavioral health and counseling services provider to place master's level clinicians in every school, at minimal cost to the district due to the partner's ability to bill students' insurance and provide grant funding for overhead and administration.

Syntero, Inc., a for-profit Ohio-based agency, offers therapeutic treatment and counseling to HCS students with substance abuse, trauma, grief, and difficult behavioral health issues. In addition to HCS, Syntero works with 11 other school districts as well as individual and family clients. Social workers employed by Syntero are co-located in each of HCS's three high schools and three middle schools, while each elementary school has a half-time social worker. Syntero also provides information via parent workshops and presentations to educate families about resources and topics such as student anxiety, setting children up for success, bullying, and more.

Typically, Syntero receives its payments from private insurance/EAP, Medicaid, Medicare, or directly from clients on a sliding fee scale, and it sometimes does pro bono work. The HCS partnership is in part funded through a Franklin County Family and Children First Council grant made available to children in county schools for addressing drug and alcohol problems.

According to Superintendent John Marschhausen, the relatively new partnership has gotten off to a good start over the first several years. "All 14 elementary schools want their Syntero social workers to be fulltime, not part-time—they want to be more preventative, less reactive. We want to engage students prior to the highest-level issues emerging," he says. Over the long term, he hopes to increase coordination and continue to improve the experience for the students, as Syntero employees are not necessarily accountable to district oversight or fully integrated into the district's support services.



Source: <https://www.hilliardschools.org/district/factsfigures/>.

For example, since Syntero is paid by outside funding, counselors are sometimes re-assigned from HCS students to individuals at higher-paying organizations, putting a strain on students' relationships with the counselors.

Augmenting Supports in Highly Specialized Domains

In select cases, districts may partner to provide the best possible supports in highly specialized domains. For example, substance abuse counseling is a specific and distinct area of practice from other types of counseling. Similarly, the most severe behavior and mental health challenges experienced by students sometimes require the attention of therapists and other specialists in settings that school districts are unable to provide.

Supporting Children with Severe Needs

Hilliard City Schools (OH)

HCS partners with Nationwide Children’s Hospital to support children with severe needs, mainly tier III students with SEB issues beyond what the districts feels it can handle. “We’ll never build the capacity to be at the level of doctors,” Marschhausen says. Children’s Hospital provides professional development to teachers and district counselors to recognize warning signs and know when to refer students to district resources or escalate to outside resources. “If we escalate a case to the hospital system—as with self-harm or talk of suicide—they are taken to Children’s Hospital, and then Medicaid and the hospital does the billing,” Marschhausen says.

HCS used to rely more heavily on Children’s Hospital for drug and alcohol counseling. “Unfortunately, it got to the point where we hired our own social workers and counselors in-house for drug and alcohol counseling,” says Marschhausen. Children’s Hospital continues to partner with HCS to provide sessions for students who violate school smoking, drug, and alcohol policies. “With Juul and vaping and opioids and other drug issues, we’re hiring our own people. If we’re buying more than 40 hours per week of outsourced services, we look at bringing it in house. But we have to be careful and ask whether by providing additional FTEs we truly relieve the burden on teachers and their time,” says Marschhausen.

Intensive Therapeutic Services

SouthWest Metro Intermediate District 288 (MN)

SouthWest Metro Intermediate District 228 (SWM) leverages county resources and state funding to provide diverse educational services along with mental health care and treatment to 4,000 students in 11 member school districts annually. In Minnesota, an intermediate district is a cooperative of school districts providing secondary, post-secondary, and adult students vocational, special education, and other services. SWM offers special education, career and technical education, adult basic education, and alternative education programs, including academic assistance and mental health services. Superintendent Darren Kermes says:

We didn’t start with a full continuum of services. We started with one program with a single type of service and proved we could provide academic support in a reasonably cost-effective manner. Once we did that, we then branched into more and more partnerships, which opened the door to state support and funding. We brought districts and vendors and providers together and asked the state for funding to expand our services.

We started partnering with county and large metro government entities, because we have the shared need to meet the mental health needs of school-age residents. That type of partnership makes sense, because you both bring resources together and blend the resources better than trying to go it alone. We’ve come a long way, but there is a lot more we need to do for our students.

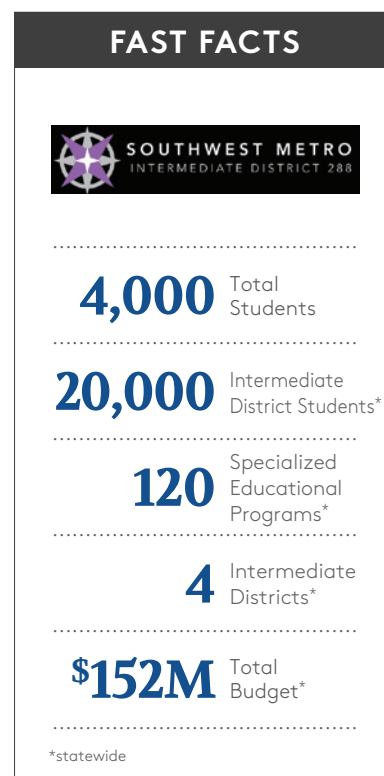
Day Treatment for Mental Health SouthWest Metro Intermediate District 288 (MN)

Since SY 2014-15, SWM has partnered with Scott County Mental Health Center to run Reflections, a day treatment program that offers 12 to 18 students ages 10-19 intensive therapeutic services and continuing instruction in core subjects. Licensed social workers and therapists provide individual and group therapy during the day, and family therapy in the evening, for conditions such as serious depression, anxiety, trauma, and post-traumatic stress disorder. Many Reflections students have been treated in partial hospitalization programs.

Reflections teachers communicate regularly with teachers at students' home schools to keep them up to pace on school material. "We have created a full-blown mental health program with Scott and Carver counties that charges insurance and offers full diagnostic services and intense therapeutic treatment," says Kermes. "SouthWest Metro provides physical space and the instructional piece, like staff and teachers. The county provides the mental health specialists and does the billing." Families are billed for mental health services through their insurance or Medicaid.

A second day-treatment program, Anicca, serves SWM middle and high school students through Carver County Health and Human Services. Students' home districts provide transportation to program sites, where licensed staff provide individual, group, and family therapy; emotional and social skills training; and mindfulness, meditation, and yoga programs. Qualified licensed teachers provide academic instruction and parent consultation regarding academics. SWM has also received grant funding from the state to extend day-treatment and educational services to the elementary level, and the district is designing therapeutic services for preschool and early-childhood programs.

Catalyst, a third program, serves SWM high school students who have chemical dependency or mental health needs. General and special education teachers and two mental health therapists work with students individually and in group sessions on self-awareness of their mental health needs and positive coping and self-advocacy skills. "Catalyst is the only district program where the therapists are school district employees. Some students are



Source: <https://www.swmetro.k12.mn.us/>

in their home high school part of the day, then can come over to Catalyst part of the day while others are enrolled in the SWMHS Area Learning Center and receive blended educational and mental health services throughout their school day. It's one notch down from full-blown day treatment," says Kermes.

Community Partnerships Strengthen Supports

Partnering with organizations in the community can be an invaluable means for school districts to expand their abilities to meet students' SEB needs and help them thrive. At a time of tightening budgets and rising needs, partnering in the community is a strategic way to increase the impact and reach of district supports and resources.

Partnerships with community organizations come in a wide variety of forms. In many cases, the purpose is to augment and extend existing district supports and resources, but at a reduced cost. Many potential community partners have access to funding or are able to provide services at minimal incremental cost to the district, for example, by billing students' private or public insurance. Other partnerships help broaden and deepen access to specialists such as mental health therapists and social workers due to partner organizations' networks of skilled professionals, specific expertise, and ability to offer attractively structured compensation and benefits. Finally, districts may collaborate with community partners that provide access to services and supports in highly specialized domains that require intensive training and distinct skillsets.

Across all formats, successful partnerships are those that make it easy for organizations in the community to work with schools. Many providers are eager to serve the student population and look to their school and district partners to facilitate scheduling, provide space, and offer clear coordination and communication. High-impact partnerships alleviate pressure on over-burdened teachers and staff while making partners feel welcome and part of the school community. Working together, districts, schools, and community partners combine to best meet students' social, emotional, and behavioral needs so that students can flourish. ♦

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