

# Practitioner Insights Research-to-Results

Child TRENDS.

...a case study on implementing school-based health and extended learning services.

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## **IMPLEMENTING SCHOOL-BASED SERVICES: STRATEGIES FROM NEW MEXICO'S SCHOOL-BASED HEALTH AND EXTENDED LEARNING SERVICES**

Ashleigh Collins, M.A., Kristin Anderson Moore, Ph.D., and Renee Paisano-Trujillo<sup>i</sup>

### **OVERVIEW**

Practitioners and policy makers from throughout New Mexico convened in Albuquerque in May 2008 for three Roundtable discussions on implementing school-based health services and extended learning opportunities in the state. Several of the Roundtable participants were involved in the New Mexico Community Foundation's Elev8 New Mexico initiative. 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 and services into a comprehensive and holistic program. This case study builds on initial work conceptualizing the value of school-based services; outlines the challenges and strategies for implementing school-based services that were shared in the Roundtables; and highlights suggestions made by Roundtable participants for implementing these services.

### **BACKGROUND**

There is a growing belief among out-of-school time program practitioners, educators, and researchers that children and youth benefit from learning opportunities that occur in multiple contexts, both inside and outside the formal school setting.<sup>1</sup> School-based health services or extended learning opportunities can establish strong partnerships among schools, homes and communities, which, in turn, can facilitate positive youth development and educational achievement.<sup>2</sup>

### **WHAT ARE SCHOOL-BASED SERVICES?**

For the purposes of this *Practitioner Insights* brief, school-based services refer to the placement of comprehensive services within schools. These services currently include family supports (e.g., social services), school-based health care, and extended learning opportunities.<sup>3</sup>

While the definition of *extended learning* is still emerging, the term generally encompasses varied supervised activities designed to promote learning and positive child and youth development beyond what is offered during the traditional school day.<sup>4</sup> Extended learning opportunities include before- and after-school activities, summer learning opportunities, and out-of-school time programs.<sup>5,6</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Director, Elev8 New Mexico, New Mexico Community Foundation

## WHAT CHALLENGES DO SCHOOL-BASED SERVICES FACE?

In collaboration with the New Mexico Community Foundation, Child Trends held three Roundtable discussions on school-based health services and extended learning opportunities with practitioners and policy makers from throughout New Mexico. Participants identified a number of challenges to implementing school-based services:

- *Securing sufficient funds.* Roundtable participants felt that school-based services and programs were often viewed as supplemental school activities and, therefore, expendable. As a result, policy makers were less inclined to provide financial support for these services and programs in a funding crunch. This perception of expendability can jeopardize the sustainability of these efforts. The Roundtable participants also noted that insufficient funding can result in factors that lower program quality, such as restrictions on hiring staff, low staff wages, and limited opportunities for staff training. The participants reported that limits on behavioral health providers, for example, restricted the availability of school-based behavioral health services. As a result, many schools could only provide behavioral and mental health services one to two times a week.
- *Sustaining youth development.* The policy makers who participated in the Roundtable felt that, although out-of-school time and education options for early childhood were being addressed by local and federal policy, a relatively limited level of support was available for children and youth as they grew older. They believed that there was an urgent need for increased political emphasis on providing mental health services and youth development activities during the secondary school years (both middle and high school) and during students' transition from high school into the workforce.
- *Maintaining effective partnerships.* Participants noted the challenges of coordinating with various community leaders to maximize student and family school-based program resources. In addition, the practitioners mentioned the need to increase the involvement of school administrators in school-based programs. In their view, such involvement would lead to better coordination of program and service efforts, improved alignment of activities with in-class instruction, and more assurance that students could receive school credits for standard-based extended learning activities.
- *Recruiting program participants.* Roundtable participants reported that stigma makes it especially difficult to attract students to behavioral and mental health services. While some Roundtable participants have used fliers and newsletters to advertise school-based services, they found such recruitment efforts unsuccessful, because children and youth were unlikely to keep or read printed materials. Furthermore, the participants noted that academic challenges and family responsibilities hinder students' program participation. Students were unlikely to participate in extended learning activities that focused on academic concepts that they found challenging; and extensive family responsibilities (such as having to take care of younger siblings, prepare dinner, or work to boost family income) prevented some students from participating.
- *Recognizing family needs.* One practitioner noted that many parents were working full time and, in some cases, overtime, making it difficult for them to be involved in programs. Other practitioners reported that some parents felt that the extent of their program involvement was to feed their children and send them to school. In addition, students' basic needs also affected their program participation. Practitioners found that some students were simply too hungry to focus on program activities, underscoring the need for students to have basic needs satisfied before they could take full advantage of school-based activities.

- *Serving minority populations successfully.* Participants stressed the need to include diverse stakeholders in program decision-making. They noted that those who were unlikely to attend decision-making meetings included representatives from rural areas, some Native American communities, as well as family members who had limited or negative school experiences themselves. In addition, while participants noted that teachers’ views were sometimes solicited, they did not feel that teachers’ input was generally taken into consideration in policy decisions.
- *Coordinating efforts.* Roundtable participants reported conflicting ideas on how to address youth program needs. Also, differences in students’ special needs, race, ethnicity, and native languages across New Mexico schools have made coordinating school-based services difficult. One practitioner mentioned the need to set clear, specific goals to maximize program success. Roundtable participants also expressed concerns about policy changes and school scheduling. They noted that new health care legislation in New Mexico<sup>ii</sup> could have a negative effect on school-based health care costs, information, and service delivery. Further, some school scheduling restrictions (for example, practitioners’ lack of authority to remove students from required classes) have interfered with practitioners’ ability to offer health services and programs flexibly to students.
- *Clarifying terminology.* Roundtable participants emphasized the need to clearly define terms related to school-based services and programming. Participants noted the unresolved debate on whether the term “extended learning” refers to recreational out-of-school time programs, school-based enrichment activities, or a holistic approach to education. The participants believed that one key to garnering support for “extended learning” and other school-based services was to agree upon one clear definition and share that definition with parents and the greater community.

## STRATEGIES FOR IMPLEMENTING SCHOOL-BASED SERVICES

Roundtable participants offered a number of suggestions for implementing school-based services:

- **Construct school-based programs to complement and meet school goals and academic standards.** Participants felt that extended learning opportunities could be strengthened by aligning them with school standards and/or the specific concepts that students are learning in their classrooms. They noted that such connections to school and class goals would also help extended learning programs gain more support from funders and policy makers.
- **Enhance behavioral and mental health programs by implementing evidence-based, but non-traditional, methods of youth development.** Roundtable participants reported that in some situations conventional behavioral therapy is not the best approach. Instead, participants emphasized the need for alternative modes of behavioral and mental health therapy, such as:
  - Mentoring children and youth.
  - Offering youth development activities or instruction that teaches children and youth positive ways to respond to life’s challenges.
  - Implementing preventive programming, which could include:
    - Informing school administrators of behavioral/mental health warning signs. For example, one Roundtable participant mentioned sharing with administrators the warning signs of depression and prevention strategies for students at risk of suicide around the winter holidays, a time of increased suicide risk.
    - Training teachers in techniques to prevent and manage classroom behavior issues.
- **Ensure that program offerings attract students by being engaging and diverse.** Roundtable participants agreed that extended learning activities based on student interests increased the likelihood

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<sup>ii</sup>Healthcare Authority Act, HB 147

of students' participation and their interest in learning. Moreover, they have found that students who select their own activities are more likely to participate in them.

- **Diversify student recruitment and retention strategies.** Many Roundtable participants reported that past or current students who had participated in the program services were effective in recruiting their peers through word of mouth. The participants also shared these additional thoughts regarding program recruitment and retention:
  - Send an extended learning staff member to P.E., a class all students are required to take, to recruit program participants.
  - Consider making program participation mandatory.
  - Provide gift cards, other incentives, and/or transportation.
  - Provide food.
  - Ask parent volunteers to distribute program fliers or share program information. Host “family nights” or community events to share information about the program.
  - Be sure to convey program information in a youth- and family-friendly way.
  
- **Provide on-going support for program staff.** Roundtable practitioners mentioned that program staff members are young—predominately 18 – 25 years old—yet many have developed an invaluable rapport with program participants. However, these staff members could be an even stronger asset and sustainable resource if given quality training. Participants discussed the need to support extended learning staff members by increasing their pay, encouraging positive relationships with in-school staff, and providing related training. Offering competitive pay and training support could help address staff shortages and turnover.
  
- **Establish and maintain positive relationships with students, school staff, service practitioners, and families.** Roundtable participants emphasized the need to include students, parents, educators, and program practitioners in the decision-making associated with school-based services. Participants shared the following approaches for developing positive relationships with school staff and students' families:
  - Build school relationships. Strong school relationships were credited with enabling joint staff training opportunities in which extended learning staff could attend school professional development offerings and teachers could participate in extended learning as program employees, staff coaches, or advocates. Roundtable practitioners found the following strategies helpful:
    - Informing school administrators of progress made by students who receive behavioral health services.
    - Creating and disseminating a health newsletter.
    - Presenting health information at school administration conferences.
    - Attending school staff meetings.
    - Meeting with staff to discuss school-based program progress and/or to plan collaborative efforts.
  
  - Build family relationships. Roundtable participants found success in engaging families and community members through strategies, such as:
    - Building rapport by sharing positive feedback with parents about their children and emphasizing that parents are respected for the significant role that they play in their children's lives.
    - Holding a parent or family night during which children share with parents, other participants, and program staff what they have learned from program participation

- Sponsoring potluck dinners.
- Designating “parent outreach ambassadors” (or other program staff) to attend the meetings of out-of-school organizations in which parents are involved.
- Offering parent-specific program offerings, such as computer classes, parenting classes, or school or program volunteer opportunities.
- Providing information about extended learning knowledge for parents, including material about its meaning, value, and activity types, in hopes of empowering parents to advocate for such opportunities for their children.
- Building positive relationships with community leaders who have preexisting relationships with parents and families.
- Making site visits to the places that parents frequent, such as churches or the laundromat.
- Having staff members who speak parents’ native language.
- Getting program input from parents.

In addition, because New Mexico has a large population of retirees, Roundtable participants suggested targeting retirees as potential volunteers in school-based programming efforts.

- **Share relevant research results with policy makers and funders to address their interests, constituents, and concerns.** Roundtable participants agreed that there are several issues that should be addressed at the policy level, such as ensuring staff qualifications, professional development, appropriate wages, and the value of extended learning. Participants felt that research on the positive effects for students of school-based services, such as extended learning and health services, would gain the support of policy makers and funders. In addition, several participants cited the establishment of clear goals and a clear definition for extended learning outcomes as necessary precursors to soliciting resources and additional funding for extended learning opportunities.

#### **CONSIDER THESE STRATEGIES FOR IMPLEMENTING SCHOOL-BASED SERVICES**

- **Construct school-based programs to complement and meet school goals and academic standards.**
- **Enhance behavioral and mental health programs by implementing evidence-based, but non-traditional, methods of youth development.**
- **Ensure that program offerings attract students by being engaging and diverse.**
- **Diversify student recruitment and retention strategies.**
- **Provide on-going support for program staff.**
- **Establish and maintain positive relationships with students, school staff, service practitioners, and families.**
- **Share relevant research results with policy makers and funders to address interests, constituents, and concerns.**

#### **CONCLUSION**

Many benefits can be associated with the effective implementation of school-based services. In fact, the Elev8 New Mexico initiative is currently working toward extending its school-based service efforts to more fully integrate comprehensive services provided to middle school students and their families. As the implementation of school-based integration of services is under way in New Mexico and other parts of the country, a continued need exists to raise awareness of the potential value of such services. Heightened awareness is vital to generating increased advocacy for effective services for children and youth. The frontline staff and policy makers in New Mexico who participated in the Roundtables shared some of the

challenges and strategies for school-based health and extended learning opportunities in schools. Their experiences and ideas can inform other school-based services and integration efforts.

### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The following resources provide more information on the integration of school-based services in schools and how to implement it in your school or out-of-school time program:

- **Bandy, T., Burkhauser, M., Collins, A. and Metz, A. (2008).** *The Role of Organizational Context and External Influences in the Implementation of Evidence-Based Practices.* Washington, DC: Child Trends.  
This report includes a section on systems-level partnerships and shared information on evidence-based practices as well as best practice strategies for external partners to support program implementation.
- **Blank, M., Melaville, A., and Shah, B. (2003).** *Making the Difference: Research and Practice in Community Schools.* Washington, DC: Coalition of Community Schools.  
This report offers research and best practices for implementing school-based integrated programs.
- **Grossman, J., and Vang, Z. (forthcoming).** *The Case for School-Based Integration of Services.* Philadelphia, PA: Public/Private Ventures.  
This brief offers an overview of school-based integration, including its benefits and examples of its implementation.

### REFERENCES

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- <sup>1</sup> Grossman, J. & Vang, Z. (forthcoming). *The Case for School-Based Integration of Services.* Philadelphia, PA: Public/Private Ventures.
- <sup>2</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>4</sup> Wright, E. (2005). Supporting student success: A governor's guide to extra learning opportunities. Washington, DC: National Governors Association.
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>6</sup> Grossman, J. & Vang, Z. (forthcoming).

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