



Addressing students' social, emotional and behavioral well-being

A California school district recognized the importance of students social-emotional needs and implemented a program unlike any other.

In LCAP Community Forums held throughout the district, parents voiced an urgent call for additional social, emotional, and behavioral support for their children. Riverside Unified School District's board and administrators made the bold decision to implement a Student Assistance Program (SAP) unlike any other. Assistant Superintendent of Pupil Services/SELPA, Tim Walker, formed a committee consisting of site and district administrators to draft a plan. The newly developed plan called for the hiring of 27 licensed clinicians, two school psychologists, 10 prevention assistants, two support staff, and a coordinator. The clinicians, all licensed clinical social workers or licensed marriage and family therapists, serve students' social and emotional needs and the school psychologists and prevention assistants address students' behavioral concerns. The Student Assistance Program (SAP) works within the department of Pupil Services and collaborates with other school and district staff members in serving students and families.

Mental health in schools aspires to pro-

vide programs and services to intervene as early after the onset of behavior, learning, and emotional problems as is feasible (Adelman and Taylor, 2010). SAP staff strive to strengthen TK-12 students' social, emotional, and behavioral capacities impacting their ability to fully participate in the instructional day and school activities. The SAP serves universal, targeted, and intensive tiers of support, while directing its focus on serving the students in need of targeted interventions.

Patricia Lock-Dawson, RUSD Board President, states, "The district recognizes the importance of the social-emotional needs of students. My concerns are understood and shared by the administration and elected trustees of Riverside Unified who have made a commitment to fund staff and programs and explore innovative approaches to wellness in our schools." Overall, the program receives a wonderfully favorable response from students, families, and staff, with many students benefitting from its impact.

By Katarina Roy Schanz, Ed.D.

SAP Counseling

The licensed clinicians, called SAP Counselors, contribute to students' well-being throughout our schools. With school site placement based on the LCAP priorities, each school benefits from at least a half-time SAP Counselor, with 10 schools assigned a full-time SAP Counselor.

SAP Counselors fill a non-traditional role in the schools by providing individual and group therapeutic counseling. Because they are employed by the school district rather than being contracted through an agency or university, they have become integral to daily school operations and are valued as support and resources by students, families, and staff members. SAP Counselors connect families and students to school and community resources, conduct classroom lessons, enhance school-wide PBIS systems through delivery of social skills lessons and check-in/check-out supports, facilitate Restorative Practices, guide mindfulness in small groups and classrooms, provide prevention services for bullying, violence, and substance abuse, and serve in the critical role of conducting assessments for risk of suicide and participating on site threat assessment and crisis teams.

Students are referred to SAP Counseling services due to experiencing family conflict or turmoil, recent loss, showing signs of depression, and displaying changes in behavior or attitude. Referred students may also be victims or aggressors in acts of bullying, display signs of possible substance use or abuse, have inconsistent school attendance, or a sudden drop in grades. Referrals for counseling come from parents, staff members, peer, or the students may self-refer. The district's school counselors continue to provide vital services to students in the academic, college/career, and social-emotional realms, with SAP providing complementary resources and increased depth in the social-emotional component. After a student began working with SAP Counseling, an elementary principal stated, "It appears like a heavy burden has been lifted from this student and she is smiling more."

Additionally, SAP Counselors promote family cohesion through meetings, support groups, and workshops. Their role extends to offering staff development in the area of



About 30 percent of girls and 20 percent of boys, totaling 6.3 million teens have had an anxiety order.

children's social and emotional needs, including trauma-informed teaching practices, understanding of social and emotional wellness or deficits in children, and consulting with school staff regarding students' social and overall emotional well-being. Through their training in Restorative Practices, they provides schools another avenue to facilitate community-building and restorative circles for both staff and students.

A 7th grade student was referred for counseling due to poor social-skills and experiencing bullying behaviors by peers. She was frequently out of class with physical complaints and avoided the lunch area due to peer conflicts. She was referred to counseling and participated in social skills and self-esteem groups. By the end of 8th grade, she attended class regularly, made significant friendships, improved her grades, and received positive comments from teachers regarding her overall behavior and classroom participation.

SAP Counseling is accessible to all students. A Time article, "Depression and Anxiety in Teens: Why the Kids are Not Alright" (Schrobsdorff, 2016) highlighted concerns related to depression and anxiety faced by adolescents. In 2015, about 3 million teens ages 12 to 17 had experienced at least one major depressive episode in the past year, according to the Department of Health and Human Services. More than 2

million report experiencing depression that impairs their daily function. About 30 percent of girls and 20 percent of boys—totaling 6.3 million teens—have had an anxiety disorder, according to data from the National Institute of Mental Health. SAP provides an avenue to whom these children can reach out. Students and families who might otherwise not seek out clinical services due to prohibitive barriers including cost or stigma can discretely request counseling at their school that occurs on site during the school day, eliminating the need for transportation or billing.

SAP Behavior

SAP School Psychologists and SAP Prevention Assistants meet a critical need by providing unique services to our schools. The SAP Behavior Team works with teachers and administrators to implement interventions for students in general education who exhibit serious behavioral concerns, including lack of response to school-wide and classroom expectations, deficiency of appropriate social skills, or aggression and withdrawal. An elementary school student had received nine referrals for behaviors such as fighting, demonstrating physical aggression, and verbal instigation of peers. After implementation of SAP behavior interventions, the student received only one behavior referral and demonstrated improved peer interactions

and fewer impulsive negative behaviors.

SAP School Psychologists participate in parent meetings, conduct classroom and playground observations, provide training for, and partner with, SAP Prevention Assistants who work directly with teachers and students. SAP Prevention Assistants work under the guidance of the psychologists, conduct observations, implement targeted individual interventions through behavior support plans, and monitor students' progress. A Prevention Assistant noted, "Our program helped identify the academic struggle the student was experiencing due to the reduction in the distracting behaviors."

SAP Behavior offers options for teachers and administrators not previously available. Through focused, intentional work with individual students, negative behaviors may be reduced or extinguished, and the focus placed on building positive relationships with peers and staff and making academic progress.

RUSD High School Experience

Think Tank

Over the course of two school years, SAP collaborated with the district's Department of Instruction to host forums throughout the district's high schools, consisting primarily of students, that included district and site administrators, teachers, school counselors, SAP Counselors, and parents. The diverse group of students overwhelmingly confirmed the need for social and emotional resources. Developmentally, the years between childhood and adulthood represent a critical period of transition and significant cognitive, mental, emotional, and social change. While adolescence is a time of tremendous growth and potential, navigating new milestones in preparation for adult roles involving education, employment, relationships, and living circumstances can be difficult. These transitions can lead to various mental health challenges that can be associated with increased risk for suicide. (youth.gov, 2018). The Student Assistance Program strives to provide the necessary systems and structures to ease their transition by sup-

porting social, emotional, and behavioral gateways to learning... and life.

Next Steps

Riverside Unified School District continues to explore options for building upon the foundations set through the Student Assistance Program. We are excited about the progress of the program and its impact on our students and families. We continue to seek grant opportunities and additional funding for expansion of the program to provide additional schools with a full-time SAP Counselor as well as additional Behavior Support staff. Additionally, we are exploring the Wellness Center concept for our high schools and may venture in that direction as funding allows.

Tim Walker reflects, "The creation of the SAP has had a profound impact on addressing the needs of students who require social-emotional support, regardless of whether their need is related to their home or school life. This focus on the well-being of our children completes a circle that surrounds them with resources designed to assist them in not only becoming college and career ready, but contributing and productive members of our society." He recalled a remark a student made at a board meeting that "the creation of the SAP, and the overall work on providing social/emotional support to students had a direct connection on saving the life of a friend."

References

Adelman, A.S & Taylor, L. (2016). *Mental Health in Schools: Engaging Learners, Preventing Problems, and Improving Schools*. New York: Skyhorse Publishing.

Schrobsdorff, S. (2016, November). *Teen Depression and Anxiety: Why the Kids Are Not Alright*. <http://time.com/magazine/us/4547305/november-7th-2016-vol-188-no-19-u-s/>

Youth.Gov. (2018) *Developmental Competencies and Resilience*. Retrieved from <https://youth.gov/youth-topics/youth-mental-health/definitions-developmental-competencies>.

Katarina Roy Schanz, Ed.D. is the Student Assistance Program Coordinator in the Riverside Unified School District and can be reached at kroyschanz@rusd.k12.ca.us



Leaders Wanted!

Doctorate in Educational Leadership for Social Justice

This three-year doctoral degree program is designed to prepare bold, socially responsible leaders who will transform the world of schooling.

Program Highlights

- Develop leadership capacity to create truly democratic schools
- Build skills to resolve the key issues that impact schools and communities
- Conduct original research to improve educational outcomes for all learners
- In-person and online class schedule to accommodate busy professionals

COLLEGE OF EDUCATION & ALLIED STUDIES | 25800 CARLOS BEE BOULEVARD
HAYWARD, CA 94542



Now Recruiting for Summer 2019!

Information Sessions:
Mon., Sept. 17 • 5:30–6:30 pm
Tues., Oct. 16 • 5:30–6:30 pm

<http://edinfosession.eventbrite.com>

Priority Application Deadline:
Feb. 1, 2019

Cal State East Bay
Department of
Educational Leadership
www.csueastbay.edu/edd
edd@csueastbay.edu
(510) 885-3596

CALIFORNIA STATE
UNIVERSITY
EAST BAY