



Schools and Mental Health Project

Summary of December 6, 2016 Site Visit to Bell Avenue Elementary School

The Mental Health Services Oversight and Accountability Commission (MHSOAC) implements policy projects based on priorities identified by the Commission. These priority areas include crisis services for children, and diversion and treatment options for persons with mental health needs who become involved in the criminal justice system. Project findings may be used to guide statewide legislative action or prioritize county services to better serve specific California populations. Data collection activities for these projects include subcommittee meetings, public hearings, focus groups, and site visits.

The first site visit for the Schools and Mental Health project occurred on December 6, 2016 at Bell Avenue Elementary School within the Robla School District of Sacramento County. The school was selected for a site visit because of the need for mental health services among the student body, and because it represents a model for innovative school-based mental health services that had been recently implemented with the support of the project subcommittee chair, David Gordon, Superintendent of the Sacramento County Office of Education.

The intervention activities include a full-time social worker to provide school-based mental health services such as screening, direct clinical service, community referral, and ongoing case management. In addition, Bell Avenue Elementary School has implemented Positive Behavioral Interventions & Support (PBIS), a framework for organizing evidence-based tiered interventions and promoting good student behavior and a positive school culture.

The first half of the site visit involved Commissioners, MHSOAC staff, and invited guests breaking into smaller groups, touring the school, and visiting kindergarten, first grade, and second grade classrooms. The groups then reconvened in the school library to share observations, discuss the mental health needs of young children overall in particular among children from lower-income families, the school's strategies toward addressing those needs, and the barriers and solutions to ensuring children and their families receive appropriate services.

Bell Avenue School Student Body 2015/2016

Enrollment: 459 students

Racial-Ethnic Minorities: 80.8%

Most Prevalent Racial-Ethnic Groups: Hispanic (42.7%) and Asian (22.4%)

English Learners: 44.4%

Qualify for Free/Reduced Lunch: 90.0%

“These children lead crisis-level lives.”

Laura Lystrup Director of Early Childhood and Special Education Programs

Laura Lystrup, Director of Early Childhood and Special Education Programs, stated that the Robla School District had experienced an increase in the number of children who appear to be traumatized (e.g., poverty, PTSD) and face social, emotional and behavioral challenges. She also said that many of the children are academically on target and would not be candidates for the Individualized Educational Program (IEP), but have considerable mental health needs but do not qualify under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) for Educationally-Related Mental Health Services.

The intervention at Bell Avenue Elementary School is an attempt to address these needs through an onsite full-time social worker, Zenaida Agramonte. In her role, Ms. Agramonte emphasized the importance of developing an ongoing and trusting relationships with children and their families. She shared that she was able to provide families with a point of contact at school to ensure the integration and continuity of services, especially when the severity of the child’s problems required outside referral and consultation.

The visit to Bell Avenue Elementary School coincided with the first Schools and Mental Health Subcommittee Workgroup meeting occurring in the afternoon of December 6, 2016. Both activities were integral to the project’s stakeholder engagement and data collection efforts to understand school-based practices related to children’s mental health needs. The site visit provided Commissioners and attendees with an overview of a school-based mental health program implemented in an underserved community that is grounded in evidence-based PBIS and includes an on-site social worker as a key component of the intervention. One of the Schools and Mental Health project objectives is to pilot test across a number of schools an intervention for the early identification and treatment of young children’s mental health needs. The Bell Avenue Elementary School model for delivering school-based mental health services and its components could potentially serve as a foundation for such as larger-scale pilot test.

Acknowledgements

We thank Lisa Hall, Principal of Bell Avenue Elementary School, Laura Lystrup, Zenaida Agramonte, and the Superintendent of Robla School District, Ruben Reyes, for hosting the site visit and sharing their experiences and insights into the challenges of identifying and treating young students with mental health needs and for providing the Commissioners, MHSOAC staff, and invited guests with the chance to observe their efforts to improve the well-being and educational opportunities for children.