

Part 5: SIA Plan

The input we received from the community and stakeholders confirmed some things we knew but have not had sufficient resources to address. First, there is widespread recognition that while the staff do a good job of connecting individually with students and building relationships, there are additional needs around mental health that are not being adequately addressed. This manifests in a variety of ways at the school: lack of motivation or engagement, poor attendance, poor sense of self-efficacy and lack of self-management. The lack of availability of services for students is not just a school problem, it is a community problem; however, the school can play a part in this effort by bringing in support for students in the form of workshops, one-on-one counseling and professional development for school staff.

Outcomes:

1. A three-tier school-based mental health program is embedded at Career Tech with an on-site mental health counselor(s).

Over the next three years, we envision the establishment of a structured, three-tier, school-based mental health (SBMH) program to improve universal and focal group student academic achievement and future success. In addition to short-term outcomes that will be realized within the timeframe of this funding opportunity, there are many long-term benefits for students such as reduced negative health impacts that result from ongoing and unaddressed mental health disorders.

2. Teachers report improved understanding of, and confidence in, identifying and handling student mental health needs when they arise at school.

Through the SBMH professional development and training component for staff, teacher understanding, confidence and capability of handling mental health crises will increase through ongoing training and support.

3. Students/families report improved access to mental health services and ability to manage mental health issues.

As a result of the implementation of an SBMH program, the school will improve access to mental health services for students and families, and students and families will utilize these services. The result will be that, through the program, students and families will experience improvement in their ability to manage their mental health.

4. Students report improved ability to manage anxiety related to academic expectations and performance.

Finally, as a component of the SBMH program, and in additional efforts to assist students with improving academic outcomes, teachers and counselors will work cooperatively to reduce anxiety for students in subjects in which they struggle.

Research has pointed to a strong correlation between mental health and academic achievement. Ultimately, by incorporating an SBMH program at Career Tech, we would realize improved learning and academic achievement for underserved students, and by doing so, help address the achievement gap for our students.

Strategies:

1. Develop a School Based Mental Health (SBMH) program that includes teacher professional development and training by an on-site mental health counselor.

The promise of SBMH programs that include an on-site therapist and teacher support have been demonstrated in recent studies (for example, Osayande, et al, 2018). With the school located in a rural area with limited access to mental health services, and no SBMH program of its own, Career Tech students and families have significantly limited options. It's telling that so many students, according to our survey, didn't know if there were adequate resources for mental health in their area. If it was a well-known and easily accessed resource, most of our students, based on need, would likely be aware of it. The reality is that the majority of children who access mental health services--which is only a fraction of the students who could benefit from these services--access it at school. When the school doesn't have such a program, where are these students to go? By investing resources in the proposed SBMH program, we may improve student outcomes and help close the achievement gap.

2. Incorporate a three-tier SBMH program with a licensed, on-site mental health counselor. The tiers are as follows: Tier 1: School-wide workshops and presentations; Tier 2: Targeted group sessions, and Tier 3: Individual and family counseling.

Examining best practices, a three-tier approach provides a multi-faceted mental health program that not only addresses individual student and family needs, but also works to educate students school-wide about approaches to self-care, recognizing impacts and issues, de-stigmatizing mental health counseling, knowing when and how to reach out for help, and other factors. It also provides targeted intervention and support for specific groups of students who may be experiencing similar challenges, such as math or test anxiety.

3. Target specific academic areas for cooperative teacher/mental health counselor engagement where students report high levels of anxiety around testing and performance (e.g. math).

School staff consistently report that anxiety is a significant barrier for many students in certain subjects and situations. Cooperative approaches to troubleshooting this issue may yield improved academic performance and learning outcomes for some students.

4. Build out new mental health counseling area for confidential meetings to increase privacy and comfort with seeking out mental health services at the school.

In the first year of funding, the school will create a space for the provision of mental health services that is private and confidential. No such space currently exists in the school. A few years ago, when the school received a grant to provide limited in-house mental health counseling, we co-opted the music studio as a counseling space which, while private, was still accessed within view of students attending classes. Students were understandably reluctant to be observed going to that room for a counseling session. There is unused and unfinished space in the building we lease directly adjacent to the school that we will use for this purpose.

5. Teachers act as therapeutic agents through raised awareness of student mental health needs, encourage adaptive behavior and communicate more effectively with students to identify mental health needs.

While most teachers do a fair amount of informal student counseling through academic-related interaction and check-ins, the intent would be to build teachers' confidence and ability to recognize, appropriately work with and refer students to counseling. This may be accomplished with support from the mental health counselor. The end result would be a coherent system of addressing issues as they arise at the school and making referrals when appropriate.

Activities:

In the first year, while the majority of funds are allocated to constructing the required space, we will begin the process of developing the SBMH program through contracted services with a local mental health provider and through professional development and training for staff. Professional development may be a combination of trainings provided by the contracted mental health provider, and outside trainings, conferences and workshops. The benefit of providing training to staff through an on-site contracted mental health provider is availability and flexibility, as well as ongoing support for implemented school-wide practices. We anticipate being able to stretch SIA funding through the contractor's ability to bill counseling hours directly to health insurers.

The responsible parties for implementing activities and overseeing the investments are the principal and education supervisor. The program will be continuously monitored through stakeholder surveys (twice yearly), staff meetings (monthly), input from the student advisory council (twice monthly), student mental health pre and post assessments (minimum of twice yearly), and other community input sessions (three times per year).

Priorities:

Our first priority is to establish a confidential and private counseling space for students. First year funds would be primarily dedicated to this endeavor. This space will include a small conference room that can accommodate eight to 10 people, as well as a smaller private room for individual counseling. This is a high priority for year one. Should funding be limited, we would prioritize construction of the smaller, private counseling room over the larger conference room space.

Our second priority in the first year is to establish the framework for the student based mental health (SBMH) program with a contracted mental health provider. This is also a high priority for year one, and will lay the groundwork for available counseling hours and resources, as well as trainings, workshops, referral processes and other on-site services. Should funding be limited, we would tailor the program to available funding, emphasizing priority services while limiting others.

Our third priority in the first year is to provide training to staff on identifying and addressing student mental health needs. This is a medium priority for year one, as we anticipate that this will become a greater focus in year two once the framework is in place and a space is established for on-site counseling services.

In years two and three, there won't be a need for ongoing construction, so resources will be allocated to supporting the SBMH program and making any modifications to the program based on stakeholder input and review. This will remain a high priority.

Ongoing professional development and training for staff on student mental health will also be a high priority for years two and three.