Overview of Minnesota’s Initiative

The “school-to-prison pipeline” is a critical public policy issue for all states and for the nation as a whole. “Zero Tolerance” policies force many students, especially students of color and those with disabilities, out of the classroom and into the juvenile justice system. Through participation in this initiative, Minnesota sought to create a school-based diversion model to avoid arrest, expulsion, and out-of-school suspension whenever possible for students with co-occurring disorders. To accomplish this, the team developed a model where clearly defined roles and responsibilities facilitate timely and appropriate actions in dealing with student incidents, as well as create more uniformity in responses. Cross-systems collaboration, between school personnel and law enforcement in particular, is an essential component of this model. Intermediate School District 287 in Hennepin County was chosen as the pilot site for this initiative. Team members from Minnesota chose to participate in the cross-site workgroup on Implementing Screening for Justice-Involved Youth with Co-occurring Mental and Substance Use Disorders.

State Diversion Activities

Process

The Minnesota Model of School-Based Diversion for Students with Co-occurring Disorders started with the creation of a team of professionals from different backgrounds and constituent groups, who participated in the Policy Academy. Through regular planning meetings and ongoing technical assistance (offered both onsite and via telecommunication), and based on the experiences and design of the Connecticut School-Based Diversion Initiative developed through the Models for Change Mental Health/Juvenile Justice Action Network, the team created an implementation manual for shared decision-making, new partnerships, and alternatives that keep students in schools. The manual describes a comprehensive approach to implementing a school-based diversion initiative that builds on existing research, evidence-based and best practices, and guiding principles developed through workgroup meetings and discussions.

Strategy

The Minnesota model provides a decision-making protocol for student incidents and presents an opportunity for schools and law enforcement to work together as a shared decision-making authority to address students’ academic, criminogenic, and behavioral health needs (mental illness, substance abuse, and trauma). The model outlines three possible responses to student incidents: (1) no action--inform a parent; (2) school case conference or behavior support team; and (3) school resource officer/law enforcement involvement. The model emphasizes a variety of approaches to meet the needs of these students. Critical elements of the model include: involvement of families at every stage; referral for screening, assessment, and treatment for early identification of youth at risk for juvenile-justice involvement; and development and availability of preventative and supportive resources within the school environment. The model is general enough to be applied to any school setting and allows for some adaptation based on local context.

Accomplishments

- The development of a comprehensive implementation manual, The Minnesota Model of School-Based Diversion for Students with Co-occurring Disorders (Minnesota Model) was a significant achievement of the Minnesota initiative. Numerous stakeholder groups, including families and students, contributed to this guide.

- The team realized that “Zero Tolerance” and exclusionary discipline practices are not the most effective methods for serving students with co-occurring disorders, and use of these practices should be reduced. It is expected that the Minnesota Model will increase screening, assessment, and treatment referrals and improve school attendance.
Additional expected outcomes include fewer arrests, out-of-school suspensions, and expulsions.

- The Minnesota Department of Human Services is partnering with the Minnesota Chiefs of Police Association, six special education Federal IV school sites, their local law enforcement, and the county attorney’s office to plan and implement the Minnesota Model statewide.

Cross-Site Activities

Process

The Minnesota team participated in the cross-site Action Network on Implementing Screening for Justice-Involved Youth with Co-occurring Mental and Substance Use Disorders. Minnesota policy currently requires service providers to use state-approved screening instruments to determine possible referrals for assessment and treatment services. The team selected the GAIN-SS because it met the validity and reliability criteria established by the Minnesota Department of Human Services Children’s Mental Health Division and was an appropriate fit for the setting and target population.

Accomplishments

- The Minnesota team participated in the cross-site activity, researched the value of the GAIN-SS, and selected it as the screening tool for the Minnesota Model.

Next Steps

- The Minnesota team is planning to develop a formal marketing and dissemination plan to promote the Minnesota Model. There is great interest in the model across the state from many partners seeking to address the “school-to-prison pipeline.”

- The Minnesota team, in partnership with the Minnesota Chiefs of Police Association, six school sites, and their local partners, has applied for a grant to further plan, implement, and evaluate the Minnesota Model for effectiveness and for statewide distribution.

For More Information

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The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration collaborated on an initiative entitled Improving Diversion Policies and Programs for Justice-Involved Youth with Co-occurring Mental and Substance Use Disorders: An Integrated Policy Academy/Action Network Initiative. The goal of this initiative was to increase the number of youth with co-occurring mental and substance use disorders diverted out of the juvenile justice system to appropriate community-based services. Eight states participated in this initiative: Arkansas, Kentucky, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, New York, South Carolina, and Virginia.

Using SAMHSA's Policy Academy model, core teams consisting of senior-level state and local policymakers were convened to learn about the latest research and effective diversion strategies for youth with co-occurring disorders in contact with the juvenile justice system. Individual state teams, consisting of the core team and an expanded home team, then developed and implemented front-end diversion strategies for youth with co-occurring disorders. Ongoing technical assistance was provided to support their efforts.

Using the Foundation’s Action Network model, which supports and links teams working on similar innovations in policy and practice, the states worked to identify and implement effective practices for screening and treating youth with co-occurring disorders. National experts provided guidance and support.

This initiative was coordinated by the National Center for Mental Health and Juvenile Justice at Policy Research Associates and the Technical Assistance Collaborative.