



COVID-19 School Wellness Initiative Key Element: School-Provider Partnerships

Overview

Strong partnerships between schools and behavioral health providers were foundational to the success of CSWI programming. Many grantees formalized these partnerships through memorandums of understanding (MOUs), while others built on pre-existing relationships. **True collaboration depended on the quality of integration**, which was assessed through how behavioral health staff embedded in school culture: attending behavioral health team meetings, adjusting approaches to student support, and coordinating professional development for school personnel.



75%
of programs
plan to continue their
school-provider collaboration

Partnerships facilitated crucial activities such as aligning mental health interventions with school priorities, improving referral processes for students in need, and providing dedicated spaces for confidential services. They also allowed schools to access expertise and resources they lacked internally, particularly given the heightened mental health needs during and following the COVID-19 pandemic.

Transitions in school leadership or staff turnover could disrupt progress, making trust-building with both administrators and frontline staff essential. **Grantees emphasized that sustained engagement and defined roles helped maintain continuity**, ensuring mental health supports remained effective and accessible for students, families, and staff alike.

Bright Spots

Several grantees demonstrated creative and impactful approaches to these partnerships. In the **Centerstone JC Parent Mentors** program, one teacher was initially hesitant, but noted that after seeing it in action, she “cannot imagine school or class without them.” Parent Mentors strengthened connections between families and school staff, supporting student engagement and embedding behavioral health in daily routines.

Juvenile Protective Association provided trauma-informed supports to teachers and administrators through their Connect to Kids (C2K) program. Through consultation, professional development, observations, and social-emotional learning (SEL) classroom groups, JPA embedded social-emotional best practices into school settings.

Meanwhile, the **Hillsboro Area Hospital Sources of Strength** program, spurred by the alarming youth suicide statistics, created shared vocabulary to identify student strengths and protective factors, and normalized help-seeking behaviors in school culture. Students and staff alike benefited from common topics of hope, resilience, and stigma reduction.

Other grantees offered training or wellness events for school staff, such as lunch and learn sessions, drop-in office hours, or self-care resources, in addition to providing flexible, confidential counseling spaces.

Barriers & Proposed Strategies

Grantees consistently encountered challenges in building and sustaining partnerships:

- High turnover among school staff or administrators disrupting alignment and trust.
- Variability in buy-in across staff and leadership, requiring ongoing engagement.
- Limited internal school resources to address rising mental health needs.

To overcome these shortcomings, some grantees implemented the following strategies:



Defining
counselor
roles within
school teams



Positioning
behavioral
health staff
in classrooms



Expanding
staff training
and wellness
supports

Lessons Learned & Summary

Strong, goal-aligned partnerships between schools and behavioral health providers are key to program effectiveness. Students were more open to addressing mental health, with a few grantees reporting a decrease in stigma amongst students related to receiving services. Embedding clinicians in school culture, maintaining consistent communication, and providing professional development improved both student and staff outcomes.

Lessons highlight that trust-building, clear role definitions, and consistent engagement with school personnel, from teachers to administrators, are essential to integrating mental health supports into the daily life of schools. These relationships take time, but they enable schools to respond more effectively to student needs, normalize help-seeking behaviors, and foster a culture of social-emotional learning.

Overall, based upon PIE's evaluation and grantee reporting, when schools and behavioral health providers collaborate closely, students, families, and staff benefit: interventions are more effective, school culture improves, and **communities across the state gain accessible and sustainable mental health supports.**