



NATIONAL RESOURCE CENTER FOR

MENTAL HEALTH PROMOTION &  
YOUTH VIOLENCE PREVENTION

SAFE SCHOOLS  
HEALTHY STUDENTS



# New Britain, Connecticut: Advancing Whole Child Wellness

Safe Schools/Healthy Students  
Grantee Spotlight

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## NEW BRITAIN, CONNECTICUT: ADVANCING WHOLE CHILD WELLNESS

In 2013, Connecticut launched the state's [Safe Schools/Healthy Students \(SS/HS\)](#) project, an \$8.6 million dollar, 4-year grant awarded by the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) to create safe and supportive schools and communities statewide.

### CONNECTICUT SS/HS: STATE-LEVEL OVERVIEW

[Connecticut's SS/HS initiative](#) is administered by the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services, State Department of Education, and Court Support Services Division, and with strong collaboration from Department of Children and Families. Connecticut's diffusion initiative: (1) promotes the physical and emotional well-being of youth, (2) prevents youth violence and substance use, and (3) creates safe and respectful school climates. The project supports SS/HS implementation in three local school districts that serve more than 36,000 students. Students in SS/HS districts face significant disparities across indicators such as poverty levels, academic achievement, chronic absenteeism, suspensions and expulsions, and arrests.

Planning and implementation components:

- **Statewide Management Team.** The Statewide Management Team assembles diverse stakeholders, including parents and representatives from education, mental health and addiction services, public health, juvenile justice, social services, child and protective services, family advocacy, and youth development. The team coordinates resources to sustain and scale innovation and to promote effective practices.
- **Community Management Teams.** Community Management Teams in each of the three SS/HS school districts create bridges with community partners, implement evidence-based prevention programs and mental health services, and coordinate resources for the benefit of students and their families.
- **Statewide Data and Innovation Committee.** The committee supports data sharing across agencies. The Connecticut State Department of Education is developing a website to facilitate information sharing and improve student- and school-level data collection on behavioral health, student supports, and service referrals.

Connecticut focused on strategies to leverage progress in the local education agencies. The Consolidated School District of New Britain is one of three local education agencies selected to implement the SS/HS model to expand and enhance improvements in school climate, access to behavioral health and other supports, reduce substance use and student exposure to violence, and encourage documentation of outcomes and data sharing among multiple partners invested in student behavioral health.

### THE CONSOLIDATED SCHOOL DISTRICT OF NEW BRITAIN: BUILDING A HEALTHY, ENGAGED SCHOOL-COMMUNITY

The Consolidated School District of New Britain's (CSDNB's) mission statement reflects leadership's commitment to a comprehensive and sustainable school improvement approach focused on the whole child that recognizes that student learning and development are

## MISSION STATEMENT

The Consolidated School District of New Britain pursues excellence one student at a time. In partnership with family and community, CSDNB works to provide the best personalized and comprehensive whole-child education so our students will be prepared for, and positively contribute to, a profoundly different future.

interconnected with physical health, mental well-being, safety, engagement, and access to needed services and supports. Leadership further values families and community members as essential partners in achieving lasting success in school, at home, and in the community.

A whole child approach needs a healthy school-community that embraces the rich historical, cultural, political, and social identities of its members. New Britain, a city in Hartford County, Connecticut, is the eighth most populated city in the state, with unique strengths and challenges. According to 2017 U.S. Census estimates, the diverse racial/ethnic makeup of New Britain's overall population of 73,206 people includes White (43.7%) followed by Hispanic (40.7%), Black (11.1%), and Asian (2.9%).<sup>1</sup> The median age in New Britain is 34 years—much younger than the state's median age (40.6 years). Hispanic individuals in New Britain are predominantly U.S. citizens of Puerto Rican heritage and culture. New Britain's challenges include rates of poverty, unemployment, and crime, all significantly higher than overall state rates.<sup>2</sup> These risk factors impact students in school and out of school.

CSDNB is one of the largest school districts in the state of Connecticut. The CSDNB school system serves more than 10,000 students and consists of 10 elementary schools, 3 middle schools, multiple alternative education programs, and 1 high school. CSDNB is also one of the poorest school districts in the state, with per pupil spending at \$13,579 (per 2013–14 expenditures), ranking near the bottom compared to all districts in the state.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, 100% of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. Public schools with more than 75% of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch are considered high-poverty schools according to federal guidelines.<sup>4</sup>

CSDNB convened a multisector SS/HS Core Management Team (CMT) and decidedly invested its efforts during the first year of the grant in conducting a comprehensive and thorough needs assessment and environmental scan. The CMT held substantial discussion about needed change, challenges, and strengths. The team made efforts to learn how systems and traditions that exist in the school and community impact stakeholders, students, and their families. Stakeholders were involved in focus groups and identified service gaps and problem areas. The Initiative conducted surveys to identify the school-community's most pressing needs and gaps, thereby informing SS/HS planning. Early on, the project recognized the need to create district-wide programming, policies and procedures to support a transient population. Due to lack of affordable housing options, families moved often, and family stability suffered. For the children of these families, these constant moves disrupt continuity in learning and school relationships and result in instability in living conditions. SS/HS staff and CMT members strive to understand the underlying issues and their root causes. At the high school level, chronic absenteeism, high rates of teen pregnancy, low student engagement, fights, and disciplinary referrals were

<sup>1</sup>United States Census Bureau. (2017). *Quick facts: New Britain city, Connecticut; Connecticut*. Retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/newbritaincityconnecticut,ct/PST045217>

<sup>2</sup>The CT Data Collaborative. (2017). *New Britain, Connecticut: CERC town profile 2017*. Retrieved from <http://www.newbritainct.gov/civicax/filebank/blobdload.aspx?BlobID=25104>

<sup>3</sup>Connecticut State Department of Education. (2016). *District profile and performance report for school year 2014–15: New Britain School District*. Retrieved from [http://www.edsight.ct.gov/Output/District/HighSchool/0890011\\_201415.pdf](http://www.edsight.ct.gov/Output/District/HighSchool/0890011_201415.pdf)

<sup>4</sup>Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics. (2015). *Free or reduced price lunch: A proxy for poverty?* Retrieved from <https://nces.ed.gov/blogs/nces/post/free-or-reduced-price-lunch-a-proxy-for-poverty>

common. Exposure to trauma was prevalent, and many students arrived at school with significant barriers to learning. These social issues, in addition to other risk factors, have had a direct impact on student academics and well-being.

Despite these challenges, educators in New Britain remained committed to helping children learn and grow. In 2012, CSDNB's analysis of chronic absenteeism data revealed that absenteeism rates among elementary students, kindergartners, and first graders were higher than expected and were negatively impacting third-grade reading scores.<sup>5</sup> The district implemented a proactive approach and formed attendance teams, held workshops, established data-monitoring systems, and adopted effective practices to reduce chronic absenteeism in kindergarten through Grade 3. Home visits were noted as improving home–school relationships and understanding of school rules. Community agencies and families were engaged. During the past 5 years, CSDNB's early grade attendance rates and third-grade reading levels have significantly improved, even capturing national attention.<sup>6</sup>

Although educators care deeply about their students and are willing to work long hours, compassion and dedication were not creating similar positive results in student academic progress and well-being. So, New Britain decided to try another way. In 2014, New Britain educators “realized [they] were missing a step,” said Ryan Langer, the district's SS/HS project manager, adding, “Our curriculum lacked a space where we explicitly teach classroom rules and expectations to our children and families. We were just quickly moving students into the disciplinary process.” Langer recalled how that realization was eye opening because it suggested room for improvement. Perhaps students were not simply misbehaving; perhaps they lacked the knowledge and skills necessary to regulate their behavior and emotions. And, perhaps, teachers and staff needed some [extra support and instruction](#).

The SS/HS grant and framework approach created a pathway for change, helping lay the foundation for a cultural shift in beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors that uphold and share responsibility for whole child wellness. The [CSDNB Core Values and Responsibilities](#) are the practices that create an optimal learning environment for a safe and supportive community among district leaders, principals, teachers, staff, students, family, and community members. The overall goal is to establish a positive school climate; support academic achievement; and promote fairness, civility, acceptance of diversity, and mutual respect.

## SS/HS IMPLEMENTATION

The SS/HS team aligned planned strategies with the whole child approach, including increased access to mental health services, evidence-based programs and best practices, and capacity-building opportunities for educators and staff (Exhibit 1). The following are key partners and strategies:

- EASTCONN—implement developmentally appropriate practices that promote executive functioning and self-regulation in prekindergarten, kindergarten, and first grade along with professional development for educators and classroom coaching
- Boys Town—implement Well-Managed Schools (WMS) and Specialized Classroom Management (SCM) programs and professional development

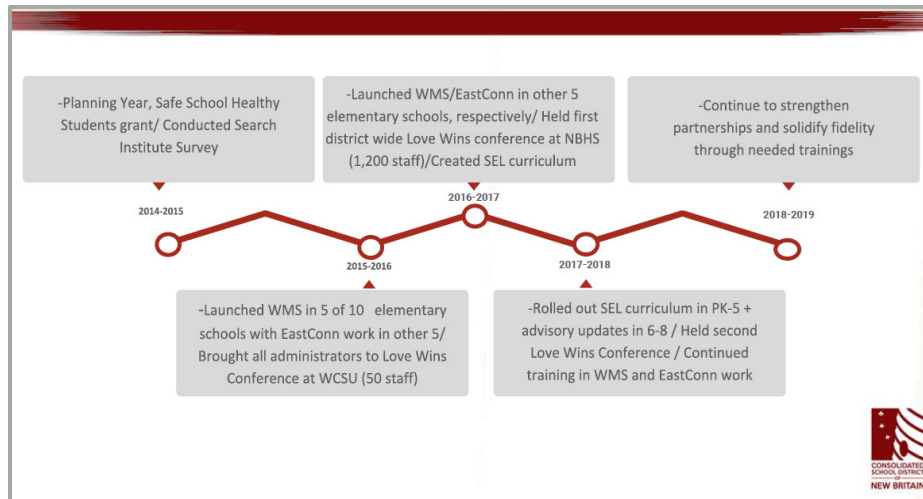
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<sup>5</sup> Attendance Works. (2013). *Success story*. Retrieved from [www.attendanceworks.org/new-britain-focus-kindergarten/](http://www.attendanceworks.org/new-britain-focus-kindergarten/)

<sup>6</sup> The New York Times. (2015). *Stopping absenteeism at the age of 5*. Retrieved from <https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/10/16/stopping-absenteeism-at-the-age-of-5/>

- The Ana Grace Project—expand access to trauma-informed care and mental health services in schools and community; provide professional development; and implement classroom supports
- SSSHS —develop a social-emotional learning (SEL) curriculum adapted to the district’s needs and to facilitate implementation of aforementioned evidence-based prevention programs and best practices

**Exhibit 1. SS/HS Implementation Timeline 2014–18**



Source: CSDNB Social-Emotional Learning Curriculum

## **EASTCONN**

EASTCONN, is a public, nonprofit, regional educational service center. EASTCONN exists to provide high-quality educational and related services to districts. During the planning year, SS/HS surveyed teachers about whether they integrate *play* in their classrooms and uncovered the need for structured play in prekindergarten through first grade. The lack of self-regulation in children is cited as an increasing problem in schools today. Behavioral and academic issues often result from underlying problems with executive function. Recent longitudinal research has demonstrated that executive function skills are the strongest predictor of academic outcomes in Grade 3. EASTCONN staff worked with CSDNB to increase the executive function skills of prekindergarten through Grade 1 students. Training and classroom coaching will continue to be provided to administrators and teachers in implementing strategies to support children’s self-regulation, while increasing their literacy and math skills. To sustain these services, CSDNB built structure for implementation in schools and hired and trained two primary instructional coaches.

## **Boys Town**

The district’s middle school had some experience (and success) with the WMS program, a [Boys Town Training](#) initiative that helps educators create a positive school culture and calm classrooms, so the SS/HS CMT contracted with Boys Town to expand the program from kindergarten to fifth grade district-wide.. The program provides a solid foundation as a behavior management tool to assist in building relationships and trust within the classroom. In 2015, after extensive training, CSDNB rolled out the WMS program in 5 of their 10 elementary schools. Teachers and staff attended a 2-day training before the school year started, and a Boys Town training consultant helped the district implement a training-of-trainers approach to build capacity

for in-district consultants and trainers. Boys Town provided teachers with tools to teach student behavioral expectations. WMS training is integrated into professional development and staff onboarding and district policies and procedures.

Within a year, the district saw significant improvement. Suspensions and expulsions declined. Chamberlain Elementary School, a school of 500 students, suspended 57 students in 2015–2016; in 2016–17, the school suspended only 26 students. Gaffney Elementary School expelled 16 students in 2015–16; Gaffney expelled no students in 2016–17. With these positive results, CSDNB decided to expand the WMS program to the district’s other five elementary schools. Even chronic absenteeism rates at the elementary level declined by up to 7% in some schools.

### ***The Ana Grace Project***

Founded in 2013, in memory of Ana Grace Márquez-Greene, [The Ana Grace Project](#) was born as a response to the tragedy that took her life in Sandy Hook, Connecticut, on December 14, 2012. *Love Wins* is the slogan adopted by her family immediately after the tragedy. The Ana Grace Project is dedicated to promoting love, community, and connection for every child and family through three lead initiatives: **partner schools, professional development, and music and arts**. The project’s mission is to offer community, families, and individuals hope for healing by bringing expertise to school-based services.

The SS/HS program partnered with The Ana Grace Project to expand the district’s capacity to address the mental health needs of students. The Ana Grace Project, in partnership with the Klingberg Family Centers, provides students and families a choice in access to mental health treatment and other clinical services at their school campus or in the community. CSDNB school social workers also benefit by being able to coordinate timely appointments according to student and family needs. Data-sharing agreements that comply with federal privacy laws have been established, and services are covered by Medicaid, assuring continuity of the mental health services. The Ana Grace Project’s partnership with Central Connecticut State University provides opportunities for students to visit the college and learn about the college experience.

The Ana Grace Project also offers a learning program for teachers that incorporates the Love Wins curriculum into their classrooms, integrating the learnings into daily lessons and routines.

#### **The Ana Grace Project “Love Wins” program provides:**

- Mental health assessment; individual, family, and group therapy; and psychiatry services at no cost to families and in partnership with Klingberg Family Centers
- Consultation and team building with administration and staff
- Consultation at individual student meetings (e.g., individualized education program, 504 meetings) at parent’s discretion
- Family referrals and access to community services, as needed
- Augmentation of school mental health services by providing marriage and family therapy and psychology interns through partnership with Central Connecticut State University
- Senior clinician responsible for coordinating wraparound services and providing direct service
- Licensed clinical supervisor for senior clinician and clinical interns

"As a teacher, my relationship with the staff from the Ana Grace Project has really shifted the way I teach," said Craig Muzzy, fifth grade teacher at Chamberlain Elementary School, adding "I realized I cannot teach math facts or reading strategies without a relationship with the students. I earn the students trust and they in turn, earn mine. If a student has trouble, we sit down and talk about making better choices."

The project provides professional development for staff to build their understanding of the effect of trauma on a child's brain and behavior and of what trauma looks like and to recognize signs of different mental health challenges. This partnership has been instrumental in building staff motivation and knowledge needed for implementation of the SEL curriculum.

## SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING CURRICULUM

Social-emotional learning (SEL) and school climate are critical ingredients to students' success in school and in life<sup>7</sup> because many students come to school unprepared to handle school routines and relationships. When educators are purposeful in their implementation of SEL practices and receive the necessary training and support to implement SEL practices successfully, students improve their academic achievement, are more committed to and engaged in school, exhibit more prosocial behaviors and fewer disruptive behaviors, and experience a decrease in emotional distress.

Building on the successes of developmentally appropriate practices, the WMS, and The Ana Grace Project, the SS/HS initiative staff developed and implemented a social skills curriculum that includes specific strategies for both prevention and intervention. A SEL curriculum is expected to support several success measures. The district relied on the [Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning](#) (CASEL) to guide its work. CASEL, a leader and a collaborator serving the SEL field, aims to establish high-quality, evidence-based SEL. CASEL's work thus far has included setting standards for evidence-based programs from preschool through high school, understanding and advancing implementation in districts and schools, and conducting research linking SEL to academic achievement and other positive outcomes for students.

CASEL's core competencies were used as a starting point to outline the identified habits of mind or character traits that CSDNB students need to be successful and align them with the district's SS/HS work. In addition, the Center for School Mental Health at the University of Maryland School of Medicine was contacted to review this approach because of the center's role as the district's SS/HS technical assistance consultant. CSDNB's social skills curriculum includes lessons, resources, and additional strategies for integrating SEL into academic and unified arts content and curriculum. A committee composed of teachers, social workers, administrators, and central office staff have created the prekindergarten through Grade 5 SEL curriculum. Sample lessons have been piloted at each grade level to allow for initial feedback and revision.

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*I love this curriculum. It is an easy solution when you are having difficulty in the classroom.*

*– CSDNB elementary school teacher*

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<sup>7</sup> Durlak, J. A., Weissberg, R. P., Dymnicki, A. B., Taylor, R. D., & Schellinger, K. B. (2011). The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. *Child Development, 82*(1), 405–432.  
Jones, D. E., Greenberg, M., & Crowley, M. (2015). Early social-emotional functioning and public health: The relationship between kindergarten social competence and future wellness. *American Journal of Public Health, 105*(11), 2283–2290.

Extensive support is available to implement the curriculum, including online resources, information, videos, and staff support and training.

Data will also be collected for ongoing feedback and improvement to focus on the following areas:

- Increase student attendance
- Decrease student chronic absenteeism
- Increase student engagement
- Increase parent engagement and satisfaction
- Increase from pre- to post- on the Behavioral and Emotional Screening System
- Decrease in-class incidents and discipline incidents (Review360)
- Increase employee attendance
- Decrease rates of student suspension and expulsion
- Establish strategic focus of partnerships
- Evaluate the effectiveness of community–school partnerships through partnership effectiveness rubric
- Administer ARTIC (Attitudes Related to Trauma-Informed Care) survey

The SEL framework aligns developmentally appropriate practices and executive functioning skills, WMS, and trauma-informed care programs and practices within the SEL curriculum to facilitate implementation by teachers. The SEL curriculum is anchored within CSDNB's policies and procedures.

## **ADVANCING SS/HS AND WHOLE CHILD WELLNESS THROUGH SCHOOL–HOME–COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS**

Chronic absenteeism, low graduation rates, disengaged students, disciplinary referrals, and teen pregnancies are all too common in high-poverty urban schools, as well as in CSDNB. Nonetheless, CSDNB, along with SS/HS partners, made a commitment to challenge assumptions that students who attend high-poverty urban schools are destined to have poor academic and life outcomes. Instead, CSDNB has set high expectations districtwide for leadership, educators, students, families, and community members, to work together in resolving these issues, guided by a whole child approach. The SS/HS initiative created the SEL curriculum to facilitate implementation of evidence-based prevention practices, developmentally appropriate practices, WMS, trauma-informed care, and other best practices that build staff knowledge and capacity and provide educators with needed tools and resources that best fit students' needs, focusing on early grades, up through Grade 12. Increased staff capacity and access to culturally responsive school mental health promotion, prevention, and treatment services and supports for students and families were achieved through community partnerships that are well positioned to address out-of-school factors that affect students and families.

Early on, New Britain's SS/HS initiative recognized that students' needs must drive strategies and that community and family engagement is essential to success. Despite best intentions, schools could not go at this alone. SS/HS partners were engaged in co-creating strategies that fit student needs and consider the context of the community. Program implementation engaged school administrators, teachers and staff members, students, families, and community agencies. Although the CMT will transition to a communitywide youth coalition, relationships with district leadership are well established. Together, CSDNB, community and family partners can continue to champion the SS/HS vision and advance the focus on whole child education and well being through future work efforts in school and out of school.