At the Lehigh Learning and Achievement School (LLAS), a school for students requiring enhanced behavioral, emotional, and mental health support, 88 police calls resulted in 40 arrests, with 10 students spending an average of more than 75 days in juvenile detention during the 2013-2014 school year. Despite its powerful model, a school police officer was needed to address the historically high number of incarcerations and arrests. When Pennsylvania received a 2013 Safe Schools/Healthy Students grant from the Substance Abuse Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), LLAS, as one of its state’s implementation sites, decided to embed a school police officer within its schoolwide Positive Behavior Intervention and Support (PBIS) framework to address the historically high number of incarcerations and arrests within its student population. LLAS specifically hired and trained Officer Dan to approach students through a preventive lens, emphasizing non-physical de-escalation, recognizing behaviors that are synonymous with mental health conditions, reinforcing positive student behavior, implementing evidence-based programs, and building positive relationships with youth and family. Despite its powerful model, 88 police calls to the LLAS campus resulted in 40 arrests during the 2013–2014 (baseline) school year, when 10 students (of fewer than 100 total on campus) spent an average of more than 75 days in juvenile detention for school-related offenses. Typical among LLAS students, third-grader Casey struggled with severe mental health concerns and other risk factors, and spent little school time constructively engaged in academics. When LLAS decided to hire a school police officer, long-time Pennsylvania State Police force veteran Dan Sist answered the call. “Officer Dan” had been trained by the National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO) to work as a partner with school professionals, families, and students.
“It’s amazing what you can accomplish when an SRO understands mental health and trauma warning signs. Their lens changes from arresting youth to ‘how can we obtain the services they need?’!”

– Deanna Moerer, Pennsylvania SS/HS Project Co-Director

RESULTS

In 2013–2014 (baseline prior to grant activities), the number of youth at LLAS placed in juvenile detention centers was 10, resulting in a total of 759 days of detainment. In 2014–2015 the number of such placements decreased to four, totaling 638 days of detainment. A year later only a single LLAS student had been placed in detention, for a total of 31 days. That measure of success has been sustained in each ensuing year.

The average cost of juvenile detention in Pennsylvania is $350 a day. It had cost Lehigh County over $265,000 to place those 10 youth in detention in 2013–2014, but only $10,850 for that single student in 2015–2016. Considerable research documents poor long-term outcomes for students removed from school for punitive incarceration. Beyond the positive results for students, families, and LLAS staff, the sharp drop in out-of-school detention saved more than $250,000 per year, as students managed to succeed on campus. (It costs LLAS about $35,000 per year to situate an SRO on campus within its PBIS program.)

MAGNIFYING PREVENTION THROUGH TRAUMA-INFORMED CARE

CLIU 21 has been a leader in promoting trauma-informed schools, having trained SROs and all other school staff using new curriculum developed by the National Center on Safe and Supportive Learning Environments (NCSSLE) for the U.S. Department of Education. Further, CLIU-21 has revamped its schools’ “time out rooms” to instead create “calming centers” in the emotional support classrooms within LLAS feeder districts. This trauma-informed sensory integration approach to build social-emotional skills also includes practices such as mindfulness, trauma yoga, MeMoves, and GoNoodle. As with its SRO training, the underlying goal is to teach social-emotional skills, triggers, physical cues (self-awareness), and self-regulation so that faculty and students can increase time attending to academics and reduce the use of restraints and, ultimately, even the need for SROs themselves.

SUSTAINING SUCCESS

The LLAS case study encouraged CLIU 21 to invite NASRO to train all school police officers in its feeder districts in de-escalation techniques, roles, and responsibilities (including the role of informal counselor/mentor—see Triad model), to keep youth from entering criminal justice systems and strengthen their successes in school, home, and community. The model specifically situates the SRO as a co-facilitator of Aggression Replacement Training (ART), and fully embeds them on each PBIS team, as needed. Pennsylvania, as part of its capacity-building strategies, will host two more rounds of NASRO training in late 2018.

CLIU 21’s SS/HS sustainability strategies rely on a capacity-building trainer-of-trainers (TOT) model for all evidence-based programs. The organization has developed numerous ART trainers, extending their reach throughout Lehigh County’s nine feeder districts and into adjacent Carbon County. Each feeder school identifies three individuals, including their SROs, to participate in ART training. Meanwhile, all current SROs within the CLIU 21 region can complete the NASRO training by the end of 2018. CLIU 21 will continue offering ART training, guaranteed in its contracts with all feeder districts, stipulating that the program must be situated within the overarching context of the PA-PBIS framework. By providing preventative models, both exclusionary discipline and even referrals to LLAS are expected to decrease.

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