

# **An Evaluation of the Safe and Supportive Schools Program**

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# **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

## **INTRODUCTION**

In the fall of 2017, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) contracted with the Research and Evaluation Department of the Collaborative for Educational Services (CES) to evaluate the Safe and Supportive Schools Grant Program (SSSP). This grant program is administered by ESE and is intended to support schools and districts in developing plans to support a safe, positive, healthy, and inclusive whole-school learning environment.

The SSSP provides funds to districts to support their use of the Behavioral Health and Public Schools Self-Assessment Tool for Schools (BHPS, or “the Tool”), an online assessment developed by an ESE-facilitated task force to help schools and districts document current practices around behavioral health, determine where gaps exist, and develop strategies to address these gaps. Schools and districts receiving funds were expected to complete the BHPS and use the results to develop an action plan that addresses gaps identified through this process.

Beginning in FY2018, ESE added a second category of grant support, to fund implementation of action plans that districts had developed during their first year of funding. Schools and districts applying during this grant year applied either for “Category A” funding, to use the Tool and develop an action plan, or “Category B” funding, to implement the action plan they had developed previously.

In FY18, ESE awarded Category A funding to ten districts representing 27 schools, and Category B funding to seven districts representing 19 schools. This report focuses on the 17 districts that received funding during the FY18 grant cycle.

## **METHODOLOGY**

CES gathered information about districts’ participation in the Safe and Supportive Schools Program in a variety of ways, including:

- An analysis of artifacts, including applications, action plans, prior surveys, and reports to ESE
- Online surveys of each grant cohort
- A focus group for Category A grantees
- Site visits to two Category B grantees, North Adams and Chelsea
- Phone interviews with key personnel at the five Category B grantees that did not receive site visits
- Phone interviews with two consultants who provided support to SSSP teams
- A phone interview with a representative of a FY17 Category A grantee who chose not to apply for Category B funding.

## MAJOR FINDINGS

The interviews, focus groups, survey results, and site visits revealed many different perspectives on the Safe and Supportive Schools Program. Perspectives and implementation varied as districts used their own processes for going through the Tool and developing action plans. However, some findings held true across most or all sites.

The Safe and Supportive Schools Program is helping schools and districts address a critical issue: schools and districts have **large numbers of students with behavioral health needs**, including trauma from homelessness, foster care placement, and other stressors as well as more general social and emotional needs. Schools are challenged by insufficient counseling staff to address these needs and to integrate and align existing services and initiatives. In addition, the punitive disciplinary approaches that many of these districts have been using for decades are not effective in modifying the disruptive behaviors that some students exhibit. Schools and districts are seeking to build capacity in all staff, and especially classroom teachers, to address these needs. Capacity-building requires training, support, and consistent application across the school, all of which are supported by the SSSP grant.

Some of the positive findings commonly heard across sites include:

- The SSSP grant provides **time and space for a reconsideration of how schools approach discipline**, and helps **shift school culture as well as policies and procedures**.
- Grantees successfully used the Tool **to identify strengths and gaps, and to develop action plans that addressed these gaps**. Most SSSP teams also strengthened specific areas of practice, such as their understanding of what district and/or school data are available, their understanding of how to reflect on or analyze data, and their team collaboration.
- Schools and districts **value the connections with other districts** that the program provides through statewide professional development convenings. In districts that did not attend these gatherings, because of difficulty with arranging release time for staff or lack of awareness, district contacts noted that these supports would have been useful to them.

Participant schools also identified some common challenges:

- **The condensed timeline of the 2017-2018 SSSP grant program was problematic for many districts**. Funding decisions were not made until late fall, and funding was not received until late 2017 or early 2018. This impacted planning and implementation, as professional development opportunities and other release or stipended time for teachers and administrators need to be planned early in the school year.
- Teachers and administrators are **uncertain how they will be able to sustain change**, if the grant funding ends with the current school year.

# FULL EVALUATION REPORT

## INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 2017, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) contracted with the Research and Evaluation Department of the Collaborative for Educational Services (CES) to evaluate the Safe and Supportive Schools Grant Program (SSSP). This grant program is administered by ESE and is intended to support schools and districts in developing plans to support a safe, positive, healthy, and inclusive whole-school learning environment.

This grant program began in FY2014 and was continued in FY2016 and FY2017 (funding for the program was initially appropriated but then eliminated in FY2015). For each of these years, ESE provided funds to districts to support their use of the Behavioral Health and Public Schools Self-Assessment Tool for Schools (BHPS, or “the Tool”), an online assessment developed by an ESE-facilitated task force to help schools and districts document current practices around behavioral health, determine where gaps exist, and develop strategies to address these gaps. Schools and districts receiving funds were expected to complete the BHPS and use the results to develop an action plan that addresses gaps identified through this process.

Beginning in FY2018, ESE added a second category of grant support, to fund implementation of action plans that districts had developed during their first year of funding. Schools and districts applying during this grant year applied either for “Category A” funding, to use the Tool and develop an action plan, or “Category B” funding, to implement the action plan they had developed previously.

In FY18, ESE awarded Category A funding to ten districts, and Category B funding to seven districts. See Figure 1, next page, for a map showing the location of funded districts by category. Appendix A lists the awardees along with a summary of their characteristics.

- The ten Category A districts represent 27 schools active in the SSSP process. About half of these schools are elementary level and the remaining schools serve middle and/or high school students. Five districts are in the eastern part of Massachusetts, with one in central Massachusetts and four in western Massachusetts. Five of the districts are in suburban areas, with two in urban areas and three in rural areas.
- The seven Category B districts represent 19 schools involved with SSSP. Again, about half of the schools served are elementary schools, with the remaining serving middle and/or high school students. Three of the districts are in eastern Massachusetts, one in central Massachusetts, and three in western Massachusetts.

This evaluation report focuses on the 17 districts that received funding during the FY18 grant cycle. Analysis in some cases is for the 17 districts overall; where appropriate, results are reported separately for Category A and Category B grantees.



## **METHODOLOGY**

CES gathered information about districts' participation in the Safe and Supportive Schools Program in a variety of ways.

### **Artifacts**

ESE shared with CES copies of each district's application for funding. Category B grantees also created action plans as part of their earlier work using the BHPS Tool; ESE provided the original action plans as well as the updated versions that became part of the Category B applications.

Category B grantees were also asked to complete mid-year reports in March assessing their progress. ESE shared these with CES as well. Finally, ESE shared results from grantee surveys that had been conducted during past grant cycles.

### **Online Surveys**

CES developed online surveys that assessed grantees' experiences with using the BHPS Tool and developing action plans. Survey links were sent to the SSSP contact person at each district and to the facilitator for each school-level SSSP team. Category B grantees, who had gone through this process in FY17 or earlier, were given the survey in February 2018; 15 of 25 (60%) school or district representatives responded. Category A grantees, who went through this process in FY18, were given the survey in May 2018; 19 of 37 (51%) school or district representatives responded.<sup>1</sup> The online survey protocol is attached as Appendix B.

### **Focus Group**

In March of 2017, CES conducted a focus group via teleconference with Category A grantees. All grantees were invited to participate; the following districts were represented:

- Berkshire Hills
- Boston
- Carver
- Monomoy
- Pioneer Valley
- Sandwich
- West Springfield

The focus group protocol is attached as Appendix C.

### **Site Visits**

CES selected two Category B grantees, North Adams and Chelsea, to receive site visits in May of 2018. Site selection was based on the following criteria:

- Districts' completion status of the online survey and mid-year report, indicating sufficient familiarity and investment with the Tool and SSSP expectations
- Progress in implementing action plans
- Geographic representation to include varied settings for districts<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The district-level contact person of one Category A grantee, comprising three schools and the district, reported that the district and schools had not yet completed the BHPS Tool at the time the survey was administered in mid-May, and so were unable to complete the survey. When these four respondents are omitted from the respondent base, the response rate rises to 58%.

<sup>2</sup> North Adams is a small city surrounded by rural towns in Western Massachusetts. Chelsea is an urban district in the Boston metro region.



CES personnel traveled to each site, interviewed key personnel, collected relevant documents, and observed school team meetings and/or classroom-level implementation of SSSP initiatives. More detailed descriptions of each site visit are included later in the report.

## Interviews

CES conducted telephone interviews with representatives of the five Category B districts that did not receive site visits. Interviews were conducted in late April and early May, and each interview lasted 45-60 minutes. The interview protocol is attached as Appendix D.

In addition, CES interviewed two consultants who supported SSSP teams with their BHPS Tool (the Tool) use and/or implementation planning, and spoke with a representative of one FY17 Category A district that chose not to apply for Category B funding.<sup>3</sup>

## DETAILED FINDINGS

### Completing the Tool

#### Process

Most teams reported that they filled in responses to the Tool as a group. However, some worked in small groups to fill out different sections of the Tool, and then came together to discuss their responses. In a few cases, one person completed the Tool and shared the responses with the group. Team members noted that the conversations that occurred during these meetings were useful and productive, helping to deepen understandings of the district's or school's challenges and resources.

District-level teams and school-level teams usually worked separately to develop their own responses to the Tool. However, in most cases, the districts and schools then came together to work out action plans that related to and supported each other. Category B districts with action plans that were aligned across schools and the district generally found more success with implementation (see Impact of Action Plans, below).

One team representative reported that using the Tool helped them become aware of how many policies and practices in his district needed to be updated and made more current, and showed them that they were not paying as much attention to students' social and emotional needs. This in turn affected how the district dealt with disciplinary issues such as suspensions.

"What was helpful was when we broke down the areas," said one Category A respondent during the online focus group. "It looks like a very cumbersome tool . . . [I'm] trying to make sure people don't see it as a cumbersome tool, but as an opportunity to really get to know what people don't know, and how we can best support them. I think each section has valid points that we need to address, but they'll have to be prioritized - we can't do it all."

<sup>3</sup> There were three districts or schools in the FY17 Category A cohort that chose not to apply for Category B funding during FY18. The contact person at the school that CES reached reported that the school was undergoing a leadership change and chose not to take on new initiatives. They might reapply in the future. The other two contact people did not respond to CES's attempts to contact them.

#### *Evaluation Questions:*

*What processes did schools use to implement the Tool? What were the strengths and limitations of the processes that schools chose to employ?*

*To what extent was ESE able to provide effective support to schools and districts in their use of the Tool?*

**Who was at the table**

The people most frequently noted as being part of the SSSP teams were principals, teachers, school adjustment counselors, assistant principals, and nurses.

Table 1, below, shows the roles of SSSP team members, along with the number of survey respondents who mentioned them.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> 31 respondents across both online surveys responded to this question; however, it should be noted that eight of them only identified their own role, likely misreading the question. For this reason, the numbers noted in parentheses can give an idea of relative prevalence of the roles of team members, but should not be read as the total number of teams that included these roles.

**Table 1: Roles of SSSP Team Members**

<b>Administrators</b>	<b>Specialists and Coordinators</b>	<b>Teachers, Instructional Staff, and Students</b>	<b>Non-School Partners</b>
<p><b>Principal/Director (19)</b></p> <p><b>Assistant Principal (17)</b></p> <p>Director of Curriculum and Instruction (8)</p> <p>Dean of Students (5)</p> <p>Superintendent (2)</p> <p>Assistant Superintendent (2)</p> <p>Administrative Assistant/Secretary (1)</p>	<p><b>School Adjustment Counselor (18)</b></p> <p><b>Nurse (11)</b></p> <p>Guidance Counselor (9)</p> <p>Curriculum Coordinator (5)</p> <p>Health and Wellness Coordinator (5)</p> <p>Special Education Coordinator/Liaison (5)</p> <p>School Psychologist (3)</p> <p>Learning/Instruction Specialist (3)</p> <p>Director of Community Engagement/Outreach (3)</p> <p>Board-Certified Behavioral Analyst (2)</p> <p>Clinician (2)</p> <p>Family Liaison (2)</p> <p>Director/Leader of Humanities (1)</p> <p>Diversity Coordinator (1)</p> <p>Occupational Therapist (1)</p> <p>Substance Abuse Coordinator (1)</p>	<p><b>Teacher(s) (18)</b></p> <p><b>Special Education Teacher(s) (10)</b></p> <p>Teaching Assistant(s)/ Paraprofessional(s) (7)</p> <p>Instructional/Classroom Coach (2)</p> <p>Student(s) (1)</p>	<p>Parent(s) (5)</p> <p>Social Worker (4)</p> <p>21st Century Site Coordinator (1)</p>

Eight survey respondents (27% of respondents) reported that it would have been helpful to have additional roles represented on the team. The roles that they wish had been represented were:

- Nurse (3)
- Guidance counselor (2)
- Curriculum Coordinator

- Occupational or Physical Therapist
- Pre-K Teachers
- Principal
- School Adjustment Counselor
- School Resource Officer
- Special Education Team Member
- Speech Therapist
- Students
- Wellness Coordinator

Interview, focus group, and site visit participants talked about the importance of having a wide range of voices represented on the SSSP teams, and the particular importance of including teachers, as they have the most direct contact with students and are responsible for implementation of classroom-level changes.

Participants also noted that when community representatives, parents, or others who are not based at school participate on school-based teams, they can add unique perspectives that push school staff to challenge conventional approaches. However, these expanded teams also require additional time to build communication strategies and clear expectations, and develop an understanding of school/district timelines and constraints.

“At first it was challenging for us, because we have at least six members of our teams who are non-school members, and don’t necessarily understand the processes of our school” reported one focus group participant. “But I have to say, it opened up our eyes to how they viewed the school and school responsibilities. We were able to get some different perspectives.”

### **Time and resources needed**

Most survey respondents reported that the time and resources needed to complete the BHPS Tool seemed reasonable. However, during interviews, site visits, and focus groups, participants sometimes reported that the Tool was time-consuming. “Finding time to complete the Tool” was reported as the most significant challenge to completing the Tool (see Table 2, page 9). Several teams reported shortcuts to reduce the time demands on everyone, such as having meetings of sub-groups of team members to complete certain sections, or by doing pre-work by eliciting responses electronically before convening as a team.

In short, while most teams found the time and resources to complete the Tool to be reasonable, the process still represented a significant amount of effort. However, many team members indicated that the time was well-spent. “We would just add that it’s very thorough but time-consuming,” said one focus group participant. “You will get a full complexion of where your needs lie, but it can’t be a rushed experience.” An interview participant commented that the process itself was as important as the product: that getting input from people in many different roles gave their team a strong understanding of their school’s strengths and needs.

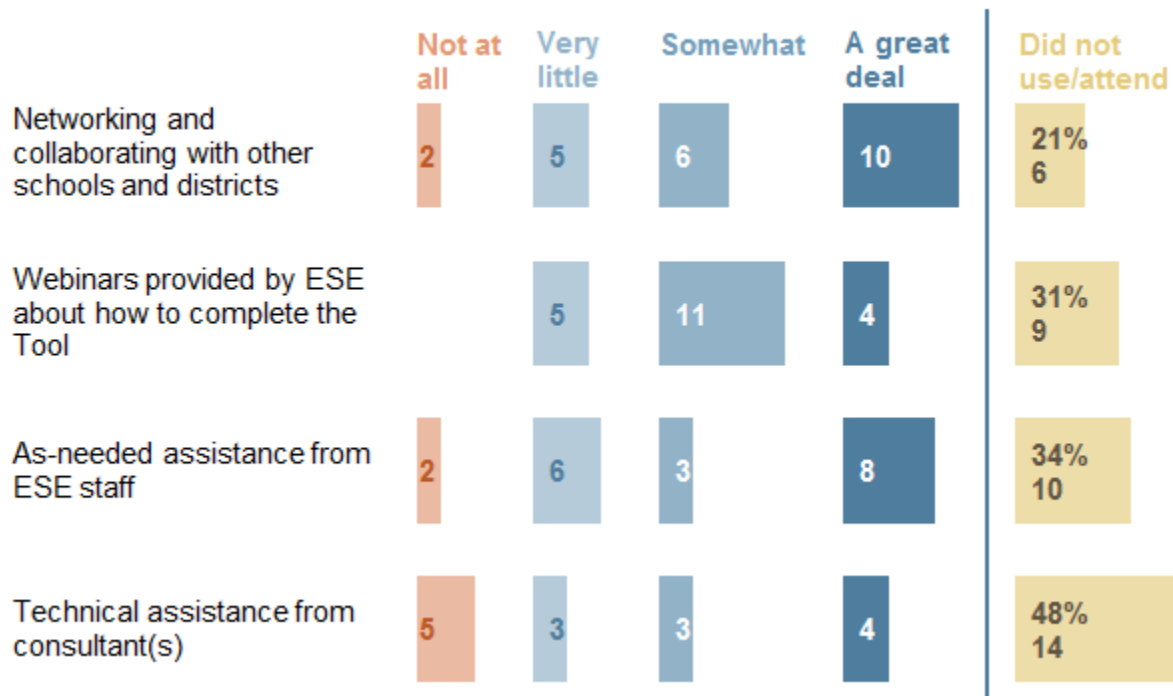
“It was a great help in promoting and framing conversation about how we work at the school, the systems of support, and where we need to develop,” reported another team member. “We really like the process of reflection, analysis, and action planning.”

Figure 2 below shows how 29 survey respondents rated the helpfulness of various supports in completing the Tool. Around 80% of teams reported having engaged in **networking and collaborating with other districts**, and 16 of those 23 teams (70%) found this support to be at least

somewhat helpful. Around 70% of teams reported having participated in **webinars provided by ESE** about how to complete the Tool, and 15 of those 20 (75%) found the webinars to be at least somewhat helpful.

As-needed assistance from ESE and external consultants were generally seen as less valuable. Of the 19 survey respondents who requested assistance from ESE, 11 (58%) found it to be helpful, and of the 15 who sought technical assistance from a consultant, just 7 (47%) found it to be helpful.

**Figure 2: Helpfulness of various supports as the team completed the Tool (n=29)**



SSSP participants also noted other supports that they would have liked to have had as they completed the Tool. Representatives from three different teams noted that an **expanded timeline** would have been helpful to them; the late funding meant that the Tool and the action plan needed to be completed quickly. Several other teams requested **help with using the Tool accurately**, such as a structure for completing the Tool, a cleaner layout, or a rubric that gives examples of various rating levels.

One team noted that the opportunity to visit other schools or examples of what other schools have already done would be helpful, and another would have liked a clearer idea of what resources and help are available from ESE. Another noted it would be helpful if the Tool clarified what its aspects look like if they are implemented, as a useful comparison to what already might be in place in the school.

**A consultant's perspective on the SSSP Process:**

A consultant who actively supported Tool completion and action planning reflected on the process with CES. She believes that the time that the district spent on reflecting and action planning is valuable, but also believes that more time, money, and resources are needed to thoroughly understand and address the needs of the schools. In her opinion, the BHPS Tool is helpful but is not sufficient to help schools understand the values and beliefs that are behind some of the results. When she worked with the grantee, she revamped the results into three categories, and then developed a secondary data reflection tool with responses rooted in data rather than consensus. She guided the district through providing examples and evidence for their ratings. "Schools really need a full picture of where they are to build the right road," she said. "Getting the data sources right is important to understanding that full picture."

As there were three schools in the district going through this process, she didn't have time to support the schools adequately in developing their action plans to their fullest potential, but schools left the workshops with a better idea of what Safe and Supportive Schools are, with self-awareness about their individual role, and with an idea about how to consider system-level changes to support their plan.

This consultant would like to see ESE send a message of understanding what a Safe and Supportive School really means in terms of culture and actions at the school level, and provide clarity around the message that this work is not just about implementing a specific strategy, but supporting and sustaining cultural change through ongoing, continuous work. She would also like to see ESE provide more resources on ways to collect data and establish an understanding of where grantees' schools and districts are right now, along with more time to develop solutions that can be fully implemented rather than seen as just another initiative.

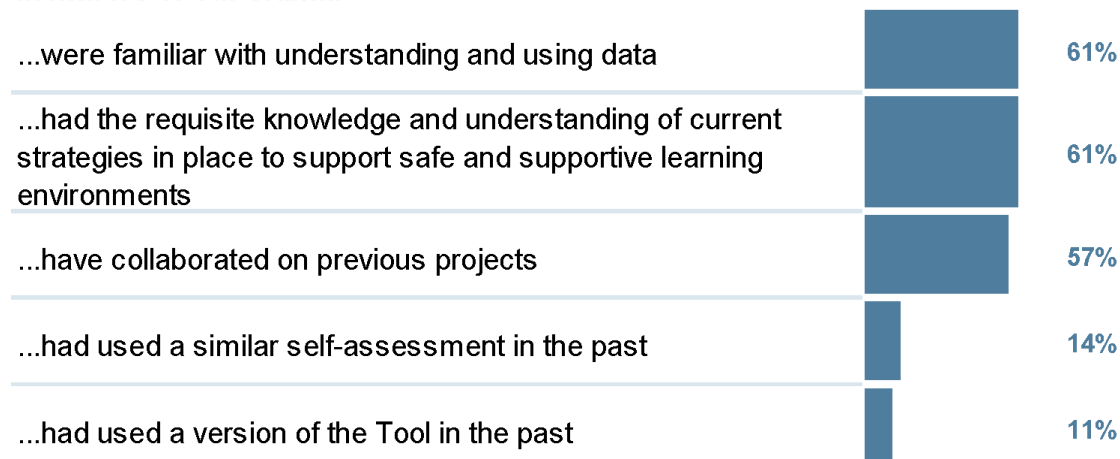
"I hope that the department views this work as prototyping [in the schools]," she said. "They need to be able to start small, try things out, see how they change, and adapt in response to what they learn." She also suggested that ESE might try to find a way to have an evaluative/ reflective person supporting the districts, to help them with the prototyping and refinement, as well as encouraging and supporting reflection.

## Facilitators

Survey respondents selected from a list of factors that facilitated their use of the Tool. Table 2 shows the frequency with which each item was selected. As the table shows, most teams had members who were familiar with the data and current strategies, and over half of the teams had collaborated on past projects. However, very few teams had members who had used the Tool or a similar self-assessment in the past.

**Table 2: Factors that facilitated use of the Tool (n=28)**

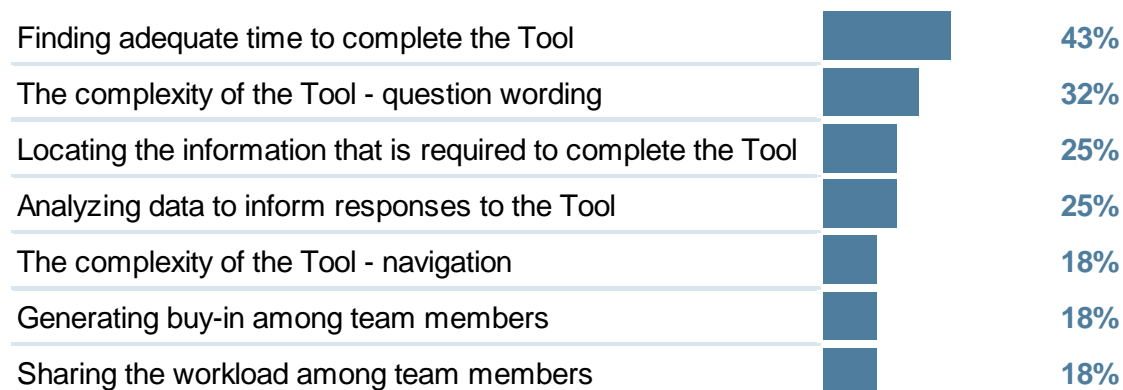
### *Members of our team...*



## Challenges

Survey respondents selected from a list of factors that presented a challenge in their use of the Tool. Table 3 shows the frequency with which each item was selected. As the table shows, finding time to complete the Tool and the complexity of the Tool were the most frequently selected options. However, fewer than half of respondents believed that any one factor was a challenge, and most factors were cited as challenging by one-quarter or fewer survey respondents.

**Table 3: Factors that presented a challenge to using the Tool (n=28)**



Several survey respondents offered additional comments on the issue of finding adequate time to complete the Tool, saying that there was pre-work involved before the Tool could be completed successfully and also that finding common meeting time across teams can be challenging.

Some also noted that the Tool itself can be difficult to understand, noting that it can be “clunky” and that wording is sometimes confusing and redundant, especially to team members who are less familiar with SEL terminology. Two teams noted an issue with the questions being too broad and/or elaborate, which made it challenging to provide an accurate rating.

### *Strategic Considerations*

Districts appear confident in their abilities to complete the Tool using the resources provided by ESE. Teams appeared to be well aware of the importance of having a wide variety of voices at the table during this process. When Category B grantees were asked, in surveys and interviews, what advice they would provide to other districts considering this process, representatives from three different teams recommended **getting the right people on the team**. One emphasized the importance of including teachers, as they will be at the forefront of implementation. Another recommended **connecting the SSSP work to existing teams**, so that planning and implementation will continue once the grant ends.

Some grantees did express that they would have preferred a **longer timeframe**. This concern could be alleviated by giving grantees a full school year to go through the Tool and develop an action plan.

## **Using the tool results/Developing an action plan**

### **Usefulness of the Tool - Identifying needs and developing strategies**

Survey respondents rated the usefulness of the BHPS Tool in helping their team identify and prioritize needs, and in developing strategies to respond to needs. As Figure 3 shows, nearly all respondents found the Tool to be at least somewhat useful in **prioritizing needs to be addressed**, and in **identifying needs**. About three-quarters of respondents found the tool to be helpful in developing strategies to respond to needs.

#### *Evaluation Questions:*

*To what extent was the Tool useful to schools and districts as they identified needs and developed plans to meet these needs?*

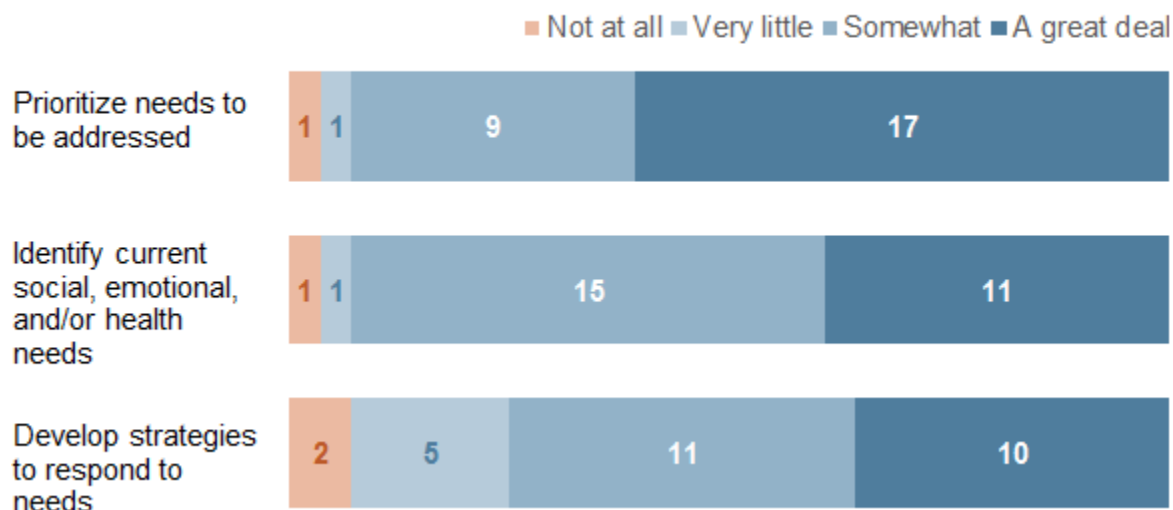
*How useful was the Tool and its findings in generating action plans?*

*To what extent are action plans aligned with assessment findings?*

*To what extent was ESE able to provide effective support to schools and districts in their use of the Tool?*



**Figure 3: Usefulness of the Tool in helping the team . . . (n=28)**



The site visits, focus groups, and interviews further explored the usefulness of the Tool in identifying needs and developing strategies. One team representative noted that in completing the Tool, they learned that communication was a significant issue for their district. While the district had resources in place, many team members were not aware of these resources and had not been using them. The process helped them understand that they need to prioritize communication about what is available.

“We were able to spotlight the need for additional PD (professional development) for teachers even though it ‘felt like’ we needed more resources for students,” reported a member of another team. “While we DO need resources for students, we have some in place, and very little SEL PD for teachers, historically.”

A member of another team noted that the Tool helped her team understand that there is more to safety than physical safety. They have developed initiatives to support students’ emotional safety as well, and have accessed resources from other sources to support this work. Without going through this process, she reported, her district would not be doing the work they’re currently doing in these areas.

### Usefulness of the Tool - Strengthening areas of practice

Survey respondents were prompted to identify areas of practice that were strengthened by their use of the Tool, and all but one of them identified at least one area. Fourteen respondents (52%) noted at least five areas in which their practice was strengthened.

Teams most frequently noted that as a result of their use of the Tool, the team **better understands what district and/or school data are available**, the team **better understands how to reflect on or analyze data**, and that **team collaboration** improved (see Table 4, below).

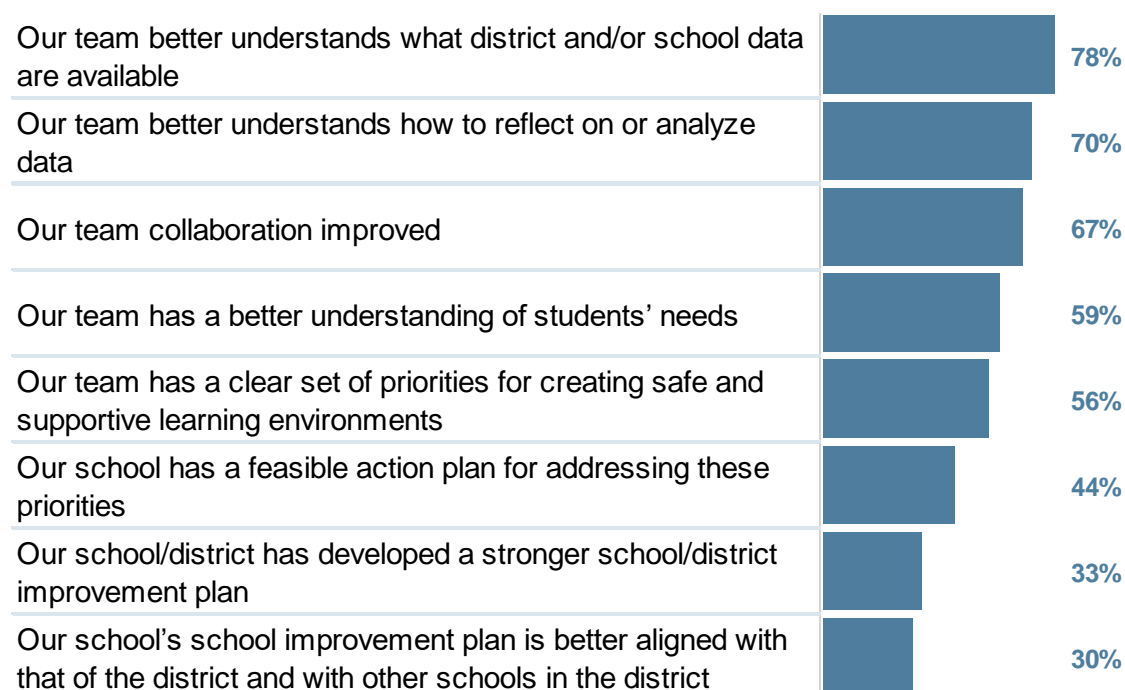
Teams were least likely to note that their school improvement plans are better aligned with that of the district and other schools in the district, or that their school or district has developed a stronger improvement plan. One potential explanation for this result is that schools and districts perceive a lack of connection between the school/district improvement plan and using the Tool. It might also be

that these survey respondents already perceived their improvement plans as being strong and well-aligned with the district and other schools, and so they did not see the Tool improving this process.

It should also be noted that the prompt about the school improvement plan being better aligned with that of the district was asked of all survey respondents, some of whom were district-level staff. They might have seen this prompt as not being relevant to their team. Of the school-based teams that were asked this question, 42% reported that their school’s school improvement plan is better aligned with that of the district as a result of using the Tool.

A further exploration of alignment of policies and practices across schools and districts appears later in the report.

**Table 4: Aspects of work or practice strengthened by using the Tool (n=27)**

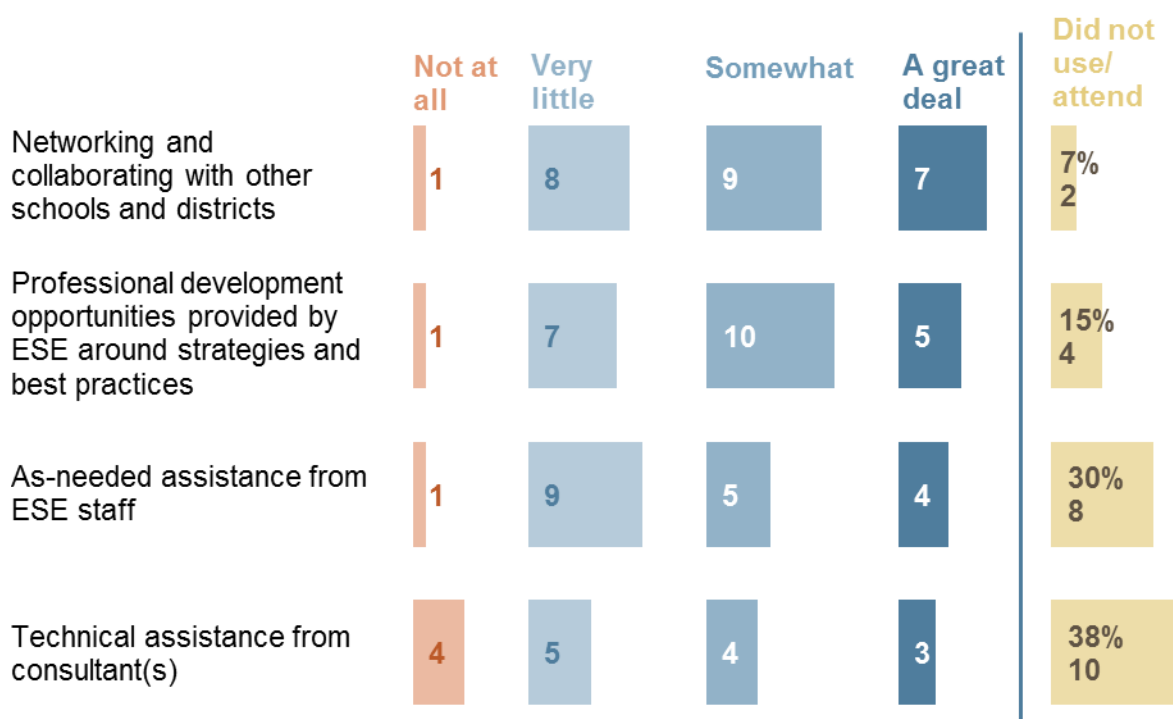


### Developing action plans: Helpfulness of supports

Figure 4 below shows how survey respondents rated the helpfulness of various supports as their team developed an action plan.<sup>5</sup> Twenty-five of 27 respondents (93%) reported having engaged in **networking and collaborating with other districts**, and of those 25, 16 (64%) found this to be at least somewhat helpful. Around 85% of teams reported having participated in **professional development opportunities provided by ESE** around strategies and best practices, and 15 of those 23 (65%) found the professional development opportunities to be at least somewhat helpful.

Teams were less likely to request as-needed assistance from ESE staff (around 70%) or to have worked with a consultant (around 60%). Less than half of those who used each of these supports found them helpful.

**Figure 4: Helpfulness of various supports in developing an action plan (n=26-27)**



Survey respondents as well as participants in interviews, the focus group, and site visits gave additional information about these supports, and also discussed additional supports that they would have found useful in creating their action plans.

During the focus groups and interviews, representatives of five different teams noted that they found the **statewide gatherings convened by ESE** to be helpful in that teams were able to hear from other districts and find out what they have been doing. One SSSP coordinator noted that many members of his team have been in the district for a long time and have limited opportunities to get

<sup>5</sup> One respondent selected “Not at all” for each prompt. When asked what supports would have been helpful as her team developed an action plan, she responded “Having information on how to start to structure our action plan BEFORE we started writing our plans.” At the end of the survey, she added “It is unclear to me what the final action plan product is supposed to be and how we will know if we receive any support to implement the plan.”

outside perspectives from other districts. Another reported that the convenings offer great opportunities for modeling implemented practices, and can help leverage alignment and fidelity to what is working.

At least one Category B team has continued to share information and resources with a site (not participating in this SSSP grant program) after connecting at a statewide meeting. Another is planning to bring a team to meet with another grantee district in June.

However, it should also be noted that of the two teams that received site visits, Chelsea did not participate in the statewide gatherings, and the high school team from North Adams did not find them to be useful. This is discussed further in the site visit summaries, below.

Participants also praised **ESE**, and **Stacy Diaz Cabral** in particular, for their responsiveness and willingness to assist with technical difficulties and substantive questions using the Tool. One Category A grantee also spoke with Shelagh Peoples, a data analyst at ESE, who helped the team think about how to use the data and supported them with access to additional resources.

Several teams noted that they would have liked **more guidance from ESE**, both in using the Tool and in developing an action plan. Specific supports requested included:

- A list of professional development and other service providers and consultants who have expertise in social emotional learning. One district, located in the western part of the state, reported that it is not easy to find providers in their location and would appreciate having a list of people to contact.
- Completed Tools and action plans from other districts.
- Materials that provide structure to meetings in which teams go through the Tool and develop an action plan. One district coordinator did this herself for the teams in her district, including an annotated agenda, a PowerPoint slide deck, and facilitation materials. She reported that the teams really needed this “hand-holding” to get through the process.
- Information about SEL resources that ESE has available, as part of a required orientation that would inform participants about how to access and use these resources.
- A crosswalk or glossary of SEL terms, including information about how they fit together.
- Feedback from ESE about progress while using the Tool and developing an action plan. This was requested by team members in two different districts. “It would be good to know if we’re on the right track,” said one school-level team member. “There are so many knowledgeable people there - we could check in through Skype or FaceTime, make connections and get feedback.”
- Additional funds that would allow teams to work together across districts and align their work. This would fund a self-assessment process that would help teams to develop a common language and align their work across the district.

## **Alignment with Assessment Findings**

Focus groups, interviews, and site visits included prompts about how action planning aligned with assessment findings. For many SSSP teams, the findings from the Tool were not surprising, but helped them categorize and prioritize their work going forward.

All districts were able to identify areas where findings from the Tool aligned with their action plans. In some cases, using the Tool helped them identify specific areas where educators were in need of professional development, or where written policies needed to be modified. Others planned behavioral interventions or parent engagement strategies as a result of their findings.

Some specific examples include:

- One school-based team used the Tool to categorize their social-emotional efforts into three sections, one of which was already implemented at the school but needed additional support and changes, and two where educators needed more support. They then did professional development for educators, and changed the tools that they were using in the existing intervention. “We didn’t have a good handle on effective interventions for Tier 2 and Tier 3 students,” the team facilitator reported. “We needed to know what was underlying their behavioral issues - earlier interventions were more superficial, not getting to the heart of working with students. We have more attention to zones of regulation.”
- In one district, the findings from the Tool resulted in districtwide policies and protocols supporting behavioral health. The school committee has a strategic planning subcommittee focusing on social-emotional learning - there has been a push to broaden this to SSSP.
- The contact person in another district noted that “Overall, across all the sites, we rated very high on policies and procedures but low on PD (professional development) and leadership, at every building. To address the PD issue, we did mental health first aid training for staff, and we are on track to have trained 300 staff members by the end of June. For leadership, we have pulled together a districtwide team to talk about commonalities across the schools.”

### *Strategic Considerations*

Districts were able to use their findings from the Tool to develop specific and concrete action plans. Some did note, however, that the scope of the Tool could make it difficult to **prioritize their action planning**. “We need more wiggle room in action planning,” said one. “If we have to address each of the six areas covered by the BHPS, then nothing gets done. We need to be able to prioritize. By being asked to focus on all 6 areas, it’s overwhelming and doesn’t help us narrow our focus. Action planning is not helpful if you’re trying to fix everything.”

Other teams followed their own protocols for prioritizing and narrowing their focus. More than one spoke of **selecting priorities** that were shared across schools and/or fit with the district’s improvement plan. This is discussed further in the section that follows.

Teams also requested **additional support from ESE** with developing their action plans, including samples of previous action plans as well as structures and tools that would help develop them. These can be developed in-house by ESE and disseminated through its website, as a service to current and future grantees as well as to other districts interested in pursuing related initiatives.

Other requests, such as feedback during the process and additional funding to allow time to plan for district alignment, require ongoing additional resources devoted to the SSSP grant program and should be assessed against competing initiatives to determine whether they are the best use of funds.

## Aligning school and district planning

District and school alignment has been uneven across the SSSP sites. CES explored potential alignment among Category A grantees by examining their application forms and noting whether their planned district-level and school-level teams included some of the same members. In five of ten districts (Berkshire Hills, Easthampton, Monomoy, Pioneer Valley, and Stoneham), the application forms noted that specific district-level personnel and/or school-level personnel would be participating in both school and district teams. In another district, Carver, the application form indicated the intention of including school-level people on the district team, but did not specify which people would be included. Among the other four grantees (Boston, Sandwich, Southbridge, and West Springfield), there was no overlap among district-level and school-level team members.

Category A grantees also responded to a survey question that asked whether, as a result of using the Tool, their school's school improvement plan is better aligned with that of the district. Only four of 13 respondents - three of eight from schools and one of five from districts - reported that this is the case.

Category B grant applications did not request a list of district-level team members, so it was not possible to determine whether these grantees intended to include school-level people on district-level teams. The school-level teams described on the school grant applications usually listed school-based personnel only. An exception was North Adams, in which Emily Schiavoni, the Community Outreach Coordinator, was noted as a member of both school-level teams. Also, in two districts (Berkshire Arts and Technology Charter School and Milton), a school principal was listed as the district-level contact and also served on a school-level team.

School and district alignment was explored in greater detail during site visits and interviews of Category B districts. Grantees appeared to be well-aware of the importance of integrating school-level initiatives with a larger district plan. In four of the six Category B grantees,<sup>6</sup> there has been a concentrated effort to align school and district SSSP plans, with district-level and school-level personnel working together to align their action plans and coordinate implementation.

Some examples of common activities implemented across districts include:

- **Coordinated professional development**, on the same topic and delivered by the same providers, for staff in different schools and at the district level.
- **Alignment of policies and procedures**, usually around disciplinary practices, across schools and at the district level.
- The development of **common language to recognize and support behavioral health**.

The two Category B grantee districts that are struggling with this alignment are not unaware of its importance; team members in both districts spoke of how the lack of alignment is holding back the effective implementation of their plans. However, in both cases, delayed funding for implementation made this difficult. In each district, some schools pursued other initiatives and did not immediately begin working on SSSP implementation, while other schools began implementing even without funding, drawing on other funding sources or incorporating SSSP initiatives into the regular school budget. When funding came in later in the school year, some schools had not yet begun while others were further along, making alignment challenging.

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<sup>6</sup> Berkshire Arts and Technology Charter School comprises its own district and is therefore not part of this analysis.

### Strategic Considerations

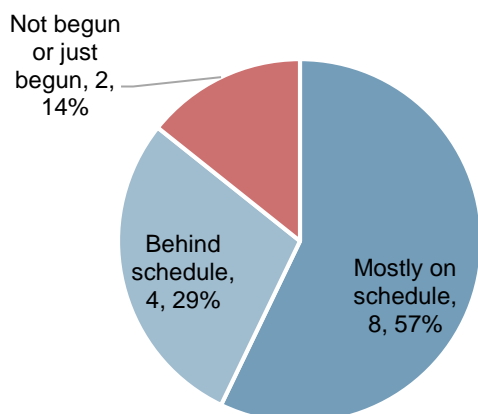
This exploration of school and districtwide alignment was not part of CES’s original evaluation plan and was added to interview and site visit protocols at ESE’s suggestion. It is also not a component of the Category A application form or Category B mid-year report. The Category B application form does request that applicants describe how school and district action plans are aligned with other school and district plans, but do not explicitly address alignment across the district - the question could be read as referring to alignment of plans within a single school.

It is clear to Category B grantees, as well as to ESE, that alignment across the district is an important way to ensure that SSSP priorities are implemented. However, it does not appear that this priority is an early focus of districts’ work, nor does it seem to be communicated to districts during their action plan development. ESE should consider **clarifying expectations around district and school alignment**, emphasizing the importance of making these connections early in the SSSP planning process.

### Action plan implementation and early successes

In the online survey conducted in February 2018, eight of 14 Category B school- or district-level grantees (57%) reported that they are mostly on schedule with the implementation of their action plans. Four respondents (29%) reported that they are implementing their plans but are behind schedule, and two respondents (14%) have not begun or have just begun implementing their action plans. See Figure 5, below.

**Figure 5: Implementation status, Category B grantees (n=14)**



Category B grantees described the changes they have been making in their schools and districts during site visits and interviews. Some Category A SSSP team members also spoke during the focus group of changes they have already made as a result of using the BHPS Tool. Major categories of changes are described below.

*Evaluation Questions:*

*To what extent have these action plans been implemented?*

*What have been barriers to and facilitators of action plan implementation?*

*To what extent was ESE able to provide effective support to schools and districts in their use of the Tool?*



## Professional Development

All Category B districts have included professional development for staff as part of their implementation plan. This does not necessarily represent a change in practice, as every school and district offers professional development for teachers and administrators. However, some team members spoke of how the SSSP grant not only allowed them to offer professional development in these areas, but **allowed time and space for them to develop a holistic approach** to guiding teachers and staff members around these issues.

For example, one district-level SSSP team member spoke of how in the past, professional development had been a series of one-time events without follow-up or building on what had come before. The district is now offering district-wide professional development to provide teachers with tools to address challenging student behaviors directly inside the classroom. The professional development was shaped after a series of conversations between the provider and school- and district-level administrators, many of whom were on the SSSP team.

At another district, a team member made a similar statement, saying that in the past, professional development had been more superficial, and was not getting to the heart of working with students. The SSSP grant has allowed for professional development that takes a deeper dive into social-emotional learning.

## Systematic Behavioral Support

At least five Category B grantees are taking a **systemic approach to addressing student behavioral challenges**, with regular meetings of teachers, counselors, and other administrators to discuss student behavior, as well as environmental changes such as “calming rooms” where students who are having difficulty with their emotions and/or are not controlling their behavior can get help with self-regulation. At one school, teachers and administrators are using Positive Behavioral Intervention and Support (PBIS), which they had had in place prior to SSSP, but are now using in a more systematic way, tracking data and discussing it in regular meetings that include teachers. The school’s team facilitator talked about the importance of including teachers in this process, as they are the ones who address student behavior most frequently. While she says there have been struggles with bringing teachers up to speed with understanding interventions, she reports that teachers have embraced this process.

In another district, the SSSP coordinator reported that they already had a process in place to talk about students who were of concern, but this process has been formalized and broadened, with more proactive planning. This person considers her district’s biggest accomplishment to be getting all of the elementary schools in the district on board with this process and bringing behavioral health to the forefront. She reports that SSSP has accelerated and formalized the district’s focus on behavioral health.

In a third district, the SSSP coordinator reports that “We are empowering our staff and helping them to be more self-reflective on how their classroom practice influences social/emotional issues,” through a shift to a focus on root causes of behavior and conversations with students and parents about disciplinary procedures.

The site visits to North Adams and Chelsea offered the opportunity for a deeper exploration of how these districts are formalizing their behavioral support systems; this is discussed later in the report in the site visit summaries.



## Changes in Policies and Procedures

In at least four Category B districts, as well as at least one Category A district, schools and in some cases districts have rewritten their discipline plans. Each of these schools and districts is focusing on a shift from a punitive approach to one that is instructional and focuses on restorative practices. The conversations that take place around this process, and the communication and implementation of the new policies, are seen by school and district SSSP team members as having led to a mindset change among staff, parents, and eventually students. In one of these districts, the SSSP coordinator describes this mindset shift as the grant's biggest accomplishment.

## Parent Engagement

Two of the Category B grantees are putting significant energy into engaging parents and caregivers. One school-level team member describes this as her school's biggest accomplishment, saying that with SSSP the home-school connection has become deeper and more meaningful. She described several initiatives including parent nights, home visits by preschool teachers, and speakers brought in to address parents. She also reported that the school is receiving more communication from home about things that might affect kids.

In addition, Drury High School in North Adams has opened a Parent Welcome Center. This initiative is described in the summary of the North Adams site visit, below.

Finally, another school-level Category B grantee is planning to do home visits later in the school year or over the summer, with the intention of better understanding children's environments and influences.

## Facilitators

Many of the facilitators of effective SSSP implementation have already been addressed in the report. They include:

- A **broad base of representation** during the BHPS Tool completion and planning process
- **Prior expertise** on the teams with understanding and using data, familiarity with the resources in place at the school and district, and past experience working together
- Resources and professional development **opportunities provided by ESE**, including supports offered through the broader Safe Schools initiative such as statewide convenings
- **Coordination of related initiatives at the district level**
- **Recognition, by administrators and teachers, of the importance of the role of behavioral health** in supporting student wellness and academic achievement
- Additional funding and **other initiatives supporting behavioral health** in schools
- **Previous coordination and cooperation among SSSP team members** and professional development and/or direct service providers

## Challenges

Challenges to implementation are similar to those that the teams experienced in using the Tool and developing action plans. Chief among them is the **timing of the implementation grant award and funding**. As one school leader said “We didn't hear back until mid-year (December) right before the break. Now we're expected to put the plan into motion and spend all funds by June 30th. It seems like a mad rush and I don't find the timeline to be efficient or intentional when compared against the realistic timeline of a Title I school.” Other school and district leaders echoed this issue, saying that getting the funding later in the year meant that schools and teachers had already committed to other professional development programs. In addition, the need to expend the funds by June 30 is a challenge, particularly in connection with engaging particular professional development providers or coordinating outside efforts.

A related challenge is the **need for districts to move forward in a coordinated way, in order to implement these changes in a way that will be sustainable**. One district leader spoke of the need for consistency of language across schools, and another noted the need for district-level leadership to move the program forward along with buy-in from school-level leaders. Representatives from several teams spoke of pressure from competing initiatives and how this hampers implementation, particularly for districts that are in turnaround.

### *Strategic Considerations*

District and school-level SSSP leaders are planning for next year and are **unsure whether or how their efforts will be sustained**. They are hopeful that they will continue to receive grant funding from ESE, but no RFRs have been released by the department. Some have incorporated SSSP initiatives into their budgets, but others are currently relying on SSSP funds to provide stipends or to pay professional development providers and do not have a plan to replace this funding.

ESE might consider **extending the time frame for implementation grants to two years**, with funding allocated for each year. This would allow schools and districts additional time to flesh out the implementation of their initiatives in a way that allows them to be incorporated into existing district-level initiatives, or to allow district-level initiatives to be informed by SSSP successes.

### **Impact of action plans**

As stated earlier, Category B schools and districts did not receive funding approval until the end of 2017, and at the time of this writing have only had about five months to implement their action plans. It is therefore unrealistic to look for substantial changes in student behavior or academic achievement as a result of SSSP initiatives. It is also impossible, within the scope of this evaluation, to attribute any observed changes in schools or districts to the SSSP initiatives rather than to other programs or to changes in the student population.

However, during both interviews and site visits, representatives from Category B districts did note that there have been changes in their schools and districts as a result of the actions they have taken as part of the SSSP grant. These include **mindset shifts among teachers and staff that have contributed to a change in school culture**. Some of the effects of this are seen in how students relate to teachers and administrators - one SSSP team member reported that while their behavior “in the moment” hasn't changed, they are more willing to engage with adults in the school in the aftermath of the event and willingly participate in conversations about what happened and ways to make amends. A member of another team reported that teachers are more compassionate and

more focused on what might be driving a student's behavior. "The first question now is 'How are they?'" reports one SSSP coordinator.

The **new connections between families and schools** have also had an impact in at least two districts, with parents communicating more freely with the school about issues at home that might affect student learning.

In at least two districts, the **systematic processes** put in place for recording and discussing student behavior have allowed teachers and administrators to pre-emptively address potential problems before they developed into crises.

### ***Strategic Considerations***

As districts continue to implement their SSSP plans through the end of the 2017-2018 school year, and provide professional development and additional supports over the summer and beyond, this impact can be expected to continue and grow. In addition, districts' action plans and the initial funding can be used as leverage for ongoing financial support of the work they are doing.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The SSSP grant has funded teacher and administrator time and has legitimized schools' and districts' efforts to address social emotional learning. Through the SSSP processes, grantees have identified strengths and gaps in their practices, and are responding to what they learned by either developing or implementing action plans that strengthen their capacity to support students.

School and district personnel provided many suggestions and requests regarding the SSSP processes. CES is highlighting a few recommendations that could help ESE to improve the program:

- **Finalize plans and disseminate information as soon as possible concerning FY19 funding**, so that districts are able to plan over the summer and be ready to apply for and receive funding early in the next school year.
- **Consider extending implementation funding for two or three years**. This will allow implementation to take root and become incorporated into school and district culture.
- **Provide a web-based clearinghouse of information**, including a list of ESE initiatives related to SSSP, consultants, and direct service providers who specialize in social-emotional learning. Prescreened, vetted resources available from ESE and other sources would be useful for teams as they develop and implement action plans.
- **Develop a process for check-ins with grantees** as they complete the Tool and develop their action plans, to help ensure they are on track and assist with troubleshooting any problems that come up. This process should perhaps be offered by an outside technical assistance provider, so that teams are able to be open about the challenges they are facing without fearing repercussions from ESE.
- **Clarify the role of ESE and the use of the information collected in the Tool as non-punitive and non-evaluative**. While most involved recognize that the SSSP funding is intended to help, some participants may fear that an honest assessment of their district's strengths and weaknesses reported directly to ESE might result in sanctions from the state.

This report provides evidence that the SSSP program is effective in meeting program goals. Participating districts report changes in the ways they speak, think, and act regarding the social-emotional needs of students. These changes are spurring action in the districts where the SSSP process has taken root. The suggestions from participants highlighted above may provide opportunities for the Department to provide even more effective support with future grantees.

## **DISTRICT-LEVEL SITE VISIT: NORTH ADAMS**

### **Introduction**

Three CES representatives visited North Adams Public Schools on May 7, 2018. They met with and interviewed SSSP team representatives at Drury High School and at Colegrove Park Elementary School, as well as the Superintendent of Schools and the district's Curriculum Coordinator. They also observed planning meetings at the high school between administrators and Polly Bath, who will deliver grant-supported professional development at both Drury High School and Colegrove Park Elementary School in June and in August. CES also visited the Welcome Center at Drury High School. A schedule for the day is attached as Appendix E.

North Adams, a small Berkshire County city, has a population of around 14,000 people. It was originally a mill town, and later the site of a major research and development center for electricity and semi-conducting materials. The closure of this center in 1985 left a large hole in the local economy. Its site has since been redeveloped into a large contemporary art museum, which attracts a significant number of tourists. In addition, the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts is located in North Adams, and Williams College is nearby. However, the city still faces high unemployment and poverty rates. The nearest larger population center is Pittsfield, which faces economic issues of its own and is located about 20 miles away.

North Adams Public Schools (NAPS) include three PreK-6 elementary schools, and Drury High School, which houses grades 7-12. It is a turnaround district, and most of the district leaders are new to their positions. Schools have also been reconfigured: Sullivan Elementary School closed in December 2015 and Colegrove Park Elementary School opened in January 2016 in a renovated building that had previously been used as a middle school, and before that as a high school. At the start of the 2017-2018 school year, seventh grade students began attending Drury High School rather than their neighborhood elementary school. Drury High School adopted a middle school model of instruction and support to serve 7th and 8th graders. At the same time, preschool programs opened in each elementary school building, and the district closed the separate building which had housed preschool programs. These changes and transitions have brought challenges, but they have also brought in new energy and created opportunities for significant changes in the ways that schools support students.

### **The Safe and Supportive Schools Grant**

North Adams used the BHPS Tool and developed their action plan during the 2016-2017 school year. The Tool helped identify district and school-level strengths, such as collaboration and resources, and also gaps, primarily in providing systematic professional development around behavioral health and in communication with parents. According to Barbara Malkas, the North Adams Superintendent of Schools, the district team had already sensed these needs and strengths. The added value of the BHPS process was that it provided time and impetus to think and discuss how to leverage their strengths more effectively to address identified gaps. Further, they were also able to identify and plan for additional needed resources. Tim Callahan, principal at Drury High School, echoed this, saying that he originally expected the BHPS Tool to help build greater consistency. Instead, he reported, it focused the attention of the team on what resources they already have and what they need to build. While the school had resources in place, the Tool showed that teachers needed support in using these resources.

The district team used SSSP funds to support work at Drury High School and Colegrove Park Elementary School. Dr. Malkas reported that district leaders saw a need to focus on the transition from elementary to secondary school.<sup>7</sup> For this reason, they wanted to enhance behavioral supports at both the secondary school and at an elementary school that fed into it, with the intention of later pursuing additional funding to replicate the elementary school work at the district's other two elementary schools. Colegrove Park Elementary School was selected because of its status as a new school and the district's desire to support the development a positive school culture there. It is also the largest of the three elementary schools. Around 70% of Colegrove Park students are classified by ESE as high-need students.

The district used the BHPS Tool findings to develop an action plan that includes the following three strategic objectives:

- Create a district vision statement for behavioral health and the implementation of the behavioral health framework.
- Create safe, welcoming environments in which all families feel that their voices are valued in order to build school-wide foundations for effective collaboration with families.
- Develop, with school leader and staff input, a comprehensive multi-year professional development plan to increase skills among staff and other stakeholders to implement the district's plan to promote behavioral health. Provide comprehensive professional development for all staff to enhance the school's capacity to improve students' behavioral health through supportive school environments, early interventions, and intensive services.

The 2017-2018 school year was dedicated to implementing strategies (described in more detail below) at each of the two schools to support these objectives. Dr. Malkas reported that the district is now looking ahead to how these strategies will be sustained next year and beyond.

## **Action Plan Implementation Progress**

### **District Vision Statement**

District staff are continuing to develop a district vision statement. While the key players are in agreement about the district's vision, the process has been delayed by difficulty in scheduling meetings with community representatives. Competing priorities have also made it difficult to focus on this element. However, the district has **maintained a consistent focus on the importance of SEL**, and representatives of two schools participating in the SSSP grant both reported that the district has been supportive of school-level work.

### **Creating Safe, Welcoming Environments**

Work around this objective has centered on the creation of a Parent Welcome Center at Drury High School, which is similar to an existing one at Brayton Elementary School. **The Welcome Center was launched in October** with the hiring of a Community Outreach Coordinator, Emily Schiavoni. It is located just inside the main entrance of the high school, in a room adjacent to a community room and the school resource officer.

The Welcome Center actively offers support to students and families, but the space is still in development, as a result of the SSSP funding not becoming available until March 2018. A large

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<sup>7</sup>Behavioral data observed by the CES team during their Drury High School site visit supported this, showing that about one-third of referrals to the Student Support Center over the course of the school year were given to seventh graders, although they comprise less than 20% of the school's enrollment.

entrance sign has been printed but has not yet been hung. The room is furnished with a desk for the coordinator, a table with chairs, a bookshelf with books, and a table with some handouts, many of which refer to the district's other Parent Welcome Center at Brayton Elementary School. Ms. Schiavoni plans to add computers and a printer, and to develop a calendar of events.

Currently, the Welcome Center does not get a lot of parent walk-in visits, although students will sometimes come in need of food or clothing (the community room nearby houses emergency supplies). Much of Ms. Schiavoni's work has been around connecting with staff at Drury High School; they alert her to the needs of their students and she makes a plan to provide for immediate needs as well as ongoing support. She also attends district and regional meetings, and collaborates with the coordinator at the Welcome Center at Brayton Elementary School.



Plans for expanding the Welcome Center's services, in addition to the resources noted above, include:

- Developing a joint advisory board with the Brayton Elementary School Parent Welcome Center
- Marketing the Welcome Center's services through newsletters, after-school events, open houses
- Coordinating with community partners and developing a plan for them to have office hours at the Welcome Center
- Offering fuel assistance to families on site (Ms. Schiavoni is currently being trained to offer this assistance)
- Working with a K-6 parent volunteer coordinator to help families navigate the transition to the high school
- Electronic tracking of Welcome Center use and services provided

## Professional Development

The BHPS Tool highlighted the need to support teachers in accessing and using the resources that schools offer to strengthen behavioral health. To that end, both Colegrove Park Elementary School and Drury High School have used the SSSP funds to provide professional development around social emotional learning to their staff.

Both schools offered **professional development to their staff during the summer and fall of 2017** as part of their SSSP implementation; their mid-year reports provide details. **During summer 2018, both schools will be offering professional development led by Polly Bath**, a consultant who focuses on managing and changing difficult school behavior. She will provide parallel sessions to each school in June and lead a longer training in August.

Polly Bath visited Drury High School on the same day that the CES staff conducted their site visit. The site visit team sat in on planning meetings she had with the school principal, the Student Support Team, and the Instructional Leadership Team. During each of these meetings, the discussion focused on how her professional development can help teachers address problem classroom behavior. Ms. Bath had spent a day visiting classrooms and reviewing classroom



practices, and during planning meetings, the teams looked at data to determine where, when, and how behavioral problems happen.

Ms. Bath and representatives of the teams came to a consensus about a number of issues to address in her upcoming professional development sessions. A primary issue is the way that teachers use and view the Student Support Center (SSC). The SSC is intended to be a chance for students who are disrupting the classroom to briefly leave, get help with calming down, and return to the classroom to continue learning. However, many teachers believe that the SSC should be a consequence for the bad behavior, and they do not welcome the student returning during the same class period. Ms. Bath and the team members talked about helping teachers understand that they are responsible for administering logical consequences for misbehavior in their classroom.

Ms. Bath noted that referrals to the SSC lacked consistency across classrooms. She spoke of the need for all adults in the building to have a shared understanding of which behaviors are developmentally appropriate for middle school students, which behaviors should be addressed immediately in the classroom, and which behaviors merit a referral to the SSC. She also noted the importance of all adults in the building keeping their eyes on the students during transition times, not just in their own classroom.

Ms. Bath's professional development sessions will focus on the issues above, as well as on teacher communication with students. She wants to help them develop proactive conversations rather than confrontational conversations and avoid power struggles. She also wants to help them develop a script that they can use in order to deal with common issues.

The professional development that Ms. Bath provides to staff at Colegrove Park Elementary School will be similar in that it will focus on behavioral issues, but it will be adapted for younger students and reflect issues that are particular to Colegrove Park.

## Challenges

District and school level representatives did not describe significant implementation challenges of their SSSP action plans; much of the plan is proceeding on schedule. However, they did indicate some concerns:

- **Implementation funding did not arrive until March**, which delayed progress on the Welcome Center.
- **Competing initiatives and turnaround obligations** may have distracted from this work.
- The need to address crisis situations nearly every day make **long-term planning difficult**.

## Impact of Implementation

As described above, the major SSSP initiatives are in the initiation phase. Therefore, it is impossible for participants to assess changes in behavior or attribute them to a program. However, district and school representatives attributed changes in attitudes and procedures to SSSP. People in each location noted that both the planning and the implementation grants gave **momentum and validity to the idea that schools need to focus on behavioral health**, including readiness to learn. As a turnaround district, North Adams has heavily focused on academic achievement, and the SSSP helped direct the district's focus to school climate and school culture and the ways that these support learning.

Dr. Malkas noted cultural and practice changes during her walk-throughs at both schools; she described **shifts in how teachers and administrators think about addressing student**



**misbehavior**. She observed school personnel asking students about how to create a safe and supportive learning environment, and she believes that there are fewer behavioral problems than there had been.

At the elementary school level, administrators and staff also noted the change in language and understanding of social-emotional issues that was mentioned by Dr. Malkas. They reported that, as a result of the professional development offered last summer and fall, students are spending more time in class: teachers are less likely to refer students to the nurse's office and instead explore with students what might cause their symptoms other than illness, and there is more differentiation of instruction and efforts to keep students in class and engaged with learning. However, it is unclear if these changes are due to SSSP or to the larger district-level focus on social-emotional learning and school climate.

Using the Tool helped the district understand the **importance of integrating professional development with the district improvement plan**. Dr. Malkas noted that in the past, professional development had been offered as many different one-time workshops and events, with no continuity or follow-up. This year, Polly Bath will be brought to the district on multiple days for professional development with continuity, which includes time for planning with teachers and administrators.

High school leadership has implemented **policy changes** as a result of the SSSP work. One shift is no longer giving students an immediate consequence for wearing a hat into the school or possession of a cell phone. Instead, faculty are to address behavior that is truly disruptive. With cell phones, the policy shift has been towards a focus on the responsible use of technology. In addition, Principal Tim Callahan noted that many past programs that had little consistency or oversight, so they have reduced or eliminated many of these initiatives.

## **District and School Alignment**

North Adams presents an excellent example of alignment of school and district priorities. Drury High School and Colegrove Park Elementary School worked together to develop their SSSP action plans, which were synthesized to become the district's action plan. As described in the **Action Plan Implementation Progress** section, the individual school SSSP initiatives overlap: the Parent Welcome Center at Drury High School works closely with a similar center at Brayton Elementary School, and Polly Bath will be providing similar professional development at Drury High School and Colegrove Park Elementary School. In addition, each school has representation on the district-level committee to develop a vision and mission for social-emotional learning. Staff in both schools visited reflected that their work was aligned with the district vision, although that vision statement is still under development.

The priorities identified in the district's SSSP action plan have been incorporated into the District Improvement Plan, thus ensuring their continued prioritization beyond the life of the grant. Key SSSP personnel at both schools spoke of how supportive the district has been in their planning and implementation. The schools and the district use a common language to describe their work, and have a similar understanding of how to approach SEL work and its importance to academic achievement.

Dr. Malkas spoke of her expectation that schools develop School Improvement Plans (SIP) that are aligned with the district's plan (which includes SSSP activities), but that schools are encouraged to develop plans that work for their individual circumstances. She said that a recent report on the district's turnaround model confirmed that Drury High School's SIP was aligned with the district

improvement plan, although this analysis was not performed for the elementary schools due to lack of funding.

## Supports and Resources

The elementary school SSSP team noted that the ongoing trainings offered by ESE are helpful, but that it is hard to arrange coverage and allow travel time to attend statewide convenings, especially given the district's distance from the sites of previous convenings. A representative from the high school attended the March 23 convening, but did not find it helpful - he reported that it seemed as though everyone else at the convening was still figuring out what to do, and that most of the useful information from the convening was also provided in the webinar.

Dr. Malkas noted that additional support from ESE around alignment would be helpful. She would like examples of best practices in embedding social-emotional learning across the curriculum, and developing a process for bringing various plans required by ESE together to drive large-scale change. The high school SSSP team would like clear models of instructional practices - ESE frequently disseminates best practices, but rarely is there a recommendation of one clear model. At the elementary school, SSSP team members reported that they would like professional development sessions that are in central or western Massachusetts.

Both teams sought assistance from an external consultant, Mel Motel, to develop their plan. However, Ms. Motel's more significant contribution was providing professional development around restorative practices. The elementary school did not work with any other districts; the high school connected with other districts around mediation.

## Lessons Learned

The North Adams SSSP teams have immersed themselves in this work and have reflected on lessons learned during this process. NAPS administrators highlighted the following recommendations:

- Make clear to teachers the **value of spending time on social-emotional learning**. Teachers need to be told that this won't be considered "time off task" and frowned upon if observed during supervisor walk-throughs.
- Ensure that the team represents **diverse roles and perspectives** when using the BHPS Tool. Planning teams at both schools noted that it is important to include teachers in the process, not just by asking them for input but by involving them in the meetings. This helps to build a common understanding among teachers and administrators about the work that is necessary in order to move forward.
- **Ensure that there is a common understanding** of all staff in leadership positions about the importance of this work. Dr. Malkas noted that the district had already been working on approaches to discipline and culture shifts; the SSSP work reinforced this and helped move it forward. She noted that it would have been much more difficult to develop and implement an SSSP action plan without these prior efforts.

## **SCHOOL-LEVEL SITE VISIT: CLARK AVENUE SCHOOL, CHELSEA**

### **Introduction**

Three CES representatives visited Clark Avenue School in Chelsea on May 21, 2018. They met with and interviewed the principal, the assistant principal, school counselors, and members of the SEL Leadership Team. They observed classroom-level implementation of the Mind Up curriculum, and an afterschool staff restorative circle. In addition, they met with Kim Huffer, the district Coordinator of Social Work Services and the SSSP grant coordinator, and with the assistant principal of Eugene Wright Science and Technology Academy.<sup>8</sup> A schedule for the day is attached as Appendix F.

Chelsea is a city of around 40,000 people, across the Mystic River from the city of Boston. The city has the highest proportion of foreign-born residents in the state, at 38%. The majority of the population (62%) is Hispanic or Latino. Chelsea is a densely populated community with an economy sustained by small stores and restaurants as well as its proximity to Boston. Its economy has been recovering since being placed into receivership by the state in the early 1990s. Its unemployment rate is low (3.2% in April of 2018), but poverty rates remain high (19% in 2016).

The Chelsea school district has a primary school, four elementary schools, three middle schools, and one high school.<sup>9</sup> All three middle schools received SSSP funding and work together on SEL initiatives as well as other programming. Two of the middle schools, Joseph A. Browne School and Eugene Wright Science and Technology Academy, are housed in the same building and the third, Clark Avenue School, is located less than half a mile away from the other two. Each middle school houses different programs for special needs populations, such as students on the autism spectrum or English Language Learners; parents of students who are not part of these populations select the middle school that they would like their child to attend. The Williams Middle School Complex, which houses the Joseph A. Browne school and the Wright Science and Technology Academy, was completed in 1997. The Clark Avenue School is still in the final stages of construction, although it is fully functional. All three schools are attractive and well-equipped with the technology and resources needed to provide a modern education.

The school population in Chelsea is less ethnically diverse and more high-need than the city's overall population. Over 86% of the student population is Latino or Hispanic; only 6% identify as non-Hispanic white and 5% as African-American. Over 80% of students do not speak English as a first language, and 37% of Chelsea students are English language learners. About two-thirds of students are economically disadvantaged, and between 40% and 50% of students have moved in the past five years.

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<sup>8</sup> CES was unable to arrange a visit to the other school participating in the SSSP grant, the Joseph A. Browne School. However, Kim Huffer reported that Clark Avenue School has the most complete implementation of the SSSP action plan among the three schools, and so CES focused its site visit there.

<sup>9</sup> The primary school serves children in grades PreK through one, the elementary schools serve grades one through four, the middle schools serve grades five through eight, and the high school serves grades nine through twelve.

## The Safe and Supportive Schools Grant

The three Chelsea middle schools and the district office completed the BHPS Tool individually. Two of the schools worked in site-based teams that met before or after school; one assigned different parts of the Tool to different people. Kim Huffer, the district-level grant coordinator, reported that working in teams to complete the Tool was more effective than working individually; individual assignments were overwhelming to the people who received them.

Each middle school team as well as the district identified weaknesses and decided which areas they wanted to address, based on previous work and district-level priorities. The district and each school developed separate action plans, although with similar and overlapping priorities. The Clark Avenue School action plan had three strategic objectives:

- Cultural Responsiveness: Provide professional development on cultural sensitivity, building relationships, and communicating with families
- Social/Emotional Learning: Provide and implement professional development in social emotional learning and effective family collaboration
- Restorative Practices: Review and revise discipline philosophy and practices at the Clark Avenue School to incorporate restorative practices

The 2017-2018 school year has been dedicated to implementing strategies and other supporting activities, described in more detail below. Administrators reported that the district and school are now looking forward to sustaining these activities next year and beyond.

## Action Plan Implementation Progress

### Professional Development

Teachers at the school have participated in professional development in the two areas noted above. This included **workshops conducted by the guidance counselor and the school adjustment counselor, as well as Jeffrey Benson, an outside provider**. The professional development focused on identifying students at risk, using classroom-based strategies to de-escalate behavior and prevent it from becoming disruptive, and addressing difficult behavior issues in students. Additional professional development workshops addressed family engagement and strategies that teachers could use to involve parents in their children's education.

Teachers at Clark Avenue School responded very positively to the professional development offered by Jeffrey Benson. Because of this, the district has already contracted with him to provide additional professional development over the summer to teachers from other schools, using other funds. The school adjustment counselor and guidance counselor at Clark Avenue School would also like to continue to offer the professional development that they offered this past year under the grant; they are willing to offer them pro bono because of their dedication to the work. However, they recognize that it might be difficult to attract teachers to the professional development, although they can continue to offer Professional Development Points as an incentive. There will be other, newer initiatives that will attract teachers' attention.

## Social-Emotional Learning

Clark Avenue School also **implemented the *MindUP* curriculum schoolwide**. *MindUP* is an evidence-based curriculum of 15 lessons addressing mindfulness, compassion and self-regulation. *MindUP* exercises are done daily in homeroom, and the students work through the lessons once each week during their advisory period. CES staff observed *MindUP* lessons being implemented in four different classrooms across all four grades at Clark Avenue School. The day's lesson plan, adapted for different grade and ability levels, involved small-group and whole-class discussions of kindness, individual writing out of compliments for other students, and finding examples of ways to be kind to each other, including a challenge to implement these examples over the next week.

The *MindUP* curriculum will be implemented next year with the incoming 5th grade class. Other classes will have already completed the lessons, but the skills learned will be repeated and reinforced during advisory sessions.

## Restorative Practices

Clark Avenue School has also implemented **restorative practices**, as has the district's high school. Administrators have attended trainings, and teachers meet regularly after school in a "Restorative Practices" circle. CES staff observed this circle during the site visit. During that day's session, twelve staff members took turns responding to prompts about what is difficult for them, what inspires them, how they can help their colleagues, and what help they need from colleagues. The mood was relaxed and jovial, with teachers respecting each others' responses but also gently joking with each other.

Restorative practices are also beginning to be implemented in addressing student disciplinary issues at Clark Avenue School. Rather than assigning students to detention, the focus is more on reinstating relationships, such as helping a teacher in the classroom after school or writing an apology note. Administrators at the school intend to continue to implement these practices next year and beyond.

## SEL Leadership Team

The work described above is coordinated and overseen by an **SEL Leadership Team**, composed of one teacher from each grade level along with the assistant principal and several behavioral specialists. This team has also supported teachers with implementation of the *MindUP* curriculum and the strategies covered during the professional development sessions. As an example, the guidance counselor and school adjustment counselor have found and shared apps related to social-emotional learning and self-regulation, which can be used by students or teachers. These have been set up on Chromebooks in "calm-down" areas of some classrooms for students to access, and teachers have used them as well.

The continued existence of the SEL Leadership team is in question for next year, given that there is no guarantee of continued SSSP funding. The principal and assistant principal noted that other teams meet without funding, and are hopeful that this team will continue as well. In addition, the district is interested in supporting SEL practices with additional professional development and a district-wide SEL team.

## Challenges

The biggest challenge to implementation noted at Clark Avenue School was **finding time** within the school/work week to prioritize the work and coordinate multiple busy schedules. The guidance counselor and school adjustment counselor reported that while they were able to offer PDPs to staff who attended the professional development sessions, it was still difficult to get staff to attend, because of the many demands on staff time.

Related to this challenge is **competing priorities** at the district and school level. Test scores are the most important priority for some district personnel. In addition, the district has adopted multiple other initiatives that compete for educators' time and attention.

The **timing of the grant funding** was also an issue, particularly at the other two middle schools in Chelsea. At Clark Avenue School, the assistant principal was committed to the work and started many of the initiatives early in the school year before the SSSP funding was in place. However, the other two middle schools did not begin the work until they received SSSP funding, and as a result had difficulty implementing their action plans after other school-wide initiatives had already begun.

Finally, the **uncertainty regarding continued funding** after the current school year makes it difficult to plan to continue the work. While the Clark Avenue School teachers and administrators involved with the site visit are committed to the work and the ideas behind it, they recognize that funding is necessary to continue the work in a systematic way, and are not sure what the source of those funds will be.

## Impact of Implementation

Teachers and administrators at Clark Avenue School were in agreement that while practices have changed, it is too soon to see widespread changes in behavioral or academic outcomes for students. They did note some of the following observations:

- School counselors reported that they are no longer seen as the only ones responsible for cultivating social-emotional learning; rather, it is seen as the **responsibility of all staff**.
- The staff are becoming more comfortable with the **concept of mindfulness**, evidenced by their use of it in the classroom and the incorporation of mindfulness language used to talk about disciplinary incidents. Staff members also appear more mindful in their interactions with students and sometimes use “mindfulness moments” in class.
- Students seem to be more **willing to discuss their behavior with teachers**. The school counselors attribute this change to the implementation of restorative justice practices.
- Students demonstrate **greater awareness of how their brain works and how they can self-regulate**. They also use **strategies to address frustration and are incorporating mindfulness techniques** into their lives. Kim Huffer and members of the SEL Leadership Team attributed these changes to the *MindUP* curriculum.
- Students are **spending more time in the classroom**, rather than being sent out for minor infractions.
- Students who need substantial help can now receive **more time and support from school counselors**. School counselors reported that they are now able to meet within a week with all students who request appointments, because they are no longer spending time addressing minor disciplinary problems.

## District and School Alignment

The work at Clark Avenue School aligns well with the district-level focus on social-emotional learning. This is the third year of a district-level focus on trauma sensitivity along with supporting Tier 1 behavioral supports. Just recently, the Chelsea Public Schools also began supporting culturally responsive practices in the schools, with attention to the ways in which students' family backgrounds might differ from those of the staff and how that might impact teacher-student interactions. The district has been offering professional development to all teachers in these areas. In addition, the district is trying to provide additional resources to continue the SSSP work at Clark Avenue School, and perhaps at other schools, beyond the SSSP funding.

In addition, the *MindUP* curriculum, initially funded by the grant to be implemented at Clark Avenue School, has now been implemented at the other two middle schools. This came from a desire to align the curriculum across schools and also because of the value that the district sees in the program. Representatives from the three schools work together to plan and develop lessons, and over the summer, they will plan for lessons that will carry the *MindUP* learnings forward for another year.

## Supports and Resources

The Clark Avenue School teachers and administrators who completed the SSSP Tool and developed the implementation plan did not rely heavily on supports from ESE; in fact, participants did not indicate familiarity with or use of the ESE webinars or professional development gatherings. They also did not use consultants or confer with other districts during the process. Kim Huffer (the district SSSP Coordinator and Coordinator of Social Work Services) supported school-level teams as needed, as well as leading the district SSSP team.

The SSSP team at Clark Avenue School reported that they found the BHPS self-assessment to be useful, but noted that it would have been helpful to have had more explicit support in how to move forward from findings. This could take the form of best practices and/or experiences of other schools. Kim Huffer at the district level noted this as well.

Kim Huffer also noted that more explicit support and advice around discipline alternatives, such as model programs or best practices, would have been helpful; this was an area of focus for the district team as well as school-level teams, but they did not see much in the Framework to support this.

## Lessons Learned

In reflecting on the SSSP process and the advice they would give to other districts, the Clark Avenue School team as well as Kim Huffer noted the following points:

- **Include people from many different roles** in the school or district on the SSSP Team.
- **Establish partnerships** among schools that allow sharing of resources.
- **Start with small goals**, focus on one thing instead of three.
- **Be open to challenges**, and commit to working through them as a team - the process becomes easier over time.