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How important is it to have Mental Health Services as a part of embedded and direct services to students in our schools?

Serving approximately 2045 students, the make-up of whom are 92 percent Hispanic, 75.1 percent low income, and 13 percent students with disabilities, Sunnyside High School School has moved from a 49% graduation rate in 2008 to 90.2% in 2018.

As an Assistant Principal, who oversees the Counseling Department at SHS, having the ability to meet the needs of ALL students is a high priority. As a school and as a district, our CORE belief is that ALL students can be successful. We also know that each student is unique and may require different levels of support to achieve that success.

Our high school, whose conceptual framework includes Academic Press, Social Support, and Relational Trust (Salina et al 2011), has created many support systems to ensure success for all students. The need that has continually become apparent over the past several years is the need to be able to efficiently identify, screen, diagnose, and provide appropriate mental health services for our students. According to a [Business Insider](https://www.businessinsider.com/us-suicide-rate-increased-since-2000-2018-6) article, U.S. suicide rate has increased 30% since 2000, and tripled among young girls (<https://www.businessinsider.com/us-suicide-rate-increased-since-2000-2018-6>). In addition, according to an article from the National Institute of Mental Health, suicide has become the second leading cause of death among individuals between the ages of 10 and 34. The article also indicated that there were twice as many suicides in the United States as homicides (<https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/suicide.shtml>). With this knowledge, and our own perceptual data at Sunnyside High School, we knew we needed the capability to provide our students mental health support.

Before this school year, we had created a system to identify and screen students with possible mental health needs. We would call a local mental health provider to come to the high school and do a mental health screening and diagnosis to determine if services were appropriate. This method was inefficient and seemed impersonal because the student did not know the mental health worker, and if services were deemed necessary, they were provided at the agency. It was difficult to ensure that the student received and would follow-through on much needed services.

This school year, we have partnered with our local mental health care organization to provide a therapist located in our school full time. The therapist is very much seen as a school staff member and not as an outside agent using an office. There are two key components necessary for this position. First, the high school staff and the therapist need to see the therapist as school community member, rather than a temporary consultant or part-time provider. This identification assists in the interconnectedness of the treatment and communication between the service provider, the students, and the school Counseling Department. Second, the embedded therapist needs to maintain the mental health agency's connection to the school so that services are being overseen by a psychologist.

Having immediate access to services has been an enormous assistance to our department and school. High school staff may now use an online referral process for mental health. We have utilized our social workers to screen students, and if warranted, introduce the student to our therapist for a mental health screen. This method has made for a much smoother and more personable process for our students. Students seem more open to assistance knowing the therapist is a high school staff person, and they feel more safe due to the treatment being provided in our school building.

We have had many wins this year with the immediacy and efficiency of mental health service delivery. It might be difficult to ascertain the number of potential serious issues we have prevented due to our treatment model, but it is certain that our students are now receiving mental health services in a much more personable, effective, efficient manner.

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