STUDENT ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS:
PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION & COST BENEFIT REPORT
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Student Assistance Program (SAP) is a school-based prevention and early intervention system designed to foster student success and healthy development by addressing academic, social-emotional and behavioral health issues. Most programs in Connecticut are operated by a Student Assistance Team (SAT) that has representation from the key stakeholders within the school including administrators, teachers, psychologists, social workers, nurses and guidance counselors, and some teams have representatives from community-based organizations. Students who are demonstrating "behaviors of concern" are referred by themselves, other students, school personnel or their family to the team which works with the student, the student's family, faculty, staff and/or outside service providers to develop a plan to ensure student success.

The Governor's Prevention Partnership has provided training and technical assistance to Student Assistance Programs since 1989. This study--the third in recent years--was intended to collect information regarding: (1) the status, scope and operation of SAPs at the elementary, middle and high school level in Connecticut, and (2) the cost-benefit impact of the SAPs. It involved a collaboration between The Partnership and a graduate psychology course at Central Connecticut State University taught by Professor Marc Goldstein. Three hundred fifteen schools in Connecticut (about one-third of the state's schools) were identified as having an active Student Assistance Program. A stratified sample of 100 schools, based on Educational Reference Group and school level (elementary, middle, high school) was then selected. These 100 schools were sent the survey; 50 schools responded for a 50% response rate.

The survey consisted of three sections. The first presented 27 statements regarding the respondent's perception of their SAP. The second section asked about the number of students referred, the reasons for the referrals, the assistance options provided, and the perceived success of the interventions. The last section focused on cost effectiveness.

Section I: Program Characteristics

Generally, Student Assistance Programs throughout the state seem to be strong in a number of areas, especially policy and procedures, referral mechanisms, prevention intervention strategies and follow-up and support to students and their families. More specifically, school administrators are providing the support that programs need to become institutionalized within the school in order to offer effective services to students; students have easy access to the SAP; there is a formal referral process that includes an incremental intervention; schools supply prevention and early intervention resources; and referred students are monitored for progress. Further, the SATs follow appropriate confidentiality guidelines, and they have a specific strategy for communicating with students and their families.

Programs at the elementary and middle school (including K-8) are stronger than the high schools in several areas including parental involvement procedures, communicating on a regular basis with school staff, and holding regular team maintenance meetings in which team functioning and conflicts are addressed.

Section II: Referrals, Interventions and Perceived Effectiveness

Taken as a whole, Student Assistance Programs reach and support an average of 6% of the school population in a given year, reaching an average of 8% of students in the elementary grades. Given the growing recognition in public policy of the importance of early identification and referral, these programs offer a significant opportunity for strengthening and expanding such efforts.

The primary specified reasons for referral to the SAT across all grade levels were grades (34% of all referrals), classroom behaviors of concern (20%), attendance and truancy (9%), family problems (6%) and mental health issues (5%).

Although the referral mechanisms in most schools appear quite effective, their intervention processes reveal several weaknesses, in particular a lower use of the research-based Gap Analysis Action Plan and a lower level of collaboration with community resources. These may also reflect an additional weakness in the lack of initial training and ongoing professional development some teams reported, since the Student Assistance training program puts significant emphasis on the use of the research-based action plan and linkage with community agencies. Both these issues could be easily addressed with additional training and ongoing professional development.

The lower use of the Gap Analysis Action Plan has implications for both the kinds and number of assistance options used, which in turn impact the effectiveness of the program. Many teams are limited in the assistance strategies they typically use. They rely mostly on classroom intervention, in-school counseling and monitoring. Linkages with community resources are far lower than they could be, accounting for less than 8% of the total number of helping options used. Lower-cost alternatives such as mentoring, altruistic activities, and peer support are also used much less frequently. The average number of options used per school is only 6.65, which seems to indicate more of a cookie-cutter approach to student support planning versus development of an individualized plan that takes into account each student's strengths and needs and builds on research-based strategies.

Despite these weaknesses, Student Assistance Programs are demonstrating a reduction or elimination of behaviors of concern in referred students in 30 – 47% of their cases, with the largest improvements being in the area of academic performance. Higher levels of use of student support action plans that are based on research strategies could reduce problem behaviors and increase positive behaviors and attitudes even more substantially.

Data collection, management and analysis are a challenge for many teams. Many say they lack the resources and easy access to information that would allow them to track process information (number and source of referrals, number of action plans completed, etc.) or outcome information (changes in the referred student's behaviors or attitudes). K-8 schools, however, seem to be stronger than elementary, middle or high schools in gathering both process and outcome data, as well as soliciting satisfaction information from referred students and their families.

Section III: Cost Effectiveness

Schools' difficulties with data collection significantly hampered efforts to determine the cost effectiveness of SAPs. More capacity building is needed in this area. However, the limited anecdotal information about cost effectiveness gathered through this survey is very encouraging. Schools report that the program has saved time, staff resources and money, particularly in the area of Special Education. Some students have not needed special education testing or services as a result of their referral to the SAT. Other students who might have had non-residential out-of-district placements were able to receive local services, either through collaborations with community partners or in-house. Cost savings reported ranged from $3500 to $45,000 for the school year.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The State of Connecticut should :

    - Assess the role that Student Assistance Programs can play in advancing its educational and early intervention policies, in particular advancing the goals of No Child Left Behind, implementing the recommendations of the Mental Health Strategy Board (particularly in the area of K-12 Mental Health Support for Education), and addressing juvenile justice issues;
    - Provide funding to assure that adequate training and ongoing professional development and technical assistance support is available to both improve the effectiveness of current Student Assistance Programs as well as expand the program to additional schools. (Note: It is estimated that close to half the schools who previously had formalized programs have not been able to sustain them over time due to lack of district level resources and a statewide technical assistance support system that operates at a significantly reduced capacity from previous years due to state funding cuts); and
    - Conduct further assessments of Student Assistance Programs with a particular focus on their potential to lower Special Education costs.

2. Local school districts should:

    - Allocate time and funds for training Student Assistance Team members, assuring that new members are trained as they join teams and that team members continue to develop skills and knowledge that will enhance their effectiveness;
    - Formalize their intervention processes and tools, assuring at a minimum that Gap Analysis Action Planning, or a similar model, is used to assure that an effective action plan is developed and that a wide range of assistance options are considered and employed;
    - Create formal linkages with the DCF Local Systems of Care via the local Connecticut Community KidCare Collaborative and with other local service providers and youth resources;
    - Better educate families, staff and students about the vision, mission and processes of the Student Assistance Program;
    - Address challenges at the high school level related to communicating with teachers and staff, involving parents and responding to more complex and entrenched student problems.
    - Develop mechanisms (and possible partnerships with local colleges) for better data collection and management and for more formalized program evaluations.

3. The Governor's Prevention Partnership should:

    - Seek foundation and/or corporate funding to leverage and match new state funding in order to provide an expanded and coordinated statewide system of training and technical assistance support to Student Assistance Programs;
    - Create a partnership with DCF to facilitate linkage of existing programs (as well as new programs as they are trained) with the Connecticut Community KidCare initiative;
    - Form evaluation partnerships with institutions of higher education to conduct further studies of Student Assistance Programs.