



Building Change from the Bottom Up: Success in Sustaining School Mental Health in Nebraska

“I think the title of the AWARE grant is so spot on. It's like, we are now aware. We are now aware as building personnel. We are now aware, as an administrative team, what's important for funding, what's important for trainings, what's going to help our families become aware of better support for kids.”

Factors Behind the Success

In Chadron, Nebraska, a small school district has leveraged Project AWARE grant funds to make big, foundational shifts in how they address youth mental health to sustain lasting change in their district. Principal Libby Mack oversees Chadron's kindergarten through second grade (K-2) primary school, one of four schools in the district, which serves about 230 students. Mack used the grant support to implement several practical changes to address the mental health care needs of her students. One major shift was increasing access to counseling services. The district hired a dedicated full-time school counselor at the K-2 building alongside a licensed mental health counselor (LMHC) for the district who could provide play therapy and services that families might not otherwise be able to access outside of school. Prior to this shift, the K-2 school was sharing counseling services with the third and fourth grade building which limited availability and responsiveness to its students. Thankfully, district leadership moved quickly to respond to this concern and expand coverage of counseling services.

“[We can't] say to our students, “Could you wait and have that breakdown on a Tuesday, because [our counselor] will be back? ...That's not feasible, that's not our reality. Our kids have a lot they are dealing with.”

As services expanded, Libby and her team began to think creatively about how to build spaces that communicate safety, comfort, and security to students experiencing emotional challenges. Using grant funds, they renovated space in their school to create “The Nest,” an homage to their school mascot, the Cardinal. “The Nest” was designed as a “space [where] students know it's ok to be dysregulated, it's ok to have these feelings” which included sensory tools, and tools to support relaxation, stretching, and movement. The district also took steps to better understand students' overall well-being. They implemented a universal screening tool that's completed three times per year. Teachers and staff report on students' academics, attendance, social emotional skills, and behavior to have a more holistic view of a student's wellbeing. In addition, students complete quick, well-being check-ins as well as surveys to assess whether they feel connected with any adults in the building to provide more comprehensive information on risk, unmet needs, and how the school can better support students.

Pathways to Lasting Change

“I was always an empathic educator but wow I had no idea...How has my own ACEs score impacted me as an educator”

Beyond structural changes in the school, Mack noted one of the most important impacts has been emotional and climate shifts in how staff think about student mental health and well-being. In Chadron, intergenerational family trauma is not uncommon and families are not always forthcoming about the challenges children face outside of school. The AWARE grant supported staff in attending national conferences and bringing in national speakers on Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and trauma informed approaches in educational settings. Everyone in the district was involved in this initiative, building a stronger sense of empathy for all staff. This wasn't a top down approach, it was foundational. Staff also began reflecting on how their own ACEs may have shaped how they work and interact. Even newer staff who were not present during the initial trainings are still benefitting, learning how to approach and address emotional and behavioral situations differently through the modeling and shifts in organizational climate led by veteran staff.

Challenges Along the Way

While Chadron's school district has implemented and sustained positive changes in their approach to youth mental health, inevitably there have been growing pains along the way. While hiring a LMHC as a permanent position within the Educational Support Unit has ensured continued funding for the role, it has also reduced the amount of dedicated time the LMHC can devote to the Chadron district specifically. As a result, the LMHC now primarily serves children with higher mental health needs who may require play therapy or other modalities of support beyond what school staff can provide.

“Sharing personal information is hard.”

Without the extra support from Project AWARE funds, it has been more challenging to send new staff to conferences focused on mental health in education. At the same time, in certain pockets of the Chadron community, it is still not the norm to openly discuss mental health challenges. The district is working to strike a balance of respecting the privacy and autonomy of parents and families while also seeking to normalize and destigmatize conversations around mental health care and meet community members where they are.

Results That Last

“And then to see the kids almost coach their parents on [emotion regulation skills]. That's the biggest testament to the great things we are doing... They're like 'oh my gosh I was getting worked up over the line at Safeway and my 5-year-old said, do you need to do a balloon breath mom? I can teach you what that looks like.'”

To build more trust between the school and the community, Libby and her team have been proactive about communication and transparency. Parental consent is required for student social emotional check-ins and surveys in accordance with state legislation. The school counselor sends monthly newsletters outlining upcoming lesson plans and goals to help families understand the work happening in the school as well as social-emotional skills and strategies families can try at home. She also provides families with resources and tools that draw on established frameworks from the American School Counselor Association and SAMHSA.

As the entry point to the district, Mack's K-2 school plays a key role in setting the tone for what parents and children can expect from staff, teachers, counselors, and administrators. She hopes that through these efforts everyone will feel included, supported, and safe in the conversations and initiatives that are shaping the climate at Chadron.



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