

Community mental health programs save schools millions

Approach improves participating youths' academics, behaviors

By **Kim Riley**

Children and youth with mental health issues thrive at school when they are enrolled in coordinated systems of care, according to a new federal report.

Systems of care are networks of community-based mental health services and supports that dramatically improve the academic, behavioral and emotional performance of participating students, and save millions of dollars in school costs, according to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

Such systems also may provide ideas to help educators and school mental health professionals deal with the challenges they face in implementing IDEA and Title I provisions under NCLB.

Specifically, children, youth and their families partner with schools and other public and private organizations to develop individualized service plans that are family-driven, youth-guided, and culturally and linguistically competent, according to SAMHSA, a division of the Health and Human Services Department.

"Service plans also establish effective services and supports that are available in least restrictive settings," according to the report. "Systems of care help children, youth and families thrive ... throughout life."

12-month turnaround

Researchers for the report, *Working Together to Help Youth Thrive in Schools and Communities*, measured the performance outcomes of system-of-care programs and found that academic improvements occurred within 12 months of enrollment for most youth with mental health problems.

For example, during the first 12 months of services, about 84 percent of youth aged 14-18 years in systems of care had either been promoted to the next grade level, received a GED, or were attending college or vocational school.

Likewise, such youth in systems of care also attended school more regularly — at least 80 percent of the time — the report said.

"This improvement means that school attendance for youth with mental health needs in systems of care approached the national school attendance average" of 83 percent, according to the report.

Children and youth also experience better outcomes when mental health services are introduced into school settings. Some of the benefits include:

Related legislation in House

The mental health of children and youth in the U.S. has also been under the spotlight on Capitol Hill with the recent reintroduction of the Mental Health in the Schools Act of 2009, H.R. 2531, by Reps. Grace Napolitano, D-Calif., and Tim Murphy, R-Pa.

The bill would expand school-based mental health services for children in K-12 by, among other things:

- Revising and increasing funding for the Safe Schools-Healthy Students program to provide access to more comprehensive school-based mental health services and supports.
- Authorizing competitive grants to local school districts to assist them in implementing mental health programs for K-12 students.
- Providing for culturally and linguistically appropriate staff development.
- Promoting positive mental health education and support.

The bill has been referred to the House Energy and Commerce Committee.

- Easier access to services for students and their families.
- Improved capability to prevent or respond quickly to crisis situations.
- Shared costs of staff positions between mental health agencies and schools.
- More effective team planning, problem-solving, and schoolwide staff training.
- Increased active supervision and behavior management of students in non-classroom settings.

Cost savings

The SAMHSA report also highlights how school systems that have had children participating in a systems-of-care program saved money.

For instance, the average annual cost of a student repeating a grade in public education is \$9,154, according to the report. Only 8 percent of youth in systems of care for 12 months had repeated a grade, compared with 15 percent of American students in the general public.

This difference translates to a cost savings of \$4.5 million for 7,092 youth aged 14-18 years who entered systems of care while enrolled in school, the report said.

Long-term financial savings also could be gained over a student's lifetime involvement in extended transitional programs that operate as part of a systems-of-care program.

To download the report, go to www.samhsa.gov/children/docs/shortReport.pdf.