



Addressing Students' Mental Health Needs: *Stamford Public Schools' Comprehensive Trauma-Informed System*



In 2014, following a series of student suicides and an increase in the number of students experiencing suicidal ideation and hospitalization, Stamford Public Schools recognized an urgent need to better identify students with mental health concerns and connect them to services. School personnel were reporting a higher number of students who had experienced trauma, including among refugee students. Prior to 2014, Stamford developed various strategies and initiatives designed to improve mental health outcomes for students and their families, but found that the need was greater than their resources, and further integration of efforts was required. In 2014, CHDI was contracted to conduct a mental health review of the Stamford Public Schools system and help them develop a comprehensive plan to enhance trauma-informed mental health services across their school district.

Schools are Increasingly Aware of Their Role in Addressing Behavioral Health

While appreciating that the schools' primary role is to educate children, school districts are increasingly aware of their role in addressing students' mental health concerns as an important way of supporting

academic achievement and overall well-being. National data indicate that about 20% of youth have mental health symptoms that would benefit from treatment but only about 20% of those youth receive treatment. Lack of access to treatment can significantly impact students' health and academic development. Schools can play a critical role in a coordinated, fully integrated, community-based mental health system. Research suggests that mental health services are effective and more accessible to youth when delivered in schools, however school personnel often lack the training and supports to fulfill this role.

A Trauma-Informed Model for School Mental Health is Improving Outcomes in Stamford

The 2014 review of Stamford's mental health services and supports for students in Kindergarten through 12th grade involved several focus groups and interviews. The process examined the behavioral health needs of students, as well as the districts' strengths and areas of concern in addressing these needs. It resulted in recommendations for improving Stamford's school-based and school-linked mental health services and supports

in four priority areas for initial action:

- Ensuring Sufficient Clinical Staff Capacity
- Providing Professional Development in Mental Health
- Engaging in Mental Health Planning and Oversight
- Promoting Data Collection and Evaluation

CHDI has worked with Stamford Public Schools to implement recommendations in these areas and they have made significant strides. In just two and a half years, Stamford has expanded the number of evidence-based services for students from zero to four, implemented district-wide trauma and behavioral health training and supports for staff, and collaborated to build internal capacity and integrate community and state resources and services for students.

Core Activities to Address Student Behavioral Health Needs in Stamford:

- Trained school social workers and psychologists to deliver [Cognitive Behavioral Intervention for Trauma in Schools](#) (CBITS) and its adaptation for elementary youth, Bounceback using a peer-learning model and leveraged additional State funds to expand the work.
- Offered Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) as a high school health skills class for students with emotional and behavioral concerns that are interfering with learning.
- Created a trauma-informed therapeutic self-contained classroom (Stark Elementary School Class-room) to serve 1st to 3rd graders with Individualized Education Plans due to emotional and behavioral concerns.
- Hired district-level trauma specialists to support clinical and teaching staff in identifying symptoms associated with trauma and supervise clinicians providing services to students with trauma needs.
- Enhanced data collection practices by incorporating new measures into the District's Scientific Research Based Interventions model including mental health symptoms, absences, and behavioral referrals.
- Partnered with the statewide CONNECTing Children and Families to Care initiative to help Stamford integrate their services with a network of care connecting youth, families, schools, state agencies and community service providers.

Results show improved outcomes for students, as well as positive feedback from parents, teachers and other school personnel. For example:

- Data from 76 Stamford students who completed CBITS and Bounceback over the past year showed significant reductions in PTSD symptoms (as measured by the Child PTSD Symptom Scale) and problem severity symptoms (as measured by the Ohio Scales).
- Feedback from parents and teachers indicate a decrease in the severity of behavioral concerns in the classrooms and at home.
- School personnel report important changes in culture and climate that reflect an understanding of trauma, how it impacts students, and how to better address students' needs using supportive and restorative approaches, rather than punitive measures.

Lessons Learned From Stamford Can Help Other Schools Improve Outcomes

Stamford Public School District has made tremendous progress in promoting a stronger district-level understanding of trauma and in developing a system that is more responsive to the needs of their students. Lessons learned in Stamford can help guide other districts seeking to improve their mental health services and supports:

- Ensure commitment from District administrators and school board members.
- Begin with a comprehensive needs assessment that identifies strengths, assets, and needs.
- Examine multiple public and private funding sources at the federal, state and local level.
- Blend and integrate school-based services with community-based services.
- Pilot small projects that include basic outcome measures to inform next steps.
- Create peer groups to support mental health staff and ensure sustainable training.

For more information on improving mental health in schools visit www.chdi.org or contact Jeff Vanderploeg at jvanderploeg@uchc.edu. To learn more from Stamford Public Schools, contact Social Work Department Head Joe O'Callaghan at jocallaghan@ci.stamford.ct.us. Related publications include CHDI's Issue Brief: [CBITS in Schools](#), the [SBDI Toolkit](#), and *IMPACT: Improving Outcomes for Children in Schools*.