Safe and Supportive Schools
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School-Based Climate Teams (Part 2)

WEBINAR QUESTION AND ANSWER SUMMARY

On September 14 and 15, 2011, the Safe and Supportive Schools Technical Assistance Center hosted a Webinar, entitled *School-Based Climate Teams (Part 2).* During the session, the presenter, Kevin Dwyer, an Associate Principal Research Scientist at American Institutes for Research, received several questions from the audience. Since the presenter could not answer all of the questions during the event, the Center has prepared the following Webinar Question and Answer Summary with responses to each question. For additional information, please email or call the Center (sssta@air.org; 1-800-258-8413).

Please note the content of this summary was prepared under a contract from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools to the American Institutes for Research (AIR). This Q/A summary does not necessarily represent the policy or views of the U.S. Department of Education, nor do they imply endorsement by the U.S. Department of Education.

Q1.   What are some ways you've seen schools successfully inform stakeholders that good things are happening in the two to three years you've mentioned it takes to see positive results?

Kevin Dwyer: We utilized easily understood best-practice constructs in our communications to stakeholders, family groups, community agencies, and other leadership groups. We communicated why we're doing what we're doing. We made certain that we had brochures that outlined our strategic plan and the action steps that we were implementing for that plan and got that out at every school fair, PTA meeting, faculty meeting, and etcetera. We utilized what are basically good advertising techniques to sell and restate over and over again our concept of school climate and its importance to your child. School climate is important to achievement. School climate is important to success.

Q2.   Are there research documents you can access to learn more about these topics or resources that schools can use?

Greta Colombi: You can direct your school to the safesupportiveschools.ed.gov Web site. If you're focused on particular topics, we have specific topics on the site as well. You'll notice that some documents are general and can fit in more than one role or more than one topic. At the end of the slides for this webinar, there is a list of citations and some of those can be found on our website. We also have an excellent series of previous Webinars archived on the website and at the end of each of those presentations, there are numerous citations as well.

Kevin Dwyer: The book, Safe, Supportive and Successful Schools: Step-by-Step (2004. Osher, Dwyer & Jackson. Boston: Sopris West) is an excellent resource to address this question. It is a

document that has a lot of the intervention programs in it that have been vetted and used in schools as well as forms and some of the materials that we've used in implementation, so you might want to have access to that (www.sopriswest.com).

Q3. **Sometimes people panic about connecting with the media; do you have any good resources, learning materials, suggestions for working with the media or how to talk to reporters?**

Kevin Dwyer: I'd refer you to professional organizations that deal with this issue. If you're in a system that has a media specialist that has a person that does the public relations work for the system, then I would certainly latch onto them and actually feed them the information and let them work with you on translating it into a good press release. The other thing is to invite the media in and describe what it is you are working to accomplish. There are some communities where there are educational reporters you could invite in to see some of the programs in action or to listen to a presentation by a teacher of what they're doing in social skills and those kind of things. Make sure your leadership understands the program. For example we've had observations by some top level administrators to see how social skills training works and how planning centers operate so they can be informed representatives.

Q4. **Have you worked with small rural schools with this process? How does it change the details you've shared today?**

Kevin Dwyer: Yes, in Iowa we have coached schools as they develop their plans. In that state they relied very strongly on the state education agency and its regional support system area offices to give them the assistance to implement a plan. The other thing is reaching out to your local universities. Many rural states have universities that can provide you with assistance and are willing to reach out to support your efforts. In some situations it's a more difficult task to do it alone in a very small rural district. You may also want to utilize the Safe and Supportive Schools Technical Assistance Center to address your ideas and what you're trying to accomplish.

Q5. **Some schools start with this process in name but fall back in focus on intervention and prevention programs that are already in place. How can you convince the school to have a whole school focus?**

Kevin Dwyer: What it comes back to is going all the way back to looking at what your goals are and how you address your needs. Is the program that's in effect now addressing the needs; in other words, is it an effective program? Does it need to be tweaked to be even more effective or does it need to be replaced? You have to have the support of your system's leadership. You're not going to be able to change a school or a system if the system wants to maintain its existing programs and give it a different title. You need a champion of best practices for the defined problems. You need an ally at the management level to make that happen or have a very strong support from someone in a leadership position.

Q6. **You mentioned that folks did shout outs of good things happening by the results of the work of the school climate team. Can you share some memorable examples?**

Kevin Dwyer: In relation to the social skills program where a youngster in the second grade class went to the principal's office and said, 'I'm learning how to think before I act. This is really helping me, but we need to have this program for my older brother.' The principal then said, 'let's think about moving this into the higher grades.' In that school situation they now have the program all the way through the fifth grade. It's that sort of thing, when a parent comes in and says, 'my child is doing his homework and he even says, I'm frustrated but I'm learning to calm down.' We give these short anecdotes of information that people report to us and then they become the shout outs for the program. In relation to planning centers, we're moving to shout outs as a way for them to track desired change. An example from that setting is a student who was suspended five times within the first six months of school, who was then moved into the planning center model and he worked with the center staff. His suspensions were reduced to zero in the next few months. That's a success in terms of developing trust and helping that student learn problem solving skills, that was the remedy for that individual student. We want shout outs at every faculty meeting that occurs, and we want a couple of minutes of the principal's time to make sure that those are communicated.

Q7. **Have you seen evidence of the time invested in these procedures, the team meetings, strategic plan, regular action planning, etc. result in saved time in the long run? That is, less time spent on discipline in the classroom perhaps?**

Kevin Dwyer: Yes and also less time making mistakes, but it does take time to plan. It takes time to select the best program that's the best fit for your system. It takes time to do those things, but it's critical that we do the planning. What we find is our student support teams meet for less than an hour a week. Preparation time is very important for those meetings. When you have a student support team that's following 70 students and none of them are being referred to special education placement, and they're all still in regular education classroom and their attendance is improving, (that doesn't mean that every one of those kids had to be brought up for discussion every week, but what it does mean is that somebody is making certain that that list of 70 is being monitored for effective interventions) it's a powerful experience once it's operationalized.

Q8. **At what grade level are you seeing school based climate teams being most utilized? Is it evenly distributed across elementary, middle school, and high school? Do you have any suggestions for improvement if it's not evenly distributed?**

Kevin Dwyer: It's more difficult to develop action plans in high schools. If you look at our researched programs and social skills programs you'll find that most social skills programs are geared to elementary aged students. We have fewer validated research and intervention programs that we're talking about in the high schools. Planning centers and student support teams are being carefully monitored and are effective in high schools; however, they are less effective than they are in elementary schools. In other words, they need more coaching, more support, and they are dealing with more complex problems in the high schools than they are in the elementary and middle school aged groups. That's an issue. We see more conflict resolution

type issues in our high schools and we're looking very strongly at that in relation to how the conflict resolution and peer mediation conflict resolution work with our planning centers. Class meetings, done correctly using trained teachers and active student leadership can be implemented in high schools as a universal prevention program.

Q9. We are considering allowing our intervention specialist at a state level to convene and be part of school teams, what are your recommendations for this approach?

Kevin Dwyer: The connection between the coaching and knowledge support from the state level and local level is great. I also would hope that in larger systems there would be local liaisons to connect state support For example, in Iowa we worked through the state agency and its regional system in order to build school teams and to help them set up their strategic plans and action plans.

Q10. We've been hearing a lot about school climate and conditions for learning, what is the difference between them or how are they similar?

Kevin Dwyer: School climate is the umbrella construct and the conditions for learning are the components you want to focus on to ensure a positive school climate. You want to make sure you don't forget to address, for example, positive discipline and social skill instruction. Academics are also critical. A school that does not address an effective reading program, and I've had this experience, results in having youngsters who are emotionally ready to learn but haven't been exposed to the kind of academics that they need in order to be successful. The ideal combination for which we're striving is the combination of a positive climate and academic vigor.

Q11. Are there any validated instruments available in the public domain for measuring school climate that a district or school could adopt without cost?

Greta Colombi: We have a list of different instruments that can be used on the SSSTA Web site. If you go to the homepage on the springboard on the bottom left, there's a school climate measurement section (http://safesupportiveschools.ed.gov/index.php?id=133). If you click there you will see that we have about 15 batteries. At the bottom of the page you will see it says survey instruments and it says whether the survey instruments are publicly available or not. In cooperation with the Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, our center has been in the process of vetting instruments that are currently available to assess their validity and reliability. This is just the beginning of the list. We know there are many other instruments out there in the field, and there is a way here to be able to click and nominate a survey.

Kevin Dwyer: One of the other things you might do in your selection process is if you think a survey is the best fit for your school, check it out with your state advisor or check it out with another authority that can give you some ideas about whether or not this makes sense. Cost is an issue these days, but it costs more to do it ineffectively than to do it effectively.

Q12. What changes would you recommend a student at a focus groups talk about in regards to staff relationships and the front office being unfriendly?

Kevin Dwyer: That's a very classic signal of a climate issue and it is one that needs to be addressed in three ways. One is the awareness level, making people aware of the impact of this because people may not be aware of the fact that when a person walks into a school that the greeter is the most important person that a school has. Ignoring the person when he/she walks in the office is pretty insulting and doesn't show the respect that needed. The second is training individuals to be positive greeters and the third is accountability. People should be expected to be respectful and to be responsive. Something that people have done in the past is to get into the whole idea that these are our customers – students included. Sometimes role-playing and other kinds of activities might be considered in a school. It should be documented that this is one of the goals; this is part of the strategic plan. You are going to look at it and evaluate it and report back in January that you are addressing it.

Q13. What's the most common obstacle school staffs face as they are implementing a school-based climate team and what effective strategies have been used to overcome it?

Kevin Dwyer: One of the toughest issues is buy-in, the issue of getting everybody on board, and not perceiving positive discipline and social skill instruction and its reinforcement as mollycoddling or humanistic education or something like that. This is a gradual process; this isn't a process that happens overnight. I do think it goes back to one of the questions asked earlier; "what is the research data showing us?" Sometimes we need to go back to that. A school may have a very high number of discipline referrals per day. In that situation, the discipline procedure may be one that is considered punishment. In that situation, how many people understand that that whole concept is that punishment doesn't work. Nor do we know what punishment for each individual youngster is. It takes time, but make sure to use the research. If you can, have the buy-in from some of your teachers and be ambassadors to the others on your faculty. If it is a leadership problem, that is a very different matter. You need to find a way to get more senior managers to address any leadership issues that are barriers.

Q14. Please give an example of how a school used the chart on slide 38 and how it supported the school's implementation.

Kevin Dwyer: That chart has been dramatically modified so that it doesn't list schools and lists some of the other issues that we've had. For example, what we would do is coach the school to make certain that they are doing what needs to be done. For example, we would reinforce that the planning center needs to demonstrate what interventions it's doing with students and validate those interventions. We would then be coaching that planning center's instructional assistant to conduct and record the intervention (like de-escalation). We would expect the principal to monitor that instructional assistant recording process and support effective interventions.. If support is needed, then the principal could request help from the coach and a coach can come back in and do more work if they need more work. In that situation, we might even decide to send that person to another school to see how their colleague has implemented that recording process and the interventions. In some schools we find that student support teams are not meeting on a

regular basis, so that is one way we would then use a more direct approach with the principal to make certain that it is meeting regularly. Then the follow-up would be to demonstrate weekly meetings by a record of those meetings being held on a regular basis. In other words, moving somebody from monthly meetings to weekly meetings is a critical component.

Q15. Do you have any additional ideas to move these ideas to regular practice?

Kevin Dwyer: The whole concept behind this is that if people do things with fidelity, they begin to see how important this is for them as individuals and get that buy-in. One of the best ways is to do this is to have that cheerleader or guardian angel on the top level management who says, 'we are not going to do this as a pilot program, we are going to do this across the board.' The next step is to show how implementation positively improves student outcomes. Finding that is also very critical. I don't know if we could do it without that.