

South Carolina Safe and Supportive Schools Initiative (SCSCI)

2015 Principal Interview Report

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Background/Purposes

In 2010 South Carolina Department of Education (SCDE) received a U.S. Department of Education's Office of Safe and Healthy Students Safe and Supportive Schools grant to implement the South Carolina School Climate Initiative (SCSCI). The initiative enables the state to develop a more complete data collection system, integrate existing datasets into a school safety score, and identify and implement research-based interventions in high-risk schools to ensure a safe, supportive learning environment for all students.

The purposes of these two-fold interviews with school principals was to gather quantitative data related to the program implementation over all three years of the grant, i.e., the programs they implemented, whether training needs were met and what further or ongoing training was necessary; how principals rated the effectiveness of programs; to what extent schools would continue to use the programs after the grant ends; and the likelihood of schools continuing other grant-related activities following the end of the grant period.

We then gathered qualitative data through open-ended interview questions that asked principals how effective programs were, which ones they would continue to implement, what measures they or their schools had taken for sustainability, and the greatest challenges they face going forward.

Methods

One WestEd evaluator initially contacted principals through email to set up individual appointments for telephone interviews. In one case, the grant coordinator at the school was interviewed instead of the principal. Each interview lasted 20-30 minutes. The interviewer analyzed and synthesized interview notes to provide data for this report.

Results

Programs Implemented

Table 1 shows the number of schools that implemented each program across the three years of the grant. The number of schools implementing each program remained mostly consistent across all three years. The programs implemented most often were Project Achieve and Talent Development High School; next was High Schools That Work; next was Brief Strategic Family Therapy, followed by PBIS, Mentoring Programs, Olweus Bullying Program, and the Referral System to Community Resources. It is important to note that not all schools had access to all programs each year, which explains why the implementation record varies. Respondents could also choose "other" as a category and enter a program that was not on the list, such as Communities in Schools or Transition Programs.

Table 1. Programs Implemented at Schools Across the Three Grant Years (%)

| Program Implemented | Year 1 | Year 2 | Year 3 |
|---|----------|----------|----------|
| PBIS | 12 (52%) | 12 (52%) | 14 (61%) |
| Olweus Bullying Prevention | 10 (44%) | 10 (44%) | 11 (44%) |
| High Schools That Work | 18 (78%) | 18 (78%) | 17 (73%) |
| Botvin Life Skills Training High School | 8 (35%) | 10 (44%) | 10 (44%) |
| Career Academies | 4 (17%) | 5 (22%) | 5 (22%) |
| School Transitional Environment Program | 5 (22%) | 4 (17%) | 5 (22%) |
| Project Achieve | 22 (96%) | 22 (96%) | 22 (96%) |
| Check and Connect | 8 (35%) | 7 (30%) | 6 (26%) |
| Mentoring Program | 12 (52%) | 13 (57%) | 13 (57%) |
| JAG | 5 (22%) | 5 (22%) | 5 (22%) |
| Crisis Prevention Intervention | 8 (35%) | 8 (35%) | 10 (44%) |
| Brief Strategic Family Therapy (BSFT) | 3 (13%) | 22 (96%) | 22 (96%) |
| Project Grad | 1 (4%) | 2 (9%) | 2 (9%) |
| Talent Development High School | 22 (96%) | 22 (96%) | 22 (96%) |
| Capturing Kids Hearts | 3 (13%) | 3 (13%) | 4 (17%) |
| Referral System to Community Resources | 9 (39%) | 9 (39%) | 10 (44%) |
| Other | 15 (68%) | 6 (26%) | 2 (9%) |

Principals were asked to rate the effectiveness of the programs on a scale from 1-5 (1= not effective at all; 5 = very effective). Table 2 shows the total (N) and the mean rating for each program. The number of schools implementing each program varies, which should be considered when interpreting the means. However, most of the programs were rated between 3.5 and 4.6 in terms of effectiveness.

Table 2: Effectiveness Ratings from Principals

| Program Implemented | N | Mean |
|---|----|------|
| JAG | 5 | 4.6 |
| Referral System to Community Resources | 9 | 4.4 |
| Mentoring Program | 13 | 4.3 |
| School Transitional Environment Program | 6 | 4.2 |
| High Schools That Work | 19 | 4.1 |
| Check and Connect | 7 | 4.1 |
| Career Academies | 6 | 4.0 |
| Talent Development High School | 1 | 4.0 |
| Capturing Kids Hearts | 4 | 4.0 |
| Crisis Prevention Intervention | 10 | 3.9 |
| Botvin Life Skills Training High School | 9 | 3.7 |
| Olweus Bullying Prevention | 12 | 3.5 |
| PBIS | 14 | 3.4 |
| Brief Strategic Family Therapy (BSFT) | 2 | 2.5 |
| Project Achieve | -- | -- |
| Project Grad | -- | -- |

School Data

Principals were asked how their school used the school climate data/score provided by the State as a result of data analysis from School Climate surveys. In answering this question, school principals and sometimes the grant coordinator shared not only how the data was used, but also some tangible outcomes and specific actions taken as a result of school teams working with data.

Ways Schools Used School Climate Score Data

All principals stated they shared the information widely, including with administration teams, school climate teams, school improvement council, principal advisory committees, department heads, and guidance counselors; as well as at student/parent meetings, parent advisory committees, and PLC meetings. Principals reported that sharing the information with staff and others led school teams to have discussions to identify strengths and weaknesses, and to determine the perceptions students and parents have about their school. Goals were set accordingly, and many have posted the school climate data on their school website, along with good news, accomplishments, and celebrations.

Data review and discussions increased understanding and awareness

Principals related what they and their school teams learned as a result of reviewing and discussing the data. For example, one principal noted the need to take notice of what students were doing outside of school hours in order to create environments to promote student success in both academic and social settings. Another emphasized the importance of paying particular attention to feedback from students, especially when finding ways to not only keep students safe, but also to ensure students feel safe, noting that perceptions of safety can be very different from reality. At times, principals found perceptions of safety held by students, parents and community members differed from the school or principals' perception.

Principals noted these discussions raised awareness of issues such as bullying for constituents who had not realized the extent of this and other behaviors. Additional topics of concern discussed during school team meetings included alcohol and substance use and abuse, violence, victimization and crisis intervention. Low parent involvement with schools was also mentioned as a common underlying concern.

Specific actions and tangible outcomes

Principals shared some of the specific actions taken and the tangible outcomes that resulted from this three-year focus on improving school climate. These included:

- Creation of a Safe Zone where students could be observers/reporters of potential incidents
- Guidance counselors used data to guide advisory lessons
- Changes made to [discipline] code book
- Students included in planning, as well as other/all stakeholders
- Collaboration with SRO officer to implement alcohol awareness sessions
- Bi-lingual guidance counselor hired
- Three full-time bilingual teachers and bi-lingual parent advocate hired
- Security cameras added
- Blackboard being used to connect parents/improve parent relations.

"We focused on what they do outside of school, i.e., drugs and alcohol, bullying. We held town hall meetings; and we put systems in place for students to bring [our] attention to others ... a safe zone for students ... where they are not just bystanders, but observers who can inform."

"We have a Parent University – monthly meetings with stakeholders – parents, community leaders, and students. We have open discussions around the data, such as attendance, [behavior] problems, bullying ... we bring what's going on to the forefront and discuss it, and look for solutions. Everyone is involved; I believe being transparent is important."

"Our Director of Guidance leads the school climate team; they review the data and share it with faculty. We saw issues of substance use at school and violence victimization, so we installed more security cameras to remove 'blind' areas on campus. We were also low on parent involvement, so we now use 'Blackboard Connect' to assist in disseminating information to parents. We do an 'Alert' every week to keep parents informed."

"... student engagement was lower than we would like so we increased activities that give students 'voice and choice'."

"We used the data to identify areas we might have gotten a lower score ... weakness areas. Every year we modify what we're doing to address those areas of weakness."

Greatest Challenges for Principals

Principals were asked to share the three greatest challenges they expect to face going forward now that the grant resources are ending. All principals easily enumerated two and most shared a third. Obtaining funding to continue the programs and improvement efforts was mentioned most often. Following this, principals enumerated other challenges, such as providing professional development for all (and especially) new staff; improving parent-school relationships; losing district support; developing new cost-free ways to incentivize students, having timely access to survey data; and staying focused and committed to improving school climate.

- Sixteen of the 22 principals we interviewed mentioned funding as their greatest challenge going forward. The remaining six principals noted: providing training for teachers, a high student transition rate, and low parent participation as their greatest challenges.
- Twenty principals offered a second greatest challenge; six of these mentioned funding, five noted providing training and high quality professional development for teachers, and ten were other challenges (see below).
- As a third major challenge, five principals mentioned funding for training staff in crisis intervention, and for training new staff. Another challenge noted was finding funding for (or new ways to support) student incentives/recognition/celebrations. Four principals noted losing the district/State support would be very challenging; and three mentioned the need to increase parent involvement.
- The following were among "other challenges" principals mentioned:
 - identifying students for 9th grade academies
 - improving transition programs at feeder schools
 - students arriving at high school two or three years behind
 - needing a mentor on site and losing a vital staff member/

- student transiency rate
- funding for supporting attendance at conferences
- district coordinator
- maintain data tracking team
- keeping focused/committed/priority
- access to survey system and detailed reporting for all grades; access to data from all grade levels/evaluation
- parental participation
- finding mentors
- transportation

Measures taken to ensure sustainability

Twenty-one school principals disclosed the measures they had taken to ensure sustainability of the progress and improvements in school climate that were achieved during the grant years. Two reported they have been able to incorporate all expenses into their school budget. Five cited the assistance of monetary and other resource donations that will be provided by community partnerships they have developed. Following are examples of principals' comments.

Incorporated cost into school/district budget

"We have incorporated [costs] into our regular school budget ... money to use to fund all the programs (and training) that were funded under the grant. We do not plan to lose anything."

"District will incorporate some things as line items in [its] annual budget."

"I have some funds and we will be able to do the things we've done. Reallocating staff to pick up responsibilities of [grant coordinator] in the past."

"... will analyze budget for ways to continue programs using general operating funds."

Developed community partnerships to provide resources or monetary donations

"We are seeking funding through community organizations and grants. We are also working more closely with the district to share in their expertise in grant writing and exploring other sources of funding."

"[We will] present [our] program to a business partner [that is] funding the mentoring program; [we] also have a business partner partially funding JAG. We are encouraged that we will be able to sustain programs with business partners."

"Looking into community mentoring program ... there are retirement homes in the area ... [we will] recruit from them and assign students to them ... we'll look for ex-educators who want to volunteer their time."

Incorporated school climate improvement strategies into programs that already exist in schools

Five principals described that many strategies or programs have been incorporated into the school or into programs that already existed at the school. One school hired a person to run programs and the school intends to maintain that person's employment after the grant to conduct monthly meetings and monitor what is being accomplished. More than one indicated exploring external grant writing and starting to work on writing 21st century grants, while others indicated they were still searching for additional funds to support specific programs, such as PBIS.

"We have made modifications; home school connection established through a media center; teacher and student of the month; bus drivers of the month; and local businesses will help us keep that going."

"Finding a way to reward students -- rewarding students with awards for their efforts (most motivated, highest improved) allowed them to acknowledge successes ... planning fall carnival as fundraiser."

Built capacity of staff through training and professional development

Eight principals indicated that they had focused on building staff capacity through training/professional development and providing attendance at conferences, and expected to be able to sustain many practices this way.

"[We have] exposed all staff to strategies; most have been incorporated into the school day. [We are] looking for ways to incorporate Check & Connect into the school day."

"Our staff are now well-trained and can continue to implement the programs we have. Our school climate team will continue to operate."

"Will continue to build capacity around behavioral health services."

"Capturing Kids' Hearts" trained 'process champions' that help keep the program going with fidelity.

RTTT is [also] helping with program sustainability."

"[We've been] building staff capacity; they can now teach and train."

"[We've] invested in teachers and technology. Incorporated the training into the meetings ... norming."

Training Needs

We also asked principals whether training needs for staff had been met with respect to the various programs implemented. The number of principals who indicated that training needs were met by each program is presented in Table 3. Overall, training needs were met in some programs while others needed more training.

Table 3. Training Needs Met

| Program Implemented n=# schools implementing) | Training needs met |
|--|--------------------|
| PBIS (n=14) | 8 |
| Olweus Bullying Prevention (n=11) | 6 |
| High Schools That Work)n=17 | 10 |
| Botvin Life Skills Training High School (n=10) | 3 |
| Career Academies (n=5) | 5 |
| School Transitional Environment Program (n=4) | 3 |
| Project Achieve (n=22) | 22 |
| Check and Connect (n=6) | 1 |
| Mentoring Program (n=13) | 5 |
| JAG (n=5) | 1 |
| Crisis Prevention Intervention (n=10) | 4 |
| Brief Strategic Family Therapy (BSFT) (n=22) | 22 |
| Project Grad (n=2) | 22 |
| Talent Development High School (n=22) | 22 |
| Capturing Kids Hearts (n=4) | 1 |
| Referral System to Community Resources (n=10) | 6 |

Table 4 shows the number of principals who believe further training is needed or ongoing training is needed by program. For nearly all the programs at least some principals said that training is still needed or ongoing training would be beneficial.

Table 4. Future Training Needs

| Program Implemented (n=# schools implementing) | Still need training | Ongoing Training |
|--|---------------------|------------------|
| PBIS (n=14) | 2 | 8 |
| Olweus Bullying Prevention (n=11) | 3 | 9 |
| High Schools That Work (n=17) | 3 | 12 |
| Botvin Life Skills Training High School (n=10) | 2 | 3 |
| Career Academies (n=5) | 22 | 3 |
| School Transitional Environment Program (n=4) | 22 | 3 |
| Project Achieve (n=22) | 2 | 1 |
| Check and Connect (n=6) | 2 | 3 |
| Mentoring Program (n=13) | 3 | 8 |
| JAG (n=5) | 1 | 5 |
| Crisis Prevention Intervention (n=10) | 22 | 8 |
| Brief Strategic Family Therapy (BSFT) (n=22) | 22 | 1 |
| Project Grad (n=2) | 22 | 1 |
| Talent Development High School (n=22) | 22 | 1 |
| Capturing Kids Hearts (n=4) | 22 | 5 |
| Referral System to Community Resources (n=10) | 22 | 4 |

Hypothetical Newspaper Article

Principals were asked what they would highlight if asked to write a newspaper article about their school climate grant. Twenty-two principals were enthusiastic as they noted progress in improving school climate, and made several mentions of evidence of positive outcomes, such as:

- increased sense of safety and reliability, decreased number of fights and incidences of violence
- higher expectations for students, an increased sense of pride, improved attitudes and greater buy-in of students and staff
- decrease in referrals, dismissals and dropouts
- higher parent participation and support
- an improved overall perception of the school due to the improved school climate.

Following are specific comments from principals given in response to this question.

Improved school climate/environment/safety

“School climate changed. Very high expectations for students; more are going on to higher education; more scholarships; 37 of 41 graduated.”

“Countless student success stories ... “palpable” positive campus climate.”

“Increased sense of security for students ... improved student attitudes ... can see and feel it on campus.”

“Increased positive recognition of students; increased teacher recognition also.”

“The biggest change we’ve seen is that our students feel more secure on campus. Staff attitudes seem to have improved as well. Relationships between students and staff are stronger than they used to be. This is something you can see and feel on campus.”

“Having the right person in the position is key ... decrease in drop outs; increased parent involvement; the Check & Connect mentor would go out and bring them to school if they had no transportation.”

Reduction in referrals, dismissals and dropouts

“I would highlight the reduction in referrals and the increased student buy-in for the school climate program. I have watched this over the years ... now it’s more student and staff driven instead of being pushed down from the top. Staff and student buy-in has increased ... and that’s a big highlight.”

“The most significant piece of data is the drop in behavioral referrals from 33 to 3 in just 2 years. We wanted to change the perception of the community about the school. Discipline was the biggest [issue] ... referrals for ‘dangerous’ was the biggest group. A very systematic process ... looked at the data ... drug and alcohol was a problem, 90% of referrals were classroom ... led to good to great results on report card. Below average to excellent on relationships.”

Increased student test scores, graduation rate and scholarships

"I would attribute to funding from the school climate grant ... a shift in buy-in from teachers. This past year our graduation rate was high, 87%; in 2005 it was 50%. End of course test scores are highest in district with 94% pass rate. School recognized by US News and World Report at least twice as being one of the nation's highest high schools. Ours is one of top 100 schools in SC in 2015. More students earned scholarships from colleges this past year ... speaks volumes of the school climate and what our teachers do to help students ... "

"100% passed algebra; graduation rates went up 10 points to 82%; due to many opportunities for kids to get help."

"The fact that 5 years ago our student population was the second lowest performing in South Carolina; and five years ago our graduation rate was 61% and now it's up to 78%. We still have a lot of work to be done, but we can get there. The students haven't changed, the environment has changed."

"33% of kids in program passed core classes and moved to next grade in year one; 60% in year 2. Year 3 begins in 2 weeks."

Specific Program Outcomes

Principals also noted the value of some specific programs, such as *Check & Connect*, *Capturing Kids' Hearts*, the *Freshman Transition Program* and mentoring programs.

"I don't have exact numbers, but our referrals for discipline issues have gone way down this year which we attribute primarily to Capturing Kids Hearts. The intentional work on building and maintaining authentic relationships between staff and students and students and students has really helped reduce discipline problems."

"I would share the Check & Connect Program because I think that made the greatest difference for students in their academic endeavors. The kids like and trust our [C&C mentor]; she is well known in the community and able to engage students that had become very disengaged with school. She built relationships ... and it allowed them to have that one person to pull them back into the school culture. To me that was the best thing that came out of it ... she knew them by name and I know they were in school more because she was involved with them."

"The biggest thing we have found over the last couple of years that we have to do more of is positive recognition of students ... rather than negative referrals ... interacting in a positive manner with students ... and that has changed. We do a lot to recognize our teachers too. That helps support and encourage teachers to do the same thing with kids. If [the administration] is recognizing teachers, and they are recognizing each other, students will start looking for positive things to do ... to show us ... like hold a door, pick up trash. They want to be rewarded ... and they are learning to be productive members of society."

"The Freshman Transition Program ... we're in our third year. Students come in for four hours over the summer; we introduce them to high school; we do a session for parents. It makes everyone more comfortable approaching high school. Once students [are here] their fear is not as high as it would be if they had not come earlier."

Plans to Continue Implementing Programs

Principals were asked if their school would continue implementing any of the programs after the grant ends. The results, presented in Table 5, show that most schools plan to continue program implementation. There were three programs that some principals noted they would not continue, Olweus Bullying Prevention, Botvin Life Skills Training High School, and Check and Connect.

Table 5. Plan to Implement the Program After the Grant Period

| Program | Yes | No |
|---|-----|----|
| PBIS | 13 | -- |
| Olweus Bullying Prevention | 11 | 2 |
| High Schools That Work | 19 | -- |
| Botvin Life Skills Training High School | 7 | 1 |
| Career Academies | 7 | -- |
| School Transitional Environment Program | 5 | -- |
| Project Achieve | -- | -- |
| Check and Connect | 6 | 2 |
| Mentoring Program | 14 | -- |
| JAG | 5 | -- |
| Crisis Prevention Intervention | 9 | -- |
| Brief Strategic Family Therapy (BSFT) | 1 | -- |
| Project Grad | -- | -- |
| Talent Development High School | -- | -- |
| Capturing Kids Hearts | 3 | -- |
| Referral System to Community Resources | 7 | -- |

Future Collection of School Climate Data

All 22 principals indicated that their school would continue to collect school climate data from students, teachers and parents; would continue school climate team meetings; and would continue to provide training in school climate strategies and programs.

Support from the State

All but one of the 22 principals gave very positive feedback concerning the support they received from State and district personnel during this three-year grant period; one principal would have liked more support and face time with State/district staff. Generally, principals shared the support they received helped them understand the parameters of the grant and technical aspects, such as budget and reporting. Many indicated they appreciated the training and professional development on and off-site, and help with event organization and community/parent support. Principals noted the State personnel provided support and guidance with developing school goals as well as with monitoring progress; gave encouragement and built confidence for moving forward with improving school climate. As one stated, "The support from the State was flexible and hands-on ... respectful assistance without being overbearing."

Principals' Concerns and Suggestions

Principals shared concern for over-burdened staff, and one noted that hiring someone with the grant monies had been so beneficial because then the school climate work was not an add-on for teachers. It was often stated that this would not be the case going forward. Another suggested district delays with funding caused difficulties: "The grant guidelines for the fiscal year don't match the school year budgetary guidelines." Still others noted that Year 1 data was not accessible or complete. A few principals made other suggestions, such as:

- Find a way to continue funding to support conference attendance.
- Create some type of extension, even it means reapplying ... some way to help sustain [the effort].
- Consider how high schools could have access to substance abuse treatment programs (not just prevention education) for students at risk. "It will be more impactful if they hear it from someone other than a teacher/mentor."
- Develop a related school climate program to implement at the middle school level, as those students hear about what is happening at the high school and show interest.
- Screening criteria based on zip codes may not be targeting/including everyone in need.
- Share success stories backed by data from other schools with similar demographics about what programs worked and had impact.