



## Meaningful Change Stories from New Hampshire's Safe Schools/Healthy Students Initiative

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# Safe Schools/Healthy Students Most Significant Changes: Why & How

## Safe Schools/Healthy Students comes to New Hampshire

In 2013, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) awarded a Safe Schools/Healthy Students (SS/HS) grant to the New Hampshire Department of Education's (NH DOE) Bureau of Special Education, with involvement of three Local Education Agencies (LEAs): Concord, Laconia, and Rochester School Districts. The 4-year grant is designed to improve the climate and safety of schools while promoting the emotional well being of students by enhancing behavioral health supports in the school and linkages to community resources. The NH SS/HS project identifies objectives in five Element areas as described in the SS/HS framework developed by the National Resource Center for Mental Health Promotion and Youth Violence Prevention (<http://www.healthysafechildren.org/SS/HS-framework>). NH SS/HS completed its third year of work in 2015-16, focusing on enhancing the implementation of objectives that began in 2014-15, after an initial planning year.

## Qualitative data enriches the evaluation of Safe Schools/Healthy Students

As the external evaluator for the SS/HS grant, the Center for Behavioral Health Innovation (BHI) at Antioch University New England monitors program implementation, processes and outcomes through quantitative data collection and analysis. Because quantitative data tells only a limited story, we designed a qualitative study to complement and enrich the evaluation. The goals of the qualitative study were:

- To learn about unintended and intended outcomes, and how SS/HS contributed to them
- To give voice to the people who are closest to the action
- To help communicate project outcomes in a more compelling way

## A blended qualitative evaluation model

BHI evaluators blended two qualitative research models – *Outcome Harvesting* (Wilson-Grau, Richardo & Britt, 2012) and the *Most Significant Change* technique (Davies, Rick & Dart 2005) – to guide the study. The strategy entailed two steps. The first was finding our way to the most significant changes that have occurred in each school district that were *at least partially attributable to SS/HS*, through an initial round of key informant focus groups in each district. The second step was to verify and thicken those stories through individual interviews with additional stakeholders who directly witnessed or experienced the changes reported in the focus groups.

To accomplish the first step, each SS/HS LEA Project Manager identified several key informants who were familiar with significant changes taking place in the district. These key informants participated in a summer focus group to collect the initial round of change stories. We elicited change stories with the following prompt: “We are interested in the most significant, observable changes that SS/HS has helped bring about in some way. Significant changes can be positive or negative, direct or indirect, intended or not. Looking back over the time since SS/HS started, what do you think the most significant change has been?” See the Appendix for the focus group protocol.

To accomplish the second step, participants nominated individuals who had directly experienced or witnessed the significant change stories that emerged in the focus groups. We contacted these individuals for phone interviews to verify and enrich the story. We shared a written description of the relevant change story and asked for their perspective/experience of it.

## Reporting exemplary stories and themes

This report presents meaningful change stories from Rochester, Laconia and Concord School Districts, as well as LEA-crosscutting themes.



## Rochester School District

### Laying the SS/HS foundation in preschool

A major challenge of implementing Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) at the Rochester Early Education for All Children (REACH) Preschool was bringing about a cultural shift among the staff members, which has directly impacted student experience and behavior. Developing and setting foundations of behavior is familiar territory for preschool teachers. For the long-time staff at REACH, the experience of an external coach systematically revisiting foundations was initially very frustrating. “Our first meeting was awful, I thought, ‘this guy is not coming back,’” reflected a staff member.

#### Key Informants:

Preschool Speech Pathologist  
 Preschool Teacher  
 External Coach

The first step was to get the staff working and thinking together. An experienced external coach laid out clear ground rules, anticipated key decisions points, and facilitated an effective process. “This group of very strong-minded individuals had to learn to think outside of their individual classrooms as the unit of change, and begin working collectively to support kids,” explains the coach. Teachers and staff ultimately learned compromise, consensus, and negotiation skills to arrive at a unifying theme, which expressed core values and behavioral expectations while allowing each class to retain a unique identity.

“We began operating at a higher level with new norms of collaboration, and what I saw transpire among the staff was also happening with the students.”

Change in the children’s behavior started with change in adult behavior. Staff had to learn to work collectively and needed to “own the core values” before they could ask the students to change. Conflicts and strained dynamics had to be resolved and they learned to value and respect each other. Staff now reports positive change in student

behavior: “They all work together, for example, helping each other line up. I don’t say a word,” reports a teacher. “The kids know exactly what to do, what is expected of them.”

Through the process, the preschool staff discovered that while they shared a *sensibility* for teaching foundations of behavior, their language and expectations were not universal. The process of systematically and collectively working through the wording, process, and steps for setting and reinforcing behavioral expectations was more effective than what they previously had achieved on their own. Establishing norms based on shared core values allowed very strong and experienced teachers to speak and be listened to in a respectful manner. “The first year has been a bumpy road and we still have a lot of work to do collectively,” reports a staff member, “however, students *and* staff are really benefiting.”

#### Lessons Learned:

Effective coaching, collective and systematic process supports implementation.  
 Getting it right inside – collectively – is a key to implementation.



## Learning to lead: creating powerful teacher teams in Rochester

The SS/HS grant brought PBIS back to life at Gonic Elementary School in Rochester School District (RSD), with the significant outcome of fostering happy students, who know what is expected of them to succeed in school. A 2010 grant first brought PBIS to the district, but five years later, participation had languished. The SS/HS grant arrived along with strong top-down leadership support from the administration and the creation of a district leadership team, an umbrella group drawn from district schools, organizational partners, and external coaches. The teacher-run district leadership team leads PBIS implementation in RSD and provides a vehicle for creative, data-driven problem solving in schools.

**Key Informant:**  
First Grade Teacher

“Three years ago three district schools didn’t even come to the PBIS meetings,” reports a teacher; “we lacked direction.” When news of the SS/HS grant came to RSD, teachers advised, “Just don’t call it PBIS.” However, the SS/HS grant brought a new mandate, and PBIS meetings gained direction and structure by using them to train PBIS teams to lead themselves. We didn’t need someone else to lead us, but we needed help to learn that,” reflects a teacher.

“Change is really hard for most people; with the team, we can talk and plan and give people what they need for support.”

Now everybody at Gonic participates in PBIS. “We are teaching the students our expectations so they know how to meet them, explains the teacher. “The kids are happy—they understand what we are teaching and modeling.” Parents know the behavioral expectations and understand the goals, and most teachers are on-board. One

of the most effective qualities of the district leadership team is that teachers are not looked down upon for saying what they need. The teacher-led team stays close to the data and empowers teachers to identify school problems and develop solutions.

### Lessons Learned:

Teacher-led teams offer opportunities to develop leadership and provide peer support. Training teachers to use data fosters creative problem solving.



## Isolation to engagement: Collaborative problem solving across RSD

As a high-need district, RSD historically experiences the ebb and flow of grant funds, with a familiar pattern of isolated staff members working away in their silos until funds dry up. Through SS/HS

### Key Informants:

RMS Drug & Alcohol Counselor  
SHS Guidance Counselor

they have developed a collaborative, solutions-oriented culture in the district, where meetings have evolved into opportunities to solve problems collectively. Staff from the RSD middle and high schools regularly gather to address school issues, many of them impacting the district's most vulnerable students.

For example, a problem RSD grappled with this past year was the transition between 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade—a tricky time for many Rochester students with long-term implications for their education. RMS staff had noticed a recurring pattern of 8<sup>th</sup> graders acting out and exhibiting anxious behaviors as they approached the end of middle school; the team recognized that making a successful transition to high school was a defining event in a student's life. How could they help entering 9<sup>th</sup> graders walk into high school with more connections and confidence?

The improved transition effort involved collaboration among team members from two schools and negotiating new territory. The team ultimately launched a new peer mentor program connecting 12<sup>th</sup> graders with new students using the extensive club program at Spaulding High School. Seniors provide new students with information about the array of available activities and show them the ropes, including how to start their own clubs to cultivate their interests.

The shift in RSD culture has been a mark of success. One counselor reports that she now has access to key resources that she needs to do her job well: support of administration, tools, and “access to the right players at the right meetings.” This access in turn promotes a higher level of professionalism; she and her colleagues focus their efforts proactively, thinking about prevention and intervention across the student experience. “Now there is time to meet, plan, troubleshoot, and consider what it is that we can accomplish,” reflects a counselor.

“When you bring a problem to the team, we work on solutions,” describes one participant, “We no longer view people identifying problems as complaining or raising roadblocks to stifle action.”

The cultural shift has implications beyond better serving the needs of the Rochester students. One counselor states, “When we recognize programs and people and identify positive effects, doing the work becomes worth the effort.” People who feel valued and empowered stay longer and want to do more.

### Lessons Learned:

Recognition and support foster empowerment and commitment.  
Solution-focused problem solving supports collaboration and creativity.



## Proactive crisis response empowers RSD community

The transformation of RSD’s Critical Incident Response Team (CIRT) is another significant outcome of SS/HS. “The result is a team that is substantially more fortified and equipped to *prevent* trauma,” reports the CIRT Coordinator. Bringing together new resources and membership, updated training, and the renewed commitment of district administration, the CIRT was able “to stitch together many pieces into an amazing quilt” and renew the team. “SS/HS funding has been key: a source of opportunity and capacity-building,” adds an administrator.

### Key Informants:

- CIRT Coordinator
- Counselor & CIRT team member
- Principal
- District Administrator

In 2015-16, CIRT developed a district-wide protocol and trauma mitigation philosophy, which they subsequently presented to all levels of the RSD administration and all newly hired teachers. Now RSD has trained crisis responders at every grade level in almost every school in the district, aligned with the state's goal to build local capacity for disaster behavioral health response. RSD is now the only NH school district with a comprehensive in-house team and protocol in place.

“Thanks to state-of-the-art training, the team has learned to scale back its response in order to empower school communities to take the lead and limit the impact of crises.”

“We’re not limited to large scale and detrimental crises anymore. Before these changes, a school would flounder. Now we have the ability to support more finite issues,” reports the Coordinator. This shift was demonstrated by the team’s interventions over the year. At one extreme, an 8-person team navigated a

large and impactful critical incident around a student overdose death. The revamped team also had the capacity and training to deliver a small-scale response to help elementary school administrators, teachers, and parents anticipate the death of a student with a terminal illness. In addition to providing support and tools for teachers and parents, the team helped educate administrators about what is and is not helpful. With the team’s guidance, the school ultimately scaled back its response to empower community members to take the lead. “The most meaningful outcome is for community members to come together on their own accord,” reports an administrator.

“Crisis response instills confidence in people we are supporting, which trickles down to the kids,” explains the CIRT Coordinator. One teacher feels relief at having been trained, because she is aware of available resources and how to mobilize them as necessary. “The response team supports students and brings them to a place of resilience,” reports a counselor.

### Lessons Learned:

- Broad-based preparation instills confidence in responders and community.
- Increased capacity enables more proactive response to a range of incidents.



## Building bridges in the Rochester community

SS/HS has been the “guiding light” for citywide collaboration, supporting an improved relationship between the RSD and the City of Rochester. The Rochester Recreation Department (RRD) is a key partner in this collaboration, which directly supports Rochester youth with new programming and access to key relationships. These connections offer validation to the RRD for their critical role in the life of the city.

### Key Informants:

RRD Assistant Director

RPD Juvenile Diversion Coordinator

Beginning in 2015, the RSD, RRD and the Rochester police collaborated to establish a summer teen travel camp. Open to all Rochester teens (ages 13-16), the camp features weekly trips to state parks and other NH destinations. The goals are to get teens out into nature, and to support them to perceive adults—police among them—as friends, mentors and models and to pause to consider their life choices. Camp provides opportunities for kids to try new things and to recognize each other as people of value.

After the teen travel camp wrapped up last summer, one of the campers, a disconnected Rochester teen, came into the RRD to ask for help finding information on driving school. “We were able to point him in the right direction. It is a small thing, but he made that connection through camp,” reports the RRD Assistant Director. Recognizing these “small things” as critical is another significant outcome of the SS/HS grant. “Each summer, RRD engages 200 Rochester youth in camp, and forty percent of them receive financial aid. If it were not for this program, we don’t know how these children would spend their summer.”

Through this collaboration, RRD has solidified its reputation as a critical resource and collaborator when community leaders consider options for at-risk youth. “We constantly interact with kids and families and recognize the importance of our ‘boots on the ground’ contact,” reports the Assistant Director. The RRD staff has the platform and the motivation to continue creative collaboration with the district and city on behalf of Rochester’s kids.

“Rochester collaborates on everything; now we know what kids like and don’t like; we know where to look for sustainability; we are strategic and bring in new partners, like the State Bar Association.”

SS/HS’s new city-wide focus is prevention programming: “How to talk to kids and support community dialog on current issues, which fits in with the police goal of focusing on prevention, not reaction,” reports a participant. In Rochester, SS/HS is recognized for providing crucial support for infrastructure and bringing partners to the table.

### Lessons Learned:

New connections and experiences support youth development.  
SS/HS infrastructure and vision undergirds multi-system coalition.





## Laconia School District

### Linking mental health and learning in Laconia schools

Recognition of the critical importance of mental health in the education of young children has brought significant change to Laconia’s Pleasant Street School (PSS) and other district schools. Increased attention to mental health and resources for the schools has brought school-based social workers and therapists as well as opportunities for training in areas such as trauma sensitivity. The mental health awareness and trauma training and framework have supported Laconia schools in making the shift from reactive to proactive responses to student behavior.

#### Key Informants:

Elementary Guidance Counselor  
Preschool Teacher

“We’ve had trauma in school and haven’t known what to do. Now we’re trained and have a framework to work within,” a PSS guidance counselor reports. A key message of the training in trauma-sensitive learning was that children who have experienced a traumatic situation are often not able to focus effectively on learning until they have healed, so their academic achievement suffers. The PSS program provides a safe, structured routine, so children know what to expect. The program gets kids “wrapped” into the school setting to help them to relax when they arrive. A powerful resource for students who have experienced trauma is a yoga practice developed for post-traumatic stress disorder. District funds have made it possible for staff to be trained in Trauma-Sensitive Yoga by David Emerson (Trauma Center) and Amy Weintraub (Kripalu Institute).

In spring 2016, the PSS guidance counselor and preschool teacher piloted the Adverse Childhood

“Ultimately our goal is to use the ACEs and learn about students’ needs from parents so we know how best to help them.”

Experiences tool with parents of preschoolers transitioning to kindergarten, with the goal of using the ACEs to learn about student needs from parents. “This was an ‘aha’ moment for us, confirming significant challenges some kids face,” reflected a PSS preschool teacher. To support this work, the

SS/HS project manager is bringing social workers to the elementary schools to work with young families to address mental health challenges.

An unintended and important outcome is increased attention to the mental health of everyone in the school community, parents and teachers included. The PSS preschool program places strong emphasis on connecting with families and parents through its monthly family meetings. Parents feel ownership in the program and have a sense of belonging to the school community. Providing this positive school experience to both parents and students has transformed the growth and progress of the students and improved the family-school dynamic.

#### Lessons Learned:

Safe, predictable school routines help mitigate trauma.  
Simple interventions build repertoire of resources.  
Adults in schools also struggle with unresolved trauma.



## Shared language and culture nurture community at PSS

Another significant change at Pleasant Street School (PSS) has been the shift in school climate. “PBIS really made an impact on the building; it’s created a family, a community.” PSS has

### Key Informants:

Principal  
Physical Education Teacher  
Kindergarten Teacher  
Behavior Specialist

transformed through changes to the school culture – some big (shared language and positive interactions) – and some small (posters, banners, and t-shirts). “I’ve always loved my school and tight community and this has made us happier,” reflects a teacher.

This sense of belonging has a profound impact on the school community. “Everyone who is part of our community knows certain things, like ‘when the lights go off, voices go off’. This is how we act in our school,” reports the principal. A feeling that “we’re safe and we’re learning” pervades the school, adds a teacher. The shift in perception from individual teachers and classrooms to a single school community has had significant ripple effects for PSS. Even small investments in t-shirts, posters, and banners have yielded results in terms of community. “Once students know the school expectations they remind other students about them,” explains a teacher. Furthermore, students are talking to each other and making connections to create their own community.

Posters, language, and expectations for voice levels are consistent throughout the school, thanks to Responsive Classroom and PBIS. “Kids hear the message from all areas of the school and it makes a difference,” reports a teacher. Further, PBIS teams frame expectations and language positively. Even when working with misbehavior, the principal tries to engage students in a positive way: “What could you have done differently to show pride?”

“Visualize rules without ‘No’ in front.”

A stated goal of the PSS Tier I and Tier II teams was to reduce teacher burden. The Tier 1 team carefully planned how to ‘roll out’ behavioral expectations for cafeteria, bathrooms, auditoriums, etc. “We designed lesson plans and a schedule for all the teachers,” reports a team member. Then they follow up at weekly staff meetings where PBIS is on every agenda and teams report on activities, plans and challenges. Because teachers don’t feel the burden falls all on them, the initiative has experienced their strong buy-in.

Reaching out to parents and the wider community has been a natural extension of this effort and another significant piece of the SS/HS grant. Community activities have included assemblies, a writing marathon, and participation in a half-time dance performance for the LHS basketball team. “Students are our biggest allies because when they have a good experience they carry it with them,” comments the principal.

### Lessons Learned:

Easing teacher burden drives buy-in and success.  
Small investments can have big impact.  
Student engagement drives family and community involvement.



## SS/HS opportunities drive teacher collaboration and leadership

At the Pleasant Street School (PSS) opportunities for leadership and collaboration have emerged naturally through work on PBIS teams. Training in a wide variety of areas also opens up opportunities for professional development. “This is not just another thing coming down from ‘that guy’,” jokes the principal. “We’ve developed a set of internal leaders.”

“At this point, one-quarter of the PSS teachers are leading efforts in the school,” reports the principal. Furthermore, outside trainings in such areas as Mental Health First Aid and Trauma Sensitivity offer possibilities for professional development and leadership. Training in the Responsive Classroom approach helps staff develop strategies for talking effectively with students. PSS teachers have fully engaged: “They put their own spin on the material,” notes a behavior specialist, “but keep to the bones of what we ask, so they are not feeling like robots and they appreciate both the structure and flexibility.”

Team leaders find that teacher behavior has changed significantly in this environment. “I find that teachers reach out much more,” reflects a team leader. Teachers seek ideas from the PBIS coach and strategies and potential interventions from the school-based behavior specialist, a resource that they had not typically sought out before. Further, teachers seek support from partner teachers or from others on their Tier teams.

### Key Informants:

Elementary Principal  
Physical Education Teacher  
Kindergarten Teacher  
Behavior Specialist

“PBIS provided a process for us to create clear and fair expectations and language without teachers feeling picked on or called out.”

One team leader attributes these changes to increased teacher empowerment: “It felt like our school was having an increasing amount of behavioral issues and I don’t think people feel that way anymore. The bars on the graphs are getting smaller and smaller; things are getting better.” Teachers want students to be treated

fairly and to have clear expectations for their behavior.

The three Laconia elementary schools collaborated to develop a list of major behaviors that result in students going directly to a support room. A documented set of steps helps teachers to keep students with minor misbehavior issues in the classroom. These processes also help new teachers struggling with classroom management, as well as substitute teachers. “I don’t think they reach the point of ‘I’ve had it!’ as easily now,” says the principal.

“I think teachers are reflecting more on their practice as well,” explains a team leader. “Office discipline referral data helps teachers ask, ‘Did I do everything I could to help every student stay in the classroom?’” Further, teachers are using School-Wide Information System (SWIS) data to connect strategies they’ve implemented to changes in behaviors. They use data to isolate areas in need of improvement, such as behavioral expectations in the cafeteria or bathroom.

### Lessons Learned:

Clear structure promotes teacher engagement and ownership.  
Clear processes collectively guide consistent response to misbehavior.  
Access to data drives effective response.



## Cultivating respect sets tone for whole school community

The most significant change for the principal and staff of Elm Street School (ESS) has been the pervasive atmosphere of respect in the building, reflected in the way that ESS staff communicate

### Key Informants:

Elementary Principal  
PBIS Building Coach

with students. In the past, small numbers of ESS teachers raised voices in anger and yelled in frustration. Through PBIS and Responsive Classroom implementation, teachers and staff at ESS learned of the impact of speaking negatively to children and learned to build new, more positive approaches. “We find

ourselves celebrating positives much more than before and have incentives for students and for adults in the building,” explains the principal.

“The second year at ESS has been amazing because the kids already knew how to behave,” reports the PBIS building coach. “There were no surprises for them.” Because Responsive Classroom aligns and builds upon what students have been learning each year, transitions between grades and schools become smoother. Students experience the same behavioral expectations as they move through the elementary, middle and high schools, in developmentally appropriate ways. Laconia School District is “vertically aligned and consistent, without taking away individuality!” the coach adds.

Parents notice the respectful environment. “They constantly compliment the school atmosphere; our building environment is positive and consistent,” reports the Principal. The parents feel less intimidated because they know what to expect and what behavior is expected of their children. Because Responsive Classroom language encourages positive feedback linked to specific expectations, teachers report that work on student behavior has been more positive and constructive.

“The way that teachers talk to students and the way that students talk to each other and to teachers has completely changed.”

One of the most powerful PBIS tools is the School-Wide Information System (SWIS). SWIS allows ESS staff to enter and track data on student office discipline referrals over time. ESS uses data from SWIS “to identify problematic places in the building and times of day to learn triggers for challenging students,” explains the Principal. SWIS allows them to consider individual student behavior as well as school-wide patterns, which gives staff information about where they need to refresh expectations. Further, a social worker is now available to work with families, offering social and emotional support for students outside of school. At ESS, office discipline referrals have fallen by 50% in comparison to last year.

### Lessons Learned:

Respectful treatment supports respectful behavior.  
Vertical alignment perpetuates consistent expectations and behaviors.  
SWIS data and dashboards inform focused interventions.



## District support and flexibility bring proactive approach to Laconia High School

SS/HS has enabled increased district support – and flexibility – for implementing PBIS in a way that works for Laconia schools, especially at Laconia High School (LHS). At LHS, support came in the form of a district-wide mandate and the resources they needed to move forward. Flexibility has taken the form of time, space, and opportunities to adapt PBIS implementation to local school conditions and the developmental level of high school youth. District-wide commitment assures continuity of the students’ experience over the course of their path through elementary, middle, and high school. Staff already reports a palpable change in culture: “A gentle wave has come through the district.”

### Key Informants:

- Principal
- Behavioral Specialist
- Librarian

“The significance of people in important positions saying ‘we are doing this thing’ is huge,” notes the principal. “SS/HS brought dedicated money and resources to start the ball rolling.” Support has come in the form of trainings – from Mental Health First Aid to cultural diversity – as well as people to help implement change, like an experienced project manager. “The trainings and continual support ensured that we support each other.”

“SS/HS is being implemented in the right way—it takes 5-10 years to fully implement a change in district culture.”

At this point, the first days of school are dedicated to introducing SS/HS; a mental health professional, a Licensed Drug and Alcohol Counselor, and a social worker are based at LHS. Another key resource is the student support room, where “we’re able to give the students instruction in behavior by people trained in those roles within a system designed to handle student misbehavior,” explains the principal. LHS students know where to go, how to access resources, and that they have a voice and a safe place to use it. LHS office discipline referrals are down about 50% since year two of the grant period. “We are more proactive now,” notes the principal. “We’re not sending mixed messages, and we’re not adversarial.”

In the face of skepticism about PBIS from high school staff, LHS administrators adapted SS/HS implementation to develop a thriving local program, a goal that has thwarted high schools across the country. “We didn’t follow the national guidance on high schools,” the principal reports. Using a problem-solving approach, they identified the biggest issues facing the school and where they wanted student behavior to improve, and built their system using data to inform them at each step. Now, “teachers are on the same page and the kids understand the shared expectations for behaviors,” offers a staff member. Additionally, LHS staff and teachers have a much greater understanding of how the home lives of students can impact their school lives. “It’s amazing some kids can even function given the adverse circumstances that some face,” says a staff member.

### Lessons Learned:

- District-wide mandate and support bring buy-in and success.
- Adapting PBIS principles to local needs and values yields commitment and creativity.



## Concord School District

### Strengthening the home-school-community connection

The Family Center in Concord School District (CSD) is a district-wide early child development program focused on strengthening the home-school connection for Concord families with young

#### Key Informants:

Family Literacy Facilitator

Early Childhood SS/HS Coordinator

children. With a boost from SS/HS funds, the program has expanded to four Concord locations. “It’s been very successful. Once a week, more than 20 families attend preschool with their children at each of the locations,” reports a staff member. “Everyone benefits; families and kids participate in key learning opportunities and the school connects with families.”

The Family Center provides exposure to school for young children while family members learn about child development and education. Young children experience the flow of daily activities – including free-play time, arts and crafts, and a sensory table – and learn school expectations like following instructions and taking turns. Absorbing these routines helps kids make the transition to kindergarten. At the same time, family members are able to connect with other families, learn about community resources like Early Head Start, and get information on topics such as early brain development. “Then we ring the bell and clean up together; wash, eat snack, read books, sing songs; and have some outdoor play to end the day,” describes a facilitator.

Center staff created a new parent group to focus on school expectations with New American families after the elementary schools experienced disconnection with them after fall conferences. “If we have a relationship with parents, then we can work together.” Now they meet monthly for discussions and activities like visiting local farms, orchards, and the public library.

“We’ve successfully reached many families, especially New American and at-risk families that really benefit from this connection.”

An unintended outcome of expansion was the launch of a new group focusing on needs and challenges of New American families, some of whom are refugees with significant trauma in their backgrounds. Trusting relationships have been forged, and families are comfortable communicating what they need to support kids and gain a better understanding of school culture. These relationships offer opportunities for families to inform and improve the Center’s work. “Our goal is continued expansion, because the Center offers a natural vehicle for learning and coming together, which makes a lot of sense to families from other cultures, where parents, grandparents, and the community are all involved.”

Convening families, the District, and community organizations has created: 1) opportunities for families to learn, enjoy community, and relieve confusion and isolation, and 2) enhanced collaboration of Concord community organizations, including Head Start, Riverbend Community Mental Health Center, Community Bridges, WIC, and City of Concord agencies.

#### Lessons Learned:

Responsiveness to emerging issues opens doors for important connections.  
Simple interventions can create big change.



## Incremental change to address underlying behavioral problems

For the School Resource Officer (SRO) at Concord High School (CHS), a significant outcome of the SS/HS grant is the addition of a new drug and alcohol counselor. “She seems to be helping,” he reports. “And she offers an alternative to suspension.” A related outcome from the SS/HS grant is a boost to an existing group, the Youth Roundtable, a monthly meeting of CHS administrators and other staff to exchange information about students. “Our ‘go to’ reaction used to be just discipline; now we try to have a more supportive kind of response,” reports the SRO. He hopes that the SS/HS grant supports efforts to further expand behavioral health resources for CHS.

**Key Informant:**  
School Resource Officer

The new drug and alcohol counselor divides time between Rundlett Middle School and CHS, where drug and alcohol misuse is widespread. “You need the right person in this role,” says the SRO. “And the kids respond well to her.” Students are connected to the drug and alcohol counselor through CHS administrators. When a disciplinary problem occurs at CHS, administrators call in the SRO to take action. Then they refer students for consultation with the drug and alcohol counselor and other school resources. “Lots of students don’t have someone to listen to them.”

With 2,000 people in a 600,000 square foot building and open doors to the community, CHS has its share of student misbehavior. In 2010, before the SS/HS grant, CHS administrators, juvenile probation and truancy officers, a social worker and the SRO established a monthly Youth Roundtable to exchange information about everything from minor attendance issues to complex

“Currently we mostly bandage—we are not yet equipped to solve problems.”

disciplinary problems. “I know a lot about kids and their stories,” says the SRO. Even with restrictions around privacy, the increased information has an impact on the way they respond to student misbehavior.

The SRO hopes that CHS and Riverbend Community Mental Health expand their partnership so that CHS has more resources to address root problems. “We talk about the kids,” explains the SRO, “but often we don’t know what to do with them.” The SRO thinks that more mental health professionals would help to support high stress families and situations in the community. For example, social workers would be equipped to reach out to work directly with families to address problems that students bring with them to school.

A new drug and alcohol counselor at CHS is a significant outcome of the SS/HS grant and signals a shift toward a more proactive approach to handling significant behavioral challenges at CHS. The pre-existing CSH Youth Roundtable provides a critical opportunity for information sharing among key CSH staff and holds the potential to inform prevention and intervention efforts at CHS.

### Lessons Learned:

Shifting from reactive to proactive strategies demands mental health resources.  
Regular opportunities for information-sharing about students inform effective planning.

## **Statewide Crosscutting Themes and Lessons Learned**

Below, we share themes that emerged across *all* our focus group and individual conversations.

### **Strong district-level commitment and support are key to school-level success**

Strong, supportive leadership happened through 1) district-level administration with strong buy-in to SS/HS implementation and 2) an SS/HS LEA project manager well positioned to have a voice throughout the district, who brings vision and experience to the role. Informants reported success when district administration brought a clear mandate to the SS/HS work and backed it up by supporting changes in district-wide professional development and training. Moreover, project managers engaged in on-going dialogue with both district administrators and the school-level teams and offered vital experience with implementing change and/or understanding SS/HS implementation.

### **New roles and opportunities for professional development nurture teachers and staff**

A recurrent theme in the NH stories is the profound impact of offering staff “the resources, tools, and the voice to speak about what we do.” District staff has been trained in an array of areas, including trauma, cultural competence and diversity, trauma-sensitive yoga, Mental Health First Aid, and crisis response; some have been trained to become trainers themselves. One principal reports that about a quarter of the school’s teachers have leadership roles on PBIS teams and routinely consult and collaborate with each other. “I’ve been in the district for 15 years and have experienced a monumental change here in the past 2-3 years,” reflects one informant. “I’ve never felt more valued in the work I do.”

### **Building on pre-existing efforts and strengths a key to success**

Informants report success with building on existing local programs and strengths rather than starting over following the infusion of SS/HS funds. For example, Concord School District recognized the potential for connecting with young children and their families through their Family Center program and used SS/HS funds to expand it throughout the city. Similarly, Rochester School District built on the prior work of its Crisis Response Team to augment and expand its district-wide capacity. The structure offered by PBIS, coupled with the support of experienced coaches systematically and collectively working through issues, made for a powerful and successful learning and implementation process.

### **Integrating behavioral health professionals in schools brings opportunities and risks**

School informants reported enthusiasm about bringing mental health services and supports into the schools; at the same time, they noted several challenges associated with integrating mental health professionals, including 1) bridging different confidentiality and communication standards and norms; 2) cultivating shared practices around collaboration and engagement with students and the community; and 3) managing outside supervision of therapists. Ways that schools/districts are working through these challenges include seeking individuals who understand and can adapt their practice to school environments and hiring mental health professionals as district employees. One lesson learned is the importance of having upfront conversations about these challenges.



### **School and community awareness of behavioral health needs enhances the work**

The persistent and recurring need to educate school boards and community leaders and members about the behavioral health needs of students and the resulting challenges faced by schools emerged as a common thread across districts. In cases where the wider community was beginning to grasp these issues, the response has been a commitment to build awareness and create change. For example, *Stand Up Laconia*, a coalition of youth and adults, has a mission to “create positive change and confront the causes and consequences of substance misuse.” In Rochester, a significant collaborative relationship has developed between Rochester School District and the City of Rochester, including the Rochester Recreation Department and the Police Department, in support of local students and their families. Making connections and building bridges across district, community and state systems—navigating systems effectively—drives effective program implementation.

### **Empowering shift in perspective brings vitality and commitment**

Shared buy-in to a common language and expectations among administrators, teachers and students builds community: “We are all part of this team and have these things in common.” One principal describes the atmosphere of mutual respect that infuses the elementary school she leads. Across districts, informants reported a shift from a helpless to a hopeful position relative to student behavior, resulting in a more proactive, action-oriented stance among teachers and staff. Formerly, when staff and teachers raised issues and problems with managing student behavior, it was perceived by others as a sign of personal weakness or failure. In the current climate, challenges are perceived as collective learning opportunities, and a critical part of teacher and staff work. Collective problem solving is valued, since it often yields new insights and better solutions.

### **Will preschool and elementary foundations persist through middle and high school?**

Informants report that PBIS implementation and SS/HS efforts are easier to implement in elementary schools; typical PBIS implementation strategies and rewards are more reinforcing to younger students. “Ages 14-21 is a tough age range to change; they are set in their ways,” reflects one informant. District middle and high school staff anticipate meeting the younger students who are now learning PBIS and predict that these students will understand common language and behavioral expectations, understand the system, and be set up for success when they reach the higher grades. Will the districts be able to support the students and sustain the changes when they reach later grades?

### **“We’re not done!” SS/HS work is an ongoing process**

The SS/HS work is constantly evolving and moving forward. There is always more work to do and ways to do the work more effectively. National conferences give the false impression of reaching a destination, which doesn’t reflect reality, notes a participant. SS/HS funds have provided the opportunity for schools to build and sustain long-term shifts in culture and attitudes of teachers, staff, students and communities towards a positive, collaborative, and prevention model of safety and health for students and staff alike.

## References

Wilson-Grau, Ricardo & Britt, Heather. (2012, revised 2013). *Outcome Harvesting*. Cairo, Egypt: Ford Foundation.

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## Appendix: SS/HS Focus Group Interview Protocol

### Context (10 minutes)

**Project:** SS/HS is designed to improve the climate and safety of schools while promoting the emotional well being of students by integrated behavioral health supports within the three tiers of the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports Framework. The intended outcomes of the project are better connections between EC/schools, families, and students; improved prevention, detection, and response to the behavioral health needs of students; and improved early childhood and school climate and safety.

**Evaluation:** We are the external evaluators on the project, from BHI/AUNE. Our job is to monitor program implementation/processes and outcomes. Most of the evaluation plan is quantitative. For instance, we're collecting data on how PBIS implementation is going in schools, how many kids are being screened and referred for appropriate behavioral health services, perceptions of school climate, parent engagement, and the number of kids being sent to the office and suspended from schools, to name just a few.

**Purpose:** Quantitative data can tell only a limited story. You've been nominated by your district to help tell the rest of the story, about changes that are happening, and what they look and feel like to the folks who experience them. This qualitative piece of the evaluation will help us learn about unintended and intended outcomes, and how the program contributed to them, give voice to the folks who are closest to the action, and ultimately help communicate project outcomes in a more compelling way.

*[stop here for thoughts, questions, concerns, etc.]*

### Overview of process (10 minutes)

So far, we've asked your project director to tell us whom we should talk to about the most significant changes that are happening in your district – that's how we found our way to you today.

Our primary goal, and what we'll spend most of our time doing here today, is to collect significant change stories from all of you. We'll do this simply by starting with an open-ended question, then following up as necessary to fill out and make sure we understand all the dimensions of the story. We're hoping to do this part more or less one story/person at a time, although you should feel free to ask clarifying questions and interact as we move along.

We'll also be asking each you to let us know other folks that also experienced the change stories you share today, to help us deepen and enrich our understanding of them.

Finally, we'll spend some time cross-fertilizing and looking for patterns and lessons learned, that you might inform your work going forward.

This information will be shared with the SLT, and ultimately incorporated into grant reporting, and used to help us get smarter about the project. We'll be sure to run a draft by you, before we report any of the stories you hear today. Please feel free to opt out of this process or retract any of the information you share, at any time. If it's ok with you, we'd like to record the session; the recording

will not be shared with anyone outside our team, and will be deleted as soon as we verify that our written notes from today's session are accurate and complete.

*[stop for questions]*

**Interview Prompts (1 hour, 30 minutes, with breaks as necessary)**

We're going to get started now. Whoever wants to can respond first, we'll make sure everyone gets an opportunity to share. If there's time, you'll be able to share more than one story if you want.

**Lead question:** *"We are interested in the most significant, observable changes that Safe Schools Healthy Students has helped bring about in some way. Significant changes can be positive or negative, direct or indirect, intended or not. Looking back over the time since Safe Schools Healthy Students started, what do you think the most significant change has been?"*

**Prompts:** who, what, when, where, project's contribution, significance?

Who experienced it/with whom we can follow up for verification?

**Cross fertilization prompts**

What did we learn about the changes that SS/PA has brought about today?

What were the patterns or themes that are most important or inspiring?

What did you hear that might make a difference in your or others' work?

What might help us improve SS/PA this coming year?