

# Indiana Project AWARE:

Lessons Learned from a Comprehensive,  
Schoolwide Initiative to Enhance  
Mental Wellbeing



# INTRODUCTION

The mental wellbeing of students has become more of a focal point for many school communities around the country. Recognizing that all students need to learn life skills, and that some students need more targeted and intensive support, school leaders are seeking ways to enhance the infrastructure and capacity of their schools to meet the many non-academic needs of their students. In addition, research is showing that mental wellbeing programming can increase academic performance, thereby linking student wellbeing with the core mission of schools.

To help meet the growing mental health needs of students in Indiana, the Indiana Department of Education (IDOE) applied for and received a Project AWARE grant (2018 – 2023) from the federal government. At its core, the purpose of Project AWARE was to help schools enhance their infrastructure and capacity to provide students with systemic programs and services to support their mental wellbeing. IDOE managed the project, in collaboration with the Indiana Division of Mental Health and Addiction (DMHA). Through Project AWARE, IDOE funded 11 school districts to build infrastructure and capacity, and to serve students through school-based mental health services in partnership with mental health providers in the community.



In this document, we discuss the main lessons learned from this project, based on data collected during the five years of the project. Where appropriate, we also drew upon experiences of other similar projects outside of Indiana. We divided the lessons into four main themes:

<b>OVERALL PROJECT SUCCESS</b>	<b>INFRASTRUCTURE AND CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT</b>	<b>MULTI-TIERED SYSTEMS OF SUPPORT (MTSS)</b>	<b>STUDENT OUTCOMES</b>
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We hope that other communities in Indiana and around the country can use these lessons as they work to address the growing mental health needs of our nation’s young people and the workforce that serves them.



## OVERALL PROJECT SUCCESS



### **LESSON 1. It is critical to have ample staff time devoted to managing the project at the state and local levels.**

As obvious as this seems, having ample staff time devoted to the project is one of the most critical aspects of successful implementation. A project of this nature, size, and scope needs dedicated and qualified staff who can devote all or much of their time to its success. Indiana is fortunate that there was relatively little turnover in key staff positions at the state and local levels, allowing for a high degree of continuity and expertise. We have witnessed elsewhere that the loss of key staff can leave gaping holes, making it difficult for projects to operate effectively and efficiently. It is also important that specialized staff (e.g., mental health professionals) are not diverted to other duties, ensuring they can devote their energies to students' mental health needs.



### **LESSON 2. Broad buy-in from administrators, staff, and parents is necessary to ensure the success of school-based initiatives.**

Project AWARE is an example of a comprehensive initiative to build infrastructure and capacity within schools that contribute to positive outcomes for students. It is not a single program in a few classrooms, nor is it a service delivered by a few staff members. It is a schoolwide initiative with ambitious goals for creating a wide range of programs, services, policies, and practices that support student mental wellbeing. As such, school leadership and staff support are essential for its success. Administrators must not only see its benefits, but they must also actively support its mission and serve as champions, incorporating its policies and practices into school life. School leaders must support instructional and non-instructional staff as they become acclimated to the initiative, recognize it is more than a simple "one-and-done" effort, and become champions for student wellbeing. Finally, school leaders and staff must inform parents of the need and value of schoolwide efforts to enhance students' mental wellbeing. As we have witnessed, misinformation and lack of transparency can have a negative impact on proactive student mental wellbeing initiatives and supports within schools. Having parents who can champion schoolwide initiatives for student wellbeing can help ensure forward progress, address barriers as they arise, and facilitate sustainability.



# INFRASTRUCTURE AND CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT



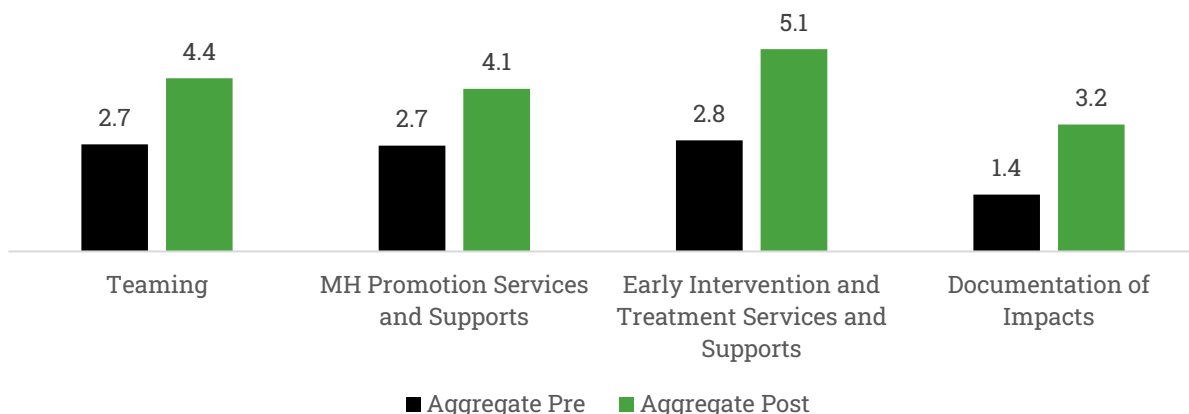
## **LESSON 3.** School districts enhance their capacity and infrastructure during a relatively brief time period when given the initial resources to do so.

Each school district reported substantial capacity and infrastructure gains during the grant period. Each school district that began partnering with IDOE in 2018 conducted a School Health Assessment and Performance Evaluation (SHAPE) at least three times during the project to assess capacity and infrastructure near the beginning of the grant and near the end. Data show considerable progress in infrastructure and capacity development in many areas including: teaming; mental health promotion services and supports; early intervention and treatment services and supports; and documentation of impacts.



*We are always thinking about sustainability. One of the things this grant has done is to build capacity. Our goal is to move the curriculum to the education funding, and we are doing the "train the trainer" model to provide the resources and training that the staff needs.*

**LEA Infrastructure and Capacity**  
(SHAPE Scores Averaged across Districts)



All the funded districts are working to maintain and build on the gains made through the Project AWARE funding, often through "train the trainer" model or shifting Project AWARE-funded activities to permanent lines in the district budget. One school district is developing its student mental wellbeing curriculum using the same scope and sequencing processes that it applies to its language arts and math curricula. In this way, teaching staff are thinking of mental wellbeing content as on par with the more traditional academic content areas. By focusing on infrastructure and capacity development, school districts can help ensure that the impact of Project AWARE lasts long after the grant ends.



#### **LESSON 4. The little things count to students.**

Students reported during focus group discussions that small acts of kindness from teachers and staff make a big difference to them. When teachers and staff reach out to students through informal check-ins, the students feel cared for and heard. Students also appreciated that staff were receiving training in topics related to student wellbeing and that they were making concerted efforts to support students. They described a greater ease and frequency with which teachers talked about mental health issues with students creating a normative culture of sharing. This perspective was especially acute given the extreme challenges that schools, communities, the nation, and the world experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although some teachers and staff are naturally gifted at reaching out to students, it takes an intentional and systemic approach by school leaders to ensure that this is the norm rather than the exception. They need training and support to develop the skills and confidence to reach out to students, offer supportive words, and direct them to helpful resources when needed.



*It's not just slide shows anymore... Saying that they're proud of me for how much I've grown and paying attention... you don't need a whole school assembly to get that across. It's just little tiny things.*



*They [Administration] had teachers go through training...teachers are more open to being like, 'Hey, I'm hearing you talk, like, how do you identify, what are your pronouns ...let's have a conversation, let's get engaged.*



#### **LESSON 5. Professional development opportunities must be continual, reinforced, and systemic.**

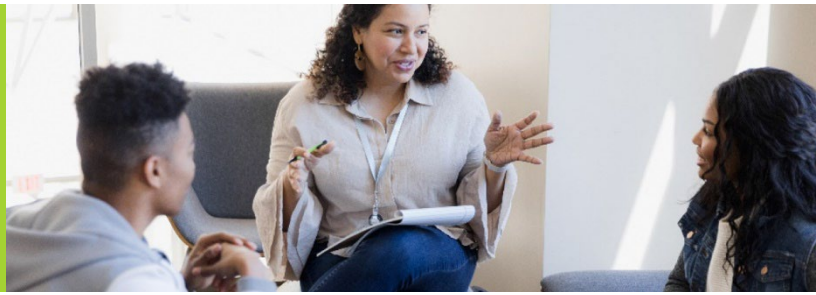
School staff are accustomed to training in programs and approaches that seem to come and go. This can be frustrating for staff when they spend valuable time learning approaches that are short-lived or not supported by school leadership. Comprehensive, schoolwide strategies to support student wellbeing require a long view, with systemic efforts to increase staff capacity through training opportunities that build and connect over time. In addition, there should be opportunities for refresher courses and for new staff to orient themselves to recent training topics. The latter is particularly important as staff turnover and the ability to fill positions is a growing challenge in

education, especially since the pandemic. Underlying these efforts is an acknowledgment of the importance of professional development and that school leaders need to set time aside for professional development days.



## **LESSON 6. To successfully support the mental wellbeing of students, schools must support the mental wellbeing needs of school staff.**

The health and wellbeing of school staff is important for supporting the health and wellbeing of students. This became more obvious during the pandemic when staff took on new roles and responsibilities, learned new technologies, and moved seamlessly between virtual and physical classrooms—all while fearing for their own health and safety and that of their families. During the initial stages of the pandemic, staff focused on caring for the mental health needs of their students, even more so than the academic needs. Over time, the stresses of these added responsibilities and the pandemic itself made it clear that staff needed the support from school systems to address their own mental health needs. More important, school leaders needed to take care of them by listening to their needs and providing supportive services including counseling. As we heard in many interviews, staff cannot help dysregulated children if staff themselves are stressed and exhausted from meeting the needs of their students.

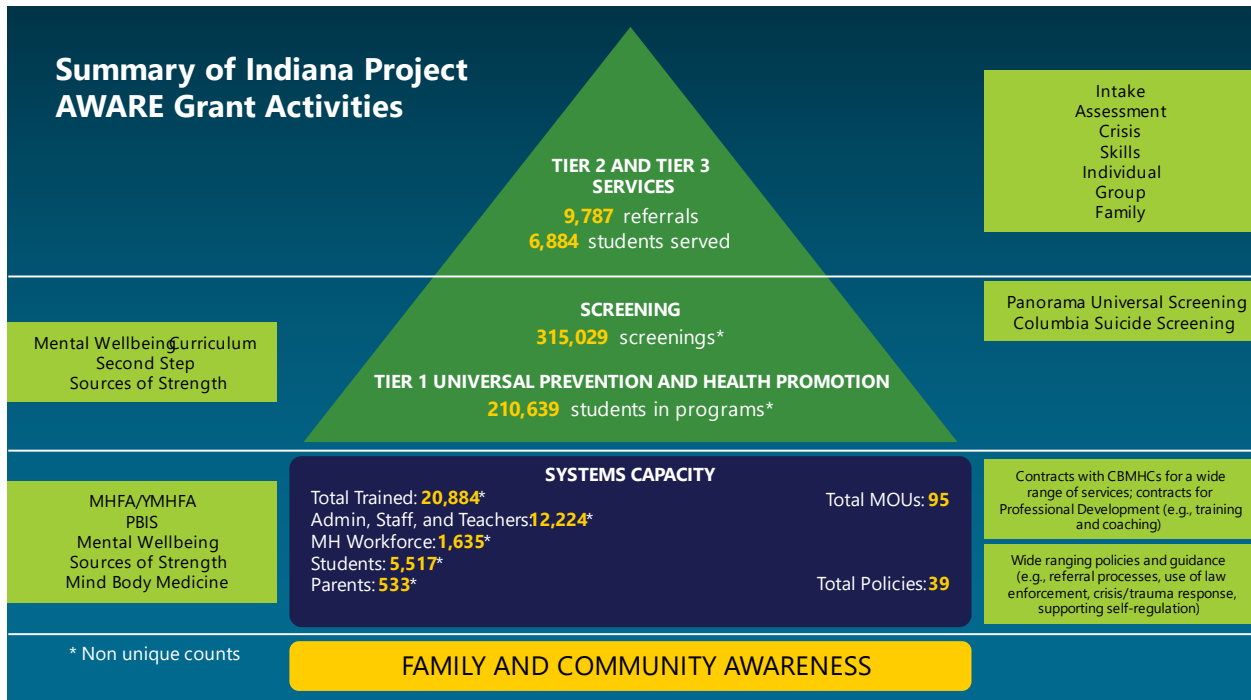


# MULTI-TIERED SYSTEMS OF SUPPORT (MTSS)



## LESSON 7. A robust multi-tiered system of support is necessary to meet the diverse needs of students.

Multi-tiered systems of support—that is, universal prevention and health promotion programs at Tier 1, supportive services for students who need more help at Tier 2 (e.g., small group skills building classes), and clinical services for students with more serious mental and emotional needs at Tier 3—provide the widest range of systemic programs and services for students with diverse needs. The notion of MTSS is not new to education. Teachers are accustomed to providing extra assistance to students who need more academic support, such as the Response to Intervention model (RTI). As such, teaching staff may need to learn that an MTSS designed for mental wellbeing is an extension of their current work, not a novel approach to education. As shown in the figure, Project AWARE school districts and the state reached thousands of students and staff using the MTSS framework to guide their work.





## **LESSON 8. The MTSS must be supported by well-documented and understood early identification and referral processes.**

Having programs and services within each of the tiers is necessary but not sufficient for success. To successfully implement MTSS, schools need to develop strong supporting structures, such as early identification, referral, and tracking systems. There should be multiple modes for identifying and referring students who need additional support, including referrals from teachers, non-instructional staff, parents, and students. We also recommend using universal screeners that can identify students with internalizing thoughts and feelings or who do not display disruptive behaviors but may need support that might otherwise be overlooked.



*We have student success data gathered three times a year from the [student wellbeing] survey and we look at students flagged for Tier 2 or Tier 3....if students are trending downward, they are flagged.*



## **LESSON 9. Within the MTSS, programs and services should be delivered by people who are fully trained, given adequate time to prepare, and see the value.**

School leaders often ask instructional staff to facilitate or deliver Tier 1 programs for students (e.g., Second Step and Sources of Strength). When doing so, school leaders should ensure that staff receive adequate training and have ample time to prepare to deliver the material. Staff noted that they sometimes received the lessons the night before the classes and, as a result, they felt unprepared to effectively deliver them. Leaders should also recruit motivated staff who want to deliver the material and believe in what they are teaching, otherwise students will notice and will tune out their efforts.





# STUDENT OUTCOMES

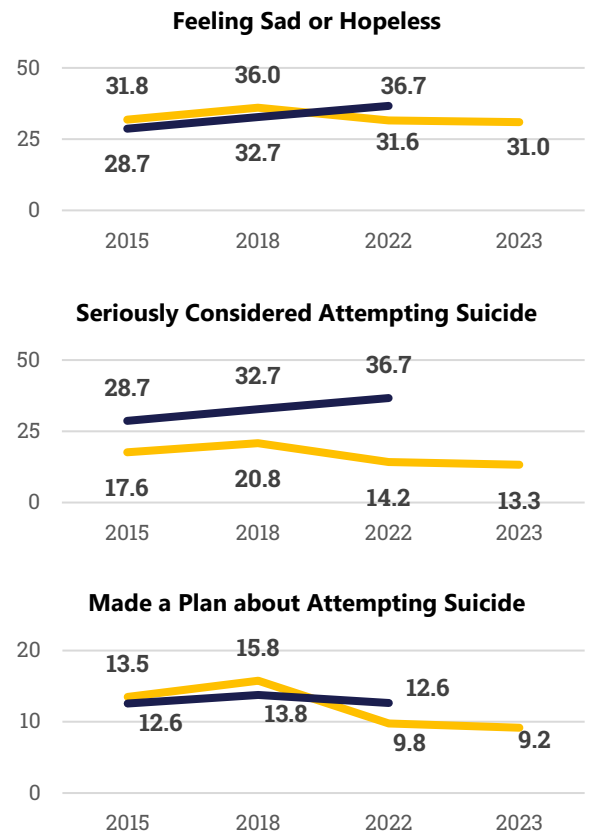


**LESSON 10.** Student outcomes are often difficult to measure and attribute directly to grant activities, but evidence suggests that Project AWARE contributed to stabilization in mental wellbeing and gains in mental health.

The Project AWARE evaluation did not collect data directly from students as the goals of the grant focused mainly on capacity building and infrastructure, but we did obtain student data from several sources, including the Panorama universal screening tool and data from the Indiana Youth Survey. Data from Panorama showed little change over time in Emotional Regulation, Social Awareness, and Self-Management. Though disappointing on the surface, this might also indicate that Project AWARE helped keep students emotionally stable during an unprecedented period of fear, stress, and anxiety related to COVID-19. Data from the Indiana Youth Survey from one school district showed that students reported decreases in feeling sad or hopeless, having seriously considered suicide, and having made a plan for suicide. In contrast, the state rates increased steadily for feeling sad or hopeless and having seriously considered suicide, and only slightly decreased for having made a plan for suicide. Although, we cannot definitively say that Project AWARE led to these decreases, the evidence suggests Project AWARE and related efforts to improve students' mental health were successful.

**INYS Data from One School District**  
(Grades 8, 10, 12)

■ School District ■ State





PIRE conducted a literature review to examine the evidence for a causal relationship between mental wellbeing programming and student outcomes, specifically academic achievement. In our review of five peer-reviewed meta-analytic studies, which collectively reviewed 344 articles that included academic outcomes, we found evidence that implementing universal mental wellbeing programming in schools can result in modest improvements in academic outcomes for students. The report can be found at <https://indiana2eval.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/SEL-Academics-Research-Summary-Report.pdf>.

# SUSTAINABILITY AND EXPANSION OF FUNDING

Project AWARE school districts are sustaining their efforts in many ways, capitalizing on the infrastructure and capacity they built during the project. Aspects of Project AWARE that will continue in some fashion among the school districts include checking in with students, delivering Tier 1 mental wellbeing programs, using early identification and referral systems, providing Tier 2 and Tier 3 services, and assigning one district-level representative to lead the planning, implementation, and sustainability of a comprehensive school mental health system.

In addition, new funding opportunities have arisen. The State of Indiana has now received three Project AWARE grants from SAMHSA. Project AWARE II (2021 – 2026) supports three school districts (Elkhart Community Schools, Garrett-Keyser-Butler Community School District, and Matchbook Learning @ Wendell Phillips 63) and Project AWARE III (2022 – 2026) supports four school districts (Clark-Pleasant Community School Corporation, KIPP Indy Public Schools, La Porte Community School Corporation, and MSD of Pike Township). In addition, school districts that participated in the first Project AWARE grant reported that they successfully obtained an additional **\$7 million in grant funding**, allowing them to continue their work to support students' mental wellbeing. We are hopeful that the lessons learned from this first Project AWARE grant will strengthen the efforts, reach, and impact of the ongoing work of Project AWARE grantees.



*I feel like my work with Project AWARE encouraged me to become more involved with our community and partners who offer resources to our students ...The Project AWARE [State] team really introduced me to the world of grant writing and pursuing additional resources for our students...outside of the normal realm of traditional education. I would definitely say that this team changed my thinking about the ways in which we serve students and widened my scope of service.*



# ABOUT INDIANA PROJECT AWARE

In 2018, the State of Indiana received a five-year Project AWARE (Advancing Wellness and Resilience in Education) grant from the U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). The goal of Project AWARE was to promote better student access to mental health services by training school staff and other community partners to identify, understand, and respond to signs of psychological distress among students. The Indiana Department of Education (IDOE) administered this grant in conjunction with the Division of Mental Health and Addiction (DMHA) in the Indiana Family and Social Services Administration.

For the first two years of the project, IDOE funded three public school districts to achieve these goals locally (Cohort 1). In Year 3, IDOE funded an additional eight school districts (Cohort 2) to receive a relatively small amount of funding to work on specific goals and benefit from the State’s Project AWARE network. Exhibit 1 provides basic information about the 11 school districts and Exhibit 2 is a map of their locations. For more information about Indiana Project AWARE, please visit <https://www.projectawarein.org/>.

## EXHIBIT 1

District	Number of Schools	Enrollment	% Free and Reduced Lunch
<b>COHORT 1 (2018 – 2023)</b>			
Avon Community School Corp	12	10,310	33.3%
Perry Central Community Schools Corp	2	1,275	32.5%
Vigo County School Corp	24	13,940	54.4%
<b>COHORT 2 (2020 – 2023)</b>			
Evansville Vanderburgh School Corp	39	21,942	45.3%
Hamilton Southeastern Schools	22	21,603	15.5%
Milan Community Schools	4	970	45.6%
SENSE Charter School	1	589	94.2%
Sheridan Community Schools	3	1,052	33.4%
South Bend Community School Corp	31	15,965	61.2%
MSD Wayne Township	18	16,343	61.3%
Westfield-Washington Schools	9	8,820	15.8%

Source: <https://indianagps.doe.in.gov>, 2021–22 data, except for SENSE data which are from the school website.

# EXHIBIT 2

