

# Mental Health, Schools and Families Working Together for All Children and Youth: Toward A Shared Agenda — Ohio's Experience

## An Overview

Research is fast accumulating on the urgency of removing non-cognitive barriers to learning and on strategies that bring families, schools and mental health professionals together to improve behavioral and academic outcomes for children and youth. In our tight economic times, and in light of the federal educational mandate to "leave no child behind," it is imperative to facilitate the adoption of effective, collaborative strategies that promote the well being of all children and youth.

Ohio has been nationally recognized for leadership in working to build and expand collaboration across education, mental health and family serving organizations in developing a shared agenda for children's mental health and school success. This work has been funded in part by a grant awarded in October 2002 from the Policymaker Partnership (PMP) at the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE) and the National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors (NASMHPD). Missouri, Oregon, South Carolina, Texas, and Vermont have received similar grants. In Ohio the policymaking leadership of education, mental health and family serving organizations is engaging with state and local partners to generate a commitment to address non-cognitive barriers to learning to support successful academic achievement for all children and youth.

In 2001 the Ohio Department of Mental Health (ODMH), in partnership with the Ohio State University Center for Learning Excellence (CLEX), and with participation of the governor's office and the Ohio Department of Education (ODE), convened a hearing that served as a "call to action" for Ohioans to improve mental health and school success for all children. The Hearing Summary and Resource Guide, and a more recent follow-up publication, have been

disseminated widely throughout the state (Ohio Department of Mental Health, 2001, 2003). Concurrent with the 2001 hearing, the Ohio Mental Health Network for School Success was formed, consisting of action networks spearheaded by affiliate organizations in six regions of the state. Currently the Network is funded by ODMH and ODE and is co-lead by CLEX and the Center for School-Based Mental Health Programs (CSBMHP) at Miami University. The mission of the Network is to help Ohio's school districts, community-based agencies, and families work together to achieve improved academic and mental health outcomes for all children. The Network action agenda is available at <http://www.units.muohio.edu/csbmhp/network.html> and <http://altdmh.osu.edu/omhn/omhn.htm>. Ohio's shared agenda initiative is being implemented within the collaborative infrastructure of the Network.

The three phases of the grant implementation thus far have included: 1) a statewide forum (March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2003) for leaders of mental health, education, and family policymaking organizations and entities; 2) six regional forums (April-May, 2003) for policy implementers and consumer stakeholders; and 3) a legislative forum (October 9<sup>th</sup>, 2003) involving key leadership of relevant house and senate committees. The Appreciative Inquiry model for promotion of systems-level change and transformation has informed the process for the forums (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999).

Phase I was completed with a Policymakers' Forum in Columbus on March 3, 2003. One hundred and twenty five policymakers attended the forum, including representatives from education, families, mental health and other child-serving systems and advocacy organizations. Nationally renowned experts Mark Weist, Director of the Center for School Mental Health Assistance at the University of Maryland, and Steve Adelsheim, Director of the New Mexico School Mental Health Initiative, were the keynote speakers who offered a national policy perspective. In addition, promising work in Ohio was showcased. Facilitated discussion during

the forum was structured to create a collective vision among all stakeholders, build a sense of mutual responsibility for reaching the vision, and instill hope that systemic change is possible.

In Phase II six regional forums highlighted a variety of themes related to advancing a shared agenda. The dates, locations, topics and keynote speakers for the forums, selected by each of the regional action networks, included:

- Southeast Ohio, April 15, 2003, Athens, *Finding New Ways to Collaborate – Breaking Down the Barriers to Learning*, Howie Knoff, Project Achieve (a national model prevention program).
- North Central Ohio, April 28, 2003, Wooster, *Addressing Barriers to Learning: Frameworks for Schools & Communities Working Together to Close the Achievement Gap*, Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor, UCLA School Mental Health Project.
- Central Ohio, April 29, 2003, Columbus, *The Child We Have in Common: Families, Schools and Mental Health*, Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor, UCLA School Mental Health Project.
- Northwest Ohio, April 29, 2003, Bowling Green, *Strengthening the Partnership: Mental Health & Education Helping Kids Succeed in Schools*, Mark Weist, University of Maryland, Center for School Mental Health Assistance
- Southwest Ohio, May 5, 2003, Hamilton, *Mental Health, Schools and Families Working Together for All Children & Youth: Toward a Shared Agenda — Southwest Ohio Regional Forum*, Kimberly Hoagwood, Columbia University, and Joseph Johnson, Ohio Department of Education.
- Northeast Ohio, May 5, 2003, Cleveland, *Mental Health, Schools and Families Working Together for All Children & Youth Toward a Shared Agenda*, State Senator Eric Fingerhut.

Across the six regional forums in Phase II various features included cross-stakeholder panel discussions, youth and parent testimony, showcasing of promising work in Ohio, and facilitated discussion structured to promote collaboration and problem-solve regarding implementation issues. Approximately 725 stakeholders participated in the Phase 1 and Phase II forums, and the evaluation data was quite positive, reflecting a strong sense that processes of the initiative will assist with development of more effective collaboration. Several recommendations were derived from the facilitated discussion of the forums, which provided the framework for the October 9<sup>th</sup>, 2003 Legislative Forum. These recommendations included the following:

1. **A statewide effort should be undertaken in Ohio to disseminate knowledge about links between mental health and school success and the importance of School-Based Mental Health (SBMH) Services.**

- Reduce stigma for children in Ohio who need mental health services.
- Promote a better understanding of children’s mental health needs, the risks of suicide, and mental health barriers to learning.
- Educate school personnel in Ohio (board members, administrators, teachers, and other staff) about the impact of children’s mental health concerns on academic performance and school success.
- Educate the public in Ohio about the need for SBMH services.

2. **The educational and mental health systems in Ohio must challenge existing ideas and practices of “traditional” education and mental health services.**

- Identify and serve children in Ohio with mental health needs early, not late. Consider school-based screening for behavioral disorders.
- Provide better training for educators, mental health providers, and families, emphasizing mental health and school success.

- Improve availability of and access to SBMH services for all children in Ohio who need care.
- Improve quality and community-relevance of mental health efforts in Ohio's schools.
- Encourage schools to incorporate awareness of mental health in the local health education curriculum for all children (K-12<sup>th</sup> grade).
- Identify funding and policy barriers that interfere with children's mental health service delivery and with mental health—education collaboration.
- Increase collaboration between education, mental health, and alcohol and drug prevention/treatment at the state and local levels.

**3. Educators, mental health professionals and families in Ohio should work together to shape and implement policies and practices that comprehensively address children's well-being.**

- Increase family involvement in school mental health and educational programs in Ohio, including policy making on the state and regional levels.
- Empower and support parents to be involved, in partnership with the schools and mental health providers, in promoting the mental health and school success of their children.
- Actively encourage parent involvement in advocacy and support groups.
- Actively solicit and appreciate student input in program planning.
- Improve collaboration between SBMH services and community-based services in Ohio.

The Legislative Forum was convened by a panel of 16 key legislators, chaired by State Senator John Carey and State Representative Merle Grace Kearns. Various speakers shared findings and recommendations from the Phase I and Phase II forums. Presentations were made by Michael Hogan, Director of the Ohio Department of Mental Health and Chair of the President's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health, and by Jane Wiechel, Associate Superintendent of the Ohio Department of Education. The legislative panel had an opportunity to

hear compelling testimony, give feedback, ask questions, and exchange ideas with students, parents, educators, mental health professionals and other interested parties from across the state.

Findings and recommendations deriving from the Legislative Forum are being developed into an action plan. Through the Phase I-III forums, and the longer-term shared agenda initiative, ODMH and ODE seek to improve educational and mental health outcomes for all children in Ohio (as reflected in the mission statement of the Mental Health Network for School Success). An important immediate goal is to raise public awareness and build advocacy for fiscal and policy support and practices, for better alignment for education and mental health in the next biennial budget process. A website exists to track and publicize Ohio's Shared Agenda initiative (<http://www.units.muohio.edu/csbmhp/sharedagenda.html>). For more information about the initiative please contact Kay Rietz (ODMH, [rietzk@mh.state.oh.us](mailto:rietzk@mh.state.oh.us)), Carl E. Paternite (CSBMHP, [paternce@muohio.edu](mailto:paternce@muohio.edu)), or Diana Leigh (CLEX, [leigh.4@osu.edu](mailto:leigh.4@osu.edu)).

#### References

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