



Oak Park Elementary School District 97

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To: District 97 Board of Education
Dr. Carol Kelley, Superintendent of Schools

From: Dr. Carrie Kamm, Senior Director of Equity

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Type of Report: Special Report

The purpose of this report is to provide the Board of Education with a year-to-date summary of the Mindful Middle Schoolers Program (MMP) and a preview of the school year 2020-2021 continued collaboration between District 97, DePaul University, and the Oak Park Township Community Mental Health Board.

The Mindful Middle Schoolers Program (MMP) is being offered through a partnership with the Oak Park Township Community Mental Health Board and Oak Park School District 97. The emphasis of the program is to provide middle school-aged children, their adult caregivers, and school staff members support in dealing with anxiety, depression, and executive functioning challenges. Program components include student individual and group services and community talks.

Individual and Group Services (As of 3/31/20)

Number of students enrolled in group services: 67

Number of students receiving individual therapy sessions: 4

Quantitative Feedback from Students on 4-week program:

- 37% of students found the 4-week program "very helpful" and 42% found it "helpful"
- 88% of students strongly agree or agree with the statement "the 4-week group has been helpful to me."
- 94% of students strongly agree or agree with recommending the group to a friend
- 72% of students strongly agree or agree that they feel less worried since starting the group
- 67% of students strongly agree or agree that they feel better able to manage anger since starting the group
- 70% of students strongly agree or agree that they have more positive interactions with others since starting the group
- 78% of students strongly agree or agree that they feel more patient in their life since starting the group
- 72% of students strongly agree or agree that the group has helped them in school
- 72% of students strongly agree or agree that the group has helped them at home
- 55% strongly agree and 22% somewhat agree that they plan on continuing to use mindfulness in their life

Qualitative feedback from students on the 4-week program:

- The most helpful part was....
 - o Breathing exercises
 - o Everything
 - o Learning mindfulness
 - o Being with my friends
 - o Discussing parts of my life that I felt like I couldn't share
 - o Helpful
 - o Learning what mindfulness is
 - o The therapist
 - o The calm talk and uno
 - o The therapist
 - o Sometimes fun
 - o Everything i love this program but in order to be still calm i need to keep doing this program
 - o When we do breathing
 - o Mindfulness
 - o How the teacher cares and that we practice
 - o I don't go anymore so I don't really know
 - o When i was super mad at a teacher and I went to that class to calm myself down
 - o The games because it's fun :)

Community Talks

During the first several months of the program, the work focused on developing a series of 6-community talks, open to all to anyone in the community who wished to attend. These community talks were communicated via multiple channels, including the Brooks and Julian principal newsletters, District 97 Facebook page, District 97 Twitter account, and District 97 webpage.

Topics included: Social-emotional needs of today's Middle Schoolers; Strategies to support executive functioning and self-regulation development based upon brain science; mindfulness-based strategies and their applications in academic environments; understanding depression in youth and strategies for treatment and support; understanding anxiety in youth and strategies for treatment and support; and technology and mental health: strategies to promote mindful digital citizenship. **143 attendees** signed-in for these events during 10/1/2019 through 12/31/2019.

For the period 1/1/2020 through 3/31/2020 the workshops were offered again. **77 attendees** signed in for these evening events. The vast majority of attendees were parents although there were a handful of students and school staff present.

A total of **220 attendees** participated in the evening community talks over the 6 month period. Overall the feedback was positive:

Quantitative Feedback:

- 93% left the workshop with at least one strategy they will try at home/school settings

- 88% strongly agree or agree that the workshop was useful and informative
- 93% strongly agree or agree that the presenter delivered the presentation in a clear and structured manner

Qualitative Feedback:

- Appreciated the discussion on racial disparities
- One teacher wanted the presentation to dive even deeper into depression
- Participants enjoyed the hands on activities and audience interaction
- One parent wrote that they were happy the presentation was accessible to parents
- One comment said that there were too many slides and it was too long
- Another comment appreciated all the strategies shared and wanted it to be adapted to a teacher institute day
- One parent was displeased that the microphone wasn't working and wished the school provided a better location
- Comments stated that they really liked the anxiety presentation and found it informative
- A teacher wanted to know specific phrases they could use when a kid is having a panic attack.
- One comment encouraged that these community talks be provided to the school staff

In addition, professional development workshops were offered to teaching staff at Julian and Brooks Middle Schools. Approximately **70 school staff members** attended workshops on *Strategies to Support Youth with Executive Functioning and Anxiety Challenges*.

Quantitative Feedback:

- 98.2% of school staff reported that they learned at least 1 strategy they will apply in the classrooms and/or with students
- 42% found the presentation extremely helpful, 45% moderately useful, and 11% slightly useful.

Qualitative Feedback:

- Mindfulness, breathing exercises, and positive reinforcement were the strategies that staff found most useful.
- Staff would like more professional development on social-emotional learning strategies to support youth with anxiety, depression, and executive functioning challenges.

Between the evening community talks and the school-based staff trainings, **290 participants** attended these training sessions.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, a video recorded community talk entitled "**Mindfully Coping: Strategies for Children and Families During a Pandemic**" was developed and disseminated through multiple district communication channels.

Success Areas

The DePaul clinicians report that communication with school staff was positive; clinicians had success in building rapport and building group cohesion, and the students enjoyed activities particularly when tailored to their interests (an example is using their music during mindfulness). The 4-week group served as a beneficial "on-boarding" and assessment period so that the

clinicians could build relationships with students and better understand their unique needs. There are many students that seem to have taken to the "mindfulness" concepts, particularly those that were well-placed/selected for the groups.

Challenges

Not all students respond to "mindfulness" approaches, particularly those that present with significant behavior needs, particularly those that are displaying externalizing behaviors (such as physical aggression or verbal bullying) as opposed to internalizing behaviors (depression, anxiety, withdrawal). DePaul has worked with the Brooks and Julian staff to understand nuances of screenings and referring students for various types of services. Parent engagement has also been challenging in some instances.

Brooks and Julian Middle Schools are in the process of building Tier 2 interventions such as social and academic skills groups and Check-In/Check-Out. Starting in school year 2020, the Tier 2 teams at Brooks and Julian Middle Schools will design these interventions and support their implementation and progress monitoring.

Looking Ahead to School-Year 2021

The Community Mental Health Board is continuing to support the partnership between District 97 and DePaul University and District 97 is deeply appreciative of this support. Dr. Morrison and I have been in conversation with the leadership teams at both Irving and Holmes Elementary Schools to develop a small group mindfulness program that will provide 7 hours per week (per school) of clinician support. Student participation criteria for these programs will be developed in collaboration between DePaul and relevant school staff (school leaders, social workers) and supported by our district Culture and Climate Coaches.

In addition, the Community Mental Health Board has dedicated funding for a Care Coordinator position to support District 97 middle school students. This position is designed to support middle school families, particularly under-resourced families and those with special needs or circumstances, access community services and supports, and align them with services students are receiving at the school. The Care Coordinator will be a single point of contact for members of the community as it relates to the wellness needs of middle-school aged children in the Oak Park school district(s). They will work with school leadership, Oak Park Township, and community partners to ensure that children have the academic and non-academic support they need to succeed. District 97, DePaul University, and the Community Mental Health Board are in the process of co-creating a job description for this role and hope to have it finalized in the coming weeks.