

NATIONAL ASSEMBLY ON SCHOOL-BASED HEALTH CARE School Mental Health Capacity Building Partnership (SMH-CBP)

OHIO YOUTH DISCUSSION GROUP

On December 6th, 2007, eight students participated in a youth discussion group sponsored by the School Mental Health Capacity Building Partnership (SMH-CBP), a national initiative made possible through a cooperative agreement between the National Assembly on School Based Health Care (NASBHC) and the Centers for Disease Control/Division of Adolescent and School Health, that aims to build capacity of schools to provide effective and sustainable school mental health services. The one and a half hour youth discussion group was part of a series of stakeholder discussion groups held in Ohio to enhance the SMH-CBP's understanding of how school mental health policies and practices operate at the state and local level. The purpose of a youth-only stakeholder group was to identify, from a youth perspective, the most effective strategies for providing mental health services in schools and for engaging youth in the development of school mental health policies and programs.

The students who participated ranged in age from 14 to 22, and seven of the students attend public schools around Ohio, including one student who attends an alternative school and one youth participant who was a high school graduate. Half of the students have been diagnosed with serious emotional disabilities. Students were recruited through two pre-existing youth groups, the Youngstown City Schools Student Advisory Board (SAB) and the Ohio Mental Health Teen Resiliency Group. The SAB serves as a vehicle for the students of Youngstown City Schools to participate in the District's Continuous Improvement Process and to represent the student voice within the Urban Congress, a community wide advisory council to the school district. The Ohio Mental Health Teen Resiliency Group, made up of youth and family members around the state, assists in the development of a resilience-based mental health system for Ohio's children.

The group was convened in conjunction with the Ohio Prevention and Education Conference in Columbus at which all eight youth were presenting. The group was co-facilitated by Laura Hurwitz, School Mental Health Project Director at the NASBHC and Dr. Paul Flaspohler, Assistant Professor from the Center for School-Based Mental Health Programs at Miami University in Ohio. The youth were asked a series of ten questions (below):

- 1. How can adults at your school make all students feel supported both in school as well as other areas of their life?**
 - Adults should support all students both in classroom and on school grounds.
 - All adults (e.g. police officers, principals, bus drivers, and lunch staff) in building need to be trained on mental health issues.
 - Change policies to avoid harsh discipline (e.g. better to call parents before police re: student's behavior)
 - Make changes in the physical environment that are conducive to supporting students (e.g. hall bells, spaces for "down time")
- 2. What can schools do to better understand the different cultures or backgrounds a student comes from?**
 - Treat everyone equally, regardless of their race or the type of student they are
 - Adults should ask students' about their cultural background
 - Schools should offer educational opportunities related to culture.
 - Students as well as teachers should be free to openly express their culture.
 - Recruit teachers from different cultural, racial and ethnic backgrounds.
- 3. How well do you think that adults in your school respond to students with health problems, such as a student who has a physical disability or a condition such as diabetes?**
 - Adults respond well since health problems are more straightforward (than mental health problems)

4. How well do you think that adults in your school respond to students with mental health problems?

- Adults who have had experience with people with mental health issues, such as family members, know better how to handle the issues than adults who have not have these experiences.
- Teachers do not respond to students with mental health problems as well as students with learning disabilities.
- Adults may have a more difficult time responding to students with those mental illnesses that are difficult to detect (e.g. depression, schizophrenia).

How could adults better respond to students with mental health problems?

- Ask for help if they lack the knowledge and/or confidence to respond to students with mental health problems.
- Spend more time with students with mental health problems while acknowledging their need for independence.

5. Think about the adults in your school whom you trust the most -what makes you trust them?

- Having past positive experiences with them.
- Honesty and maintaining confidentiality

6. If you or a friend had a personal problem and needed to talk to someone in the school about it, who or where would you go to first?

- The person you trust most and with whom you have a relationship

7. If a student had a problem that was serious enough that they needed some kind of counseling, who in the school would be the best person to give them this kind of help?

- While various people are assigned to the role of talking to students about problems, students should have flexibility to go to any adult they trust, regardless of their training.

8. If a student does receive counseling, how much of what they say do you think should be kept confidential or private?

- It is OK to share basic information about a student but not the details of a student's problems.
- If a student is at risk, then it's ok to share information, as long as the student is informed. In extreme situations (e.g. drugs, threats, violence, danger self or others), student does not need to be informed first.

9. Has anyone here been involved in any programs outside of the classroom (but in your school) that have helped you feel better about yourself?

- Yes -- Student affairs, sports, marching band, JROTC

How did this help you to feel better about yourself?

- Students had the opportunity to be a role model and educate others.
- Students have a sense of belonging and connectedness to school.

How could this experience be improved?

- Student run programs are more enjoyable, as the attitudes and behavior of the adults may negatively influence students' motivation to participate.

10. We know that you are all in some way involved in helping your school, community or the state of the Ohio improve the way it helps youth. If a peer of yours was asked to participate in a similar kind of committee or activity with a group of adults, what would make them want to participate?

- Students are more likely to participate if there are incentives (e.g. money, food, field trips)
- Students are more likely to participate if they feel like they are contributing in a meaningful way.
- Students would be more likely to participate if the activities were fun.

- Students are more likely to participate if they feel like they are part of a group.

Implications for school mental health capacity building: The comments from this youth have important implications for developing effective school mental health programs. The students emphasized the importance of the whole school environment –the facility as well as all staff – in feeling accepted and supported at school. Students stressed the need to have adults around them whom they can trust, who accept their differences, and who get to know them as individuals in order to feel supported. While students acknowledge the importance of staff being trained in how to respond to students with mental health problems, students would prefer to talk to the adult they trust most, regardless of their role at school or training. Students with mental health problems expressed a need for policies that address their individual situations rather than harsh discipline. The students communicated the value of being involved in extracurricular activities in developing leadership skills, confidence, and a connectedness to other students and the school. In order for students to want to participate in adult led activities, they want rewards but more importantly they want the youth voice to be taken seriously.