

Minnesota's School-based Diversion Model (SBDM)

School Year 2020-21 Findings

Every youth should have the opportunity to reach their full academic potential, which requires that school environments be safe and nurturing for all. Disruptive or unsafe student behavior can be addressed in inclusionary, effective ways. Typically, practices of school-based arrests are inherently exclusionary, and their use and overuse among some student demographics, such as students of color and students with disabilities, can lead to negative educational and social-emotional outcomes for youth.

Background

The Minnesota's School-Based Diversion Model (SBDM) is a student-centered plan to keep youth from entering the criminal justice system due to arrests at school or during school hours. A team of professionals, students, and parents from various backgrounds and constituent groups created this model. The project is funded by a Minnesota legislative appropriation and two Department of Human Services (DHS) grants; one for grant management and the other for project evaluation. The team published an implementation manual outlining shared decision-making, community partnership services, and alternatives to exclusionary practices in schools.

In spring 2017, an RFP was issued across the state; it was open to school districts and nonprofit agencies. The first site, Robbinsdale Cooper High School, began implementation in all 2017, and five more sites were added in January 2018: Minneapolis Roosevelt High School, Duluth Denfeld High School, Owatonna High School, Cloquet Alternative School (transferred to Cloquet High School in fall 2019), and St Cloud McKinley Area Learning Center. Robbinsdale Area Schools' school based diversion has also expanded to include Armstrong High School.

What is the Minnesota's School-Based Diversion Model (SBDM)?

SBDM provides a decision-making protocol for student incidents and presents an opportunity for schools and law enforcement to work together as a shared decision-making authority to address students' academic, behavioral health, and criminogenic needs. The model outlines three possible responses to student incidents: (1) no action-inform parent; (2) school case conference or behavior support team consultation, which can result in referrals to restorative justice conflict resolution, mental/chemical health services; or (3) school resource officer/law enforcement involvement.

The model emphasizes a variety of approaches to meet the needs of students. Critical elements of the triage system include: involvement of families at every stage; referral for screening, assessment, and treatment for early identification of youth at risk for juvenile justice involvement; and development and access to preventive and supportive resources within the school environment, using community supports such as restorative practices, mental health screening and support, and chemical dependency evaluation and services. The model is general enough to be applied to any school setting and allows for some adaptation based on local context and resources.

Evaluation

Wilder Research is working with DHS to help collect and analyze information about how the SBDM is helping each pilot program increase screenings, assessments, and referrals to mental and chemical health treatments, as well as to improve students' school attendance and responses to behavioral situations. Additional long-term outcomes may include reduced school arrests, out-of-school suspensions, and expulsions. This report focuses on data for the 2020-21 school year. It is important to note that three significant events occurred during this reporting period: the COVID-19 pandemic, the civil unrest that followed the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police, and the killing of Duante Wright by Brooklyn Park police. This report provides a brief overview of some of the ways these factors affected the pilot sites for the School-Based Diversion Model, including referrals and service provision as well as opportunities and creative approaches. Due to the limited number of referrals for school year 2020-2021, limited data were gathered for reporting.

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Pilot sites	Students referred into program	Students served by program
6	56	44

Challenges

The COVID-19 pandemic presented unprecedented challenges to providing school-based services to students. With students not physically present in the school building during distance learning orders for much of the school year, many of the pilot sites reported a lack of referrals to the diversion team with one site reporting no referrals at all. The pilot site that received no referrals reported challenges with the school maintaining contact with students throughout the year due to inconsistent attendance and lack of overall student participation. For some sites who did receive referrals, there were also some difficulty making connections with the students. One site reported that they concentrated their efforts in connecting and staying connected to students and maintaining school engagement for students. Another site reported that when they did return to in-person school in the final weeks of the year, a fighting incident occurred involving many students but the shortage of student support staff and teachers made it hard to apply restorative practices with all the students who were involved in the incident.

Opportunities and creative approaches

While school year 2020-2021 was challenging in many ways, sites reported opportunities to address racial equity, have open-dialogue and healing conversations, and strengthen the understanding of restorative practices. Two pilot sites developed creative approaches during this challenging time of isolation and social unrest. One of these sites held virtual lunch-and-learns for students to be able to check in and have continued conversations about what was important to them. The restorative team at this site also held weekly circles for their students. The site reported that these activities helped to foster a sense of belonging and connectivity to their school community while also supporting the students' social-emotional needs. This site also created affinity restorative circles to support Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) staff and parents who were also needing healing from the challenging experiences of this school year. The site reported that the affinity circles positively impacted staff, and helped staff to understand the importance of restorative work and embedding restorative practices into the school environment. Another site also reported that their school engaged in "Courageous Community Conversations" with community leaders with a goal to promote equity, diversity, and inclusion.

For more information

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