

Care and Connection: Supporting Mental Health in Education Using ESSER III Funds

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The winter season and holiday breaks, while exciting for some, can be stressful and anxiety-provoking for others. Building caring, positive relationships in our school communities is one way to support each other during challenging times. Oregon's Care and Connection Campaign, part of ODE's Strengthening Mental Health in Education (SMHiE) Initiative offers many tips and resources for helping students, families, and staff navigate transitions successfully.

The SMHiE Initiative, which kicked off in June 2022, has four primary goals. These goals respond to several years of input from Oregon's students, families, and staff regarding which mental health resources would benefit them the most. The first goal involves increasing mental health literacy for all Oregonians. This is being achieved via Oregon Classroom WISE, a free online suite of resources designed to increase knowledge and awareness regarding mental health. Content includes tips for creating safe, inclusive communities, addressing students' social and emotional needs, and working with students experiencing challenges.

The second goal involves providing credentialed mental health learning opportunities for school staff and community-based organizations that serve youth that is strengths-based, equity-centered, and trauma/social-emotional learning-informed. The third goal, the Community Care Project, is a collaborative partnership between the Oregon Department of Education (ODE), Oregon Health Authority (OHA), University of Oregon (UO), and four Oregon school districts from different state regions. This demonstration project involves embedding Community Care Specialists in school buildings where they provide students and families with emotional support and help them navigate their local systems of care. These systems provide mental health services, food, housing, medical care, and other resources that families need to support their health and well-being. Each Specialist's role is a bit different because every community is unique.

The fourth goal involves documenting and evaluating the entire design and implementation process to ensure that each of these activities is best serving Oregon's students and families and to provide a pathway for expansion and sustainability. Olga Acuña, Executive Director of Federal Programs at Hillsboro School District, one of the demonstration project sites, is already feeling the impact of having a Community Care Specialist in her schools. "We have families being connected," Acuña shared. "We had a parent a month ago who presented to the board and talked about how this level of service is one that could be brought into every school. Parents are asking, 'if it's a demonstration project, how can we bring that into all of our schools?'" One Hillsboro Specialist has been working with community-based organizations such as the Latino Network. "What excites me are the expansions that we may see in the future with other opportunities," Acuña said. "It's about the potential for innovative partnerships that

would bring about school-based mental health systems, resources, and providers.” Dr. B Grace Bullock, ODE Director of Mental and Behavioral Health, Project Director, and Co-Principal Investigator, believe that this demonstration project represents an important step in improving school-based mental health services and supports for Oregon school communities. “This unique collaboration with the University of Oregon, OHA, and partner school district staff and families gives us the opportunity to co-design locally-driven systems that not only provide emotional support to families and staff but also connect them with local organizations and resources. Students, parents, and caregivers now have advocates who link them to the services they need, including mental health support. Schools serve as community hubs where caring connections can be made. In a few short months, we are already seeing what a positive difference this Initiative can make thanks to the hard work and dedication of district staff and our project team.”

The SMHiE Initiative is currently funded by \$5.5 million in American Relief Plan Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) III dollars through September 2024. ODE was recently awarded a \$5.4 million Project AWARE grant from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) to partially fund the Initiative through September 2027. “We will continue to seek funding to develop and expand this work to serve all Oregon school communities in the coming years,” Bullock says.