

VANGUARD

UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI COLLEGE OF HUMAN ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCES 2015

**BUILDING
A FRAMEWORK
FOR CHILDREN'S HEALTH**

STUDENTS IN SCHOOLS ACROSS BOONE County have been answering a new set of assessment questions this spring that have nothing to do with the annual standardized tests familiar to youths across the country.

There are no wrong answers to these assessment questions. Students in third grade through high school have been responding to queries about their relationships with peers. For example, do they feel they have friends at school; have they experienced or witnessed bullying; and do they respond to problems with internalizing or externalizing behavior, to name a few. There are questions aimed at determining who may need support with the mental health issues that afflict some 5 percent of the nation's children between the ages of four and 17 years old, according to the 2014 Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics report on child well-being.

"It's what I'd call a prevention model for schools," says Aaron Thompson, an assistant professor at MU's School of Social Work helping to lead the mental health project. "We're trying to locate kids who are struggling and address it head on."

These assessments are just an initial step in the effort jointly led by Thompson and Wendy Reinke, an associate professor in the Department of Educational, School and Counseling Psychology in MU's College of Education. Analysis and school staff training in identifying and responding effectively to mental health issues also are key components of the plan, called the Boone County Schools Mental Health Project (BCSMHP). Eventually, the project will include all of Boone County's roughly 25,000 public school students in the area's six separate school districts, Thompson says.

Financing the BCSMHP's multifaceted effort is an approximately \$1.19 million grant from the new Boone County Children's Services Fund, created when voters approved a quarter-cent sales tax in November 2012 to provide an array of services for children and youths up to 19 years old. The BCSMHP grant, which runs through June 2016, was one of 23 awarded this year from the children's services fund, says Kelly Wallis, director of the Boone County Community Services Department overseeing the fund.

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- Mental Health Coalition



A DEEPER UNDERSTANDING

Thompson and Reinke's project addresses a need cited in a 2014 report on Boone County children's services developed by the Institute of Public Policy in MU's Truman School of Public Affairs. A summary of the group's findings states that "there needs to be significant improvement in the education of mental health providers, school staff, and parents" to properly serve children in the county.

Some of that education is being provided by the BCSMHP, Wallis says. She adds that county officials also found the program's plan to gather mental health data on all public school children attractive. "It provides a great opportunity to assess what the risk factors are for our youth," Wallis says.

For her part, Reinke credits the Boone County Children's Services Fund with providing an opportunity for programs such as the BCSMHP to systematically work to prevent mental health problems in the county's children. Until now, such efforts have been pursued piecemeal, she says. But the Boone County voter endorsement of the children's services fund—generating an estimated \$6.5 million annually—has changed that.

County support in hand, Thompson and Reinke launched their project as a pilot program in 13 Boone County schools last February. Reinke says the pilot program's primary aim is to ensure that the preventive framework the project seeks to build is feasible for the schools. Once the project's assessment and intervention methods have been fine-tuned, the BCSMHP will be extended to cover all 51 public schools in the Columbia, Centralia, Hallsville, Harrisburg,



Members of the Boone County Schools Mental Health Coalition

Southern Boone and Sturgeon districts within the county. The project's timetable calls for county-wide public school participation by the 2015-2016 school year.

"We're figuring out all of the kinks here in the spring," Reinke says. "Then we're going to roll it out in all our schools in the fall."

PROMOTING PARTNERSHIPS

The BCSMHP team's starting point is a broad-based information gathering program, already in place in the pilot schools. Through the assessment tests taken by students in elementary through high school—as well as assessments gathered from their teachers—the MU professors are trying to identify youths who either are at risk or already suffer from a serious emotional disorder. Often, that's more difficult than it may appear, Thompson notes. Youths with emotional problems such as depression or anxiety-related

disorders may express them through outbursts or disruptive behavior, frequently leading to punishments that may serve only to worsen such problems, he says. The assessment each student takes is intended to help school staff members recognize whether or not a child's disruptive behavior stems from mental health issues, Thompson says.

Once each student in a participating school has been screened, the BCSMHP plan calls for analysis of the student responses. Thompson and Reinke will help individual school-based teams pull out salient data, reviewing and interpreting the information they've gathered in order to determine how to best address student mental health issues the assessments reveal. Reinke hopes the assessment data can be used both to find youths in each grade level who might benefit from social service intervention and to uncover such



Aaron Thompson

school-wide issues as bullying that may affect mental health. From there, the school-based teams will devise programs that respond to their students' mental health challenges. Central to the program, the MU professors believe, is the early identification and support of youths who may be struggling with mental health issues.

"This will allow us to catch them early, and prevent something serious from happening," Reinke predicts.

Another key element of the BCSMHP is its aim to train the school-based team members to obtain and analyze

information on student mental health on their own, as well as establish a framework in which school staff members are able to respond with what's called "wraparound" services bringing schools, families and community partners

together to build support networks. Part of the training will consist of formal instruction, such as the Mental Health First Aid courses that school staff members are slated to start taking this summer. Some will be hands-on, provided by project members as each school's mental health assessment process gets under way, Thompson says.

"A lot of times, schools have a lot of data, but they don't know what to do with it," Thompson says. "We're hoping to provide a framework that can help them take the data and use it in a meaningful way."

Thompson adds that the BCSMHP includes funds to help schools finance the programs they develop through the project.

Both MU professors believe the project and the training it provides offers school staff members the tools and systemic framework they need to effectively promote mental health. Indeed, Reinke hopes the BCSMHP will be the first of many similar efforts throughout the country.

"I think we're really going to be a national model that other communities can look at and say, 'How can we replicate that in our community?'" Reinke says. "It's really cool."