



## **SUCCESS FOR ALL STUDENTS PROJECT**

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For more information contact:

Rebecca Whicker

Rebecca.whicker@cobbk12.org

678-736-3941

### **What do you get when a school district, a juvenile court, a sheriff's office and a public mental health agency join forces? An Unprecedented \$8.5M Federal Grant for School-based Mental Health Services**

Metro-Atlanta, GA

As the **tenth anniversary of Columbine** approaches, and in response to the recent school shootings in Germany, Josef Kraus, head of the Deutsche Lehreverband teachers union, appealed for doubling the number of mental health providers available to students saying he didn't "...think metal detectors and video cameras are the answer." (Associated Press, *USA Today*, March 13, 2009). Accordingly, school mental health professionals say only 10% of all school districts in the US currently have established school-based mental health programs that go beyond what school counseling and social work staff can provide.

The Cobb County School System Department of School Social Work agrees. Following a year-long pilot program in Area 5, the district applied for and recently received an unprecedented \$8.5M in grant funds from the federal Safe Schools/Healthy Students Program, the fourth largest grant in the nation and history of the Safe Schools Initiative. Since 1999, the Safe Schools/Healthy Students Initiative has funded more than 200

urban, suburban, rural, and tribal areas nationwide, totaling more than \$800 million. Cobb County is among these national trend setters creating systemic change by providing school-based mental health for students with a focus on strategies to reduce the risk factors that come between children and their ability to learn. The current project will initially span four years and potentially impact 37,390 students within 20 elementary, 9 middle and 6 high schools in Acworth, Kennesaw and Powder Springs, approximately 35% of the entire enrollment for CCSD.

Federally funded by the Departments of Education and Health and Human Services, the Cobb County project is building on a collaborative framework with its *Success for All Students Project* by implementing community-wide strategies aimed at promoting school safety and healthy youth development for students, parents, educators, and Cobb County citizens at large. The mission is to provide strategies to reduce the risk factors than can come between our children and their ability to learn – at home and in the classroom. So, what’s the bottom line? The heart of the project is to provide school-based mental health and other intervention services to decrease discipline events, improve attendance, academic achievement and, ultimately, graduation rates.

“The project will provide FREE and convenient school-based mental health intervention that is more intensive and ongoing than school counseling staff can offer, as well as a myriad of other mentoring and evidenced-based program curriculums. Through Learning Support Resource Teams formed by each participating school, this project collaboratively examines a child’s overall needs and provides a team approach to a child’s wellbeing through early intervention activities,” said Matt Yancey, Project Manager. Not only are agencies collaborating, local school children are getting on the band wagon. Durham Middle school students contributed artwork for the Success For All Students (SFAS) offices located on Dallas Highway. “It’s all about communities coming together and children being prepared to learn,” continued Yancey. Dr. Paulette Herbert, Cobb County School Social Work Supervisor and Project Director coordinated the writing of the grant and believes that providing mental health and other support services to both students and their families will allow teachers and administrators to do their jobs, ultimately giving them more time to teach and students to optimally succeed academically.

The SFAS required project partners include the Cobb Community Services Board, Cobb County Juvenile Court, and the Cobb County Sheriff's Office. Project leaders anticipate strengthening partnerships with Cobb Public Health, DFCS and local childcare organizations and have contracted with Georgia State University to provide evaluation services.

What makes this program different from others? "In these communities, police will focus *not* just on enforcement, educators *not* just on education, and mental health providers *not* just on mental health. Each will work together with the others, understanding that the elements are closely woven together, to address student needs in a meaningful way with a comprehensive, collaborative approach to barriers," continues Yancey.

In these tough economic times, what do the feds want in return? The Department of Education wants children to improve academically by improving test scores and increasing graduation rates. The Department of Justice wants to keep children out of the judicial system, while the Department of Health & Human Services wants to increase access to mental health services by making it free and convenient.

The Success for All Students Project is comprised of five key elements:

- 1) Safe school environments and violence prevention
- 2) Alcohol, Tobacco and other drug prevention activities
- 3) Student behavioral, social and emotional supports
- 4) Mental health services
- 5) Early childhood social and emotional learning programs.

How Does the Program Complement the Mission of Schools? Lynnda Crowder-Eagle, Vice Chair of the Cobb Board of Education, believes the program has the potential to promote academic achievement by increasing students' attention, improving academic performance and saving instructional time currently lost to disruptive behavior. "The benefits to students, families and communities are obvious," says Mrs. Crowder-Eagle.

Patricia Crowther, a pioneer in school-based mental health, believes there are an astounding number of children who need mental health services, but never receive them. "One of the most pressing and plaguing problems presented to educators," she says, "is the ever increasing number of children, who despite an inherent ability to learn are not benefitting from a regular classroom teaching experience as shown by their continuing academic underachievement." She believes that the student's lack of improvement is often due to unaddressed mental health, stress, family, and trauma issues that could also lead to future delinquent and violent acts.

Studies have shown that only 16 percent of all children receive any mental health services. Of that same 16 percent, 70-80 percent receives that care in a school setting (Health In School Organization).

"The burden of suffering experienced by children with mental health needs and their families has created a health crisis in this country," wrote David Satcher, MD, PhD in his "Report of the Surgeon General's Conference on Children's Mental Health: A National Action Agenda." Clearly our violence problem is a public health crisis, as well, and it must be fixed. As a solution, we can continue to spend more money on trials and jails. However, we must also put more money into prevention, identification, and therapy for troubled youth and their families. Money spent in pre-school programs with family involvement, home visiting programs, and school-based mental health programs is well spent and has demonstrated great results. It's time to take a stand and do more to prevent violence in this country."

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*Success For All Students Project – Communities Coming Together. Children Ready to Learn.*

Additional Contact:

Judge Juanita Stedman  
Juvenile Court of Cobb County  
770-528-2224