

## Results in Brief:

# Collaboration for Safe and Healthy Schools: Study of Coordination Between School Climate Transformation Grants and Project AWARE

June 2018

The Now is the Time initiative, introduced following the school shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary in 2012, includes among its goals making schools safer and increasing access to mental health services. To address these aims, the U.S. Department of Education launched its School Climate Transformation Grant (SCTG) program, which aims to promote more positive school climates and safer schools using an evidence-based framework known as Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS). MTSS emphasizes proactive strategies for defining, teaching, and supporting appropriate student behavior and learning to create positive school environments. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services simultaneously began its Project Advancing Wellness and Resilience in Education (Project AWARE), which aims to promote better student access to mental health services by training school staff to notice, understand, and respond to signs of psychological distress.

The purpose of this study was to examine how states and districts that participate in both SCTG and Project AWARE reported coordinating services and supports, including the mechanisms and practices used in coordination; grantee perceptions regarding the value of coordinating; and the challenges and lessons learned from a collaborative effort. This study used a conceptualization of coordination as a continuum of activities from simple communication and information sharing at the low end toward mutual responsibility and accountability at the high end.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

1. How did grantees coordinate SCTG programs with Project AWARE?
2. What did grantees see as the benefits of coordinating these two grant programs?
3. What were the challenges and lessons learned?

## STUDY DESIGN

This study focused on coordination that occurred at the grantee level in sites that received both an SCTG from the Department of Education and a Project AWARE grant from the Department of Health and Human Services. Therefore, only those state education agencies and school districts that were awarded *both* grants were asked to participate — a total of 36 grantees, including 27 local agencies and nine state agencies.

Study findings are based on reviews of grant applications, grantee progress reports, and 136 semi-structured telephone interviews with state and district officials conducted between December 2016 and February 2017. Three to six staff members (primarily in student support roles) were interviewed per grantee; most but not all respondents were knowledgeable about work and coordination activities occurring beyond their immediate responsibilities.

## Highlights

- Grantee coordination involved joint training, coordinated planning, communication, and the development of shared organizational structures. Most grantees (69 percent) were rated as being involved in at least a moderate level of coordination.
- Better integration of efforts to improve school climate with mental health services (e.g., by training staff in student identification and referral practices) was the most commonly reported accomplishment of coordination for grantees (75 percent).
- Regarding factors that inhibited coordination, districts most often described limited resources (including time, staff, or funds), whereas states more often reported lacking common goals or understanding and having different philosophies.
- Planning activities that grantees stated they wished they had done differently included establishing a team as soon as feasible, leveraging existing teams, clarifying goals early on, and mapping resources to determine which services and strategies were already in place to avoid redundancies.
- Lessons learned about communication included the importance of messaging, helping stakeholders understand the need for and goals of the grant, and connecting these goals to the district's mission and other initiatives and strategies.

## COORDINATION BETWEEN SCTG AND PROJECT AWARE GRANTEES

**Grantee coordination involved joint training, coordinated planning, communication, and the development of new organizational structures.**

To address the question of how grantees coordinated, the study gathered data on the activities that consistently composed coordination efforts.

**Joint training** was the most common strategy identified by school districts (21 of 27) and states (all nine). It referred to the incorporation of content from one grant into the training of the other, or training staff from each grant program together.

**Coordinated planning** was mentioned by seven of nine states and 14 of 27 districts, suggesting that coordination required intentionality and effort to create or redefine positions; establish or revise the scope of work for leadership teams; engage community stakeholders, families, and youth; schedule training; supervise implementation; and monitor data.

**Communication** as a coordination strategy included attendance at meetings with representatives from both grants, cosponsored parents' nights, regular correspondence in the form of newsletters or updates, and the sharing of collected data.

Finally, eleven of the 27 districts and all nine states indicated that they used **organizational structures** to coordinate work across grants. This mechanism involved using a staff position, team, or office to coordinate information, work, and responsibility across two or more organizations.

**Most grantees were rated as being involved in at least a moderate level of coordination. Overall, states exhibited a higher level of coordination than did districts.**

More than half of districts and all state sites (69 percent of grantees) were engaged in at least moderate levels of coordination. The degree of coordination was determined not by the *type* of activity but by the degree to which it was shared. At the low level, grantees shared information about their work. At the moderate level, staff across the grant projects worked together and planned events and activities, and their relationships were altered to some degree by the shared nature of their work. Grantees in the high range shared goals and resources and were mutually responsible and jointly accountable for success.

## BENEFITS OF COORDINATION

**Better integration of efforts to improve school climate with mental health services (e.g., by training staff in student identification and referral practices) was the most commonly reported accomplishment of coordination for grantees (75 percent).**

Respondents identified the integration of school climate and mental health approaches in schools as the primary

accomplishment of grantees' coordination efforts. Grantees at both the district and state levels indicated that with both grants, they could enhance interventions for students, create teams, and more effectively meet students' needs than they could with either grant alone.

**Slightly more than half of grantees (53 percent) described increased efficiency in the delivery of services as the primary advantage of grant coordination, followed by stronger relationships (42 percent) and working across disciplines (42 percent). States were consistently more likely to report each of these advantages than were districts.**

**Increased efficiency** was identified as an advantage because grantees reported that coordination allowed them to align previously separate streams of work and thereby minimize redundancy and staff burden. Coordination produced **stronger relationships** for grantees, they reported, by establishing or expanding professional networks with community groups or feeder schools to meet student needs more effectively. For states, the creation of state management teams provided opportunities for staff to work with community partners and with staff **across disciplines**; respondents reported that this would not have happened had states not received funding for both grant programs.

## CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED

**Regarding factors that inhibited coordination, districts most often described limited resources (including time, staff, or funds), whereas states more often reported lacking common goals or understanding and having different philosophies.**

Examples cited by district respondents included not having enough funds to pay people for participating in training or to pay for the substitute teachers that would allow them to attend training required for MTSS or Project AWARE. Time also was a limiting resource, with time pressures making it hard for school staff to attend training and meetings.

**The importance of planning and the value of communication were the most commonly reported lessons learned for grantees (56 percent each).**

Planning activities that grantees stated they wished they had done differently included establishing a team as soon as feasible, leveraging existing teams, clarifying goals early on, and mapping resources to determine which services and strategies were already in place to avoid redundancies. Lessons learned about communication included the importance of messaging, helping stakeholders understand the need for and goals of the grant, and connecting these goals to the district's mission and other initiatives and strategies.

## ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

The complete report is available online:

<https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/opepd/ppss/index.html>