

DOINGWHATWORKS



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FULL DETAILS AND TRANSCRIPT

Long Term Strategic Planning in Bedford County

Lyn Skillington • June 2009

Topic: Reducing Behavior Problems

Practice: Schoolwide Approach

Highlights

- Bedford County in south central Pennsylvania conducted a risk and resource assessment and discovered that the county needed a common program across all its districts' elementary schools.
- Through grant funding, the county was able to implement three programs aimed to teach students social-emotional skills and provide consistent classroom management and instructional strategies across all K-6 classrooms.
- The county considers this to be a long-term strategic planning process that engages all stakeholders.
- The executive director of the Bedford County Unified Family Services Systems noted that allocating sufficient resources and establishing and maintaining strong communication is key to success.

About the Interviewee

As executive director of Unified Family Services Systems, Lyn Skillington has worked to bring comprehensive youth development and prevention programming to all children and their families in Bedford County, Pennsylvania. These include

three universal, evidence-based prevention programs that are being integrated into the curriculum of the county's five independent school districts, impacting more than 5,000 children pre-K to grade 8 and providing ongoing training for more than 350 teachers.

As a poor, rural county, Bedford County has a compelling need to support the healthy development of its children and families, Skillington believes. Through a systematic needs assessment process, the collaborative board identified issues, service gaps and appropriate evidence-based programs that could fill those gaps and address issues and worked to build the capacity to bring those programs to children, families and the educational community. Her background as a nationally award-winning community journalist and program development specialist for educational and non-profit human service agencies has helped her lead this process.

Full Transcript

I am Lyn Skillington. I'm the Executive Director of Unified Family Services Systems in Bedford County, Pennsylvania.

Through our countywide Communities That Care Prevention Board, we undertook a formal risk and resource assessment about five years ago. We looked at both our risk and resource protective factors and the risky behaviors of our youth and data about our community and adult population. We also sought out and listened to teachers, parents, administrators, business leaders, clergy. And they were all telling us that increasingly they were seeing children that, socially and emotionally, just weren't ready to learn and that there was a need to provide both teachers and parents and grandparents the tools that they needed to support children to be strong socially and emotionally.

After we undertook our initial needs assessment and talked to lots of folks in the educational, human service, and the community, we decided as a collaborative board that we needed to undertake a countywide effort, that we needed consistent strategies and teaching practices and support from district to district and school to school. When we decided as a county to look at implementing countywide programs, we had to set aside some local biases or local control and let the county do what was best for children and for the community as a whole. That mindset was important because it meant giving up local control of things like staff development time, how teachers would interact with each other, and was a key to allocating sufficient resources for implementing these programs. In order to do these programs, we decided as a county to apply for grants from the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency Research-Based Violence and Delinquency Prevention Program, and we've been successful to secure three separate funding sources that allow us now to provide training for more than 350 teachers and to provide programming that impacts more than 5000 students K-8 within the county.

We worked from the beginning to instill in the entire educational community that we weren't looking at a short-term fix, that we didn't have all the immediate answers. The three programs that we've implemented countywide through all of our elementary schools need to be seen as part of a long-term strategic planning process. It's a long-term effort. It's part of a set of strategies that address the development of the whole child on a consistent and countywide basis. We need to be proactive to ensure that the various pieces of the programs are occurring in the schools and in the community. Our assessment process is a combination of fidelity monitoring, to making sure that the quality of the implementation is there, and then also impact. We're trying to assess the outcomes; we want to know what change we're seeing students, in teachers, and in parents. Communication is key. We have a steering committee that meets countywide every month made up of principals. It helps them focus monthly on these programs. We provide updates. We get their input. We meet with superintendents monthly to bring them along on the progress of the programs and also to get their input. We have regular training of coaches and teachers; we get their input. So communication, everybody talking to each other and keeping the focus of the programs at the forefront has been a key part, one of the challenges and also, I think, one of the successes of these programs.