The Student Support Services Project Welcomes...

Bethany Mathers as the PEER/MTS Consultant to the Florida Department of Education (FDOE). For the past three years, Bethany has worked for the FDOE within the Bureau of Exceptional Education and Student Services (BEESS) as a program specialist. Her program areas included intellectual disabilities, other health impairments, orthopedic impairments, and traumatic brain injury. During this time she provided oversight on the development of standards and courses for ESE students, and served as the liaison for Collaborate, Plan, Align, Learn, Motivate, and Share (CPALMS), Florida’s online toolbox of information concerning the implementation of teaching standards. She also managed the course code directory for the bureau and served as project liaison for the Florida Inclusion Network. Prior to joining FDOE, Bethany worked for six years as a classroom teacher for students with varying exceptionalities. She also spent three years as a project coordinator for an educational exhibit company based in Tallahassee, Florida.

Bethany says, “Having used PEER as a classroom teacher, I know how invaluable this program is and how much educators count on it in their daily lives. I am excited to use my knowledge and experience to support continued improvements to the program, and provide excellent, timely support to our stakeholders.”

We welcome you to reach out and introduce yourself to our newest team member. Bethany may be reached at 850-245-0962 or bethany.mathers@fldoe.org.
Florida AWARE and Florida SCT
Advancing Wellness and Resilience in Education and School Climate Transformation

The news that Florida has recently been awarded two major federal grants that prioritize and help to resource comprehensive supports with a focus on mental health and positive school climate has come at a wonderful time. The four disciplines of student services (counseling, social work, nursing, and psychology) in Florida provide critical knowledge and experience that is central to these efforts, and we are well on our way to more effective ways to integrate our supports across our disciplines and within the multi-tiered system. In case the news is “news to you” today, here are the details:

BEESS, FDOE was awarded two five-year collaborative grants totaling over $2.5 million per year from the U.S Department of Health and Human Services and the U.S. Department of Education. The State Education Agency’s “Now is The Time” – Advancing Wellness and Resilience in Education (Florida AWARE) and School Climate Transformation (Florida SCT) grant programs both focus on achieving long-term improvements that ensure all students in Florida have access to effective school and community practices evidenced to improve social, emotional, and academic outcomes. We are proud to contribute to the continual improvement of education in Florida!

Florida AWARE will provide coordination of services from youth serving agencies at the state and local level through a long-term plan developed by a Florida AWARE State Management Team. The focus of these efforts will be on improved social, emotional, and behavioral health impacts for all Florida children, adolescents, and their families. Florida AWARE will collaborate with three Local Education Agencies (LEAs) (Pinellas, Polk, and Duval County School Districts) to develop prototypical sites with improved access to school- and community-based services and establish the infrastructure to become the model for systems wide scale-up throughout the state. Florida AWARE also aims to increase mental health awareness of educators, students, and other youth-serving adults through statewide dissemination of Youth Mental Health First Aid training. In addition to the state-level award, the following nine Florida Local Education Agencies received AWARE grants at the local level: Polk, Osceola, Hillsborough, Lake, Duval, St. Lucie, Broward, Pinellas, and Lake Whales Charter Schools, Inc.

Florida SCT will expand Florida’s statewide system of behavioral support by providing training and technical assistance to LEAs in implementing an evidence-based, multi-tiered framework for improving behavioral outcomes and learning conditions for all students. Florida SCT will expand the Florida Positive Behavior Support Project by training and supporting more schools across the state and expanding training and supports across tiers within schools that are already participating. Florida was one of 12 states awarded this grant. The following five LEAs also received SCT grants at the local level: Broward, Duval, Hillsborough, Nassau, and Polk.
Upcoming Events

Florida Association of School Nurses (FASN) 19th Annual Conference—This event will be held February 6–7, 2015, at the Florida Hotel in Orlando. FASN strives to improve the health and educational success of students and the school community by developing leaders to promote and advocate for school nursing best practice. For more information on the FASN Conference, visit https://fasn.nursingnetwork.com/page/21441-fasn-19th-annual-conference-2015.

School Social Work Association of America (SSWAA) 18th National School Social Work Conference—This event will be held April 15–18, 2015, at the Sheraton Music City Hotel in Nashville, Tennessee. The purpose of SSWAA is to enhance the social and emotional growth and academic outcomes of all students. For more information on the SSWAA Conference, visit http://www.sswaa.org/events/event_details.asp?id=437495.

Florida School Health Association (FSHA) Annual Conference and Training—This event will be held May 13–15, 2015, at the Rosen Centre Hotel in Orlando. The purpose of FSHA is to promote a comprehensive and coordinated approach resulting in improved school health programs in the state of Florida. For more information on the FSHA Conference, visit http://www.fsha.net/FSHA_conferences.htm.
Osceola County Schools...
In the News
Foster Care and Making a Difference

Elizabeth Lane, MS
Supervisor, Social Services
Osceola County Schools

Six years ago a student transitioning from foster care to independent living residing in Osceola County would be picked up from his/her school early in the morning to be driven to Orlando (45 minutes in traffic), attend the meeting and be brought back to school in time to catch the bus home. One school day wasted and education left entirely out of the picture for a student whom research shows is greatly at risk for dropping out or not going to college. This happened on a regular basis.

Fast forward to today and meet Amanda (name changed for this article). She has been in foster care since 2009 and moved back to Osceola County in 2011 where she attended high school her junior and senior year. Working with her guidance counselor, Amanda selected a college to attend, participated in the Advancement Via Individual Determination program, scored a 1690 on her SAT and was enrolled in advanced placement classes. Teachers at her high school offered tutoring both before and after class. Currently, Amanda attends Florida International University in Miami and maintains a 3.4 GPA while taking a 15-hour class load. This summer she will participate in a research project in Guatemala.

Amanda’s success story is one of many that Osceola County has seen as a result of a collaborative partnership between Community Based Care of Central Florida (CBCCFL). During a Department of Children and Families (DCF) Summit four years ago; whereby caseworkers, DCF protective investigators and other persons associated with out-of-home care discussed how difficult it was to access the schools and school records in Osceola County. These difficulties were impeding the educational process for a group of students already at risk for dropping out of school. On the other side, schools were spending a great deal of time gathering information and witnessing at-risk students being removed from school on a regular basis for doctor appointments, transitional meetings, and supervision. As a result of the issues raised at that summit, leadership from the school district, child welfare, and DCF began meeting on a regular basis to discuss mutual concerns and center responses to the best needs of the students.

Beginning with the question “What if?” ongoing conversations have allowed for changes in the school district process that not only mandates immediate enrollment but also allows for information sharing, placing everyone on the same page. In addition, caseworkers are instructed to only take students out of school on an emergency basis and to schedule appointments for Wednesday afternoons, an early release day for students. Another need was stated and answered—the need for a liaison who could work with case management and the school district. The Educational Liaison for Children in out-of-home care is a unique position developed by the Osceola County School District and the CBCCFL, who were awarded the child welfare contract for Osceola in 2011. The end product is a collaboration in which the district contracts with CBCCFL for an Educational Liaison, employed by the school district, who works specifically with out-of-home students.

The Osceola County School District currently has 98 students who are in out-of-home care and placed in Osceola County and 108 students who are in out-of-home care and live elsewhere. The Educational Liaison for out-of-home care maintains offices at the CBCCFL and with the school district school social workers. The position requires a graduate degree in either Social Work or Education. The Educational Liaison’s tasks...
are many, but are dedicated full time to the school districts’ out-of-home students. She receives copies of the shelter orders immediately after they are signed by the judge. She contacts the school and sends them the information to update the files with the most recent information. If a placement change is involved, she works closely with the district transportation department to determine if it is possible for the student to remain in the same school for school stability. If not, she works with the caseworker to ensure a speedy transfer. For students coming into care for the first time, she contacts the home school to receive educational records, which are provided to the CBCCFL for caseworkers, guardian ad litem and DCF personnel.

In addition to providing educational records, the Educational Liaison also acquires up-to-date information from teachers and counselors for case staffings, provides the school the most up-to-date information on the progress of the child and, in general, keeps the information line flowing between school, child welfare and the courts. This allows for a Systems of Care for out-of-home students, which brings everyone to the table. Information is input monthly into an internal DCF/CBCCFL program, which informs or alerts everyone involved should there be a change in grades, attendance or discipline.

The Educational Liaison position provides an umbrella in which both education and child welfare can work together to provide the best opportunity for academic progress for our district’s children. The ability to quickly access school records and provide them to case management allows for school stability. Allowing school personnel to be apprised, with regard to their students, brings about an understanding and empathy of common behavior concerns and appropriate focus on academics. In the case of Amanda, the Educational Liaison attended her Youth Transition Meetings and provided updates to the team and student regarding GPA, credits, grades, and educational information. When the time was appropriate, she also provided information on the Florida Bright Futures Scholarship. Amanda’s story is a result of the collaboration between the Educational Liaison for out-of-home care, CBCCFL, and the resilience that is a part of many of our out-of-home students.

Marcy Morris, Executive Director for Osceola County CBCCFL, states, “One would have to search far and wide across the state to find a better collaboration than the Osceola School System and the Community Based Care of Central Florida. The Educational Liaison contractual position has been instrumental in allowing us to obtain invaluable educational assistance and information regarding our children in out-of-home care. In fact, Osceola’s liaison position has been so successful it is being implemented throughout the tri-county area in Central Florida.”

Ms. Morris is not alone in her praise of the school district’s collaboration. Deputy Superintendent of Operations, Tom Phelps adds, “In our business it is all about the children. Through a shared vision, Community Based Care of Central Florida and The School District of Osceola County have created a partnership where the needs of children are always first. Through constant collaboration, there are no obstacles that keep us from completing our shared vision. The creation of the Educational Liaison position has allowed our two agencies to provide the necessary resources for the children in out-of-home care. We are so grateful for the wonderful partnership that we share between the two agencies.”

The mission statement for the Osceola County School District is Education which inspires all to their highest potential. By removing silos and working with out-of-home children as a team, our mission statement has become a way of doing business. Mutual training, regular conversations and asking the question “What if?” continue to be part of our planning as we look forward to a successful collaboration which benefits our children.
Praises for Civility

Deidre Skaggs
District Guidance Specialist
Polk County Schools, Florida

Yes, civility is fun... serious fun that deserves celebrating! Scott Lake Elementary leadership sees it as a “game changer” for their school climate. Within a few short weeks of implementing Precious NOT Prickly Civility at Scott Lake Elementary I began hearing inspiring stories of turnaround in individual student behavior as well as overall school culture. Now that’s music to my ears!

“The first signs of change came right away,” reported school counselor, Candace Shim at a recent Polk County school counselor professional development. “I saw a fifth grade student, known for bullying younger students, nearby a third grader who dropped her lunch tray. In the past, this boy’s reaction would likely be to kick the tray out of her reach. I was shocked when he leaned down and helped her retrieve her lunch and tray from the floor. It is a heartwarming change that came through implementing Precious NOT Prickly.”

A few weeks later, another outstanding story and update from Candace. “Things are going great. I actually do have a story to share – we have an autistic fifth grader who has been in a separate ESE class since pre-K. She is just now starting to increase her social interactions and is able to do some regular education schoolwork. Her teachers requested she be a patrol (fifth grade helper) in the lunchroom at breakfast and she has been doing great. The regular education fifth grade patrols who also are on breakfast have really chipped in and helped her and are very supportive. One of the fifth grade teachers has been really working the Precious NOT Prickly in the class, and her students asked her if their peer could join their class for parties and at lunch time. They have included her in birthday celebrations and have invited her to sit with them at lunch. It has been so wonderful to watch these kids embrace their peer with special needs and treat her like one of their own. Thank you so much for the opportunity to bring this to our school.”

This is especially newsworthy because Scott Lake Elementary reported the fourth highest discipline referrals out of our 87 elementary schools. Although it’s a great school on so many levels, a schoolwide civility immersion was in order. Civility story lessons, brain building techniques like gratitude exercises, acts of kindness homework and daily lifestyle of kindness challenges began at the start of this school year.

“Research has shown that effective school counseling services can impact student’s academic performance...”
I applaud the outstanding leadership of my School Counselor, Candace Shim, and her civility team at Scott Lake. I am also grateful for Ruth Reimer, Principal, and her enthusiastic staff for embracing and going all out for civility including a 750-kid flash mob dance to celebrate Kindness Day.

I discovered this civility education curriculum at last year’s Florida School Counselor Association Convention where I met Amy Barnett and learned about Precious NOT Prickly and Operation Hedgehog civility programs for K-12. These programs provide the resources and training needed to improve student behavior and open the brain to learning. Each day many of our students struggle with emotional and social difficulties and need help. When students are not given the skills to overcome these barriers, academic achievement can be hindered. Research has shown that effective school counseling services can impact students’ academic performance, and enable teachers to provide quality instruction to assist students in achieving high standards.

Currently, Polk County Schools is beginning the process to implement Precious NOT Prickly in at least a dozen additional schools. My personal goal is for all Polk County school counselors to be equipped to bring Precious NOT Prickly and Operation Hedgehog programs into their schools. Are you like me, working toward safer and healthier school environments?

For more information contact Deidre Skaggs at deidre.skaggs@polk-fl.net or 863-519-8197 or Amy Barnett, Operation Hedgehog at amy@littlehedgehog.com or 904-612-5031, http://www.operationhedgehog.com.

Reducing Absenteeism

Take an opportunity to remind parents and students about the importance of consistent, daily school attendance as some parents try to squeeze in vacation days after the winter break. Absenteeism can weaken academic performance because instructional time is lost, which results in retention or not completing high school. For tools to help parents and students that every school day counts, and that a good education begins with getting to school every day, please visit http://www.attendanceworks.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/giftofattendance.pdf.

Schools and Medicaid Meeting Materials

The Schools and Medicaid meeting was held in September. This annual meeting is designed for school district personnel who are actively involved or interested in the implementation and administration of the Medicaid program in schools. The meeting included information related specifically to the Florida Medicaid certified school match fee-for-service and administrative claiming programs.

Materials from the meeting sessions can be found at http://www.sss.usf.edu/resources/topic/medicaid/index.html.

Materials posted include presentations from the sessions and data on Medicaid reimbursement received by individual districts.
Exceptional Student Education Rules Approved by the State Board of Education


One of the major changes was a revision of the initial evaluation timeline for ESE eligibility (IDEA). Effective July 1, 2015, initial eligibility evaluations (IDEA) must be completed within 60 calendar days after receiving parental consent. However, summer vacation and school holidays do not count toward the 60 days, and the timeline can be extended for absences beyond eight school days during the 60-day calendar period.

The rule revisions adopted on November 18, 2014, also modified the timeframe for obtaining consent. When there is reason to suspect that a student may be a student with disability and need special education OR a parent requests an evaluation, the district must obtain consent or provide notice of refusal within 30 days unless parent and school agree otherwise in writing. Previous revisions to Rule 6A-6.0331 (effective March 25, 2014), clarified the circumstances under which a district’s child find obligation would be initiated. The revised language also clarifies that a school-based team is responsible for making this determination. For preschool children, the results of the developmental screener would establish the child find obligation.

Other rules approved by the State Board of Education on November 18, 2014, that impact exceptional student education include:

- Rule 6A-1.0943, Statewide Assessment for Students with Disabilities
- Rule 6A-1.0995, Form of High School Diplomas and Certificates of Completion
- Rule 6A-1.09963, High School Graduation Requirements for Students with Disabilities
- Rule 6A-6.03022, Exceptional Student Education Eligibility for Students with Dual Sensory Impairments
- Rule 6A-6.03028, Provision of Free Appropriate Public Education and Development of IEPs
- Rule 6A-6.03411, Definitions, ESE Policies and Procedures, and ESE Administrators

These rules can be viewed at https://app1.fldoe.org/rules/RulesArchive.aspx. The anticipated implementation date for all rules, except the 60-day evaluation timeline, is the end of December.
Celebrating the Season

This year the Student Support Services Project staff decided to “give back” to the community through two activities. Student Support Services Project staff, along with several members of Heather’s daughter’s Girl Scout troop, brought joyful noise to a local rehabilitation hospital. Staff sang songs, played instruments, and talked with the residents.

We also participated in a local school’s adopt-a-girl program. The school provides girls and young women an opportunity for a better future through education, counseling, training and advocacy. We know that the student we adopted will love her jewelry, FSU sweatshirt, gift cards, socks, and candy!

Trivia Questions… for Your Entertainment

Q-1: What does the above number represent?
Q-2: What act provides educational stability to students in foster care?
Q-3: How is a student’s response to instruction and intervention measured?
Q-4: What are two ways Section 504 differs from IDEA?
Q-5: True or False
A student can be retained more than once in third grade.

Answers
A-1: Represents the amount of money school districts have received since the Medicaid
A-2: Foster Connections to Success Act and increasing adoptions Act
A-3: Ongoing progress monitoring
A-4: Anti-disability vs. entitlement; broader definition of disability
A-5: False see section 1002.52(6)(b)(5), Florida Statutes

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