

**FULL-SERVICE COMMUNITY SCHOOLS GRANT**

**INTERIM EVALUATION REPORT**

**MARCH 1, 2023 – FEBRUARY 29, 2024**

**SUBMITTED TO: COMMUNITIES IN SCHOOLS OF EASTERN PENNSYLVANIA**



**SUBMITTED BY: EDUCATIONAL ENTERPRISES, LLC**



**FEBRUARY 2024**

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#### Introduction

In January 2023 Communities in Schools of Eastern Pennsylvania (CISEPA) was awarded a Full-Service Community Schools (FSCS) Grant by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education (DOE). This capacity building and development grant targeted Title 1A Schoolwide Program Eligibility as an absolute priority and the overarching goals are to (1) meet student social, emotional, and academic needs and (2) strengthen cross-agency coordination and community involvement to advance systematic change.

In collaboration with the Reading School District, the Southwest Reading community, and additional partner organizations the grant is providing services to two elementary schools and one middle school in the Reading School District and is estimated to impact approximately 1,940 students. The partner organizations include Reading Science Center, Reading Public Museum, YMCA, Olivet Boys and Girls Club, Centro Hispanic, Easter Seals, Berks Counseling, CSC Early Learning Resource Center 13, United Way Bucks, Caron Treatment Center, Berks Initiative for School Attendance, and Opportunity House/Second Street Learning Center.

More specifically, the grant funds CISEPA's further expansion into the Reading School District by creating five new support positions. A Community School Coordinator is in place at all three schools: Southwest Middle School, Tyson-Schoener Elementary School, and the 10<sup>th</sup> and Penn Elementary School. Additionally, Student Support Specialists have assumed their positions at both Southwest Middle School and Tyson-Schoener Elementary School. These expansions allow CISEPA to implement critical services in the district, including trauma-informed behavioral health services, integrated school supports, positive youth development programs, transitional supports, summer and after-school programs, professional development for school staff, kindergarten readiness opportunities, and strategies to address violence. There is also a focus on building parental leadership as that voice evolves additional community school services may be adopted based on identified community needs.

The general goals of the grant are to improve student learning, build stronger families, and ensure a healthier community. More specific outcomes and indicators include: (1) a significant decrease in both chronic absenteeism and disciplinary referrals, (2) a significant increase in parent and family engagement, and (3) a substantial increase in the number of youths connected to quality out-of-school opportunities. It is anticipated that additional indicators and elements may be included once DOE finalizes their reporting requirements.

## Program Evaluation

Educational Enterprises, LLC (EE) was selected to serve as the FSCS external local-level evaluator. EE has provided CISEPA with evaluation services for more than a decade and has recently acted in the role of external evaluator for several school districts including Allentown, Bethlehem, Easton, and Philadelphia. Additionally, EE has served as the state-level external evaluator for the Pennsylvania Department of Education on federal grants including the Math and Science Partnership, Comprehensive School Reform, and Neglected/Delinquent Programs.

EE conducted site visits at the 10<sup>th</sup> and Penn Elementary School, Tyson-Schoener Elementary School, and Southwest Middle School during January 2024. At each school interviews and focus groups were conducted with key constituents and stakeholders; EE staff spoke at length with building/grant administrators, teachers and students participating in grant initiatives, as well as social workers, guidance counselors, and parents. There are two primary questions addressed at this stage of the evaluation: What is working? What is not working? These qualitative data enable the EE Evaluation Team to: (1) identify grant accomplishments and strengths and (2) gain insight as to how things have gone with the start-up and, if appropriate, offer recommendations for improvement.

## Evaluation Findings

*General Goals.* The overarching goals of the grant are to improve student learning, build stronger families, and ensure a healthier community. While the grant initiatives have been operational for a relatively brief period of time there were many noteworthy accomplishments.

Of those interviewed, both building administrators and teachers reported that the grant promoted a strong academic orientation and that “academics were first and foremost with many of the activities introduced in the schools.” Since the inception of the grant there has been increased engagement with students and their families and that “grant-supported staff have been readily available to create and cultivate relationships.” Administrators, teachers, and parents felt there has been a considerable increase in community relations that has resulted in a “shifting of the culture” and “making the school a more homelike and nurturing environment.”

*Specific Outcomes and Indicators.* The specific indicators/measurable outcomes for the grant are: (1) a significant decrease in both chronic absenteeism and disciplinary referrals, (2) a significant increase in parent and family engagement, and (3) a substantial increase in the number of youths connected to quality out-of-school opportunities. The data obtained from school constituents suggests meaningful progress has been made in attaining those major objectives.

It was reported by the building administrators that attendance has improved and is approaching 95% at two of the schools – there has been a focus on attendance at the schools and various incentives have been institutionalized. Teachers said that there “has been a reduction in bad behavior” and that “incidents of bad behavior have sharply declined.” All the constituents agreed there has been increased communication and parent involvement; one parent spoke at length about the enhanced parental interactions, and the friendships that have evolved, leading to an improved synergy between the parents and the schools. The grant has developed and implemented numerous after-school opportunities for the students and those programs and activities have been fully enrolled; please see the section below entitled Positive Youth Development Programs for greater details.

*Grant Services and Initiatives.* There were three major initiatives undertaken in the 2023-2024 school year: (1) Building Parental Leadership; (2) Positive Youth Development Programs; and (3) Integrated School Supports. Data gathered from the interviews and focus groups with grant constituents suggest these initiatives have been fully implemented and are functioning as intended.

*Building Parental Leadership.* It is understood that all parents want to help their children but, in some cases, do not know how to connect with their local school; one aim of the grant is to provide a more structured environment for providing advice and support. The following activities have been instituted and are available to all parents: Parent Advisory Committee, Monthly Parent/Family Events, Parenting Resource Fair, and Open Doors Program. One parent reported “an 8-fold increase in attendance at parent events and activities” which is testament to the effectiveness of these initiatives in strengthening communication and parent involvement with the schools. A social worker added “as the interactions between parents have increased, parents are coming the realization that they are not in this alone.”

*Positive Youth Development Programs.* There have been a plethora of activities and clubs established with the support of grant funds. Among those are: Read Alliance in collaboration with the United Way, Robotics Club in partnership with the Reading Science Center, the Swim Club in conjunction with the YMCA, the Writing Club with ties to the Reading Museum, and a Girl Scout Troop. There are also school-based activities such as the Lunch Study Group and the Chess Club that meet routinely as well as occasional “special events” such as the Attendance Parade and the faculty sponsored Trunk and Treat. There is a high degree of student participation in these programs and students said they excitedly look forward to the after-school activities. Attendance at many programs has been capped as they are fully subscribed, which is testimony to the attractiveness of the offerings.

*Integrated School Supports.* Based on the feedback from school constituents it is clear that grant staff members, the Community School Coordinators and Student Support Specialists, are viewed as members of the school team. There has been an infusion of collaboration and cooperation between grant staff, principals, and other school leaders; for example, grant staff attend school recruitment and planning meetings. There are close working relationships with social workers and guidance counselors to supplement Individual Case Management and address issues such as attendance, behavior, truancy, and homelessness. Assistance has been provided to teachers including, for example, the development and implementation of Student Assistance Programs and bilingual support.

*Recurring Themes.* There were two topics mentioned by multiple interviewees that bear mention as they provide additional insight to grant impact and the degree to which the grant is meeting the needs of constituents. The topics frequently addressed related to mental health issues and the provision of food at after-school activities and other events.

As a guidance counselor said “a lot has been accomplished in a small timeframe with respect to mental health.” There are protocols in place to address mental health issues including risk assessment and dealing with depression; the grant supports the Aevium Club and participating students said they “had learned to manage their emotions better.” The second topic is the grant-funded provision of food for all clubs, after-school activities, and parent events. The meals are much appreciated by all participants and are a contributing factor to improved attendance. Students look forward to the after-school activities and meals are an important attraction – for some it may be their only evening meal. The meals are served in a communal setting for all students participating in grant-supported activities on any particular day. This setting promotes social interactions among a wide range of students across grade levels and one student commented “it feels like I’m part of a special group.”

*Grant Management.* The two words most frequently used by interviewees to describe the overall management of grant initiatives were: effective and efficient. One principal said “they have become part of the fabric of the school” and another stated “they have built a reputation as team players.” Teachers reported that they are “readily available to provide whatever student support is necessary” and “have created positive relationships with everyone in the school.” An assistant principal added “they are cooperative, collaborative, and bring a good balance to the mix” and “they have developed a rapport with everyone and gotten buy-in to the notion we are all partners in this enterprise.” Finally, another principal said “they are positive advocates for the school, the students, and their families.”

*Potential Program Refinements.* As the resources provided by the grant are finite, some of the suggestions for “improvement” were unrealistic; for example, it would not be financially feasible

to hire additional Student Support Specialists for the schools. There were three ideas put forth that grant managers may wish to consider moving forward. Multiple interviewees suggested expanding “brand awareness” by providing more information/training with respect to grant resources and accomplishments; that is “taking credit where credit is due.” The other suggestions were to consider (1) providing additional attention/support to middle school transition and (2) adding more after-school activities/programs for kindergarten students.

### Conclusions and Recommendations

The qualitative data collected from the constituents of the schools benefiting from grant-provided services persuasively support the conclusion that considerable progress has been made towards the attainment of the general goals of the grant, which are to improve student learning, build stronger families, and ensure a healthier community. Meaningful improvements were noted with respect to the more specific outcomes and indicators; it was reported that the schools have observed (1) decreases in both chronic absenteeism and disciplinary referrals and (2) increases in parent and family engagement as well as the number of youths connected to quality out-of-school opportunities. In reviewing the data related to goals and outcomes, a common denominator emerged: there has been a significant increase in engagement with the school on the part of students and their families.

The overall management of the grant was reported to be effective and efficient and, as one principal stated the services provided “have become part of the fabric of the school.” The positions funded by the grant, Community School Coordinators and Student Support Specialists, are in place and feedback from school constituents regarding their performance has been overwhelming positive; they are viewed, in the words of another principal, as “positive advocates for the school, the students, and their families.” In terms of potential program refinements grant managers may wish to consider expanding “brand awareness” by providing more information/training with respect to grant resources and accomplishments; that is “taking credit where credit is due.”

This report is qualitative in nature and based on the opinions/perceptions program constituents and stakeholders expressed during the interviews/focus groups. These qualitative data provide valuable insight into program accomplishments and strengths as well as areas that may need refinement. The findings from this report can supplement the quantitative data required by DOE to provide a more complete picture of program impact on the targeted populations. That is, these data can lead to a greater depth of understanding regarding the attainment of both intended and perhaps unanticipated program outcomes.