

RESEARCH & EVALUATION

District sees evaluation framework as key to expanding and improving mental health delivery

Aurora Public Schools



44,000 students from 130 countries, speaking more than 130 languages—
55% Hispanic, 19% Black,
71% free/reduced lunch, 36%
English learners



\$9 million/year in new funding
for mental health



277 mental health providers;
20% of them are BIPOC

McREL International



Expertise in both evaluation
and school improvement



Collaborative, “co-creation”
approach



Experienced in contextualizing
data and cultural sensitivity

Elements of Long-Term Evaluation Framework



Focus groups



Questionnaires



Data analysis and reporting

“ We get frequent feedback from McREL. If we need to change direction or we’re not getting what we want, they’re very responsive and supportive. ”

—Jessica O’Muireadhaigh, director of mental health and counseling, Aurora Public Schools

“ Our goal is not to go in and say which mental health strategy is best, it’s to go in and say: Are you getting the results you want for what you are doing, or do you need to redo anything? ”

—Dr. Lisa M. Jones, managing researcher, McREL

McREL evaluators help school district's mental health department plan for the future



The challenge: Expanding mental health services and increasing effectiveness

Something wonderful happened in Aurora, Colorado, in 2018: Voters approved a mill levy that would provide \$9 million a year for student mental health and counseling in Aurora Public Schools (APS). The district boosted its provider force, assuring that all 40,000-plus students, not just those with individualized education programs, could have access to services at any time.

As the person tasked with spending that money, Jessica O'Muireadhaigh, director of mental health and counseling, saw an opportunity not merely to grow, but to become more effective and accountable to the public. She wanted to be able to evaluate her department's operations—not just once but continuously—and to accomplish this she turned to McREL International, where an evaluation team led by Dr. Lisa M. Jones had already helped other districts in the U.S. improve their mental health operations.

"I like working with an outside evaluator because they are impartial to the outcome, so I feel like I'm going to get just the facts, which will help me make solid decisions based on credible data," O'Muireadhaigh said.

Helping providers to help students

Put simply, the plan was to be able to continually ask caregivers, students, educators, parents, and community members what's working in APS mental health delivery and make changes as needed. The McREL/APS team put together a schedule of surveys and focus groups, working together to fine-tune items for maximum responsiveness.

One example of how McREL helped: APS had been avoiding the sentence starter *I feel* . . . in student surveys and was instead using third-person questions due to a common understanding in the evaluation field that this produces more reliable responses. The McREL team pointed out that *I feel* is a better way to learn how a student is doing at a given moment.

McREL also talked with APS about social desirability bias—the tendency for respondents to say what they think the questioner wants to hear—and how it can affect survey results.

Focus groups had to be postponed because of COVID-19, but this allowed the team to expand its scope in response to new concerns it was hearing. About a fifth of the district's counselors, social workers, and psychologists are BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, people of color) and many were experiencing their own distress from what they perceived as a constant barrage of micro-aggressions, including having their credentials and experience challenged.

Recognizing that providers who feel under threat are unlikely to be at their peak when counseling students, McREL helped the district's BIPOC providers committee find ways to assess and address the issue, including new mentoring opportunities and professional development.

Future direction: How do you evaluate an evaluation framework?

The evaluation framework won't ever be "finished," according to Dr. Jones, because the whole point is to continuously adapt it to newly discovered needs long after McREL's formal involvement ends.

So how will success be measured?

This poses challenges even for evaluation experts, because one way of looking at mental health services is that they succeed when bad things *don't* happen. There's also the fact that the superintendent is accountable to the community for improving academic performance, and it's hard to prove that happier, healthier providers cause happier, healthier students—let alone that this causes better test scores.

One thing that's already clear to APS's O'Muireadhaigh is that working with an external evaluator was "absolutely, one hundred percent" the right call.

"I would highly recommend working with an evaluator because you're getting someone whose expertise is in evaluation. They can look at a question and know whether we're going to get the feedback we want. Also, people can be more open and honest with people who are not affiliated with their agency."