

CONFERENCE ABSTRACT

Early intervention and integration of access to health and social care for vulnerable families in schools on the Central Coast, New South Wales, Australia

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Adverse childhood events are major contributors to the burden of disease overall in Australia (1). Thus, providing prompt support to children when vulnerability (health, social, and educational) is identified, may improve overall health throughout their life course.

The Family Referral Service is a program designed to connect vulnerable families to appropriate health and social care. Through a multi-agency partnership, the Family Referral Service in Schools (FRSIS) program was trialled successfully in 2016/2017 on the Central Coast, NSW, and extended in 2018, to reach three learning communities (total of 13 schools, both primary and secondary), with a combined student population of over 10,000 children and young people.

Stakeholders in this program are schools, the local Primary Health Network, the commissioned Non-Government Organisation, Departments of Education, Health, Family and Community Services and the Local Health District. Representatives from these stakeholders comprise the governance group, which coupled with local leadership in the school communities' support the program's operation.

The placement of the program within schools enables teachers to identify children at risk of educational disengagement and/or poor health and social outcomes, and offer assistance via the program. It represents a low-barrier soft entry to health and social care via supported referrals for families who find it difficult to access the care they need. The service model is an early intervention approach to health and social care.

As FRSIS has expanded, the operational delivery by the commissioned NGO has been stable, however, the governance group has experienced considerable membership change. The common core objective of supporting vulnerable children and their families' has aided in keeping the multiple agencies engaged with and focused on supporting the program. However, sustainability and support of the program depend on the continued engagement of all members of this governance group, thus consideration of the goals of their corresponding organisations is relevant. The current evaluation is seeking to map and align these overlapping and changing objectives to that of the program, its metrics and the policy environment that supports it.

We postulate that building and sharing this coherent understanding will aid in program sustainability as it expands and experiences workforce change both at the operational and strategic oversight levels. Building school communities, with a common vision and strong strategic alignment, are factors that contribute to the programs sustainability as well as replicability and application in other school settings.

Analysis of the policy environment and keeping the strategic organisational alignment of objectives of the multiple agencies which support the program, has shown good harmony with those engaged with FRSIS. It will be important to continue to keep abreast of changes in policy, and organisational focus, and update the program's narrative and review its operation as needed.

Children and their families are at the centre of the FRSIS model, not the services that support it. This has led to sustained engagement in schools and also at the strategic governance level, where multiple agencies balance their involvement against their organisational objectives.

References:

1- Moore, SE et al(2015)Child Abuse Negl.48:208-220.