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Albert Schweitzer Fellowship - Detroit Chapter
Final Report

Project Description

My project partnered with the Michigan Collaborative for Mindfulness in Education (MC4ME) to incorporate mindfulness training in the middle school environment for both teachers and students, through which we aim to increase the physical, mental, and social health well-being of teachers and students, increasing their awareness of themselves and their health as well as their ability to contribute to a positive school environment and climate. Through MC4ME, I worked with two middle schools to implement the mindfulness program.

The goals of my project were to: 1) explore the role of mindfulness training through MC4ME in lowering teacher stress levels, 2) explore the role of mindfulness training through MC4ME in reducing student stress levels, reducing student mental health symptoms, and increasing their awareness of themselves and their healthy behaviors, and 3) build an understanding how the current MC4ME mindfulness programs fit into the careers and school days of teachers and curricula of students at the middle school level and how it can be continued on in the daily routine of each student and teacher on an individual level

Success of this project was defined as: 1) students reporting improvement in their post-program surveys as compared to their baseline surveys in the areas of decreased stress, decreased mental health symptoms, including anxiety and depression, and increased mindfulness and engagement at school, and 2) teachers reporting lower stress levels, lower burn-out levels, and improved incorporation of mindfulness in their professional lives as seen in comparison of pre- and post-program surveys.

Evaluation Methodology

Surveys were administered to both teachers and students at the start and conclusion of the mindfulness training program. Each of these surveys was given a unique ID number and de-identified. Through these surveys, we assessed:

- 1) Student self reported outcomes, on a 5 point scale: decreased mental health symptoms, decreased stress levels, increased engagement in school
- 2) Teacher self reported outcomes, on a 5 point scale: decreased stress levels, decreased burn-out levels

3) Program evaluation by teachers, on a 5 point scale: accessibility to teachers, ease of incorporation into daily school routine, satisfaction with program

With respect to the quantitative data, the data will be analyzed with appropriate statistical models, with the goal of the program receiving an average of 4 out of 5 on each of the instruments of measurement.

In addition, qualitative data is being collected through individual interviews and focus groups with teachers, in order to assess their perceived stress and burn out levels as well as their perception on the program and their ability to incorporate it into their regular school routine and curriculum.

After each mindfulness training session/module, students complete a journal entry describing what they learned through the mindfulness session as well as their self reported levels of stress and mental health symptoms.

Findings

We are still in the process of gathering the remaining post-program data for analysis, however, preliminary data is promising. Students are positively rating the program in terms of its impact on their mental health symptoms, with scores ranging in the 4's and 5's. Teachers are also positively rating the program in the 4-5 range, reporting that mindfulness training is helping both themselves and their students better engage with each other throughout the school day. In addition, teachers are rating the program in the 4-5 range in terms of accessibility and ease of implementation in their classrooms.

Recommendations

It is encouraging to see that teachers and students have found the program content to be effective and positively impacting their mental health. The mindfulness program implemented is based on a variety of evidence and data, and looking at the feedback and data we have received shows trends towards positive effects on student emotional well being. It is also encouraging to see that teachers have found the program to be accessible and easy to implement in their classrooms. This is a key component to ensuring that the skills that teachers develop are able to continue with different classes they may be teaching.

Based on my experiences implementing this program, one of my strongest recommendations is the importance of finding a supportive school leadership at the site where you are considering implementing this program. Having a supportive principal

who gave us time during professional development days to work with teachers as well as the opportunity to implement mindfulness sessions during the school day was instrumental to the progress and success of this project.

In addition, building relationships with teachers and students at the school sites is incredibly important. Their investment and belief in the program is foundational to the success of implementing a mindfulness curriculum, and helping students and teachers understand the purpose of the program, how it can benefit them individually as well as a school community is critical to building understanding and receptiveness of the program.

Sustainability

One of the goals of this program is to help both students and teachers develop the skills to become peer educators for mindfulness in their school community. This could look like students organizing a lunchtime space on mindfulness, teachers helping their new classes next year incorporate mindfulness principles into their daily routines, and returning teachers guiding new teachers on how to implement a mindfulness program with their classes.

I think peer to peer education is an important part of sustainability, as it contributes towards developing a school culture more focused on mindfulness and well-being. In addition, students and teachers in the school community already have existing relationships with other teachers and students at their school site, and are well positioned to leverage those relationships to promote mindfulness as part of the school day. Supporting peer education enables us to build off of those relationships and assist teachers and students to share their mindfulness practices and knowledge with new teachers and students each school year.

Reflection

It has truly been a privilege to be a part of the Albert Schweitzer Fellowship program. I've had the opportunity to dig deep and really learn and practice what it means to work in partnership with community stakeholders in identifying, designing, implementing, and reflecting on a community health initiative. I have learned so much throughout this experience listening to community members about their needs, hearing their ideas and thoughts and concerns, and being able to visit school sites in the community. It has offered me a unique perspective on how I hope to practice medicine in the future and how invaluable it is to have the voice of community leaders throughout the entire field of medicine.

I also found the structure of the Albert Schweitzer Fellowship program to be a very supportive part of implementing my project. The speakers we met with on a monthly basis were all leaders in the community and experts in their field as well as the needs of the community, and being able to learn from their experience and wisdom assisted me in critically examining my own approach to community health and provided unique skills and knowledge that I needed to further both my project and my interest in health equity.

The cohort model and program director have both been key supports throughout this fellowship program. I enjoyed the chance to learn from colleagues from other fields of medicine and health care broadly defined, as well as seasoned leaders who have been working in the health sector for a while. The cohort model and program director are both uniquely able to provide advice and suggestions regarding different obstacles and barriers that routinely emerge during the development and implementation of community health initiatives.

Impact Statement

Recent research and surveys by professional educational associations show job satisfaction for educators descending to record low levels, with 46% of teachers reporting high levels of stress at school. More importantly, studies have demonstrated that teachers who are under unhealthy levels of stress are less effective and engaged; furthermore, students of stressed teachers often show poorer academic and social achievement. In addition, students are experiencing increasing levels of stress and pressure to perform in their school and extracurricular environments. This malignant level of stress in both teachers and students is damaging to their physical, mental, and social well-being and is detrimental to their career and educational success. These barriers to wellness permeate throughout our community as kids and their families face additional challenges in reaching their full potential. The health curriculum provided in local K-12 public schools often fails to address the relationship between stress, neuroscience, and the mind.

There is a valuable opportunity here to work with middle school students, who are undergoing a period of significant brain, cognitive, and emotional development, as well as their teachers to incorporate mindfulness training as a pathway to promote their physical, mental, and emotional health and well-being. By doing so, our hope is that our schools will be a cornerstone in supporting healthy, thriving communities through ensuring that each student is reaching their full academic and individual potential as well as supporting teachers in building the necessary skills to help their students towards that goal.

By the end of the school year, my goal is to see students report decreased mental health symptoms such as depression and anxiety, decreased stress levels, and increased engagement in the classroom and school campus as well as increased sense of belonging and community at their school.

In addition, teachers will report decreased stress levels related to their jobs, and decreased burn-out levels, as measured by validated surveys as well as their self-described sense of sustainability at their jobs and perception that they are well supported at their school both as professionals and as individuals. Both teachers and students will report an increased sense of community and belonging in their classrooms as a result of their stress reduction practices and emotional regulation. Students and teachers will also feel empowered and competent to share the skills they have learned with incoming students and new teachers joining their school community.