



Cultivating State-Wide Reform: The Colorado Futures in School Psychology Project

By Gloria Miller, Cathy Lines, Anita Manning & Barbara Bieber

School psychologists, as mental health professionals, have training and background in child development, learning processes, evaluation and critical systems operating within schools. Due to this expertise, they often are expected to play a key role in the design of effective classroom accommodations and supports that can positively impact academic, social-emotional and behavioral student outcomes. In late July 2004, a Sliver Grant was awarded for an innovative, professional development project to assist us in these roles, titled “*Colorado Futures in School Psychology.*”

The goal of this collaborative endeavor is to build statewide expertise in transformative school reform that promotes effective learning and development for all learners, including those with disabilities. This goal will be achieved through the design and dissemination of four regional training forums for school psychologists and other educational support personnel. The forums will focus on empirically validated, data-based, problem-solving models useful in the redesign of special education services. A brief overview of the development and proposed objectives of this project are outlined in this article, which is the first in a series of reports that will highlight outcomes fostered through this grant.

Background

The seeds for this project were firmly “planted” during the multi-site School Psychology Futures Conference held in Indianapolis in November 2002 and simultaneously broadcasted to various national and international sites (*School Psychology Review*, 2004). With the support of Barbara Bieber at the Colorado Department of Education, this project was further “germinated” during several stages following this historical professional conference.

Three critical “gardeners” from Colorado have been instrumental in advancing ideas from the Futures Conference and engaging professionals across the state. Drs. Cathy Lines (a mental health specialist from the Cherry Creek School District) and Cynthia Hazel (then

a PhD student at UNC and now a faculty member at the University of Denver) were selected from a wide applicant pool to attend the conference and provide practitioner and student input on contemporary needs, issues and practices, and how to prepare for the future of our field. Dr. Michelle Athanasiou, from UNC, was selected to spearhead one of the national, video-feed locations, which enabled over 50 students, practitioners and faculty from across the state to fully participate in the conference in real time.

After the conference, the above individuals, attendees and other interested individuals began to meet regularly to further “cultivate” key insights, initiatives and options for how to implement ideas into practice. Input was sought from other practitioners, administrators, and university trainers who are members of a newly formed CDE School Psychology Advisory committee initiated by Barbara Bieber in the wake of this conference. During several quarterly meetings this group began to proactively discuss state level educational initiatives and professional development ideas in light of the upcoming reauthorization of IDEA.

Proposal

The final project “sprouted” from the work of a highly dedicated Futures subcommittee whose members provided the foundation from which the final grant was drafted. The final proposal was a collaboration between three entities: (1) CSSP—outgoing President, Jerry Amendola, endorsed the project and incoming President, Anita Manning, co-wrote the grant and initiated a structure whereby regionally appointed Project Coordinators from the CSSP Board will be selected and paid to help coordinate and develop the regional training forums.

(2) The Cherry Creek School District—Cathy Lines and other administrators, including Edward Steinberg, have strongly encouraged and have begun to initiate district-wide educational reforms highlighted at the Futures Conference and were willing to take on major fiscal and grant coordination responsibilities. The professionals at Cherry Creek also will help harness the support and expertise of other districts across the state by communicating with key administrators interested in nominating and supporting a district school psychologist who will then participate in all future project planning and dissemination.

(3) The University of Denver—Gloria Miller and Cynthia Hazel helped formulate the initial grant and have agreed to continue to provide resources to help meet project evaluation and dissemination objectives and to supervise a graduate student who will assist Project Coordinators. Faculty at all three of Colorado universities with graduate training programs in school psychology are committed to ongoing consultation and also will help solicit other trainers and professionals with critical expertise and resources who can assist the Project Coordinators as they plan the format and content of the four regional training forums. Funds are available to support invited speakers and materials needed to carry out each regional training forum.

It is our hope that this collaborative project will help establish new “roots” and avenues for the delivery of high quality data-driven special education services. In the future, the outcomes and critical information developed from these regional training forums will be posted on the CSSP website. This one-year project is an important initial, albeit small, step in establishing a “perpetual, long-term, high-yield garden” that thrives on innovative professional development and resource sharing. Such a process is essential for school psychologists who wish to expand their roles as intervention leaders and critical liaisons between regular and special education.

A needs assessment survey was being distributed in October to all school psychologists in Colorado and the feedback obtained is being used to plan trainings and better understand the staff development priorities of Colorado school psychologists. A panel presentation and follow-up planning session on this project and other Futures issues was held at the CSSP annual conference in November to gather further input and partner with colleagues in the interest of better serving Colorado’s children and youth.

© 2004, National Association of School Psychologists. Gloria Miller, PhD, is on the faculty of the University of Denver; Cathy Lines, PhD, is a school psychologist with the Cherry Creek (CO) Schools; Dr. Anita Manning is a school psychologist in the Lewis-Palmer School District and President of the Colorado Society of School Psychologists; Ms. Barbara Bieber is on the staff of the Colorado Department of Education. A full presentation of the key issues associated with the proceedings of the School Psychology Futures Conference can be found in the 2004 volume of School Psychology Review, 33(2) or School Psychology Quarterly, 18(4). See related article on page 28.