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Marion strengthens counseling services

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BY Carolyn Muyskens - cmuyskens@chronicle-tribune.com

Editor's note: The Chronicle-Tribune is looking at how each of the five school corporations in Grant County are spending money awarded for a county-wide comprehensive counseling initiative. Madison-Grant and Mississinewa were covered in an article on July 22 and Oak Hill and Eastbrook were covered in an article on July 31.

Marion Community Schools has been at work this summer preparing its teachers and social workers to better serve the counseling-related needs of its students, thanks to a major grant from the Lilly Endowment.

MCS's \$357,000 grant was awarded as part of a collaboration between the five school corporations in Grant County to write similar proposals for the grant with the help of Project Leadership.

The first period of the four-year grant began last fall and wraps up at the end of this summer, with a first-year data reporting deadline coming up Aug. 31.

In the first year of the grant, MCS has focused on training staff and teachers.

According to Michele Smith, director of education for MCS, grant funds have been used this summer to pay for planning hours for counselors during the summer and professional development for counselors and staff including paying for them to attend state-level conferences.

"We've been investing our dollars in our training," she said.

For example, some MCS staff participated in a QPR (Question, Persuade and Refer) training for suicide prevention this spring along with representatives from each of the five Grant County schools.

According to Brenda Morehead, director of impact at Project Leadership, the event was designed to "train the trainer" so that representatives from each school could in turn go back to their respective schools and train more staff in QPR.

"We want to build our own capacity within our team," Smith said. "We need to be able to sustain that (programming) after the grant is no longer supporting that."

The school corporation has also been expanding the reach of its Botvin program so that more staff are trained in the substance abuse and violence prevention curriculum.

Whereas many of the other county schools have hired new staff and invested in new software programs using the grant funds, Marion Community Schools has focused on continuing and expanding its existing counseling services through Project Leadership and Family Services Society.

Morehead said in the first year of the grant MCS has largely continued with the same programming Project Leadership has provided for the corporation in the area of college and career counseling, for example enrolling junior high students in the 21st Century Scholars program and conducting college application labs for high school seniors. Similarly, Marion has been using the Botvin program through Family Service Society for several years already and continued its use this year under the grant.

"It's really an expansion of what we've been doing," Smith said. "It's more that we're able to take all of those services to another level."

Patricia Gibson, communications director for MCS, said, "How I would describe it is that a lot of what we have done previously has been targeted at either a specific chronological point or smaller group of students. The way I'm seeing this grant is it's allowing us to spread out those services to a wider group of students and be more proactive."

Oak Hill and Eastbrook schools have chosen to frontload most of their expenses at the beginning of the four-year grant period in order to gather as much data about the impact of their initiatives as possible, but Gibson said MCS is spending relatively little in this first period and plans to ramp up spending later on.

"The year two through four plans entail a much higher funding level than the year one plan," Gibson said.

In regards to what MCS plans to do with the higher funding in years two through four of the grant, Smith said they hadn't settled on plans for exactly how to spend the money yet.

For one, they will continue to expand partnerships with Project Leadership and Family Services, including piloting a new Family Services intervention group at a to-be-determined elementary school location.

As for the rest of the spending and the possibility of new counseling initiatives, "we're continuing to electively determine that," Smith said. "The wheels are still turning as we dig into these areas of college and career and social and emotional needs."

MCS plans to use data gathered from surveys of students to see where the needs are greatest.

"We're going to be asking questions like, 'Does the Botvin curriculum address all the needs? Currently all the social workers are equipped with Botvin training, but who else needs that training? How can we continue to expand that support and continue this work?'"

Morehead said MCS's years two through four plan includes "a continuation" of contracting with Project Leadership for services and "exploring best practices for social-emotional curriculum and looking at using a college and career curriculum for grades K-12."

The other county schools have also been contracting with Project Leadership and Family Service Society to implement new programming in their schools, and all five schools have cited the county-wide cooperation as something they are grateful for.

“The collective work being done by the coalition across the county is building a better future for all of our children, and we are proud to be a part of it so that we can better support our students and our community,” Smith said.

Lilly Endowment Comprehensive Counseling Initiative Grant Awards:

Marion Community Schools: \$357,900

Mississinewa Community School Corporation: \$243,500

Oak Hill United School Corporation: \$167,000

Eastbrook Community Schools: \$153,900

Madison-Grant United School Corporation: \$121,700