I. Connecting the Dots: Executive Summary

Mental health problems are prevalent among school-aged children (aged 13–6) with one-in-five impacted by a diagnosable mental health or learning disorder. Undeniably, behavioral health issues (mental health and substance use) and learning disorders have an immense impact on school success. These unmet behavioral health needs are a very pressing concern for educators and have a significant impact on students' readiness to learn. Research tells us that fostering a positive school climate can mitigate these behavioral and educational risks. When schools and districts focus on improving school climate, students are more likely to be engaged, to develop positive relationships with each other and adults, and to demonstrate positive behaviors (American Institute for Research, 2017).

To help address these needs and improve school climate in Washington State, in October 2014, the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI), the State Education Agency (SEA) was awarded a five-year Project AWARE (Advancing Wellness and Resilience in Education) grant from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. The purpose of the grant was threefold: 1) to build and expand capacity to make schools safer, improve school climate, and increase awareness of mental health issues among youth; 2) to provide training for school personnel and other adults to detect and respond to mental health issues in children and youth; and 3) to connect those who may have behavioral health issues with appropriate services.

Three local education agencies (LEAs), Battle Ground Public Schools, Marysville School District, and Shelton School District were chosen for this project as a result of their unique set of strengths, needs, and level of readiness. At both the state and local levels, the social, emotional, and behavioral (SEB) goals of this project were approached through a Multi-tiered System of Supports (MTSS) framework. This framework assumes that school-based social, emotional, behavioral programs, services, and supports are comprehensive and provide a full array of services across a continuum of tiered supports.

The executive summary that follows provides a high-level overview of project outcomes, framed by the guiding research questions included in the project’s Evaluation Design.

Goal 1: Build and/or expand capacity at state and local levels to improve school climate and safety

*Have we expanded the State’s capacity to implement a multi-tiered system of support to improve school climate and safety in the three school districts?*

Evidence demonstrates state-level efforts increased capacity to improve school climate and safety through a multi-tiered system of supports structure. At the state level, the SEA Coordinator, in collaboration with other state and regional partners, developed the Washington State Integrated Student Supports Protocol (WISSP). The purpose of the WISSP
was to ensure schools adopt an evidence-based, scientifically validated approach to identify and address both academic and nonacademic barriers facing their students. This integrated service delivery system is outlined in the Washington State **Multi-tiered System of Supports** (WA-MTSS), key components of which include using data in evidence-based processes that monitor student progress and rapidly connect staff and students to a system of supports; a tiered support system that integrates evidence-based supports for behavior, achievement, and social emotional needs; collaborative inquiry practices that engage staff in action research to improve teaching and learning; and transformational leadership planning and actions that engage staff, families, students, and communities.

As a sustainability measure, the SEA Coordinator also collaborated with staff from OSPI’s System and School Improvement division and the Center for the Improvement of Student Learning (CISL) to develop, write, and submit a proposal for the Department of Education’s SEA-level School Climate Transformation grant. This was viewed agencywide as an opportunity to scale up the MTSS work of AWARE. OSPI received notice of the 5-year grant award in October 2018.

“At Battle Ground Public School used to be 18 islands, but over the years, and with the help of Project AWARE, directives have changed to a districtwide approach, and for the most part, this has been a uniform approach to MTSS/PBIS with school buildings and staff on the same page, moving forward at the pace that is appropriate for their level of readiness.” - Superintendent Hottowe

At the LEA level, efforts to expand capacity to improve school climate were exemplified through the implementation of a positive behavior interventions and supports framework. This framework was used to establish the social culture, behavioral supports, and disciplinary responses necessary for schools to be safe, caring, and effective learning environments for all members of the school community. Through this work, each LEA implemented a unique set of tiered supports to address the needs of youth and families in each of their regions.

*Did the three LEA school districts revise or eliminate discipline policies, practices or procedures that disproportionately impact ethnic, racial, or other minority students?*

Coincidentally, as Project AWARE was launching and in response to the political outcry to address disparate discipline practices statewide, the legislature had made significant changes to state laws regarding student discipline. State-level reforms and federal guidance on school discipline were increasingly aligning, in theory and practice, with the ongoing efforts of education practitioners, researchers, and advocates. Statewide school districts were required to review discipline data—at least annually—to identify disparities and monitor progress toward eliminating them.
Findings from Project AWARE indicated evidence of persistent disproportionality in discipline practices at the LEA level, particularly among American Indian/Native Alaskan, multi-ethnic, Special Education and male students across program years. Nonetheless, the LEAs made positive progress toward the elimination of these disparities. In fact, all districts undertook more proactive approaches to routinely review discipline data as part of their MTSS/PBIS teams, to identify disparities, to understand the implications of these, and adjust practices as needed.

Although Project AWARE is a specific, time limited grant, the Project's leads at both the SEA and LEA level worked fiercely to uphold the objectives and activities aligned with reducing disparate discipline practices. In doing so, this work created a broader conversation among stakeholders, breaking down perceptions and beliefs related to the more traditionally held views of school discipline and instead built up knowledge and awareness of the intersection of social emotional learning and trauma informed approaches to discipline practices. Through the goals of education equity and improved climate, statewide discussions on improving student success were responsively shifting to be warmly inclusive of how Project AWARE and other efforts could join forces. This work will continue to be supported by OSPI and guided by legislative policy to ensure sustainability of practices statewide.

**Among targeted schools, did the Student-Student relations subscale of the School Climate Survey increase for 3rd, 5th, 7th, 9th, and 11th grade students as compared to baseline?**

Across LEAs, data indicate variation in students' perceptions regarding peer relationship (e.g., student to student relation subscale), by both grade level and LEA site. For example, in both Battle Ground and Marysville, opinions of peer relationships became more favorable among younger youth and less among older youth. However, in both Battle Ground and Shelton, perceptions among 7th grade youth became less favorable over the project period, suggesting a need to provide students with relationship building skills at the middle school level.

When examining the frequency of reported bullying over the years; however, several trends emerged. For example, across all LEA sites, instances of bullying were reported at a higher rate by 7th grade youth than youth in grades 9 or 11. A similar trend is reflected in findings of the Healthy Youth Survey in which generally higher rates of bullying are reported among middle school participants as compared to older peers. Generally speaking, survey findings indicated that instances of bullying were (and continued to be) relatively infrequent (less than once a month) across the three LEA sites.

**Did the number of students being served by each of the three LEAs increase?**

Resoundingly, yes. As direct service implementation rolled out across the project period, not only did more students receive services, but the number of buildings in which targeted activities were delivered expanded. By project end, all students in all three LEAs were receiving some type of Project AWARE-funded service, support, or intervention; including
Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS), Student Assistance Program (SAP) services, and mental-health services.

**Goal 2: Build and/or expand capacity at state and local levels to increase access to mental health services.**

"We have increased systems within our schools to respond to students’ social emotional, behavioral, and mental health needs. We have been able to provide better training for staff as to how to respond to students that are struggling in the areas mentioned. We also identified areas of need in our own school that would help support students, staff, and parents to be more successful. Project AWARE truly helped change the culture of the school." — Shelton Stakeholder

In general, the activities aligned with this goal at the SEA-level focused on expanding the state’s capacity to increase access to mental health services as well as to improve awareness and literacy of mental health issues in children. As such, the SEA Coordinator worked collaboratively with state partners, such as the Department of Social and Health Services’ (DSHS), the Division of Behavioral Health and Recovery (DBHR), and the Prevention Policy Consortium as well as other key stakeholders across the state. These working relationships allowed the Coordinator to identify not only evidence-based practices and programs focused on addressing children’s mental health, but to work in collaboration with partners in the state knowledgeable about issues facing children and families.

Throughout the 5-year project period, efforts at the SEA level were significant and meaningful. Cross-systems and intra-agency collaboration focused on the need to expand capacity at both the state and local levels, ultimately addressing a number of systems-level barriers in the process. In doing so, awareness skills of teachers, staff, students, and other stakeholders were positively impacted, resulting in reduced stigma and improved mental health literacy. By project end, policy-level recommendations were beginning to address the gap in the workforce, such as by providing alternative paths to credentialing with a focus on ensuring a more diverse and culturally competent workforce. These examples provide evidence of the changes taking place within Washington State to increase the capacity to address the mental health needs of children and families, thus improving access to care and reducing systems barriers.

*As a result of program implementation, has the number of school-aged youth in each of the targeted LEAs who receive school-based mental health services increased as compared to baseline? Are identified barriers to MH services reduced for school-aged youth and their families as a result of program implementation?*
If you build it, they will come. Without a doubt, the development, launching, and delivery of school-based services, including strong referral systems, resulted in not only increased, but *improved* access to mental health and other school-based services across the LEA sites. Findings indicated that in general, access to services to meet the social, emotional, and behavioral needs of students within the targeted LEA sites was limited or nonexistent prior to project implementation. Through trial, error, and persistence on the part of the LEA leads and school-based teams; referral systems were built, and children were referred.

Overall, all three LEA sites successfully and substantially increased their capacity to provide school-based mental health services, enrolling 1,452 youth project-wide, well above the project-end target of 980. These findings demonstrate that implementation of school-based mental services does, in fact, increase access for children while reducing access barriers.

*Among youth enrolled in school based mental health services, did the severity of identified problem behaviors decrease as compared to program entry as a result of program participation?*

Program findings indicate that services provided to address behavioral health challenges were successful at reducing problem behaviors for youth struggling with moderate to severe problem behavior. Results showed that across all risk areas, severity of problem behaviors declined, with these reductions statistically significant—a trend consistent across program years.

*Did implementation of program services result in an increase in the number of students referred to community-based mental health services, which resulted in mental health services*
being provided as compared to baseline? What barriers prevented referrals to services? Is access to services different among groups of students; e.g., gender, race, and grade level?

Again, project level findings indicate that the design, implementation, and delivery of a comprehensive MTSS structure positively impacts not only engagement of students and families in school-based mental health services but also engagement in community-based mental health services. Across program years the number of students both referred to and engaged in community-based services increased, due to the purposeful effort on behalf of the LEA sites to engage community partners in a more collaborative manner.

Not surprisingly however, data also indicate referral and engagement in community-based services varied across sites. Review of program practices identified a number of barriers that prevented and/or slowed access to community-based services. In large part, this was due to a lack of workforce and resources in the LEA communities. The rural nature of these districts often meant that there were limited to no readily available community-based providers. Referrals to outside community-based mental health providers may not be accessed due to transportation barriers—families either did not have the means nor the capacity to follow through with community-based referral recommendations. Moreover, our findings indicated variations in the type of students and families that followed through and engaged in community-based services. For example, both older youth and students of color were less likely to engage in community-based referrals as compared to their peers.

Did the percentage of 8th and 10th grade students who reported depressive feelings in the past year decrease as compared to baseline (HYS 2012) at project-end?
Healthy Youth Survey results demonstrate a pervasive and persistent trend of depressive symptoms among students in the targeted LEAs both prior to and during program services. Further, these data show that these feelings increased over time across both grade groups, a troubling trend seen statewide. These findings speak to the need for continued education of adults and community members in mental health literacy and to teach youth resiliency skills, while expanding access to both school- and community-based mental health services and other supports.

Did implementation of program services impact school staff/other adults’ knowledge regarding early detection of mental health issues in children and youth as compared to pre-program services?

="[Project AWARE] has been extremely beneficial. Educators and parents are better aware of MH issues and now have the ability to access MH services more readily and quickly. School-based MH services have been very effective in increasing access and identifying children/youth that need help, especially the ones that struggle with depression/anxiety and don’t present with behavioral issues that cause classroom disruption.” – LEA Stakeholder

There are multiple indications that implementation of project services directly impacted school staff and other adults’ knowledge and awareness. As school staff became more aware of social, emotional, and behavioral health challenges facing their students, the number of students referred to Tier 2 and Tier 3 program services—both student assistance and mental health—increased across program years. In addition, we saw an increase in the number of school staff and other adults engaging in youth mental health first aid trainings that provide further evidence of growth in knowledge and awareness. In addition, findings
from stakeholder surveys showed that participants overwhelmingly agreed (96 percent) that knowledge and understanding of social emotional learning approaches improved, while 67 percent reported improvement in the ability to detect and respond to the mental health needs of children; and nearly all (97 percent) believed that mental health literacy among decision makers and other adults on the school system was impacted as a direct result of Project AWARE.

*Do stakeholders agree that collaboration and community-based mental health providers increased (improved) as a result of project activities?*

Throughout the five-year project there is evidence across the SEA and LEA sites that demonstrates increased collaboration between community-based mental health providers and the education system. At the LEA level, for example, Battle Ground Public Schools developed and implemented a Provider Agreement for any licensed mental health provider within their county. The agreement created a process that allows community-based providers to co-locate services in a school building and to deliver services to children served by those agencies, thus reducing access barriers and establishing a uniform expectation of community-based providers serving students within the school setting.

> "I think one of the most effective changes has been schools' increased willingness to have support services embedded within the schools. Schools seem generally cautious about outside entities who may be disruptive to education and/or educators, so having effective staff who integrate well within the school with minimal disruptions goes a long way towards building trust between mental health systems and the school system." – Marysville Stakeholder

Moreover, increased collaboration among state-level partners at the SEA level allowed for a deeper understanding of the education and mental health systems and how these systems could better collaborate to reduce systems-level barriers and increase access to care. In addition, results from the stakeholder survey indicate that many respondents (83%) agreed that as a result of Project AWARE, collaboration among education and community-based mental health systems improved.

*How, and at what level, did project implementation impact state and local policies and/or practices related to mental health and violence prevention during the project period?*

Overall, findings demonstrated that Washington’s Project AWARE initiative made immediate and substantial progress toward the goal to increase access to mental health services at
both the SEA and LEA levels. In order for the education system to effectively address the mental, emotional, and behavioral health needs of students, it required an examination of existing policies and practice. Across the five-year period, the state and local sites considered what changes needed to be made in order to not only successfully implement a comprehensive system but to sustain this for the long term. At the SEA-level, this included (among other things) working closely with the Mental Health in Education Legislative Workgroup to help shape state-level decision making around the children’s behavioral health system. At the LEA level, policy and practice changes included creating new referral pathways, establishing integrated teaming structures, and providing additional training and support for district and building staff around school safety. These policy and practice changes will undoubtedly have a lasting effect on the ways in which these districts operate. As one stakeholder summarized, “Project AWARE helped to change the culture of our district and improved our systems to address student behavior and social emotional needs.

Goal 3: Build and/or expand capacity at state and local levels to increase awareness of mental health issues.

Did we increase the number of individuals trained as YMHFA “first aiders” and/or “instructors” across the state and within the targeted districts?

Project AWARE set out to improve mental health literacy as a means of increasing awareness of adults, not only in the three LEA sites, but statewide. The project’s intent was to train 4,125 first aiders statewide, including 625 in each LEA site. This saturation model widened the net of caring and knowledgeable adults in the community that are prepared to intervene and offer support to children and youth presenting with mental health challenges. Overall, 4,686 individuals were trained statewide, including 633 in Battle Ground, 723 in Marysville, and 455 in the Shelton catchment area. Further, 118 individuals were trained as YMHFA Instructors across the state and local regions. The data are proof positive that as a direct result of Project AWARE there are more caring adults across our state who can connect, detect, and respond to the mental health needs of children and adolescents.

Did the number of school-aged youth referred to mental health or other related services increase within the targeted LEAs as a result of Youth Mental Health First Aid?

With an increased number of adults trained as first aiders statewide, it was assumed that the resultant effect would be an increase in the number of school-aged youth referred to systems of support. And in fact, findings from the YMHFA Survey of Support indicate that 4,230 youth were referred to services by a first aider across the 5-year period (exceeding the projected target of 3,050 youth).

The final research question asked: At the LEA and SEA levels, did capacity to effectively respond to students' mental, social, emotional, and behavioral needs improve as a result of program implementation?
Undoubtedly, project results show considerable improvement in capacity at both the state and local levels to respond to the social, emotional, and behavioral needs of school-age children. Project AWARE strategies and activities planned, developed, and implemented through the MTSS structure have fundamentally changed the manner in which the three LEA sites and OSPI approach the mental health and well-being of children and youth. In fact, as outlined here and in the full report we see how, through persistence and dedication, systems-level change altered policy and practice. At the same time, these changes ultimately led to improvements in the school climate and culture of each site, while implementation of service delivery components resulted in behavioral changes at the student-level, improved access to care, and eliminated barriers.

Was implementation perfect? Of course not. Both the SEA and LEAs faced barriers and setbacks throughout the project period. However, strong leaders that championed the cause provided the direction needed to step back, re-assess, modify, and move forward with an eye on sustainability and achievement of the big hairy audacious goal to "connect, detect, and respond to the mental health and well-being of Washington youth."

Well done, Washington State Project AWARE!!
The following summary of key activities and findings demonstrate the achievements toward stated project goals and objectives during the full project period (October 2014 – September 2019) as outlined in the Coordination and Integration Plan.