

**2008-2009 AT-RISK STUDENT PROGRAM EVALUATION  
RICHLAND SCHOOL DISTRICT TWO  
COLUMBIA, SOUTH CAROLINA**

**Program Name: Family School Intervention Project**

**Site(s): District Alternative Schools (Anna Boyd and Blythewood Academy)**

Richland School District Two utilized the EEDA grant funds to continue and supplement its services to families and students identified as "at risk" due to behavior that had resulted in disciplinary action. What we have learned over the past four years is that when we use this criterion to identify at risk students, they possess many of the other identifiers cited in the literature such as academic problems, poor attendance, dislike for school, and family problems. Even though we had hoped to be able to use our chosen intervention model in all the middle and high schools in the district as a preventative or early intervention strategy, we were only able to run one school-based group. Our grant (and our efforts) focused primarily on those students and families who were placed in an alternative school setting as a final alternative to expulsion. Since these students had already exhausted the interventions made at their respective schools, the population that we targeted was **at even higher risk** of being excluded from school attendance than those students identified earlier. Our major efforts focused on the implementation of **The Family Solutions Program**. FSP is a multi-family group program for youth with behavior problems or school difficulties aimed at increasing youth life skills and family strengths and at reducing juvenile delinquency. It received approval as a "promising" program for the Model Program guide (MPG), an informational resource tool that offers a database of scientifically proven programs to address a variety of youth problems. It is also listed in the EEDA *At-Risk Student Implementation Guide*.

*The total number of students who attended an expulsion hearing during the 2008-2009 school year and were placed at one of the two district alternative schools was **455**. The Family Solutions Program excluded those students who had completed the FSP in the previous year, were in the IES program (Individualized Educational Setting), or were receiving other counseling services in the community. IES serves special education students who were recommended for expulsion, but were not deemed appropriate for the regular alternative school setting. The remaining students were required, *as a condition of placement at an alternative school, to participate in FSP*. The following tables provide a description of the demographics of the students who attended an expulsion hearing and were provided follow up services aimed at preventing subsequent expulsion from school. Even though the vast majority of these students participated in the Family Solutions Program, some families(students) participated in another service (individual family counseling, counseling at a community agency, individual counseling by an intervention services staff member or graduate student, or alternate parenting program). Of the*

total number of families referred from a hearing, **227** families participated in the Family Solutions Program and **33** students were provided with other services provided by Intervention staff or graduate students. The demographics and outcomes of the students receiving “other” forms of counseling are provided in separate charts.

\*Demographic breakdown of 227 students served in the **FSP** who were placed at either Anna Boyd School or Blythewood Academy

Alternative school population( <b>N=227</b> )	
Grade	4(2), 5(6), 6(27), 7(24), 8(31), 9(66), 10(41), 11(17), 12(13)
Gender	M(154), F(73)
Ethnicity	B(202), W(17), H(4), O(4)
F/R lunch	F(104), R(21)
IGP	# 110 out of 137 high school students

The following chart describes various outcomes, as listed in the At Risk Student Program Evaluation Checklist, of those students/families participating in the FSP.

Measures used:	Grades K-8	Grades 9-12	% successful
(1)Students expelled from school	2	3	97.7%
(2) Students referred to court for truancy	0	1	99.5%
(3)Students retained in grade	1	31	85.9%

The following chart describes the demographics of those students who were placed at either Anna Boyd School or Blythewood Academy and provided alternate services by the Intervention Services staff. These students cannot be coded with a SCDE At- risk identifier SASA code, but our district does code them in the discipline atom. We will continue to track these students.

Alternative school population ( <b>N=33</b> )	
Grade	4(1), 5(1),6(2),7(5),8(3),9(13),10(4),11(3),12(1)
Gender	M (26), F(7)
Ethnicity	B(24), W(3), H(4),O(2)
F/R lunch	F(11), R(2)
IGP	18:21

The following chart describes the outcomes measured in the grant for non FSP

Measures used:	Grades K-8	Grades 9-12	% successful
(1)Students expelled from school	0	1	96.9
(2) Students referred to court for truancy	0	1	96.9
(3)Students retained in grade	0	9	72.7

We believe that our data supports the belief that students who participate in services that include parents and other family members will be less likely to be put out of school, to drop out of school, to be truant from school; and will, therefore, be more likely to remain in school and graduate from school on time. **Of the 227 students who participated in the FSP during the 2008-2009 school year, 24 students left our district. In other words, 84.4 % of the students in the program remained in school in our district through the end of the year. Of the 24 who left, only 5 were expelled, 1 transferred with unknown status, 14 transferred out of the district, 3 transferred to an adult education program, and 1 dropped out.** We have not been able to track academic averages as well as we would like, but we believe that "when" a student and his/her family is more positively engaged in school, he or she will be more academically successful.

We have, however, been able to check pass/fail (promotion/retention) for most students in our target population. **Of the 227 students in the FSP, 32 were retained as of July 27, 2009. Eighty five (85.6) per cent were promoted. Of the 227, 167 (73.5%) are currently on grade level, while 60 (26.5%) are not (they did not begin the 2008-2009 school year on grade level).** We know that these students who are behind where they should be are even "more" at risk than those who are on grade level and will, therefore, require even more attention and support. **The target population included 13 seniors, 11 of whom graduated in May.**

**Of the total 227 students who participated in the FSP (all of whom had been recommended for expulsion prior to the program), only 31 (13.6) received a subsequent recommendation of expulsion and only 5 were actually expelled. Only 1(0.44%) student from our target population was sent to family court for truancy and of the 227, only 4(1.76%) others had attendance improvement plans during the school year.**

**Of the 33 students/families receiving alternate Intervention Services, 1 was expelled, 1 was referred to court for truancy, and 9 were retained.**

Richland Two is committed to involving parents and other family members in the services aimed at reducing the expulsion and drop out rate of its students. The Family Solutions Program, by its very nature, requires parents and other family members to participate along with the identified at risk student. Since all of our referrals are tagged in SASI, it will be possible to track these students throughout their time in our district or any other South Carolina school district.

We followed an evaluation protocol for each student who was in the program that included pre- and post-questionnaires completed by the parent and student that measured attitude toward school and parental stress. The parental stress inventory was included in the evaluation instruments provided to us by Families4 Change, Inc. Our results indicated a positive change in parent stress, but not at a significant level (0.17). We also added a 35 item questionnaire aimed at measuring attitude toward school of both parents and students before and after their participation in

the FSP. The student's assessment consisted of 35 questions that were broken down into 5 categories: academic self perception, attitude towards teachers and classes, attitude toward school, goal evaluation and motivation or self regulation.

Using statistical analysis (dependent t-tests), **students' attitude towards school improved and the results were statistically significant overall ( $p = 0.02$ )**. The biggest changes occurred in "**attitude toward school**" ( $p < 0.001$ ), **academic self perception ( $p = 0.03$ )**, and **motivation/self regulation ( $p = 0.05$ )**. The results were slightly positive for the category of goal evaluation ( $p > 0.50$ ) and slightly negative, though not significant, for the category of attitudes toward teachers and classes ( $p > 0.50$ ). Our parent attitude assessment did not indicate any improvement (actually showed a negative change) among the participants. The two areas that improved were: parent participation in school activities ( $p > 0.20$ ) and barriers to parent participation ( $p > 0.50$ ). We feel, however, that there are understandable reasons for these results (such as families were confused as to whether they were evaluating their sending school or the alternative school, the parents' anger at the school system for making them transport their child to the alternative school, etc). We had difficulty finding an instrument that would adequately measure parental attitude toward school and are working on developing another assessment that will allow us to factor in the elements of both home school and alternative school experiences.

We believe strongly that we need to engage the parents more positively in the school life of their child and our assessment provides us with feedback that indicates that they do not see the school as a caring place and feel their child has not received fair treatment. We know that in addition to re-examining/revising the questionnaire that we use for the parents, we also need to build in strategies for more effectively linking them with their child's school(s).

We also gathered qualitative data. Feedback was provided by the group facilitators and family members in their written reaction reports, emails or phone calls about the group(s). Over 85 percent of the families participating in the groups felt that the experience was beneficial. Examples of the comments in the final evaluations were:

***"We talk out our problems now. I feel this program has greatly benefited our family by other families sharing their thoughts and dreams. It helped me to make better choices for the future. My daughter and I seem to have a better understanding of each other and can communicate without arguing all the time. Helped me to say stuff to my mother. My daughter has improved her attitude a lot; plus I have improved mine. I've become a more positive person. Also I think things through before I react to a situation. The FSP has helped me be more responsible at home and at school. A difference in our family relationships is that we listen to each other more and don't just talk."***

Additionally, Intervention Services staff visited the groups during the course of the year to observe and provide support to both the facilitators and the family members

and to check to see that the program was being delivered as intended. The observations were mostly positive and the families appeared to be enjoying the program and the opportunity to interact with other families in the group. One of the strengths of the FSP is its structure, clear leader information, and interactive games or exercises. We provided training for all the facilitators and were able to place at least one co-facilitator with each group, usually a graduate student. The help from the co-facilitators eased the stress of leading a group of mandated families alone and made the organization of the materials, the paperwork required (attendance etc.) much easier. Even though we were able to run approximately 24 groups between June 2008 and July 2009 school year, the logistics involved in putting the groups together was very time consuming and difficult to manage. (A 25<sup>th</sup> group is ongoing, but not scheduled to finish until mid August.)

We found that we needed "at least" a full time staff person to coordinate the FSP program for this size population (or 75% of that person's time and the additional support of a graduate assistant, a secretary, and other staff members). Our FSP coordinator spent a great deal of "up front" time providing information, answering questions, and dealing with the family's resistance prior to their participation in a group. In our experience, when families are able to "choose" or "volunteer" to participate in the program, there is less resistance and more willingness to get fully involved in the group process. Since we delivered this program to families of alternative school students for whom this was a requirement for completion of the alternative school program, we found that we needed to provide our facilitators with more support during the initial sessions.

As described above, the Family Solutions multi-family group program was our primary intervention strategy with alternative school families. However, we also served families of students experiencing discipline problems who were referred from the schools earlier in the discipline process and from those students returned to their home school on probation from an expulsion hearing. Some of these approaches were: individual counseling with a student at the school site, family counseling with the student and family, involvement as a Service Leader in providing community service experiences for students referred through the FSP or a community agency, and small group counseling in the schools with a graduate intern. Even though these families/students were not specifically included in our grant, we utilized some of the same resources (such as graduate students, service leaders, etc) to serve these other at risk students.

<i>Students referred by school administrators at 3<sup>rd</sup> suspension receiving services <b>N=(219)</b></i>	
<i>Grade</i>	<i>9(91), 10(56), 11(46), 12(26)</i>
<i>Gender</i>	<i>M(140), F(79)</i>
<i>Ethnicity</i>	<i>B(180), W(35), H(1), O(3)</i>
<i>F/R lunch</i>	<i>F(79), R(25)</i>
<i># expelled from school</i>	<i>7:219 or 3.2% expelled</i>
<i>#referred to court for truancy</i>	<i>9:219 or 4.1% Truant 2</i>

<i>Other(guidance, social work, psychologist) school referrals receiving services (N=206)</i>	
<i>Grade</i>	<i>1(6), 2(2), 4(2), 5(13), 6(6),7(12), 8(41), 9(48), 10(35), 11(25), 12(16)</i>
<i>Gender</i>	<i>M(113), F(93)</i>
<i>Ethnicity</i>	<i>B(147), W(33), H(22), O(4)</i>
<i>F/R lunch</i>	<i>F(93), R(26)</i>
<i># expelled from school</i>	<i>3:206 or 1.456%</i>
<i>#referred to court for truancy</i>	<i>1:206 or 0.485%</i>

<i>Students referred from the Hearing board s receiving services (N=140)</i>	
<i>Grade</i>	<i>1(3), 2(3), 3(3), 4(6), 6(10), 7(16), 8(27), 9(24), 10(18), 11(15), 12(15)</i>
<i>Gender</i>	<i>M(93), F(47)</i>
<i>Ethnicity</i>	<i>B(109), W(17), H(8), O(6)</i>
<i>F/R lunch</i>	<i>F(67), R(13)</i>
<i>Students expelled from school</i>	<i>3:140 or 2.14%</i>
<i>Students referred to court for truancy</i>	<i>1:140 or 0.714%</i>

In some cases, we included other at risk students in providing services to the students at the alternative schools. For example, our **Service Leaders** (exceptional students chosen from the at risk population) assisted with the community service projects required by the FSP. They participated in leadership training retreats and in planning and working with the other students in the Saturday service activities.

We were also able to run one FSP group for regular intervention students at Spring Valley High School (the have been included in the FSP charts). This group was facilitated by our community service coordinator who is also the freshman guidance counselor at that school. She reported very positive interactions and participation in that group.

Some of the strengths of our program include the support of our school district and school board. This district is unique in its philosophy of engaging parents and other family members in its efforts to reduce the drop out/expulsion rate of students involved in the disciplinary process. We have been fortunate enough to be chosen as a placement site for graduate students from several colleges and universities; these interns assist in providing individual counseling, group counseling, the Family

Solutions Program, and community service activities. These students come from both master's level (school counseling, family counseling, clinical counseling, and nursing), and PhD programs in psychiatric nursing and marriage and family counseling. We will have three "externs" placed with us this coming year who will provide counseling services on a voluntary basis in exchange for supervision from our program coordinator and staff. We are joined by school site counselors in providing the placement and supervision of the graduate students who are placed in our schools.

We have developed partnerships with two community retreat or camp sites- Camp Discovery and Rivers Edge Retreat- who provide opportunities for our staff and students to do training, planning, and community service. We have used consultants from the school and local community to provide our staff and students with training, assistance, motivation and opportunities to help others. We work directly with several local charitable groups for which our students provide service. These include: Harvest Hope Food Bank, God's Storehouse, the Salvation Army, Tucker Center, Harbison State Forest, and Helping Hands Ministry (feeding the homeless). We are seeking to partner with Girls, Inc., City Year, and the Richland County Sheriff's Department this coming year. We have assigned district intervention services staff to work with the students at the alternative schools and the regular schools, (K-12), linking with guidance counselors, school psychologists, administrators and teachers.

As a result of our efforts to provide the Family Solutions Program and other family support services to at risk students in the school system, we have been contacted by other school systems for information and advice. There does not seem to be any other public school district, however, that has made the kind of commitment to these services as has Richland School District Two.

In regards to the implementation and success of core components, we feel that we were able to follow our stated objectives with the alternative school students, but were not able to provide the FSP program to the regular school sites as we had hoped. This was more a result of the massive responsibility of being asked to provide services to "all" of the alternative school students/families and the lack of time and management resources to get those other groups up and running in all the schools.

Our efforts to develop a multi-family group program with fewer sessions than the FSP is still in progress. A planning committee is working on a program with 6 sessions that we plan to pilot in some of the regular schools this coming year. We will target those students who are referred from the school administrators, counselors, or social workers. If we find that we have positive results from this program, we will submit this program to the at risk committee for consideration in the future.

**What we have learned** over the past year is that our chosen intervention strategy, the Family Solutions Program, is best used with families whose students are grade 4-5 and above. We also know that it is better received by families when

they participate voluntarily and/or are able to attend a group closer to their home. Ideally, the program would be used to “prevent” serious disciplinary problems and/or recommendations of expulsion. Transportation to our alternative schools is a challenge for some of our families (they must provide their own), and the requirement to complete the program as a condition of returning to the home school is complicated by the logistics required in setting up the groups and completing it in a 45 day period. With the number of students being referred from the alternative schools for services, we feel we need to have other options available that may not require as much time, coordination, resources or outside assistance.

**What we know** is that the FSP has been used successfully in our district to more positively engage families in the education process and to reduce the likelihood of failing, going to court for truancy, or being expelled from school. **What we see** as a challenge is to address the needs of the families of the younger children who are developing patterns of dysfunctional behavior and to further develop our repertoire of interventions aimed at linking the family and the student to the school, the classroom and the community.