



from the field

BY TOBY GILBERT

Gateway to Success builds an infrastructure of hope and opportunity

Alhambra USD program for school-based mental health services is a model for the nation

Nestled in the San Gabriel Valley, eight miles from downtown Los Angeles, a quiet miracle has been unfolding. It was here, 10 years ago, that Laurel Bear, assistant superintendent for student and employee welfare, envisioned a pioneering way to deliver mental health services to the students and staff at the 19 campuses of Alhambra Unified School District, one of the most culturally rich and diverse student bodies in the state. The program is called Gateway to Success.

The mission of the Gateway program is to ensure that each student reaches his or her educational potential. Gateway does this by providing a cohesive, collaborative infrastructure that addresses the barriers to learning, such as mental health, drugs and alcohol and safety issues — the complex social-emotional and behavioral challenges that many students face at one time or another. Students who are depressed, hungry, homeless, anxious or endangered are not able to focus on academics or social learning. The Gateway vision is to establish comprehensive prevention and intervention services for the district as a whole, and to overcome many of the hurdles that are often faced by families who wish to access counseling services by bringing such programs to school sites. The aim was to accomplish all of this within a sustainable framework that maximized resources and utilized current staff to provide services to all students in the district. Services are available to students through Medi-Cal, Healthy Families, private insurance or no insurance.

“Gateway to Success is the most comprehensive and effective mental health program I’ve seen in any school system,” says Alhambra Police Chief Timothy Vu. “What really distinguishes the Alhambra USD Gateway program is its commitment to constant follow-up with the student at school and at home to ensure that the student and family are provided with every available resource.”



Alhambra USD Superintendent Denise Jaramillo echoes that view, stating, “Dr. Bear is the driving force behind Gateway to Success. In our field, we often study the concept of transformational leadership — meaning one who really challenges the way we do business. Dr. Bear is the definition of a transformational leader. Bear nurtured the community partner relationships one meeting at a time and changed local practices, first by modeling behavior, then training us all.”

Passionate about her work, Bear works tirelessly to maximize the program’s exposure and share its message wide and far. In one recent week, she appeared on Fox LA’s “Good Morning LA” with Ron Silverman, founder of Matthew Silverman Memorial Foundation, a nonprofit partner funding some of Gateway’s suicide prevention and mental health programs; hosted a joint Alhambra USD–MSMF program titled “Help-Seeking is Strength” for the Gateway Saturday

School for parents and 7th-to-12th-grade students; delivered a keynote speech on suicide prevention in schools at Los Angeles County's seventh Annual Suicide Prevention Conference; appeared on NBC LA's Noon News to talk about the upcoming Alhambra USD–MSMF program on how to deal with cultural resistance to mental health services; and gave the Gateway Update Report at the monthly Alhambra USD board meeting.

Bear credits the success of the Alhambra USD Gateway program to these key elements:

1) The joint efforts of committed students, parents, teachers, staff, the Gateway team, district administration and the Alhambra USD board;

2) The infrastructure of community partnerships such as those with the Alhambra Police Department, judges, prosecutors, elected officials, nonprofits, hospitals and faith groups, among many others;

3) Data collection conducted by the University of California, Los Angeles and 10 other university partners at the 19 Alhambra USD campuses which tracks and measures results of Gateway initiatives. For example, when counseling self-referral rates for students dropped, the district noted the drop and instituted a bar code which only required a click to initiate the self-referral. Rates went up. (Bear quotes Bill Gates, who says, "We can't address what we can't measure."); and

4) Gateway's dedication to teaching mental health life skills not only to students, but to their families, district staff and to community partners like the police department through programs such as Parent University, Police New Cadet training and district staff training conferences.

"However, the heart of Gateway's effectiveness is the Annual Student Mood Assessment Survey, which is how students-in-need are identified," said Bear. "The data from that yearly Student Mood survey drive all efforts to assist our students. Because Gateway to Success is dedicated to not only treating the symptoms of mental health challenges, but to addressing the root causes of mental health issues, the district can give students, parents and our staff real opportunities to heal, learn and flourish."

Alhambra USD Board President Jane Anderson praised Gateway to Success, saying, "Not surprisingly, our teachers and school leaders say that they, in turn, are now able to maximize academic performance results with higher test scores, higher AP class enrollment and more college applications and enrollments. The Gateway commitment to school-based



mental health services is grounded in finding help for all kinds of student and family challenges that imperil mental health and cause despair so that ultimately academic excellence can be the real focus."

Anderson points out that Gateway's Parent University, in cooperation with the Alhambra Police Department, has made such an impact on parents, grandparents and students that some families have returned two or three times.

Alhambra USD alumna Sammy Tang credits the program with saving the life of a relative, and takes the lessons learned in high school with her throughout life. "Alhambra USD is a family, and we all share ownership in its greatness," she said. "Learning active listening, healthy coping skills, the early warning signs of mental health distress and the range of resources in the community has made me more effective at home and at work."

City Manager Mark Yokoyama points to the effectiveness of the district program's combination of teaching mental health and interpersonal skills in tandem with supportive, active community involvement. "Growing up is tough and parents should not have to be alone in guiding a child's development," he said. "I have personally seen kids who were going down a troubled path who get corrected and change course through the community collaboration model of Gateway."

Superintendent Jaramillo adds, "The community buy-in is an important part of creating the cost-effective, long-term effectiveness in a program like Gateway. With Dr. Bear's leadership, Gateway to Success is woven into the fabric of both our district and the community. The program is structured in such a way that it has taken on a life of its own and is now far bigger than any single person. In the end, isn't that what a true leader strives for?"

Recently, Bear and MSMF Founder Ron Silverman were honored during National Suicide Prevention Month with a resolution signed by Mayor Eric Garcetti, the City of Los Angeles and the Los Angeles City Council for their work on behalf of student mental health. "Early, ongoing mental health education is a foundational strength for life and for learning," said Bear. "Gateway to Success is committed to providing exactly that kind of learning and to providing all the mental health and social services needed to support our children. There is nothing better than seeing a child become her or his best self."

MSMF is funding the filming of Gateway to Success programs in order to share them with more California schools. To learn more, visit www.mattsfoundation.org. **CS**

Resources

Alhambra USD Gateway to Success:
www.ausdgatow.com

CSBA brief series: Climate for Achievement, Issues 1–4:
www.csba.org/GovernanceBriefs.aspx

Safe Schools/Healthy Students Framework:
www.healthysafechildren.org/sshs-framework

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration:
www.samhsa.gov/safe-schools-healthy-students

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