

## RPS: Randolph Community Middle School Therapeutic Learning Center (TLC) Program Evaluation Executive Summary

This Program Evaluation was conducted for the Randolph Public Schools at the request of the District's Director of Special Education and Student Services in order to examine the District's Middle School Therapeutic Learning Center (TLC) Program as part of a larger continuum of program evaluations. The overall purpose of the evaluation was to determine program effectiveness in supporting positive outcomes for students with emotional and behavioral disabilities who are served within this district program and to identify areas of strength and areas for improvement for the District to consider. The report, in its entirety, provides action-oriented recommendations to guide future decision-making based on the evidence acquired through the evaluation process.

Several guiding questions were developed by the evaluation Team based on conversations with District administrators and through collaboration with the previous TLC evaluator to help frame the scope of this evaluation. These guiding questions included:

- 1) How is the District currently performing in regards to evidence-based practices specific to educating students with Emotional Impairments within the Middle School TLC Program?*
- 2) How are therapeutic supports differentiated for students who are serviced within the context of the TLC program?*
- 3) What type of program model would support a continuum of cohesive services and supports for students with Emotional Impairments across the district in grades K-12?*

The TLC program at the middle school showcased a variety of strengths that the district can utilize when formulating an improvement plan. The most impactful positive aspect is the hiring of an additional Climate Support Specialist, emulating the successful role developed at the high school level, within AIM Academy. For any therapeutic program to be effective it is highly reliant on relationships amongst staff as well as between students and staff. The staff within the TLC program, including the newly hired Climate Support Specialist, exemplified dedication, personal connection and a supportive demeanor that clearly conveys their positivity toward the students. Collectively, the staff share a strong desire to collaborate toward improved programming and were forthcoming during the evaluation to promote positive change. Student

attendance can often become an issue for students with significant emotional impairments or behavioral difficulties that can lead to school refusal. However, the attendance at the TLC middle school program was notably high providing additional evidence of the personal connections that often bring students to school settings. The district promotes and supports weekly meetings with the new Climate Support Specialist at TLC and Director of AIM (High school) to start to improve programmatic alignment. There is Common Planning Time scheduled for the ELA/Social Studies teacher with district curriculum leaders. The School Adjustment Counselor has started incorporating mindfulness activities. The district continues to offer relevant and program-specific Professional Development opportunities annually to TLC staff. And, lastly, the administration's dedicated efforts to the betterment of the program, such as this external evaluation process, show meaningful leadership toward continuous improvement.

### **Overarching Finding #1:**

#### **An Omission of “Therapeutic” supports and Social-Emotional Learning Focus**

An essential piece of a “Therapeutic” program is the integrated use of therapeutic tools and behavioral strategies in conjunction with a proactive, systematic approach to Social-Emotional Learning (SEL). The TLC program at the middle school is inherently lacking these components. A School Adjustment Counselor (SAC) is assigned part time to the TLC program and the limitations of scheduling greatly impact availability to the TLC students. To that end, it is questionable if the level of access to a SAC is any greater than a student in an inclusion setting would receive. Furthermore, there is not a Social-Emotional curriculum utilized in the program nor is there a sense of a cohesive approach to address Social-Emotional Learning and the resulting behavioral impacts within the program. The SAC attempts to spend more time in the program but other school-wide responsibilities impact the presence in the TLC program. There is a necessity to interconnect the “therapeutic” supports and behavioral approaches (as it relates to finding #2) to create a strong foundation within the TLC program.

### **Overarching Finding #2:**

#### **A Lack of Classroom Management Resulting in Reduced Time on Learning**

The program at the Community middle school lacks a cohesive and systematic PBIS system that targets expected rules within and across all learning environments. Lack of program structure directly affects time-on-learning and student outcomes and this was corroborated by direct observation and data collection during learning opportunities across the school day. In addition to a programmatic system, the “therapeutic” premise of the program would benefit from a stronger system (i.e., Check In-Check out system) that focuses on behavioral and/or social-emotional expectations at the onset of each activity. This approach serves as a priming

procedure to set students up for success and on the latter end of an activity it also provides a self-reflection piece.

The Middle School "TLC" Program Evaluation identified the need to develop stronger self-awareness, self-management, and self monitoring skills amongst the student population. Program alignment with the school-wide "ROCK" system would start to build a connection to the larger middle school community. A program-designed positive behavioral support system will develop a more consistent approach to classroom management and, in turn, improve student outcomes and time on learning. The TLC program is situated at the end of a hallway in the back corner. There are both positive and negative aspects to this design. One perspective would oppose the site of the program as it could create a feeling of exclusion and separation from the "general education" classrooms and peers. The other perspective, especially in light of the program's current status, promotes student privacy, dignity and respect by shielding their behaviors from the larger group of peers. Alongside the two academic classrooms is an additional room called the "Flex Room". This room holds much potential from a proactive behavioral and therapeutic standpoint, however, it remains undefined and used in reaction to student behavior, which is in opposition to the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's September 2021 guidance on reducing and eliminating the use of time out space. Identifying how the "flex room" will be used and redesigning the space could greatly support more effective regulation through the development of personal coping strategies students learn to use proactively.

### **Overarching Finding #3:**

#### **Staff Retention Concerns /Staff Training in SEL and Therapeutic approaches**

Both acquisition and retention of highly qualified staff have a major impact on the overall success of the Community Middle School TLC program. Reportedly, the last two years have resulted in 100% and nearly 100% staff turnover rates. In the 2021-2022 school year there were no returning members of the TLC Team to the program. During the prior school year (2020-2021) it was reported that only one staff remained in the program for the following school year. Significant staff turnover in the program has resulted in an unstable and inconsistent program that lacks leadership and replicable systems. This is evidenced through the current staff belief that they have to "start from zero" to get the program operating successfully for students. The findings from the Lippitt-Knoster Model for Managing Complex Change shows vision, consensus and action plan as missing components of the current program design. These missing elements create confusion among staff and leave staff to unintentionally sabotage the intent of the model. Consideration of these large scale needs while systematically approaching an action plan will guide the District to overhaul the program. All staff reported that they feel supported through the district's Professional Development opportunities and that they are

provided sessions that are pertinent to the specific needs of a Therapeutic program. In alignment with that, the District will want to ensure that the carryover or generalization of the learned skills are transferred to the classroom setting. A program with high needs students requires a honed set of skills by the teachers and paraprofessionals. This creates a need for even more highly focused professional development, on-the-job training and feedback (i.e., Behavior Skills Training), and continued access to professional learning. Based on current observations, the professional development focus will need to be on developing a therapeutic setting with behavior systems and social-emotional approaches to learning.

#### **Overarching Finding #4:**

##### **Needed focus on Assessment, Transition Planning, & IEP Development**

Through access to a sampling of IEPs from the TLC program and through discussion with staff, the assessment process for students in the TLC program appears very linear in its focus and lacks a differentiated approach to each student's need. The School Psychologist solely conducts the psychological (cognitive) assessment and the educational evaluation for each student who requires testing for their three-year re-evaluation. This seems to be a limited and pre-packaged approach to evaluating students. There was no evidence of transition planning or goals that align to the outcomes of a transition plan. Transition planning, according to the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, states that "Secondary Transition is a time that begins when they turn 14 (or earlier, if the IEP team agrees)". Furthermore, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) states that secondary transition services are a "coordinated set of activities... within a results-oriented process, that is focused on improving the academic and functional achievement" of students with disabilities. Given the profile and needs of the student population in TLC, it would be imperative that the IEP Team begin Transition planning as early as possible. Additionally, it will be important to enhance the transition planning process with consultation, training, and/or support from a Transition Specialist who brings a different lens and focus on how to develop appropriate services targeting long term, functional outcomes. When working with students with Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) or Trauma, there is a strong therapeutic benefit to knowing your evaluator and, through staff reporting, the evaluator is mostly unfamiliar to the students only serving the role of test administrator. Consideration of a more sensitive approach to testing and moving toward including portfolio assessments or informal assessments to supplement formal testing would help create a stronger picture of each students' learning profile. The lack of Social-Emotional Learning measures within the program carry over to the IEP process that has limited or no focus on the student growth in the primary area that directs students to a Therapeutic setting, social-emotional and behavioral needs. Lastly, it was noteworthy that the shared IEPs were lacking goals in the area of SEL or behavior skill development. In essence, the two areas work in tandem and should be represented as such on student IEPs. Students' maladaptive behaviors reduce when they are taught more socially

appropriate ways (regulation) to meet their needs. The creation and implementation of an Individualized Education Plan for a student in a sub-separate Therapeutic Learning program should identify student-specific goals in the social and/or emotional realm and oftentimes behavioral goals that support their placement away from the general education setting where all students can access Tier 1 or Tier 2 supports.

### **Recommendations**

Several detailed recommendations were generated based on the findings from this program evaluation that will be useful in providing the District with additional ways to further develop capacity and ensure continued high quality programming for students with substantial social, emotional and behavioral needs. Recommendations were organized into three main sections: *Recommendations for District-Level Considerations*, *Recommendations for TLC Program Model and Structure*, and *Recommendations for Curriculum and Instruction*. The **district recommendations** underscore the importance of strengthening the district's multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) framework in order to meet the academic, social, emotional, and behavioral needs of all students, with an emphasis on creating robust universal and targeted social, emotional and behavioral supports at Tiers 1 and 2. Within this tiered support system, additional recommendations to improve the District's Trauma-Sensitive and Culturally Sensitive practices were outlined.

Specific recommendations for the **TLC Program Model and Structure** include developing a clear vision for the TLC program across all grade levels/buildings as is also noted in the Elementary TLC evaluation. As noted within this evaluation, substantive differences in the TLC model were noted at the elementary and secondary level, which creates substantial confusion with regards to the overarching structure and vertical alignment of a cohesive district program continuum for students with Emotional Impairments. As previously mentioned, the middle school TLC program receives students from the Elementary TLC program, an intended model of a therapeutic classroom, and then graduates students into the high school AIM Academy whose philosophical approach is to serve the "at-risk" population through an Alternative Education approach. This marked difference intensifies the confusion for the expected model at the middle school level.

The collaboration between the SAC and the BCBA plays a pivotal role in developing the successful school-based therapeutic model. PBIS provides guidance on developing interconnected systems for behavioral support and mental health support to effectively coexist. The district is encouraged to refer to the Midwest PBIS Network for guidance on developing interconnected systems called The Advancing Education Effectiveness: Interconnecting School



Mental Health and School-Wide PBIS. This is an implementation guide of the Interconnected Systems Framework (ISF) that will support the complementary nature of managing behavior while simultaneously providing therapeutic support.

A programmatic emphasis should be made on maximizing the availability of inclusion opportunities across the TLC continuum so that students with emotional and behavioral disorders have equitable access to instruction within the general education environment, as deemed appropriate by the Team. The district will want to ensure that, prior to entrance into the TLC sub-separate program, interventions at Tier 1, Tier 2, and Tier 3 are exhausted in the general education setting.

The District should also consider adopting a consistent practice across all programs in the use of specific assessment tools geared towards determining the presence of Emotional Impairment. Furthermore, conducting a Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA) should be part of the fabric of any program model that supports students with behavioral needs. The District should consider implementing a clear process for conducting FBAs for students who exhibit challenging behaviors with differentiated practices geared towards this specific student profile, including the implementation of trauma-informed FBAs, as well as identifying the roles of specific professionals that are typically involved in this process (e.g. BCBA, Psychologist, Adjustment Counselor, Special Education Teacher, etc.). A student’s right to an FBA or review of a Behavior Intervention plan is outlined in IDEA 2004.

All TLC teachers and related service providers would benefit from training and sample IEP models that reflect streamlined best practices for documenting services across the TLC continuum while staying steadfast to the guidance on Least Restrictive Environment (LRE).

In an effort to increase the effectiveness and impact of paraprofessional support, the District would benefit from creating clarity with regards to expectations for paraprofessionals that support students in the TLC program. Specific staff training on how to facilitate generalization of targeted social-emotional skills, how to effectively prompt students during whole-group instruction, how to implement positive behavioral supports, and how to support students’ academic needs without creating prompt-dependence or hindering instruction from the teacher would be beneficial to ensure that this role is utilized more effectively.

An integral component of a Therapeutic setting is the understanding of how to utilize de-escalation strategies as educators and how to assist students with developing a tool box of social-emotional, behavioral support strategies.

The TLC program at the middle school level would benefit from scheduling an interdisciplinary team model that encourages increased collaboration among various service providers and focuses on embedding social-emotional strategies, behavioral regulation skills, and consistent use of the Flex room across the entire day. directors.

Recommendations in the area of ***Curriculum and Instruction*** were considered first and foremost with the framework of Universal Design for Learning. The premise of all curriculum and instruction should fall under the umbrella of Universal Design for Learning with a focus on enhancing the three elements: Multiple Means of Engagement (why), Multiple Means of Representation (what), and Multiple Means of Action/Expression (how). Specifically, within the TLC program, the students' varying social-emotional needs, and academic needs impact traditional learning and teachers will want to focus on more high impact accommodations. Three areas were highlighted for the District to expand on: Social Emotional Curriculum, Math and Science Curriculum, and improved use of instructional and/or assistive technologies to support UDL and equitable access to learning.