

MVUSD Breakthrough Student Assistance Program

Interim Evaluation Findings

In December 2008, EVALCORP Research & Consulting was contracted by the Riverside County Department of Mental Health Substance Abuse Program to design and conduct an evaluation of the Murrieta Valley Unified School District's (MVUSD) Breakthrough Student Assistance Program (SAP), funded by the California Alcohol and Drug Programs, Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities (SDFSC) Governor's Program. This EvalBrief outlines the Interim Evaluation Report, summarizing Breakthrough's progress, accomplishments, and evaluation findings from the 2008-09 academic year, the second year of project implementation.



Program Overview

The Riverside County Department of Mental Health received a five-year SDFSC grant in the fall 2007 on behalf of MVUSD to fund Breakthrough, an alcohol and other drug (AOD) and violence reduction focused SAP. Breakthrough addresses the need to reduce high risk use and binge drinking by high school students in the MVUSD, serving Murrieta Valley High School, Vista Murrieta High School, and the continuation school, Creekside High School. In addition, as of August 2009 Breakthrough is also serving the new high school, Murrieta Mesa High School.

“The Breakthrough program helped me excel in my life.”

- Breakthrough Student

As a core strategy, the Breakthrough SAP identifies youth at-risk of or currently involved in high risk use/binge drinking patterns and offers them Family Conferences and links to services that will reduce AOD use, improve academic outcomes, and increase their resiliency. As a result of Breakthrough, district policy has been amended to require all MVUSD students suspended for AOD and violence-related reasons to be referred to Breakthrough for a Family Conference.

Students are also referred by school teachers, counselors, other personnel, or may be self-referred. Breakthrough staff initiates a Family Conference with all referred students and their parents to assess their strengths, risks, needs, and resources in a 90 minute structured interview using the Brief Risk Reduction Interview and Intervention Model (BRRIM) developed by Jan Ryan and Jim Rothblatt.

In addition to conferences, Breakthrough uses other strategies from the Project SUCCESS (Schools Using Coordinated Community Efforts to Strengthen Students) model program developed by Ellen Morehouse and adapted to serve students district-wide. Aligned with Project SUCCESS, Breakthrough services include:

- Family Conferences for referred students and their parents
- Prevention Education Series (PES) with lessons in selected health courses for 9th grade students and new students in the continuation high school
- Individual counseling for at-risk students
- Educational intervention and support groups for at-risk students
- Parent workshops
- Prevention materials

Evaluation Overview

A comprehensive formative evaluation design was used to assess the implementation and corresponding outcomes of the Breakthrough SAP. Evaluative data was fed back to project stakeholders at regular intervals to help shape the project's development and strengthen its implementation.



Data Collection Strategies and Tools

The data collection methods and tools used in the evaluation included:

- **Document Reviews:** Comprehensive reviews were conducted of all project-related documents.
- **Data Indicators:** Several data indicators were collected and analyzed to evaluate the program's outcomes. In collaboration with evaluators, Breakthrough staff created and maintained a Family Conference participant tracking database which included: participant demographics, program participation and referrals, academic grades, attendance and retention rates, and suspension and expulsion rates. School and district level data on AOD and violence-related discipline rates were also analyzed.
- **Key Informant Interviews:** Structured interviews were conducted with four Breakthrough staff and two Riverside County management employees to determine the progress and accomplishments of the program and to identify next steps for moving forward.
- **Survey Research:** Multiple surveys were developed to obtain evaluative feedback from Breakthrough participants and their parents and to assess the program's impact on participants' perceptions and behaviors. In 2009, Breakthrough staff piloted the California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS) Modules B and C, administering the initial survey to students during their Family Conferences. CHKS Modules B and C were also given to Breakthrough participants at three and six month intervals from when they began services. In addition, students participating in Breakthrough Family Conferences, PES in health courses, individual counseling, and groups were asked to take a Student Evaluation Survey. During Family Conferences, parents were asked to complete a 40 Developmental Assets Checklist indicating their child's internal and external assets. Approximately one week after the Family Conference, parents were called by Breakthrough staff and asked to complete the Family Conference Exit Survey regarding their satisfaction with the conference and follow through with referred services.

Table 1. Overall Impacts of the Breakthrough Student Assistance Program

Because of Breakthrough...	% Agreed
My behaviors are not causing me as many problems.	61%
I am doing better at school.	57%
I have better relationships with my peers.	56%
I am less likely to drink alcohol or use other drugs.	50%
I have better relationships with my teachers or other adults at school.	48%
I am involved in more activities or hobbies in my free time.	48%
I have a better relationship with my parent(s).	47%
I am learning a lot of new things and skills.	41%

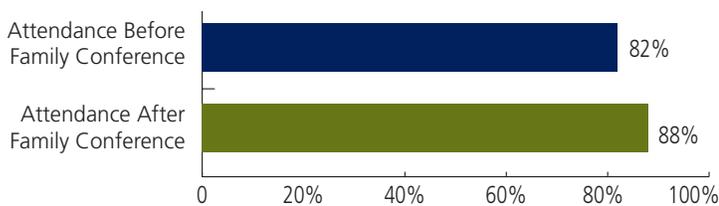
Promising Findings and Impacts

The following summarizes the key findings and accomplishments from the Breakthrough SAP interim evaluation.

Data Indicators

- **A total of 89 students participated in Family Conferences; 520 students received Project SUCCESS PES lessons in health courses; 104 students participated in Project SUCCESS groups; and 178 Project SUCCESS individual counseling sessions were held.** Additionally, 1,500 Breakthrough pamphlets and 300 folders were distributed. A pilot Project SUCCESS parent workshop was also conducted.
- **School attendance rates increased among students participating in a Family Conference.** Specifically, participants' average attendance at school increased from 82% during the 30 days before the conference to 88% during the 30 days following the conference (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Attendance Rates Before and After Participation in the Family Conference



- **The average number of discipline incidents decreased after students attended a Family Conference.** During the 30 days prior to the conference, participants overall received an average of 1.8 disciplinary actions, as compared to 0.7 disciplinary actions during the 30 days following the conference.
- **The number of high school students expelled from MVUSD decreased since 2006-07.** There were 50 expulsions in 2006-07, in comparison to only 28 in 2007-08, and 29 in 2008-09.
- **Breakthrough students who participated in a Family Conference had a higher average year-end GPA (2.19) after participating in the Family Conference, compared to those who were referred to the program but did not participate (1.76).**

Student Surveys

- **Breakthrough participants had fairly high levels of resiliency** based on responses on the CHKS Module B. The majority planned to graduate from high school, had goals for the future, and believed they could do most things if they tried. Most also said a parent or another adult in their home expected them to follow rules and always wanted them to do their best.
- **Students participating in Breakthrough for six months were more likely to report they did not drink alcohol or use marijuana during the past three months** than those who had just entered the program based on responses on the CHKS Module C. That is, 20% more students were alcohol-free and 25% more students were marijuana-free who had been in the program six months, compared to those new to the program.
- **84% of students would recommend Breakthrough to a friend** and only 4% expressed negative opinions when asked on the Student Evaluation Survey how happy they were with Breakthrough.
- **More Family Conference participants experienced positive impacts** than students participating in other Breakthrough services. For example, 59% of Family Conference participants said they were less likely to drink alcohol or use other drugs as a result of Breakthrough, as compared to 47% of those who participated services other than the Family Conference.
- **Fifty percent or more of Student Evaluation Survey respondents said that because of Breakthrough: their behaviors are not causing them as many problems (61%), and they are doing better at school (57%).** Over half said they have better relationships with peers (56%), and half are less likely to drink alcohol or use other drugs (50%) (see Table 1).

“I would absolutely recommend this program to other parents.”

- Breakthrough Parent

Parent Surveys

- Nearly all parents participating in the Family Conference Exit Survey “agree” or “strongly agree” that the Family Conference was conducted in a professional manner and that they felt respected (94%), and that they would use this service again as needed and would recommend the service to others (84%).
- Over 80% of the parents completing the 40 Developmental Assets Checklist indicated that their children possess external and internal assets such as: cultural competence (96%); school boundaries (89%); interpersonal competence (86%); family support (84%), high expectations from parents and teachers (84%), and safety (i.e., the young person feels safe at home, school, and in the neighborhood) (80%).

“Breakthrough has been very beneficial for students, the community, and families. They feel they have somebody to go to. I am really proud to be part of a school district offering these types of services and program.”

- Breakthrough Staff

Key Informant Interviews

- When asked about Breakthrough accomplishments to date, all interviewees discussed achievements related to the Family Conferences. They shared successes such as: (a) increased number of families served; (b) consistent implementation and strong support from the district; (c) improved family relationships (i.e., closer relationships, getting along better); and (d) follow-through from students and their families on Family Service Plans.
- Interviewees also discussed accomplishments related to changes in student behaviors resulting from participation in Breakthrough. They reported that some students “change their whole behavior pattern.” Specific changes reported in Breakthrough participants included: reduced drug, alcohol, and tobacco use; decreased fighting and other violent behaviors; less bullying of other students; better attendance rates; improved academic performance; increased graduation rates; more involvement in the community; and, fewer expulsions within the district.

Recommendations and Next Steps

Based upon evaluation findings, the following next steps are recommended for Breakthrough staff and their partners as they move forward with their efforts to help students and their families reduce AOD and violence-related issues.

Consider implementing changes suggested by Breakthrough students and parents.

- More time with the Breakthrough counselors
- Games, activities and real-life examples in lessons
- Food or refreshments at meetings
- Have students talk and listen to each other more
- Increase parent involvement
- Build greater awareness of Breakthrough

Investigate methods to increase the use of Family Service Plans by students and their families.

- Follow up with parents after longer intervals to allow sufficient time to better measure the completion of the Family Service Plans

Continue to build on the strengths of the students and surrounding community.

- Measure and build on student strengths
- Identify community assets to help support students

Continue to collect high quality data and evaluate the impacts of Breakthrough.

- Use data and evaluation findings to improve and sustain Breakthrough, and inform other SAPs

Develop and implement a plan to secure additional resources and increase the long-term sustainability of Breakthrough.

- Disseminate and use evaluation findings to acquire additional funding sources to ensure long-term sustainability of the program