

# Circle of the Horse

## 2011-2014 Evaluation Report

## What is the Circle of the Horse?



In spring of 2010, the Kings County Behavioral Health Department created a Planning Team that was tasked with identifying populations and service needs within the county that would most greatly benefit from MHSA (Mental Health Services Act) prevention dollars. MHSA prevention funds are designated to support services that are innovative. As a result of numerous key informant interviews, focus groups, roundtable discussions and meetings, the Planning Team determined that the Kings County MHSA Innovation Funds would be well spent by focusing on at-risk youth, defined as those not performing at



Equine –Facilitated Therapy for Tachi-Yokut Youth

grade level and/or exhibiting behavioral or emotional problems at school. Specifically, the Team decided to focus efforts on Tachi-Yokut students in the 4<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grades from the Central Elementary School. A select group of students would be given the

opportunity to participate in Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP). This model uses horses to address emotional, social, and behavioral needs. The program is overseen by the Learning Council, which consists of representatives from

*But the impact that the horses have on them...it's for the right planting of a seed to start thinking of different ways that maybe won't show up today or tomorrow but maybe will show up as they get old enough to realize... that they can choose to act differently instead of repeating the same mistakes and getting in trouble.*

*~ Circle of the Horse staff*

Kings County Behavioral Health, the Tachi-Yokut Tribe, the Central Union School District, the privately-contracted therapists, and the program evaluation team.

## What is MHSA?

The Mental Health Services Act, or Proposition 63, was passed by California voters in November 2004. MHSA imposes a 1% income tax on net personal income in excess of \$1 million. This money is used across the state to provide increased funding to county mental health programs, specifically for innovative and integrated mental health services.

MHSA addresses prevention and early intervention by providing infrastructure, technology and training. Under MHSA guiding principles, Kings County Behavioral Health seeks to increase geographic access to services; increase the array and types of services available to children; ensure that services are age-appropriate through collaboration with local agencies; increase and expand community

partnerships or education, jobs, housing, social relationships and meaningful contributions to community life for all; ensure that services are culturally and linguistically appropriate; and increase monitoring and accountability to ensure that service delivery approaches are effective, and that training needs are met in a timely and appropriate manner.

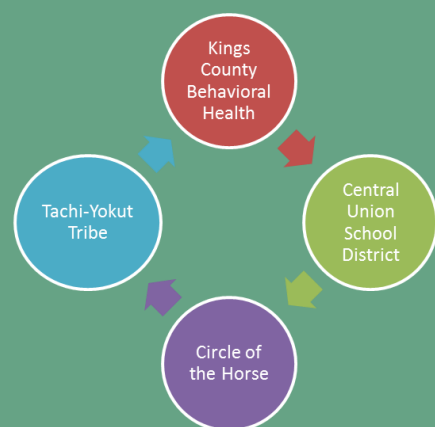
## Partners and Staff

Once a week for 16 weeks, students were taken from school to the Circle of the Horse program at the ranch owned by the Marriage and Family Therapist (MFT) subcontracted by Kings County Behavioral Health. Students returned to school after their session. Three groups of students, grouped by age, were brought to the facility for sessions lasting approximately an hour and forty-five minutes. The MFT subcontractor brought other professionals into the program, including another MFT from out of county, an MFT Intern, and staff members to help with the horses. Kings County Behavioral Health assigned a prevention coordinator to the project, whose responsibility was to provide both transportation between the school site and the ranch, along with additional support services. In addition to these direct service providers, the program brought together administrative staff from Kings County Behavioral Health, Tachi-Yokut Tribal Services, and the Central Union School District to form the Learning Council.

Project staff were a mix of both male and female, as well as a range of ages, which allowed students to develop relationships with a variety of adults and observe a diverse array of role models.

All therapists working with the program have worked with horses in a therapeutic setting, and also have personal experience with horses. The primary therapist is a private practitioner who normally works with clients on a one-on-one basis. One of the other therapists is a certified Equine Assisted Psychotherapy Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA) instructor.

While the other members of the Learning Council sporadically visited the program to observe, they did not attend frequently. It was agreed that too many visitors would impede the students' trust and comfort with staff members, thus slowing down their progress.



## Program Changes

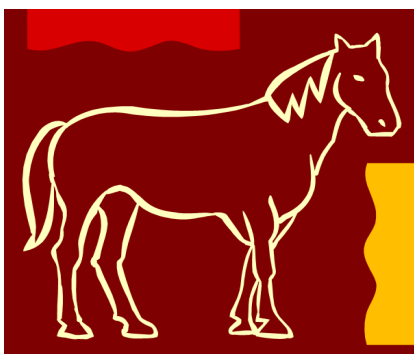
During the first year of the program a discussion arose regarding whether or not to extend the program length from the 16 weeks originally outline in the program plan to the entire length of the school year. This discussion revealed the underlying differences in pedagogical approaches between program staff. While Behavioral Health staff preferred an approach centered on skills-building and cognitive-behavioral change, some of the other staff preferred a therapeutic approach customized to the individual needs of students.

Because the first year cohort was in need of more intensive services, therapeutic and school staff believed the students would benefit from a longer period of intervention. Toward the end of the first year, however, the number of sessions proved to be too much for students. Several staff indicated they felt that the chaos students experienced in their home life was being duplicated during the sessions. While some staff strongly felt that structure and boundaries were lacking in the program, other staff believed that allowing more freedom of expression would produce an empowering experience for students, who often have little control over their lives, to explore and create their own boundaries. By the end of the year, it was agreed that all staff needed to be "on the same page" and that staff and Learning Council members would make this paradigm disparity a focus during the second year.

In the second year, the students' time in the program was limited to sixteen weeks. Since staff roles were more clearly defined, staff believed they were better able to find the balance between therapeutic and cognitive-behavioral approaches.

## Structure of the Program

The program structure consisted of three small groups of four students each. Each group met on the ranch at different times on the same weekday. A Kings County Behavioral Health (KCBH) staff person transported each group of students from school to the ranch for a session that lasted about an hour and forty-five minutes. At the conclusion of the session, the same KCBH staff member transported the students back to campus, and checked them in.



Once students arrived on site, they gathered together with the staff to go over the day's schedule and to have a check-in time. This allowed staff to gauge each student's emotions that day. Check-in lasted between ten and twenty minutes, after which the group would move to the day's main activity. This took up the bulk of the time period, lasting forty-five to sixty minutes. During this time, staff engaged in both group and individual activities with students, depending on the students' needs that day. Once the activity was completed, all staff and students would gather together again to summarize the

learning that occurred while having a snack before returning to school.

As a result of transportation time and checking students into and out of the school site, approximately twenty to thirty minutes elapsed between groups. During that time, staff met collectively to write case notes and discuss the successes and challenges they encountered during the previous group.

While students and staff gathered at the beginning and end of each session, the rest of the period varied between group and individual instruction, depending on the scheduled activity and the individual participants' needs each day.

Students were introduced to the horses (grooming, cleaning their feet, etc.) early in the program. The therapist constructed activities in order to integrate the horses. While working with the horses, students were encouraged to consider the personality of each horse and discuss its behavior, providing an opportunity for the student to explore his/her own feelings and behavior. In addition to horse-centered activities, students also participated in other interests such as badminton, board games and cards.

The group setting allowed the therapists to help the students work together to develop life skills, including improve interpersonal skills between group members. Due to the high staff to student ratio, students

who were disrespectful or having difficulty in the group were taken aside or into a private area for one-on-one conversation. This provided an opportunity to delve more deeply into individual issues and provide the student with an opportunity to refocus before rejoining the group.

*There's been one or two that we thought could really use individual [counseling] but the politics of their families isn't going to bring them to individual therapy. If this is all we get, then we do the best we can; that's the limitations of understanding that the kids are at the mercy of whoever is taking care of them and they don't have a say so. In other words, they can't say "I need therapy over here," and come on their own. So we do the best [we can], because this is better than nothing.*  
~ Circle of the Horse Staff

## Cultural Interpretation

Some, though not all, of staff and Learning Council members indicated that they understood the importance of being culturally sensitive to the population of students with whom they were working. In addition, most were also able to describe their understanding of the home environments from which these students come. Home environments for most students were described as chaotic, with students frequently shifting from one house to another and lacking consistent adult supervision or guidance. Some staff described parents as non-responsive to school and program staff, and as being too open with their children about financial matters. Many staff and Learning Council members described the Circle of the Horse students as reserved, and as lacking respect because they treated adults as if they were peers or equals. Staff members attributed these behaviors, to varying degrees, to cultural norms established in the students' homes. Most program staff discussed addressing these behavioral issues by helping students to express themselves and share their emotions more openly.

Research has shown that the meaning of similar behaviors differs across cultures. This is known as the lack of functional equivalence, and it can occur subtly. For example, Indian children may appear very quiet and reserved, and non-Indian teachers may label these children as withdrawn and unresponsive, the implication being that their behavior is a form of emotional dysfunction. Some of the staff described participating students in ways that non-Indian observers often do describe Indian children, with little knowledge of or consideration of local cultural norms. Thus, the cultural norms expressed by non-Indian staff may influence the way they see and interpret the behavior of Indian youth. The behavioral issues described by many of the program staff may, in part, be a function of cross-cultural misinterpretation.

Cross-cultural interpretation may require the program staff to further clarify the focus of the program. Because these students must learn to straddle the very different norms of their own culture and that of the non-Indian community (at this age, specifically the educational system), the staff must recognize the differences between the two so that they can assist the students in navigating between differing sets of expectations. In doing so, however, staff must also consider the fact that some behaviors are clearly not safe where horses are involved, regardless of cultural interpretation. Around issues related to safety, staff must lay out clear expectations at the onset of the program and hold students accountable. Explicitly examining and discussing the differing cultural worlds in which these students live and function will assist them in better negotiating those worlds, while a focus on developing decision-making and problem-solving skills will better equip students to function in both cultures.

Some of the initial problems that arose in the first year of the program (for example, staff occasionally using language that inadvertently demeaned Indian culture) were resolved by the second year, primarily through discussion, acknowledgement, and changes in approach. While staff often didn't realize when their language was pejorative or negative, once this was pointed out, they adopted new ways of communicating with the students.



*"I have found those students who have participated cared a little bit more, they kind of opened up a little bit more, they have taken their academics a little bit further. They were more below basic academic wise, which I saw as improvement. They were trying a little harder."*

*~Teacher of several Circle of the Horse students*

## Who are the Participants?

Participants in the Circle of the Horse program were Tachi-Yokut students selected by the principal of Central Elementary School, based on a combination of teacher recommendation and a review of students' academic performance. Selected students have a history of behavioral issues at school. Among the 62 participants in the first three years, there were sixteen 4th graders, twelve 5th graders, thirteen 6th graders, twelve 7th graders, and nine 8th graders. Both boys and girls have participated, with 31 boys and 31 girls participating to date.

All program staff, regardless of their role, described the three groups as

having distinct personalities. In particular, staff noted that group dynamics were greatly impacted by the age and gender of the students.

The diversity in both age and gender created challenges in conducting some activities and in communication dynamics, particularly when students were two grade levels apart, or if groups consisted of three members of one gender and only one of the other. The most effective groups had students who were not more than one grade level apart and had either two boys and two girls, or all four members were of the same gender.



Photo: Happy Sisters via Veer®

*They're a mix of both [serious and silly]; wanting to try to get it, but also wanting to have fun. So I've seen improvements there with attention toward working together. They seem to really enjoy the process—not always having to care if they're doing it right; listening better; being more mindful around the horses; understanding themselves in relation to the horse; what scares the horse or what the horse likes. So the sixth grade age is nice because the younger kids, the fourth graders, are a little more playful and fun and sometimes they're a little rambunctious, too. I wouldn't call it aggressive towards the horses, but they move faster and they're quicker and that can set the horses off a little—not a lot, but we have to remind them [to be careful].*

~ Circle of the Horse staff



### The School

Central Elementary School is one of four schools in the Central Union School District. The District, located near the city of Lemoore, serves a diverse population of just over 1,800 students, two-thirds of whom are located on the Lemoore Naval Air Station. Central Elementary School serves approximately 350 students, of whom nearly half (about 47%) are American Indian and roughly 40% are Latino. Located adjacent to the Tachi-Yokut Rancheria, the school has been in operation for over 70 years, serving the rural population living on the Rancheria and to the south of Lemoore. The school's motto is, "Together We Achieve."

## Student Progress

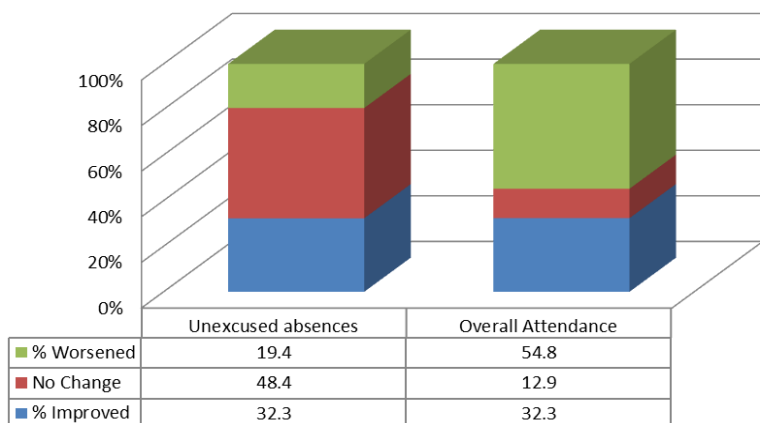
### School Record Data

Attendance and discipline data for participating students were supplied by the school site. Baseline refers to the trimester before students participated in Circle of the Horse and follow-up data are from the most recent trimester data are available, but at least one full trimester after the student concluded Circle of the Horse activities. School record data represent students in the first two years of the program, as follow-up data are not yet available for students served in 2013-2014.

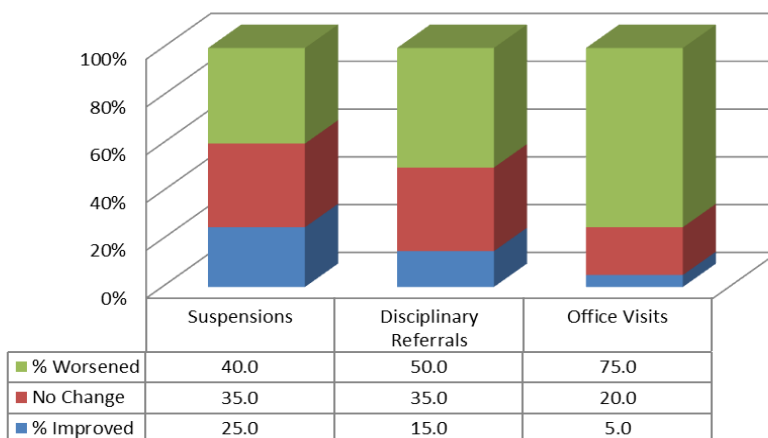
Results were most promising in the area of school attendance. Approximately one-third of the Circle of the Horse participants improved their overall attendance and unexcused absences.

Fewer students showed improvement in disciplinary measures. One-quarter of students had fewer suspensions; three students (15%) had fewer disciplinary referrals; and one student (5%) had fewer office visits.

**School Attendance, n=31**



**Disciplinary Infractions, n=20**

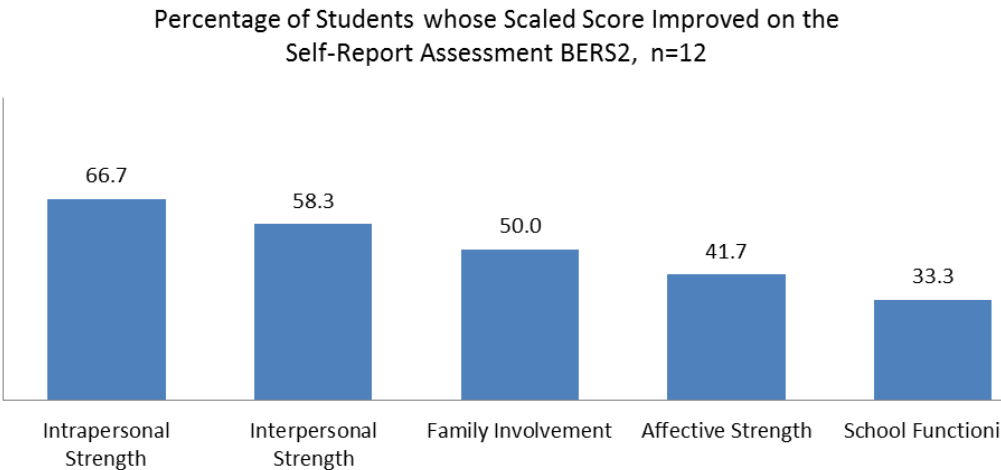
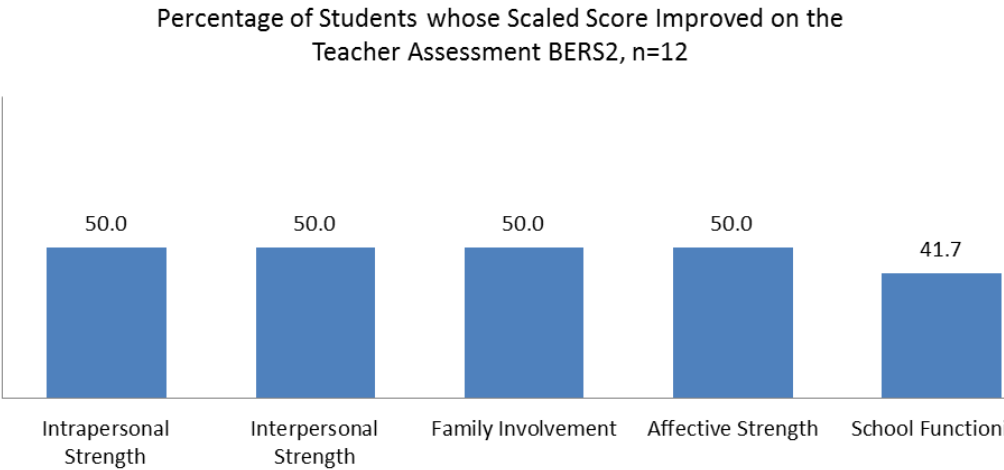






BERS2

Following the first year, it was determined additional and more nuanced measures of student progress were needed to better understand whether and in what ways students participating in Circle of the Horse were showing improvement. The BERS2 (Behavioral and Emotional Rating Scale) was selected. The BERS2 is an evidence-based assessment which measures interpersonal and intrapersonal strength, family involvement school functioning, and affective strength. Assessments were completed by three sources (parents, students, and teachers); however, results are available only for teacher and student assessments because none of the parents completed both a baseline and follow-up assessment. Although results are only available for 12 students, the graphs below show that students reported greater variability in their improvement than did their teachers. While more students than teachers saw improvement in intrapersonal strength, more teachers than students noted improvement in school functioning.



## Parent View of the Circle of the Horse Program

Phone interviews were conducted with parents whose children participated in the first two years of the Circle of the Horse program. Eight out of twelve randomly selected parents completed the interview.

The majority of parents indicated that school personnel, specifically the principal, suggested the Circle of the Horse program for their children. In some cases, the parent's own relatives told them about the program. One parent described the program as being "very popular" in their community.

In general, parents did not know many of the details about the program before their child began attending the sessions. Their initial perception was that it would help resolve their child's issues through "some kind" of therapy and working with horses. Although parents liked the idea of the children working with horses, they were unsure of how the activities involving horses would fit with the therapy. In some cases, it wasn't until their child completed and brought materials home from the program that the parents had a better idea of the activities that took place at the ranch.

Although parents did not know much about equine therapy, their overall impression of the program was positive (a "good" program). Several described how their children would get excited when they talked about the activities that they did with the horses (e.g., grooming, feeding, and riding). According to parents, their children always looked forward to

attending the program and did not want to miss any of the sessions.

The program received mixed reviews when parents were asked whether or not they believed the program had a lasting impact on the child's behavior at school or at home, and in their academic performance.

While some parents believed the program made a positive impact in their child's behavior both at home and at school, other parents believed the program had little to no influence on their child's behavior. Parents who described their children as having disciplinary issues at school reported receiving fewer phone calls from teachers regarding negative behavior. These parents also indicated that their children were less likely to engage in fights. Parents whose children did not actively participate in classroom discussions and were considered "shy" noted that the children were able to ask for help from the teachers more often and they were more likely engage in classroom discussions. Furthermore, a few parents also reported that the child's attendance and grades had improved since their participation in the program.

Parents reported that at home their children were able to manage their anger more effectively and got along better with their siblings.

Only a very few parents disclosed any concerns about their child's participation in the program. One parent expressed concern about the time that was spent away from the classroom. In that

parent's mind, their child was not doing well academically and leaving instruction may have put their child further behind. Another parent's concern was that groups were not formed with enough attention to student dynamics. In this case, the child was put into a group that included students that he did not get along with at school. In fact, the child had to transfer schools because of issues with these students, and yet, he was asked to work with them in the equine group.

In spite of their limited knowledge of it, parents reported being satisfied the Circle of the Horse. Most parents liked the program and believed it made a positive difference in their child's behavior at home and school. Few concerns were disclosed during the interviews. Parents provided many positive comments and most indicated their children would like to attend again in the future.





## Teacher View of the Circle of the Horse Program

Interviews were conducted with five teachers from Central Elementary School who had students participate in the Circle of the Horse program. Teachers were encouraged to discuss what they knew about the program and whether or not they believed the program was beneficial to their students, either academically or behaviorally.

In many respects, the teachers' responses resembled those of parents. Teachers believed the program was good for the students but lacked knowledge about the specific practices that were used in therapy. According to the teachers, students really liked attending. A teacher recalled *"They love it, they love it. They wanted to keep going. They tell me about the horses. They show me the pictures..."*

Teacher opinions regarding the impact the program had on students varied. Some teachers believed that the program helped students make great strides in improving attendance, academic performance, and student interaction in the classroom—and gave concrete examples. According to a few teachers, some students who were isolated and failed to engage in classroom discussions spoke and interacted more often with their peers and participated more during

class after beginning the program. One teacher explained *"I have found those students who have participated cared a little more, they kind of opened up a little bit more..."* Some students were also less aggressive and their social skills got better, according to some teachers.

Even though some teachers were able to recount success stories, others believed that the program did not have any lasting effect on their students. This was especially true in the area of academic performance. Teachers understood that the program focused more on social and emotional issues, but would have liked to see greater academic benefits to students' participation.

A few teachers indicated that while they saw positive changes in their students initially, students' behavior tended to regress after they completed the program.

Although some teachers could not identify positive changes in behavior that could be attributed to the student's participation in the program, all teachers believed the program benefited students. Teachers indicated that the program exposed students to positive role models and that their time was spent doing activities that were productive and engaging. At the very minimum, students were

taught to listen, follow directions, and to get along with others.

Teachers were asked if they believed that the time spent away from the classroom created a problem. Teachers admitted that it was difficult to catch up the students on the lessons at times, but insisted it was not major issue.

Teachers did not have many suggestions on how the program could be improved. One suggestion was to have the students spend more months receiving equine therapy, with the belief that continued participation would have more lasting benefits. A few teachers talked about the serious issues students were dealing with at home, and the need for intensive therapy. Another recommendation was to somehow include parents and teachers in the program. A fourth recommendation was that the program be modified to include an academic component.



## Students' Experience

Three focus groups were conducted with fifth, seventh, and eighth grade students who previously participated in the Circle of the Horse Program. Students were asked questions about why they decided to attend the program, what they liked best about the program and how could the program be improved.

Students indicated they were referred to the program due to behavioral issues. One student frankly stated, "I had anger issues." Students attended the program for various reasons, including they wanted to try something new, they heard that it was fun from other friends and relatives, and they hoped to learn about horses.

Caring for the horses and riding the horses was the students favorite activity. Looking after the horses taught the students about the similarities between horses and humans. Students learned that horses have temperaments just like people. By their own admission, caring for the horses taught them how to work better with people. Students made the connection that they had to be careful around their horse, just as they had to be vigilant about their interaction with other people. One student explained, "They [the horses] taught me how to be nice, be polite." Similarly, another student indicated he was taught how to use better words to explain his feelings.

Students felt comfortable with the staff from the Circle of the Horse. Students indicated they trusted the staff with personal information and also noted that they do not have that type of trusting relationship at school. They felt that they could talk freely with staff about their troubles at home and school without feeling that their privacy would be violated. Students found the staff was very helpful and kind.

The only recommendation students had was to extend the program. They felt that attending sessions once a week was not enough time to work with the horses.

Students liked their participation in the program. One student simply stated, "It's the best program ever." Those who had previously heard of the program felt their expectations were met. They not only learned to care for horses, but were able to use the skills they had learned when they interacted with other people.



# Challenges and Recommendations

## Successes

Many of the recommendations made in the previous report have been implemented. The school now tracks disciplinary referrals; the evaluation team identified and implemented a student behavior assessment; and staff established specific criteria for including students in the program. Other successes around student selection include an even balance of boys and girls within the same groups and keeping students of similar age together.



## Challenges

Many of the challenges encountered during previous years have been resolved. For example, it took the members of the Learning Council time to learn how to work effectively together, given that it is made up of multiple agencies, each coming in with a framework reflective of their individual missions, priorities, and expectations. While there was consensus around the ultimate goal of the program, to empower and equip participating youth, there was initially some disagreement in the most effective way to achieve this goal. By the second year, the council found its footing and was collaborating effectively.

## Recommendations

- ⇒ School staff bring attendance and disciplinary data for participating students to the monthly Learning Council meetings so all parties working with the students can see their current behavior at school.
- ⇒ While a student behavioral assessment was implemented, rather than being administered by therapeutic staff, as recommended, it is being administered by school administration. Given the power dynamics that exist between school administration and students, responses are likely to be more honest if completed with therapeutic staff.
- ⇒ Due to the small size and close-knit family ties of the students participating in the program, great care should be taken when using the experiences of students from previous cohorts as examples during sessions. Students can easily recognize who is being described in the example even if names are not used.
- ⇒ Identify how, and if, the program has increased perception and knowledge of behavioral health among Tachi-Yokut and other Native American community members.
- ⇒ Enhance the cultural enrichment component for participating students.
- ⇒ Invite selected parents to participate on the Learning Council, as outlined in the program plan.



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