The Ceres Unified School District is committed to providing high levels of academic and social/emotional services on a district-wide basis to raise the quality of education for all Ceres students. As Dr. Anthony Muhammad emphasizes in his book, Overcoming the Achievement Gap Trap*,* in high-achieving schools, internal and external obstacles are viewed as “challenges and opportunities for growth and to do what is perceived as impossible. … They recognize that students are not **at risk**, but … **school dependent**. They believe that with the right guidance, resources, and enough time, ALL students can become academically and socially successful.” This belief is at the core of the goals, actions, and services of the Ceres Unified School District. With 82.7% of our district’s students qualifying for the federal Free and Reduced Lunch program, and 30.8% of students classified as English Learners, our district has established goals in the areas of social and emotional health to ensure that pupil outcomes reflect access, equity, and achievement in research-based support programs that will lead to lifelong success.

Providing mental health services and supports to all students and their families in a primarily low socio-economic area is essential given that our students often live with *adverse childhood experiences* such as child abuse, neglect, substance abuse, parent incarceration, mental illness, spousal abuse, and/or single-parent households (http://www.pent.ca.gov). Helping our students overcome these challenges in their lives is a critical component of our overarching goal of educating the “whole child” – academically, physically, emotionally, and socially. In order to effectively meet our goals, staff has identified specific research-based objectives in the areas of prevention and intervention: 1.) Design a comprehensive counseling program for our district, including the creation of the Student Support Specialist position dedicated to prevention and intervention supports; 2.) Adopt and implement a three-tiered Response to Intervention model for behavior and social/emotional support; and 3.) Provide structured and specific professional development in the areas of Social-Emotional Learning curriculum and assessment of student attainment and progress.

As part of our three-tiered model, Ceres Unified offers levelized services to meet the specific needs of our students, including Mentors, Social Skills Facilitators, Student Support Specialists, Psychologists, and Clinicians. Each of these services are provided at each school site, with our School Psychologists providing case management, behavior support and progress monitoring of students receiving those services. In the 2014-2015 school year, our service providers worked with 1,168 students (9% of the student population) district-wide; in the 2015-2016 school year, with the addition of the Student Support Specialists and additional Psychologists, we provided support services to 2,328 students (17% of the student population). The most extensive service is provided by our Student Support Specialists (SSS), as each of our 19 schools have a full-time *SSS* on campus. Student Support Specialists are visible and active before and after school, and during recess and lunchtime, developing rapport and establishing relationships with *all* students and families on their campuses. As a result, our students and families feel more connected and supported at school, and feel safe to reach out when there are problems. This has helped reduce the stigma attached with needing to see a “counselor,” and has allowed schools to be more preventative with potential behavior and discipline concerns. Our intervention model consists of a referral process that connects students to the appropriate service provider based on their specific need. One-to-one and small group counseling has proven to be an instrumental component of helping students overcome challenges and thrive in school. Student Support Specialist Marcus West, who works at Blaker Kinser Junior High School, shares the value of the SSS position and its impact on students:

*In an ever-changing, fast-paced school climate, it can be very easy for a student to fail-out, fall behind, or become “invisible.” As Student Support Specialists, we are afforded the unique opportunity to take the time and see the student as they are and for the light that they can bring into the world. We get to share their struggles, know their pain, understand their fears, and watch their triumphs. Most importantly, we get to see – in their eyes, in their demeanor, in their talk – the confidence that is gained when they see* thatsomeone *believes in them.*

As a district we have already seen an increase in Average Daily Attendance rates to 95.7% since our program’s inception two years ago. In addition, home suspensions across the district have decreased by 38%. The SSS staff has also had an impact in ways that data just cannot show. A recent graduate of Ceres High School had this to say in her final reflective essay about her school’s SSS, Denia Rivera:

*My senior year of high school was supposed to be filled with fun, laughter and adventure; it instead turned out to be the year that I struggled, lost, and learned things that I shouldn’t have had to learn. Throughout this struggling journey, there has been one amazing person on this campus who has helped me overcome these challenges- Denia Rivera. [She] taught me that the struggles I thought were going to break me were life lessons instead [and] I have learned how to handle situations much differently. Learning this and applying it to my life has made me a much happier person … also just a better person in general. I could never thank Denia Rivera enough for being a great role model and inspiration in my life…I will continue on my own journey and will always look at life as a glass half full instead of half empty.*

Our Student Support Specialists are also trained in the Nurtured Heart Approach (NHA), a set of relational strategies focused on recognizing “the greatness” in all students. The approach focuses on adult-to-child relationships and provides a powerful set of strategies designed specifically to turn the challenging child around to new patterns of success (Howard Glasser, 5th Edition 2016). The NHA is being taught to teachers, administrators, and support staff at each of our schools. As of the 2016-17 school year, we have successfully certified more than 60 staff members across the district in the Approach as well as provide trainings to hundreds of staff. Trainings for parents have also been provided at several of our elementary schools. After conducting a six-week parent workshop at Sam Vaughn Elementary School, SSS Gonzalo Rodriguez received excellent feedback from all 16 of his attendees. Specifically, a parent of a sixth-grade student had this to say at the end of the workshops:

*Overall, I would like to thank the Nurtured Heart program and our presenter Gonzalo for touching our lives and making a difference to help better ourselves [as parents] and our children’s lives. The NHA program was truly a life changing experience and a blessing to many families. This is just the beginning to a very successful future with our children.*

We have seen remarkable results due to implementing the NHA – with staff, students, and their parents. Eric Domen, the SSS at Don Pedro Elementary School, ran a yearlong “Greatness Club” for the most behaviorally intense fifth- and sixth-grade boys in the school, resulting in a vast reduction of defiance, disruption, and conflict in each of them. One male student in particular was nominated and selected for the *Every Student Succeeding* award, given to students who overcome extreme obstacles to be successful in school. We are proud of our comprehensive mental health program, and feel it is exemplary because it encompasses and supports ALL students, staff, *and* families.

The vision of the CUSD Board of Trustees is that “all students are academically prepared to achieve their full potential, supported by and contributing to the community.” Our Board contributed greatly in establishing our innovative mental health program by first approving our plan, and then allocating resources and targeted funding to help it grow and flourish. Through an ongoing process of stakeholder involvement, the Board has been instrumental in supporting the implementation, evaluation, and revision of our mental health goals, actions, and services within the Local Control Accountability Plan.

It is crucial to the vision of our Board that programs such as this remain sustainable over time. As we wind down our third year of our program, the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) provides a committed revenue stream into our district that is supported both internally and externally by all stakeholder groups. These groups consist of the Board of Trustees, school and district staff, students, parents, and members of the community.

As the old adage goes, it “takes a village to raise a child”. Replicating a mental health program such as ours begins with dedicated leadership. This requires a strong vision of a school board who recognizes the value that social and emotional supports and programs brings to educating the whole child. By first soliciting stakeholder involvement to identify needs, every voice within the community is heard and valued, thus building ownership and unity. Resources can then be apportioned accordingly to identify personnel and implement research-based programs and a systematic and responsive approach to support students and families alike.

Over the course of the past two and a half years, the mental health program in Ceres Unified has grown exponentially and has made a significant difference in the lives of our students, families *and* staff. CUSD Board President Lourdes Perez summarizes the importance and value of our district’s comprehensive mental health program:

*This has truly been a team effort in establishing our unique mental health program in the district. It has been essential in our work with students and their families, as it has greatly contributed to the overall success and well-being of our students and the positive effects it has had on the environment and culture of our district. This program has allowed for students to come to school in a supportive and nurturing environment, to effectively guide them during concrete times of need. It has also impacted students in all other areas of their life- academically, socially, and personally within their family environments.*