



Schools in Action

Trusted Connectors to Services

School staff are often among the first to recognize when a student or their family needs additional support, positioning them as trusted connectors to community services. The [IRIS in Action: Impact of School and Community Collaborations](#) virtual session centered the stories of schools and Regional Office of Education (ROE) staff in Illinois engaged in an IRIS Network that activates community partnerships that improve student and family well-being.

If you missed the session, continue below to see how schools use IRIS to increase positive social and health outcomes for students.

Importance of Local Partnerships in Coordinating School-Based Referrals

“Having the ability to find agencies through the IRIS system and connect has just made a world of difference.” – Kathleen Batistich, Community Outreach Coordinator, Valley View Schools, IL

Each of the session’s presenters reinforced the importance of cross-sector community collaborations as a key benefit to using IRIS. A recurring theme we heard throughout the session was the increasing instances of schools being asked to respond to complex student and family needs that extend well beyond academics. At the same time, many states are introducing new expectations around coordinated care and student well-being. These factors make effective partner collaboration and referral coordination more important than ever.

“The Regional Office of Education [is a] liaison between the State Board of Education and our school systems...we are able to work collaboratively with our schools, and the people who are the boots on the ground, to [make their jobs] a lot easier.” – Mandy Kreps, Director of LEAP(ALOP) Program, Regional Office of Education #26, IL

Recognizing the Need

Change happens when those invested in the work identify the barriers that students and families face and the areas where systems may not be fully interconnected. Often, the source of these challenges is the need for better coordination between schools and community partners. Kathleen Batistich, the Community Outreach Coordinator with Valley View Schools, addressed the challenges their school experienced stating:

“Schools cannot do it alone; the importance of partnerships coming in to support our kids are critical...we [identified] kids having trouble connecting with primary care, dental care services.”

Similarly, Aimee Babin Howard, a local IRIS Leader with the Regional Office of Education #47, emphasized that “inconsistencies with data tracking and...communication barriers” led to partners reactively addressing family needs resulting in unregulated workflows and disjointed processes.

The experiences of school and ROE staff like Aimee and Kathleen, solidifies the importance of identifying what is needed within a school's community supports process. This initial step is essential to first step finding avenues for improvement and to ensuring students and their families have access to resources they need to thrive.

Determining the “Why”

Every organization reaches a point where they transition from acknowledging a challenge to actively seeking a solution. Schools typically begin their engagement with IRIS when the right combination of capacity, timing, and need aligns to address that challenge. The decision to use IRIS as the appropriate tool to support their efforts differed among the presenters. For some, it was because their challenges began to hamper their ability to help families. For others, such as Valley View Schools, seeing other school districts in their region successfully onboarded into IRIS pushed them to pursue it as a solution:

“In our existing system, we [identified] a significant gap which was [a lack of] two-way communication. IRIS resolved that gap and when we started seeing that it was working for other districts, that was really what pushed us over the edge.” – Lisa Allen, Director of Community Supports, Valley View School District, IL

The collaborative communication IRIS introduced into their processes meant that their referrals were no longer stuck waiting for partners to respond or resolve a referral. Through IRIS, they could see a referrals status and if follow up was needed with the family. Resulting in clearer processes, transparent workflows, and a streamlined experience for the family.

The Impact

Strong school–community collaborations, supported by coordinated referral systems, make it much easier for students and families to connect with the resources they need. Aimee shared how coordinated referrals can make a difference for a student or family stating, “[IRIS] strengthens the partnerships with our community agencies because...everybody's getting the same consistency and accountability [across] all of our partners, reducing miscommunications or delays.”

For Mandy Kreps, in her role as an IRIS Local Leader, it was giving community partners a voice in shaping the referral standards of their community that has led to impactful changes among partners. She emphasizes that “everyone is expected to follow the same community standards. They all have a voice in creating them...bringing all the parties to the table to have conversations around what is the need and then how can we meet the need together...serves both...the student, the family, and the school.”

It was essential for each presenter to identify the challenges they faced in their respective work and to collaborate with partners to develop agreed-upon solutions. Every community has specific needs that cannot be addressed by a single organization. By working within a shared referral network, these schools were able to establish strong partnerships with organizations outside their own sectors, better supporting the evolving and increasingly complex needs of students.

In this way, IRIS has impacted how organizations communicate and collaborate when supporting students and families. These programs built relationships across schools and community organizations, designed a referral process that works for the people using it, and learned along the way the

importance of creating systems that reduce duplication and make it easier for families to access services.