



Lake Forest Community High School District 115

Student Services Report

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Overview of the Cates Report

In the wake of alarming guidance from leading institutions such as the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, the Children's Hospital Association, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, there has been a nationwide recognition of the escalating mental health crisis facing our youth. The institutions recognizing this pressing concern include Lake Forest Community High School District 115.

Acknowledging the profound challenges that their students grapple with, especially in recent tumultuous years, the district's Board of Education and administration took a proactive stance. The context of this audit and review occurs in light of the following combination of factors: the continuing effects of a gripping pandemic, the impact of trauma, the high demands of a conscientious and successful community, the school's continued recognition among the state's best public high schools, and the remarkable accomplishments of LFHS alumni.

Their mission in soliciting this report was two-fold:

1. to better understand the current state of mental health services offered to LFHS students, and
2. to identify areas for improvement to adapt and optimize these services.

To ensure impartiality, transparency, and comprehensive insights, the Board and administration entrusted this vital task to an external authority, Dr. Daniel Cates, a reputed school leader with a background as a psychologist. Over an intensive three-month period, from March to May 2023, Dr. Cates undertook a thorough review process. He engaged in in-depth conversations with a diverse group of stakeholders, encompassing faculty members, parents, graduates, and community professionals. These candid discussions, characterized by their honesty and depth, formed the bedrock of this report.

The leadership and faculty of LFHS showcased their unwavering commitment to student welfare by actively seeking out and supporting this review. Their collective aim, powered by the feedback of their community, was to reinforce and refine the processes, people, platforms, and partnerships dedicated to student well-being. The findings emerging from this exhaustive study offer a reflective, informed, and forward-looking perspective on student services at LFHS.

Current Situation

Lake Forest Community High School District 115 proudly stands out as one of the top-ranking public high schools in Illinois. Quality leadership, strong faculty, caring staff members, a rigorous curriculum, engaged parents, and a comprehensive range of opportunities combine to make LFHS a premiere environment for grade 9-12 students.

However, beneath these commendable achievements lies a complex milieu. The combination of a global pandemic, heart-wrenching student tragedies over the past twelve years, and the inherent pressures of its high-achieving community backdrop makes addressing student mental health pivotal. The profound ramifications of which still resonate within the school's corridors.

In fact, these tragic events remain fresh in numerous individuals' memories and daily perspectives. At times, this reviewer had the clear sense that the experiences of these student deaths within the team of social workers, psychologists, and others in the school continue to shape and guide current decisions and processes profoundly. This essential background information and awareness of the previous trauma will be foundational throughout the remainder of this report.

Recognizing the urgency, as highlighted by the American Academy of Pediatrics and associated agencies' declared emergency on youth mental health, LFHS has taken active steps to examine its student services critically. LFHS provides a remarkable public high school experience. Staff members demonstrated a strong commitment and personal dedication to developing students into quality individuals prepared to succeed with the skills they will need to face challenges in the life they choose to pursue after high school. The school maintains a safe campus designed for learning. Staff members of all levels demonstrated professionalism and a recognizable, conscientious dedication to the welfare of students.

Furthermore, LFHS implements a noteworthy multi-tiered system of support (MTSS). The administration, district leadership, and many program providers have set an excellent course capable of immediately assisting students experiencing various complications. The model exemplifies the positive impact of open communication, frequent monitoring, and adjusted interventions tailored to each student.

Findings

With any institution striving for excellence, the expectation is not just to recognize strengths but to discern areas that call for enhancement. This report, cultivated from candid discussions with a diverse group of stakeholders, reflects the school's unwavering commitment to its students. The findings provide a snapshot of the current landscape, capturing the intricacies of student needs against the backdrop of a rapidly changing world—be it the reverberations from a global pandemic, mounting mental health needs in adolescents in America, or the challenges posed by an affluent and achievement-driven community.

This section delves into the student services delivery by examining four main domains: Processes, People, Platform and Partnerships. A short description of each component is below for reference.

- **Processes:** refers to the operational mechanisms associated with the delivery of student services.
- **People:** addresses the groups of staff and other individuals involved in the delivery of student services
- **Platforms:** refers to the infrastructure of the services
- **Partnerships:** includes those who are part of the communication networks necessary to deliver student services.

Findings: Processes

Reporting to the Department of Child and Family Services

School personnel and Board of Education members are all mandated reporters when they suspect possible child abuse or neglect. A general rule of thumb that serves mandated reporters well is this: If you have to ask the question of whether you should report something, you already know the answer. School personnel play an essential role in protecting students' welfare, and when they learn of information that causes them to question whether a minor student's welfare may possibly be neglected or abused by action or inaction, the legal mandate to make a report is unequivocally clear. It

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is a common fact that school personnel and school districts can be and have been cited for failure to report. If a school staff member faces the question of whether a matter facing the student or staff member that could threaten the welfare of a student requires a call to the Department of Child and Family Services, the clearest guidance is to make the call. DCFS is the designated governmental authority to determine how to proceed.

Reporting the possibility of suspected child abuse or neglect to DCFS can, and often does, compromise an existing partnership between school personnel and the parent. In some cases, school personnel choose to inform the parent or caretaker directly that they have made the call to DCFS for the purpose of sustaining the commitment to open communication. In other instances, school personnel may opt not to notify parents. The reasons may be varied. Whether a school staff member notifies the parent of the call to DCFS, once a call is made to DCFS, the authority for all interviews and decisions transfers to DCFS.

Student Access to Mental Health Services

While there is a deep-rooted desire to support students, especially in light of recent community traumas, there is a need for clearer guidelines on when and how a student requests mental health support through formal channels at LFHS.

The report emphasizes the necessity to establish protocols for students' absences from classes when a counseling or mental health need arises so that both staff and parents/guardians understand the student's desires and articulated needs. The process by which students are encouraged or approved to unilaterally seek support on an as-needed basis, without a "pass" or scheduled appointment, is a process in need of review.

LFHS prides itself on being a competitive, rigorous learning community with highly trained faculty. It is one of the state's top high schools, and its students attend colleges and universities at all national levels. When a student misses a class session or multiple class sessions, the consequences for many students can compound.

Special Education Procedures

The advancement of the co-teaching model over the last few years reflects a sustained effort and a commitment at all levels to sustain it as a priority. As a result, LFHS delivers extensive co-teaching and has advanced its co-teaching model to an admirable level, directly allowing more students to participate in what the field refers to as the “general curriculum,” which is a rigorous, college-preparatory curriculum taught alongside peers.

At the time of this change, procedures shifted including adjustments to the review process for IEPs. The change included shifting to a different model of IEP preparation and support, which created frustration among families and students. It was determined by the reviewer that this was not initially communicated well to parents and guardians. Subsequently, team member roles were further refined in response to parent concerns. While the documentation of IEPs and 504s are exemplary and rigorous, continued reforms will better enhance communication with families.

With recent changes in special education leadership, the school is poised for its next steps in ongoing teamwork and service delivery.

See Recommendations on Page 14 and Next Steps on Page 16 for more details on particular areas of improvement.

Findings: People

Staff Qualifications

Staff members have exhibited commendable skills, training, and professionalism, showcasing their capability to serve the students, parents, and faculty of LFHS with exceptional care. This reviewer holds that procedural shortcomings contribute to the inconsistent practices that eventuated in the underlying cause for multiple criticisms of staff leveled by parents, not a lack of qualifications.

In fact, this reviewer finds, upon review, that the teams of staff members possess sufficient or beyond levels of training, skills, professionalism, and practices to serve the students, parents, and faculty of LFHS with quality and recognizable care. It was repeatedly evident to this reviewer that the administration, student services personnel, social workers, psychologists, faculty, and support staff emphasize student well-being as a top priority at LFHS.

Social Worker Engagements

LFHS needs the effective work of social workers and psychologists now more than ever. Countless students and families have benefitted from their services throughout the year. Each of the infinite interactions among students, parents, and staff members can have a lasting impact.

A comprehensive modern-day public high school of the caliber of LFHS is complex. The number of daily interactions among 1400 teenagers, thousands of parents, and hundreds of staff members over the course of 180 school days combines to create an infinite number of individual points of contact throughout the school year.

The sheer scale of contact points between social workers and the school community exemplifies a need for a system and protocol to strengthen the systems for better collaboration among staff and parent/guardian support.

Core Team Impact

The social workers and school psychologists at LFHS are long-tenured, highly certified, and thoroughly trained professionals. But more than this, they are all thoroughly committed to providing caring, responsive services and student support. Without reservation, this reviewer can substantiate that the Core Teams, made up of social workers, school psychologists, guidance counselors, and deans, dedicate themselves to the diligent, heartfelt work of responding to the many needs, challenges, trials, tribulations, and developmental tasks inherent in a public high school of ~1400 students.

The students who were interviewed for this review offered similar accounts. Many noted that, if not for the ongoing care, patience, and support of the team personnel, they would not have enjoyed the success, stability, and contentment they experienced at LFHS. Their journeys involved distinct periods of serious emotional and mental health crises requiring quality responsiveness and attentive intervention.

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Special Education Team

Approximately 12% of the student body qualifies for special education services. Students eligible for special education services have an Individual Education Plan, known as an IEP. The services and supports included in each IEP are determined by a team of school professionals, parents, and students.

Department chairs in the re-formulated structure of the special education department also play a critical role in supporting students and the services identified for success. They offered insightful comments, a genuine desire to collaborate and build community within the department, and a willingness to raise the quality of special services and supports to students with IEPs. Along with the new director of special education, this reviewer predicts that the upcoming new department leadership will bring a welcomed reset and rejuvenated togetherness to the special education department.

This reviewer finds the incoming director to be a talented, responsive, thoughtful, and collaborative leader capable of leading this critical arena within the LFHS school faculty and the larger community. He has stated that he intends to thoughtfully and strategically examine any shortcomings surrounding the continuum of services while sustaining the successful progress in co-teaching that has advanced thus far. This reviewer offers a strong endorsement of this individual and the administration for making this appointment. The director and department chairs will drive the future course, leveraging past successes and integrating previous services.

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Findings: Platform

Academic Setting

Academic settings, particularly those like LFHS with a student body of approximately 1400 students, inherently operate within a framework of both opportunities and constraints when considering the growing mental health needs of today's student population.

While schools serve as crucial touchpoints in students' lives, offering them both education and developmental support, their operational realities often limit their scope. With an academic calendar spanning just 180 days annually, time becomes a precious commodity. The bandwidth of the available staff members, dedicated as they may be, can be stretched thin when trying to cater to the multifaceted needs of such a sizable student population.

In light of these constraints, it's important to understand that while schools can provide foundational guidance and support, they are not equipped to function as private therapeutic agencies. Their primary mission is education, and despite best intentions, they may not be fully capable of addressing the intricate and varied mental health needs of every individual student.

Physical Layout

Lake Forest Community High School District 115 boasts an infrastructure that, while historic and robust, has room for enhancement to fully serve its student community. In considering the beneficial platform and partnerships availed through the core team model, the school's physical layout does not fully capitalize on the potential impact for students, families, and fellow staff members.

A primary concern lies in the segmentation of vital student services across different sections of the school building. Notably, areas such as Room 160, and the manner in which they are currently used, do not align seamlessly with the district's operational objectives. This physical fragmentation often translates into a "siloe" approach in service delivery. The core team members, pivotal in offering support to students and families, find themselves physically isolated. Deans, social workers, psychologists, and counselors each operate from distinct locations, inadvertently reducing the potential for synergistic collaboration.

However, the potential for transformation is evident. Adopting a model where core team members share a unified space can herald significant operational improvements. Envision a "core team area" dedicated to serving the unique needs of a subset of students. Within this centralized space, students would be empowered to seek out the appropriate support they require, be it from counselors, deans, or any other core team member. Such a cohesive approach would not only streamline student services but also foster a more holistic and collaborative environment for staff and students alike.

MTSS Framework

The high school implements a noteworthy multi-tiered system of support (MTSS). The administration, district leadership, and many program providers have set an excellent course capable of immediately assisting students experiencing various complications.

Described in full on the district's [website](#), a brief breakdown of the MTSS framework defines tier 1 interventions as those supports that 100% of Lake Forest High School students may access and receive. These supports include universal social and behavioral guidance, access to support staff, departmental resource centers, personal learning time (PLT), school-wide behavioral and academic standards and, very importantly, rigorous classroom instruction. Tier 2 interventions are targeted at students whose needs are not being met by universal tools and interventions. Approximately 15% of the student body may receive tier 2 interventions at any time. When tier 2 interventions aren't meeting a student's needs, tier 3 interventions may be warranted. Approximately 5% of the student body may require tier 3 interventions. Tier 3 interventions typically involve frequent check-ins, specific behavioral or academic planning and may include a social contract signed by the student and their guardians.

The goal of any effective system is for its users and implementers to have a clear, guiding understanding of the purpose, means, measures, and processes inherent to the system. The simple and effective elegance of the MTSS system at LFHS delivers on each of these aspects. If students fall behind a little bit, they can get a commensurate level of support that includes a defined structure of checking in, checking out, and raising the degree of accountability. If they need more help, the necessary components to deliver a fitting degree of responsive intervention are available. Measures are taken, and adjustments are made relative to the demonstrated response to the intervention. If a student is not responding favorably, a change is made within a known structure.

The model exemplifies the positive impact of open communication, frequent monitoring, and adjusted interventions tailored to each student. While the school is commended for its agile and well-articulated interventions, a more connected mission and vision are deemed necessary as are detailed protocols to be used district-wide regarding parent notification of interventions delivered and deemed necessary.

Special Education Instruction

The service delivery platform implemented over the past three years allows all students to attend the regular high school and the college preparatory curriculum they would experience if not otherwise eligible for special education. In addition to this co-teaching platform of delivery, the special education department has special education “instructional” classes to meet student needs in which a small number of students receive instruction from a special education teacher in a classroom with other special education students. Further opportunities exist for additional innovations in offering interventions to students aligned with their IEPs.

See Recommendations on Page 14 and Next Steps on Page 16 for more details on particular areas of improvement.

Findings: Partnerships

Parental Collaboration

The emphasis on forging close partnerships with parents remains a top priority, especially for developing adolescents. There is evidence of strong parent partnership throughout LFHS's delivery of student services; however, additional efforts must be made to forge stronger partnerships and ensure complete and full communication with parents/guardians. An immediate action plan focuses on drafting practice guidelines for professionals to engage with parents, particularly when student needs are assessed as pressing. This reviewer holds the perspective that it is impossible to over communicate and each step in building a robust communication strategy and framework will benefit students and staff in their mission and goals.

Peer Mentoring Program

One noteworthy program is the peer tutoring program. This observer visited the community room to see the peer tutoring taking place. Several peer tutors were observed making their final connections with the Enriched Studies coordinator. The quality of the communication was immediately recognizable, and the nature of the connection fostered additional interest among the students to seek further opportunities to contribute.

This model and quality communication provide an exemplary template for other services and supports undertaken by the school. Quality partnerships lay critical groundwork for future quality partnerships and create a teamwork environment that can more readily integrate additional effective supports.

Outreach and External Support

Given the surge in mental health service requests, the reviewer suggests a restructuring to meet student demand, ensuring parents' high engagement levels and potentially outsourcing some needs to private practitioners.

In synthesis, the findings reflect both the dedication of LFHS to its students and its pledge to continuous improvement. Each facet, be it process, people, platform, or partnerships, is intrinsically linked to the overarching aim of nurturing a conducive environment for every student to thrive within the larger community.

Internal Collaboration

Considering the special education partnerships within the confines of LFHS, the extensive co-teaching model implemented in recent years has facilitated heightened familiarity of special education providers with the faculty of all departments and fostered closer professional consultations. Guidance counselors agreed that they valued and benefited from the communication and consultations with the special education professionals.

The school leadership fosters close collaboration among the faculty and with students via the time invested for professional collaboration and student support on Wednesday and Thursday mornings.

The commitment to offer two late-start mornings is a major demonstration of the administration's value it places on collaboration. The time availed during these weekly time slots serves the staff and students in need of support in meaningful ways.

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Recommendations

At the heart of my findings for Lake Forest Community High School District 115 is the assertion that procedural shortcomings contribute to the inconsistent practices. As outlined, the immediate focus for the school should be threefold: refining processes, communicating with parents/caregivers, and fortifying partnerships to further assist students outside the school day.

Among the crucial aspects highlighted is the critical role played by the social workers at LFHS. With their myriad of contact points involving students, parents, and other school personnel, the linchpin to effective student service lies in fostering a strengthened, seamless system where all these stakeholders collaborate. A salient point that stands out is the imperative for clear communication lines, especially concerning student welfare. When trained mental health professionals discern a need for repeated removal of a student from an academic class due to their mental state, it becomes paramount that parents are promptly informed. Such decisions, made using professional judgment regarding a student's well-being, necessitate transparency and parental awareness.

Similarly, another domain for enhancement pertains to the collaboration with students' private mental health providers. This reviewer underscores the importance of reaching out and forging a partnership with these external professionals. It is recommended that when the core teams at LFHS identify specific challenges or issues a student is grappling with, there should be a standardized procedure to loop in these outside experts along with parents, ensuring they are in the know and can offer their specialized insights.

It is clear that the Multi-Tiered System of Support tool is effective in delivering support but could benefit from a more structured communication protocol. While many parents are currently informed by the Core team once intervention plans have been put in place for their child, a more comprehensive approach is advised. This would involve informing all parents when the Core team deems their child requires a specialized professional review. The objective is to maintain an open line of communication, updating parents on recommended interventions and any proposed changes along the MTSS continuum.

In summation, the crux of the recommendations lies in architecting an intricate, yet transparent, communication system. As the Core team deliberates and decides on steps for individual students, these decisions and interventions must be clearly relayed to parents and any affiliated faculty members. The ultimate goal remains steadfast: ensuring the holistic well-being of each student, with all stakeholders working in harmonious synchrony.

Recommendations

Domain	Mental Health/Counseling	Special Education	Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS)
Process	Establish parent notification guidelines.	Revise procedures for special education minutes prioritization.	Leverage and review the continuum of supports.
People		Enhance the behavioral intervention plans. Training should aim for elevated efficacy.	
Platform	Reassess team structures and their locations.	Ensure 504 and testing accommodations are consistently met.	Allocate a dedicated budget line for MTSS and expand programs for academically at-risk students.
Partnership	Improve parent communication, especially regarding crisis interventions and non-special education visits.		Engage parents from the onset of any intervention.

Next Steps

The journey ahead is mapped with clear actions. Drawing from the audit context — the aftermath of a pandemic, student traumas, and societal expectations — the route is marked with a holistic vision: a school environment where each student not only achieves academically but thrives mentally and emotionally.

To achieve this vision, LFHS must emphasize and ensure close partnerships with parents as it is the foremost priority for developing adolescents. An immediate action plan below, compiled in partnership with LFHS, details the immediate next steps the district can take to continue to improve upon its robust student services supports, team protocols and parent and community partnerships.

It is important to note that no school is perfect. The infinite interactions and complexities of each individual student cannot all be solved by a complex matrix or a detailed protocol. In this sense, it is of immense value to LFHS the level of expertise and dedication of its staff, administrators and board of education, all of whom value and place importance on all students' health, well-being and access to supportive educational services.

Next Steps

Domain	Mental Health/Counseling	Special Education	Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS)
Process	Implement a method for logging session details.	Engage parents in crafting and refining procedures.	Develop a systematic procedure for engaging parents in the core team process and earlier student reviews on the continuum of services.
People	Undergo an annual review of crisis procedures.		Publicly present a thorough examination of practices.
Platform		Expand current offerings, notably the summer programming for underserved students.	Delve into the potential for peer counseling.
Partnership	Ensure proactive communication, especially in cases of crisis interventions or when specialized mental health providers are contacted.		Elevate parent partnerships by engaging them at every pivotal stage.

Conclusion

In summation, Lake Forest Community High School District 115 stands at a pivotal juncture. With the proactive backing of its Board of Education, administration, faculty, and staff, the district showcases unwavering dedication to addressing student mental health holistically. This comprehensive report serves as a testament to that dedication, acting as a compass in navigating the intricate and vital realm of student well-being. The school's intent is to foster an environment where every student not only achieves academic excellence, but also feels a sense of belonging; deeply understood, supported, and empowered in their mental and emotional well-being.

By dedicating efforts to articulate current best practices to meet the challenges and needs of today's students, the school will advance and improve its existing services to students. In particular, upon recognizing students who are struggling or warranting support, close communication with parents will benefit all parties. The investment in articulating procedural best practices in numerous areas will pay dividends for staff members and students in the short and long term.

The ethos of continuous improvement is deeply embedded within Lake Forest Community High School District 115. As an institution of merit, Lake Forest High School understands the importance of acknowledging its strengths, while simultaneously striving for further enhancement. This blend of recognition and relentless pursuit of betterment signifies excellence in its truest sense. With this report illuminating the path ahead, LFHS is not just aiming for incremental improvements. The school is geared to redefine student services, championing a vision where every child's holistic needs are met, celebrated, and nurtured.

About Dr. Daniel Cates: A Comprehensive Career in Education and Clinical Psychology

Dr. Daniel Cates has a distinguished career that spans across both the realms of clinical psychology and public high school administration. He brings with him a wealth of knowledge and understanding, gleaned from his tenure as a doctoral-level school psychologist and a licensed clinical psychologist. His credentials are further accentuated by his hands-on experience in a public high school district of a stature parallel to that of Lake Forest Community High School District 115.

For over two decades, Dr. Cates has been an influential figure in public high school administration. His extensive journey has seen him don various roles, each crucial in shaping the fabric of educational institutions. From serving as the assistant director and director of special education to the associate superintendent of administrative services, his expansive roles have provided him with a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and intricacies inherent to large, top-tier public high schools.

His roles required him to master a multitude of administrative responsibilities, including evaluating and hiring personnel, policy formulation, budget proposal and oversight, and the delivery of quality programs. Notably, his role as superintendent equipped him to cater to the diverse needs of nearly 12,000 students, further emphasizing his commitment to fostering an environment conducive to student growth and development.

Dr. Cates' career not only epitomizes excellence but also reflects his unwavering commitment to understanding and addressing the multifaceted nature of large public high schools. His insights, drawn from his vast professional experiences, make him an invaluable authority in the realm of education and psychology.
