Evaluation of Statewide Training in Student Suicide Prevention

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Method

To evaluate the effectiveness of the two training models, we conducted a retrospective survey of 373 school staff members who had completed training in recent months. The staff members included 169 teachers, 117 counselors, and 82 other school personnel.

The control group consisted of 249 school personnel from schools located in regions where training had not yet taken place. School personnel were selected from staff rosters found on school websites. School personnel were selected by occupation to produce a distribution of administrators, counselors, teachers, etc. comparable to the trainee group.

Counselors made significantly more contracts with students not to hurt themselves than participants in the ASIST training program (M = 5.1) reported significantly more contracts with students not to hurt themselves (M = 5.1 and ASIST M = 0.7). This a 42 percent reduction in the number of suicide attempts for training participants. This finding suggests that the training was beneficial in preventing suicide attempts, but requires further study. Since participants were not randomly assigned to training and control groups, it is not possible to conclude that there was a causal effect of training.

There were no significant differences between training and control groups in the number of students that participants reported questioning about possible suicidal ideation. However, one of the goals of training is to encourage school personnel to inquire about suicide anytime they suspected a student might be suicidal. Accordingly, the survey also asked how many times they “wondered if a student might be suicidal, but you decided not to question to student about suicide.” This question produced some unexpected results, since trainees reported more such cases when they failed to ask a student about suicide than control participants. It appears that the concept of questioning a student any time there is a concern about suicide should be given more attention during the training. Also unexpected was the finding that counselors (M = 5.3) reported not questioning possibly suicidal students more often than did teachers (1.8) or other support staff (3.8). More study is needed to investigate these unexpected findings.

The mean number of students referred for mental health services per year was significantly higher in the control group than in the training groups. The mean number of student contracts per year was also higher in the control group.

Rationale

Suicide is the third leading cause of death among children and youth in the United States (CDC, 2002) and nearly one in ten adolescents in the United States (CDC, 2002) attempt suicide during the previous year (Scherff, Ecker, & Miller, 2005). One means of preventing student suicide is to train school personnel to recognize signs and symptoms of a suicidal student and to provide support and referral assistance so that the student receives mental health intervention.

In order to promote student suicide prevention, the Virginia Department of Health initiated a training program on working with potentially suicidal students. Two kinds of training were offered in regional workshops across the state—Question, Persuade, Refer (QPR; QPR Institute, 2005) and Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training (ASIST; Guttormsen, Hofoldt, Silvola, & Burkeland, 2003). This statewide prevention effort was funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

QPR training is a 1.5-hour program that teaches participants how to recognize suicide risk factors and warning signs. Participants are instructed to question potentially suicidal students about their intent, to persuade them to stay safe and seek help, and to refer them to mental health professionals for further services.

ASIST training is a two-day, interactive workshop intended for mental health professionals who might have suicidal students referred to them. The first day covers knowledge about suicide behaviors and risk factors similar to QPR training, and the second day covers intervention strategies.

Study Questions

1. Are there differences between trainees and control participants in working with potentially suicidal students?

2. Are there differences in the ways that teachers, counselors, and other support staff work with potentially suicidal students?

Conclusions

The survey results provide support for the benefit of gatekeeper training for school personnel to identify potentially suicidal students. Most notably, trainees reported fewer cases in which they referred students for outside mental health services and fewer student suicide attempts than school personnel in the control group. It is important to confirm these findings by examining suicide attempts and referrals using independent sources of information and to conduct a prospective, controlled experiment with random assignment of schools to receive training.

ASIST training was associated with larger effects than QPR training in several domains, such as number of contracts made with students not to harm themselves and fewer reported suicide attempts; however, in most respects, the ASIST and QPR trainees did not differ.

Only selected results are presented here; a complete copy of this study is available from the first author: farah@virginia.edu. We thank the Virginia Department of Health and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for their support of this project.