It's a crazy idea to have family therapists working in the schools along with the school counselors, social workers, and psychologists? Or, is it a cost-effective way to pull multiple systems together in order to lend crucial support to students at risk of dropping out or being expelled?

The administrative staff in Richland School District Two in Columbia, South Carolina, grapples with a common problem: what to do about at-risk students. At the same time, we also try to find ways to engage the family more successfully in their child's school experience.

Nine years ago, district leaders decided to try a new approach. They incorporated family therapy into the existing services offered by the district. Family therapists are trained to identify the various systems at play in a student's life and to try to work within those systems to bring about positive change.

In private practice, family therapists do not have access to the school system. On the other hand, family therapists hired by the district are integrated into the schools with full access to the schools and the family, as well as the community and peer systems. They can use a truly integrated approach to problem-solving.

The National Drop Out Prevention Center lists “family engagement” as one of the top strategies to use with at-risk students. Much of the literature on risk and protective factors lists the family as one of the most valuable resources for a student. But engaging the families and developing their ability to help and support their children can be challenging.

INTERVENTION SERVICES
In the 2005-06 school year, Richland Two’s director of learning support services and the executive
director of pupil personnel services hired a veteran family therapist who also had extensive experience as a school counselor to begin the “Intervention Services” program. This therapist was able to straddle both systems, developing a program of services that could build on school district strengths while reaching out to at-risk students and their families.

The program’s goals were to reduce the number of suspensions and expulsions and to increase the success rate of students who had been sent to the district’s alternative school. Thus began a nine-year journey of development for a multifaceted program that has seen much success in meeting these goals.

The program has grown, with the support of administrators and the school board to five therapists, as well as volunteers and multiple interns from area university training programs.

In the first year, 117 students and their families received services. During this past year, more than 900 students received services. Richland Two’s expulsion rate for the district has declined from 1 percent of the school population in 2006-07 to .4 percent in 2013-14. Records indicate that 97 percent of the students seen in Intervention Services complete the school year.

**SERVICES FOR STUDENTS**

Initially, high school students were referred to the program when they were suspended for the third time. They were invited to participate in lieu of a recommendation for expulsion.

Current services include:

- Family and individual counseling for students who have been recommended for expulsion but placed back in school on probation as well as for those who receive a third suspension from a high school.
- A multifamily group therapy (Building Bridges to Success) with six two-hour sessions plus one community service project required of all students who attend the district alternative school.
- A group curriculum (Project Success) for those students transitioning back into the regular school environment from the alternative school.
- Bilingual therapy.
- Therapist participation in parent/teacher conferences and IEP and 504 meetings.
- Family counseling for students referred by school social workers, psychologists, or counselors when the student or family is struggling with mental health issues.

Family therapy services are offered during late afternoon and evening hours, when parents are more likely to be able to attend. Even though the coordinator and secretary are the only year round employees, services are continued by staggering staff and utilizing graduate student trainees who are seeking additional hours and experience.

**LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES**

Students who have received services can be nominated and chosen as service leaders and attend leadership training at a summer retreat. They volunteer with the multifamily group program. They also assist with a summer camp for the siblings of referred students or younger students who have been referred by the hearing officer, a school social worker, counselor, or psychologist.

Of the 66 students chosen as service leaders (not counting those who are currently undergraduates), only two have not graduated from high school and they received their GED on the first attempt.

A student shared the following in her reflections:

“My therapist had me and my family join a therapy group. You have to stand in the middle of the circle and tell the other families why you were there and how you were going to change the ways you did things. So when I told my story, the therapist thought it would be good for me to start doing community service and coming with my family for counseling after the group ended. In com-
munity service, we go around and volunteer at shelters, nursing homes, and feeding the homeless. In the family sessions, we talk about my whole family, what is good and what is not. It helped to get my parents talking to each other again. It is not perfect, but it is better. Since I have been doing this, I can see a big difference in my behavior and attitude. I have not been suspended or kicked out of school since my sophomore year. After graduation I plan on continuing to do community service to help me stay on the right track, to attend college or go into the military.

**FUTURE VISIONS**

At-risk students often do not see the future possibilities for themselves. They and their families are invited once a year to a Future Visions program, a half-day event to explore vocational opportunities. This program has been most well received by the Latino community, many of whom are undocumented and have little hope for formal education opportunities.

This community is so motivated to learn more about the school system and the opportunities for themselves or their children that others around the state who have heard of what Richland Two is doing call and ask to attend our program.

Latino families who are recent immigrants (the case with most of our at-risk Latinos) have a special set of needs that often go unaddressed by the school district and local community. Few mental health services are available in Spanish.

The program now has a counselor who is a native Spanish speaker. The Latino counselor offers individual therapy, couples therapy, and women’s groups, in addition to family counseling. The waiting list for this service is long and a second bilingual therapist is needed.

**TRAINING PROGRAM**

A critical component of the family-based services is the training program we developed. Colleges and universities from inside and outside South Carolina are requesting more and more placements for their students. Staff members serve on two college advisory committees, and we house a University of South Carolina Marriage, Couples, and Family Counseling practicum class.

This partnership brings an additional group of graduate students and a professor with supervisory credentials to our center to work with families and staff. A goal of our program is to inform and inspire future generations of family therapists.

These therapists will be equipped to work within the school setting. They won’t be outsider contractors but will be an integral part of the school system, with shared goals and hopes for the students who are struggling to stay engaged and out of harm’s way.

**CREATING A BRIDGE**

When family therapists are a part of the fabric of schools, they are less threatening and more convenient and affordable. They are more likely to create a bridge between the families and their child’s school life.

Teachers, administrators, and, mostly, the mental health professionals in the schools, are appreciative of this resource being readily available and easily accessed. School officials have historically struggled to get a family into counseling in a community agency; agencies and other school personnel have historically worked with the student alone.

Now they can turn to a parent (or a student, for that matter), and say, “Here, take this card and call this number to get help for your family.” Instead of worrying about that family or student all night, they know that they will be seen in a timely manner and that the services will be professional and respectful of each family’s culture, history, socioeconomic circumstances, or educational background.

This, in itself, goes a long way toward establishing a positive link between the school and the family. What may start as a “forced or mandated” referral is often transformed into a service that the family appreciates and utilizes, not only at this time of crisis, but in the years ahead.

When families leave the district, they often ask if they can continue with the program. Other districts who have heard about this service call to see if they can refer families to our program.

Our program has a proven track record of meeting the needs of students and their families who are at-risk and supporting those students as they begin their journey to be positive members of our community.

Karen Cooper-Haber (kcooperh@richland2.org) is coordinator of intervention services and Sarah Sanchez (sarahsan@aol.com) is the retired director of learning support services (and current volunteer) at Richland School District Two, Columbia, South Carolina.