

# Preventing Youth Suicide in Indiana

Clinton Prairie School Corporation



Photo credit: Getty Images/Klaus Vedfriet



## Background

The Clinton Prairie School Corporation is a school district of 1,300 learners tucked into a sea of cornfields in western Indiana. With pre-K through high school students all learning in one building, Clinton Prairie, as well as the community that surrounds it, is close-knit. When a student here dies by suicide, the whole community is affected.

Until recently, however, Clinton Prairie did not have much capacity to confront the issue of suicide. School-based prevention services were limited, and the policies that were in place around how to respond to students in crisis were informal.

“We were very much in a reactive state, not a proactive one,” explains Stephanie Kozuch, the school’s counselor for grades pre-K through 6.

## PARTNERING TO PREVENT SUICIDE

EDC Solutions’ Multi-tiered Suicide Prevention for Schools (MTSP for Schools) service supports education leaders as they develop and sustain multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) focused on suicide prevention.

### WITH MTSP FOR SCHOOLS, EDC SOLUTIONS STAFF:

- Develops and delivers materials that guide districts through the incorporation of evidence-based suicide prevention strategies within their MTSS
- Provides training and tailored consultation that reflects the changing needs of school administrators and district teams
- Draws upon deep content expertise to provide technical assistance, guidance, and support

## WHAT IS MTSS?

Multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) provide schools with a three-tiered intervention framework to promote student well-being. Data-driven and collaborative, the MTSS approach provides a structure for prioritizing student health and connectedness.

### TIER 1

Tier 1 policies are implemented at the school level, reaching all students.

### TIER 2

Tier 2 interventions reach groups of students at increased risk for negative outcomes.

### TIER 3

Tier 3 programs provide intensive, individualized support to students with the greatest needs.

In 2022, Clinton Prairie joined the Preventing Youth Suicide Initiative (PYSI), a grant program funded by North Central Health Services, in order to improve their suicide prevention efforts within their overall multi-tiered system of support (MTSS). With technical assistance provided by EDC Solutions' Multi-Tiered Suicide Prevention for Schools (MTSP for Schools), Clinton Prairie has implemented a number of initiatives designed to prevent suicide, leading to a healthier, more supportive environment for all students.



## Taking Inventory

Kozuch and other members of the Clinton Prairie PYSI team—which included teachers, the superintendent, a representative from a community partner, and a parent who was also a member of the school board—were motivated to join the grant because of suicides that had recently occurred in the school community. However, they knew that they would have to proceed with both caution and care because of the stigma surrounding conversations about mental health and suicide.

The team began by taking stock of their current efforts. To do this, they used the *School Suicide Prevention Environmental Assessment*, a tool developed by MTSP for Schools. The tool helped Kozuch and her colleagues evaluate the district's existing strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities for addressing suicide.

“The most important thing was for the district to use the data they got from their environmental assessment,” says EDC's Richard Fournier, who provided technical assistance to

the Clinton Prairie team. “This gave us insight into what was missing and where they were already strong. For example, they knew they had some foundational protocols for staff, but not all staff were aware of these, and they weren't necessarily documented.”

The assessment highlighted the lack of clear prevention and postvention protocols in Clinton Prairie. But it also revealed that while the district had not yet engaged parents in their prevention efforts, they did have a number of community partners that they could lean on for support and messaging. Creating new protocols and leveraging existing partnerships would become central to the Corporation's work over the two-year PYSI grant.



## Action Steps

The first priority for Kozuch and the Clinton Prairie PYSI team was to develop consistent, schoolwide policies and protocols for suicide prevention. They began by recording the informal protocols that were already in use—documenting many of them for the first time. As they built out their new guidelines, the team looked to exemplars provided by Fournier. They also worked closely with their community partner Healthy Communities of Clinton County Coalition to ensure their new plan was in line with best practices.

Throughout the development process, the team also drew inspiration from a core element of the MTSP for Schools: a community of practice (CoP) facilitated by EDC Solutions technical assistance staff. In the CoP, EDC staff and content experts shared resources, knowledge, and experiences around suicide prevention, helping PYSI grantees address their stated pre- and postvention objectives.



**The CoP webinars were wonderful opportunities to meet with the other schools. While all schools had a unique cultural approach to the work tailored to their students and communities, it was helpful to share best practices, unique ideas, and resources with one another.**

—Stephanie Kozuch

One specific item that the team wanted to address was confronting the spread of information, including rumors, after a suicide. After examining the issue in a CoP, they developed a plan for how to address circulating information. The plan stressed transparency while still honoring the privacy of the loved one's family.

In July 2023, the new policies and protocols for suicide prevention were approved by the Clinton Prairie School Board, marking an important step toward the Corporation's goal of supporting their students' mental health needs.

Meanwhile, Kozuch worked on another aspect of building prevention into the school's MTSS: training staff. Throughout the school year, Kozuch trained all staff—including teachers, bus drivers, custodians, and paraprofessionals—in the Question-Persuade-Refer (QPR) method, giving them a tool to use if they were concerned about a student's mental health. She also used PYSI grant funding to produce magnets, flyers, and signage with information about the new prevention policies and the key QPR steps for school staff.

"Before the grant, I don't think a lot of staff members felt like they had a role in suicide prevention," says Kozuch. "They felt like, 'That kid's in crisis. Send them to the counselor.' Now they know what to do, and they have tangible reminders about their roles and responsibilities."

The Clinton Prairie team also wanted to address the stigma surrounding suicide in the community. Despite suicide being an uncomfortable topic for many, Kozuch recalls that families were open to talking about it because "when suicide is happening to your family, it is a whole different situation. Everyone wants to be a part of the support system. And everyone wants to feel supported, themselves, as well."

To raise awareness, the Clinton Prairie team partnered with Healthy Communities of Clinton County Coalition to run suicide prevention-themed nights in conjunction with athletic events. At these "mental health games," players and coaches wore purple—the color of suicide prevention—and students spoke out about the importance of mental health and help seeking during breaks in the game.

In a community where talking about suicide was difficult, these events successfully raised awareness about the importance of discussing it. They also fostered an environment of openness and support.

## About Clinton Prairie School Corporation

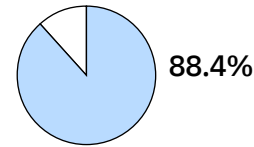
Students:

1,193

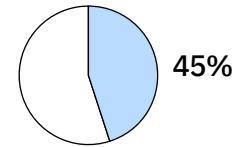
Region:

Rural

Graduation rate:



Free/reduced lunch:



Indiana Graduates Prepared to Succeed. (n.d.).

Clinton Prairie School Corporation.

<https://indianagps.doe.in.gov/Summary/Corporation/182>

"Having a night where you show a film about suicide is not attractive to a lot of people," says Kozuch. "But if you already have an event where people are going to get popcorn and watch their kids play, then you've got a captive audience. Now you can pass out the resources—now you can share where they can go to get help."

The events have been so successful, she adds, that neighboring communities have asked about how to do them.



## Deep Expertise

EDC's Fournier proved to be an important partner as the Clinton Prairie School Corporation developed and implemented their PYSI action plan. He provided assessments, conducted site visits, curated research, and offered model protocols from other districts, allowing the team to make quick progress on critical items.

Fournier also led the district through its planning and action steps, helping them to understand the importance of ongoing evaluation.

"The district has planned several activities and trainings, so we want to be able to regularly know if these are effective, and, if not, what can we change?" Fournier says. "Every year, they have new families and new students, and it's especially important for schools where staff turnover is high."

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Kozuch describes Fournier as “a great sounding board,” who would push her to be detail focused and forward-thinking. “I always loved the fact that he helped to stretch my thinking on what we should be doing,” she says.



## Building A Healthier District

The initiative’s impact has been profound, with increased awareness and preparedness among staff and students alike. Kozuch highlights the district’s achievements, including formalized policies and a community that’s more open to discussing mental health and suicide prevention.

“

**Before the grant, I don’t think a lot of staff members felt like they had a role in suicide prevention...Now they know what to do, and they have tangible reminders about their [roles and responsibilities](#).**

—Stephanie Kozuch

“Staff members are now much more aware about suicide,” Kozuch says. “They are now helping to identify students in need and communicate with them, as opposed to waiting until they are in crisis.”

With the groundwork laid by MTSP for Schools and the dedication of the district’s staff, Clinton Prairie is showing how rural districts across the nation can build effective suicide prevention services into their MTSS.

“Participating in this grant has been an opportunity for us to make ourselves better, to be able to help and be better equipped to serve students,” says Kozuch. “We’ve been very blessed to be a part of it.”

### ABOUT EDC SOLUTIONS

EDC Solutions partners with schools and districts on SEL integration, systems change, and strategic planning. We assist districts implement programs and policies that help every student succeed. Contact us at [solutions@edc.org](mailto:solutions@edc.org) to discuss partnerships and services.



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