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The Rundown podcast transcript for Performance Audit report titled ***Trends in Social Workers Employed by School Districts*** – Released April 2022

Brad Hoff, Host and Recruiting and Training Manager: [00:00]

Welcome to The Rundown, your source for the latest news and updates from the Kansas Legislative Division of Post Audit, featuring LPA staff talking about recently released audit reports, discussing their main findings, key takeaways and why it matters. I'm Brad Hoff. In April, 2022, Legislative Post Audit released a limited scope performance audit that focused on trends in social workers employed by school districts and answered the following question "How has the number of social workers employed by school districts changed in recent years?" I'm with Tanner Rohrer, auditor at Legislative Post Audit, who supervised the audit. Tanner, welcome to The Rundown and thanks for taking the time to discuss the audit's findings with me.

Tanner Rohrer, Supervisor and Auditor: [00:46]

Yeah. Thanks, Brad.

Brad Hoff, Host and Recruiting and Training Manager: [00:49]

Before we dive into the audit's findings, let's take some time and have you provide some background on the mental health intervention team program that was created in 2018 by the Kansas legislature and what the purpose of that team is?

Tanner Rohrer, Supervisor and Auditor: [01:08]

Yeah. So, this program created teams of staff that were made from school districts and community mental health centers, also known as CMHCs. These teams were intended to coordinate mental health care between school districts in the community to help address district's need for mental health care for students. So, the teams are made up of school liaisons, case managers and clinical therapists...just some examples of the roles each of those have coming up here. The school liaisons are school employees who help identify students in need and then communicate with the CMHC staff, students and families, to figure out how to best serve each student. Case managers serve a similar role, but are CMHC employees. So, they also help identify students in need, but on the CMHC side. They participate in treatment planning and communicate all parties involved also to serve each student's needs, Clinical therapists develop treatment plans and provide clinical care to students. As you said, the overarching purpose of this program is to increase students access to mental healthcare. And as a result, these staff all provide these services inside the

schools so that these mental healthcare resources are more readily available to students.

Brad Hoff, Host and Recruiting and Training Manager: [02:32]

The report notes that this program has expanded since 2018 when it was created. Talk about how many school districts participate in the program and how the program is funded.

Tanner Rohrer, Supervisor and Auditor: [02:47]

Yeah. So, this program has been reauthorized and expanded each year. It started as a pilot program and I'm going to go into a little detail on how exactly to explain which year it started because it's a little tricky. It was passed in the 2018 legislative session, but with the intent that the program was implemented in the 2019 school year, the 2018-2019 school year so you might hear me say both and I'll try and be specific. So, in that first year, the program started with nine school districts. And then by the 2020 - 2021 school year, the program had expanded to 56 school districts. As far as the funding goes, the legislature has appropriated around \$10 million each year from the state general fund for this program. These funds were intended to contribute to treatment costs and the creation of a database. After the first year, the legislature adjusted the program funding to re appropriate unused funds from previous years and also to add a local 25% match to help fund the school liaisons we talked about just a little bit ago that districts hire.

Brad Hoff, Host and Recruiting and Training Manager: [04:05]

So the audit's question was how has the number of social workers employed by school districts changed in recent years? What is the answer to this question?

Tanner Rohrer, Supervisor and Auditor: [04:18]

So, based on licensed personnel report data collected by KSDE that we reviewed the number of social workers has increased in the last few years. In school year 2019, there were 590 FTE, now FTE refers to full-time equivalent, so it's not necessarily each head, it's just an estimation. So, in school year 2019, there were 590 FTE social workers reported by school districts. In school year 2022, the reported number had increased to 761 FTE social workers. This is an increase of about 29%. We also looked at the trend for total mental health staff, which includes social workers. In school year 2019, there were 1,647 licensed mental health staff FTE reported and in school year 2022, that number increased to 1,770 FTE. This is around a 13% total increase. We included both social workers specifically and licensed mental health professionals overall in our analysis because of some limitations we encountered with this data that I think will discuss soon. For more information on this trend in these numbers, refer to figure one in the report.

Brad Hoff, Host and Recruiting and Training Manager: [05:46]

Now, the report does say that because school districts don't report social worker FTE

consistently to the Kansas State Department of Education that the FTE trend should be interpreted with caution. Why is that?

Tanner Rohrer, Supervisor and Auditor: [06:05]

Yes, we, we do want these overarching conclusions to be interpreted with caution. And that's because when we spoke with five school districts who, by the way, all did participate in the mental health intervention team program since the beginning. Some school districts told us they reported their social worker staff FTE based on license. For example, each licensed social worker is reported under the social worker category even if their role in the district is different, something else like a school counselor. Yet other districts we spoke to said they reported their social worker FTE based on the role the licensed social workers have in the district. For example, only licensed social workers who function as social workers are reported as social workers. If a social worker is hired as a school counselor, for instance, they are reported as a school counselor. We spoke with KSDE staff on this as well and they told us districts should report their licensed staff based on role, but they also told us that they don't currently provide specific guidance to school districts on whether social workers should be reported by a license or by title. Another limitation we encountered came up when we spoke with one school district that said the data that we are using in the licensed personnel report doesn't include all the licensed social workers that they themselves employ. This district said they employed licensed social workers in some of their school liaison positions funded by the mental health intervention team program, but these staff FTE are not included in the data we looked at because they are submitted on a different report to KSDE. KSDE staff, on this matter, told us they expect to see all licensed staff FTE reported on their annual licensed personnel reports. But again, there's no specific guidance on how schools should report this program staff FTE. These limitations mean that KSDE's licensed personnel report data provides a general of overall mental health staffing trends, but it doesn't give accurate counts for specific staff position FTE or staff FTE within districts. It was still the best data available to show the overall trends and that's why we're using it for this report.

Brad Hoff, Host and Recruiting and Training Manager: [08:39]

As part of your field work, you also talked to officials from community mental health centers. What did they have to say about the program?

Tanner Rohrer, Supervisor and Auditor: [08:49]

I'll get into the CMHC officials' thoughts in a moment, but first I wanted to make a quick note that generally there has been a concern that the mental health intervention team program we've been discussing hasn't had the impact on school district hiring practices that was intended before the program. CMHCs and school districts both needed to hire mental health staff from a limited pool of qualified applicants. As a result, schools and CMHCs were competing over the same staff. The program aimed to reduce this competition by increasing collaboration between

schools and CMHCs and giving schools access to the CMHCs existing mental health resources. That said, we spoke with CMHC officials from communities who had participated in the mental health intervention team program alongside some of the schools we spoke with. A couple of the CMHCs were also selected because they were in communities that showed a high amount of social workers being hired into school districts. Overall, the CMHC officials we spoke with expressed approval of the program. They believe the program helps their mental health services reach students more directly by providing them inside the schools. However, these officials also expressed that they have experienced a lot of trouble hiring and maintaining mental health staff. Each official we spoke with mentioned that they have lost staff to school districts specifically. Typically, because they can't offer competitive salaries and benefits to their employees that school districts can't offer.

Brad Hoff, Host and Recruiting and Training Manager: [10:36]

Finally, what is the main takeaway of this audit report?

Tanner Rohrer, Supervisor and Auditor: [10:41]

I think the main takeaway is pretty much in our answer to the primary audit question. That is, based on the data we examined, the number of social workers hired by schools in Kansas appears to have increased. However, we have to approach our conclusions on that with caution because we did encounter some limitations with the data, but regardless of these limitations, this data was still the best information available for our purposes and can speak at least somewhat to the overall trend of social workers hired in Kansas schools in the last few years.

Brad Hoff, Host and Recruiting and Training Manager: [11:16]

Tanner Rohrer is an auditor at Legislative Post Audit. He supervised an audit examining trends in social workers employed by school districts and evaluated how the number of social workers employed by school districts has changed in recent years. Tanner, thanks for visiting The Rundown and discussing the audit's findings with me.

Tanner Rohrer, Supervisor and Auditor: [11:34]

Yeah. Thanks Brad.

Brad Hoff, Host and Recruiting and Training Manager: [11:36]

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