



INTEGRAL
COMMUNITY
SOLUTIONS
INSTITUTE

Counseling in the Schools Project

Community Counseling in the Schools: An Integral Approach to Holistic Wellness and School Achievement

INTEGRAL COMMUNITY SOLUTIONS INSTITUTE (ICSI) has established a new prevention and early intervention and workforce model for schools, called Hip Hop Therapy: *Pláticas* and *Atención Plena*. ICSI, a 501(c)3 non-profit community mental health agency, was founded in 2011 by a group of community mental health experts, providers, and advocates. Over the years, ICSI has contracted with several local agencies and schools to provide mental health services to individuals and families in need. ICSI believes in promoting community health through advocacy and wellness of the body, mind, and spirit.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

ICSI provides opportunities for San Joaquin Valley's diverse youth population to discover their inner strengths and to thrive in their community schools, where they can increase their academic, college, and career readiness. However, we need to expand our network of school districts and community partners to contribute as donors to maintain our important programs. Here is what we do and how you can become involved.

COMMUNITY-DEFINED APPROACH

Our mental health consumer base includes children, youths, and their families exposed to trauma; women and families of victims of domestic violence, sexual assault, and human trafficking. ICSI is a prevention and early intervention program providing counseling services to children and adolescents in their schools through partnerships with other programs and agencies in Fresno Unified School District. From a workforce perspective, ICSI staff trains, mentors, and supervises students in graduate programs aspiring to be mental health professionals, counselors, MFT, LCSW. Additionally, ICSI offers counseling services to students in middle and high schools, including mentoring, group therapy inside the classroom, and professional development for educators and staff.

We are especially proud of our hip hop therapy program, conducted in the classroom by our talented staff and mental health MFT-registered interns. Our hip hop therapy includes two interventions that are currently being evaluated by the California Department of Public Health as a community-defined evidence approach. These two interventions are *Pláticas* (community conversation-type seminars) and *Atención Plena* (mindfulness). In addition, the hip hop therapy is aligned with core academic standards in English language arts, and health and behavioral health career technical education standards.

Our hip hop therapy counseling program (including *Pláticas* and *Atención Plena*) is a school dropout prevention program that increases students' school engagement by improving their school attendance, classroom participation, peer-to-peer and teacher-to-student relationships, goal setting, positive behaviors, and effective communication. This translates to a workforce strategy that recruits diverse cohorts of youths and young adults interested in pursuing careers in mental health. Our goal is to help youth discover a purpose and serve a meaningful role in life by helping others.

ICSI Counseling in the Schools Project *continued*

Our school-based counseling program also focuses on intergenerational stress and conflict by providing youths and their parents an opportunity to discuss generational differences and expectations, stressors associated with immigration and acculturation, and life experiences. Parents are encouraged to listen to what their children are saying about their own problems in adjusting to the dominant culture in their communities and schools. We also work as a cultural broker between the community and law enforcement and the courts by creating opportunities for dialogue to ensure that youths' and their families' rights are protected.

At ICSI, we recognize the important role that parents play in the mental wellness of children and youths. We use *Pláticas* as a strategy to engage parents in conversations and enhance their understanding of the risk factors associated with depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and other physical and mentally disabling disorders. We believe that strengthening relationships within the family structure can lead to youths' positive behaviors and success in school and community life. Additionally, we use *Atención Plena* to work closely with parents and families on improving their personal growth, including communication and relationships with each other and their self-realization and cultural application.

SERVICE COMPONENTS

Behavioral Counseling – ICSI recognizes that the target student population may come from home environments that lack resources and emotional support. For example, children and adolescents may be struggling with their cultural identity and other interpersonal conflicts that may be linked to traumatic experiences. ICSI staff recognizes that treating underlying issues is critical to changing youths' and families' trajectory from illness to well-being. In collaboration with community-based organizations and Fresno State University, the executive director will recruit MFT interns/trainees from advanced graduate programs to provide counseling to individuals, families, and groups. Under the supervision of a licensed clinical staff person, the MFT interns/trainees will be on campus during school hours providing services to students and their families. This approach is consistent with the community engagement method of taking services where they live, study, and age, which is an effective way to reduce barriers that prevent students and families from receiving the services they need, when they need them.

Many of our student consumers have a difficult time managing anger and expressing their emotions in a positive manner. Through mindfulness, we've demonstrated success in effectively helping students reduce episodes of anger, manage their emotions, achieve inner-peace, identify and prioritize values, and improve their overall sense of well-being. This approach, incorporating cultural relevance and reframed as *Atención Plena* (mindfulness), will be implemented in small groups of youths that have been suspended from school for fighting, bullying, excessive absenteeism, disengaging from school activities, and displaying risky behaviors that ultimately affect their ability to function and succeed in school. Part of the behavioral counseling component is also a family systems approach, working with parents and children with detachment issues.

By working in school classrooms, we connect with students using school- and community-defined strategies that include general individual or group counseling, hip-hop therapy, self-worth and self-efficacy, and connecting and communicating using expressive arts. After experiencing *Atención Plena*, many of our students are more academically engaged, more likely to graduate from high school, and able to strengthen their college and career readiness.

ICSI Counseling in the Schools Project *continued*

Parent Groups, Trainings, and Workshops – ICSI offers *Pláticas* (community conversation-type seminars) to students, parents, and families. It is important to mention that many of our youths in Fresno and Madera counties have immigrant parents and families. Many parents are not familiar with the pressures and stresses their children face when navigating the school system. When youths' cultural values come in contact with divergent values of a school system, tension, misunderstanding, and disengagement from communication often occur. Stigma, acculturative stress, and language are common barriers to our youth consumers. They often have difficulty with the trauma their parents experienced after immigrating to the United States. This is when ICSI steps in to help change the course of internal and external conflicts that, if left unresolved, could lead to severe mental disorders (e.g., depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and comorbid conditions), including exposure to crime and violence, incarceration, spiritual brokenness, and suicide. Using *Pláticas*, we provide youths and their parents safe spaces to engage in conversation and acquire culturally relevant strategies to overcome barriers, seek help early, and achieve and manage their well-being. For example, we offer parenting seminars that include effective communication, intergenerational understanding, self-development, goal-setting, and entrepreneurship planning.

Home Visits – ICSI is planning to provide students and school sites with wraparound comprehensive services by conducting home visits and sessions with students' families. Immigrant, low income, and monolingual Spanish-speaking populations face many barriers that prevent them from being full participants in their children's school life. It's been well documented that underserved populations (i.e., Latino immigrant populations) often lack adequate public transportation, have too many financial obligations and can't miss work, and simply feel like they don't have a role in community life. Through home visitations and collaboration with other community-based agencies, ICSI can integrate mental and physical health services inside neighborhoods to build trust and rapport with community members.

Collaboration with Probation and Support Restorative Justice Practices – ICSI extends counseling services by aligning therapeutic goals with the department of probation for each individual student on probation. In order to address these concerns in the counseling groups held on campus, we provide students and staff with additional support to manage student-teacher and student-student conflicts. This additional step in the discipline process supports restorative justice and reduces the number of student suspensions, expulsions, and the school-to-prison pipeline. The collaboration between probation staff and schools with guidance from ICSI, can lead to increased student participation in school life and improved retention rates. The ICSI counseling team facilitates interactions and ensures that dialogue is meaningful and purposeful to youths in developing protective factors and building upon their personal and cultural strengths.

Peer Mediation, Mentoring, Reintegration and Continued Care and Support – While much of ICSI's work is done inside alternative or nontraditional schools, the goal is to continue supporting and caring for students so they can successfully return to their respective school sites. ICSI's integral approach is consistent with the mental health recovery model that strengthens linkages between youths, parents and family members, and community through person-centered efforts that include holistic wellness and growth, family and relationships, meaningful role to service, spirituality and well-being, and education and advocacy.

ICSI Counseling in the Schools Project *continued*

ICSI's integral approach is also in line with the cultural wealth model in that it focusses on the individual's personal and cultural talents, strengths, resources, and life experiences. That is, centering on the assets that youths possess to strengthen their spirituality, aspirations, and perseverance to succeed in school, college, career, and life. Using the cultural wealth model, combined with the racial cultural development paradigm, families, parents, and their children begin to understand that their trials and tribulations are sources of strength and resilience rather than the cause of their struggles, poverty, and marginalization. The answers are within rather than outside of their cultural framework of understanding their life experiences.

Currently, students in hip-hop therapy groups participate in a peer mediation showcase, sharing their works of spoken word, rap, poetry, and writing depicting personal experiences and struggles, as well as promoting mental health, well-being, and positive coping mechanisms. We believe it would be beneficial to facilitate further peer mediation by involving students who previously participated in the program, current students who are exhibiting increased levels of success, students who have been successful at reintegrating into traditional comprehensive school sites, and students who continued on to higher education as mentors to share their experiences and paths of success.

ICSI has a strong team with support from the California Reducing Disparities Project, and partnerships with Ripperdan and Sunnyside High School administrators, educators, and counselors, as well as parents, families, and community members. The team helps youths and their families fulfill their educational aspirations by increasing achievements in school, graduating from high school, enrolling in college, pursuing a career in mental health, and increasing the number of underserved youths and families accessing and using mental health services.

**Financial donations can be made to:
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**To donate your services, contact:
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