



# Enhancing Community Connectedness Through School Programs

IRIS in Lee, Ogle, and Whiteside Counties, Illinois

Contributors:

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*"I don't think we've ever had, in our community, a way of collecting this real-time data so we can collaboratively get back together and say, 'How are we doing? How are we, as a community, going to respond to these needs, challenges, or barriers in our communities and do some collective problem-solving?'"— Anji Garza, Director of Professional Learning & Educational Services, Lee/Ogle/Whiteside Regional Office of Education #47*

What started as a Coordinated Intake for Home Visiting Collaboratives Project, funded through the Illinois Governor's Office of Early Childhood Development's Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five (PDG B-5), designed to establish coordinated points of entry for home visiting services, has grown into a robust network of multi-sector community agencies, taking a regional approach to streamlining connections to services and programs that can address the needs of the whole family. With the Lee, Ogle, and Whiteside Regional Office of Education #47 (ROE #47) championing the work of the local IRIS network, school-based services and programs provide families with an entry point for connecting with other supports that ensure their children are arriving at school ready to learn.

With 300 families experiencing housing insecurity and truancy services being recommended in over 750 cases during a single school year, it became apparent to ROE #47 staff that the lasting impact of COVID-19 was still touching many of the families they serve. Isolation, trauma, and situational poverty have increased the social-emotional needs of students and their families. Due to disruptive events, such as employment changes, medical issues, and other pandemic-related stressors, families were attempting to navigate a complex network of community services on their own. Recognizing that many local schools and districts were lacking the human or systems capital to address intensified student needs, let alone the needs of the families, the local leadership team in for the IRIS network in Lee, Ogle, and Whiteside Counties (locally known as Sauk Valley) expanded their original vision of connecting families to home visiting services, to supporting the whole family through the whole child, by using IRIS in their local schools.

*Everyone benefits from a healthy, thriving, well-connected community that values all of its citizens. A centralized and coordinated referral system like IRIS can help eliminate many barriers that prevent families from engaging with available services, and well-connected organizations can benefit from the increased ease of identifying clients who are interested and eligible for their services. – Sauk Valley STARS IRIS Vision*

Word spread quickly in this tri-county region, and many local agencies were eager to come together to create a connected network in the community to support local families. Within two weeks of launching IRIS in August of 2021, 25 community agencies had signed partnership agreements and committed to the shared vision of the Sauk Valley STARS IRIS Network.

One year later, the Sauk Valley STARS IRIS Network has grown to over 70 active cross-sector partners across the region, including early learning and educational programs, medical and behavioral healthcare, housing and employment supports, and others to provide wrap-around supports to the families in their community. With all public schools and most private schools in the tri-county region participating in the network and acting as the primary source for referral initiation, over 300 families have been touched by the efforts of the local IRIS network. To date, 500 referrals have been made on behalf of these 300 families, with nearly 60% of those referrals resulting in enrollment in services.

The Sauk Valley STARS IRIS Network leaders continue to have their feet firmly planted in their community's vision. They are aligning efforts to sustain and increase partnerships with their assembly of local agencies to enhance community connectedness, specifically targeting childcare resource coordination and barriers to employment.

For more information about how the Sauk Valley STARS and Lee, Ogle Whiteside Regional Office of Education #47 are using IRIS, contact Lois Meisenheimer at [lmeisenheimer@roe47.org](mailto:lmeisenheimer@roe47.org) or Diana Merdian at [dmerdian@roe47.org](mailto:dmerdian@roe47.org).