



Muscatine Schools: Basic Needs & Building Networks— Navigating Community Resources for Student Success

Resource Navigators

What are Resource Navigators? Through a partnership with Trinity Muscatine Public Health and Muscatine Schools, Resource Navigators connect students and families in crisis with services and supports within the region so they can be successful in school and in the community. The district acknowledges the obstacles that families face, when meeting their children’s basics needs takes the most amount of time to address and often create barriers to learning. The Resource Navigators work with families to meet their needs in areas like housing, food insecurity, healthcare, transportation, family dynamics, mental health, and even clothing.



Elyse Kress outlines the role of Resource Navigators in Muscatine Schools to summit attendees.

The Muscatine Schools Board of Directors acknowledged this need in their community, but it was important for them not to create the solution, which came about when the district partnered with Trinity Muscatine Public Health, who could provide a career path for the Resource Navigators that the district couldn’t necessarily provide. The board recognized that the partnership would provide direct access to needed mental health resources.

How does the program work?

- Administrators, nurses, and school counselors refer students and families to Resource Navigators.
- Resource Navigators, who have ongoing training in HIPAA, Medicaid applications, child abuse, and confidentiality, sign releases with the families and meet with them to identify their needs.
- Resource Navigators connect or reconnect them to a variety of resources within the community.
- Follow-up is completed for all referrals and outcomes communicated to the district staff.

“We wanted our families to feel secure and private. We wanted everyone to feel comfortable and know that we were being their advocate,” says Resource Navigator Elyse Kress.

How are these positions funded? Muscatine Schools funds the Resource Navigator positions from its At-Risk Budget and DCAT (Child Welfare Decategorization Project) funds.

Administrators, school counselors, and nurses acknowledge that the Resource Navigators are instrumental in helping them do their job. As Franklin Elementary school nurse Deb Ortiz says, “Honestly, I don’t know how we survived without Resource Navigators before this.”

Community Partnerships

The district knows it’s important to connect students and families with the right people in the right positions, and the Resource Navigators know they can’t do their jobs without the support of all the providers. They are experts in terms of community resources, they know which local agencies to contact, and always make sure follow-up is done. The district works with over 30 local and regional public assistance programs to connect students and families with the resources they need. Some of those agencies include:

Families First
Life Connections
Lutheran Services of Iowa
Salvation Army
United Way

Families, Inc.
New Horizons
YMCA
Trinity Public Health
Rick’s House of Hope

Four Oaks
Muscatine County Services
Big Brothers Big Sisters
Safepath
Local food pantries

What Are the Outcomes?

After the first year, the board could see the success of the program, but that more staffing was needed. They made it a priority to continue finding ways to financially support the work of the Resource Navigators. The board spends time looking at the data to understand the full capacity of those served, not just in terms of referrals, but in terms of people served. While Muscatine Schools supported instruction during the pandemic, they also made the work of the Resource Navigators a key focus during that critical period.

When the Resource Navigator program was launched during the 2017–18 school year, just over 200 referrals were made between students and families and local agencies. At the time of the summit, they had already made 502 referrals since the start of the school year. They acknowledge that the need doesn’t end when the school year ends, and they continue to be available to students and families throughout the summer. The district has seen the impact of Resource Navigators. Student attendance and behavior has improved while student mental health issues have declined.



Summit attendees engaged in Muscatine Schools presentation on Resource Navigators.

What do students and families have to say about the Resource Navigators?

“The Resource Navigator has helped me through a lot of things, such as help with job applications, not having service on my phone to call people I need to call. He’s also just been there to chat when I need it.” --Muscatine Schools Student

“We really appreciate you going out of your way to help us through. We really have nothing right now and it’s amazing that you can help.” --Muscatine Schools Parent

Key Takeaways from the Board

Muscatine Schools saw a deficit in student learning caused by a lack of access to basic human needs. Is there a similar trend in your district? Is your board equipped to acknowledge the causes of these gaps in student learning, consider connections with community partners to meet those needs, empower district administrators to develop an action plan, and commit to finding a fiscally responsible way to tackle the issue?

For more information about Muscatine Schools’ Resource Navigators, contact Elyse Kress at Elyse.Kress@mcsdonline.org or Deya Leza at Deya.Leza@mcsdonline.org.