



## COMMUNICATION MATTERS

# Populating the Extra Mile: School Psychologists as Difference Makers

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FEATURED "DIFFERENCE MAKER" ON BEHALF OF CHILDREN

## Charlotte "Char" Armstrong

*Monument, Colorado*

A school psychologist wears many hats during the school day. In response to recent events and in recognition of our depth and breadth of training, school psychologists are increasingly being asked to serve on and lead crisis response teams. Charlotte "Char" Armstrong took that responsibility a few steps further in her role as coordinator of the Colorado Society of School Psychologists (CSSP) Statewide Crisis Response Team. During her years in this position she not only facilitated statewide responses to major crises, but also helped her team acquire more than \$100,000 to broaden training available to crisis responders throughout the state. For this, and her extraordinary dedication to her daily responsibilities as a school psychologist, Char Armstrong is a true "Difference Maker." In particular, Char exemplifies two important "Difference Maker" attributes: outstanding professional functioning and effectiveness, and extraordinary personal or professional dedication to improving outcomes for students.

**Outstanding professional functioning and effectiveness.** Char says that she considers her role as the coordinator of the CSSP crisis response team to be an accomplishment that provides both professional and personal satisfaction. One of the charges that she received in this role was to provide support and training to school personnel with a consistent statewide crisis response model. Primary obstacles to such a task are funding and reaching practitioners in more remote regions of the state. Char and other members of the CSSP crisis response team, in its early years of existence, were able to provide high quality training by accessing state grant funding. Today they continue to make training available without the aid of grant funding. The process took years to implement and involved securing three consecutive Colorado Department of Education Sliver Grants. During year 1, 2001–2002, Char worked with other members of the newly formed crisis team to research and create a training module of school-based response, adapted from National Organization of Victim Assistance (NOVA) and other research-based materials. She and other members of the team traveled throughout the state to present the curriculum to practitioners. During years 2 and 3, Char was instrumental in the creation of statewide curricula including "Best Practices in Threat and Suicide Assessment" and "Educational Implications of Trauma" and in completing a "Level of Use Evaluation" for the trainings. A year of extensive data collection revealed that the trainings were highly effective, with over 95% of participants knowledgeable on the content presented. Participants in the training also indicated a high level of satisfaction and a desire to take additional training if offered. During the 2003–2004 school year the CSSP statewide crisis response team provided training to more than 600 individuals. Individuals who have provided the training continue to help with outreach in their specific regions. Char became coordinator of the team in 2004. The team was no longer eligible to receive funds through the Colorado Sliver grant so Char helped seek additional funding through the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment to provide continued training in suicide assessment and intervention. They have received national recognition for their model and for

implementation of crisis response. According to Susy Ruof, CSSP past president, Char guided and supported the CSSP crisis team's contribution to NASP's PREPaRE curriculum. While they still conduct some trainings with locally developed materials, the statewide crisis team is currently focused on utilizing the PREPaRE training to improve consistency of training across Colorado. Several members of the statewide crisis team, including Char, have attended the PREPaRE Training of Trainers workshops offered by NASP in order to bring the training back to the state. In addition, members of the statewide team attend periodic additional trainings to ensure that they are able to bring the most up-to-date skill set to practitioners. In particular, Char's focus is to get representatives from all regions throughout the state trained to bring PREPaRE training to local districts. She notes that while psychologists are often by default the local crisis point person, they are not always leaving training programs fully prepared for such a role. In addition, as the field of crisis response changes and best practices are updated, people who were previously trained will need refreshers to ensure their competency. Without statewide funding, districts must find funds internally to access available fee-for-service trainings. Subsequently, a primary role that Char has undertaken is that of marketing the need for training throughout her state. Char's team has developed a marketing letter and pamphlet that they send with other relevant materials to special education directors and professional development coordinators throughout the state annually. The pamphlet details the role of the statewide crisis team as well as the training that they have available. Funding continues to be the primary obstacle to districts. When possible, Char will help districts locate funds through Safe and Drug Free Schools monies and reallocation of funds from other professional development that might not be relevant to the role of school psychologists. Currently, Char and her team are focused on building capacity in Colorado for consistent crisis response. Char is helping to make this training available to practitioners across the state. States like Colorado that have significant rural areas are often challenged to bring consistency across regions. Char is helping to reach out to colleagues in the smaller districts to help bring training to collaborative groups.

***Extraordinary Personal or Professional Dedication to Improving Outcomes for Students.***

Char's effort to professionalize and enhance the crisis response capacity of school psychologists throughout Colorado is what she does in her "spare" time. Her "day job" is at the Lewis-Palmer School District in Monument, Colorado where she is a highly visible and valued school psychologist. In particular, Char stresses that she makes it a priority to involve parents in children's education by enhancing family-school partnerships. Colleagues and parents alike note not just specific professional accomplishments but also her personal characteristics that contribute to her success in meeting the needs of her students. According to a parent, "Char is a wonderful model of positive parenting and is a joy to interact with. On a professional level, she conducts herself with a high level of integrity throughout our community." An administrator notes, "Mrs. Armstrong's specialty is incorporating those talents and skills used by a psychologist to provide [student] success in a regular classroom." Her colleagues stress that "Char is consistently a leader in keeping us all focused on what is best for students," and "Char stays up-to-date on current legislation and research affecting schools and readily disseminates this information to appropriate people." Finally, the CSSP leadership explained, "She is herself a very dedicated and respected professional who has had a broad range of professional responsibilities, education, and experiences in her career, all of which she brings to bear on team issues. As a direct result of her leadership, our team is highly respected both throughout Colorado and nationally." Not surprisingly, Char was recognized by her state as the 2007-2008 CSSP School Psychologist of the Year. Congratulations and thank you to Char Armstrong for being a true "Difference Maker" on Behalf of Children! ■