

VOA Alaska and Providence

Behavioral Health Services in the Anchorage School District

Background

Even before the unprecedented period of social disruption related to the COVID-19 pandemic, it was estimated that nearly 1 in 6 U.S. children had enough behavioral or emotional symptoms to meet criteria for one or more childhood mental disorders.ⁱ Mental health disorders are among the most prevalent health conditions children and youth face,ⁱⁱ including anxiety (7.1%), behavioral or conduct disorder (7.4%), and depression (3.2%).ⁱⁱⁱ In Alaska, the rates of youth depression and suicide are increasing and youth experience some of the nation's highest substance misuse rates in the nation.^{iv} Despite the overwhelming need, an estimated 70% of children and adolescents with a behavioral health disorder do not receive services.^v The highest unmet need is found among low-income youth and communities of color.^{vi} The issues fueling this are varied and complex, including barriers to screening and diagnosis, stigma associated with mental health care, high cost of care, and lack of insurance. Untreated mental health conditions can affect a student's performance and ability to learn and grow and are preventable barriers for their health and future wellbeing. The COVID 19 pandemic has only increased the need for behavioral health supports. In recent research, it is estimated that youth experiences with mental health difficulties has doubled during the pandemic.^{vii} This suggests there is an urgent need to bring mental and behavioral health resources directly to youth and reduce barriers for accessing care.

These statistics do not capture the innate potential and capacity for resilience among Alaska youth, and their potential for recovery, future wellness, and leadership. We have the opportunity to address gaps in the systems of care through collaboration and trauma-informed delivery of services. Our community is ready to address these behavioral needs before they become disruptive to student health, academic experiences, and school climate.

Benefits of School-Based Behavioral Health Services

Across the country, research has documented that schools are communities' primary site for providing consistent and accessible behavioral health and wellbeing services to children and adolescents. For most children who receive mental health services, schools are their point of entry – and providing culturally responsive, community-reflective services within schools improves education outcomes.^{viii}

The benefits of school-based services include:

- increase in attendance,
- improved academic performance,
- decrease in disruptive behaviors,
- increase in student autonomy,
- improved resilience and mental wellness,
- addressing the needs of children affected by trauma,
- improved children's health by preventing the onset of mental illness,
- cost savings associated with earlier interventions,
- access to screening and referrals, and
- decrease in stigma associated with behavioral health services.

Integrated Multi-Tiered Behavioral Health Service Model

There are various models to delivering behavioral health services in a school setting. However, an integrated multi-tiered approach has emerged as the most effective model to promoting wellness, supporting behavioral health needs, and contributing to academic success.^{ix} In this approach, behavioral health and wellness is integrated into the school climate, not seen as separate, and is supported through a collaborative partnership between school staff and services providers.

With an integrated multi-tiered approach, the therapist is a fully integrated member of the school staff. Formalized agreements allow for open communication and ease of accessibility for both students and educators. This integration enables therapists to infuse wellness and behavioral health strategies throughout the school environment. In this model, all students receive a broad set of wellness and prevention-based services, a smaller subset receive more targeted interventions and assessments, and a limited number of high-need youth receive intensive treatment services.

Key components of the VOA Alaska/Providence partnership with Anchorage School District include:

- a strong collaborative relationship with principals and school staff to address the school's unique needs,
- open communication between partners,
- shared understanding that behavioral health and wellness is integral to academic success,
- a strength-based and trauma-informed lens,
- alignment with research and best practices,
- minimizing barriers to accessing mental health services,
- alignment with 2021-26 School Board Goals and Guardrails, and
- partnerships to provide additional services as part of a coordinated service delivery system.

Core Services

The core services provided by VOA Alaska and Providence can be organized into three tiers: school-wide, targeted, and intensive. These are the critical activities that directly contribute to improvements in student health, wellbeing, and project success. This approach empowers all students and school staff for better health, regardless of their level of behavioral or emotional symptoms.

Tier One: School-Wide Services

Universal initiatives provide support to students, families, and staff to develop wellness practices and maintain mental health. Services include education, community collaboration, training, prevention activities, and peer support.

Tier Two: Targeted Services

These include on-site real-time resources for staff, students, and families focusing on those identified as "at risk" for a mental health concern or issue. Services include parent/caregiver support, family outreach, staff support and consultation, psychoeducation and skill development groups, enhanced student support, referrals to intensive services, student support and behavior plans, crisis intervention, and conflict mediation.

Tier Three: Intensive Services

This tier includes behavioral health treatment for students experiencing a significant stressor and/or mental health condition. Services include mental health and substance use assessment, individual therapy, family therapy, group therapy, treatment planning, and case management.

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