

CHOP Tri-County School Mental Health Consortium (SMHC): Understanding Approaches to Implementing & Sustaining Evidence- based Mental Health Programming in Schools

Statement of Problem

Youth spend most of their time in school, offering an important opportunity to deliver mental and behavioral health services that meet them where they are. Specifically, schools can provide prevention services aimed at supporting positive youth behavioral health, decreasing the need for higher-level care. This is particularly important in light of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children and families and amid the ongoing youth behavioral health crisis.

While many school-based prevention and early intervention programs are effective, they are often not implemented with fidelity in routine school practice due to issues such as lack of adequate staffing or sufficient levels of expertise on intervention programming. Furthermore, school-based programming based on investigator-initiated research projects may not align with school needs and priorities or be sustainable beyond the grant period. To support this work, we need innovative models for implementing, funding, and sustaining evidence-based prevention and early intervention programs in schools.

Description

Supported by a four-year grant, the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP) Tri-County School Mental Health Consortium (SMHC) is a collaboration between CHOP researchers from PolicyLab and the Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences and the Chester, Delaware and Montgomery County Intermediate Units (IUs). In Pennsylvania, IUs serve as regional education agencies that provide operational and instructional services to school districts and non-public/private schools.

The goal of this project is to build upon existing initiatives to strengthen school- and district-level capacity to implement, evaluate, and sustain Tier 1 and 2 school mental health services. Within a framework of multitiered systems of support, Tier 1 services are universal interventions for all students in the school or classroom, and Tier 2 services provide targeted early intervention for students who would benefit from support beyond Tier 1.

The SMHC team will begin with an exploration phase to characterize key needs and priorities for Tier 1 and 2 programs among the three IUs and the schools and districts they serve, understand current resources and programming, and identify implementation barriers and facilitators. This information will be used to determine how efforts to strengthen mental health programming can be most beneficial.

In this phase, the CHOP team, along with a working group of representatives from the partner IUs, will survey district representatives about current school mental health programming across their district and areas of priority, as well as conduct follow-up interviews or focus groups with district and school staff to gather more information. These data will inform the selection of priority areas for Tier 1 and Tier 2 mental health programming, as well as strategies to support implementation.

In later years of the project, the SMHC will partner with participating schools and districts to help them plan, implement, and evaluate the selected evidence-based prevention and early intervention programs. The team will use scalable implementation strategies to support program delivery, evaluate the implementation of these programs and use these results to inform sustainment efforts. Additionally, the SMHC, including researchers and policy experts from PolicyLab, will work to identify opportunities for sustainable funding of Tier 1 and 2 school-based mental health programs.

Next Steps

Pairing researchers, behavioral health specialists, policy experts, and education leaders, we hope these efforts will lead to additional opportunities for research-practice partnerships to support mental health promotion programs in schools. Altogether, we're working toward a shared goal of all children in the tri-county area receiving evidence-based prevention programs that invest in their long-term mental health.

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Related Tools & Publications

- [Building and Sustaining Programs for School-based Behavioral Health Services in K-12 Schools Tools and Memos](#)
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