RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SUCCESSFULLY ESTABLISHING UNIVERSITY-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS & EVALUATING SCHOOL-BASED MENTAL HEALTH PROGRAMS

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Agenda

• Need for school-based mental health research
• Overview of the School Based Support Program
• Strategies for forming successful university-school district partnerships
• Challenges and recommendations for evaluating schools-based mental health programs
The Need

• There is a need for quality school-based research that promotes the successful development of vulnerable students

• Estimated >20% of school age youth struggle with mental and behavioral health issues
  • Majority of youth go untreated

• Mental health challenges have a negative impact on school success including academics, attendance, social skills and behaviour
  • The very things that schools are responsible for
Research Challenges in the School Setting

• Unique challenges for faculty who are interested in conducting school based research
  • Change in teachers and administrators at the school level
  • Change in leadership at the district level
  • Testing-based curriculum and schedules
  • Test score focus in schools
  • Reduced funding available – grants more competitive
  • Study design challenges – lack of control groups
Critical Element: Partnership

• One difficult, but highly critical element for overcoming challenges and developing a successful research agenda includes having the capacity to establish and maintain a positive and productive partnership with a school and/or district.

• For many new scholars, this can be a difficult obstacle to overcome.
  • Without the partnership there will likely be no research.
Strategies and Practical Lessons Learned for Forming and Maintaining Partnerships

• This goal is to highlight key strategies and lessons learned for forming lasting university-school partnerships based on experience with a multi-year school-based mental health projects in North Carolina
  • School Based Support Program
School Based Support (SBS) Program

A multisystem partnership between a local school district, the local management entity, and UNC Chapel Hill School of Social Work.

• Focus: Bring mental health services onto school campuses
  • Connecting and creating community
  • Coordinating and providing wraparound services
  • Informing school staff and local communities
  • Linking families with schools’ goals
  • Improve academic trajectories and long-term outcomes
  • Facilitate and maintain partnership
The School Based Support (SBS) Program (2)

- The School Based Support Team consists of:
  - Program Manager
  - School Psychologist
  - Parent Liaison

- The team works in conjunction with other school support staff to provide services to students and their families, such as:
  - Home Visits
  - Individual and Small Group Counseling
  - Classroom Observations
  - Staff Consultation
  - Tutoring & Mentoring
  - Behavior Plans and Individualized Educational Plans
  - Referral to Community Agencies
Crucial Mechanisms

• Crucial mechanisms for successful university-school partnerships include:
  • transparency
  • flexibility
  • active engagement
Transparency

• Critical for establishing new partnerships as it builds trust
• Need for a set of key conversations:
  • What we get out of this
    • Data leads to publications and promotions
    • How grant funds are distributed and used (course releases, summer salary)
  • How much time and effort project will require
  • Overload vs. duty release for school staff
  • Nothing published without their approval
  • School/district name used in publications is at the school/district discretion
  • Opportunity to publish or present made available
Flexibility

- Critical for developing new and maintaining partnerships
- Flexibility needed in:
  - Meeting times and places
    - Schools are busy and district offices are nuts
    - Days start early and end early
    - Offer multiple sessions for trainings/workshops
  - Meet where and when it works best for school staff
    - Pre-established staff meetings, in-service days, before or after schools often work well
  - Differences between districts (# of meetings, approvals, formality, red tape)
- Programming
  - Intervention must meet needs of the district and schools, this can require adjustments (e.g., bullying prevention programming)
Active Engagement

• Critical for maintaining partnerships
  • Agree from the beginning to make adjustments as needed to intervention
  • Communicate regularly
  • Help out when possible (e.g., additional trainings, board meeting presentations)
• Establish staff meetings for the year (in advance) and attend – bring food
• Solicit feedback about the intervention from all levels (students, parents, teachers, administrators, and front-line staff). Use information to make modifications.
  • Interviews, focus groups, questionnaires
• Intervention and data collection during the school year - report development and review over summer
  • Reports designed to be useful for schools
Establishing Partnerships: New Points of Entry

- Connections through University faculty with similar research interests
- University programs that use school-based placements for internships or field placements (social work, education, counseling)
- Field Liaison
- Connections with local teachers or school staff
- A cold call is tough but an option
Challenges & Recommendations for Evaluating SBMH Programs

- Difficulty obtaining comparison group (control or treatment as usual group)
  - Implications for practice and research
  - Recommendations
    - Obtain comparison data from students in same district, different schools where MH program not offered
    - Obtain retrospective data on students who are participating in MH program
Challenges & Recommendations for Evaluating SBMH Programs (2)

• Emphasis by schools on academic outcomes versus mental health outcomes
  • Schools held accountable to academic achievement
  • Researchers interested in impact of MH program on students’ mental health outcomes

• Recommendations
  • Emphasize to schools the interrelatedness of mental health and academic achievement
  • Collect social/behavioral indicators from report cards
Challenges & Recommendations for Evaluating SBMH Programs (3)

- Collecting multiple indicators of the same outcomes
  - Some indicators more prone to subjectivity (e.g., report card grades)
- Recommendation
  - Collect both report card grades and End of Grade test scores
Challenges & Recommendations for Evaluating SBMH Programs (4)

• Data collection can be burdensome for school staff

• Recommendations
  • Make data collection as easy as possible for schools
    • Use database to collect data
    • Conduct training on database
    • Convene quarterly meetings to collect data
      • Meeting held onsite in school district
      • Program managers bring laptops with electronic data
      • Program managers bring hard copies of report cards
Challenges & Recommendations for Evaluating SBMH Programs (5)

• Longitudinal data collection is challenging
  • Limited by time, money, students moving
• Recommendations
  • Make case to schools why this is important
  • If cannot collect longitudinal data moving forward, collect retrospective data on students
Challenges & Recommendations for Evaluating SBMH Programs (6)

• Presenting complex results in an understandable fashion
  • Recommendations
    • Create individual reports for schools (w/ line graphs and bullet points) and aggregate results
    • Convene in-person meeting to distribute reports and explain findings
    • Create final report to present at school board meeting
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