



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

Danielle Swick, PhD, MSW
University of North Carolina at Greensboro
Joelle D. Powers, PhD, MSW
Boise State University

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

Contact Information

Danielle Swick
dcswick@uncg.edu

Joelle Powers
joellepowers@boisestate.edu