Introduction

The pathway from school misbehavior to exclusionary discipline and eventual entry into the juvenile justice system is disproportionately populated with young people who have mental health needs. There is an opportunity for schools to transform their approach and response to disruptive behaviors and adopt policies, practices, and procedures that offer a behavioral health response for students and their families. The students experiencing exclusionary discipline have higher incidences of behavioral health needs and traumatic experiences. Traditionally, these mental health needs have not been addressed in schools. Misbehavior is met with punishment rather than a behavioral health response. Longstanding practices, like zero-tolerance policies, hurt youth with behavioral health needs rather than deliver the support they need. There are alternative approaches to school discipline that can prevent involvement in the juvenile justice system while promoting student success.

Methods

The National Center for Youth Opportunity and Justice (NCYOJ) is conducting a quasi-experimental, mixed methods study designed to measure the effects of school safety interventions on systems level indicators over a period of three years. As part of this larger study, the Research Team is investigating outcomes associated with implementation of a school responder model (SRM) in Louisiana. Preliminary Results and SRM Evidence

A School Responder Model | Core Components

Cross-Systems Collaborative Team

Voices from a range of stakeholders should be at the table from the inception of planning. Active involvement from law enforcement, schools, service providers, families, and youth lays the foundation for a robust program structured for success.

Family and Youth Engagement

Family engagement is critical to ultimate success. Families must be actively involved at every stage of planning and implementation. Including grassroots community-based organizations may also foster acceptance among community members.

Implementation of a Behavioral Health Response

A behavioral health response that provides behavioral health screening and connection to clinical assessment and services is the cornerstone of a responder model.

Creation of Formal Structures

Responder initiatives must be institutionalized through formal structures that include:

- Training
- Policies and procedures
- Memoranda of Understanding between agencies
- Structured decision-making tools such as grids or matrices

Cross-System in Action

A collaborative, cross-systems approach and response to disruptive behaviors and adopt policies, practices, and procedures that offer a behavioral health response for students and their families. SRMs hold tremendous promise of equalized opportunity for students with behavioral health conditions. The need for a new paradigm for these students is pressing and expansion of this work is an important building block for more equitable and effective education systems. It is essential that we work to create an ecosystem that supports students experiencing behavioral health needs, being explicit about trauma and its impact, and addressing disproportionality in schools.

Case Example of SRM Success

A school responder model is a behavioral health response to school infractions that provides an alternative to calling law enforcement and addresses root causes of disruptive behavior. In an SRM, a responder screens youth for behavioral health needs, which include mental and substance use disorders, and traumatic exposure, and connects youth to effective community-based behavioral health services. An effective responder initiative will identify youth with behavioral health needs, reduce their disproportionate referral to the juvenile justice system, and increase their connection to appropriate services that have been shown to work.

School Discipline Based on a Graduated Response/Restorative Justice Model

This is an alternative to out-of-school suspension, arrest, and entry into the juvenile justice system.