The Georgia Apex Project: Increasing Access to Intensive Mental Health Services through Community Partnership

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INTRODUCTION
An estimated one in five youth ages 13-18 has a diagnosable mental health problem; approximately half have unmet mental health needs.

• School-based mental health (SBMH) programs are a strategy for minimizing barriers to accessing needed services.
• In an effort to build infrastructure for SBMH services and increase access to mental health care for students, the Georgia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities developed the Georgia Apex Project (GAP).

Through this pilot, which ran the duration of the 2015-2016 school year, community mental health providers across Georgia partnered with school districts and local schools in their service area to provide intensive mental health services in the school setting.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE
The objective of this poster is to present qualitative and quantitative results from the ongoing evaluation of the project, including program successes, challenges, and lessons learned.

STUDY DESIGN
The study population for GAP is 29 community mental health providers in Georgia. Provider agencies contracted with between one and fifteen school partners serving elementary, middle, and high school youth. The three objectives of the project were to:

• Increase access to mental health services
• Increase early detection of mental health disorders
• Increase sustained community collaboration between mental health providers and schools

GAP’s objectives are examined using qualitative and quantitative data collected from provider agencies monthly. Data elements that are gathered include:

• Quantitative data
  • Students referred and served
  • Students visiting a MH provider for the first time
  • Services provided
  • Billing mechanisms

• Qualitative data
  • Successes and challenges during reporting period
  • Training and community events

• Program characteristics
  • Geographical location
  • Number of schools served
  • School and community climate

Students referred and served through the pilot were receiving mental health services for the first time.

By December 2015, 29 provider agencies were serving 1,006 students in 127 schools. At the beginning of May 2016, nearly 1,500 students were receiving services in 135 schools. Across the pilot period, an average of 34% of students served through GAP has steadily increased throughout the pilot. As seen in Figure 1, the number of students served via GAP from August 2015 – March 2016.

Figure 1. Number of students served via GAP from August 2015 – March 2016

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY OR PRACTICE
SBMH programs such as GAP are a budding avenue for providing mental health services to children and reducing access barriers faced by children and families across the country. Lessons learned from Georgia’s investment in SBMH can be applied to other providers, jurisdictions, and states wishing to implement this type of program.