



# Behavioral Health Needs in Afterschool & Summer Programming: Equipping Programs to Support Georgia's Youth

July 2020



GEORGIA STATEWIDE AFTERSCHOOL NETWORK

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The Georgia Statewide Afterschool Network (GSAN) is a public-private collaborative that envisions a day when all communities in Georgia have the resources to provide exceptional afterschool and summer programming. Our mission is to advance, connect, and support high quality afterschool and summer learning programs to promote the success of children and youth throughout Georgia.

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GSAN would like to thank the 37 youth development professionals who generously shared their time and experiences to make this research possible. And many thanks to the Georgia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities for their contributions to this report. Without each of you, this work would not have been possible.

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# Foreword

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Access to behavioral health supports is now more important than ever before. The Coronavirus pandemic has created situations that lead to increased behavioral health challenges, while also exacerbating the obstacles to accessing services that already existed. Moreover, it has limited the social interactions and supports youth typically had, like their afterschool and summer programs. The combined impact of these factors make the release of this report, ***Behavioral Health Needs in Afterschool & Summer Time: Equipping Programs to Support Georgia's Youth***, coupled with the release of Voices for Georgia's Children's ***Supporting Children's Mental Health in Georgia Schools: How Three School-Based Mental Health Providers Serve Students***, all the more timely.

For years prior to the pandemic, Georgia struggled to meet the behavioral health needs of children and youth – with a shortage in the behavioral health workforce and lack of access to services for children and families. However, an increasing array of research on the causes of child and adolescent behavior, combined with the political will to promote nurturing child-serving environments, and a more widespread understanding of the social factors that play into a child's well-being has been leading Georgia in the right direction.

One step taken to address this issue was the creation of the Georgia Apex program in 2015. The program was developed by the Georgia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities – Office of Children, Young Adults and Families to bring behavioral health services to youth in a place that is already easily accessible to them – their school. While the Georgia Apex program has adapted to bring behavioral health and other resources to families during this pandemic, youth do not have the same access to supports they previously had during the school day. In addition, there are many families in Georgia that cannot take advantage of all the supports that are being put in place due to lack of connectivity.

Afterschool programs throughout Georgia are also stepping up to help families in this time of crisis due to COVID-19. While

“Afterschool programs are finding new ways to serve youth and communities.”

some programs are closed, many others are open, providing childcare and enrichment, while many more are providing meals to families in need. Afterschool programs are finding new ways to serve youth and communities, whether through virtual programming, take home activities, meals and snacks, regular check ins with youth, and assessing family needs and connecting them to supports. Program providers are doing everything they can to stay in touch with and support youth, while planning for the upcoming months and devising ways to address the additional trauma that youth and families may experience suffering.

Providing behavioral health services for children seems to be a recurring theme in the countless pandemic press conferences, soundbites, strategy discussions, and Zoom meetings amongst state and local agencies, child-serving non-profit organizations and academic institutions. This pandemic has brought to light what experts in the pediatric behavioral health space have always advocated: **behavioral health supports and services are essential**; they must be **easily accessible**; and they must exist as part of the **greater whole of healthy child development**, in schools, at home and in the community.

As we respond to COVID-19, we must keep in mind that children and families have been cut off from in-school and out-of-school routines and services, while suffering anxiety and confusion in this unpredictable time. We hope that this report and our recommendations to connect afterschool and summer learning programs to behavioral health resources and training can be used to support our youth, families, teachers, and behavioral health workforce as youth return to school, afterschool, and summer learning, as well as for years to come.

# Executive Summary

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Children and youth suffer behavioral health challenges on a daily basis. In fact, the 2017-2018 National Survey of Children's Health revealed 24% of Georgia's youth aged 3 – 17 years had one or more mental, emotional, developmental, or behavioral problem. Positive behavioral health increases a child's sense of well-being, supports healthy relationships, and enables children to achieve their full academic potential.

High quality afterschool and summer learning programs are an ideal, yet often overlooked, opportunity to support youths via positive youth development. These programs provide supportive environments where healthy habits are incorporated into routine; offer protective factors that contribute to positive developmental experiences and improved outcomes for youth, while mitigating the effects of risk factors; reduce children's chances of developing substance use disorders and other negative health issues; promote positive behavioral factors like positive decision-making skills, self-control, and self-awareness; provide opportunities to learn from mentors; and have been linked to improved work habits and classroom behavior, gains in reading and math, and increased school attendance and graduation rates.

Unfortunately, afterschool and summer learning professionals do not always have access to behavioral health resources or referral networks. In Spring 2019, the Georgia Statewide Afterschool Network (GSAN) conducted five behavioral health round table discussions to identify strategies, tools, and resources to address program challenges in supporting young people with mental and behavioral health challenges.

All afterschool and summer learning professionals indicated encountering behavioral health challenges in the youth they serve, with the most common relating to how youth behaved, handled their emotions, and interacted with their families and peers. Participants reported facing challenges ranging from lack of information at the program, family, and community level, program capacity, parent/guardian cooperation, and inability to serve youth with severe needs. The most common successful strategies included raising awareness about behavioral health, including families in services and intervention methods, and offering youth opportunities for choice, nurturing relationships, supportive age appropriate environments, and enriching activities. All participants expressed a desire for behavioral health training, education, resources, and a vetted master list of services, partners and referral organizations.

## Recommendations

When properly trained and given the necessary resources, youth development professionals can support schools and teachers in creating positive environments that encourage learning and lessen the burden of Georgia's behavioral health workforce. GSAN's recommendations include the following:

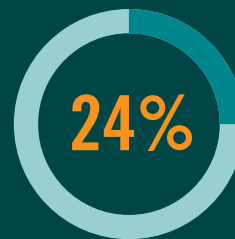
1. Create incentive grants for afterschool programs to use trauma-informed practices and evidence-based programs to build protective factors.
2. Enable access to trauma-informed and behavioral health training to afterschool and youth development professionals.
3. Encourage all Community Service Boards to offer training to community partners, including afterschool and youth development professionals.
4. Link Georgia Apex providers with afterschool and summer learning programs as a referral source – particularly the Georgia Department of Education's 21st Century Community Learning Centers and the Georgia Division of Family and Children Services' Afterschool Care Program.
5. Encourage Georgia Apex program participants to create partnerships with summer learning programs to utilize their facilities and extend services to youth during out-of-school time or as a referral source to schools served.
6. Share school-age specific guidelines similar to the Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning's SEEDS that can be used in school age classrooms by professionals to address age appropriate developmental needs, cultivate social emotional skills, and decrease challenging behaviors in school age youth.

# Introduction

Children and youth need nurturing environments in order to learn how to manage their emotions and behaviors in positive ways. This ability to regulate is a key part of their developmental milestones. According to the Georgia System of Care, behavioral health is “a state of mental and emotional being and/or choices and actions that affect wellness. Behavioral health challenges include substance abuse or misuse, alcohol and drug addiction, serious psychological distress, suicidal ideation, and mental disorders.”<sup>1</sup> Positive behavioral health increases a child’s sense of well-being, supports healthy relationships, and enables children to achieve their full academic potential. Children with emotional and behavioral difficulties may experience major changes in the way that they learn, behave, handle their emotions, and interact with their families and peers. Without early diagnosis and treatment and without support from appropriate services, these difficulties can have an effect on their healthy development and carry into adulthood.<sup>2,3</sup>

According to the 2017-2018 National Survey of Children’s Health, 24% of Georgia’s youth aged 3 – 17 years had one or more mental, emotional, developmental, or behavioral problem.<sup>4</sup> However, most of these challenges are not diagnosed and treated early on and there are simply not enough behavioral health practitioners with appropriate and specialized training available to youth and families in Georgia.<sup>5</sup> High quality afterschool and summer learning programs are an ideal, yet often overlooked, opportunity to support these youths via positive youth development. Because these programs have flexibility, they can provide time for youth to participate in enriching activities, cultivate social and emotional skills, and develop close relationships with supportive adults. Unfortunately, afterschool and summer learning professionals do not always have access to behavioral health resources, such as education, training, and referral networks in order to serve youth to their full potential.

This report focuses on how high quality afterschool and summer learning programs, including school, community, and faith-based programs as well as federally funded 21st Century Community Learning Centers and the Georgia Division of Family and Children Services’ Afterschool Care Program serving school-aged youth can be vital partners in supporting the behavioral health needs of youth; insights from five behavioral health round table discussions conducted by the Georgia Statewide Afterschool Network (GSAN) to identify strategies, tools, and resources needed for programs to better serve youth; a spotlight on collaboration between afterschool and school based behavioral health services; and recommendations to maximize the opportunities and advantages offered by these programs to the youth of Georgia.



of Georgia’s youth aged 3 – 17 years had one or more mental, emotional, developmental, or behavioral problem.<sup>4</sup>

*2017-2018 National Survey of Children’s Health*

## Why Afterschool

Children spend 80% of their waking hours outside of formal classroom learning. These hours may be full of enrichment and opportunity for some, but not for everyone. Afterschool and summer learning programs can help turn this time of potential risk into a time of opportunity.

### Afterschool Supports Healthy Development

Our brains develop continuously from birth into adulthood, with the first 8 years of development functioning as a foundation for future learning, health, and success in life.<sup>6</sup> Childhood is followed by adolescence, a vital time in building cognitive, social, and emotional skills.<sup>7</sup> In fact, after the early childhood years, adolescence is “the second most critical period of development” as it is marked with the opportunity for positive growth, possibility of recovery from negative childhood experiences, and an increased sensitivity to the environment around them.<sup>8</sup> **Children and youth need a continuum of support throughout their development and in all learning environments – whether in school or out of school – and afterschool is a key part of that.**

During this time, children’s brains are developing rapidly and forming patterns of reactions to the outside world.<sup>9</sup> These patterns become the coping skills for the way young people navigate life.<sup>10</sup> Eventually, as adolescents grow into young adults, these coping skills harden and are further solidified in later adulthood.<sup>11</sup> Whether one comes to adulthood equipped with healthy coping skills depends on the positive — or negative — experiences received and reinforced during adolescence.<sup>12</sup> **Regular involvement in afterschool provides children with supportive environments where healthy habits are incorporated into their routine.**<sup>13</sup>

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## Afterschool Promotes Protective Factors

**Risk and protective factors are characteristics, events, or variables at the biological, psychological, family, and community level that can hinder or promote positive youth development and outcomes, respectively. The cumulative effect of these factors can contribute to the behavioral health of youth as well as later on in life.**<sup>14,15</sup>

Some risk factors include poor social skills, anxiety, negative family environments, poverty, community and school violence, as well as low commitment to school.<sup>16</sup> Current research suggests evidence-based afterschool programs offer protective factors that contribute to positive developmental experiences and improved outcomes for youth, while mitigating the effects of risk factors.<sup>17,18</sup> High quality evidence-based afterschool programs are a protective factor themselves because they offer participation in structured youth programs with opportunities for engagement – whether in school or in the community.<sup>19,20</sup> These programs can help build additional protective factors, including strong relationships with caring adults, clearly outlined rules and expectations, as well as opportunities to learn skills such as self-regulation, problem solving, and decision making, while increasing a sense of belongingness in schools. These factors have a high likelihood of positively affecting multiple youth outcomes, including challenging behaviors such as aggression, oppositional defiance, impulsivity, discipline concern/challenges, expulsion, truancy, substance use and misuse, as well as poor academic performance.<sup>21</sup>

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## Afterschool Offers Connection and Healing

**Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are traumatic events that occur in childhood such as abuse, neglect, or violence that can affect a child's overall physical and behavioral health.**<sup>22</sup>

Afterschool provides the opportunity for young people to form relationships.<sup>23</sup> Whether they are with caring mentors who can guide them through the challenges of growing up or with other young people who can offer peer support, it is during this time that community relationships can greatly contribute to increased well-being for youth.<sup>24</sup> Relationships with informed adults are especially impactful when program providers are trained in trauma-informed practices to help children overcome ACEs.<sup>25</sup> A trauma-informed approach extends support particularly to children with compounded negative social determinants of health such as poverty, abuse, and neglect. **Additionally, the use of trauma-informed approaches in afterschool can reduce children's chances of developing substance use disorders and other negative health issues.**<sup>26,27</sup>

Beyond nurturing relationships with adults, adolescents also have the opportunity to form friendships with their peers in afterschool and summer learning programs. Through peer interaction, youth learn necessary skills like how to voice their opinions, respect others, and work in teams toward shared goals.<sup>28</sup> It is in comfortable, supervised environments with the support of positive relationships that youth can feel safe to explore their sense of self and develop confidence.<sup>29</sup> Through healthy relationships with adults and peers, children also cultivate social emotional skills.<sup>30,31</sup> Regular participation in high quality afterschool programs promotes positive behavioral factors including positive decision-making skills, self-control, and self-awareness.<sup>32</sup>

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## Afterschool Provides Mentorship

For young children who do face mental and behavioral health challenges, early intervention is key to overcoming them, and this in part can happen within the context of afterschool.<sup>33</sup> **As youth learn from the examples of their mentors, they gain strategies for how to deal with strong emotions and are more likely to demonstrate positive behavior.**<sup>34</sup> With these social emotional strategies in place, children can participate more fully in the school day and find success in their studies as well.<sup>35</sup> Additionally, participation in afterschool is also linked to decreased reports of misconduct in school and disciplinary incidents, including aggression, noncompliance, and conduct problems.<sup>36</sup>

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## Afterschool Enables Growth

When children are in safe, supportive afterschool environments there is opportunity to learn collectively and room to hone problem-solving and critical thinking skills.<sup>37</sup> Youth can safely explore new interests and focus on the subjects where they excel. In areas where youth do not naturally excel, afterschool can also provide academic remediation, enrichment, and enhancement. Whether children are learning new things or building upon pre-existing knowledge, academic practice in afterschool fosters school day successes.<sup>38</sup> Participation in afterschool has been linked to increased school attendance, improved work habits and classroom behavior, as well as gains in reading and math, and increased graduation rates.<sup>39,40</sup>

Afterschool programs provide safe environments, with opportunities for students to engage in structured enrichment activities, learn social-emotional skills, and build trusting relationships with others. By incorporating regular behavioral health resources, the afterschool realm has the potential to offer more extensive services and deepen the investments made in the future of youths.



# Behavioral Health Round Table Discussions

While afterschool and summer learning programs are a great mechanism to provide connection and build social and emotional skills for youth, these programs still face challenges in serving the behavioral health needs of youth. As previously mentioned, afterschool and summer learning professionals do not always have access to behavioral health resources or referral networks. The Georgia Statewide Afterschool Network (GSAN) conducted behavioral health round table discussions to identify strategies, tools, and resources to address program challenges in supporting young people with mental and behavioral health challenges.

## Methodology

In Spring of 2019, GSAN conducted five behavioral health round table discussions among 37 afterschool and summer learning professionals from Boys & Girls Clubs, YMCAs, 21st Century Community Learning Centers, the Georgia Division of Family and Children Services' Afterschool Care Program, school-based programs, parks and recreation programs, and other community-based programs across the state in five locations: Cordele, Douglasville, Hiawassee, Lawrenceville, and Valdosta. These locations were chosen to ensure geographical diversity – from rural to suburban locations. The participants' experience in youth development varied from some having just begun their careers to other having spent over two decades in the field. Collectively, participants' programs served a wide

range of youth aged 3 – 18 years old with program capacities varying from community based programs serving small groups of youth to networks serving larger parts of the population.



In order to conduct these discussions, GSAN partnered with local program providers, who leveraged their relationships in the local community to bring other providers to the table. To ensure frank communication, all participants were assured that no identifying information about their individual programs would be released. A series of questions about common behavioral challenges and factors, successful strategies, obstacles, and resources needed were asked to gather information from each group. Each session was recorded, transcribed, and coded.

## Findings

From all five round table discussions, common themes emerged that were grouped into five major categories that are broken down below. These first two categories have been combined and include behaviors exhibited by youth and the factors that led to them. The other three categories include challenges in addressing behavioral problems, successful strategies used by professionals to deal with such behaviors, and resources needed to increase programs' capacity to serve the behavioral health needs of youth. Figure 1 depicts the common themes that were grouped into these categories, with the size of the text in direct correlation with the number of occurrences of the theme mentioned and/or agreed upon. A code cloud was used to create the figure, and only includes subjects that were mentioned at least 5 times. A breakdown of each category in Figure 1 can be seen on page 7.

## BEHAVIORAL CHALLENGES & CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

All afterschool and summer learning professionals indicated witnessing behavioral health challenges in the youth they serve. The most common behavioral challenges encountered





**Figure 1. Common Themes in Behavioral Health Round Table Discussions**



by participants included concerns with how youth behaved, handled their emotions, and interacted with their families and peers. Most participants reported observing “attention seeking behaviors” being used as language to represent what youth were feeling or trying to express.

Many afterschool and summer learning professionals have been engaging in positive youth development for their entire careers, which allows them to have a deeper understanding of behaviors observed in youth. Many pointed out the need to look at the underlying factors that contribute to behavioral problems like fatigue, struggling with authority, inconsistent expectations in different settings, and the negative impacts of social media, such as increased bullying, disconnection, and a lack of focus. Most participants also identified risk factors that contribute to behavioral issues, including abuse, negative or unstable family and home environments that may involve incarcerated parents, guardians that are dependent on drugs or alcohol, lack of attention and/or discipline due to uninvolved or inexperienced parents, food insecurity, and other ACEs.

*"You can tell when a kid's acting out for attention, or when they're acting out because they don't understand, or there is something else going on up here [points to head] that's not connecting."*

*It's just finding out what the root of that behavior stems from. Are they tired? Are they hungry? Do they not understand the homework or the activity and is that why they're acting out? Is there something going on in the home, something going on in the classroom? So you got to find out what the root of that is, in order to be able to address it.*

Physical and verbal altercations among peers were the second most commonly found behaviors. Many participants also had experience with youth who suffered from anxiety and frustration that led to isolation or withdrawal from both adults and peers. Participants believed that a lack of language and conflict resolution skills in youth led to such behavior, making structured afterschool programs, with clearly established boundaries and opportunities to develop social emotional skills in youth even more critical.

## TOP 3 CHALLENGES

- 1 Lack of behavioral health knowledge, understanding, and training
- 2 Program capacity stretched too thin
- 3 Lack of access to a list of referral services and organizations

*I think as much as we need to be educated, I think the parents are crying out for that same education; where they have a greater and better understanding of what their child is going through.*

The capacity of an afterschool program and staff may also be stretched thin. Afterschool programs often rely on cooperation with families – both as the sole source of information on the physical or behavioral health needs of youth and as a vital party to establish consistent expectations at home and in the program. However, in the absence of information reported there is a resulting gap in program staffs' knowledge of students' needs, lack of an action plan, a reactive course of action when the behavior occurs, and inconsistent expectations for youth in different settings. In addition, staff can feel pressure from consistent behavioral challenges that they are not prepared for and it can take a toll on their own well-being. This is often exacerbated by a small staff pool, a common characteristic of afterschool programs, leading to a strain on the entire program, especially when handling behavioral issues that require one-on-one interaction.

*We're having to figure out how to pick up the pieces versus giving us a chance ahead of time to kind of work with your child. And that's a difficult one because ultimately, we want to serve that child, we want to figure out everything we can do to make it work.*

*We found ourselves having to assign staff one-on-one with a child and our programs aren't set up like that. It's not feasible for us to be able to do that. So it puts us at a disadvantage.*

## CHALLENGES IN ADDRESSING BEHAVIORS

Afterschool and summer learning professionals reported facing obstacles in their attempts to address behavioral challenges in youth ranging from lack of information at the program, family, and community level, program capacity, parent/guardian cooperation, and inability to serve youth with severe behavioral health needs.

A lack of behavioral health knowledge and understanding at the individual and community level leaves everyone unequipped to deal with behavioral challenges. Participants identified a strong need to educate program staff, families, and their larger communities in order to eradicate stigma surrounding behavioral health needs and services as a first of many steps. This will allow families and communities to acknowledge, discuss, report, and serve the behavioral health needs of youth and the community as a whole. However, they also mentioned that this education needs to take place in a culturally competent manner that accounts for differences in belief systems, values, and communications within communities – whether due to race, urban or rural location, and socio-economic backgrounds.

*There's got to be a level of training for being culturally aware of different groups... I want strategies that address our unique needs. We are a unique population and we have unique families with unique barriers and problems and we care about those people.*

While all high quality afterschool programs are ideal opportunities for youth to develop relationships and cultivate social emotional skills, they are not all equipped to serve youth with severe behavioral health needs that require specialized and targeted services. The most commonly reported example of such severe needs included youth that could present a danger to themselves or others and/or run away. One afterschool professional stated in reference to a recent incident with a youth:

*"I did not feel equipped to handle that. None of our techniques worked that day, on that child. It was hard. And scary, too, because not only was I worried about him, I was worried about the other kids in the room, and I was worried about myself."*

Participants stated the best way they would be able to serve youth with severe needs is by becoming trained in recognizing signs and symptoms and having access to referral networks that would allow them to refer youth to the right organization.

## SUCCESSFUL STRATEGIES

All afterschool and summer learning professionals, no matter the stage of their career, believed that experience was the best teacher. Years of experience, whether their own or a supervisor and/or mentor's, allowed them to recognize signs of changing

behavior in the youth they served, identify triggers for certain behaviors in youth, and successfully deal with challenging behaviors. The most commonly reported successful strategies in addressing behavioral challenges included raising awareness about behavioral health; including families in services and intervention methods; and offering youth opportunities for choice, nurturing relationships, supportive age appropriate environments, and enriching activities.

Participants reported that raising awareness and the level of education surrounding behavioral health both among youth development professionals and families was of utmost importance to serve the behavioral health needs of youth. Increased awareness and education would allow staff to properly prepare and plan to meet the behavioral health needs of youth.

*"It's hard for our staff who are just trying to make it work on a day-to-day basis to feel prepared to deal with those unknowns when they're going, "I'm not an expert, I'm not trained in behavioral psychology," or working with children with differential needs. So that's an inherent challenge, and it's something that we're trying to balance every day."*

### Increase Behavioral Health Knowledge

Youth development professionals develop understanding of and are more prepared to respond to behavioral health needs

### Create Supportive Environments for Families

Families more comfortable with sharing behavior challenges early on using registration forms.

### Comprehensive Plan

Allow families and staff to exchange tips, successful strategies, and resources with each other.

*“We have a crisis intervention team. Part of that crisis intervention team includes members of our team who are certified counselors. And so, whenever a child is at harm or thought to possibly be in harm, we train our volunteers coming in on our crisis intervention steps, reporting is key, and making sure, because we are primarily volunteer driven, that our volunteers know it is not their job to diagnose, to treat it, or to fix it.”*

Increased awareness and education would also create opportunity for families to more easily share with programs early on that challenges exist during the registration process. Most afterschool and summer learning professionals include questions about behavioral health on registration and/or intake forms in order to create a plan to best serve youth. However, many families are hesitant to disclose such information due to stigma or fear of being turned away.

*“We try to educate parents on the fact this [registration form] is not going to be used to determine whether or not your child is accepted or not. It's just beneficial in ensuring that we can join in partnership with you, and help you meet the needs of your child.”*

*“Parents have to be willing to disclose the information so that we can structure these programs to help manage these type of behaviors.”*

Creating more supportive environments would also allow youth and families to learn how to communicate about their feelings, express their challenges more openly, and develop coping skills, while allowing youth development professionals to include families in planning and intervening processes.

Most participants emphasized how important it was to work with families so that they are included and consulted in intervention methods. This would not only provide consistent expectations for youth in the program and at home but would also allow

families and staff to exchange tips, successful strategies, and resources with each other. Participants also emphasized that it is crucial to develop positive relationships with families and include positive feedback on a regular basis to keep them engaged. This ensures a good supportive relationship with families that is not overwhelmingly comprised of reports of problem behaviors.

All afterschool and summer learning professionals indicated that it is essential to allow youth to feel a sense of control and autonomy, while giving them opportunities for self-expression and cultivating self-awareness. Youth thrive when given the autonomy to explore various interests – whether art, music, or cultivation of any other new skills and ideas – without being tied to grades. In addition, it is also crucial to provide time to socialize and talk with peers, run around, play with friends, and get excess energy out. This gives them a sense of control and accomplishment as well as opportunities to engage with other students and build relationships. Participants also pointed out that it was important to teach youth about self-reflection of feelings and behavior in order to develop communication and coping skills.

*“When you put them [youth] together with others, and they're able to bounce ideas off of each other, learn how to listen, and encourage one another, it really brings out the best in them.”*

However, the cornerstone of this is building relationships and establishing trust with youth. This must be accompanied by establishing boundaries around behavior within the program so youth feel supported and accountable simultaneously.

*“Really the relationship and building a trust relationship is our biggest strategy at [program name], because they feel like they have someone who cares about what they're going through, what they have to say, and who they are.”*

Participants believed that in addition to providing autonomy to explore interests, it is also important to provide youth with engaging activities throughout the program as well as transition activities in between to keep them engaged. Other successful



strategies included utilizing isolated youth as helpers or aids to keep them active and involved; restructuring programs to address the needs of youth; creating separate spaces for younger kids and teens; and separating youth from triggering situations and redirecting them in a positive manner.

## RESOURCES NEEDED

Afterschool and summer learning professionals need access to key behavioral health resources to help them better serve youth with mental and behavioral health challenges. All participants expressed a desire for meaningful behavioral health training and resources, which are especially scarce in rural communities. In addition, participants desired a vetted master list of behavioral health resources including information on appropriate trainers, trainings offered, and any free webinars that would increase their knowledge, while keeping in mind that most of these programs do not have the capacity to spend additional funds. Participants advocated for increased professional development and more in person, meaningful and classroom applicable training that covered topics such as special needs, de-escalation, recognizing signs and symptoms, and best practices.

*I feel like we don't have as many training resources, or meaningful training resources, as we could.*

*I think that all of this stems back to training. I think that if we are all trained to deal with these type of issues, I think that we're able to manage it.*

*I'm a really big supporter of professional development and I think if we are going to approach this as professionals, we also have got to be accountable for the level of professional development that we're getting or else we are unqualified to serve these kids.*

Most professionals also pointed out the need to provide parents with behavioral health education, training, resources, and a list of services. Many participants admitted that they did not have enough information to refer parents when the program could not serve the needs of the child. Most programs, especially community based ones, do not have access to any referral networks to behavioral health services.

*[If there was a] vetted resource list, it would be great to see it on a county by county, as well as a statewide basis, because we have a waiting list. So even when we don't have room, to be able to refer people within their county would be beneficial.*

*There's power in partnership. And really, because we don't have enough hours in the day or the expertise, it's important to really build that network, that bank of experts in different fields, so that they can come in and we can remove the stigma of mental health, and all these things that families and kids are dealing with.*

Access to a list of partners and referral organizations would allow staff to point families in the right direction. Information and knowledge about other key players in the field of behavioral health would also allow them opportunities for collaboration and equip them to serve the behavioral health needs of Georgia's youth.

## TOP 3 RESOURCES NEEDED

- 1 Training and professional development
- 2 Education and awareness
- 3 Vetted master list of services, partner and referral organizations

# Spotlight

## Community Relationships are the Key

In 2015, the Georgia Department of Behavioral Health & Developmental Disabilities (DBHDD) started the **Georgia Apex Program**, a partnership with community health providers in order to promote early detection in school age youth, increase access by bringing behavioral health services to youth in schools, and create and sustain coordination between providers and the school districts.<sup>41</sup> Services offered may include mental health awareness and parent education events, individual and group therapy, behavior assessments, clubhouse referrals, and community support services.



Since 2015, the program has supported partnerships between providers and more than **500 schools**, provided almost **14,000 students** with first-time services, and delivered over **212,000 services** to students.



In addition, **75% of schools** extended these services over the summer – often in partnership with **DBHDD Mental Health Resiliency Clubhouses, Boys & Girls Clubs, YMCAs**, and others.<sup>42</sup>

### SERENITY BEHAVIORAL HEALTH SYSTEMS:

Serenity is a community health provider that is well connected with the community they serve. Serenity hosts community events that bring together a variety of community partners to share resources and raise awareness. This allows them to effectively disseminate information about behavioral health and services offered through the Georgia Apex program. Serenity:

- Offers school based mental health service through the Georgia Apex Program
- Partners with the Boys & Girls Club of the Central Savannah River Area (CSRA)
- Provides multiple behavioral health supports to the community

### Boys & Girls Club of the CSRA | Augusta, GA

The partnership between Serenity and the Boys & Girls Clubs of the CSRA is based on community engagement, involving multiple meetings, needs assessments, and cultivating networks.

- Serenity utilizes the Boys & Girls Club's facilities to provide Georgia Apex services and bring their expertise to the afterschool program and during the summer.
- The Boys & Girls Club of CSRA and its counsellors can refer youth for services at no cost
- Serenity leads groups in anger management, anti-bullying, skill building, and social emotional development
- "Parent Nights" that lead to collaboration and sharing resources with families

- Training and counseling sessions for Club staff as needed
- A Georgia Apex program coordinator from Serenity regularly takes part in meetings with all Boys & Girls Club area directors for planning
- Mandated monthly meetings of community stakeholders to refer youth to the program including crisis stabilization centers, pediatricians, assistant and lead principals, and wrap around services coordinators.

This partnership has been formalized and included in the Boys & Girls Club of CSRA's successful application for a 21st Century Community Learning Center (CCLC) grant, a federally funded afterschool and summer learning program administered by the Georgia Department of Education.

## THE COMMUNITY SERVICE BOARD (CSB) OF MIDDLE GEORGIA:

CSB of Middle Georgia is a community health provider that is deeply involved in the community, with representatives in multiple community coalitions, partnerships with various stakeholders such as local libraries, United States Department of Agriculture, and Georgia Family Connection Partnership, and hosting community events open to all. This allows them to accurately assess and fulfill the needs of their community. CSB of Middle Georgia:

- Offers school based mental health service through the Georgia Apex Program
- Operates the Supporting Opportunities Achievements and Resiliency (SOAR) Clubhouse
- Provides multiple behavioral health supports to the community

### SOAR Clubhouse | Dublin, GA

The clubhouse serves youth with behavioral issues and is structured like most afterschool and summer programs are – with project based activities that keep youth engaged.

- Youth aged 6 to 18 years old attend in groups that are led by certified peer support specialists
- Access to a free meal, a music and dance studio, and a therapy dog
- Enrichment activities, including karate, drama, music recording, and art
- Youth must be referred to the clubhouse in order to take part in the program
- Referral methods: school administrators, local primary care physicians, Department of Juvenile Justice, Division of Family and Children Services, family members, etc.
- Operates daily after school and most Saturdays throughout the year
- Operates full days over the summer months. SOAR Clubhouse has had great success in the number of members that attend the summer programs due to fun and interactive peer led activities being incorporated daily.

There is also an Emerging Adults program, which serves 16 to 26 year olds and helps them develop resumes, improve interviewing skills, and prepare for job and college readiness.

### AIME Grant

The CSB of Middle Georgia is also one of two community providers in Georgia that receives funding under the AIME grant from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), focused on strengthening the system of care infrastructure through increasing **Awareness** of services available, **Integrating** family and youth peer support at multiple levels, **Mobilizing** supports and services that have access to youth outside of clinic settings, and **Educating** community partners, stakeholders, youth, families, and the community.<sup>43</sup> This grant is used to offer free training to community partners – including afterschool and summer learning programs. Trainings can include, but are not limited to:

- Suicide prevention
- Youth Mental Health First Aid
- Trauma informed care
- Play therapy
- Sources of Strength (youth suicide prevention)
- Teaching families about medication, and more.

This allows CSB of Middle Georgia to build a robust behavioral health support system at multiple levels throughout the community.

# Recommendations

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When properly trained and given the necessary resources, youth development professionals can support schools and teachers in creating positive environments that encourage learning and lessen the burden of Georgia's behavioral health workforce. GSAN's recommendations include the following:



## **INCENTIVE GRANTS**

Create incentive grants for afterschool programs to use trauma-informed practices and evidence-based programs to build protective factors.



## **TRAUMA-INFORMED TRAINING**

Enable access to trauma-informed and behavioral health training to afterschool and youth development professionals.



## **COMMUNITY TRAINING**

Encourage all Community Service Boards to offer training to community partners, including afterschool and youth development professionals.



## **REFERRAL SOURCE**

Link Georgia Apex providers with afterschool and summer learning programs as a referral source – particularly the Georgia Department of Education's 21st Century Community Learning Centers and the Georgia Division of Family and Children Services' Afterschool Care Program.



## **SUMMER PARTNERSHIPS**

Encourage Georgia Apex program participants to create partnerships with summer learning programs to utilize their facilities and extend services to youth during out-of-school time or as a referral source to schools served.



## **SCHOOL-AGE GUIDELINES**

Share school age specific guidelines similar to the Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning's SEEDS that can be used in school age classrooms by professionals to address age appropriate developmental needs, cultivate social emotional skills, and decrease challenging behaviors in school age youth.



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