

CREATING STUDENT SUPPORT SYSTEMS TO IMPROVE LEARNING

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Schools are on the frontline of the mental health crisis affecting children and youth. Educators in Dublin City Schools, Hall County Schools, and Henry County Schools describe students grappling with depression, anxiety, and anger. Many students carry the weight of family challenges including substance use, physical and emotional abuse, incarceration, caring for elderly family members or younger siblings, and more. These challenges existed before the pandemic and have worsened in its wake.

Districts often struggle to effectively respond to students' mental health challenges. Schools are organized around and accountable for students' academic success. Providing access to mental health and wellness services is an expansion of the school's role in serving students. However, the three districts profiled in this case study recognized the importance of developing integrated student support systems to address students' health and well-being. The districts responded to the needs of their students and communities, ensuring students were ready to succeed.

These support systems have an impact. Student attendance has improved in Dublin City Schools, and the percentage of students reporting suicidal ideations has decreased. Hall County Schools has seen a decline in the percentage of students reporting suicidal ideations as well as a reduction in discipline referrals among students who received mental health services. In Henry County Schools, students who received mental health and well-being support have improved attendance and behavior.

The Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education (Georgia Partnership) visited these districts to understand their student support systems. The case study is part of the [CARES Impact Study](#), a multi-year project that examines how districts are addressing students' needs in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. The case study's aim is to share learnings that inspire policymakers to implement similar student support systems.

While the districts' student support systems differ in many ways, they share five attributes:

Committed Leadership. Each district leader prioritized student mental health and well-being and invested time and resources to develop a comprehensive student support system.

Systems Approach. Each district created an integrated student support system that emphasized the dual focus of student success and well-being. Leaders understood that fostering student wellness required student support strategies that integrate academic and wellness goals.

Enhanced District Capacity. These districts increased the quality and effectiveness of their student support strategies by hiring staff with mental health expertise to provide guidance and direct assistance to school leaders and direct service to students.

Increased Educator Knowledge. Districts invested in building educators' knowledge of and skills in student mental health and well-being, including mental health awareness, the impacts of trauma, identifying students who might need additional support, and delivering effective interventions.

External Funding. External funding, including federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) grants, made it possible for districts to design and implement their student support systems.¹

Districts are increasingly expected to deliver and provide access to mental health and well-being services, a significant expansion of their core work of delivering high quality instruction and fostering learning. The student support systems created by Dublin City Schools, Hall County Schools, and Henry County Schools reveal how districts can

¹ Georgia's school districts and state charter schools received \$5.9 billion in ESSER funds to help them operate schools safely during the pandemic and provide supports to students to accelerate learning and address pandemic-related barriers to academic success including mental health and well-being concerns. The grants expired in September 2024.

improve student well-being and their academic success. Their efforts point to action steps policymakers can take to accelerate the adoption of integrated student support systems in other districts across Georgia.

1. Fund school counselors, social workers, and psychologists at recommended ratios: one school counselor per 250 students, one social worker per 250 students, and one psychologist per 500 students.
2. Increase funding for the Georgia Apex Program, which enables mental health counselors to provide counseling services in schools to students with mental health disorders or other significant needs. The program currently serves 33% of schools.
3. Establish and fund a district-level mental health coordinator position to manage and support delivery of student support services, particularly intensive and individualized mental health services, sometimes referred to as Tier 3 services, to students.
4. Increase funding for professional development in the Quality Basic Education formula so districts can provide quality training to staff in mental health awareness and first aid, trauma-informed practices, and suicide prevention.

DUBLIN CITY SCHOOLS HIGHLIGHT

Dublin City Schools created the Shamrock Button, a tool that streamlines the identification of and service delivery to students and staff who need assistance.

HALL COUNTY SCHOOLS HIGHLIGHT

Hall County Schools developed Dialectical Skills Groups, which teach middle and high school students life readiness skills, including managing their emotions, developing positive relationships, and working productively in school and out.

HENRY COUNTY SCHOOLS HIGHLIGHT

Henry County Schools created the Mental Health and Wellness Facilitator, a school-level position that provides direct support to students and staff and leads the implementation of support system components.