

McDowell County: Better Serving Younger Students with Mental Health Challenges



McDowell County School District convening attendees in Marion, NC, on May 16, 2023.

The McDowell County School District (MCSD) has noticed a significant increase in younger students working through mental health problems. This trend is driven, in part, by the county's universal pre-K program, which brings more young children into the school system. It has presented a complex set of challenges for MCSD's behavioral healthcare team:

- The growing number of kids who need help is stretching the capacity of both the district's counselors and local providers
- More youth-focused mental health resources are needed to help ensure the kids, and their families, get the best care and counseling
- The district needs to develop strategies for better engaging with parents, many of whom are affected by the stigma surrounding mental health. They are less likely to engage with the MCSD staff and keep them informed about their child's care plan.

McDowell County Action Plan

The MCSD team is expert at resource building and partnering with their community-based organizations. Over the course of our 90-minute conversation, we worked with them to develop an action plan focused on expanding available resources for younger students:

1. **Expanding access to on-demand resources.** Families, especially those with younger children, are busy—each day brings its set of activities and challenges. To maximize the time they can devote to their child's mental health challenge, they need easy access to helpful care information. The NC Psychiatry Access Line and the local System of Care Collaborative, organized by Vaya Health, are creating materials that can help.

2. **Understanding best practices.** The school system faces an unprecedented crisis as a provider of mental health services. Counselors, administrators, and faculty need to understand the best practices, particularly for the first steps to take when a need is identified.
3. **Connecting families to helpers.** In addition to finding good information, parents of young children tend to need more help dealing with the issues of fear and stigma. Our team discussed a plan to connect families to:
 - **Family Partners.** Family Partners are local residents who have successfully guided their children through the process of getting mental healthcare. These family peers are better able to build connections with other families. They can teach strategies to help remove fear and uncertainty. These Partners are coordinated by McDowell County's System of Care Collaborative.
 - **Care managers.** Through their health plans, Medicaid beneficiaries have access to care managers, who can help guide parents through the process of finding care. Just as important, the care manager will ensure that the mental healthcare the child receives is coordinated with their physical care and pharmacy needs.
4. **Building benefits awareness.** Health plans serving Medicaid beneficiaries offer additional benefits that may help cover any costs associated with receiving mental healthcare. These plans are continuing to communicate the availability of these benefits to their members across the county.

Convening Participants

Thank you to all of McDowell County's community and behavioral health leaders who joined i2i and the MCSD team for our convening:

- [Mental Health Transformation Alliance](#)
- [NC DHHS, Division of Child and Family Well-Being](#)
- [NC Families United](#)
- [NC Psychiatry Access Line](#)
- [NC Youth and Family Voices Amplified](#)
- [United Healthcare](#)
- [Vaya Health](#)
- [WellCare of North Carolina](#)