

Orange County: Putting Students at the Center of Mental Healthcare



Orange County Schools convening attendees in Hillsborough, NC, on May 4, 2023.

Our Orange Convening brought the school district's behavioral health team together with the county's mental health support network including community groups, care coordinators, insurance organizations, and NC DHHS to discuss how to more effectively deliver student mental healthcare.

Orange County Schools (OCS) needs more mental health resources. The behavioral health team, teachers, and staff had been assisting a larger number of students dealing with trauma prior to COVID—a situation the pandemic worsened. Participants were reporting high numbers of Psychogenic Nonepileptic Seizures, which are caused by psychological distress. On top of that, the system is finding that many students are still struggling to manage emotions coming out of the pandemic.

With a shortage of behavioral health counselors, OCS teachers have been working harder to help students. But with student needs growing, teachers' bandwidth narrowing—and the ever-present stigma that surrounds mental healthcare—reaching every child with timely care is difficult.

The OCS team prides itself on putting students first in everything they do. The challenge for convening attendees was to help keep students at the center of OCS's mental health delivery system with no additional resources.

Orange County Action Plan

Over the course of our 90-minute conversation, we worked with OCS to develop a student-centered action plan:

- 1. Invest in training.** Part of the care delivery process is the awareness that care is needed. Continuing to increase OCS staff knowledge about youth mental health and how to recognize

mental health warning signs and the most common forms of trauma is a priority. The NC Psychiatry Access Line and Alliance Health will work with the OCS team to provide the information it needs.

2. **Focus on resilience.** The OCS staff works mostly in reaction to the student needs it observes. An important aspect of a student-centered approach is being proactive—helping students address potential problems before they can escalate. To be more proactive, OCS will focus on teaching emotional wellness—or resilience—skills to teachers and students. It will also explore the process for allowing school counselors to bill for services through Medicaid. Establishing a process to allow school counselors, who maintain the same credentials as mental health counselors in private practice, to deliver more services for Medicaid beneficiaries will help ensure more proactive care can be delivered.
3. **Lean on the community.** Orange County’s network of mental health support organizations can help ensure OCS is using every community resource for its student's benefit. This includes engaging family partners, who are local residents who have successfully accessed mental healthcare for themselves or their children. These peers are better able to build connections with other families and help them make decisions about their care. Family partners are coordinated by Orange County’s existing System of Care Collaborative managed by Alliance Health.

Convening Participants

Thank you to all of Orange County’s community and behavioral health leaders who joined i2i and the OCS team for our convening:

- [Alliance Health](#)
- [AmeriHealth Caritas](#)
- [Carolina Complete Health](#)
- [Community Care of North Carolina](#)
- [Josh’s Hope Foundation](#)
- [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](#)
- [WellCare of North Carolina](#)