



# North Carolina Project AWARE

## Advancing Wellness and Resilience in Education

### Overview

North Carolina's Project AWARE is a collaboration between the NC Department of Public Instruction and the NC Department of Health and Human Services to develop a comprehensive plan of activities, services, and strategies for connecting youth and families to mental health services in three pilot school districts.

Project AWARE promotes innovative service delivery based on the recommendations of the [NC School Mental Health Initiative](#) for equitable access to high quality and well-coordinated mental health and substance abuse services including 1) continuum of supports and services, 2) strategies to foster sustainability, and 3) engagement of all stakeholders.

Project AWARE addresses the three tiers of mental health (promotion, prevention, and intervention) through a continuum of education, universal screening, and appropriate services and supports for all students in response to varying levels of need. Recognizing the interrelatedness of academic outcomes and mental health/well-being of students Project AWARE seeks to provide an embedded approach within an existing system (schools) versus fragmented and reactive approaches.

### Funding and Context

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) awarded grants to 24 US states/territories and the District of Columbia for a 5-year funding cohort for FY's 2018-2023. The Project AWARE grant serves to build state and local education agencies' capacity to develop a comprehensive, coordinated and integrated program to advance wellness and resilience in educational settings for school-aged youth.

The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Care Act established the Interdepartmental Serious Mental Illness Coordinating Committee (ISMICC). In December 2017, the ISMICC issued a Report to Congress that outlined five major areas of focus and recommendations intended to support a mental health system that successfully addresses the needs of all individuals with serious mental illness or serious emotional disturbance and their families and caregivers. Project AWARE addresses the Healthy People 2020 Mental Health and Mental Disorders Topic Area and aligns with the following ISMICC recommendations:

- 2.6 Prioritize early identification and intervention for children.
- 2.7 Use telehealth and other technologies to increase access to care.
- 2.9 Support family members and caregivers.
- 3.2 Make screening and early intervention among children and youth a national expectation.
- 3.5 Implement effective systems of care for children and youth throughout the nation.

### Partner Local Education Agencies (LEAs)

Three school districts were selected as Project AWARE pilot sites to create transformation zones to serve as models to scale sustainable mental health services throughout the state. The racial, ethnic, and socio-economic status of students in the pilot project sites reflects the

diversity of North Carolina's LEAs. In addition, these three pilot sites have a strong history of collaboration with the State Education Agency and local mental/behavioral health providers.

- Beaufort County Schools
- Cleveland County Schools
- Rockingham County Schools

## Goals and Outcomes

The NC Department of Public Instruction's Exceptional Children Division in collaborate with the NC Department of Health and Human Services has the following goals for Project AWARE:

1. Improve behavioral and psychological indices of school engagement and decrease school disciplinary events for preschool through 12<sup>th</sup> grade by implementing universal prevention activities within a Multi-Tiered System of Support.
2. Reduce school dropout, rate of attempted suicide, and substance abuse by increasing the number of at-risk students receiving supplemental and intensive mental health and substance use supports within a Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports.
3. Improve coordination and sustainability of mental health supports and services through increased family and community agency engagement.
4. Increase the knowledge and effective practice of all school staff in recognizing and responding to student mental health needs.

An external outcome evaluation will document the context of NC Project AWARE grant implementation, metrics to measure the fidelity of grant-related activities, performance outcomes, data collection schedules and plans, and data analysis procedures. The NC Project AWARE evaluation will share lessons learned in leveraging community partnerships, building district infrastructure and capacity, and best practice to inform North Carolina schools and communities interested in accomplishing similar goals to improve mental health awareness and responses.

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