



NJ4S:

Early Implementation Insights from a Statewide Youth Mental Health Initiative

*New Jersey Statewide Student Support Services
(NJ4S) Formative Report Submitted for Review*

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Executive Summary

The Department of Children and Families (DCF) launched the New Jersey Statewide Student Support Services (NJ4S) program in 2023 to address the current youth mental health crisis through a holistic, prevention-first approach. Utilizing a Hub and Spoke model, NJ4S provides tiered services to support students with diverse needs: universal prevention programs and small-group sessions with evidence-based programming delivered by Hub prevention consultants, and brief individual clinical support delivered by clinicians. With 15 Hubs covering all 21 counties, NJ4S aims to expand access to mental health resources and fill care gaps.

While not the sole solution for the youth mental health crisis, NJ4S is a vital component of a continuum of care designed primarily for prevention. NJ4S is a holistic program aimed at supporting students, their families and school faculty through a variety of services. The program provides general services open to the public for students of all grade levels, evidence-based group programming and brief clinical interventions for public middle and high school students. It offers families vital resources within schools and makes important connections to community resources as needed.

This report details findings based on qualitative data from 14 ethnographic observations, 35 in-depth interviews with key stakeholders, and 15 focus groups, complemented by quantitative data from an implementation survey taken by NJ4S staff. It highlights stakeholder and provider insights on youth mental health challenges, caregiver challenges, initial impressions, program strengths, program challenges, and future directions. Quantitative metrics detailing the reach and activities of NJ4S can be found in the NJ4S Annual Program Report ([NJ4S Annual Program Report, 2025](#)).

Program Strengths

- **Much Needed Program:** Acknowledged as essential in the context of post-pandemic recovery.
- **Experienced Hubs:** Leverages strong connections with schools and community partners for seamless integration and collaboration.
- **Open, Collaborative Culture of Learning:** Hub leadership and DCF staff cultivate a culture of learning and open dialogue to raise issues and problem-solve.
- **Credible Messengers:** NJ4S staff have personal experience to enhance trust and rapport with youth and families.
- **Holistic Prevention and Intervention Approach:** NJ4S offers skilled and comprehensive prevention and intervention services to youth, their families and educators that are tailored to local needs.
- **Expanded Inclusion:** NJ4S takes a customized approach to assessing the needs of each district such that schools can be provided the support they need across the state.
- **Participant Engagement:** Uses interactive methods to develop stress management and relationship-building skills.
- **Community-based Mental Health Support:** Employs “outside staff” with diverse experiences, helping students who may feel uncomfortable discussing sensitive topics with familiar school staff.
- **Supportive Environment:** Creates a welcoming atmosphere for youth, caregivers, and educators.

Program Challenges

- **Initial School Buy-in and Technology Challenges:** Early difficulties in establishing Hub-school relationships and navigating the NJ4S Connex Portal, the program’s MIS system, affected adoption and integration.
- **Obtaining Consent:** Barriers in communication and consent procedures between schools, parents, and Hubs reduced accessibility and participation.
- **Service Gaps for Younger Youth:** Adolescent target population for the Program limited early intervention and preventative efforts.
- **Mismatched Expertise:** Inconsistencies in matching facilitators’ skills and expertise with the needs of specific services.
- **Variations in Hub Culture and Leadership:** Differences in leadership styles across Hubs affected staff morale and engagement.
- **Marketing/Branding:** Marketing strategies have not yet reached all relevant stakeholders, resulting in less awareness and understanding of the program.

Opportunities for the Future

- **Broaden Services to Younger Students:** Expanding NJ4S offerings to include children below sixth grade can increase opportunities for prevention and equip young children with critical skills they will need to promote their own mental wellness in adolescence. Stakeholders emphasize the importance of early prevention, particularly for challenges like vaping and bullying, which increasingly affect younger demographics.
- **Augment Training for Prevention Consultants:** Provide training content for prevention consultants centered on equipping facilitators to manage tense situations and address moral or ethical issues not encompassed in existing curricula can improve staff's ability to handle varying and unanticipated responses in Tier 2 sessions.
- **Strengthen School and Community Engagement:** Strengthening relationships with schools, especially in areas where skepticism persists, is vital. Emulating successful Hub strategies, such as conducting in-person visits and offering tailored support through the NJ4S Connex Portal, may foster better engagement.
- **Streamline the Caregiver Consent Process:** Continue to find ways to streamline and automate the consent process to address the current inefficiencies and frustrations, thereby enhancing service accessibility and boosting participation rates.
- **Create Peer and Recreational Opportunities:** Collaborating with community partners to set up peer support groups and after-school programs for students can help mitigate social isolation and enhance community involvement, helping youth build genuine, supportive connections in their communities.
- **Foster Open and Collaborative Hub Culture:** Encourage NJ4S Hub leadership to engage in learning opportunities that emphasize development of a collaborative culture. This approach allows staff to freely share challenges and collaborate on solutions, enhancing collective problem-solving.
- **Leverage Hub Strengths:** Continue group learning exchanges to harness the strengths of successful Hubs. By analyzing data trends and sharing best practices, NJ4S can continue to strengthen outreach, enrollment, and service delivery efforts.
- **Expand Marketing and Outreach Efforts:** Enhance marketing strategies to increase awareness of NJ4S services among educators, community partners, youth, and caregivers. Consider attending educational conferences and requesting funds to launch a social media campaign to extend program reach.

Why Read Further:

- **In-Depth Analysis:** The full report delves into the nuances of these themes, providing a comprehensive understanding of NJ4S implementation.
- **Actionable Recommendations:** We provide suggestions for enhancing the effectiveness of NJ4S and addressing identified challenges.
- **Stakeholder Insights:** Detailed feedback from stakeholders offers a holistic view of the program's strengths and areas for improvement as well as key information on mental health and other issues facing youth and caregivers.

Introduction

Overview of the NJ4S Initiative

In September of 2023, the Department of Children and Families' (DCF) Division of Family and Community Partnerships (FCP) launched an ambitious initiative called the New Jersey Statewide Student Support Services (NJ4S) program. The goal of this initiative is to address the mental health crisis facing youth by prioritizing prevention-focused strategies. NJ4S employs a tiered approach for intervention that applies primary and secondary prevention strategies and evidence-based practices (EBPs) to support youth and promote their mental wellness. Moreover, NJ4S features an innovative "Hub and Spoke" model that enables 15 regionally dispersed Hub providers to receive requests from schools throughout the entire state of New Jersey. Hubs then respond to those requests with the deployment of services that address specific school needs in a way that equitably provides coverage.

Context and the Need for NJ4S

Youth in the United States are facing tremendous mental health challenges that appear to have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. A systematic review evaluating the effects of the pandemic on youth mental health found substantial increases in depression and anxiety symptoms compared to rates observed prior to the pandemic lockdown (Panchal et al., 2023). In 2023, 40 percent of U.S. high school students reported feeling consistently sad or hopeless, up from 30 percent in 2013 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023). In addition, from 2013 to 2023, one in five students seriously considered attempting suicide (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023).

Schools are an optimal place to address the youth mental health crisis. Children spend a significant amount of their time in school, and mental health is closely linked to academic achievement (McCurdy et al., 2022). While states have utilized varying methods to support student mental health in schools, few have implemented statewide prevention-focused models with diverse expertise, oversight, and staffing structures to sufficiently promote youth mental wellness (National Academy for State Health Policy, 2021).

Importance of NJ4S as a Prevention Program

Prevention as a Strategy for Addressing Youth Mental Health

Prevention is a promising avenue through which to address youth mental health challenges, facilitate wellness, and proactively detect and address emerging mental health issues to mitigate the need for more intensive services. All-too-often, school mental health is crisis-driven or reactive, rather than utilizing a systematic, preventive, and highly tailorable approach to identify and address student needs upstream (Crooks et al., 2022). Tiered, prevention-focused models, in particular, encourage healthy development for all students while coordinating more intensive supports for students with greater needs. Research consistently finds that preventive and promotive mental health interventions are cost-effective, resulting in reduced medical costs, improved academic progress, and lifetime increased earnings (Kumar, 2025). Preventive strategies have also been shown to reduce the need for long-term intervention, support student well-being, and elevate overall school climate (Kern et al., 2022).

Systemic Change and Community Integration

Systemic change means creating a deep shift in how an entire system works. This goes beyond fixing individual problems and, instead, changing the beliefs, behaviors, rules, and structures contributing to those problems. Achieving lasting change within the school mental health landscape means improving how those support systems are designed and delivered. Systemic change takes place when mental health is woven into the daily fabric of schools and communities-- not treated as an isolated, crisis-driven add-on. Integrating partnerships with community professionals and local resources into the school setting, as the NJ4S model does, helps to facilitate consistent, diverse support so that students have access to key mental health resources long before a crisis arises.

By prioritizing preventive measures that tackle the root causes of mental health issues, multi-tiered mental health systems enable the integration of support directly within schools and communities, ensuring that youth have consistent access to preventive care and early interventions which can significantly reduce the likelihood of mental health issues escalating (Fixsen et al., 2005). These integrations can include training teachers to spot early signs of distress, cultivating relevant services that engage students and families, or facilitating partnerships with community organizations to build a culture of prevention and mental wellness. NJ4S uses strengths-focused approaches to mental health support by reinforcing positive social aspects of health and addressing factors such as educational access, community support, job/career readiness, and financial literacy among youth and caregivers, to create environments that promote well-being and reduce mental health challenges (Solar & Irwin, 2010).

Over time, this approach helps to shift how schools, families, and communities view and address mental health, moving beyond crisis response to a more proactive and comprehensive system that centers targeted, consistent access to care, and long-term mental well-being. Empowering students, educators and communities through education and awareness is central to NJ4S's strategy, as increasing the collective understanding of mental health and reducing stigma encourages proactive engagement with mental health resources (Pescosolido et al., 2008).

In Tier 1 assemblies, for example, teachers, guidance counselors, caregivers and community members are given education and resources for how to talk with youth about mental health issues in a way that is non-stigmatizing, nor harmful, but rather encouraging and effective. Furthermore, NJ4S utilizes data-driven strategies to identify trends and evaluate the effectiveness of individual interventions, ensuring that preventive strategies are tailored to meet the specific needs of student populations, enhancing its overall impact and sustainability (Coie et al., 1993).

Program Structure and Goals

NJ4S utilizes an innovative “Hub and Spoke” delivery model that provides tiered services to students, parents, and school staff on core categories of social connections, classroom management/disruptive behaviors, job/career readiness and mental health. NJ4S aims to prevent bullying, absenteeism, suicide, substance misuse, and classroom expulsion. Goals for youth include healthy development; improved social, emotional, and behavioral functioning; expanded social connections; improved mental health; and increased resiliency. Comprised of 15 geographically dispersed “Hubs” staffed by social service providers, NJ4S covers all 21 counties in the state of New Jersey. “Spokes” are schools that can request an array of tiered services from the Hub in their geographical area, based on the unique needs of the youth they serve. Moreover, each Hub has its own Advisory Committee that includes local community leaders, community members, caregivers, youth, educators, and others who provide advice to the Hub on a variety of issues as well as providing linkages to community supports.

These services can take place within schools or within community settings, such as libraries, places of worship, and other community-based centers. Multi-tiered school mental health systems, or multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS), are a promising structure for implementing effective and comprehensive mental health services. This model aligns resources efficiently to promote the well-being of all students at Tier 1, identify students with social, emotional, and behavioral needs as they emerge, and respond promptly with targeted interventions at Tier 2, and coordinate more intensive, individualized support for students with greater needs at Tier 3 (Bohnenkamp et al., 2023).

Tier 1 Services

Tier 1 is the first level of prevention programming offered by NJ4S and is typically designed for large groups. Tier 1 services range from assemblies on the dangers of vaping to interactive drum circles designed to strengthen community connections, to presentations on how to identify early signs of depression that may lead to suicide. Programs and offerings are identified with the involvement of the Hub’s advisory group that includes students, parents, school representatives and community members. Tier 1 services are critical in raising awareness of issues and disseminating information to a variety of individuals that include youth, caregivers, educators, and community members.

Tier 2 Services

Tier 2 services are evidence-based or evidence-informed prevention programs that can be requested by schools for youth with a presenting problem or concern. These programs may be directed at a universal or targeted population of students. Prevention consultants facilitate workshops on emotions that may be troubling youth from sadness to anger to anxiety, and

emphasize skills and techniques to manage emotions, resolve conflicts, and problem-solve for situations that involve bullying. Tier 2 services provide youth approaching adulthood with an opportunity to connect with peers and learn problem-solving, stress reducing, and healthy lifestyle strategies. A few of the most requested services are: “Life Skills Middle School,” “Coping and Supporting Training (CAST),” “Safe Dates,” “Bullying Has Never Been Cool,” “Teen Mental Health First Aid,” “Social Skills,” and “Got Conflict?”

Through interactive videos, informative presentations, creative trust-building games, and guided journaling, prevention consultants work to provide a safe space for youth to talk about issues that may be bothering them. As trust is built over the course of several weeks, Tier 2 prevention consultants teach skills and techniques on how youth can best handle stressful situations, avoid decisions that may lead to dangerous outcomes, respond to situations that may make them angry, and build self-efficacy and resilience. Tier 2 services are also available for caregivers on topics such as “Active Parenting.”

Tier 3 Services

Tier 3 services are reserved for youth and caregivers whose mental health issues present as more serious in nature, requiring one-on-one counseling sessions with a clinician. If youth require additional support after Tier 3 services, Hub staff work to provide a “warm hand-off” to a community or peer support service, licensed clinician, or New Jersey’s Children’s System of Care (CSOC) for aftercare. In offering Tier 3 one-on-one counseling services within the school and community setting, NJ4S is filling a critical gap in the state. There is a well-documented shortage of licensed clinicians available in the private sector (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 2025; Health Resources and Services Administration, 2025), and some of the most economically vulnerable youth do not have stable health insurance, making licensed clinicians largely inaccessible.

Formative Evaluation

The Office of Applied Research and Evaluation (ARE), an independent research office within the DCF, partnered with FCP to design an evaluation of NJ4S. The evaluation includes two major components: a formative evaluation and an outcomes evaluation. The current formative phase of the evaluation focused on early learnings from the rollout and first two years of NJ4S implementation. The outcomes evaluation will take place in the next phase of evaluation, giving NJ4S time to adjust for the early implementation challenges that accompany any program.

Selection of Hubs, Interviews and Focus Groups

For the formative component of the evaluation, we selected five Hubs. The five Hub sites varied by geographic location (north, central, south), neighborhood type (urban, suburban, and rural), racial/ethnic/cultural diversity, implementation service volume, and socioeconomic indicators. Across these five Hubs, we facilitated 35 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with seven key stakeholder types in the following groups: youth, caregivers, Hub staff, Hub leadership, educators/school staff, community members/partners, and advisory committee members. We also facilitated a total of 15 focus groups (three in each selected Hub) inclusive of three specific groups: one group consisting of youth, another group consisting of caregivers, and a third group that combined educators, community members, and advisory committee members. The interviews and focus groups were designed primarily to gain insight into the issues facing youth,

caregivers, and communities; assess stakeholders' initial impressions of NJ4S and its ability to address those issues; identify the strengths and challenges of NJ4S; and identify areas for improvement.

Ethnographic Observations

In addition to the interviews and focus groups, we engaged in 14 on-site, ethnographic observations of NJ4S, three of Tier 1 and 11 of Tier 2 sessions, from March 2024 through December 2024. The goal of these observations was to gain first-hand insight into how the prevention consultants were facilitating the workshops, how participants responded to the lessons, what aspects of service delivery worked well, and what issues needed to be addressed to strengthen Tier 1 and Tier 2 service delivery. In this way, we were able to assess how well the EBP content and other service curricula were resonating with youth as well as how well the prevention consultant facilitators were able to form trusting relationships with youth and balance the lesson plan with organic issues that emerged from participants. We also observed how the community and school environment contributed to fostering services in a welcoming, engaging, comfortable, and inspirational setting. After each ethnographic observation, the observing team member composed detailed notes that were used to analyze themes and inform recommendations.

Implementation Survey

To learn more about the implementation of NJ4S, we created and administered an implementation survey, sent to all staff members at the 15 Hubs. A total of 217 staff members (63% of all staff) participated in the survey, which consisted of 76 questions. The survey explored a breadth of topics such as the expertise Hub staff held on youth issues; the kinds of trainings they participated in and found helpful; Hub staff's professional background; Hub recruitment, staffing, and cultural inclusivity; training and professional development; EBP selection; collaboration and communication with partners and other Hubs; organizational culture; advisory board committees; marketing and communications; program planning and scalability; and implementation challenges. Additionally, staff provided recommendations for improvement.

Implementation and Continuous Quality Improvement Teaming

Finally, since the inception of NJ4S, the evaluation team has attended team meetings with Hub staff and program partners to better understand the issues involved in implementation, while sharing themes and lessons learned from the evaluation in real time. We have assisted Hubs in learning how to use the Connex database system, providing hands-on technical assistance through a continuous quality improvement (CQI) effort to guide Hubs and program leads on how to interpret, analyze, and use data to improve service delivery.

Issues Facing Youth, Caregivers and Communities

Impact of COVID-19 on Emotions: Isolation, Depression, and Anxiety

Through our evaluation, we confirmed what many in the field hold to be true; the COVID-19 pandemic -- and resulting isolation, fear, and economic uncertainty -- appeared to influence youth, caregivers, and communities in negative ways. Specifically, several stakeholders suggested that COVID-19 led to increased use of social media, cyberbullying, and substance misuse, as youth grappled to find ways to cope with feelings of hopelessness, depression, anxiety, isolation, and trauma. Moreover, the emotional challenges facing youth did not “go away” when the pandemic lessened; these challenges remain as youth struggled with how to return to a “normal” that, for some, was a distant memory. One caregiver noted:

“I blame part of it on the pandemic. ... A lot of kids are isolating. They’re using social media platforms now. They’re smoking their weed. They’re sitting there, getting pictures of people and all kinds of craziness is going on. ... They don’t understand the ramifications of it. ... A lot of bullying and cybercrimes and things of that nature ... have gone through the roof” (Caregiver 4).

Similarly, another caregiver shared:

“I see these kids. They’re just flipping through the phone, you know? Four to five seconds, next, next, next. It’s ruining their attention span. It ruined grades in school. It created anxiety for a lot of children and families. ... I think a lot of anxiety and a lot of kids’ issues in today’s world comes from over stimulus, and over information, and unrealistic images and expectations of what they’re seeing online. ... Kids are struggling, young kids are struggling” (Caregiver 3).

In line with these caregivers’ concerns, an advisory committee member offered:

“The lasting impacts of the pandemic ... the anxiety, the isolation during such critical times. ... We know that social media can help in a way, but it also can be bad in a way. ... Anxiety has been one of the biggest reasons for our mobile response ... not wanting to go to school” (Advisory Committee Member 3).

As the stakeholders above noted, there is a concern that social media is negatively affecting the attention span, grades, and expectations of youth. Other stakeholders pointed to issues of cyberbullying and the deep anxiety and sadness that come over youth when they are “removed” from a social media chat, “blocked” by a friend they may have never even met in person, or worse, become the object of cyberbullying with personal attacks on their character, physical appearance, and unflattering images --all of which can lead to depression and low self-esteem.

Challenges in Social Interaction and School Environment

One community leader, who reported spending 20 years in the field, noted that for the first time in his career he is encountering a belief among some young people that they do

not need to pursue a traditional education because they can simply become millionaires as “social media influencers.” This community leader further noted that many young people do not have a “why” for attending school, they have little school spirit, are without a favorite teacher, and remain uninspired by the thought of sitting in a classroom. These perceptions were echoed by a youth who shared that there is very little school spirit or connection in his school:

“There’s no school spirit anymore. You get it from teachers too. ... We had a pep rally two days ago and it wasn’t that much spirit. ... I’ve also just seen kids, there’s no, I guess many of us don’t feel that. I don’t know why. Maybe it’s a loss of connection. Maybe we could bring back the pandemic or just being more on technology and not really valuing those personal or physical connections. ... I find myself spending more time on my computer. ... We’re not really creating friendships. ... I feel like when it comes to mental health, it’s really hard. ... You see them walk the halls, sometimes you see people worried, they don’t seem happy, they always seem to be down, or it seems like they’re going through really hard times” (Focus Group Youth 1).

While it is not clear how pervasive the loss of school spirit or tendency to underestimate the importance of face-to-face interactions and attending school may be among young people, in another interview, a young person noted that it takes an enormous amount of energy just to get themselves mentally prepared for face-to-face interactions. Some youth appear to worry about being made fun of, either in person or online, and corresponding “rumors” that can harm self-esteem. These youth tend to try to “blend in” and act “low key” to avoid possible negative attention.

Social Skills and Pro-Social Bonds

Related to the tendency to remain “low key” in social interactions, some youth exhibit a sense of futility, lack of enthusiasm and boredom. In a Tier 2 service observation, one young girl was described as “sinking into her chair.” This scene supports the point made by the community leader referenced above around youth lacking a “why” or inspiration for school. Others play the role of “class clown” in an attempt to persuade those who bully to appreciate their sense of humor and avoid bullying them. While we did not talk to youth who attempted to “act tough” to protect against bullying or those who were in services to address bullying behavior, we will continue to examine this issue in the future phases of the evaluation.

Part of the reason some youth experience challenges in social interactions may have to do with limited social skills or know-how needed to form genuine friendships or even co-exist in face-to-face settings. A community member shared:

“We’re seeing kids that don’t know how to be in a group setting. ... just being in a new environment with a group of peers is emotionally overwhelming. ... not knowing how to socialize... they all are experiencing sensory overload, like it’s just a lot of dysregulation a lot of inability to connect” (Community Member 2).

The remnants of COVID-19 appear to have seeped into the ability of some young people to form friendships and pro-social bonds in the form of positive peer support groups. Pro-social bonds

and positive peer support have long been shown to be critical for healthy development, the ability to do well in school, and the inclination to avoid negative outcomes such as not finishing school or involvement in the criminal legal system. Social isolation heightens the risk for adverse school-related outcomes and continues to plague students' experiences in school (Hooper et al., 2023).

Need for Trusted Adults and Peer Support

One caregiver was especially emotional when explaining the angst she felt over her daughter's inability to form even one cordial, genuine, in-person friendship. This caregiver's daughter was from a divorced household and was struggling with her father's lack of interest in seeing her, whom he referred to as a "disrespectful child" when she shared her hurt feelings. This caregiver lamented:

"[My daughter] was becoming so sheltered, withdrawn from peers. She doesn't have any friends. She doesn't talk to anybody. She just goes to school, comes home, goes to school, comes home. ... Little kid is a numb kid. She doesn't cry. She doesn't [do] nothing. ... She feels so depressed about the situation. She said she used pain to make her heart so hard" (Caregiver 2).

Moreover, other stakeholders have also underscored the challenges youth seem to have when it comes to being able to break out of their shells and form in-person friendships. Expanding upon the frustration expressed by the caregiver above, a young person explained that "trusted adults" and "peers" are needed to help youth open-up and talk about issues bothering them. This young person shared:

"I think just being able, like opening up that conversation ... the honesty and transparency that everyone needs ... just being able to have like more trusted adults in the building, more trusted people. ... peers or staff ... because [youth] shut themselves down when they feel they don't have anyone, or they feel they're alone. And that can go into suicidal [ideation] as well. Feeling alone" (Youth 4).

Another young person went into further detail about the need to not feel "alone" in her situation, and the need for a trusted community that enables her to feel a sense of belonging, being understood, and even closure. A young person expressed the following:

"I feel like a lot of people don't have somebody to actually go to and talk to about what they're struggling with. ... You know they have depression and anxiety ... they don't have someone close like that. ... [Youth need] more closure like they're not alone in what they're struggling with, you know? Because they don't know that other people are going through the same thing that they're going through" (Youth 2).

The term "struggling" came up organically many times in our interviews. This word is instructive in that it shows youth are trying to fight against something – here the impulse to succumb to emotions that may be hindering them – but they are not yet "winning" their battles. Similar to the experiences of youth shared above, one young person spoke of the importance of learning from fellow peers who have gone through similar struggles and having a peer support so that she does not feel alone. This young person shared:

“First of all, at school, it’s a struggle, right? I think ... it’s how you react to the struggle, right? ... It would be nice [to have peer support groups] because these people would be talking about their own experiences, and they would see that they’re not alone in their experience and there’s others struggling. And there’s people that have struggled with it but they’re now maybe doing a little better, and they can share what they’re doing about it so that those people can learn hopefully” (Youth 1).

Another youth shared:

“I feel like it definitely helps if you have somebody who is probably our age because when you see these older kids, the older kids are like, they try to teach you lessons ... versus if it’s somebody who’s going through the same thing as you and y’all are the same age. ... We can relate on things because we went through trauma. I went through trauma. We’re still both going through trauma. Why not help each other? You can build friendships out of it. So, I definitely feel like it helps a lot more to have somebody your age talking about it because it’s like, okay, I don’t feel alone” (Focus Group Youth 2).

Socio-Economic Challenges

Beyond the emotional needs of youth, caregivers and community members also noted that they were struggling with mental health challenges of their own – namely stress and anxiety – over the very concrete need to be able to put food on the table in a difficult economic climate. One advisory committee member shared: “families here are struggling with rising housing costs and food costs. And I think there’s people working two or three jobs, you know, families. ... Poverty is a huge issue ... that impacts all of us” (Advisory Committee Member 1). An educator added very frankly: “a majority of our kids grow up in poverty” (Educator 5). Similarly, a community member offered: “we are watching young people go from youth who are homeless to young adults who are homeless” (Community Member 1). Another advisory committee member echoed: “the economic climate for our families, as far as housing insecurities and food insecurities obviously impacts our youth and our families” (Advisory Committee Member 3).

In addition to exacerbating the stress that youth experience, economic and housing challenges can limit caregivers’ ability to tend to the emotional needs of their children. In a focus group with Latino caregivers, we learned that many are simply not even home to talk through emotional issues with their children. With so many caregivers working two and three jobs, youth often find themselves “alone” with no one to talk with about their feelings. Latino caregivers implored us to ask NJ4S to work with community officials to help with this issue. One man asked if sports programs could be brought back into impoverished areas, and if trusted adults could pitch in to coach and mentor their children after school. The sentiment of the caregivers was also expressed in other settings. A community member shared: “parents are working long hours, and, you know, it’s tougher to have those [mental health] conversations nowadays. ... A lot of caregivers will look to schools to be those solutions” (Community Member 4).

Stigmatized Views of Mental Health

Some youth described the shame associated with talking about mental health issues and feelings of being judged, experiencing depression and anxiety. One young girl shared:

“A lot of people say that mental health is fake. They say it’s for people who are lazy like. ‘Oh, you’re not depressed, you don’t have anything to be depressed about,’ but they don’t see how much you could go through as a child. They don’t remember how they struggled as a teenager too. It’s just ‘oh, depression, you’re lazy. You just don’t want to get out of bed. Oh, you’re sad, you’re not depressed. You don’t know what that feels like. Anxiety? You don’t have anything to be anxious about. ... It’s really sad because in [impoverished] areas they don’t have the best education system. ... Don’t have teachers who are passionate about teaching. ... It’s just fights, it’s gangs, it’s guns, it’s threats, it’s an unsafe environment, and you’re not learning there, you’re kind of drifting by, you’re going with the flow” (Focus Groups Youth 2).

In the quote above, the young girl lifted up the importance of de-stigmatizing mental health issues and correcting the view held by peers and teachers that tend to blame youth for their struggle to overcome emotions and issues of mental health. This is an important issue to address. Youth who are struggling with emotions and mental health issues need to feel comfortable coming forward and asking for help. And when they do muster up the courage to attend school and participate in activities, it is important that they receive encouragement (rather than discouragement) as they navigate through their mental health journey.

Initial Impressions of NJ4S

“A Much-Needed Program”

In qualitative interviews and focus groups, we asked stakeholders about their initial perceptions of NJ4S. Stakeholders described a real need for a program that could assist with youth mental health issues, post COVID-19. One caregiver stated:

“Initially I didn’t know about it [NJ4S]. We noticed that our daughter was struggling a little bit for about a year and a half or two years. ... We had problems finding good counseling for her. The school counselor ... finally told us about the program. ... The [NJ4S Clinician] is great and this program ... is really a Godsend... because it’s really a struggle. Kids are struggling, young kids are struggling and there’s not nearly enough resources for young kids right now” (Caregiver 3).

Passionate Stakeholder Endorsement

The sentiment among many stakeholders is that NJ4S is a “much needed” program. A Hub staff member shared:

“I’m very, very passionate about this program and I’m just very happy that this program exists, especially with everything that happened with COVID and everything. ... I go on these meetings, and I start to hear what’s going on with kids and they’re so young and it’s like, wow, thank God. ... middle school and high school, that’s when they can get in real trouble, and it just takes one thing to change the whole course of your life. So, I’m happy that there are resources available to these kids” (Hub Staff 4).

A community member shared their initial thoughts of NJ4S:

“I was excited to see NJ4S once I learned what the program was designed to do, and to address mental health needs for young people and students, in particular. ... This is very much needed, so I was thrilled. ... NJ4S for us, now we’re able to do that, and we’re literally saving young people. ... So, I think this program is amazing” (Community 1).

Overcoming Barriers to Access

As the caregiver above noted, the ability to secure mental health services is not always seamless. Among the issues facing youth and caregivers are lengthy waitlists to see a counselor; a shortage of child and adolescent psychiatrists; lack of insurance or coverage by insurance plans; and challenges related to transportation and travel (AACAP, 2025). Thus, the idea that high quality mental health services could be provided within school and community settings is a blessing for many families. As one educator shared, “it is not easy for guidance counselors in schools to address the myriad needs of youth.” This educator expressed: “I love that the state is trying to get involved ... it’s really hard sometimes as a counselor in a school to be able to give a student [support] each week. So, to have someone come in, it takes the pressure off” (Educator 3).

Innovative "Hub and Spoke" Model

Community members and program participants praised the NJ4S model as a state-wide program with a unique "Hub and Spoke model" through which coverage could be "dispatched" to schools to deliver interventions based on local needs. Stakeholders highlighted the program's ability to create connections within the community, making resources more familiar and accessible to both schools and families. One Hub staff member shared: "I feel our main focus is to be that Hub and Spoke, so we hear everything that's happening in the community and then we're able to refer out to all of our different partnerships to be able to provide that support, from my understanding" (Hub Staff 5). NJ4S's approach was celebrated for its widespread applicability and ability to address targeted issues.

Reflecting on the Hub and Spoke model, a Hub leader shared: "I feel like what I've observed is just a lot more collaboration with community providers and community Spokes... weaving those already existing services that have been there for years into their communities, into the schools" (Hub Leadership 3). Overall, the NJ4S Hub and Spoke model stands as an innovative framework, with the potential to effectively bridge resources and communities to address multifaceted challenges faced by today's families. NJ4S does the research and outreach to ensure that the appropriate community resources are identified and linked to youth and caregivers such that the stakeholders are not on their own in this process.

"Flexibility" and Engagement

Among some of the common adjectives used to describe NJ4S, upon initial impression, stakeholders were quick to point out the "flexibility" of NJ4S and its ability to target interventions to truly meet the needs of communities as opposed to employing a one size fits all approach. A Hub staff member noted, "I'm like, my impressions, like, wow, this is a fantastic program. ... We had this flexibility to go out and create things that met the needs of mental health in the community we're in. So, it's been a really great experience" (Hub Staff 3).

A community member shared: "everyone that I've encountered has been super engaged, very responsive, very engaged, and very willing to be flexible to kind of meet our environment and needs" (Community Member 2).

An educator similarly shared their initial impressions of NJ4S as an engaging program, describing a prevention consultant's interactive "shooting a hoop" exercise used to elicit answers to questions:

"They ran a session where they came in for two days over the course of two weeks. ... They did sessions on study skills, work habits, and time management. They made it engaging – the kids kind of shooting a hoop to answer questions, and it was just very well received from both the teachers and the students. And I was able to share that information with parents" (Educator 4).

Finally, a community member commented on NJ4S's efforts to engage multiple stakeholders to share information and resources relevant to youth mental health. "NJ4S is present at many community events, building their presence and engaging caregivers. They are trying to help parents, youth, schools, and the community at large" (Community Member 3).

Strengths of NJ4S

Hub Agencies

Stakeholders highlighted many strengths that illustrate the unique value of NJ4S. First, many of the Hubs selected to implement this program were described as having a great deal of experience, knowledge, competency, and understanding related to working on youth mental health issues as well as a strong reputation and presence within their communities. This was considered an asset, particularly during the start-up phase, in the first year of implementation. One Hub leader commented:

“We definitely hit the ground running. [Our agency] has been around for over 30 years now and doing prevention work, so we have a lot of relationships. And we have an education department that was already doing some of the Tier 1 work with schools.” (Hub Leadership 1).

Established Relationships and Rapid Implementation

Another Hub leader echoed the sentiment about the ability of their agency to “hit the ground running” given their well established, trusting relationships. They shared:

“We were able to pick up the phone right away and say: ‘listen, I just accepted the position as Director of NJ4S. ... I’m looking for AB and C. ... I need space for, you know a meet and greet. ... I need folks on my advisory group that know what they’re talking about and that are really invested in youth and families. ... And they’re like ‘we can help you with that.’ ... And that is amazing. Relationships make the difference” (Hub Leadership 4).

Further exemplifying the importance of the relationship between Hub staff and school officials, during an ethnographic observation of Tier 2 workshop, we noticed that school officials attended the workshop graduation and had a very cordial relationship with Hub staff. This seemed to have an effect on the youth who felt supported not only by the Hub but also by their school principal and other officials. This underscores the need for all Hubs to work on forging strong relationships with school officials. Not only do these relationships promote effective service delivery, but they ensure that a partnership is in place such that youth are insulated with support from many trusted adults.

Collaborative Culture and Open Communication

In addition to the Hubs’ prior experience with youth issues, reputation within their communities, and relationships with school officials, many of the Hubs had a highly collaborative culture both within their organizations and in working with partners. This fostered an open dialogue wherein staff members of all positions felt free to lift up and trouble-shoot issues that may be impeding success. These findings align with the literature on school mental health programming, which contends that integrated school mental health systems similar to NJ4S have a unique capacity for collaboration and shared decision-making overall (Zhang et al., 2024). Reflecting this sense of collaboration within one Hub, a staff member shared: “our environment here is very open to

people voicing their opinions, concerns on having a voice. And I think people feel comfortable. They do feel supported.”

As a corollary to the relationship and stature of Hubs, another strength was that many Hubs had prior experience implementing EBPs and mental health services. A Hub leader noted: “we have mental health services; we’re very solid in terms of that social work approach ... meeting people in the environment, looking at what those environmental factors are that are impacting quality of life, and then really addressing that” (Hub Leadership 2).

Hub Staff as Credible Messengers

Hub leaders frequently commented on the subject matter knowledge, agility, and tenacity that NJ4S clinicians and prevention consultants bring to their work. Some further noted the importance of bringing on staff members who have “lived experience” and can serve as “credible messengers” as they grew up in a community like the one served or shared a similar background to the students served through NJ4S.

Building Trust with Youth, Families, and Schools

Hub staff placed a great deal of importance on staff members not giving up on youth who may be a little “tough” or show signs of difficulty opening up, noting that sometimes all youth really need is a trusted person to listen to them. One Hub staff member shared:

“You have some kids that are tough and their [Hub staff member] is able to eventually break them down and get to them. ... They may fight you, you know, so forth, but the team is able to, you know... try to figure out really one-on-one what like what was going on with you that day? ... Sometimes all these kids want to do is have somebody listen to them” (Hub Staff 2).

NJ4S Hub leadership emphasized the importance of understanding and addressing the specific needs of each school community. As one Hub Director noted, rather than offering a one-size-fits-all program, NJ4S seeks to understand the unique challenges faced by each school and tailor its programming accordingly: “What are the needs you’re seeing? How can we create programming? How can we use our evidence-based curriculums to meet the needs that you’re seeing?” (Hub Leadership 3). This approach fosters buy-in from school administrators and teachers and strengthens relationships across the state.

By leveraging the lived experiences of its staff and prioritizing the voices of schools and communities, NJ4S built trust and created meaningful connections to enhance its effectiveness.

Relatability and Connection

Echoing this sentiment, an educator noted how NJ4S is not afraid to get down on the floor, a symbolic action showing they are not “above” the youth; they are “with them” and they are willing to meet them on their level. They shared:

“I like the live action, like somebody coming in, sitting on the floor, emotional things. ... NJ4S, they’ll get down to the level needed in order for students to understand. ... When they came, I was like ‘Ok. This is cool.’ ... Sometimes you

need to talk to them the way they know how to be talked to ... their level” (Educator 1).

Further emphasizing this point, one educator shared:

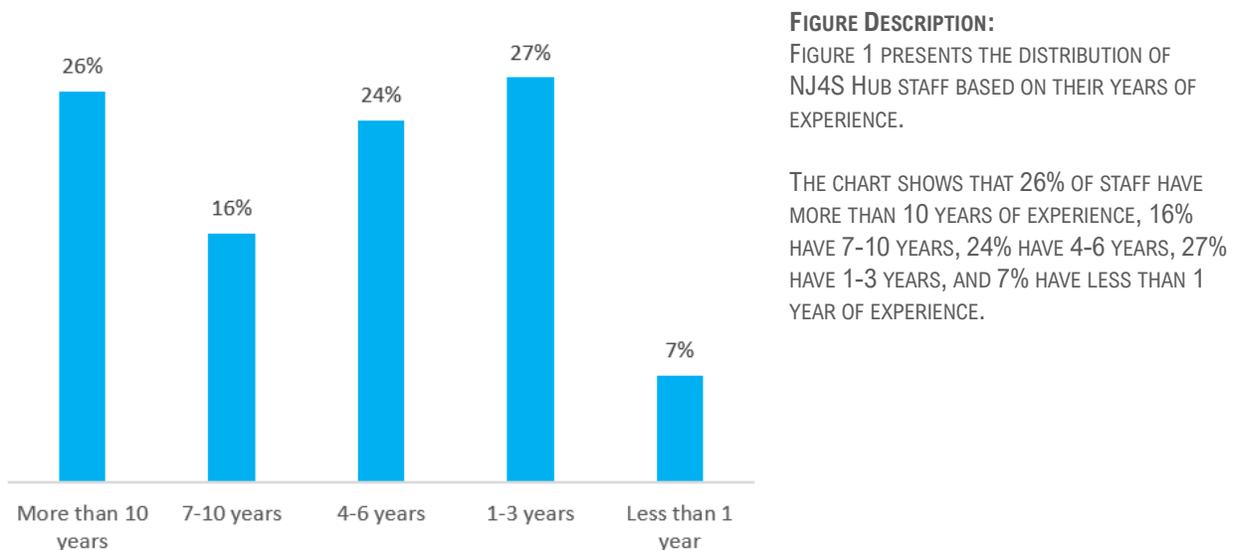
“They’re professionals, and they’re clinicians. ... They understand the needs of our school pretty well. ... Some of them were born and raised in [community]. ... They have that understanding. ... From what I’ve seen, all of the clinicians and staff there have been able to, you know, reach those kids” (Educator 2).

A community member further commended the decision of NJ4S to bring on younger prevention consultants who can relate to youth. They noted, “The younger staff can relate to what the students are going through and have been able to engage them effectively” (Community 3). The ability of NJ4S staff to connect with participants through lived experience and genuine engagement highlights a significant strength of the program.

Hub Staff Skills and “Incredible Wealth of Knowledge”

The skills and credibility of Hub staff as messengers allows effective delivery of mental health services and support within the community. According to our implementation survey, most NJ4S Hub staff members joined the program with several years of experience working with youth issues. Sixty-five percent of staff had more than three years of experience, with 25 percent having over 10 years (see Figure 1). Their prior experience serves as a solid foundation for the delivery of impactful services, helping to ensure that staff are well-prepared to handle a variety of situations and connect meaningfully with youth.

Figure 1. Hub Staff Years of Experience Working with Youth Issues



In addition to their existing expertise, to maximize their ability to deliver Tier 2 services effectively, many Hub staff members attended specialized training such as motivational

interviewing to further harness their abilities to engage a group and learn how to lead sessions effectively. While the degree to which each Hub staff member participated in trainings varied, facilitators who listened openly, as can be taught through trainings, are often able to build a strong rapport with youth and caregivers and facilitate the lessons with efficacy.

Interactive Facilitation Techniques

Many of the Hubs used interactive facilitation techniques in order to engage students and ensure their ongoing participation in activities. In an ethnographic observation of a Tier 2 service, we noted a cordial staff-youth relationship wherein the eyes and faces of the youth visibly “lit up” with enthusiasm upon seeing their prevention consultants. This service consisted of a small group with just four youth participating. The prevention consultants were very relatable, engaging, and interactive in delivering the lesson plan. They began with a warm “check-in” on how the boys were feeling.

Effective facilitation practices included a combination of “physical touch” in the form of “high fives” and a “trust fall,” and creating space for deeper or more vulnerable conversations. Once such instance included a reading and analysis of a sensitive poem about child abuse featured in the movie *Antwone Fisher* , and personal time for journaling. At one point, when the boys’ attention began to drift, the prevention consultants brought them back into focus by saying: “let’s lock in,” a phrase that shows their ability to connect in ways the boys valued.

However, such practices were not necessarily consistent across facilitators or Hubs. While factors such as geographic region, level of poverty, size the of the group, and relatability of the EBP materials may be at play, it was clear that trusting relationships forged by the prevention consultants played a significant role in youth engagement in NJ4S activities. This highlights the importance of not only utilizing EBPs but also ensuring that facilitators can effectively relate and connect with youth, bringing the material to life in meaningful ways.

Hub Training on EBPs

When determining which staff members will facilitate the requested Tier 2 services, some Hubs emphasized the importance of staff members practicing EBPs and other workshops before delivery to youth and identifying which staff members are best suited for Tier 2 topics. As one interviewee noted, "For me personally, I think the level of training is unbelievable and we have staff that are so well supported and so well trained to do their jobs" (Hub Leadership 2). Another Hub leader shared:

“Prevention consultants were trained in every evidence-based program (EBP) we were using. ... And then we saw what they do in ‘teach backs.’ So they teach whatever they’re presenting. ... I pop in and give my two cents. ... We’re like: ‘that’s who we want to present this topic. She’s passionate about that topic.’ ... Prevention consultant supervisors knew ... who [was] good at what and where their strengths lie” (Hub Leadership 4).

Additionally, the emphasis on ensuring staff are confident implementing EBPs was highlighted by another participant: "We've actually done several trainings to make sure that when they go into these schools and so forth that they feel confident and are able to implement these evidence-based practices with fidelity” (Hub Staff 2).

In summary, NJ4S Hub staff are equipped with an incredible wealth of knowledge and experience, bolstered by specialized training in EBPs and interactive facilitation techniques. Their deep expertise allows them to connect meaningfully with recipients of NJ4S programming, fostering trust and engagement in all Tiers of service. The emphasis on effective training and the strategic selection of staff to lead these services ensures that the programs are delivered with confidence and impact.

Accessing NJ4S Services

One novelty of NJ4S is its ability to provide services from Hubs to spokes (in school or community settings) by submitting requests through an electronic information management system, Connex. We learned that many individuals found it easy to request and receive services. This was especially the case when Hub staff were able to visit schools in person, pull up a computer, and help school staff navigate through the system in a very hands-on manner. In addition to requesting services through Connex, some school representatives and Hubs have formed collaborative working relationships and often engage in telephone conversations to discuss the need for services.

Many stakeholders, from educators to parents to community members, noted that Hub staff members were friendly, engaging, positive, and helpful. The combination of a robust Connex database system wherein service requests can be received, assessed, dispatched, and tracked efficiently, along with the informative, collaborative, and personable nature of Hub staff members has led NJ4S to fulfill the needs of many schools comfortably. One educator shared:

“I personally feel very comfortable reaching out and saying, you know, this is what I’m thinking for this year. Is this something that you know you’d be able to do? Do you have the expertise? ... The team will say ‘yes, this is something we could potentially do.’ ... Very easy to have a conversation with and share ideas”
(Educator 4).

This sentiment of ease and comfort in communication was echoed by other educators, highlighting the willingness of NJ4S staff to engage in open dialogue and collaboratively explore solutions.

Requesting and Accessing Services

Echoing the sentiments expressed by the educator above, many youth and caregivers reported ease in requesting NJ4S services at school and accessing these services. Caregivers and youth are able to speak with guidance counselors and school representatives to request NJ4S services on their own behalf. Of those who did advocate for themselves to receive NJ4S services, many found the process “comfortable” and “easy.” Reflecting the sentiment of one young person who stated: “yes, I felt very comfortable” (Youth 5), a caregiver also noted the ease of requesting services for their daughter:

“...it wasn't difficult to be honest with you... I read you guys brochure... And I spoke with the guidance counselor and from there we had a good dialogue. We

communicated and we had that communication. Therefore, we just started the program from there” (Caregiver 2).

While some youth did express initial hesitancy requesting services, many more stressed the ease in requesting services. After initial engagement in services for one reason, for example, depression, young people often felt able to lift up additional issues after trust was built with their NJ4S Hub staff member. One young person shared: “If I need help, I’m fine, because if I need help, I’m gonna ask for you” (Youth 2). Moreover, several educators echoed not only the simplicity in requesting services and accessing services for students but also how NJ4S staff facilitated that ease:

“... I’m very comfortable...I’m always comfortable with participating in helping wherever I’m needed...I think it was a relatively smooth process because although we may have been the initiators of the referrals or just setting them up or whatever we’re doing, but also I think [the] NJ4S representatives that we had, they also did... their part by just reaching out and following up with them as well“ (Educator 5).

Welcoming and Belonging

In addition to the contentment noted by the educator quoted above, youth and caregivers shared a similar sentiment of satisfaction and even belonging when describing their interactions with Hub staff. One youth shared:

“It was a welcoming environment. ... I’m afraid of new things. But as soon as I got more into the flow of everything, it definitely was welcoming and comfortable. ... It’s so easy to talk to her [Hub staff member]. ... She felt open to hearing all your experiences” (Youth 3).

Continuing with the theme of NJ4S providing a welcoming environment, in ethnographic observations of Tier 1 and Tier 2 services, we found that the space services were delivered in could impact engagement. For example, when services were delivered in spaces that were inspirational, warm, and welcoming – some featuring children’s artwork, bold colors, motivational posters – youth sometimes had a more positive experience.

Some youth also mentioned feeling comfortable talking with NJ4S (as an outside of school program) rather than an in-house guidance counselor whom they see every day. There is a certain sense of embarrassment that can come over young people when they feel they’ve shared something vulnerably with someone whom they have to see every day, those who have the ability to talk with their teachers and principal about issues, and those who are responsible for grading them. While NJ4S can and has made referrals if a young person reports an issue that rises to the level of concern, the point remains that some youth reported feeling more comfortable talking with NJ4S staff than someone from inside their school.

Youth Satisfaction and Support for Emotional Management

As a result of the positive interactions with Hub staff and the lesson shared through curricula, many young people reported being very happy with NJ4S. One youth shared: “I’m definitely

satisfied. ... A lot of the resources I was given, definitely, I still use right now, and it helps me” (Youth 3). Similarly, a parent gave high praise to NJ4S in its ability to help her daughter who was struggling with severe isolation, anxiety, and depression. She noted:

“The service was nothing but exceptional. ... The person we interacted with was really amazing. She didn’t short on anything. ... She communicates throughout the entire process to see if I see any improvement [in my daughter]. ... My daughter is not an emotional child. She never used to give hugs. She never used to give kisses. ... With the [NJ4S] session she came out showing a lot of emotion. ... Like now, she lives for kisses. She lives for hugs. ... I believe whatever the person [Hub staff member] was doing with her, she just looked at it and offered a different angle” (Caregiver 2).

Another youth who was seeing a private therapist after a friend passed away had a therapist discontinue work with her due to insurance issues. After having developed a rapport and explained her issues, she felt dismissed with no other private therapist available to help her outside of NJ4S. While this youth was initially reluctant to begin seeing a one-on-one counselor with NJ4S due to having felt betrayed by her last counselor, she agreed to give the program a try with her mother’s urging. The youth ended up having a very positive experience with NJ4S. She noted:

“I used to have a lot of anger issues. I was very hot headed. I didn’t want to talk to people. I was very rude, very nasty. ... So, she [Hub staff member] helped me just looking at the positive side; it’s not always bad. ... She would come in, offer me a snack. She would ask how my day was, how my week was, any updates. ... Then we would always play Uno. ... The way she played it was like ‘okay, well if you throw a red card, you gotta tell a happy memory.’ ... I really enjoyed it because it made me talk, it made me think. It’s like you’re in a competitive mind state, but it’s calming, it’s fun” (Focus Group Youth 2).

Like the experience of the young person expressed above, another young girl noted that NJ4S Hub staff provided critical skills and techniques that she was able to incorporate into her life even after her sessions ended. She emphasized that these skills were essential in teaching her how to stay calm in stressful situations. She shared:

"There was a lot going on at the time when I was in the program. ...[NJ4S] helped guide me and give me resources on how I could calm myself down because I was really stressed. [NJ4S offered] different ways I could kind of distract myself, but also like get away from everything for a little bit just so I could ease my mind. ... I still use those things to this day ...they're really helpful” (Youth 3).

Prevention and Intervention Programming Based on Local Needs

In a state with significant geographic, socioeconomic, and cultural diversity, another benefit of NJ4S is its ability to provide both prevention and early intervention services that are responsive to local needs. We learned that many stakeholders found the needs assessments that Hubs

conducted enhanced their ability to effectively meet local needs. As a Hub advisory committee member shared:

“I would say [the] strengths are that I feel like the programming is really geared towards that teenage level. I think they really get it. What the kids need... I think they've done the research to know what's needed in [Hub County] specifically, and that's what will make them successful even going forward. Just keeping a pulse on the kids” (Advisory Committee Member 3).

Further illustrating this exceptional strength and how this data productively supports relevant, valuable programming, one Hub leader noted:

“Being able to ... just really hear from parents at parent support groups that we're running or hearing from school representatives or hearing from school superintendents about what the needs are in the county and then being able to say 'we can do that. We can devise this program, we can run this evidence-based group, you know, we can offer these supports'...Like all that really takes that grassroots need and pulls it all together. That's what I love about the program” (Hub Leadership 3).

Similarly, in utilizing local needs and feedback to inform programming, another strength of NJ4S is the holistic service approach that encompasses both prevention and intervention to meet those needs. One leader shared: “So we're really covering the whole spectrum of prevention work and the clinical intervention that is so well needed” (Hub Leadership 1). Likewise, we learned that many stakeholders stress the importance of prevention while many also recognized the novel comprehensive approach of delivering both. As one community member stated:

“...The more preventative and the more upfront we can get early engaged with these youth, the better outcomes are gonna be in. I see NJ4S as part of that kind of trying to start to get a little bit of upstream ... not just the reactive nature... It's good to see that framework for that early intervention” (Community member 4).

Moreover, many stakeholders and particularly those more experienced in prevention services and science as well as youth services stressed the importance of prevention. Several Hub leaders have gone so far as to educate schools around the importance of preventative programming during consultations. One Hub leader shared:

“...[One] thing that that I've observed and has been really successful is changing that culture of--so when we would get referrals last September, they all came in as you know, this kid needs counseling...This kid needs mental health counseling. Changing that education piece of that. Not everyone rises to the level of needing mental health. Tier 3 counseling supports has been really significant in our county. The schools are understanding the shift through ... our message that not everyone rises to that level. Let's put them in a prevention group. You know and ... go from there...So that's been really positive” (Hub Leadership 3).

Expanded Prioritization of Schools

Another unique strength of NJ4S is the use of a comprehensive index to prioritize schools based on different types of school and community-based needs. Many stakeholders, especially ones with experience in prevention services within the local communities, praised NJ4S for giving important attention to schools that do not always receive services. As one Hub leader stated:

“...for example, you say high risk. Everybody says as [Towns in Hub Vicinage]. They know it...they can spew out those communities. Oh, that's where you need it, so that's where the funding goes for prevention... We have 13, under NJ4S high risk communities, that's huge. Because that right there tells the other communities you're important. You're just as important as these four communities, and that has sent a different message out. So NJ4S is really different in that aspect because the way they saw the needs of the county in the community were different. ...they expanded that high-risk area... So, there's a lot more schools... these other fundings don't see it as a high-risk community. The state has broken that barrier” (Hub Leadership 4).

While praised by many NJ4S stakeholders, some were also quick to point out that regardless of school need level and prioritization, services were provided for all levels of need. One Hub staff member noted:

“We need to be in these communities based on high, low, moderate [need]. But I will say we're really good... whether they were considered low, moderate [or] high, we kind of went into all of them... We were able to meet the needs, whether it was a low [needs] school ... we were able to meet the needs of all the different levels” (Hub Staff 3).

Challenges of NJ4S

A Novel Program

As stated earlier, NJ4S was a new initiative with a unique “Hub and Spoke” model. Whenever a new model is introduced, there is a planning phase that sometimes involves changing aspects of the program such as eligibility criteria. Some partners felt a sense of uncertainty as to how NJ4S would be implemented, how much time would be needed to ensure service delivery, and how the model would address the needs of youth and other stakeholders. Even a student mentioned, “sometimes it is hard to like really get into a school and for them to listen and be supportive of the services right away” (Student 4).

To address the newness of the NJ4S model, Hubs worked diligently to establish collaborative relationships with School Assistance Counselors (SACs) within schools. These efforts were aimed at ensuring that the NJ4S services complemented existing school resources rather than being perceived as a replacement. Hub staff mentioned that the approach helped alleviate concerns and highlight the program's capacity to enhance, rather than compete with, the efforts of SACs.

School Engagement Barriers

When building relationships with schools and communities, many Hubs adopted a proactive, hands-on approach. They actively visited school representatives, cultivated strong connections, and followed up with phone calls to gain deeper insights into the needs of the youth. Some Hubs even went on site to schools with a computer to help school representatives understand how to navigate the NJ4S Connex portal and request services, which affected the integration and ease of accessing services. Hubs participated in CQI meetings improving their ability to provide technical support and training for school representatives. Even Hubs with this proactive approach, however, sometimes faced difficulties reaching certain schools for a variety of reasons that may include lack of time, resources, knowledge of NJ4S, and/or infrastructure. NJ4S has made strides in overcoming these engagement barriers through direct parent engagement at school events and proactive relationship-building.

School Non-Engagement

Some schools throughout NJ have yet to engage in NJ4S services or return the phone calls of Hub staff. The reasons for non-engagement may vary from lack of knowledge of NJ4S, to a feeling that their school does not need NJ4S services, to a misunderstanding of the merits of NJ4S as a program. Related to the perception that NJ4S may not be needed was the idea that schools were already doing something to try to address the issues NJ4S was designed to cover, and that NJ4S could potentially usurp those inside school efforts. One Hub Staff member noted: “there was sometimes friction in the sense that maybe there is already someone in the school and they feel threatened that we're gonna take over” (Hub Staff 4). However, through communication with schools, NJ4S was able to explain how NJ4S is a value add: differing from and expanding upon existing services. This relationship building process tended to open up the dialogue, making schools more receptive to NJ4S services. This was especially the case when relationship between NJ4S and the district SACs was strong, as schools became less anxious that their inside school services would be replaced. A Hub Leader explained: “I think there was a

barrier to overcome, and we overcame it...because people trust us and why we're here. We're here to work with you. What can we do for you? What can we do together?" (Hub Leadership 4).

Caregiver Consent Processes

In addition to issues Hubs face regarding engagement, an important challenge shared by many stakeholders centered on the complexities involved in gaining caregiver consent for NJ4S services. There are several forms that need to be reviewed and signed by a caregiver prior to a young person participating in NJ4S. Given that some caregivers have busy schedules, and some may hesitate when it comes to signing formal documents, the consent process caused delays, frustration, and possibly even lower rates of participation. During one interview, a Hub Staff member offered a promising practice to address these issues. They shared: "we attended nearly every back-to-school event, which was the best way to reach caregivers because they were present. Once we explained the program... parents sign [the consent forms] immediately after learning about the services" (Hub Staff 2). This proactive approach of engaging caregivers directly at school events has been one strategy employed to streamline the consent process.

Age Eligibility for NJ4S Services

Some key stakeholders also noted scalability of NJ4S. One challenge, as discussed earlier, is that NJ4S does not serve elementary school students under grade six. Those who suggested expanding NJ4S to younger grade levels shared an awareness of research stating that prevention works best when children are reached in their early years. One parent shared:

"Why can't we go in and start with the younger age and more for prevention? Sadly, I hate to tell you, intervention is also needed on the elementary school level. ... You have a lot of nine- and 10- year- olds vaping away. ... You have a lot of nine- and 10- year- olds vaping away. It's easy to access. ... So, the earlier you start with prevention when it comes to ... bullying, substance use, mental health ... sexual health, the sooner the better" (Caregiver 4).

Despite the model of not serving students below grade six, Hubs from the evaluation described proactively using Tier 1 services to extend their reach to younger audiences and the broader community. By organizing community-wide events, workshops, and informational assemblies, Hubs aimed to raise awareness about mental health and prevention strategies among younger children and their families.

Hub Culture and Capacity

We identified variation in the culture and capacity of Hubs. While many Hub staff and Hub leaders reported a strong degree of prior youth experience, connections to schools and community partners, and an open, collaborative culture, some Hub staff and leaders reported the opposite. The latter group shared that the culture of their Hub was not very collaborative and was perceived to have a top-down structure that tended to stifle the expression of opinions.

Leadership Styles and Impact

The leadership style within a Hub significantly affects its culture and effectiveness. Some Hubs benefit from inclusive leadership that encourages input from staff and community stakeholders, fostering an environment in which innovative solutions can thrive. Conversely, other Hubs operate

under more centralized decision-making, which may lead to feelings of disenfranchisement among staff. As one stakeholder observed, the shift to an autocratic style can mean that "nobody knows anything because the program is not democratic."

The leadership approach can also impact staff morale and engagement. In Hubs where leadership is perceived as inclusive, staff report feeling valued and are more likely to contribute actively to the program's success. In contrast, in Hubs where decision-making is centralized, staff may feel disconnected from the program's goals and objectives, impacting their motivation and engagement.

To address challenges related to culture and capacity, Hub leaders discussed initiatives aimed at fostering a more inclusive and collaborative environment. For instance, one Hub organized staff retreats to build team cohesion and encourage open dialogue among team members. Another Hub leader arranged for staff to attend movie nights, such as a viewing of "Inside Out 2." This event not only served as a social gathering but also sparked creative discussions on how to incorporate fun and innovative techniques into sessions focused on social and emotional awareness.

Enhancing Facilitation of Tier 2 Services

In ethnographic observations, some facilitators demonstrated a lack of preparedness to handle the organic issues and vulnerable responses that emerged during Tier 2 sessions. Despite the effectiveness of the highly curated Tier 2 curriculum, sensitive topics may provoke difficult or unpredictable emotions among participants. Variability in facilitators' responses often stems from differences in their training, professional experience, and alignment with the lived experiences of the group.

Addressing Emotional Vulnerability

In one Tier 2 session we observed, a prevention consultant asked: "What makes you angry?" eliciting emotions from participants. A young girl, for instance, mentioned "talking about someone behind their back," while a young man listed "touching, traffic, jealousy, touching after being told to stop." Another girl expressed frustration with "people who don't say please and thank you, and people who are fake and liars." The youth expressed their issues very clearly. However, it appeared that the Prevention Consultants did not fully unpack the emotions and tended to continue with the lesson plans. In this way, opportunities to get to the crux of youth issues may have been missed.

This pattern was common across other Tier 2 sessions. Facilitators often posed questions that led to vulnerable answers but did not pause, listen deeply, validate experiences, or offer guidance on managing complex emotions. Perhaps driven by a need to adhere to the lesson plan and maintain fidelity to the EBP, facilitators prioritized progressing through the PowerPoint rather than engaging with participants' emotional needs.

Aligning Expertise with Service Delivery

Improving Tier 2 facilitation requires effective matching of prevention consultants' skills and competencies to the specific needs of each service. Some Hubs take a customized approach to assessing prevention consultants' expertise, interests, and capabilities, and assigning them to

facilitate services according to their strengths. However, our observations revealed inconsistencies in this practice across Hubs. In some cases, consultants were chosen based on "availability" rather than "expertise," undermining the potential impact of the sessions. For instance, in a group session composed of girls, a male consultant struggled to connect with the participants, leaving both him and the youth uninspired.

Staffing Shortages

Another challenge several stakeholders, particularly those close to the program, noted is the need to hire more Hub staff members to meet requested services of schools. As one educator stated: "I just think that for them to improve really is... to be able to, I guess hire more staff...I would say because what they're providing [services] for the parents, for the teachers, for the students, like it's not even just for the students" (Educator 2).

Some Hub leaders involved in hiring further stressed the difficulty of hiring staff in the first place and then the additional issue of trying to retain staff:

"The job market is pretty crazy at the moment, so it's hard to get people in... I believe that while the funding amount that we got was good, I think we could use more ... for staff retention ... we could set better salary ranges, especially for those educators and scheduling coordinators. That and kind of incentivizes them to stay with us longer and build a program and grow it more, you know" (Hub Leadership 1).

Another staff member further illustrated the need for more staff, especially clinicians: "...more clinicians because I think that having the Tier 3 is what puts that big cherry on top of what the NJ4S sundae of growth looks like...I feel like the more clinicians we have, the more people we can serve" (Hub Staff 1).

A community member seconded the need noting the lack of mental health care providers currently:

"A barrier...would be an equitable response to the demand for mental health practitioners. So, if NJ4S is relying on each Hubs area, service areas own network of mental health clinicians to serve the youth there already, we're already at a dearth of what we should be... So, if NJ4S is looking to acquire more clinicians to serve, then it would make sense to be equitable to go and provide the number an area needs to be equitable with everybody else" (Community Member 5).

In an effort to utilize resources as effectively as possible, DCF prioritized the needs of youth in grades six and above. This affected the eligibility of schools. Some Hub leaders felt an imbalance in staff-to-eligible school ratios whereby some Hubs have a larger service area to cover than other Hubs. While Hubs have implemented strategies such as hiring per diem staff, onboarding interns, and temporarily using waitlist applications to meet demand—particularly for Tier 3 services—these measures cannot secure long-term balance.

Marketing and Outreach

Another challenge area appears to be marketing of NJ4S. Of all the stakeholders we interviewed, very few had seen an NJ4S brochure. In many areas, school buses do not have NJ4S signage, nor do community centers like the Boys and Girls Club or the YMCA. While Hub staff shared that they have engaged in several marketing strategies, additional outreach and materials would likely be helpful for guidance counselors, teachers, and other school representatives to circulate and raise awareness of the program.

At the same time, however, when NJ4S engages and delivers a Tier 1, 2, or 3 service, they often bring a number of marketing items with them that stakeholders find thoughtful and valuable. One community member shared: “NJ4S has marketing materials like paperwork, pamphlets, and even cute little bags with positive messages (e.g., ‘you are special,’ ‘be brave’)” (Community Member 3). Youth appeared to be very grateful for the complimentary journals, stress balls, and other items given to them as part of their participation.

Conclusion

Overview of NJ4S Program Effects

Study findings revealed that many NJ4S Hubs entered this initiative with strong expertise on youth programs and well-established relationships with schools and communities. These Hubs took a hands-on approach in reaching out to schools and communities, visiting them onsite and helping them get set up in the program's management information system. They took the time to hold telephone conversations aimed at understanding schools' needs and the NJ4S model allowed for the flexibility to target services to meet those needs. They recruited and retained staff with "lived experience" who have the skills and experience to break through to youth who may be tough to reach. Many youth describe the program as providing a welcoming and engaging environment. NJ4S Hubs offer techniques on how to handle stressful situations, how to process emotions, and cover important lessons on topics like life skills, vaping, and safe dating. Many Hub cultures are collaborative, encouraging open dialogue and discussion of potential issues toward the goal of collective problem-solving. For the most part, Hub staff appeared to facilitate effectively and deliver EBPs with fidelity.

Advantages of the NJ4S Model

Additionally, the "Hub and Spoke" model of NJ4S offers several advantages over traditional school service models. One significant benefit is its ability to extend services to a broader range of schools, which enables expanded reach and impact. Unlike traditional models that rely heavily on internal school staff, NJ4S employs "outside staff" who bring diverse experiences and specialized training. This external perspective allows for a more objective assessment of school needs and facilitates innovative approaches to addressing them. In some cases, youth also appear to be more comfortable talking about vulnerable topics such as emotions and mental health with professionals who are not school staff, as they noted a sense of embarrassment that comes along with a school official knowing their struggles and then having to face them and interact with them on a daily basis. Furthermore, NJ4S staff are trained in a variety of EBPs, which enables them to effectively match their services to the specific needs of each school. This flexibility in service delivery not only enhances the effectiveness of the intervention but also fosters a more tailored and responsive support system for youth.

Areas for Improvement

By and large, NJ4S Hubs appear to be making a difference in the lives of youth they serve. However, there are several areas that require attention. One issue is that NJ4S does not serve students below grade six – an area that many stakeholders viewed this as a critical gap. Another issue is the need to streamline the cumbersome consent process so that youth can be served in a timely manner, and caregivers are not overwhelmed with forms. Many Hub cultures are open and collaborative, creating an environment for all staff to feel comfortable lifting-up issues and problem-solving collectively. However, a few Hubs embody a top-down culture that tends to stifle the degree to which staff feel comfortable lifting issues, exchanging ideas and collectively problem-solving. In addition, there is a need to enhance marketing strategies to ensure that all

stakeholder groups are aware of NJ4S. Another important issue is that there is some variation in performance across different Hubs. NJ4S does have a strong learning exchange structure where Hubs meet as a group with FCP program partners and ARE evaluators on a regular basis. These sessions provide an ideal opportunity for FCP program leads to offer technical assistance to Hubs in a way that builds on the findings of this report and helps to ensure high quality practice and fidelity to the model across Hubs.

Training and Staff Development

To enhance program impact, NJ4S might consider preparing prevention consultants for tense situations that could arise unexpectedly during sessions, as observed in some Tier 2 ethnographic sessions. While many Hub staff have “lived experience” that enables them to understand the environmental and cultural issues unique to each school and/or community, some Hub staff do not have that level of understanding. Training staff to effectively manage these moments and address issues that may not be covered in lesson plans can help prevent escalation, promote respectful communication, and ensure that the needs of youth are met.

In the implementation survey disseminated to all Hubs, we included an optional question asking staff which areas they would like to receive additional training in. Of the 217 survey responses received, 73 staff indicated additional areas for training (Figure 2).

Figure 2. NJ4S Hub Staff Training Request

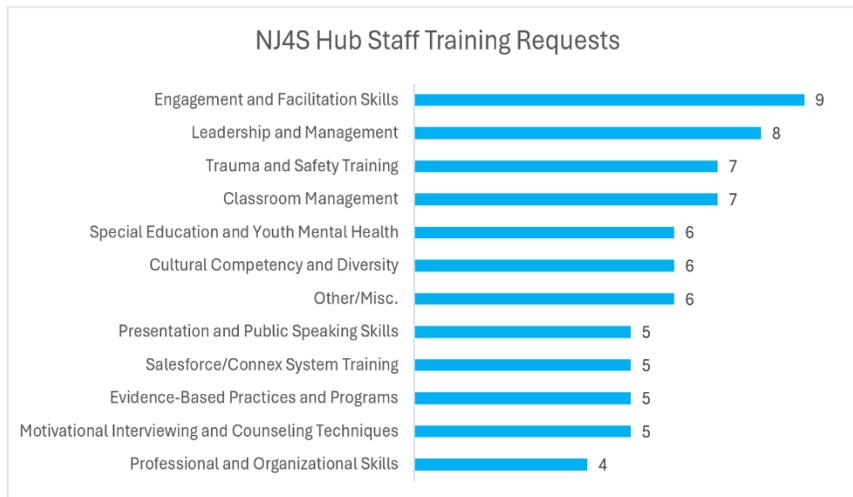


FIGURE DESCRIPTION: FIGURE 2. DISPLAYS THE TRAINING REQUESTS FROM STAFF AT NJ4S HUBS, HIGHLIGHTING VARIOUS AREAS WHERE ADDITIONAL SKILLS ARE DESIRED.

THE CHART SHOWS THE HIGHEST NUMBER OF REQUESTS, TOTALING 9, IS FOR "ENGAGEMENT AND FACILITATION SKILLS." THIS IS FOLLOWED BY "LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT" WITH 8 REQUESTS.

The graph reveals that many Hub staff appear to be very self-aware and in step with the need to develop stronger skills in “engagement and facilitation,” “leadership and management,” “trauma and safety,” and “classroom management,” to name a few. As described earlier, the topics covered by the Tier 2 sessions can lead to very vulnerable and unpredictable exchanges. In addition to developing a greater understanding of youth culture in specific schools and communities, it is critical that prevention consultants receive facilitation training on when to pause, how to listen deeply to answers given by youth, how to validate their experiences, and how to offer guidance and techniques for managing complex emotions. Although prevention consultants approach Tier 2 services with lesson plans guiding them, if youth are crying out to share more about a topic than the lesson plan allows for, it is important for prevention

consultants to allow some time for youth to talk through their issues. In addition, as noted earlier, some Hubs have the ability to assign prevention consultants based on their topical expertise, while other Hubs with less staffing capacity can only assign prevention consultants based on availability. As NJ4S progresses, it may be worthwhile to explore the extent to which Hub staff members can be selected to facilitate services based on expertise and receive targeted training in specific areas, or whether they should become “generalists” who are comfortable leading a wide range of sessions. The issue, of course, is one of bandwidth and practicality.

Addressing Youth Needs and Social Connections

There is a great need to help youth who are, in their own words, “struggling.” While some youth who face serious mental health issues may require urgent one-on-one counseling and even hospitalization, in our evaluation we met youth who are quite simply lonely and sad, without a genuine group of friends whom they can call upon for moral support during a difficult time or share a laugh with while creating happy memories. We met youth who were anxious about how to carry themselves in face-to-face social settings, as their world, fueled by COVID-19, has prepared them to be loners, reliant upon social media to unwind, learn, forge connections, and even vent. We also met youth who appeared to be exhausted, lifeless, uninspired, and bored. While we did meet some youth whose faces and eyes lit up at the sight of their Tier 2 prevention consultants, and many youth who offered praise for NJ4S Hub staff in their being welcoming, engaging, and helpful in sharing techniques on how to better handle stressful situations, the youth stories that hold these pages are instructive. For, it is not just that youth need services like NJ4S to help with how to make good choices, how to avoid substances, and how to process emotions, but youth need peer support in the form of social and community bonds.

The Role of NJ4S in Post-COVID Recovery

As a prevention-focused initiative, NJ4S is uniquely positioned to reach youth who are recovering from the collective trauma of COVID-19. While the pandemic may not have affected all youth in the same way, some appear to be experiencing loneliness, sadness, depression, anxiety, and a sense of hopelessness about the future with no one to talk to about their feelings. Many young people have become accustomed to a virtual world wherein the pressure to present themselves in everyday life was somewhat “staged,” making the act of face-to-face interaction in the real world both exhausting and scary. As difficult as it may be for youth to learn how to interact socially and process their emotions accordingly, it is critical that they do so. It has long been documented that the most effective way to heal from collective trauma, like the COVID-19 pandemic, is for people to come back together and foster ties within their communities once again. Feelings of connection to peers, school, and trusted adults have been identified by researchers as a primary promotive and protective factor against adversity in childhood and adolescence (Leonard & Gudiño, 2021).

Enhancing Peer Support and Community Connections

NJ4S Tier 2 services not only provide important lessons on how to cope with emotions and avoid negative influences but also bring together youth in a small group setting where they can bond and forge face-to-face peer connections. When the Tier 2 sessions end, youth may be referred to community services for additional support. However, this referral process does not always take place. If NJ4S could place more emphasis on finding ways of referring youth to peer support

groups, clubs, sports, and other places that forge bonds within their communities, that could help to address the issues of isolation expressed by youth and provide them with a community where they feel they belong and are not alone. Many young people in Tier 3 services that involve one-on-one counseling are already provided with a “warm handoff” to services within communities. While it may not be possible for NJ4S to address the need for after-school activities alone, perhaps through partnerships with community organizations and government, NJ4S can help ensure that youth, whose families are forced to work long hours to make ends meet, are emotionally and physically supported. By fostering these partnerships, NJ4S can extend its reach and support the creation of more comprehensive support systems that address both the emotional and physical needs of youth, ensuring they have trusted adults and peer support to guide them.

Reducing Mental Health Stigma

Finally, NJ4S is chipping away at the stigma associated with mental health issues. Tier 1 services, for example, help to open the eyes of many young people and emphasize the point that it is ok to feel sad, lonely, depressed, and anxious. Tier 1 services also help to educate teachers, guidance counselors, and community members on how to talk with youth about mental health. In breaking down negative connotations associated with mental health issues, NJ4S is helping youth feel more comfortable to come forward and ask for help rather than suffering in silence. As NJ4S continues to solidify its presence in schools and communities, it could help to change school and community culture and the ways in which youth who struggle with mental health issues are viewed. Moreover, if we think back for a moment on the Tier 2 session observed where the prevention specialists were able to get the boys in their group to “light up” with enthusiasm and reach out for human connection, even “touch” through the simple but meaningful act of hand-slapping, we can see the best of what NJ4S has to offer youth who are “struggling.” In the post COVID-19 pandemic, NJ4S staff are encouraging youth, . helping youth identify and talk through emotions that they are struggling to overcome and teaching important prevention-based life skills. NJ4S is a promising approach for promoting youth mental wellness in the post-pandemic era. Hub staff members are helping to bring youth out of the mental health crisis exacerbated by the pandemic through its prevention-based, tiered approach and its innovative “Hub and Spoke” model. As NJ4S continues to evolve, we suggest that the program consider building upon the many strengths identified in this report and finding innovative ways to address areas in need of improvement.

Opportunities for NJ4S Development

In this formative report, we set out to provide an in-depth qualitative analysis of the NJ4S program, focusing on its implementation strengths and challenges in the early phases of implementation, while providing an assessment of how the program addresses some of the most compelling issues facing youth, caregivers, and communities. In line with the themes presented in this report and the concluding discussion, below are some key recommendations for NJ4S to consider as it moves past the point of early implementation and continues to evolve as a statewide program focused on addressing the youth mental health crisis in NJ.

Expand NJ4S Services to Younger Grades: Consider extending NJ4S services to include youth below grade six. Multiple stakeholders highlighted the importance of early prevention, particularly in addressing issues like vaping and bullying, which are increasingly affecting younger children.

Enhance Training for Prevention Consultants: Provide additional training focused on managing tense situations and addressing emergent issues that are not covered in lesson plans or within EBP curricula. This aligns with the observed need for consultants to better handle emotionally charged interactions during tier 2 sessions. Ensuring that consultants possess the relevant expertise and can empathize with participants' experiences is crucial for fostering meaningful interactions and enhancing the effectiveness of Tier 2 services.

Strengthen School and Community Engagement: Facilitate stronger relationships between Hubs and schools, especially where skepticism of the program exists. Strengthening messaging and providing clear communication about NJ4S's role have been suggested as ways to alleviate these concerns. This can be achieved by adopting successful practices from Hubs that have effectively engaged schools, such as in-person visits and personalized support through the Connex database system.

Optimize the Caregiver Consent Process: Create a subcommittee to simplify and automate the consent process, addressing the current challenges and frustrations experienced by school representatives and caregivers. Simplifying the caregiver consent process through direct engagement and digital solutions has shown promise in increasing participation rates. This would improve service accessibility and participation rates.

Develop Peer Support and Recreational Programs: Work with community partners to establish peer support groups and after-school activities, addressing the social isolation and lack of community engagement that many youth face. This recommendation aligns with the expressed need for youth to form genuine, supportive peer connections.

Foster Open and Collaborative Culture: Encourage NJ4S Hub leadership to participate in training that emphasizes developing an open, collaborative culture. This environment allows staff to freely share challenges and collaborate on solutions, enhancing collective problem-solving.

Leverage Hub Strengths: Continue group learning exchanges to harness the strengths of successful Hubs. By analyzing data trends and sharing best practices, NJ4S can strengthen outreach, enrollment, and service delivery efforts.

Expand Marketing and Outreach Efforts: Enhance marketing strategies to increase awareness of NJ4S services among educators, community partners, youth, and caregivers. Leveraging materials that have been successful within service delivery for community outreach and marketing may be an area for NJ4S to consider as it continues to evolve and grow. Consider attending educational conferences and launching a robust social media campaign to extend program reach.

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