



PARTNERSHIP POSSIBILITIES: ASSESSMENT CENTERS AND SCHOOLS

Too often, when children display disruptive behaviors in schools, the responses of authority figures do not address the underlying cause of the behavior, rather they marginalize children with behavioral health conditions through exclusionary discipline policies (Cocozza, Keator, Skowrya, & Greene, 2016). The lack of identification of mental health concerns in children can serve as a “disruption of functioning at school paired with academic underachievement” (Schanding & Nowell, 2013). In addition, youth with severe mental health challenges are at high risk for school dropout (Schanding & Nowell, 2013). Over the years, schools have adopted approaches to address behavior such as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) and Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports (MTSS). Despite these efforts, schools continue to struggle to curb behavior. [In a 2019 study](#), school staff across the country reported an increase in disruptive behaviors among students and an increase in stress among teachers and staff.

Supporting youth and families who may be struggling with behaviors should not be the sole responsibility of the school system. Assessment Centers have a unique opportunity to support their local school systems by serving as the bridge to local, community-based services and supports that can address underlying behaviors. Assessment Centers serve as a neutral, unbiased organization that identifies the needs that exist for the youth and family. These needs could be undiagnosed and/or untreated mental health or substance use issues, trauma experienced by the youth, or simply a lack of access to prosocial support. If a need is identified through the screening process, Centers may follow up with a more comprehensive assessment to pinpoint the drivers of behavior. Based on the assessment, an individualized plan is created in partnership with the youth and family. The plan outlines what services and supports are best suited to meet their needs and ultimately address the behavior.

School districts around the country can utilize Assessment Centers in various ways:

Alternatives to Citation/Arrest, Suspension, or Expulsion

Research continuously shows us that exclusionary discipline practices such as suspension and expulsion can [more than double a youth's probability of arrest](#) and involvement in the justice system. Removing adolescents from school provides unstructured and unsupervised time that can facilitate drug use or other delinquent acts. Additionally, when schools rely on police or school resource officers (SROs) to address behavioral issues, [youth are more likely to end up in the justice system](#). As referenced in our publication [Detention Is Not the Answer: An Alternative Through Assessment Centers](#), justice system involvement is often ineffective and expensive. Assessment Centers can identify underlying behavioral issues and connect youth and families to supports and resources in an effort to stabilize and curb behavior.

Policy Considerations: Establish policy and protocol that supports referrals to an Assessment Center in lieu of exclusionary actions. For example, after three behavioral incidents, a referral to an Assessment Center is made. An additional policy example is prior to a suspension or expulsion, school staff

refer to an Assessment Center to identify underlying issues, and bridge youth to effective, community-based services.

Truancy

Truancy, or chronic absenteeism, is often a symptom of greater issues. Factors that contribute to truancy include: poor identification of special education needs, low academic achievement, mental health, gang involvement, or problems within the home (i.e. financial or medical issues) ([Coalition for Juvenile Justice](#)). School staff can work directly with Assessment Centers to effectively identify and address the reasons a particular youth is missing school, while also connecting them to community-based services and support that will help address those underlying issues.

Policy Considerations: Establish policy and protocol that supports referrals to an Assessment Center after “x” number of missed days or when truancy issues are identified. Assessment Centers can serve to support schools’ resources dedicated to addressing truancy.

Prevention & Universal Screening

All too often, youth don’t receive interventions until failure is observed or behaviors become externalizing and disruptive (Albers, Kratochwill, & Glover, 2007). As a result, students often require more intense interventions than those youth who had been identified and treated with early prevention measures. This reactive approach can impact key development areas in children. Prevention measures, including universal screening for social and emotional health, identify internalizing and externalizing behaviors that can give insight to supports that may be needed. Assessment Centers can complement the efforts of a school district by providing follow-up screening and assessment for youth who are identified through universal screening efforts or other prevention methods.

Policy Considerations: Establish policy and protocol that supports the inclusion of an Assessment Center in the universal, social, and emotional health screening process or other prevention efforts. For example, youth who “screen-in” receive a referral to the Assessment Center for further screening and assessment, and, if necessary, are connected to community services and supports. An additional example is that a referral is made to an Assessment Center when behavioral health needs and/or basic needs for youth and families are identified.

There should be a community approach to youth and families struggling with behavior. Schools alone do not have the capacity, resources, or expertise to identify underlying causes of behavior and determine which community-based interventions and supports are the most effective and appropriate. Assessment Centers, along with their deep-rooted partnerships with community-based providers and stakeholders, can provide a holistic and collaborative approach to behavior. A partnership between schools and Assessment Centers can streamline access to services and supports which in turn maximizes community resources, capacity, and funding. Ultimately, Assessment Centers can serve as the bridge between youth, families, schools, and communities, ensuring youth get the right care at the right time.