

Opinion

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Supporting Collaborative School Based Substance Use Disorder Interventions

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Opinion

We are facing critical challenges in providing treatment to adolescents with substance use disorders. Adolescent drug use is a national concern, with annual reports between 22% and 35% of adolescents using drugs, and 5% developing a substance use disorder (SUD). Only one in ten of the 1.3 million adolescents who need treatment will receive it [1,2]. Adolescents experiencing substance use problems are also at risk for academic failure, school drop-out, relationship difficulties, and health problems. Although schools are identified as a primary resource for students who receive mental health services, substance abuse problems are difficult to address in schools due to barriers related to confidentiality, implementation, and resources. School personnel may also lack the necessary experience or training to adequately provide these services to students' suffering from substance abuse. Research on this topic is encouraging in that school-based intervention programs have been shown to be effective in helping to identify and support students with substance abuse issues [3,4]. With both evidence-based intervention practices available and competent training of mental health school professionals, students experiencing substance abuse problems may receive needed services and support in schools. School support staff (school counselors, school psychologists, school nurses and social workers) need to consider specific steps they can take to broaden their skills and knowledge for providing intervention for students experiencing substance use problems.

A survey of licensed school psychologists in Virginia [5] was conducted to gather information on their training and knowledge of working with students with substance abuse problems, as well

as identifying perceived current level of need for such services in schools. Data from the survey suggests that limited training and time is spent on providing direct services for students at risk or experiencing SUD. Whereas 90% of school psychologists in the study agreed somewhat, moderately, or strongly that students in their schools need treatment for substance abuse, 94% reported feeling only slightly prepared or not at all prepared to provide screenings or interventions. There is a significant gap between the perceived need for services and the level of preparedness school psychologists have for addressing the need. Research studies emphasize the need for additional training for school support staff to address the needs of students at risk or experiencing SUD.

Collaboration

One of the primary challenges for increasing school support services for substance use identification and treatment is the development of staff competency and confidence in providing this service. Although additional training is the first step in availing students' greater access in schools for SUD treatment, school staff may be hesitant to fulfill this role based on lack of perceived competence and confidence. A significant aspect of training and providing school-based SUD interventions is collaboration of school support staff. Inter-professional collaboration among school support staff in training and working collaboratively has the potential for impacting a sense of professional confidence. As school staff begin to embrace this new role in service to students, working side by side with another student support staff member encourages initiative to work with students with substance use disorders.

Professional Cultural Shifts

Opportunities for schools to intervene have dramatically increased with the changes nationally in approaches to responding to substance use. Current professional cultural shifts in treating substance use disorders support strategies that minimize stigma, treat substance abuse as an addiction (chronic illness) and not a character flaw, and focus on harm reduction instead of abstinence. This has resulted in a national wave of trainings and professional request for all mental health and health professionals to screen and intervene, including school professionals.

With a focus on the Screen, Brief Intervention and Referral to Treatment (SBIRT) model, school support staff have access to effective intervention steps to help students with SUD. The SBIRT model emphasizes harm reduction and behavioral change initiated through Motivational Interviewing, Stages of Change, and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, all of which are within the repertoire of professional skills for school support professionals. We are well positioned in schools to improve the lives of students suffering with substance use disorders.

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Conflict of Interest

Author declare no conflict of interest.

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