

Sustaining School Mental Health in North Carolina: A Success Story in Systems and Partnerships

“When I first came into schools, there was very minimal awareness of what mental illness looked like in students. Kids were just seen as ‘bad’ and [were] disciplined more. Through AWARE, we moved the needle. We educated staff and put real systems in place to support the kids.”

In 2018, North Carolina embarked on a bold new journey to transform how schools support student mental health. With funding from SAMHSA, the state launched [Project AWARE/ACTIVATE](#) in three rural pilot districts, communities where access to services had long been a challenge. The goals were ambitious yet clear: (1) Increase awareness of youth mental health issues, (2) Provide training to school staff on youth mental health issues, (3) Connect students and families to mental health services.

Over the course of a five-year grant, the Project AWARE team worked tirelessly to implement school mental health programming into these districts, and the results speak for themselves. In the first cohort of three districts, 88% of students who were referred to mental health services received services. In the end, AWARE served 10,980 students from 2020-2023, a dramatic shift from where they started. AWARE’s early successes led to them being awarded a second SAMHSA-funded grant in 2021.

Despite the significant success of these two AWARE cohorts, the project had to face a new, yet all too common challenge: how to sustain programming when grant funding ends.

Factors Behind the Success

“We kind of intentionally picked some high flyers, some districts that [were] already doing some great school behavioral health work...and this just gave them rocket fuel to take off and to do greater things.”

From the beginning, **partnerships** were the backbone of North Carolina’s approach. AWARE fostered close collaboration with the NC Department of Public Instruction and the NC Department of Health and Human Services, aligning education and mental health priorities. These partnerships extended to state and regional school mental health networks, which AWARE leveraged to keep their ear to the ground across NC and share resources and lessons learned. The key to cultivating these partnerships was establishing shared goals and language, creating formalized structures for collaboration, building capacity and shared learning opportunities, and prioritizing communication and relationship building.

Just as importantly, AWARE invested in people to foster sustainment. By training school staff on Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) and Trauma-Informed approaches, districts built internal expertise they could carry forward, even after grant funding ended. Local flexibility was key. Each district self-selected from a menu of services that best fit their community, making them more motivated to sustain those services. Services that were integrated into existing systems, like Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS), provided structure for organizing supports at all levels and ensured alignment with broad districts goals and funding streams. In the end, these practices were supported by district leadership and community partners, and found significant success in both effectiveness and sustainability.

Challenges Along the Way

Sustaining large-scale programs is never without hurdles. Loss of funding, staff turnover, leadership changes, and shifting priorities all posed barriers to sustainment. After grant funding ended, every pilot district eventually lost its original AWARE director. Staff turnover and a loss of knowledge base were inevitable, underscoring the importance of building systems and not only relying on individuals. On top of that, AWARE faced another challenge when they lost a major state leader in education who was a big proponent of the work. Additional uncertainties continued to loom, given the national shift on how we view mental health funding priorities and the language used to describe the work.

Pathways to Lasting Change

“In a rural area, you don't have a lot of choices so you really have to cultivate positive relationships with the limited number of providers or services that you have. You can't burn those bridges.”

Yet Project AWARE adapted. They continued to cultivate partnerships with local agencies and providers to maintain a support network for existing school mental health positions. AWARE also leveraged their two back-to-back grants, building on early lessons and creating a Project AWARE Implementation Manual to guide future sustainment efforts.

Additionally, NC Project AWARE/ACTIVATE partnered with Rural Opportunity Institute, a community-based non-profit organization, to develop a [Medicaid Cost Recovery Toolkit](#) and launch a Medicaid Learning Collaborative. This 9-month technical assistance cohort is designed as a sustainability strategy, equipping Public School Units (PSUs) with the tools, knowledge, and ongoing support needed to effectively access and maximize Medicaid reimbursement for school-based services, including school behavioral health. By building local capacity and embedding cost recovery practices, the initiative ensures long-term financial sustainability for critical student support services, reducing reliance on short-term grant funding and strengthening the infrastructure for school mental health systems statewide.

At the state level, AWARE influenced landmark policy changes. North Carolina's General Assembly passed legislation requiring every public school unit to adopt a formal [school mental health plan](#), supported by AWARE-created resources. AWARE also helped shape statewide [threat assessment](#) planning and [suicide prevention planning](#). Another major strategy to sustain the work was the creation of a school mental health clinician position for districts, including a standardized job description, pay grade, and classification. To this day, AWARE continues their policy efforts, embarking on a cost-benefit analysis study to communicate the cost-saving value of investing in the students. By diligently integrating AWARE practices into policy, the work is becoming embedded in the daily fabric of schools throughout North Carolina.

Results That Last

“Integrating the work into policy, procedure, or practice means even if a local director leaves, the work continues.”

Due to AWARE's sustainment efforts, several districts have seen the value and impact of mental health programming in their schools. After the AWARE grant ended, districts began to commit their own funding through local boards of education and county commission allocations, retaining 5 school mental health clinicians. AWARE's visibility and credibility extended beyond individual districts. It became the top strategy in [North Carolina's Unified School Behavioral Health Action Plan](#), further embedding its influence into the state's long-term vision for student well-being.

Looking back, AWARE leaders recognize how far North Carolina has come when there was minimal resources and staff awareness of how to identify and treat student mental health problems. Now, staff are trained, systems are in place, and students have real options for care. NC AWARE has been a leader in how to effectively leverage funding to build partnerships, shift policy, and permanently expand school-based mental health infrastructure. As AWARE's experience shows, sustainability is not about replicating a grant forever. It's about embedding practices into the systems, the policies, and the people so that the work lives on. Project AWARE has done exactly that—moving the needle for student mental health across the state, and lighting a path for other states to follow.



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