

Bringing Community Voice into Cross-Sector Data Sharing: **Addressing the Health Needs of Children and Youth in Rural South Carolina**

There have been efforts across the U.S. to better integrate physical and behavioral health resources within schools, making school settings a ‘one-stop-shop’ to meet students’ educational, social, and health needs, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, many of these efforts have focused on urban school settings, which have distinct contextual considerations compared to rural settings. In South Carolina, there was a desire to leverage data to improve educational and health outcomes for students living in rural communities, specifically, to ensure more equitable learning opportunities between urban and rural school settings.

As part of [Learning and Action in Policy and Partnerships](#) (LAPP), a national initiative that supports community-based data sharing efforts, researchers at the University of South Carolina, including those involved in the ALL4SC Initiative, the Child Development Research Center, and the Center for Rural and Primary Healthcare, partnered to assist a rural, high-poverty South Carolina county in identifying specific inequities related to age, socioeconomic status, and race/ethnicity disparities.

AT-A-GLANCE

- **Community Health Goal:** Determine how to integrate social supports into schools in a rural, high-poverty South Carolina county to best address the physical and behavioral health needs of children and youth 18 years of age and under.
- **Partners:** Researchers at the University of South Carolina (project lead); South Carolina Revenue and Fiscal Affairs Office; and county, community, and school leaders.
- **Project Highlight:** Directly involving youth and community leaders in setting data analysis priorities to identify, and ultimately address, the distinct health, educational, and social-emotional needs of students in the county.
- **Policy Impact:** Making the case for how and why public data should be more usable and accessible to communities; providing evidence on how mental and physical health needs relate to school outcomes; and advancing the University of South Carolina’s ALL4SC initiative that supports whole child education efforts.

BRINGING COMMUNITY VOICE INTO CROSS-SECTOR DATA SHARING

Sharing data across state agencies and community-based organizations is critical for advancing health equity and addressing complex health challenges that involve multiple sectors. Insights from individuals with lived expertise provide valuable context to inform data-sharing efforts that is critical to improving health equity. This case study is a product of [Learning and Action in Policy and Partnerships](#), a national initiative led by Data Across Sectors for Health in partnership with the Center for Health Care Strategies and supported by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

The project aimed to help the community better understand and address the health, educational, and social-emotional needs and development of youth and families.

Notably, the county was involved in the ALL4SC initiative prior to the LAPP project and had garnered critical support from community members through the ALL4SC initiative, including the school district superintendent, high school student leaders, and local behavioral and physical health providers. Already having this support in place ensured a strong foundation for the project to move forward efficiently with substantial community engagement and feedback along the way.

To achieve their goal of utilizing data to better support the health needs of students and their families, the South Carolina LAPP team partnered with South Carolina’s Revenue and Fiscal Affairs (RFA) Office, which oversees the South Carolina Integrated Data System ([SC-IDS](#)). The SC-IDS is an integrated data warehouse that includes data related to health, education, employment, and service delivery. While the RFA website allows anyone to look at macrodata (county or state-level information), the team worked directly with the RFA to request access to the more complex microdata (deidentified individual-level information) in order to more accurately identify and assess the needs of the community.

About ALL4SC

The [ALL4SC initiative](#), a project of the University of South Carolina, aims to transform education via whole child education innovations including using data to see how various factors like physical and behavioral health impact educational and developmental outcomes. The initiative also directly asks community members and relevant organizations what issues they think are most important for schools and communities to address. This model aims to better integrate community resources within schools, making school settings a community-informed ‘one-stop-shop’ to meet physical, academic, and mental health needs.

Key Project Activities

The South Carolina LAPP team met with RFA staff to learn what data were available through the SC-IDS. Following that, the team held a weekend retreat to bring together youth organizing groups, youth leaders, superintendents, teachers, and community members from the county to discuss child well-being. The retreat helped the researchers better understand community needs and identify which SC-IDS data to explore. In particular, hearing from the youth leaders directly about the growing mental health needs of students during the pandemic allowed researchers to shift from only focusing on physical health to also prioritizing data related to behavioral health.

Using themes from these community discussions, the researchers worked with RFA to submit applications to access data needed from the SC-IDS for their analysis, including Medicaid, mental health, and education-related codebooks. Once the team had the requested data, they were able to perform an initial analysis and present their findings to leaders in the community. This initial analysis compared county data to state

averages. Community members suggested that they instead compare data from their county against other high-need rural communities to get a more accurate comparison.

The South Carolina LAPP team supported the community request and re-analyzed the data using a more comparable data set. The updated findings were shared with stakeholders, including student leaders, teachers, the sheriff, employees from the local powerplant, mental and physical health providers, among others. The data analysis provided community leaders with clear measures to track and has prompted three subsequent community-wide meetings to address the data findings. One of the most important findings was a link between mental and physical health needs of students and absences. This finding is helping state agencies and local leaders better understand the link between student health, student absences, and drop-out rates, and informing further whole child policy reform efforts in the state.

Data-Sharing Accomplishments to Improve Community Health and Advance Equity

The South Carolina LAPP team’s ability to analyze the data to help community members meaningfully advance whole child education efforts within the county was a major achievement.

At the community level, involving youth directly in the data-sharing process at the summer retreat proved key to informing the broader data analysis. Involving feedback from youth leaders led the county’s school district to incorporate more mental health support across the district.

The South Carolina LAPP team’s data analysis of state and local data reflected a connection between the mental and physical health needs of students and links to excessive absences, a key factor in drop-out rates. This understanding calls for a cross-sector approach at the state level to provide social supports to students, as different health-related factors impact education outcomes.

Looking Ahead

The South Carolina LAPP team hopes to continue their work to advance the ALL4SC whole child education efforts across the state by analyzing 2021 data and continuing to incorporate community perspectives into their work in schools across the state. The involvement with community members proved a powerful tool to give context to data trends, ultimately helping to move the needle on the project — and informing the policy initiatives that will follow.

In striving for a broader systems level change, the South Carolina LAPP team hopes to continue to use data to advocate for increased access to services as they, alongside schools and community members, work together to give children the best chance at a successful and healthy life.



ABOUT THE CENTER FOR HEALTH CARE STRATEGIES

The Center for Health Care Strategies (CHCS) is a policy design and implementation partner devoted to improving outcomes for people enrolled in Medicaid. We support partners across sectors and disciplines to make more effective, efficient, and equitable care possible for millions of people across the nation. For more information, visit www.chcs.org.

ABOUT DATA ACROSS SECTORS FOR HEALTH

Data Across Sectors for Health (DASH) is a national initiative launched by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to improve community health, well-being and equity, by fostering greater alignment among health care, public health, and other community-based social systems to improve multi-sector collaboration and data sharing. For more information, visit www.dashconnect.org.