

Turning Research Into Action: Steps for Youth and Families

Purpose

This framing document translates the *Youth and Family Engagement* priorities from the **Thriving in School: A Patient-Centered Comparative Effectiveness Research Agenda on School-Based Mental Health for Children and Youth with Special Health Care Needs (CYSHCN)** into accessible, action-oriented language. It's designed to help youth and families understand how this research agenda connects to their lived experiences — and how they can use it to drive advocacy, collaboration, and systems change where they live and go to school.

Why This Matters

Youth and families know what works and what doesn't when it comes to school-based mental health (SBMH). This agenda recognizes CYSHCN lived expertise as essential to building services that are effective, responsive, and inclusive as a group that often has specific emotional and behavioral needs. While the agenda itself focuses on CYSHCN, many proposed lines of research could positively impact the broader student population. By translating these research priorities into youth and family-friendly messaging, we can inspire broader awareness, spark new partnerships, and ensure that research becomes a tool for real action and impact.

Key Themes

- Youth and Families are Collaborative Partners in Systems Change Work:** Youth and families are experts in their own experiences. Their perspectives should guide every stage of planning, implementation, and evaluation of SBMH.
- Research is Power:** Research helps make the case for what youth and families already know: when children and youth feel safe, connected, and supported, they thrive. These priorities can strengthen advocacy for inclusive and equitable supports in schools.
- Belonging and Safety Come First:** Schools must foster environments where youth and families can speak openly about their needs without fear of stigma or dismissal. Psychological safety, transparency of system limitations, and trust are essential conditions for engagement and connection.

- Feedback Fuels Actionable Change:** The use of technology, the implementation of youth peer support, and real-time feedback can transform how schools respond to youth and family needs. Listening is only the first step - showing youth and families they are heard and their ideas are implemented builds positive feedback loops.

Opportunities for Engagement

Dissemination & Awareness Building

- Youth-Led Messaging Campaigns:** Youth can translate key research questions and findings into youth-friendly infographics, short videos, printed materials (posters), or social media campaigns that connect evidence to real-life school experiences.
- Peer-Led Listening Sessions or Townhalls:** Youth can host local or virtual forums ("Research in Action" sessions) where youth break down what the agenda means for their schools or communities and gather youth/family perspectives to share back with researchers or system partners.
- The Power of Storytelling:** Youth can use digital storytelling, zines, presentations, or podcasts to humanize the research agenda, connecting lived experiences to the evidence gaps the agenda identifies.

Advocacy & Systems Change

- School or District Ambassadors:** Youth can meet with school boards or advisory councils to present research priorities - especially those connected to peer support, youth/family engagement, and safe environments as justification for new policies or other SBMH program investments.
- Youth Review Panels:** Establish local youth/family review groups that assess whether new or existing SBMH programs align with the research agenda's priorities (e.g., climate, co-design, or feedback systems).
- Community Partnership Projects:** Encourage youth and families to partner with behavioral health agencies or universities to co-design mini research or evaluation projects using the agenda as a guiding framework.

Implementation & Evaluation

- **Youth as Co-Researchers:** Equip youth advocates to serve as data collectors, evaluators, or co-authors in studies that align with the agenda, particularly on questions around peer support and climate conditions.
- **Feedback Loop Creation:** Youth can help schools design real-time feedback systems (surveys, suggestion boxes, digital check-ins) to ensure continuous improvement and accountability to efforts around the engagement of youth and families. This should be offered on a continuous basis and reviewed to leave room and time for improvements and course correction.
- **Pilot Testing Inclusive Strategies:** Youth can test engagement approaches (e.g., youth/family design teams, peer support models) and share outcomes through community networks.

Capacity Building & Training

- **Youth Research Literacy Series:** Develop youth-led training on “Understanding Research” that uses this agenda as the example, demystifying how youth voice fits into evidence-building.
- **Family–Youth Learning Labs:** Bring families and youth together to interpret the research agenda and explore how to apply themes to improve communication or advocate for SBMH care improvements.

- **Professional Development for Schools:** Youth presenters can co-facilitate professional development sessions for teachers and administrators on partnership practices highlighted in the agenda.

Policy Influence

- **Policy Brief Development:** Youth can create short, accessible summaries or policy briefs of the top research questions, connecting them to state or district mental health priorities.
- **Legislative Testimony or Advisory Roles:** Youth can use the agenda as an evidence base when testifying or serving on local/state advisory boards about school mental health.

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