



## **Georgia APEX Project brings critical mental health services to schools**

By Melanie Dallas, LPC

If you are of a certain age, you may remember having a classmate in school that always seemed to be in trouble. A child that may have been punished frequently by teachers, forced to stand in the corner, kept inside during recess, maybe even paddled or suspended. Teachers may have thrown up their hands in exasperation and simply declared the student a “bad child.” More punishments usually followed.

While it’s true some children will have challenges learning, following rules or interacting appropriately with classmates, the idea that some students are simply “bad children” is increasingly outdated.

Today we know that a child’s “bad” behaviors are often the result of other factors in the child’s life, including his or her home life – physical, sexual or emotional abuse, the stress of poverty, feeling unsafe or vulnerable, or housing insecurity, for example. A child’s negative behavior also may be the result of emotional disturbances or mental illness – which in some cases can be caused or exacerbated by any of these other factors.

As I’ve written before, mental health issues in children are more common than many people realize. An estimated one in five children ages 13 to 18 have a diagnosable mental health problem, and up to half have unmet mental health needs. Further, half of all lifetime cases of mental illness start by the time someone is 14 years old. Children with untreated mental illness may develop behaviors as a result of their illness, but also to help them cope with the symptoms, without even realizing how their actions can impact themselves or others.

Of course, while children can exhibit negative behaviors anywhere, they often attract the most attention at school – because negative behavior can interfere with learning, and because children spend a lot of time at school where their behavior can be observed. As such, teachers, counselors and other school staff are in a unique position to identify children whose behavior indicates they may need help.

This is the idea behind the Georgia APEX Project, a school-based program to increase access to mental health services for students, funded by the Georgia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities. Through APEX, mental health providers such as Highland Rivers Health partner with local schools to provide mental health counselors onsite, train staff to identify children with mental health needs, and coordinate timely access to mental health services for students and their families.

Studies have found access to school-based mental health programs provide many benefits to students and schools, including improvements in attendance, academic performance, engagement

in learning and school climate. In addition, school-based programs help decrease classroom disruptions and discipline issues, as well as inpatient hospitalizations for students with mental health problems.

The APEX program has been very effective. In fact, last year when the Governor's Commission of Children's Mental Health released its report on ways to enhance mental health services for children in Georgia, its first recommendation was to expand the Georgia APEX program. Even better, Governor Deal has asked Georgia lawmakers to provide more than \$20 million in new funding for children's mental health services in the 2019 budget, and it appears APEX will be among the programs to receive some of that additional funding.

In northwest Georgia, Highland Rivers Health has partnered with nearly 20 elementary, middle and high schools in three counties (Gordon, Bartow and Pickens) to provide APEX services, and we are hoping to expand the program into more schools in our service area. Additional funding will not only help us do so, but will be especially important to many counties in Georgia where there is a critical shortage of mental health services.

Highland Rivers applauds Governor Deal, the Georgia General Assembly and the Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities for their ongoing commitment to the APEX program and children's mental health in Georgia.