

Fellowship Spotlight: Enhancing School- Based Mental Health Evaluation in Detroit

2023 - 2025



Megan Jagolinzer

Policy Fellow

Detroit Public Schools Community District



Background

During the 2022-23 school year, the Youth Policy Lab (YPL) launched a three-year evaluation in 84 schools within the Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD) to assess the implementation and effectiveness of the TRAILS Early Intervention program (TRAILS-EI). This school-based program aims to enhance the social and behavioral outcomes for students experiencing depression and anxiety symptoms by encouraging the use of evidence-based practices, with the ultimate goal of boosting academic performance. TRAILS-EI focuses on improving awareness and understanding of mental illness, enhancing the accurate and timely identification of students with mental health concerns, and encouraging students to seek help more actively.

However, coordination with DPSCD was a challenge during the pilot year of the study. A fellowship position was created in 2023 to serve as a designated liaison between YPL, TRAILS, and DPSCD. By integrating a Fellow into DPSCD Central Office, YPL hoped to gain a better understanding of the implementation context at DPSCD and complete data collection and other research activities more effectively. Megan Jagolinzer was hired as a Data and Policy Fellow in September 2023 after completing her Master's in Social Work with a concentration in Child and Family Welfare. Prior to this role, Megan worked in youth development organizations in Ann Arbor and Detroit. Through her graduate education and direct service work with youth, Megan gained training and experience in evidence-based mental health practices such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) and Motivational Interviewing. Megan also brought with her prior exposure to the TRAILS Social Emotional Learning Program. Megan was tasked with supporting YPL's student and staff data collection efforts, providing regular study updates to YPL staff, and supporting communication between DPSCD and YPL.

Key Accomplishments

Improved Communication Between Project Partners

By working at DPSCD Central Office, Megan was able to address challenges and get answers to questions in a timely manner. Her relationships with DPSCD staff led to critical discussions about adapting evaluation and implementation activities to be appropriate for the DPSCD context. For example, YPL and TRAILS needed to collect data about the program reach and CBT competency from School Mental Health Professionals (SMHPs). In previous years, this survey had been administered virtually. However, the team was not seeing a strong response rate. The length and complexity of the survey led them to believe it could be better delivered in person. The evaluation/research team proposed sharing the survey at a counselor meeting, but Megan's knowledge of internal staffing structure within DPSCD helped them realize that this meeting would not be ideal because not all of the SMHPs would be in attendance. Her knowledge and understanding of the program saved the research team time and energy and enabled them to focus their efforts on more effective measures.

Megan also supported TRAILS implementation by communicating directly with School Mental Health Professionals. Through the TRAILS E-I program, SMHPs attended a 6 hour TRAILS training in Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) at the beginning of the school year and received additional support through a curriculum manual and Learning Collaborative coaching sessions. The SMHPs were then expected to run small CBT groups with the eligible students. Megan visited schools implementing the program to conduct in person check-ins with SMHPs and gather qualitative information about implementation barriers. Megan also made herself available to SMHPs via phone and email to answer questions. As a result of Megan's direct communication with school staff, YPL learned that some SMHPs were asking community mental health vendors to assist them in implementing TRAILS. Learning this information influenced the research team's evaluation efforts; they added additional questions in the end of year staff survey to fully capture relevant program delivery data.

Conducted Data Analysis and Developed Reports for DPSCD

The Universal Wellness Screener (UWS) was developed in partnership with TRAILS to measure student depression, anxiety, and exposure to trauma. As part of the partnership with DPSCD, YPL created an annual report to translate the UWS results for a wider audience, inform DPSCD leadership about mental health trends, and add value by breaking down trends by demographic category. As part of her fellowship, Megan analyzed the UWS data in Stata, and wrote the district wide reports for the 2022-2023, 2023-2024, and 2024-2025 school years. She also created school-level reports for the 2023-2024 school year that were distributed to individual school leaders. These individual reports compared school level outcomes to district trends. Based on the 2022-2023 school year report, YPL identified that the rate of DPSCD high school students experiencing depression symptoms was roughly 17 percentage points lower than the national average. These findings were reported by the [University of Michigan News](#).

Engaged in the Research Team's Evaluation Efforts

To measure the number of students reached by the TRAILS program and staff CBT competence, YPL administered an end of the year staff survey to all DPSCD school counselors and general education social workers. Megan contributed to the development of the survey and rollout protocol, as well as engaged in strategic email outreach to solicit responses from across the district. She also contributed to the writing of an academic paper investigating the impact of the TRAILS program on student mental health and academic outcomes. Through this process, she gained skills in a new style of writing as she developed the literature review and collaborated on the review of the document.

Provided Additional Support for the School District

In addition to Megan's designated responsibilities relating to the IES project, she supported a number of data collection and reporting efforts for DPSCD. She tracked behavioral health service provision across the district, and helped develop a template to be used monthly to track Climate and Culture metrics such as chronic absenteeism, disciplinary incidents, and Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) activities. Megan also supported the development of district wide grief and loss materials, including email and robocall templates for school leaders to communicate with families, a staff resource guide, and a landing webpage. Additionally, she researched and created presentations for various DPSCD audiences on behavioral health topics like trauma.

Conclusion

Megan's fellowship benefitted DPSCD by taking evaluation-related tasks off of district staff's plate and communicating district priorities directly to the evaluation team. YPL benefitted from improved communication with the district and a better understanding of how to conduct research activities in DPSCD. Megan developed a quantitative data analysis skillset, improved her communication skills, and was exposed to many learning opportunities at the district that aren't usually available to early career professionals. Megan moved into a role as a project manager with YPL, continuing to work on projects related to youth mental health and education.

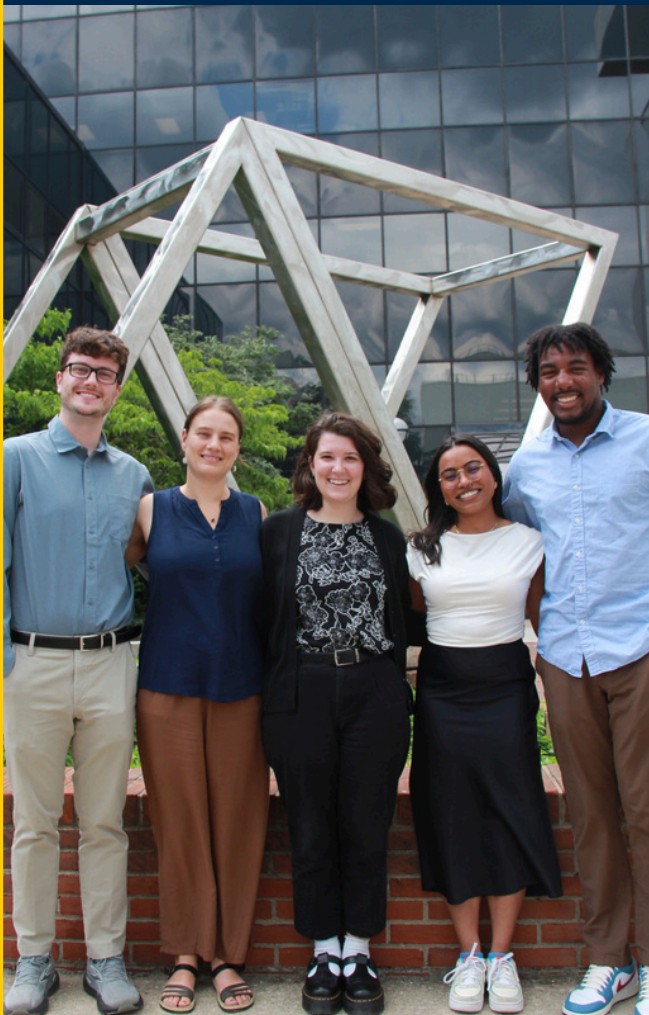
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(Megan Jagolinzer's) help has been invaluable. She has been kind, dependable, willing to assist, and an absolute pleasure to work with. Megan's contributions have furthered the work of the TRAILS and YPL DPSCD partnership as well as strengthened several of our internal processes. I have truly appreciated the collaboration and the opportunity to benefit from her skills, professionalism, and spirit of teamwork.

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Dr Angelita Jacobs, Executive Director
Whole Child Support,
Detroit Public Schools Community District



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Our mission is to inform public policy decisions that impact youth by analyzing data and evaluating programs to help society answer its most pressing questions.



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