

# Michigan Project AWARE Evaluation: In Brief

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# Executive Summary

School-based mental health programs are crucial as they increase access to care, facilitate early detection and intervention for mental health concerns, decrease academic and behavioral challenges, and normalize help-seeking by reducing stigma and barriers to services. This is especially important in rural communities, where school staff may have limited training in social and emotional learning and families often must travel long distances outside their communities to access mental health services—creating significant barriers for youth who need support.

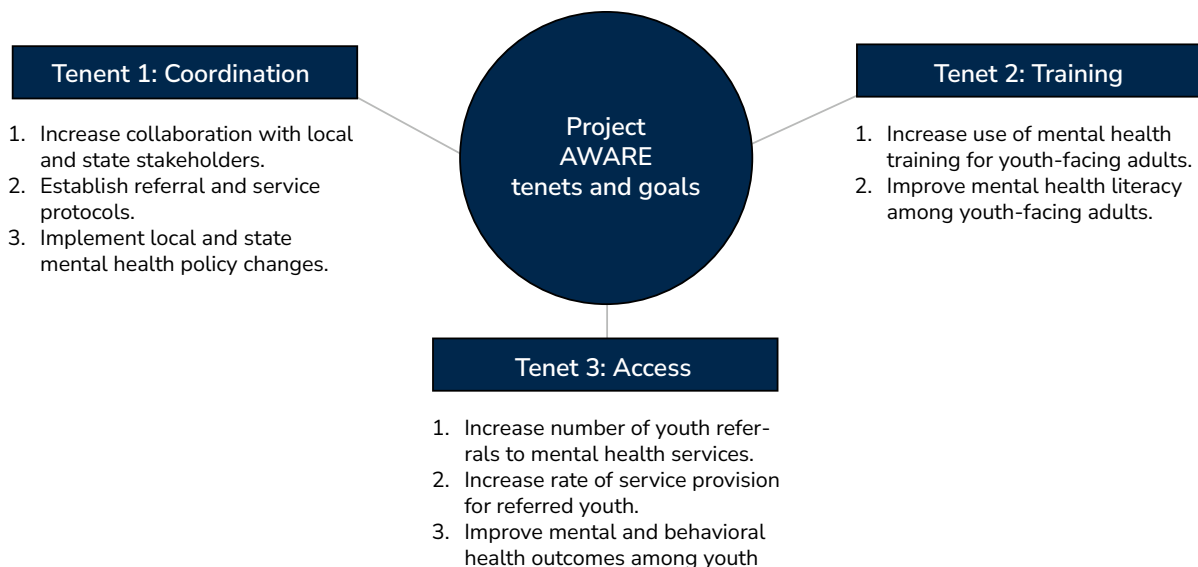
Project AWARE (Advancing Wellness and Resiliency in Education) is a five-year grant program funded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) to support collaborative partnerships between state and local educational agencies and state mental health agencies designed to develop a sustainable infrastructure for school-based mental health programs and services.

While offered in multiple settings across the United States, this brief focuses on a Project AWARE grant awarded to the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) in 2020. It funded a collaborative five-year partnership between MDE, the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS) and three rural community sites across the state.

The brief provides an overview of the University of Michigan Youth Policy Lab's evaluation of the program in the three participating sites: Copper Country, Delta-Schoolcraft, and Van Buren. The main focus of the evaluation was to understand project implementation and evaluate the extent to which grant activities yielded progress towards the project's stated goals, objectives, and targets. The evaluation team measured community sites' progress using various data collection instruments including surveys, interviews and focus groups, and worked with MDE and MDHHS project managers to collect implementation and outcome data from the state.

The project's goals, objectives, and targets were set by the state team, which also held ultimate responsibility for ensuring their achievement. The state team also allowed community sites flexibility to pursue specific activities that were particularly relevant to their individual communities. The community sites were guided by three core tenets: (1) improve coordination between AWARE partners; (2) provide mental health support training to youth-facing adults in their communities; and (3) increase youth access to mental health services. Figure 1 shows a summary of the three tenets and associated goals.

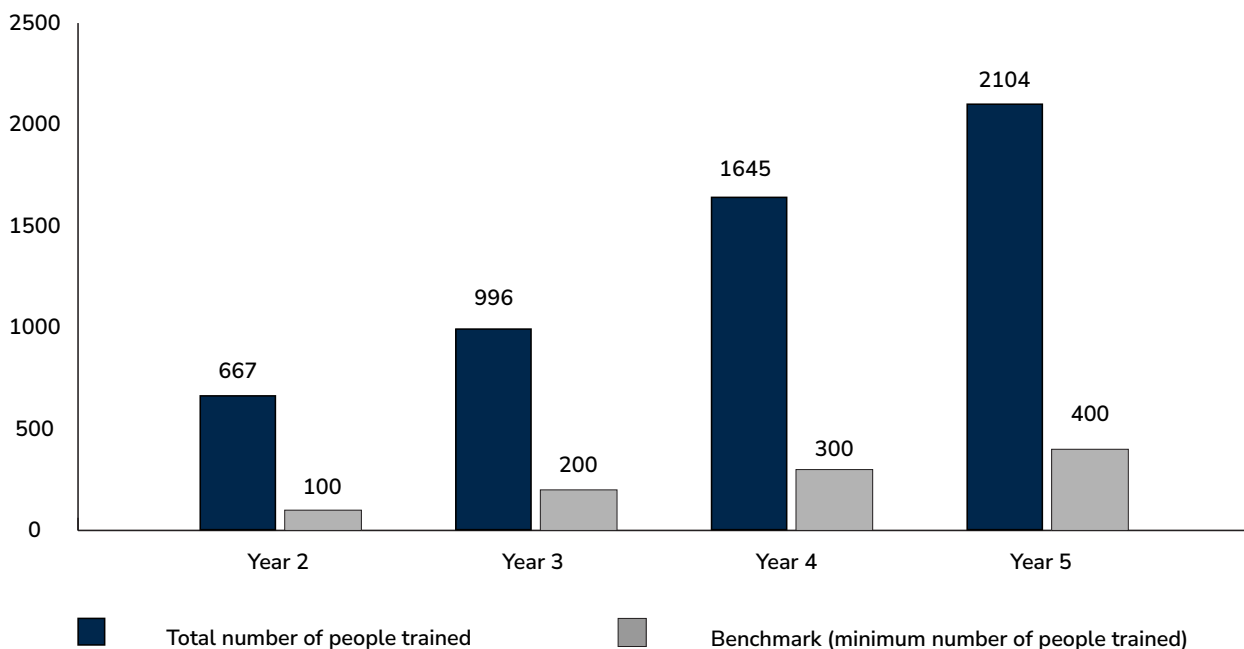
Figure 1. Project AWARE Tenets and Goals



# Key Accomplishments

The Michigan Project AWARE grantees reached a wide audience through mental health-related events and activities that involved parents and students in their communities. They were able to train more than 2,100 individuals in youth mental health awareness and literacy, with nearly three fourths of participants coming from outside of the mental health field. Figure 2 shows the cumulative number of individuals trained, reflecting the broad dissemination of knowledge that occurred during the grant, well beyond the target of 100 individuals per year.

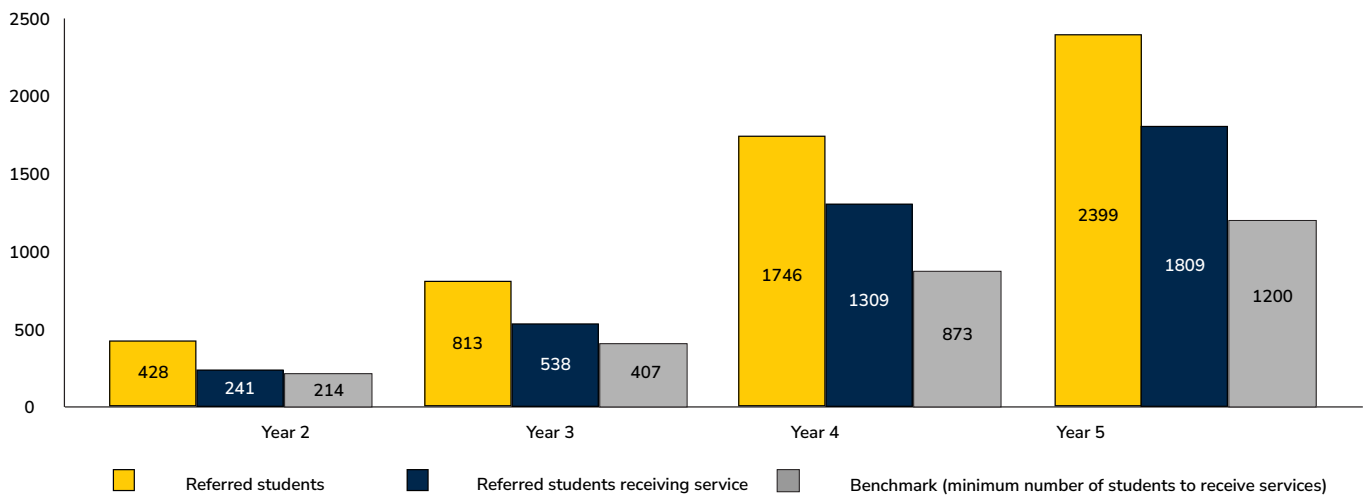
Figure 2. Total people trained (cumulative)



*Note: The reported figures are based on information collected directly from all three sites by the evaluation team as of June 2025.*

In addition, the community sites made great strides in improving access to mental health services for youth. They referred almost 2,400 students to mental health services in total, far exceeding the grant goal of 400 students. They also provided services to approximately 75% of referred students, surpassing the annual target of 50%. Figure 3 shows the total students referred and served over the course of the grant.

Figure 3. Total students referred and served (cumulative)



*Note: The reported figures are based on information collected quarterly from sites by the evaluation team as of June 2025.*

The community sites felt they made meaningful progress toward increasing collaboration during the Project AWARE grant. ISDs led outreach efforts with a broad range of stakeholders—including schools, families, and health partners—and tailored initiatives to fit their local contexts. For example, Van Buren convened a Whole Child Summit that brought together diverse stakeholders to discuss mental health topics. Copper Country established Parent Cafes, which enhanced parent engagement and communication by addressing critical topics such as stigma reduction and educational outreach. Delta-Schoolcraft initiated an innovative healthcare partnership to address the lack of collaboration with their Community Mental Health agency and to supplement their referral process. Sites also strengthened internal referral and training capacity, expanded in-house mental health trainings, enhanced collaboration across sites, and overcome challenges related to community partnerships, staffing, data tracking, and state-level coordination.

# Barriers and Challenges

Despite the successes, sites also experienced difficulties. They often struggled to engage external community stakeholders, and faced issues related to staffing, capacity, and turnover. Members of each site were expected to report a moderate collaboration—defined as coordination, coalition, or collaboration—with 80% of other local member organizations. However, by Year 4 of the grant, there was less collaboration among members, with community site members reporting moderate collaboration with just 50% of other team members on average.

In addition, there were implementation challenges and some of the planned activities did not end up taking place. A policy scan activity, designed to identify mental health policies or processes to change, add, or delete at each site was delayed while sites waited for clear guidance from the state team regarding appropriate methods and activities. Only two out of the three community sites ultimately completed the activity, and one of two reported that it was both time-consuming and of limited value.

Similarly, there were difficulties in the administration of the Michigan Profile for Healthy Youth (MiPHY), which sites were encouraged to participate in to better understand the mental and behavioral health needs of students in their districts. Growing political contention and increased scrutiny of the survey's content (which included questions about sexual activity and alcohol and substance use) made it difficult for districts to participate; many schools faced pressure from parents and community members to withdraw. Although the evaluation team requested and compiled MiPHY data beginning in Year 2, only 6 out of the 15 Project AWARE schools ultimately participated even one time by the end of the grant.

Finally, community sites encountered barriers in measuring student and parent satisfaction with provided services. While a satisfaction survey was developed to make this a routine practice—and community sites had the opportunity to distribute the Student/Parent Satisfaction Survey in Year 4—sites chose not to use it. Their rationale centered on staffing limitations and concern that individual service providers might be directly evaluated, despite encouragement from Project AWARE leadership.

# Recommendations for the Field

Based on the evaluation findings, the research team offers several recommendations for any similar large-scale school-based community mental health initiatives:

**Conduct a community readiness assessment prior to any large-scale school-based community mental health initiatives.**

Given the varied capacities and willingness to collaborate among partners, any Project AWARE implementation should begin with a structured assessment of each community's readiness, focusing on both operational capacity and leadership commitment to collaboration. Experience with this cohort showed that a "one-size-fits-all" approach overlooks important differences while Van Buren Intermediate School District (ISD) was ready to participate, Delta-Schoolcraft ISD faced substantial challenges, yet both were held to the same expectations.

To ensure success, an initial screening should identify each community's needs so that tailored support or capacity-building can be provided as needed. This approach fosters the trust and collaboration necessary for achieving Project AWARE's goals.

**Facilitate collaboration between participating sites as well as past/current cohorts.**

A key benefit of this grant was fostering cross-site collaboration. Community sites exchanged experiences and received valuable feedback during Community of Practice (CoP) meetings and other events organized by state leadership, such as bi-monthly all-site meetings and biannual retreats. While virtual participation is necessary in a large state like Michigan, shifting to in-person meetings significantly strengthened engagement and relationships. Future initiatives should prioritize accessible in-person gatherings, including support for transportation, to ensure statewide participation. Community sites valued the structured format of these meetings.

**Build internal staff capacity by implementing "train-the-trainer" models.**

Community sites showed great initiative by training their own staff, rather than relying on external trainers, to better meet local needs—especially in the Upper Peninsula and rural areas. This train-the-trainer approach provided flexible, tailored training and effectively met the grant's goals. Future initiatives should consider empowering internal staff to sustain effective training within communities.

**Balance autonomy and support through clear communication.**

While the state team aimed to help community sites become more independent, sites often needed more guidance for timely decisions, such as on allowable expenses. For future initiatives, state teams should identify common areas of uncertainty and provide clear tools and guidance, as well as clarify roles early on. This will help balance support and autonomy, enabling sites to act confidently and efficiently.

For detailed analysis, refer to the full report: Michigan Project AWARE Final Grant Report 2020-2025.

## About the Authors

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## Youth Policy Lab

The Youth Policy Lab, a joint research center of the Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy and the Institute for Social Research, envisions a world where partner-driven and policy-centered research fuels positive social change. 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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