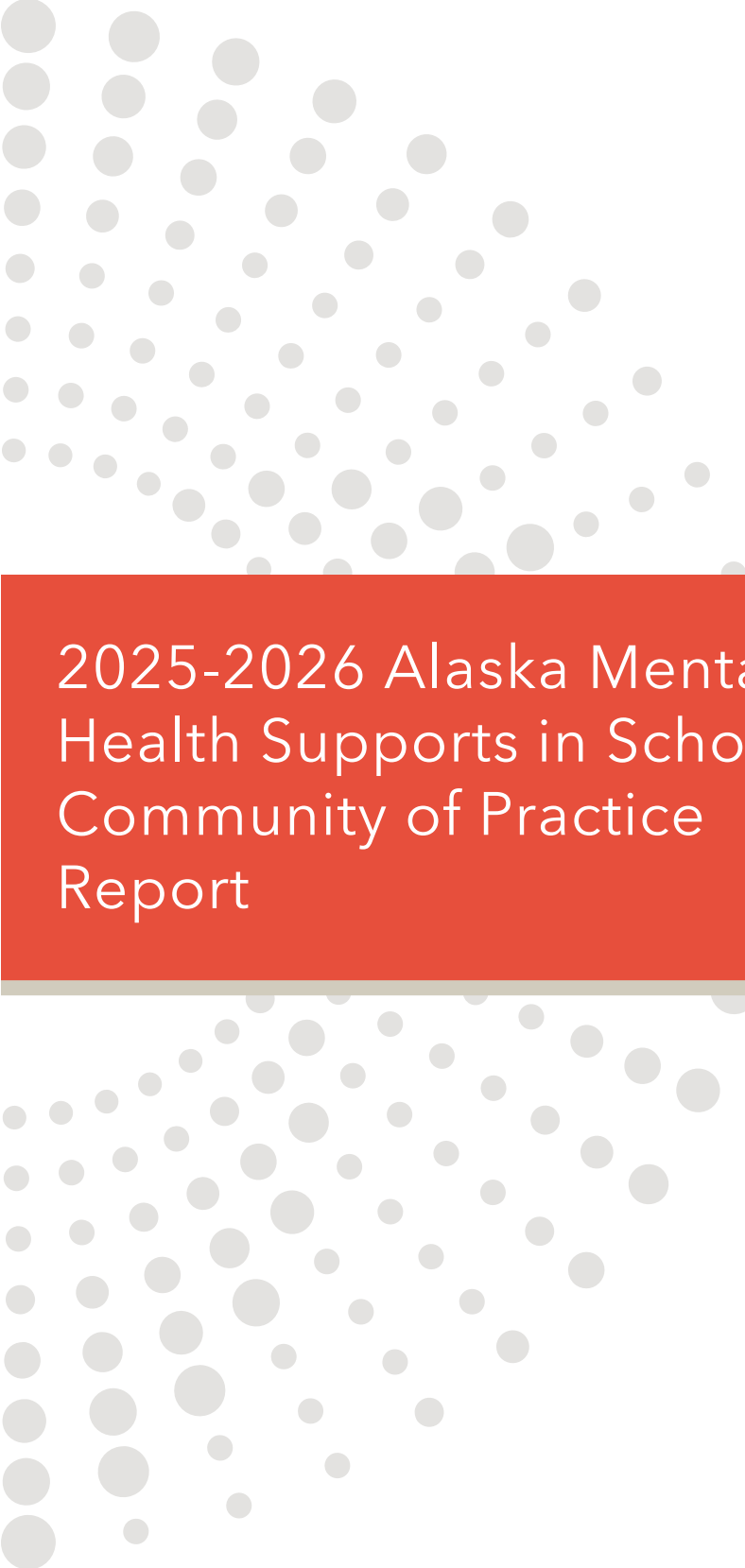




2025-2026 Alaska Mental Health Supports in Schools Community of Practice Report

BACKGROUND

Mental health is a serious situation, especially for Alaskan youth.¹ Between 2011 and 2023, there has been a significant increase in the percentage of adolescents who:

- » *felt sad or hopeless for a significant time in the past 12 months (from 26% to 43%)*
- » *seriously considered attempting suicide (from 15% to 23%)*
- » *made a plan about how they would attempt suicide (from 13% to 21%)*
- » *attempted suicide (from 9% to 19%).²*

The lack of access to mental health supports is one reason that the U.S. Surgeon General has recommended that mental health supports be placed where children and youth spend a lot of their time: in educational, community, and childcare settings.³ Recognizing the dire need for mental health supports, the Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority (The Trust) spearheaded the creation of the Mental Health Supports in Schools State Leadership Team alongside partners from the State of Alaska Departments of Education & Early Development (DEED) and Health (DOH), Alaska Mental Health Board/Advisory Board on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse (AMHB/ABADA), and other statewide stakeholders.⁴ In 2021, the State Leadership Team released the [Mental Health in Alaska Schools Phase One: Landscape Assessment](#). Initial work from the Landscape Assessment was built on to create the 2022 [Mental Health in Alaska Schools Phase Two: The State of Student Mental Health & Promising Approaches](#) report. Overall, these reports have revealed how important it is to learn from and support one another not only to achieve a truly whole-of-society approach to mental health, but also to strengthen mental and behavioral health systems in the state. The reports have also revealed how solutions can come from within communities and within school districts themselves when they are equipped with the right tools and resources.

PHASE THREE: THE COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

In 2024, the State Leadership Team embarked on the third phase of this project, a Mental Health Supports in Schools Community of Practice (COP). A community of practice is defined as a group of people who come together on an ongoing basis to share a common concern,

¹ National Alliance on Mental Illness. "Mental Health in Alaska." [NAMI.org](https://www.nami.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Alaska-GRPA-Data-Sheet-8.5-x-11-wide.pdf), March 2025, <https://www.nami.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Alaska-GRPA-Data-Sheet-8.5-x-11-wide.pdf>

² Alaska Department of Health. "Alaska YRBS Statewide Survey Results." *Alaska Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS)*, January 12, 2026, <https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/yrbs.alaska/viz/yrbs/LandingPage>

³ U.S. Office of the Surgeon General. "Protecting Youth Mental Health: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory." *U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Public Health Service*, 2021, <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-youth-mental-health-advisory.pdf>

⁴ Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority. "Mental Health in Alaska Schools Phase One: Landscape Assessment." *AlaskaMentalHealthTrust.org*, 2021, <https://alaskamentalhealthtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Mental-Health-in-Alaska-Schools-Phase-1-Landscape-Assessment-FINAL-REV-8-22.pdf>

interest, or goal.⁵ The purpose of the COP is to bring together teams of education professionals, mental and behavioral health professionals, community leaders, families, and other relevant stakeholders to learn with and from one another, gaining new ideas and resources to strengthen mental health supports in their school districts and communities. The Trust contracted with the Stellar Group through a competitive process to support phase three, including convening and facilitation of the COP.

In its first year (2024-2025), the COP was open to school district teams comprised ideally of 1) a member of the school district administration involved in their district's mental health systems, and 2) a mental or behavioral health clinician, either an internal or external provider working with the school district. 20 participants representing nine school districts joined the COP.

THE 2025-2026 COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

In its second year, participation was opened up to anyone who was interested in mental health support in schools, though the following were highly encouraged to join as individual participants:

- » *School district administrators involved in their district's mental health systems*
- » *Community-based mental or behavioral health organizations interested in strengthening relationships with school districts*
- » *Mental health clinicians, school counselors, school leadership, teachers, community leaders, school-based health centers, school nurses, social service agencies, and student-parent-family support agencies*

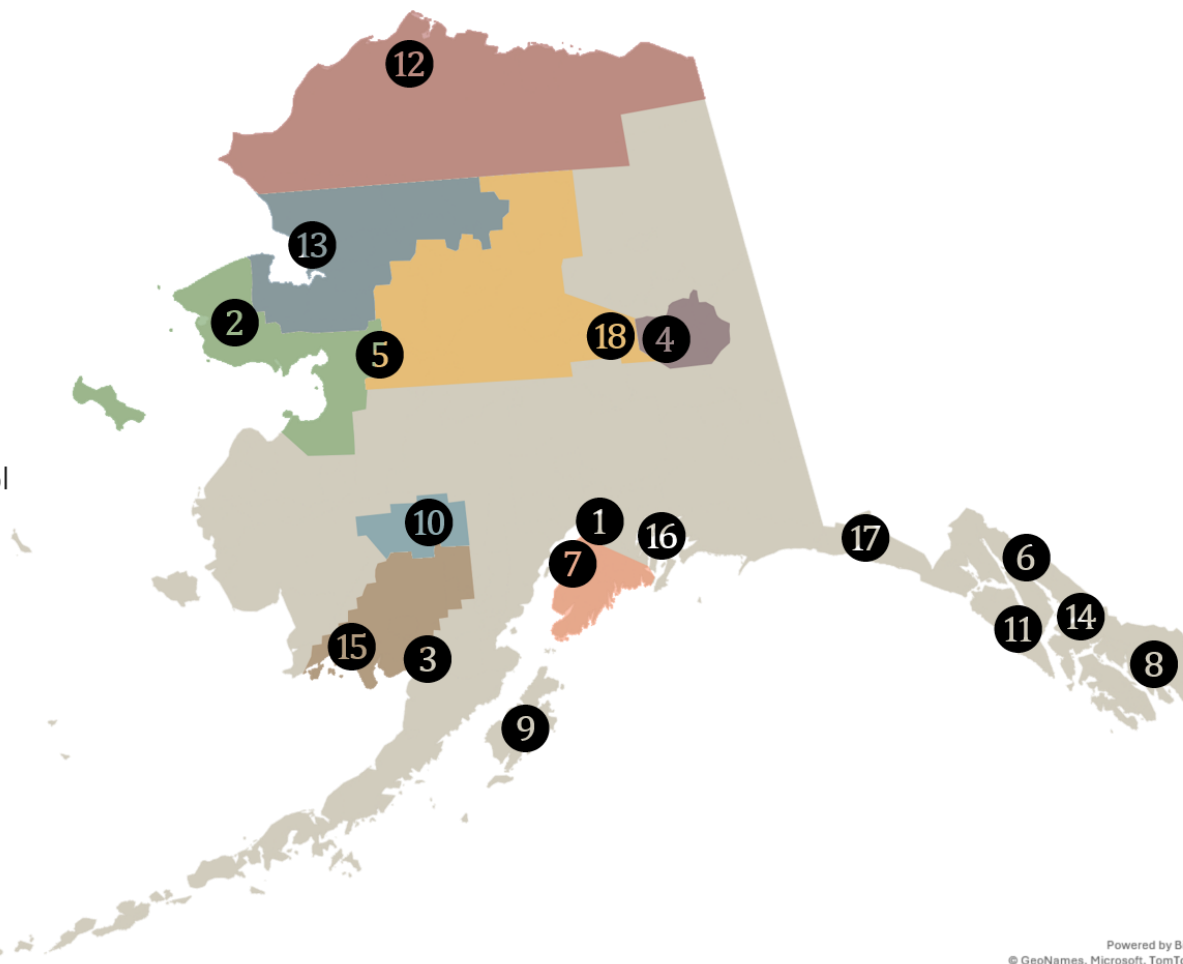
Recruitment kicked off in September 2025 during the School Safety and Well-Being Summit, an annual summit convened by DEED that gathers educational leaders, key staff, and strategic stakeholders to improve school safety and well-being in Alaska by both learning and sharing methods to promote healthy development, improve school climate, and be better prepared for any possible school crisis. While most participants were recruited within a month of the summit, recruitment continued throughout the year. In all, the 2025-2026 cohort comprised of 54 participants representing 25 school districts, community organizations, and state agencies, demonstrating how the change in eligibility increased enrollment.

⁵ Edmonton Regional Learning Consortium. "What is a Community of Practice?" *Creating Communities of Practice*, 2016, <https://www.communityofpractice.ca/background/what-is-a-community-of-practice/>

MAP OF SCHOOL DISTRICTS THAT HAD REPRESENTATIVES PARTICIPATING IN THE COP⁶

School districts:

- ❶ Anchorage
- ❷ Bering Strait
- ❸ Bristol Bay Borough
- ❹ Fairbanks North Star
- ❺ Galena City
- ❻ Juneau Borough
- ❼ Kenai Peninsula
- ❽ Ketchikan Gateway
- ❾ Kodiak Island
- ❿ Kuspuk
- ⓫ Mt. Edgecumbe High School
- ⓬ North Slope
- ⓭ Northwest Arctic
- ⓮ Petersburg City
- ⓯ Southwest Region
- ⓰ Valdez City
- ⓱ Yakutat
- ⓲ Yukon-Koyukuk



⁶ Based on DEED's District Map: https://education.alaska.gov/alaskan_schools/alaska-district-map

TABLE 1. MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORTS IN SCHOOLS COP REGISTRATION

School District/Organization	Participant Name	Role
Alaska Behavioral Health Association (ABHA)	Victoria Kildal	Chief Learning Officer
Anchorage School District	Allison Susel	Director of Student Support
	Ashley Doss	School Psychologist
	ChaSae Harris	School Nurse
	Elizabeth Congdon-McGee	Counselor
	Jen Mickelson	Migrant Education Student & Family Engagement Manager
	Kayla McDonogh	Educator
	Maureen Cronin	Academy Coach
	Nicole Stuemke	Social Work Coordinator
	Lillian Anderson	School Nurse
Alaska School Counselor Association	Cathy Snider	Region 3 Representative
	Maggie Samson	Region 2, Chair of Research Relations and University Liaison
Bering Strait School District	Emily Crysel	Counselor
	Russell Espina	Educator
	Sarah Swanson	Counseling coordinator
Bristol Bay Borough School District	Esther Pepin	Director of Special Projects
	Kathryn Frutiger	Social Worker
Alaska Department of Education and Early Development (DEED)	Kristie Parsons	Empowerment Specialist, School Recognition and Support
Alaska Department of Health (DOH)	Jennifer Baker	Public Health Specialist
Fairbanks North Star Borough School District	Dana Ricks	Counselor
	Liz Kane	Counselor
Galena City School District	Ashley Murray	
Juneau Borough School District	Natalia Bucher	Counselor
	Nicole Weston	Counselor
Kenai Peninsula Borough School District	Claudette Schlegel	School Nurse
	Danielle Self	Social Worker
	Donna Anderson	Educator
	Erin Stevens	Title I Specialist
Ketchikan Gateway Borough School District	Ashley Kessler	Social Worker
	Cathy Rocke	Counselor
	Jason House	Director of Student Supports
	Robert Holston	Community Member
Kodiak Island Borough	Kate Korrow	School Psychologist
Kuspuk School District	Madeline Aguillard	Superintendent

	Rebecca Stallworth	Director of Administrative Projects & Food Service
Mt. Edgecumbe School	Miranda Bacha	School administration
	Shadiya Alshabibi-Nestor	Counselor
National Alliance on Mental Illness Alaska (NAMI)	Ann Ringstad	Executive Director
North Slope Borough School District	Laura Thomas	Public Health Nurse
	Shirley Hautala	School Principal
	Tracy Mulvenon	Assistant Superintendent
Maniilaq Association	Billie Halsey	Lead Children's Therapist
Petersburg School District	Rosal Concepcion	Educator
Southwest Region School District	Le Esia O'Sullivan	Special Education Director
Spirit of Youth	Aislinn Waite	Coalition Coordinator
	Karen Zeman	Executive Director
Valdez City School District	Gianna Gusti	Counselor
	Jason Weber	Superintendent
VOA Alaska	Haylee Donovan	Director of Community Services
	Jaclyn Wallen	Vice President of Community Behavioral Health
	LeeAnn Mitchell	School-based clinician
Yakutat School District	Carol Pate	Superintendent
Yukon-Koyukuk School District	Roxanne Stickman	State and Federal Programs Administrative Assistant
	Maegan Mascagno	Administrative Assistant

SESSION DATES & ATTENDANCE

The Stellar Group sent monthly meeting invitations to all registrants and compiled meeting notes, slides, and recordings. Only presentations were recorded. The facilitators compiled all recordings and meeting materials into a [webpage](#) that participants can continue to reference and access even after the close of the COP sessions. The first and last sessions were not recorded, since they were mostly discussion sessions.

While there were 54 registrants for the 2025-2026 cohort, there were, on average, 11 attendees per session, similar to the first year of the COP. There was also an average of 4 views per available session recording.

1. *October 14, 2025: 14 attendees*
2. *November 18, 2025: 10 attendees, 5 views*
3. *December 9, 2025: 14 attendees, 5 views*
4. *January 13, 2026: 10 attendees, 3 views*
5. *February 10, 2026: 11 attendees, 7 views*
6. *March 10, 2026: 11 attendees, 1 view*
7. *April 14, 2026: 9 attendees, 4 views*

8. May 12, 2026: 6 attendees

In addition to the regular monthly COP sessions, the Stellar Group helped organize three half-day special topic sessions which were open to the Alaskan public, not just COP participants:

1. *January 14, 2026 - Positive Behavior Interventions & Supports Learning Session (with Northwest PBIS): 32 attendees, 4 views*
2. *March 12, 2026 - Youth-Centered Approaches to Substance Use Prevention (with Alaska Alliance and VOA Alaska): 24 attendees, 6 views*
3. *April 20, 2026 - A Deep Dive into the AK Safe Grant (with SERRC Alaska): 16 attendees, 2 views*

COP TOPICS

When registering for the COP, participants were asked about what issues they were experiencing in their school districts and their biggest needs. Comments were also gathered from the School Safety and Wellbeing Summit in September 2025.

Participants cited student mental health issues, such as bullying, substance misuse, depression, and anxiety. Suicide was a particular concern for a number of participants. They also discussed several barriers to delivering appropriate services to students, including a lack of programming, limited access to services (especially in rural areas), and insufficient human and financial resources. In addition to the need for more targeted support and interventions, participants discussed the need for universal and preventive support, including social-emotional learning, healthy relationships, coping and resilience strategies, culturally responsive support, and alternative pathways. In addition, the participants mentioned the need for increased family and community engagement, the removal of social and cultural stigmas, and a response to students' and families' basic needs.

In the registration form, participants were also asked if their school district or organization had any strengths or successes they wanted to celebrate with the rest of the group. The facilitators invited those who answered this question to present to the group if they were interested and available. Additionally, the facilitators worked with DEED and the rest of the Mental Health Supports in Schools State Leadership Team to brainstorm presenters for the half-day special topic sessions. Based on the cited needs and issues, as well as presenters' interests and availability, the following topics were discussed:

November 18, 2025: Building and staffing a mental health team with Kuspuk School District and Anchorage School District

Participants from the Kuspuk and Anchorage School Districts discussed creative ways to build their schools' mental health teams, including exploring telehealth options, professional development, technological innovations, and community partnerships.

December 9, 2025: Approaches to threat assessment with Valdez City School District

Participants from Valdez City School District discussed their approaches to threat assessment, i.e., a clinical measure used to evaluate situations and provide appropriate services. It involves building multidisciplinary teams that communicate and coordinate with one another.

January 13, 2026: Referral Coordination with Help Me Grow Alaska

A representative of Help Me Grow Alaska was invited to present on their referral coordination services. They are a statewide non-profit organization that helps connect families and children to needed services at no cost. School staff can work with them to request referrals to students as needed.

February 10, 2026: Student Referral and Tracking System with Ketchikan Gateway Borough School District

Participants from the Ketchikan Gateway Borough School District presented their student referral and tracking system, which they developed to track student needs, referrals, and the services accessed. It also involves building trust through outreach and consistent communication strategies, as well as developing data management and tracking systems.

March 10, 2026: Community Partnerships and Collaboration with Maniilaq Association, Kotzebue

A participant from Maniilaq Association talked about how they collaborate with the Northwest Arctic Borough School District and other state and community partners to enable planning, resource sharing, support and intervention, and to ensure that students access the services they need.

April 14, 2026: Interconnected Systems Framework with Anchorage School District

Participants from Anchorage School District and VOA Alaska presented on the Interconnected Systems Framework, a structured approach that integrates school mental health systems with Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) to ensure that students, school staff and leadership, and providers communicate effectively and create a single system of delivery.

May 12, 2026: Participants' end-of-year reflections

During the last session of the year, participants reflected on their experiences and engaged in a reflection exercise about what each person has learned and then the main learnings they are taking with them.

Participants appreciated learning from the creative responses of different school districts during **tough times**. The presentations throughout the year highlighted how school districts are innovating and continue to prioritize youth health and wellbeing, even with dwindling budgets. Amidst challenges, there has been significant positive change and encouraging

momentum. As an example of a creative approach, one member from the North Slope School District shared that they recently began using an **online therapy program called Huddle Up**. They reported that it was very well received and helpful to some students.

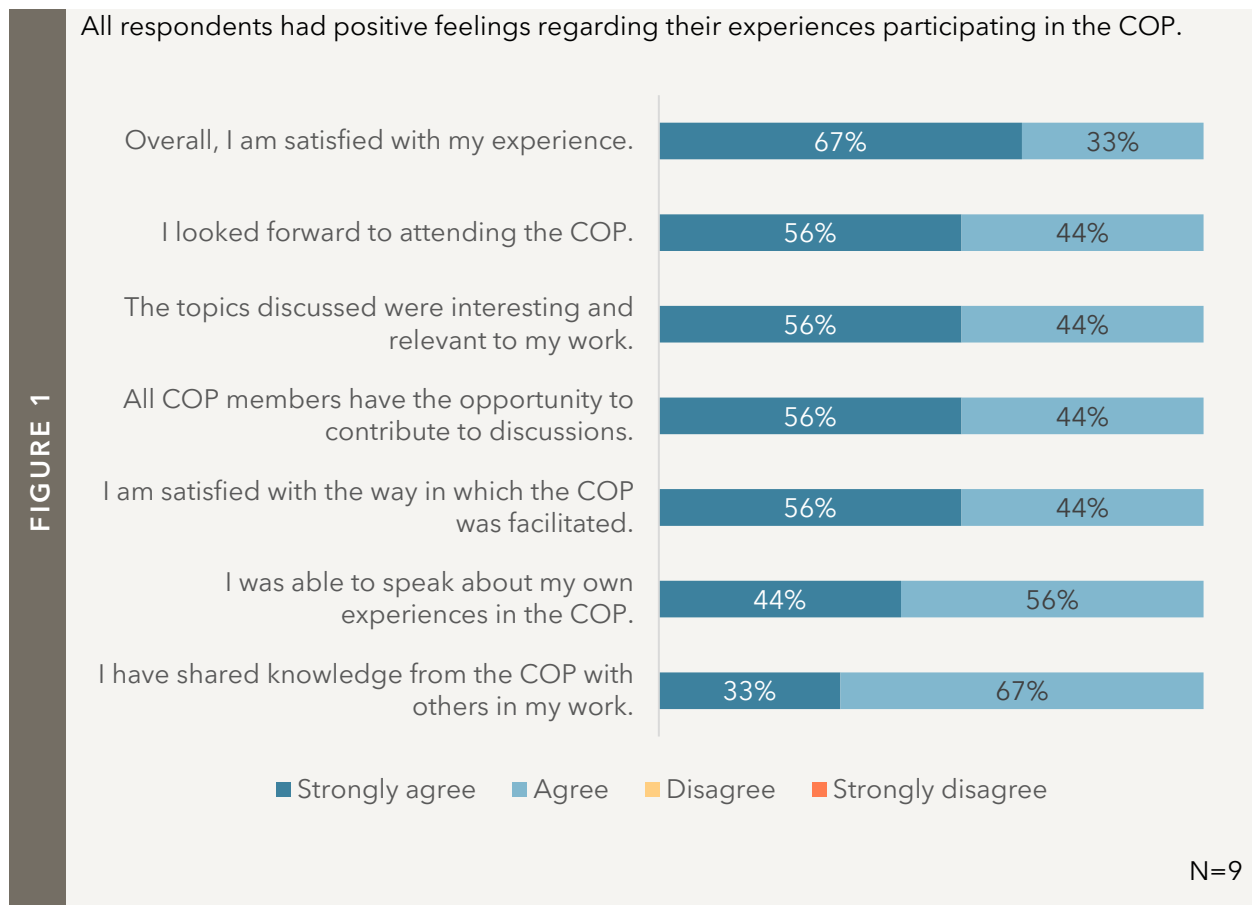
Some also mentioned the need for a coordinated approach and **the importance of a multidisciplinary team**. Ensuring that a variety of professionals are involved in understanding the factors each child faces is key to addressing root causes. Holistic support that looks at the whole child is most effective. Additionally, **family engagement is front and center** and key for the success of the work, especially from an Interconnected Systems Framework perspective. Working with youth means including the parents in the conversation and treatment approach.

One member discussed the benefits of Mental Health First Aid as an element of workforce development and career preparedness, not only for mental health professionals but also as an empowering training for all people who work with students. Members also talked about **the value of peer support for mental health professionals**. Hearing about how others are encountering and navigating similar issues in their work is encouraging and decreases a sense of isolation. One member said the COP meetings have been key to collaborating with others and overcoming obstacles.

FEEDBACK FROM COP PARTICIPANTS

The Stellar Group disseminated a satisfaction survey to all 54 participants from May 6 to May 19, 2025. One of the emails bounced. Of the 53 survey recipients, 9 provided valid responses (17% response rate).

Overall, 100% of respondents (N=9) agreed or strongly agreed that they were satisfied with their experience in the COP. They agreed or strongly agreed that they looked forward to attending the sessions, that the topics discussed were interesting and relevant to their work, that they felt they had the opportunity to contribute to discussions and speak about their own experiences, and that they have shared knowledge they learned from the COP back to their own workplace.



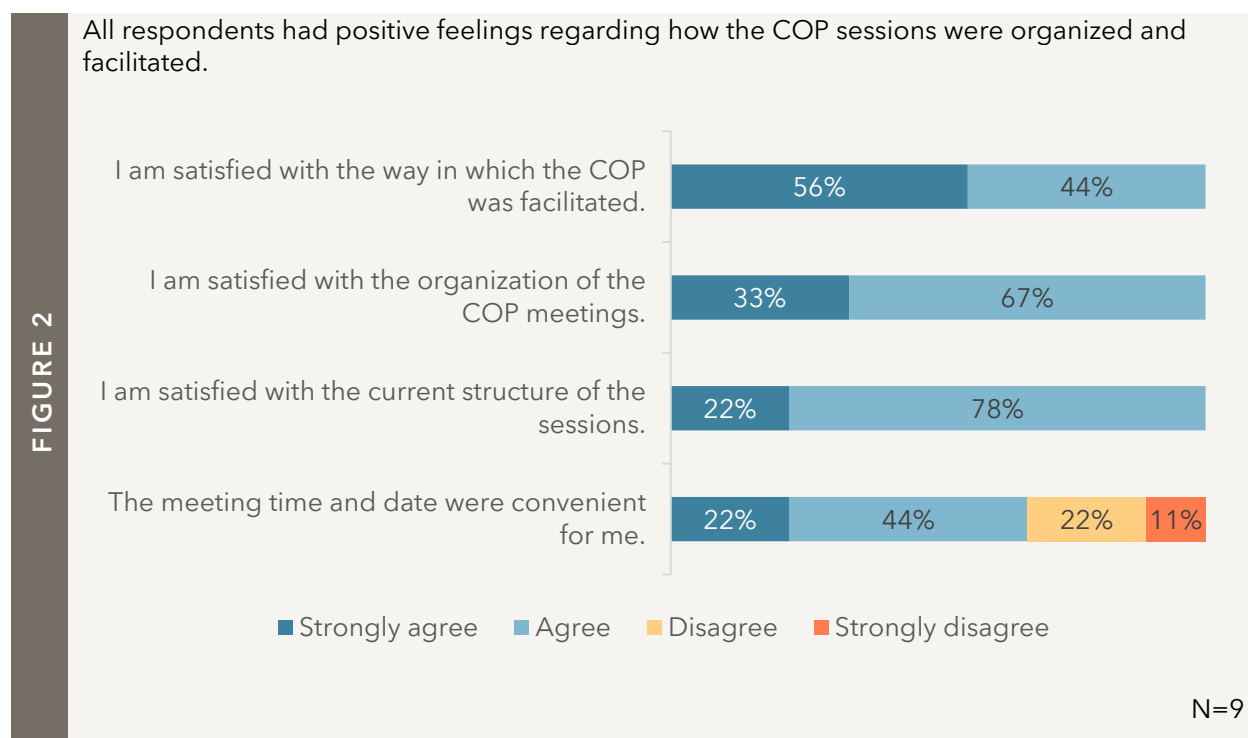
When asked what they most enjoyed about the COP, respondents had many positive comments, mostly about the connectedness they felt as part of the COP:

- » *I enjoyed connecting with others in similar programming and learning from others.*
- » *Meeting people from all over the state that have the same issues and are doing similar work.*
- » *It's nice to hear from others around the state. It's validating to know our successes and challenges are similar.*
- » *Very good to hear about and learn from other programs and how they are supporting mental health in schools.*
- » *The opportunity to connect with and learn from others in multiple fields across the state*

One hundred percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they were satisfied with how the COP was facilitated and with the organization and structure of the sessions (N=9). One respondent shared: “Always appreciate how well these are facilitated and the demeanor of the facilitators.” Sixty-seven percent agreed or strongly agreed that the meeting times and dates were convenient for them. It may be noted that when coordinating with COP

registrants, no single day and time fit all registrants' schedules, so the facilitators ultimately selected the time and day that best suited the largest number of registrants.

Even if the day and time worked, a few respondents noted that their limited capacity affected their attendance. One respondent shared that *"For me it was always juggling of time."* Another respondent shared: *"Monthly meetings have been difficult to attend. Perhaps meetings every other month would be more convenient for others as well."* Moreover, another participant suggested scheduling sessions either before or after the school day.



When asked whether they had any suggestions for improving future COPs, a few respondents shared ideas, including allotting less time to the monthly introductory check-ins, incorporating mindfulness activities, inviting speakers from other states, and sharing more data that illustrate school districts' successes.

One hundred percent of respondents reported they were likely or very likely to participate in the COP again if it were restructured to be more goal-oriented next year (N=9). When asked how they would want to structure the COP to be more goal-oriented, one respondent summarized the opportunity well:

» *I appreciate it when we hear from professionals or informational sessions combined with real-life practical examples and programs. I want to know how to put things into action. I feel like I have talked and heard time and time again, but to actually put something into practice is where it becomes more difficult. Maybe a project-based approach woven in, identifying personal/professional projects and then checkpoints*

and having accountability for the project/opportunity you chose to put into action or further develop. Some support through the process and having the group or a team as a check-in resource.

In summary, respondents appreciated the COP and offered some suggestions for continued improvement. They value being able to connect with their peers across the state and see an opportunity for the COP to help them become more goal-oriented and turn shared ideas into tangible next steps.

"I appreciate the opportunity to participate, and I would like to participate in all COP sessions for next year." - Survey respondent

APPENDIX A: RECRUITMENT FLYER



MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORTS IN SCHOOLS COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE:

"COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS FOR BUILDING SUPPORTIVE SCHOOL COMMUNITIES"

The **Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority** and the State of Alaska **Department of Education and Early Development** are hosting the second year of the **Mental Health Supports in Schools Community of Practice (COP)**, which brings together education leadership, mental and behavioral health professionals, and community leaders to share resources and strengthen mental health supports in their school districts and communities. This COP aims to be:

- *A space for learning about & sharing resources*
- *A collaborative space for enhancing mental health supports in schools*
- *A way to cultivate a shared vision for Alaska schools*
- *A way to share best practices, and address challenges*
- *An opportunity to communication with state-level leaders about local-level needs and priorities*

What is a Community of Practice?

A Community of Practice (COP) is a group of people who share a common concern, a set of problems, or an interest in a topic and who come together to fulfill both individual and group goals.

Who can join?

While the COP is open to everyone interested in mental health supports in schools, we highly encourage the following to join:

- School district administrators involved in their district's mental health systems
- Community-based mental or behavioral health organizations interested in strengthening relationships with school districts
- Mental health clinicians, school counselors, school leadership, teachers, community leaders, school based health centers, school nurses, social service agencies, and student-parent-family support agencies

What is the commitment?

Participants are asked to commit to regular attendance in the COP through the 2025-2026 school year. Meetings will be virtual.

- 8 monthly one-hour meetings, starting October 2025
- 3 specialized topical sessions, conducted virtually (open to the public)



How to join?

Please complete the sign-up form on [this link](#) or scan the QR code to the right. For more information, please email Adrian Alarilla, COP Co-Facilitator, adrian@stellargp.com.



LEARN TOGETHER. SUPPORT EACH OTHER. BE PART OF OUR COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE.

Join Us on January 14th for a Learning Session on PBIS

Learn more about Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS), an implementation framework for supporting the academic, social, emotional, and behavioral competence of all students.

WHAT

The Alaska Mental Health in Schools Community of Practice is hosting an online learning session on *Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS)*, facilitated by Northwest PBIS. The objectives for the session are:

1. Provide an overview of how PBIS integration in schools can promote academic achievement.
2. Define systems, practices, and data in the school district that facilitate integration of healthy student behavior promotion and response.
3. Provide examples of integration at the classroom, school, and district level.

WHO

The workshop is free and open to all interested school district personnel and community providers/partners in Alaska.

WHEN

Wednesday, January 14, 2026, 12:00pm-3:00pm.



ABOUT THE SPEAKERS

Dr. Jessica Swain-Bradway is the Executive Director for the Northwest PBIS Network (NWPBIS). Dr. Swain-Bradway holds a PhD in Special Education. She was a high school self-contained teacher, Research Director for a regional technical assistance center, and research faculty at the University of Oregon prior to joining NWPBIS.



Dr. Patti Hershfeldt is a trainer and coach for the Northwest PBIS Network (NWPBIS). She holds an EdD in Special Education. Prior to joining the NW PBIS Network, Patti was a high school self-contained teacher, a faculty associate at Johns Hopkins University and a co-director for a regional technical assistance center at Old Dominion University.

REGISTER HERE:



Or visit: https://bit.ly/pbis_ak26

For questions or more information, please contact adrian@stellargp.com.



Join us on March 12th for

Nothing About Us Without Us: Youth-Centered Approaches to Substance Use Prevention

WHAT

This session offers a youth-informed approach to prevention that centers young people's voices and experiences in developing effective strategies. The session will be divided into two parts:

1. Information and insights from Anchorage Youth Speak Out Events, as well as partnership work between Prevention Coalitions and the Anchorage School District.
2. An overview of Choose Connection, an underage alcohol use prevention campaign developed with significant input from Alaska youth, and a new curriculum which will be available for implementation statewide in March.

Attendees will leave with practical resources, including information about accessing the Choose Connection curriculum and models for incorporating youth voices into their substance use prevention efforts.

WHO

The learning session is free and open to all interested school district personnel and community providers/partners in Alaska.

WHEN

Thursday, March 12, 2026, 12:00pm-3:00pm.



ABOUT THE SPEAKERS

Aaron Osterback is an Alaska-born professional with 23 years of experience in the nonprofit healthcare sector. He now brings this experience to his prevention work with the Anchorage Suicide Prevention Coalition and the Voices for Prevention Coalition. Aaron is proud to support VOA Alaska, contributing a broad range of experience, a strong work ethic, and a deep commitment to the organization's mission and vision.



Kelby Murphy is an experienced public health professional and marketer. In her role as CEO at Walsh|Sheppard, Kelby leads the development and evaluation of strategic marketing and public health campaigns for a range of state and nonprofit agencies. She has led initiatives to improve public health outcomes in Alaska, including campaigns for CDVSA, SNAP-Ed, WIC, Seward Community Health Center, Aleutian Pribilof Islands Association, Copper River Native Association, the Alaska Highway Safety Office, Recover Alaska, and The Alliance.

REGISTER HERE:



Or visit:

<https://bit.ly/NothingWithoutUsAK>

For questions or more information, please contact adrian@stellargp.com.



Join us on April 20th for A Deep Dive into the AK Safe Grant with SERRC Alaska

WHAT

Safety is more than just a locked door—it's about building a culture of trust and support. Join us for a walkthrough of the AK SAFE Grant and the suite of tools it provides to Alaskan educators and students.

From the proactive power of Anonymous Reporting to the healing potential of Culturally Responsive Restorative Practices, this session highlights how we are equipping districts to better support student mental health and safety. We will also demonstrate the AVAP Toolkit, a specialized resource for victim assistance and safety planning, ensuring every school has a roadmap for both prevention and response.

WHO

The learning session is free and open to all interested school district personnel and community providers/partners in Alaska.

WHEN

Monday, April 20, 2026, 12:00pm-3:00pm.



ABOUT THE SPEAKERS

Jackie Wood, Ed.D. has worked in education since 2006, with credentials in elementary and secondary education, special education, and administration. Jackie has experience as a classroom teacher, as well as a site and district administrator. She earned her Doctorate of Education in Educational Leadership from the University of California San Diego with a focus on the inclusion of students with disabilities. At SERRC, Jackie supervises student-serving programs and provides professional learning around the state.



Jess Mangram, M.Ed. has worked in education since 2011, with credentials in special education, elementary, and secondary education. Jess has experience being a special education teacher, in both self contained and inclusion settings. She earned her Masters in Collaborative Education from Auburn University in 2015. Currently, Jess is pursuing her Doctoral Degree in Organizational Leadership from Columbia International University. At SERRC, Jess is continuing her work in special education by working with the Alaska Transition Outcomes Program.

REGISTER HERE:



Or visit:

<https://bit.ly/AKSafeGrant>

For questions or more information, please contact adrian@stellargp.com.

