RAMSEY PUBLIC SCHOOL DISTRICT

Working to Break Down the Stigma of Student Mental Health Before It's Too Late

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The Ramsey Public School District is a comprehensive community public school district that serves students in pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade from Ramsey in Bergen County, New Jersey, United States.

Challenge

District staff began seeing that kids they were referring to in-person and virtual therapy were experiencing significant delays. Wait lists were growing longer by the minute, while the number of students seeking support continued to rise.

Solution

After conducting a thorough review and exploration of other providers and services, the school district ultimately chose Gaggle Therapy and Coaching to support its students' growing mental health needs.

Results

Students and staff have been able to utilize the program and access therapy when they need it. The district reports that Gaggle Therapy and Coaching continues to provide essential aid to students and staff, and is considered a valued resource as they continue to guide students to success.

OVERCOMING THE BACKLOG

Administrators were experiencing significant issues in getting their students mental health support due to a variety of reasons. Realizing that many of their students' issues were escalating at a pace they could not keep up with because of delays in receiving care, the district introduced Gaggle Therapy and Coaching to their students and staff. "We had students whose parents either couldn't afford to engage in therapy or were unable to travel or spoke a language other than English and Gaggle Therapy was able to provide us with people who fit all of those needs for us and were able to do so in a quick manner," said Donna Volpe, M. Ed., M.A., Director of Special Education for Ramsey.

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One of the challenges the district faced in assisting families prior to implementing Gaggle Therapy was navigating insurance. They saw families struggle with how to find providers and figure out their benefit options. The process of working through insurance also brought to light monetary concerns for families who needed services, but were limited in their means to be able to access them.

"Gaggle Therapy eliminated that barrier. The fact that we had the resources to do it made it easier. We probably served more families who had never had therapy. That financial and red tape barrier was removed for our families which was a blessing."

MICHAEL BIGGAN,
SUPERVISOR OF 9-12 STUDENT EDUCATION & WELFARE

Before Gaggle Therapy students were also experiencing extended wait times before they could get support. "Insurance companies have not made it easy to get the help that our communities need. It really bothers me. Working with Gaggle [Therapy] we were able to break through all the red tape of getting help within 24-48 hours - literally - and having families not have to stress about the insurance end of it. They couldn't believe we were providing this service and we weren't asking for insurance or any sort of reimbursement. Then two months into it, the feedback on how professional the counselors were, was amazing. That was something I was very intentional about - getting feedback from the families and the staff members who were using the services. So it was the immediacy, the no red tape, and the incredible feedback we continue to get on the service," said Matthew J. Murphy, Ed. D., former Superintendent of Schools.

QUICK INTERVENTION AND EFFECTIVE SOLUTIONS

As students began using the service, they were assigned a case manager within the school who was someone that could follow up on their Gaggle Therapy services. The feedback from these case managers to school administrators was overwhelmingly positive. They shared that because students were able to receive intervention quickly, they didn't require a long-term therapy plan.

"That's what I always try to tell parents about breaking the stigma down when it comes to therapy: handle it now when it's small and manageable because if you look the other way it can then become a much larger issue for you and your family to have to work with. It was great to see that we didn't have people coming back to it and for the majority that one little intervention was enough not to need a longer term solution for them."

The district also noticed that other stakeholders, not just students, were utilizing the program and accessing therapy. A few of their school families were also able to roll their services into a long-term therapeutic approach, which was guided by their Gaggle therapist. This was helpful to the district because it made it easy to identify families who needed long term support.

Administrators also praised Gaggle Therapy as a way of providing therapeutic assistance to students outside of regular school hours, allowing them to continue their regularly scheduled school days without disruption.

"The virtue of Gaggle Therapy for us is being able to have a student do it after hours, yet it's still a district resource. We still provide the bridge for families to therapy, but it's not taking kids out of instructional time, which I think is a really big virtue of the program," said Biggan.

Another benefit was that Gaggle Therapy served as an external support system which helped teachers and administrators build positive relationships with students and parents. "Sometimes conversations in therapy are hard and it's not something schools are really meant to do for many reasons. Through Gaggle Therapy, not only are they able to get that assistance outside, but we also continue a relationship and conversation with the therapist when the parent signs on for permission for us to speak to them, so it can impact the student's day in school in a positive way," said Volpe.

The feedback from parents in the community is something that's valued to the school district. They continue to receive positive comments about the service. "Overwhelmingly it's been positive, gratitude, appreciation across the board. It has alleviated some of the pressure on our local service providers that are hired by the district. There were a lot of desperate families in those early months who were on six month long waiting lists, and Gaggle Therapy bridged the gap in a significant way. We've had people overwhelmingly say it's been a great thing for them and their families. It was an immediate win for us. We had some families ask 'can we start tomorrow?' and sometimes Gaggle has been able to meet that need. It's nice that the people trust the service so much that they are eager to be part of it," said Biggan.

REAPING THE BENEFITS OF FLEXIBLE TELETHERAPY MODEL

Staff who typically have conversations with students and parents on various issues have also appreciated being able to offer Gaggle Therapy as a resource to families.

"That has been a big win in addition to the parents liking it, the staff here has liked it - the child study teams, child psychologists, social workers, guidance counselors like having that and feel a sense of support from the district for offering it."

DONNA VOLPE, M. ED., M.A.,
DIRECTOR OF SPECIAL EDUCATION

The advantages of teletherapy over traditional methods of in-person therapy is another important feature of the Gaggle Therapy service. This includes the flexibility in scheduling for students who are receiving support. According to the district, many families have multiple kids or parents who both work outside the home. This can frequently make logistics of getting to in-person therapy appointments a challenge.

When it comes to the students, they have been very responsive to the teletherapy model. Since the pandemic, meeting on a digital screen is something that kids are now used to and comfortable with. "Kids are digital natives, so this idea is not difficult for them. By and large, kids are naturals in this environment and it meets their needs. Anytime a kid can have a good first experience with therapy, it's a win for a lifetime of support. We're meeting kids where they're at and they're having an initial positive experience, even if the relationship [with the therapist] ends, they can look back as 'well, I went to therapy once and it helped me'. That's a huge win for a lifetime for a young person," said Biggen.

HELPING STUDENTS THRIVE

While the district has seen many of their students thrive as a result of Gaggle Therapy, there are some success stories that capture how crucial it is to provide mental health support to young people today.

One student whose family was affected by financial hardships due to the pandemic, was having a hard time emotionally and was identified as needing some extra support. After connecting with Gaggle Therapy, the student was identified as having an anxiety disorder. The district was then able to work with the student to receive an educational support (504) plan. "They really turned around their academic life here. By taking part in the Gaggle Therapy services, it brought their issues to light so the school could support them better. Now, the kid is killing it. The student is a junior this year and doing great," said Biggen.

After a few sessions with the Gaggle therapist, another student who was in middle school, was identified as needing a higher level of care. The therapist was able to make that recommendation to the parents who followed through with that. The student is now receiving a higher level of therapeutic support and is thriving in school instead of having difficulty.

"We were able to be the catalyst for that student receiving that support. That student is a middle school student which is when a lot of these difficulties really begin to emerge."

A NO-BRAINER FOR SCHOOL DISTRICTS

“Gaggle Therapy is a no-brainer to recommend. I’m their number one fan in New Jersey. I absolutely recommend Gaggle Therapy as a wonderful solution for school districts.” - Matthew J. Murphy, Ed. D., former Superintendent of Schools

“I would absolutely not only recommend it but I have recommended it. I have spoken with other districts and the information I’ve shared has piqued the interest of other school districts when I talked about what tier one and tier two interventions we have available, and having Gaggle Therapy be part of our continuum of services for students. It’s a good way to support students following that school structure without needing to hire other people to do it. It’s a way for us to support students within our capacity.” - Donna Volpe, M. Ed., M.A., CCC-SLP, Director of Special Education

“If you’re a school district with students experiencing mental health problems– and you’d be hard pressed to find one that’s not in 2023 – and you’re not providing local services that you think are meeting the needs, then this is the program. It’s easy for families to access, it’s free for students, you don’t have to worry about insurance, it’s a win/win/win on those levels.” - Michael Biggan, Supervisor of 9-12 Student Education & Welfare