**NEW JERSEY DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES**

New Jersey Statewide Student Support Services (NJ4S)
Advisory Taskforce Meeting
December 2, 2025

# Agenda

- **Welcome and Introductions**
- **Reach & Engagement**
- **Key Program Updates**
- **Evaluation Presentation**

# Reach and Engagement

- Eligible Schools: **1,133**

- Reached Schools: **907** (80%)

- Engaged Schools: **574** (50% of eligible schools; 63% of reached schools)

- Applications since Sept 1, 2025: **1,714** from 332 schools across 206 districts

  - Reached = School representatives are identified in the information system
  - Engaged = Applications for Tier 2 and/or Tier 3 have been made

# Key Updates

- **Manualization of NJ4S**
  - Focus on Evidence-Based Program Implementation and Hub Advisory Groups
- **Request for Engagement: Marketing Research Firm**
  - Identification of student archetypes
  - Assist with messaging strategies – clarify how NJ4S can be of benefit and the range of programming available throughout the continuum of care including CSOC
- **Request for Information: Hub Technical Assistance**
- **Additional Clinician Support: Hazel Health**
- **Additional Student Support: Coaching through Soluna App**
- **Connection with District Superintendents through County Superintendents**

**NEW JERSEY DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES**

NJ4S Formative Evaluation: Results Overview

December 2nd, 2025

# Agenda

1. **Introduction**
   a. NJ4S Tiered Service Model
   b. NJ4S Hub and Spoke Approach
2. **Formative Research Questions**
3. **Methods**
4. **Findings**
   a. Strengths
   b. Challenges
   c. Recommendations
5. **Questions**

# Introduction: Overview of NJ4S

- NJDCF has **15 regional NJ4S Statewide Hubs** throughout the State to deliver NJ4S programming.

- Each regional Hub is staffed by prevention consultants and licensed clinicians to promote positive mental health; teach and strengthen social, emotional and behavioral skills; and support a positive school climate and staff well-being.

- Hubs receive requests for an array of prevention and early intervention services from the school districts assigned to the Hub.

# Introduction: Overview of NJ4S

- Services are divided into three tier categories.

  - **Tier 1** includes universal prevention program that benefits all students.

  - **Tier 2** includes evidence-based prevention interventions typically delivered through small groups.

  - **Tier 3** includes assessment and brief individual clinical interventions to youth in distress.

# Introduction: NJ4S Hub and Spoke
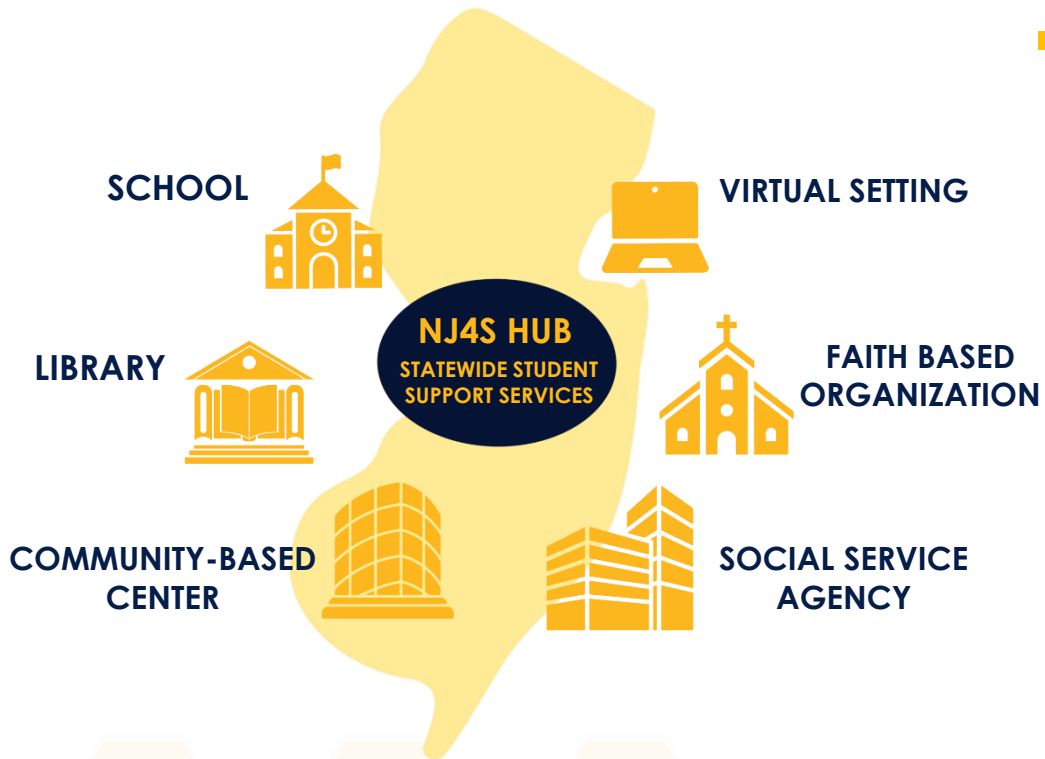


- **NJ4S Hub and Spoke Model**

  - **NJ4S** features an innovative Hub and Spoke model, designed to empower schools to request services from the Hub covering their region.

  - Connex is the database system used to request, track, and deploy services

  - This model provides coverage for the state in a way that other service design cannot

# Formative Research Questions

1. What are the **issues facing youth, caregivers, and community members**?

2. What are the **initial impressions** of NJ4S?

3. What are the **strengths** of NJ4S?

4. What are the **challenges** of NJ4S?

5. What are **recommendations** to improve NJ4S?

# Methods

- **Selection of 5 Pilot Hubs to Study**
  - Diverse in geography (north, central, south), neighborhood type (urban, suburban, rural), race/ethnicity, implementation service volume, and school needs index
- **14 Ethnographic Observations of Services (11 Tier 2 and 3 Tier 1)**
  - Provided insight into how hub staff facilitated assemblies and workshops, how participants responded, what went well, and what needed improvement
- **35 In-depth Stakeholder Interviews**
  - Provided insight into view of NJ4S by Youth, Caregivers, Hub Staff, Hub Leaders, Educators/School Staff, Community Members/Partners, and Advisory Committee Members
- **15 Focus Groups**
  - Provided insight into view of NJ4S by Youth, Caregivers, and Educators, Community Members, and Advisory Committee Members
- **Implementation Survey to all Hub Staff (217 Responses)**
  - Provided insight into hub capacity, strengths, challenges, and recommendations

# Program Strengths

# Strengths:
# Much Needed Program

- Acknowledged as **essential** in the context of post-pandemic recovery.

"…Our daughter was struggling a little bit for about a year and a half or two years…We had problems finding good counseling…the school counselor…told us about the program. The [NJ4S Clinician] is great and this program … is really a Godsend…kids are struggling and there's not nearly enough resources for young kids right now"
-Caregiver 3

# Strengths:
# Holistic Prevention and Intervention Approach

*"…when we would get referrals last September, they all came in as you know, this kid needs counseling…Changing that education piece of that…The schools are understanding the shift through our training, through our message that not everyone rises to that level. Let's put them in a prevention group. You know and … go from there…So that's been really positive"*
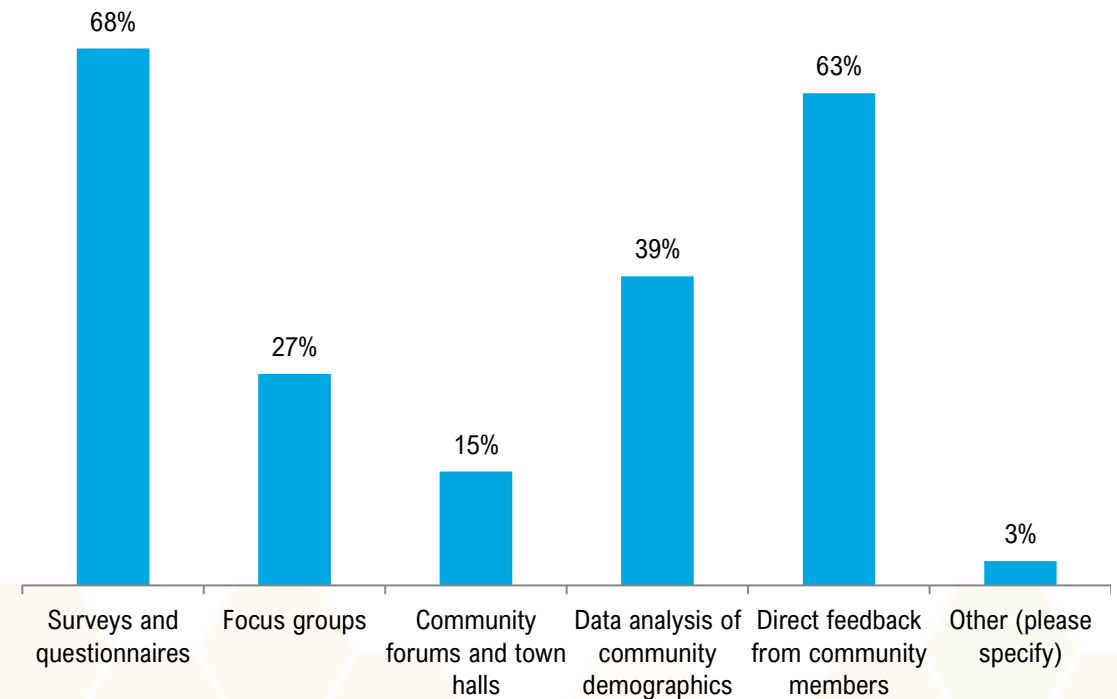*- Hub Leadership 3*

- NJ4S offers **skilled and comprehensive prevention and intervention services** to youth, their families and educators **tailored to local needs**.

# Hub Community Needs Assessments

- Hubs have been engaged in **identifying needs specific to their communities** and have **diverse methods** for doing so. Consistent with interview findings.

- Stakeholders credited Hubs for **customized services based on identified needs**; "flexibility" was frequently mentioned.

**What methods has your NJ4S Hub used to assess community needs?**



| Method | Percentage |
|---|---|
| Surveys and questionnaires | 68% |
| Focus groups | 27% |
| Community forums and town halls | 15% |
| Data analysis of community demographics | 39% |
| Direct feedback from community members | 63% |
| Other (please specify) | 3% |

# Strengths:
# Expanded Prioritization

- NJ4S policy **expanded** the definition of **high needs,** thereby **prioritizing more schools** for services across the state.

*"…you say high risk. Everybody says [Towns in Hub Vicinage]…so that's where the funding goes for prevention…We have 13, under NJ4S high risk communities…that right there tells the other communities you're important…has sent a different message out. So NJ4S is really different in that aspect because the way they saw the needs of the…community were different…they expanded that high risk area...So there's a lot more schools…These other fundings don't see it as a high-risk community. The state has broken that barrier"*
*- Hub Leadership 4*

# Strengths:
# Experienced Hubs

> *"We definitely hit the ground running. [Our agency] has been around for over 30 years now and doing prevention work, so we have a lot of relationships. And we have an education department that was already doing some of the Tier 1 work with schools."*
> *- Hub Leadership 1*

- **Hubs have leveraged strong existing connections with schools and community partners** for seamless integration and collaboration.
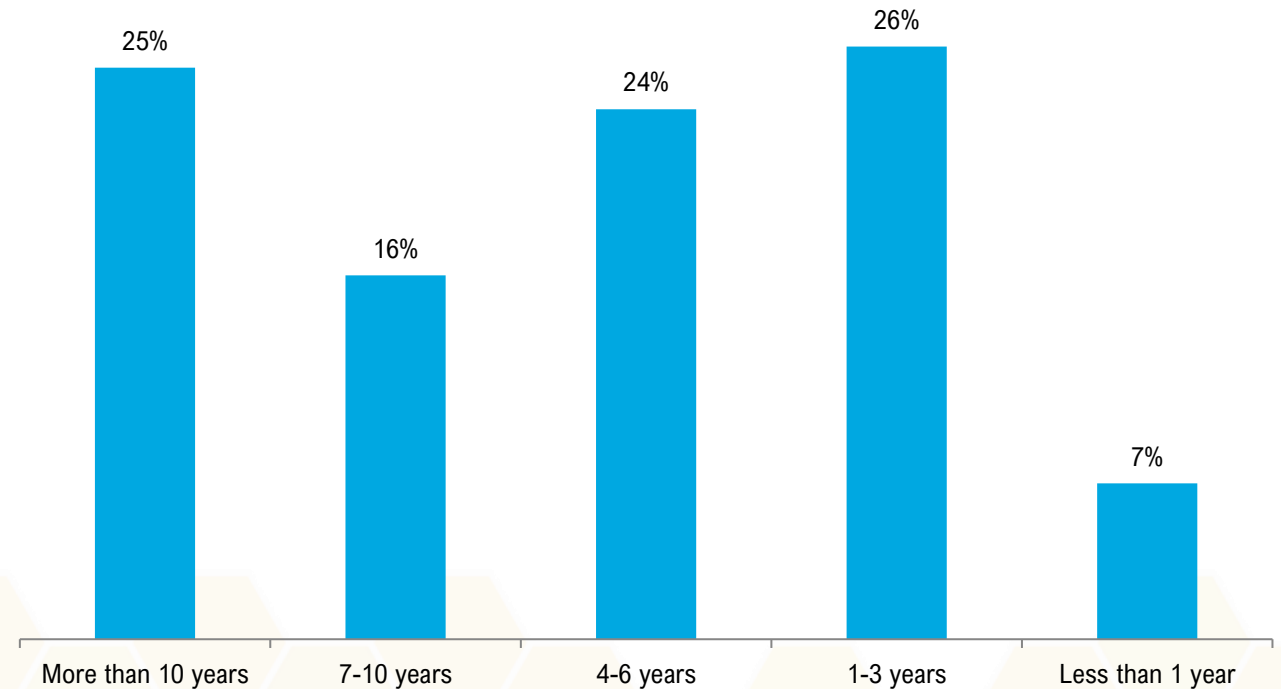
# Strengths:
# Experienced Credible Staff

- NJ4S Hub Staff are **highly experienced working with youth issues**, with 65% having had over 3 years of experience and 25% having over 10 years of experience.

**How many years of experience do you have working on youth issues?**

# Strengths:
# Open and Collaborative Culture of Learning

- DCF staff and Hub leadership have cultivated a **culture of training and open dialogue** to raise issues and problem-solve.

*"...all of the prevention consultants were trained in every evidence based program...And then we...do teach backs...they're presenting back to leadership...prevention consultants, supervisors and to each other... It shows this one's passionate about that topic...And when we receive a...referral...the prevention consultant supervisors knew who to ... assign because they know who's good at what and where their strengths lie."*
*-Hub Leadership 4*

# Strengths:
# Training and Engagement

- Hubs have received a **good amount of training on issues facing youth** (83% received this training).

- There is **opportunity for more facilitation training** (46% received this training).

  - Observed the need for such training in our ethnographic work.

- **Need for training on how to engage non-responsive schools**; program leads to discuss with Hubs promising practices for engaging this group.

**What training opportunities have been available to staff at your NJ4S Hub?**
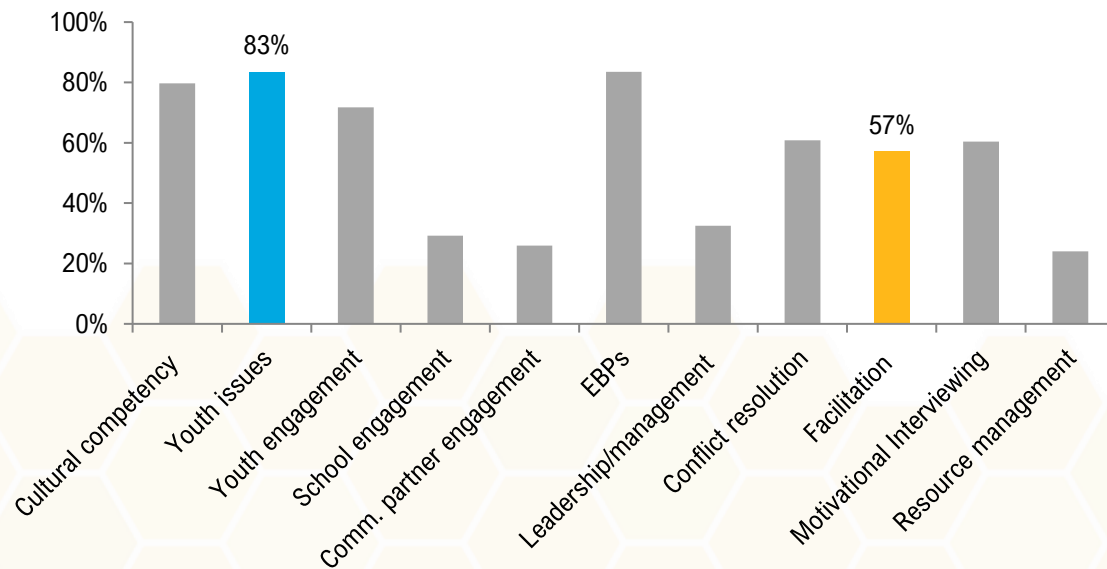


**Which training programs have you participated in?**
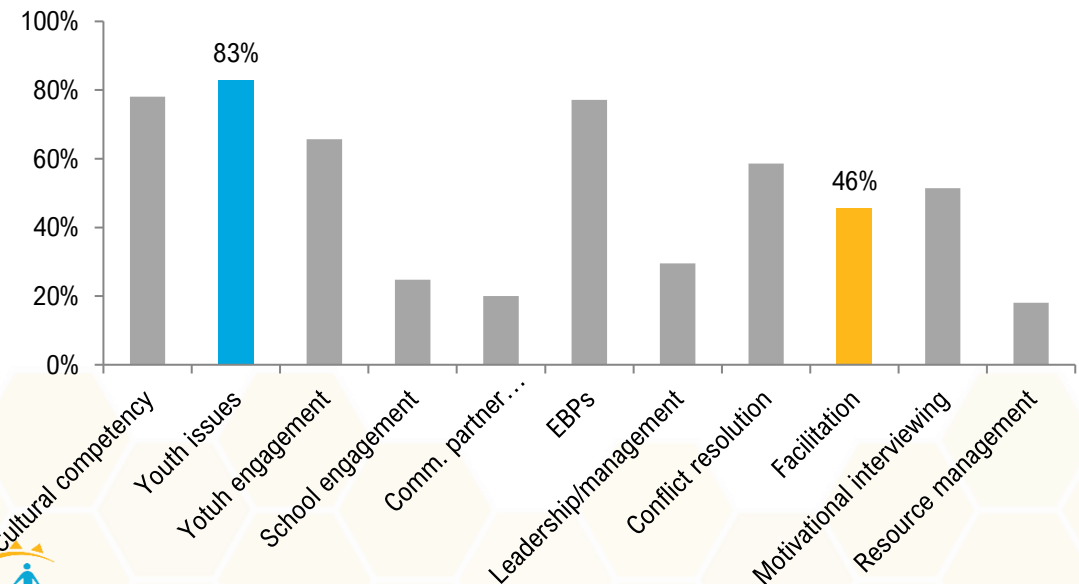
# Strengths:
# Hub Communication with Community Partners

- Hubs have used **various modes of communication to engage with community partners**, which is worth celebrating and leaning into.

- Hubs have gone above and beyond in terms of **frequency of communication** with community partners (63% at least weekly, 92% at least monthly).

**What methods are used to communicate with partners?**

- Email: 87%
- Phone calls: 74%
- In-person meetings: 72%
- Video conferences/meetings: 76%
- Collaborative platforms (e.g., Teams): 37%
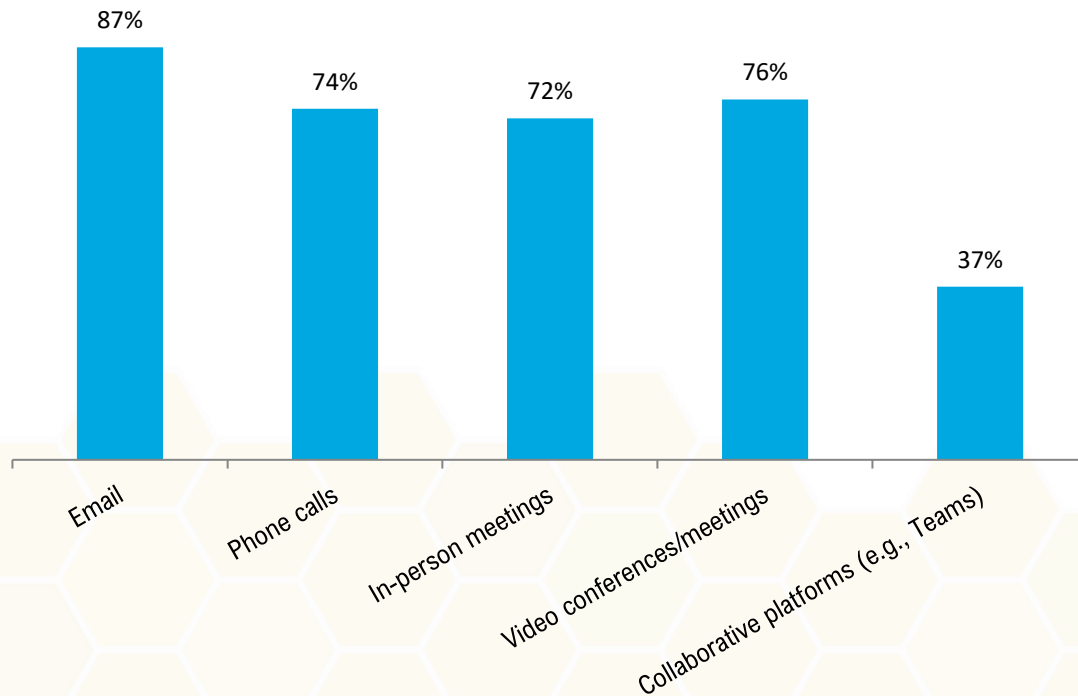
**How often does your NJ4S Hub communicate with these partners?**

63%

- Daily: 20%
- Bi-weekly: 11%
- Weekly: 32%
- Monthly: 29%
- Quarterly: 1%
- Other: 8%
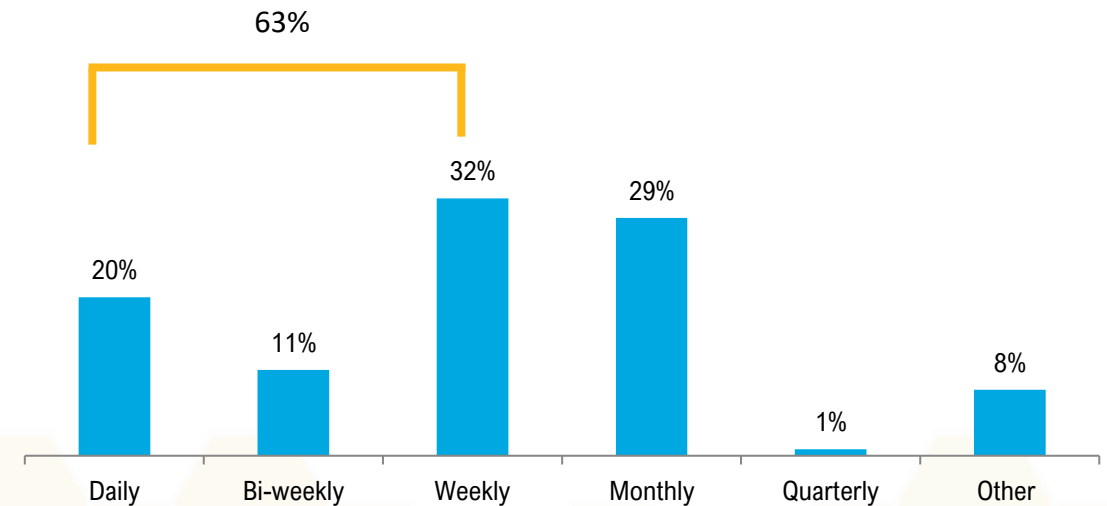
# Strengths:
# Community-Based Mental Health Support

- Employs **"outside staff" with diverse experiences** and a more objective assessment of school needs, **helping students who may feel uncomfortable discussing sensitive topics** with familiar staff.

*"See like a lot of students and kids my age, they need that kind of guidance. And sometimes they can't find that in other people like older, like teachers or. . . even their parents. . . . So the program's helpful 'cause it offers. . . Like an outside perspective on things."*
*– Student 3*

# Strengths:
# Participant Engagement

*"They ran a session where they came in for two days over the course of two weeks. ... They did sessions on study skills, work habits, and time management. They made it engaging – the kids kind of shooting a hoop to answer questions, and it was just very well received from both the teachers and the students. And I was able to share that information with parents"*
*- Educator 4*

- Focuses on **interactive methods** to develop stress management and relationship-building skills.

# Strengths:
# Supportive Environment

- Creates a **welcoming atmosphere** for youth, caregivers, and educators.

*"It was a welcoming environment. … I'm afraid of new things. But as soon as I got more into the flow of everything, it definitely was welcoming and comfortable. … It's so easy to talk to her [Hub staff member]. … She felt open to hearing all your experiences"*
*- Youth 3*

# Program Challenges

# Challenges:
# School Buy-in and Tech Challenges

- Hubs have faced challenges building relationships with some schools.
- Schools' uncertainty navigating the NJ4S Connex Portal affected integration.

- Building relationships with schools for a newly implemented program was challenged by initial skepticism about the purpose of NJ4S and aligning the initiative's objectives and existing school priorities and resources

*"There was sometimes friction in the sense that maybe there is already someone in the school and they feel threatened that we're gonna take over"* - Hub Staff 4

*"I think there was a barrier to overcome and we overcame it...because people trust us and why we're here. We're here to work with you. What can we do for you? What can we do together?"* - Hub Leadership 4

# Challenges:
# Obtaining Consent

- Barriers in consent procedures among schools, parents, and Hubs has reduced accessibility and participation.

*"The only the only other barrier I find- and I know it's necessary- is the parent consent forms . . . tracking down these parents sometimes is not easy. . . I know they have the hard copy and the online form. But you know the hard copy goes in the locker or the backpack and it will never be seen again." – Advisory 2*

# Challenges:
# Service Gaps for Younger Youth

*Why can't we go in and start with the younger age and more for prevention? Sadly, I hate to tell you, intervention is also needed on the elementary school level. … You have a lot of nine and 10 year olds vaping away. – Caregiver 4*

*"Prevention itself does not start in middle school or 6th grade. It is from K through 12 and then into college, right? So, it's always an ongoing thing. The younger that we educate kids, the better we could delay the onset of maybe substance use or even mental health issues or anything like that... Being able to do Tier 2 and 3 at younger ages, I think, would be great."*
*– Hub Leadership 1*

- Many stakeholders requested the incorporation of younger grades into NJ4S for a continuum.
- Resources may not allow for full expansion, however NJ4S is utilizing Tier 1 services and considering other ways to reach younger youth.

# Challenges:
# Diverse Needs for Staff Training

## NJ4S Hub Staff Training Requests

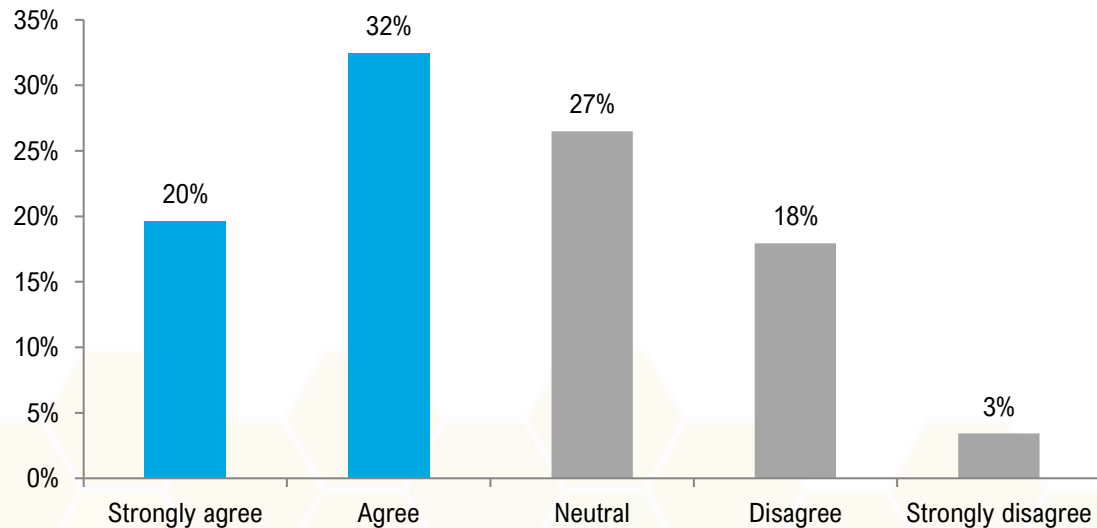| Category | Requests |
|---|---|
| Engagement and Facilitation Skills | 9 |
| Leadership and Management | 8 |
| Trauma and Safety Training | 7 |
| Classroom Management | 7 |
| Special Education and Youth Mental Health | 6 |
| Cultural Competency and Diversity | 6 |
| Other/Misc. | 6 |
| Presentation and Public Speaking Skills | 5 |
| Salesforce/Connex System Training | 5 |
| Evidence-Based Practices and Programs | 5 |
| Motivational Interviewing and Counseling Techniques | 5 |
| Professional and Organizational Skills | 4 |

- Variation in staff expertise and service delivery across Hubs has impacted program effectiveness and consistency.
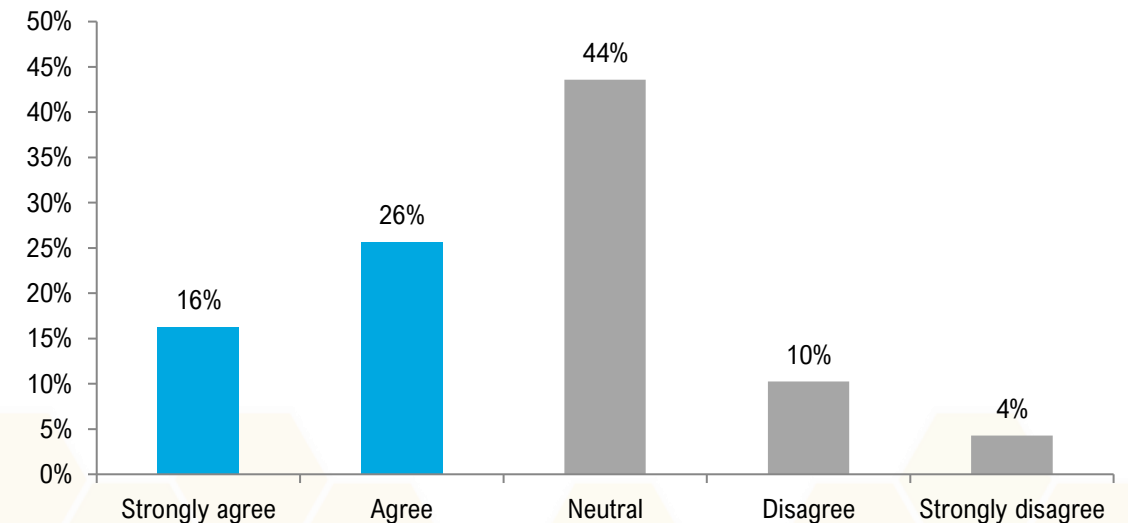
# Challenges:
# Advisory Board Recruitment of Youth and Caregivers

- Hubs have continued efforts to recruit and retain youth and caregivers as Advisory Board members (53% and 42% respectively).

**My NJ4S Hub's Advisory Board Committee has faced challenges maintaining adequate youth membership.**

| Category | Percentage |
|---|---|
| Strongly agree | 20% |
| Agree | 32% |
| Neutral | 27% |
| Disagree | 18% |
| Strongly disagree | 3% |

**My NJ4S Hub's Advisory Board Committee has faced challenges maintaining at least 25% of parent membership.**

| Category | Percentage |
|---|---|
| Strongly agree | 16% |
| Agree | 26% |
| Neutral | 44% |
| Disagree | 10% |
| Strongly disagree | 4% |

# Challenges:
# Marketing/Branding

*"You can go to Target in Florida, and you can go to Target in New Jersey and it's the same when you walk in a Target. That's what I envision for NJ4S. You know every Hub is gonna run things differently based on their community needs --and that is the beauty of the program. But more of that [statewide] marketing too so that across the state, everyone knows, 'Oh, NJ4S. This is what they do.'" -Hub Leadership 3*
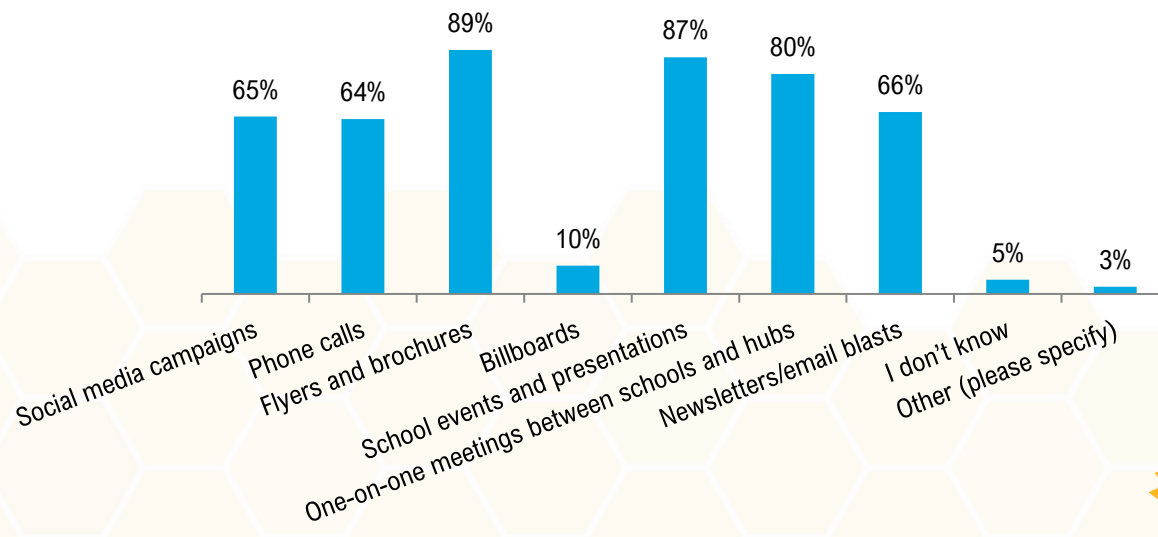
- Marketing strategies have not reached all stakeholders, limiting awareness and understanding of the program.

- A statewide marketing campaign can help to amplify the outreach already underway by the Hubs.
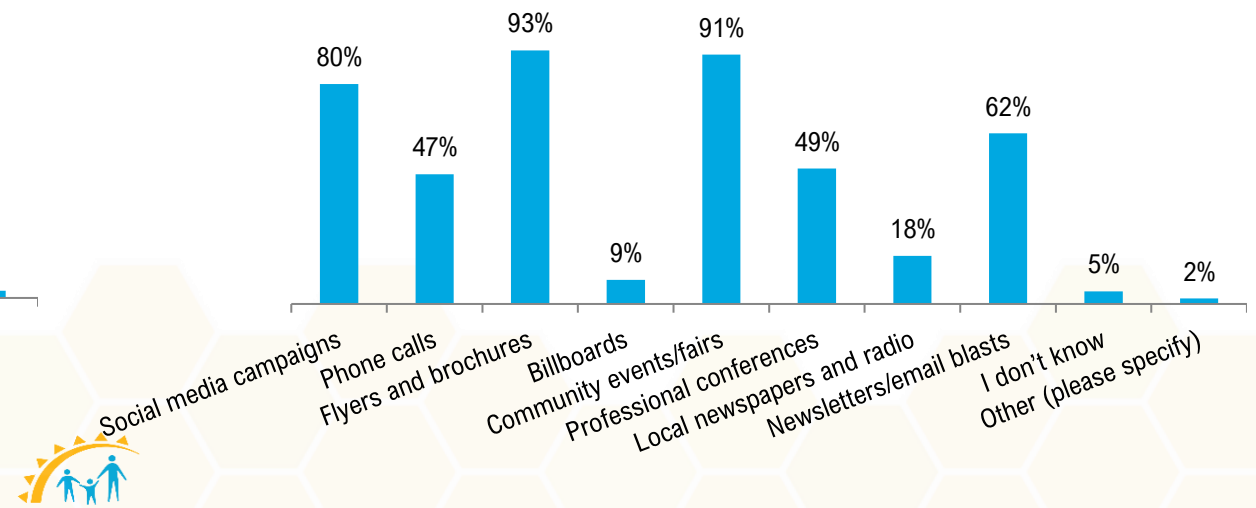
# Challenges:
# Marketing and Outreach Efforts

- While Hubs have employed a variety of marketing and outreach techniques, they have not reached all stakeholders.

- Hubs presented at "Teacher's Week," also known as the NJEA Convention this November 2025 in Atlantic City to expand outreach.

- The NJ4S program team plans to work with a marketing consultant to advise on how to engage schools and communities statewide.

### How has your NJ4S Hub marketed its services to schools?

| Category | Percentage |
|---|---|
| Social media campaigns | 65% |
| Phone calls | 64% |
| Flyers and brochures | 89% |
| Billboards | 10% |
| School events and presentations | 87% |
| One-on-one meetings between schools and hubs | 80% |
| Newsletters/email blasts | 66% |
| I don't know | 5% |
| Other (please specify) | 3% |

### How has your NJ4S Hub marketed its services to the community?

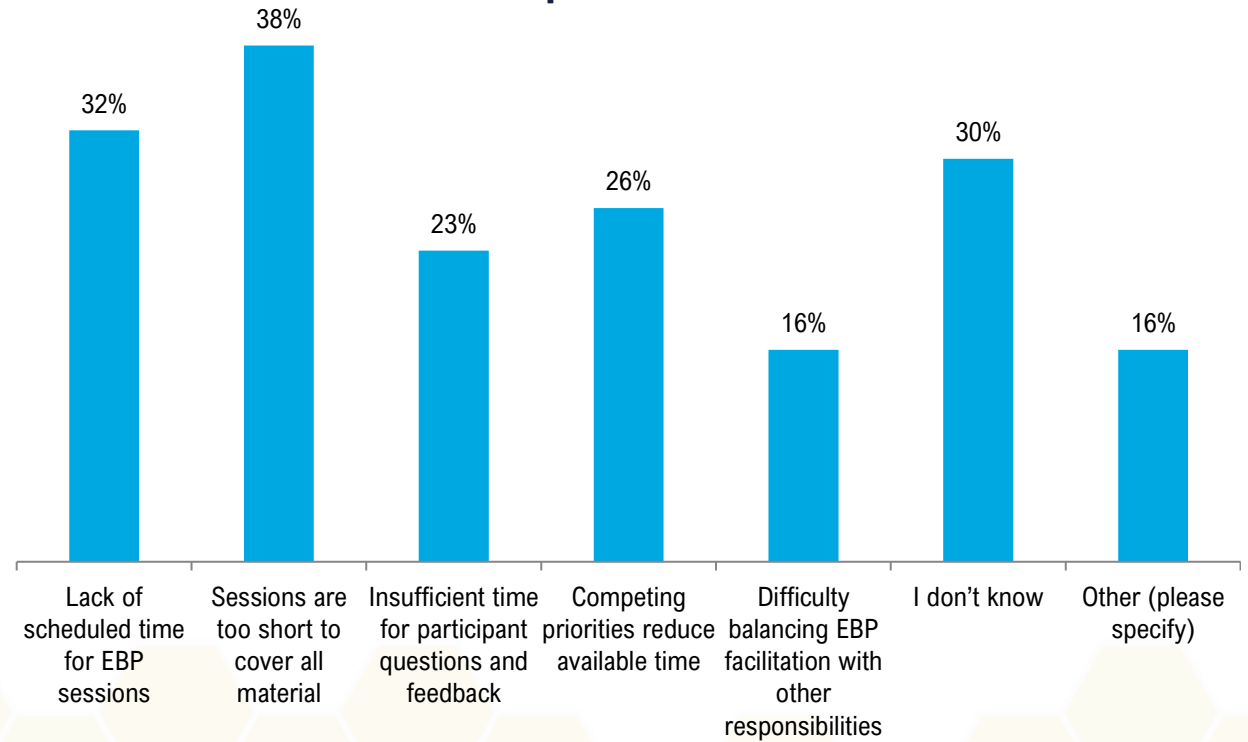| Category | Percentage |
|---|---|
| Social media campaigns | 80% |
| Phone calls | 47% |
| Flyers and brochures | 93% |
| Billboards | 9% |
| Community events/fairs | 91% |
| Professional conferences | 49% |
| Local newspapers and radio | 18% |
| Newsletters/email blasts | 62% |
| I don't know | 5% |
| Other (please specify) | 2% |

# Challenges:
# Prevention Consultants and Facilitation

- Some Prevention Consultants faced challenges balancing program delivery with responding to topics or feedback from students during group sessions.

- Some Hubs assigned Prevention Consultants to sessions based on availability over specialty.

**What challenges has your NJ4S Hub faced related to time constraints in facilitating EBPs and addressing group questions?**

| Category | Percentage |
|---|---|
| Lack of scheduled time for EBP sessions | 32% |
| Sessions are too short to cover all material | 38% |
| Insufficient time for participant questions and feedback | 23% |
| Competing priorities reduce available time | 26% |
| Difficulty balancing EBP facilitation with other responsibilities | 16% |
| I don't know | 30% |
| Other (please specify) | 16% |

# Program Recommendations

# Recommendations

- Broaden Services to Younger Students
- Augment Training for Prevention Consultants
  - Generalist vs. Specialist Training
- Strengthen School and Community Engagement
  - Ideas for employment pathways
- Streamline the Caregiver Consent Process
- Foster Open and Collaborative Hub Culture
- Leverage Hub Strengths (e.g., Peer Learning)
- Expand Marketing and Outreach Efforts
- Create Peer and Recreational Activities
- Consider efforts to destigmatize mental health

# Questions