



Tackling School Avoidance: Getting our students back in the classroom

**Georgia Senate Combating
Chronic Absenteeism Study
Committee**

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www.cartwheel.org





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Georgia is investing billions in education innovation

- 27% growth in annual education budget since 2023 (\$13.6b total)
- \$50m for literacy initiatives
- \$20m in career & technical education innovation
- \$500m in transportation and facility improvements

**To maximize impact,
*we need our students
to attend school***

“We can invest all we want in new textbooks, professional development, facilities ... It will fall flat if our neediest students don't come to school or struggle to sit through class.”



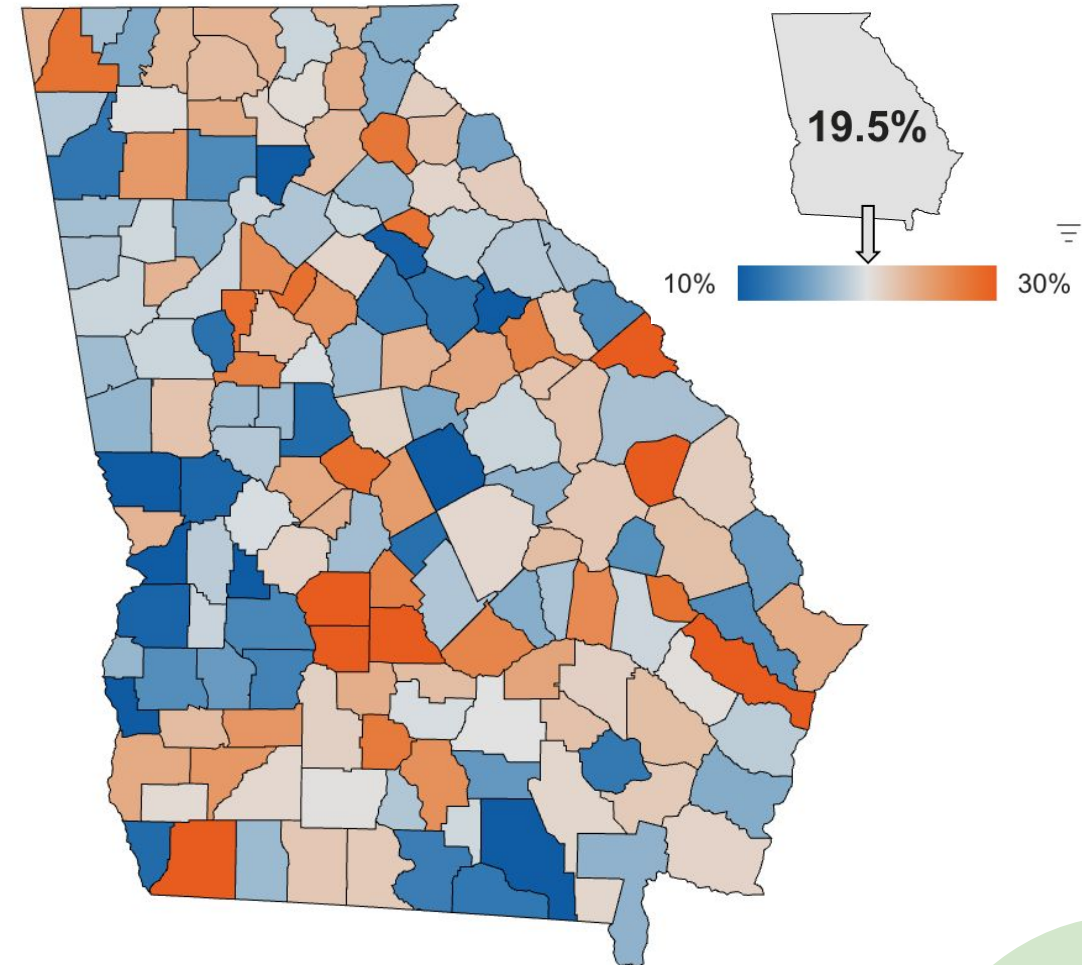
Layton R.
Former superintendent

360,000 students in Georgia are chronically absent from school

- **20% of all students statewide** (7 points higher than pre-COVID levels)
- Progress significantly lags behind **Alabama** (15% absenteeism rate)
- Up to 40% in **rural** counties and **urban** systems like Atlanta
- **Low-income** students miss 3x more school days than their peers

Chronic absenteeism rate by county, 2025

Source: [Georgia Department of Education](#)



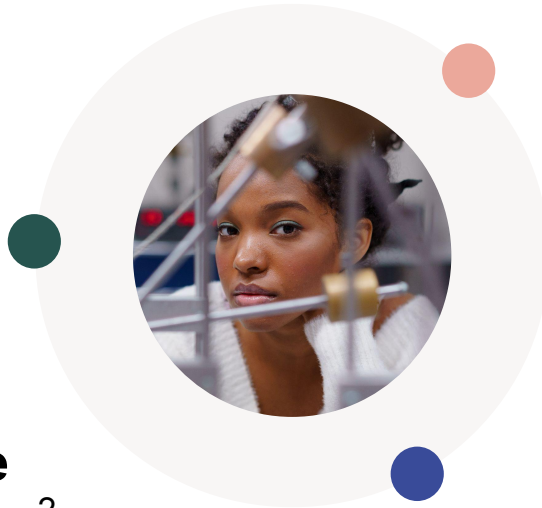
Note: Chronically absent is defined as missing 1 in 10 school days

Mental health is one of the top causes of school avoidance

Absenteeism

Students with a mental health disorder miss **twice** as many school days²

Anxiety is the leading cause of absenteeism^{3,4}



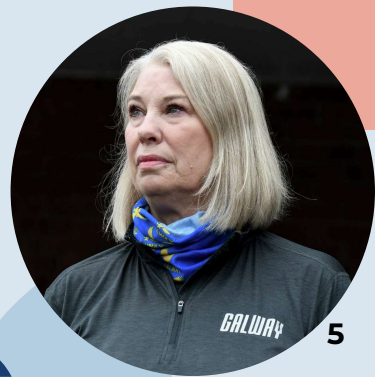
Behavior

Unaddressed mental health issues lead to more suspensions, missing more days⁵

Graduation

Students with a mental health disorder are **44% more likely** to dropout of school¹

To reduce absenteeism, we need to improve student mental health



School-based, in-person staff are essential, but they can't tackle this crisis alone

● Strengths

- ✓ Trusted in the community
- ✓ Can knock on doors, meet with parents, de-escalate in person
- ✓ Spot early warning signs in the hallways and classroom

☪ Challenges

- ☐ Staffing shortages – especially in rural areas that have big needs
- ☐ Can't always reach kids where they are (at home, after hours)
- ☐ Limited training to address specialized needs like anxiety, trauma, depression
- ☐ Privacy concerns from some families



OUR MISSION

Cartwheel's
school-community
partnership model
tackles root causes
of school avoidance

330+

District and statewide partners



92%

Our students improve in
mental health outcomes

44%

Decline in absenteeism for
students served in key studies

School Avoidance Program treats *root causes* of school avoidance

- ✓ 1-1 weekly therapy with a specialty trained clinician
- ✓ 1-1 parent guidance from a licensed clinician
- ✓ Optional educational groups for parents
- ✓ Psychiatric evals and medication management for more intensive needs
- ✓ Reach students where they are (8am-8pm + weekend hours, available from home)



*Designed in partnership with
the Arizona Dept of Education*

Schools and families need care that is **specifically tailored to school avoidance** – social anxiety, depression, trauma



Technology increases speed for families and reduces burden on school staff

9:41

cartwheel.org/get-started/...

Cartwheel
Greenlands Elementary School

First, let's get to know the student who will be receiving care.

Please provide the following:

Student's first name

Student's last name

Student's date of birth

mm/dd/yyyy

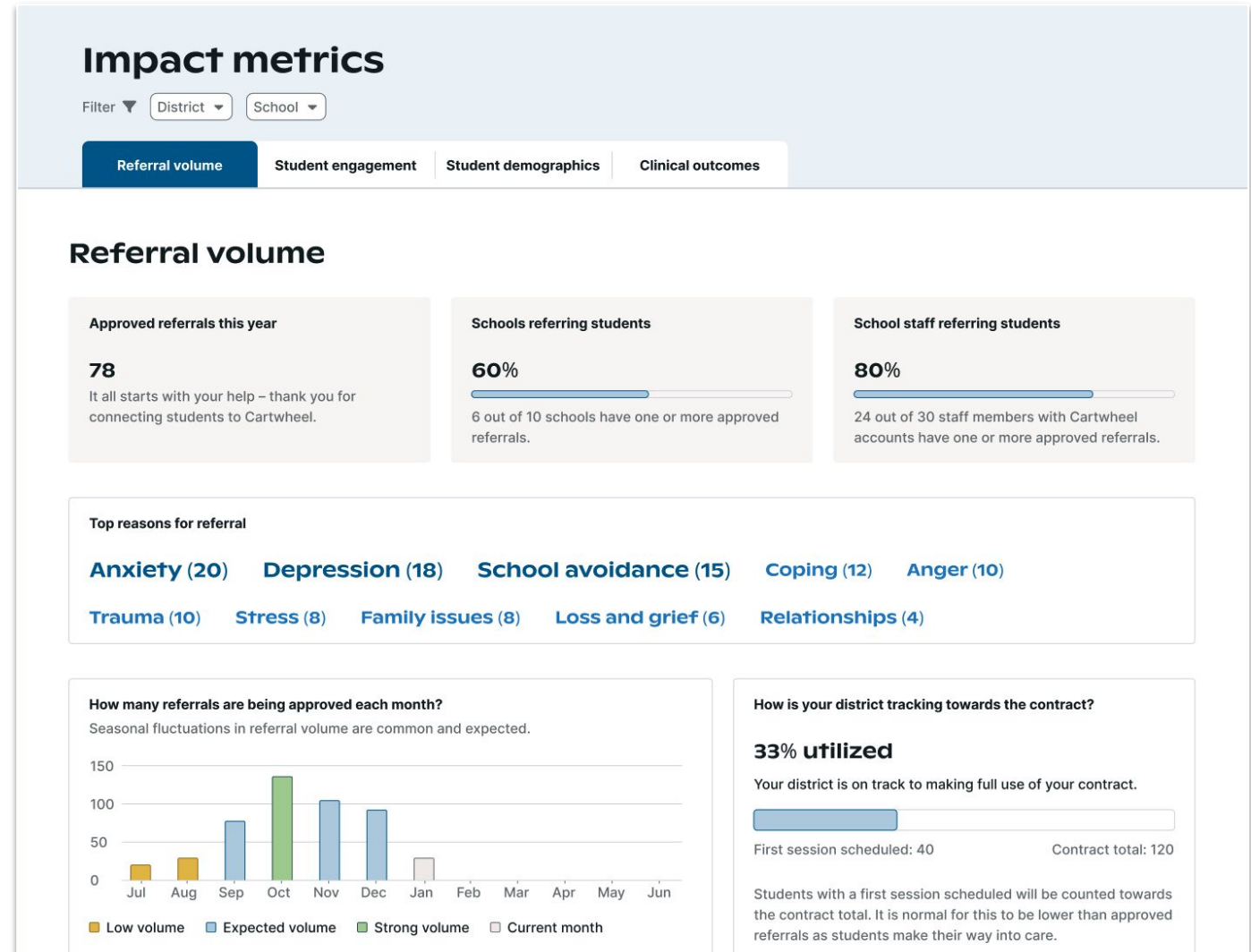
Continue >

"Cartwheel was a game changer for my daughter's life."
Kim, Cartwheel Parent

Continue >

Enter details manually >

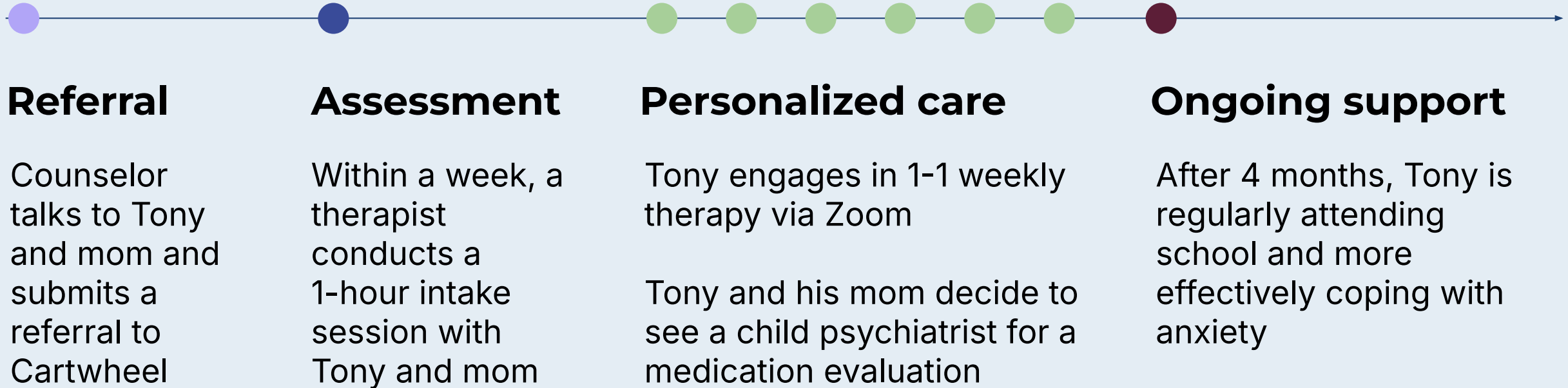
Fully automated reporting for the state to track impact and return on investment



Anonymized student: Tony, grade 10



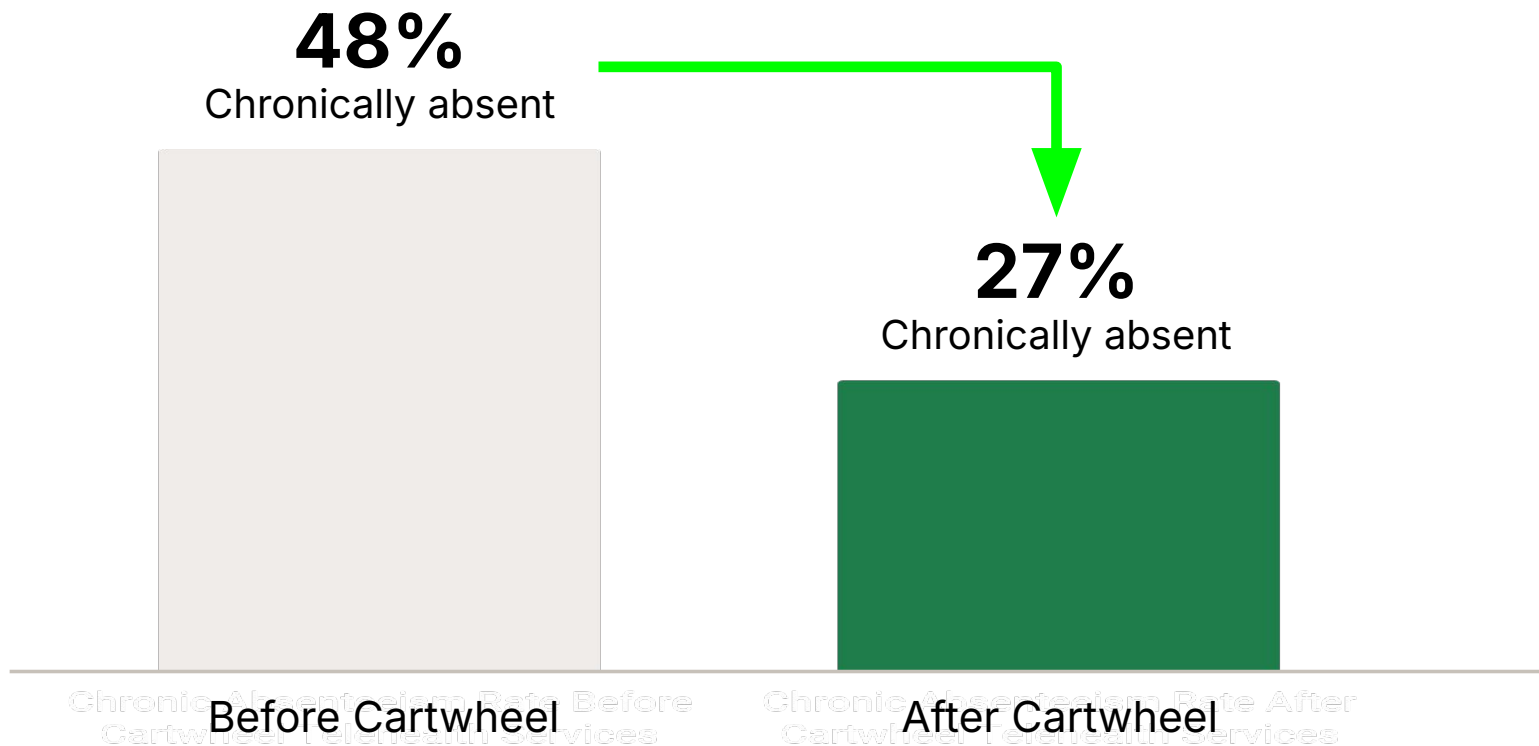
Tony missed 25 days of school. He's been struggling to adjust to the new school since moving from out-of-state and feels anxious about entering the school building. He is coping with some alcohol use.



With parent consent, Cartwheel collaborates with the school throughout care

Case Study: 44% reduction in chronic absenteeism for students receiving Cartwheel telehealth

Chronic absenteeism rate before and after Cartwheel



Sample size: n=141 students who engaged in Cartwheel telehealth services in a 13,000 student urban district (75% free/reduced lunch) during the 2022-23, 2023-24, and 2024-25 school years. First bar shows the % of students receiving Cartwheel who were chronically absent in the year they were referred for services. For the same cohort, the second bar shows the % who were chronically absent the following school year. Chronic absenteeism is defined as missing 10 percent of school days within an academic year.

44%

reduction in chronic absenteeism for students receiving Cartwheel (21 percentage points)

62%

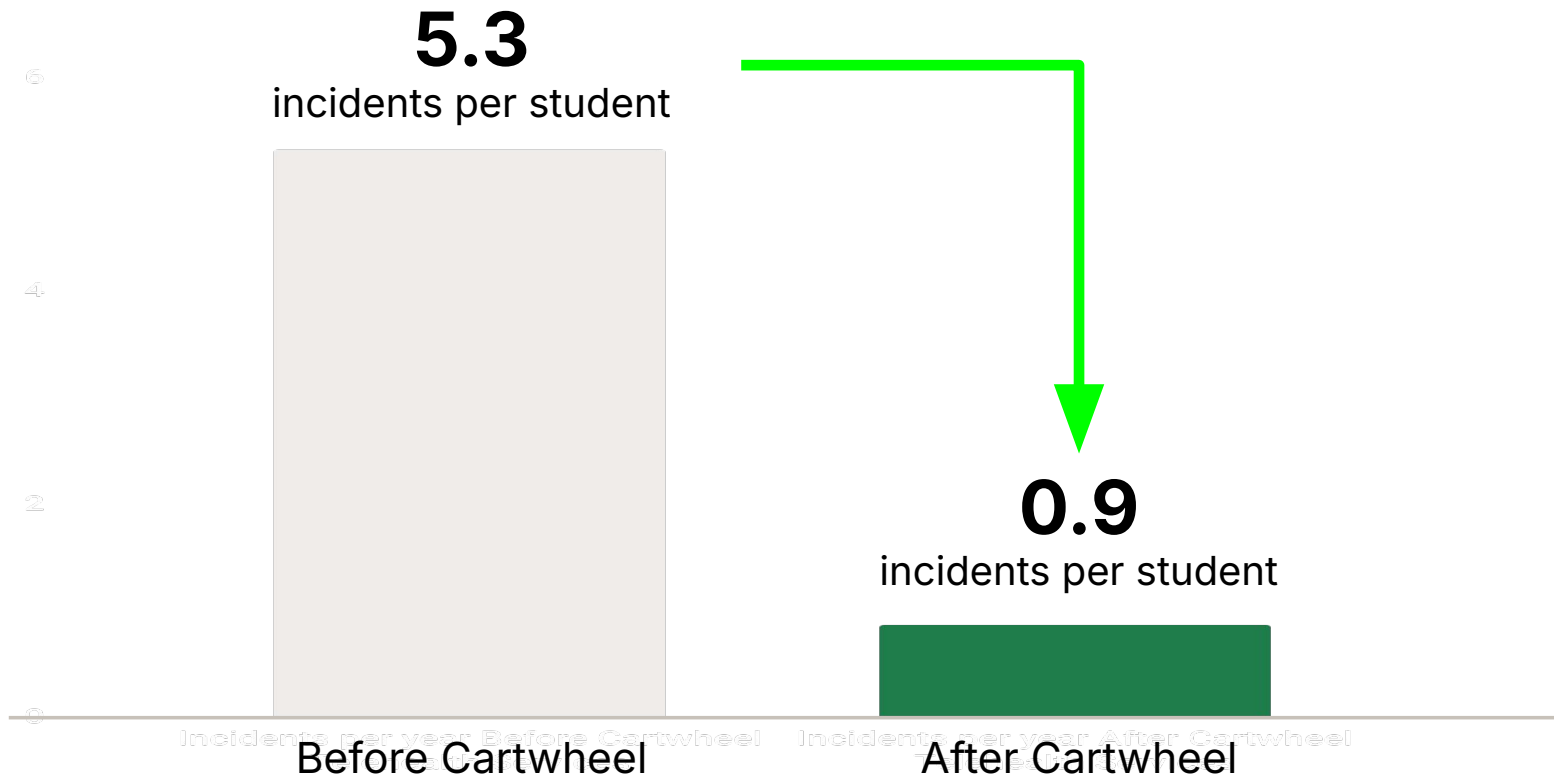
reduction in absences per student (6 absences after care vs. 16 absences before care)

Comparison group:

Students who did not receive Cartwheel services did **not** see improved attendance

Case Study: 84% reduction in behavioral incidents for students receiving Cartwheel telehealth

Behavioral incidents per student per year before/after Cartwheel



84%

reduction in incidents per student after receiving Cartwheel services

4.4

fewer incidents per student per year

Comparison group:

Students who did *not* receive Cartwheel services did not see fewer incidents per year

Sample size: n=594 students who were referred to Cartwheel telehealth services in a 5,000 student suburban district (12% low income) during the 2022-23, 2023-24, 2024-25, and 2025-26 school years. Of these students, 72 committed behavioral incidents and attended sessions with Cartwheel. First bar shows the average # of incidents per year before starting treatment with Cartwheel for the 72 students. For the same cohort, the second bar shows the average # of incidents per year after starting services with Cartwheel. Incident defined a code of conduct violation requiring documented administrative response, such as bullying or physical aggression.

Offset up to 75% of service costs with health insurance billing

Health insurance

\$0 copay for families with Medicaid plans

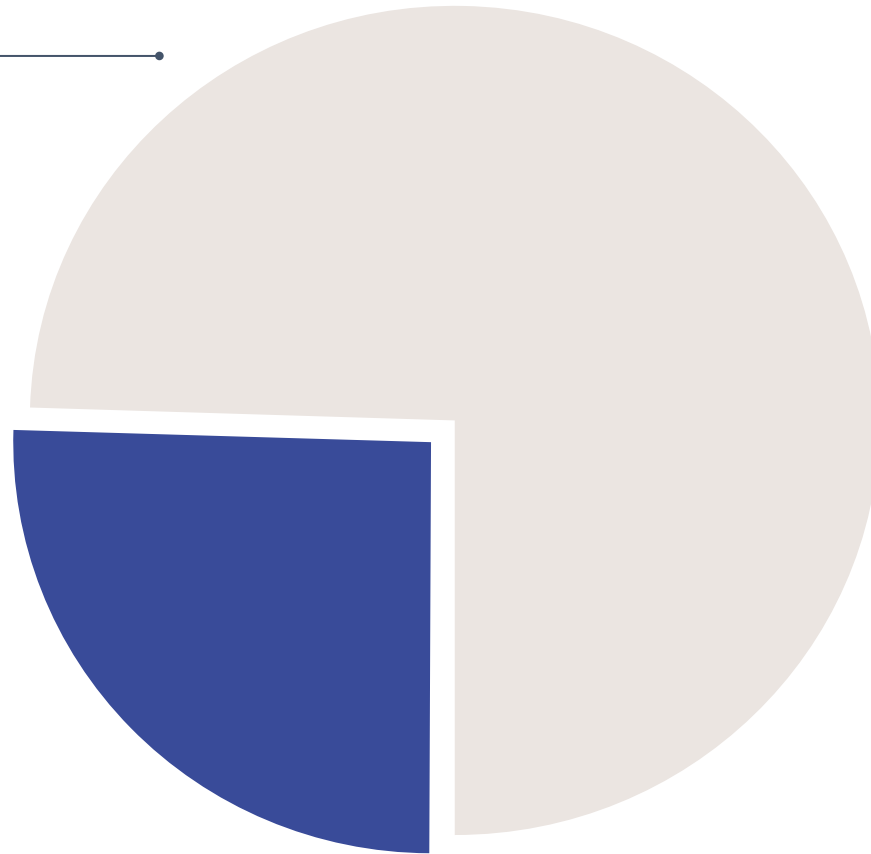
In-network for families with any other insurance

School district

Technology platform

Family supports

Financial aid fund



Insurance-only solutions have long waitlists, high turnover, limited data, and no time for collaboration.

Solutions that rely entirely on **school funding** are unsustainable.

Braided funding models deliver the best of both:

- ✓ 4x cheaper for schools
- ✓ Higher quality care
- ✓ Financial aid for students who need it

Takeaways

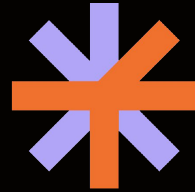
Mental health is a key to student success, starting with attendance

School-community partnerships can bring kids back to school – *when done right*

- ✓ Telehealth reduces barriers (staffing, transportation, privacy)
- ✓ All telehealth isn't the same – specialized care can produce better impact
- ✓ Parent involvement improves outcomes
- ✓ Insurance billing ensures sustainability

Request for this Committee:

1. Maintain \$20,000 per public middle and high school for direct mental health services
2. Echoing the call of the GADOE to expand \$20,000 per school to elementary schools



Cartwheel

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