PRIME 46
Research and Consulting

North Dakota
Health and Human Services
Youth Services Focus Groups

September 30, 2025

Youth Services Focus Groups

This report synthesizes findings from 10 focus groups with six key stakeholder groups: Administrators, Law Enforcement, School Resource Officers (SROs), Special Education Staff, School Counselors, and Teachers. The Moderator's questions structured the sessions, and additional themes emerged organically. Each section begins with the topic area and questions asked by the moderator, followed by a summary of perspectives, and ends with representative quotes from each stakeholder group. Quotes are attributed by stakeholder role. The intent of this document is to better identify what stakeholders are thinking, not to make recommendations.

Children in Crisis

Moderator Questions

- What comes to mind when you hear the phrase 'youth in crisis' or 'child who is struggling'?
- How do you define these terms in your setting?
- How do you recognize a "crisis" situation?
- What kinds of actions or behaviors raise concern most often?

Summary

Across all focus groups, participants described 'youth in crisis' as situations where immediate safety, well-being, or ability to function was at risk. Administrators tied crisis to acute trauma, suicidal ideation, or violent incidents that required urgent intervention. Law enforcement and SROs defined crisis more narrowly as imminent danger, emphasizing that many issues schools label as crisis do not meet their interpretation of crisis.

Counselors described the distinction in terms of functionality: struggling students may still attend class and respond to supports, but those in crisis cannot engage without intensive intervention. Special Education staff said crisis often meant that external services were necessary, whether law enforcement, hospitalization, or specialized programs.

Teachers added that in early grades the distinction is blurred. Many kindergarten and elementary students enter already traumatized, lacking basic self-regulation. For these children, defiance, rage, or total withdrawal feels like crisis to teachers, even if other systems do not respond. Secondary teachers noted that students expressing suicidal thoughts, sleeping through classes, or completely disengaging were clear markers of crisis. Teachers tied these behaviors to parenting practices, lack of early childhood preparation, and family instability.

Representative Quotes

> ***Administrator: "Crisis, I probably would attach more to some type of trauma or significant event… a struggling student may not necessarily be at that level yet."***

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Law Enforcement: "Crisis is when there's an immediate threat to safety. Struggling is ongoing difficulty, but not life or death."

School Resource Officer: "Teachers often call disruptions a crisis, but for us it only qualifies if there's imminent danger."

Special Education Staff: "When outside services need to be called in, that's when we move from struggling to crisis."

Counselor: "A struggling student may still function; crisis means they've tipped and can't manage at all."

Teacher: "My kindergarteners are already coming with mental health challenges and no self-control—it starts before school does."

Current Landscape & Experience

Moderator Questions

- In your role, how do children in crisis typically show up (school, home, community)?
- Are there common triggers or patterns?
- Are some situations more difficult to respond to than others?
- What options do you currently seek for helping kids in behavioral crisis?
- Who do you call or turn to for help?
- How do you involve families (if applicable)?
- What is most difficult for you to navigate?

Summary

Teachers described crisis behaviors ranging from rage, defiance, and property destruction to complete withdrawal. Counselors reported disclosures of suicidal ideation, abuse, or chronic anxiety—often revealed in one-on-one conversations. SROs were typically called for fights, threats, or law violations, though they emphasized that underlying drivers were often untreated trauma or mental health conditions. Administrators said they triage incidents to determine when to involve outside agencies, balancing safety with educational continuity. Special Education staff pointed to absenteeism and academic decline as early warning signs that often precede overt behavior issues.

Across roles, common triggers included domestic violence, parental addiction, unstable housing, poverty, and lack of consistent adult support. Teachers stressed that while crises erupt in classrooms, they rarely originate there—school is simply where stress surfaces. Rural staff underscored limited local services and long transports to urban centers; urban staff cited a wider array of programs but crushing waitlists. Families frequently disengaged when faced with complex referral processes or repeated denials, which left schools to act as de facto crisis hubs.

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Participants described a practical response pattern: stabilize the student's immediate safety, notify caregivers, engage school-based supports (counselor/psychologist/administrator), and, when necessary, coordinate with law enforcement or external crisis teams. Across the board, the lack of a predictable pathway beyond the school's doors was described as the most difficult part to navigate.

Representative Quotes

> ***Administrator: "We're the triage point. If it rises to immediate safety, it's crisis. If not, we try to manage in school."***
>
> ***Law Enforcement: "Addiction, domestic violence, and homelessness are the three big triggers we see most often."***
>
> ***School Resource Officer: "Teachers call for crisis when they feel unsafe, but we have to determine if it meets the legal threshold."***
>
> ***Special Education Staff: "Absenteeism and academic decline are often the first red flags."***
>
> ***Counselor: "I often learn about crises directly from students—they'll tell me about suicidal thoughts or abuse."***
>
> ***Teacher: "Often the crisis didn't start in the classroom—it started at home the night before and shows up when the child walks in the door."***

Messaging and Understanding

Moderator Questions

- When talking to others (parents, school staff, law enforcement) about these situations, what language do you use?
- What terms or phrases seem to resonate—or cause confusion?
- Are there words or concepts you intentionally avoid?
- How does your language differ when talking to a parent vs. school staff?
- What do you think parents/families believe they need—and what do they actually need—in these situations?

Summary

Participants agreed that language can either open doors or shut them. Counselors and administrators emphasized plain, nonjudgmental language focused on observable behavior and concrete supports ("when X happens, he elevates and does Y; we're teaching him to do Z"). Acronyms like CHINS, QRTP, and PRTF consistently confused families and eroded trust. Law enforcement preferred safety-centered, behavior-specific language that maps to legal thresholds, while educators acknowledged

sometimes using the word “crisis” to communicate urgency, even when a situation may not meet external criteria.

Special Education staff noted that clinical labels and special education terminology can carry stigma and prompt resistance—particularly among families who have had negative prior experiences. Teachers described shifting their language for parents—from policy-speak to empathetic, skill-building phrasing. Across groups, the consensus was that consistent, family-friendly language builds trust and helps align expectations across systems.

Several participants highlighted that what families say they need (immediate placement or removal) often differs from what they actually need (reliable case management, trauma-informed counseling, and coordinated school supports). Clear, compassionate messaging helps move conversations from blame to collaboration.

Representative Quotes

> ***Administrator: “If I explain the pattern—what triggers and what the child does—parents engage. Calling a kid ‘a mess’ shuts it down.”***
>
> ***Law Enforcement: “Describe the behavior and the safety risk; keep it concrete so we can act appropriately.”***
>
> ***School Resource Officer: “Teachers want black-and-white words for gray situations; shared definitions help.”***
>
> ***Special Education Staff: “Jargon and labels push families away—plain language brings them back.”***
>
> ***Counselor: “Leading with empathy and specifics keeps families from feeling judged.”***
>
> ***Teacher: “I translate the school terms for families and focus on what we’re teaching the student to do instead.”***

Services

Moderator Questions

- Have you encountered confusion or misunderstandings about what services are for, or who qualifies?
- Any examples that stand out?
- How do you navigate services in your area?

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Summary

Services were described as fragmented, eligibility-driven, and inconsistent across communities. Rural districts frequently lack local counseling, day treatment, or psychiatric beds, leaving law enforcement to transport students long distances. Urban areas may have more programs, but volatile funding and long waitlists undermine reliability. Administrators and counselors said families often receive lists of phone numbers rather than guided connections—resulting in attrition before services begin.

Special Education staff described scenarios where higher levels of care required conditions families could not meet—including custody relinquishment in rare cases—which eroded trust. Teachers emphasized that school-based counseling, while helpful, is not a substitute for clinical therapy. Participants said that when services exist, they are often siloed, with little coordination or follow-through after the intake.

Across roles, the biggest gap was navigation: families need a single, consistent point of contact who follows the case until the student is truly connected and stabilized. In the absence of that, schools become the default navigators, straining limited staff capacity.

Representative Quotes

> ***Administrator: "We can make a referral, but without a navigator most families are left to figure it out alone."***
>
> ***Law Enforcement: "Even if a service exists, if access takes weeks, the crisis doesn't wait."***
>
> ***School Resource Officer: "We get pulled into transport because there's nowhere else to take a kid at 10 p.m."***
>
> ***Special Education Staff: "Sometimes the only available next step is one a family can't accept—then everything stalls."***
>
> ***Counselor: "School counseling helps, but it isn't a replacement for therapy that many students need."***
>
> ***Teacher: "We hand out numbers; parents hit barriers and give up. Then the student is back with us tomorrow."***

Barriers, Trust, Communication Channels

Moderator Questions

- What do you think gets in the way of families accessing help when a child is in crisis?
- Are there trust issues? Gaps in awareness? Logistical barriers?
- How do families learn about services—if they do at all?

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- Are there particular messengers or channels they trust?
- What concerns do you hear from families or peers about using behavioral health or crisis services generally?

Summary

Top barriers included stigma, fear of CPS involvement, transportation, childcare, time away from work, insurance hurdles, and confusing eligibility rules. Families who tried and failed to get help became less likely to try again—especially when they perceived agencies as unresponsive. The trust gap was most pronounced among families with prior negative experiences with schools or social services.

Participants agreed that relationships are the strongest bridge. Parents are more likely to answer a call from a known teacher or counselor than from an unfamiliar agency. In rural areas, where privacy concerns are high, families may avoid local resources for fear of stigma. In urban settings, long waitlists and staff turnover discourage follow-through.

Communication channels that worked best were direct and personal: a known staff member making the call, sitting with parents to complete forms, and following up after referrals. Mass emails, flyers, and websites were rarely sufficient on their own. Families trusted messengers who listened first, used plain language, and focused on practical help.

Representative Quotes

> ***Administrator: "We lose families after the second or third dead end—that's when trust collapses."***
>
> ***Law Enforcement: "Some families have normalized unsafe situations; convincing them to accept help takes time."***
>
> ***School Resource Officer: "A familiar face gets a call answered; a stranger doesn't."***
>
> ***Special Education Staff: "Paperwork, denials, and phones that don't get picked up—those are the breaking points."***
>
> ***Counselor: "If I sit with the parent and call together, we actually get through."***
>
> ***Teacher: "Parents respond to people they know—emails and websites don't move the needle."***

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Ideal Messaging & Recommendations

Moderator Questions

Imagine we could improve how we talk about the support available for kids in crisis.
What messages would help you feel more confident in guiding families to support?
What messages would help families feel safe and supported in seeking help?
Are there specific examples of materials or conversations that worked well (or didn't)?
What should we avoid saying or doing if we want to build trust with families and professionals?

Summary

Participants called for simple, localized 'hot sheets' that list available services, eligibility, hours, and live contacts—updated quarterly. Messaging should lead with safety, hope, and practical steps: what the service does, how to access it, and what happens next. Avoiding jargon and acronyms was seen as critical to building trust.

Staff emphasized the value of scripts or talking points that use plain language and normalize help-seeking ("lots of families use this; here's how it works"). Teachers noted that brief, parent-facing one-pagers worked better than long brochures. Counselors recommended including realistic timelines (e.g., wait times) and backup options so families aren't surprised.

Participants warned against messaging that minimizes concerns or overpromises outcomes. Clear caveats—paired with concrete next steps—were viewed as the most respectful approach for families already under strain.

Representative Quotes

> ***Administrator: "A one-page local 'who to call' with real names and direct lines would change our day-to-day."***
>
> ***Law Enforcement: "Tell families exactly what the service does and what to expect—no jargon."***
>
> ***School Resource Officer: "Shared talking points keep teachers, admins, and SROs on the same page."***
>
> ***Special Education Staff: "Plain language and realistic timelines prevent false hope and broken trust."***
>
> ***Counselor: "Normalize help-seeking—'many families use these supports' opens the door."***
>
> ***Teacher: "Parents read one page; they won't read a packet."***

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Wrap-Up

Moderator Questions

Is there anything else you'd like HHS to know about your experience or perspective that we haven't asked?
If HHS could change just one thing about how services for youth in behavioral crisis are communicated or delivered, what should it be?

Summary

Across roles, participants asked for clarity and coordination: shared definitions of crisis, aligned age/eligibility thresholds, and reliable case management that stays with families from first call through stabilization. Educators stressed that schools cannot be the only safety net; consistent community partners are essential.

Many emphasized continuity of care after a student leaves school or is returned from a hospital or facility. Without warm handoffs and clear follow-up, the cycle repeats. Participants urged HHS to convene local networks regularly to keep service maps and relationships current.

The prevailing tone was pragmatic and hopeful: with clearer pathways, families and schools can act sooner and prevent escalation. Participants want to work together; they need a system that makes that collaboration possible.

Representative Quotes

> ***Administrator: "We're ready to partner—give us clear lanes and reliable contacts."***
>
> ***Law Enforcement: "Shared definitions and faster handoffs keep everyone safer."***
>
> ***School Resource Officer: "Consistency across districts and agencies would cut down the chaos."***
>
> ***Special Education Staff: "Continuity after discharge is where we win or lose."***
>
> ***Counselor: "A navigator who stays with the family changes outcomes."***
>
> ***Teacher: "We can teach; we just need partners who show up and stay."***

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Additional Themes

Parents in Crisis / Family Capacity

Moderator Questions

In your experience, how do parent or caregiver challenges contribute to youth crises?
What supports for families—not just students—are most needed?

Summary

Participants across roles emphasized that many youth crises are rooted in caregiver strain—poverty, addiction, mental health, unstable housing, or inconsistent parenting skills. Teachers noted a rise in students arriving without basic self-regulation or sleep routines, which accelerates behavioral escalation in classrooms. Counselors described parents who want help but are overwhelmed by systems, leading to disengagement after a few failed attempts.

Administrators and Special Education staff said schools increasingly provide wraparound supports—food, clothing, transportation, coaching parents on routines—because other systems are slow or inaccessible. Law enforcement and SROs observed that families sometimes normalize chaotic environments, making it hard to mobilize external help. Across groups, the consensus was that child-focused services must be paired with caregiver-focused supports to be effective.

Participants recommended practical family supports—navigation, parenting coaching, respite options, and access to counseling—delivered in a non-stigmatizing, relationship-based way.

Representative Quotes

> ***Administrator: "Parents in crisis lead to kids in crisis—we end up supporting both."***
>
> ***Law Enforcement: "If the home is chaotic, we'll keep seeing the same calls."***
>
> ***School Resource Officer: "Families ask for help, but the steps are too hard to manage alone."***
>
> ***Special Education Staff: "We're teaching regulation at school while home routines unravel."***
>
> ***Counselor: "Parents want help; they need someone to walk with them through it."***
>
> ***Teacher: "Basic routines at home—sleep, boundaries—change what happens in my room."***

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Skill vs. Will (Behavior vs. Motivation)

Moderator Questions

When a student acts out, how do you distinguish skill gaps from willful behavior?
How does that distinction change your response?

Summary

Educators described using a 'skill vs. will' lens: some students lack the skills to regulate emotions or follow directions; others have the skills but are unmotivated or oppositional in specific contexts. Teachers said this distinction shapes whether they focus on teaching replacement skills or on consistent accountability. Counselors cautioned that trauma can look like defiance; hasty judgments can backfire.

SROs and administrators emphasized predictable routines and clear expectations as foundations for both groups. Special Education staff highlighted structured supports (e.g., visual schedules, sensory breaks) for skill deficits and graduated consequences for willful misconduct. All agreed that mismatching responses—punishing a skill deficit or excusing willful harm—worsens outcomes.

Representative Quotes

> ***Administrator: "We first ask: can't do or won't do? It changes everything."***
>
> ***Law Enforcement: "We respond differently to skill deficits than to deliberate harm."***
>
> ***School Resource Officer: "Trauma can look like defiance; slow down the judgment."***
>
> ***Special Education Staff: "Teach the missing skill and hold a fair boundary."***
>
> ***Counselor: "Function drives the plan—skills need teaching; will needs limits."***
>
> ***Teacher: "Once I see it's a skill gap, I change what I do.***

Rural vs. Urban Service Gaps

Moderator Questions

How do service options differ across rural and urban settings?
What does that mean for response and outcomes?

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Summary

Rural participants reported thin or nonexistent local mental health capacity; crisis often defaults to law enforcement transport to distant facilities. Limited privacy and social stigma further suppress help-seeking. Urban staff noted more services, but also long waitlists, eligibility bottlenecks, and turnover that break continuity.

Teachers and counselors in both settings described ‘service deserts’ for specific ages or needs—especially for younger children and for youth with aggression. Administrators said geography should not determine access, yet in practice it does. Families face either distance or delay, and students frequently return to class without adequate stabilization.

Representative Quotes

> ***Administrator: “ZIP code should not set the support you get.”***
>
> ***Law Enforcement: “In rural towns, transport becomes the only option.”***
>
> ***School Resource Officer: “We’re not clinicians, but we end up bridging the gap.”***
>
> ***Special Education Staff: “There’s nothing local for intense needs, so kids boomerang.”***
>
> ***Counselor: “Urban resources exist—until the waitlists stop you.”***
>
> ***Teacher: “My student can’t wait eight weeks for an intake.”***

Juvenile Justice & Policy Changes

Moderator Questions

How have recent policy changes affected roles, referrals, and outcomes for youth in crisis?

Summary

SROs and administrators said policy shifts (e.g., CHINS processes, truancy citations) changed expectations without sufficient guidance. Educators experienced fewer formal consequences but no equivalent increase in meaningful alternatives, leaving schools to manage complex needs with limited leverage. Law enforcement described focusing on diversion and safety thresholds, which sometimes clashed with educators’ desire for immediate action.

Participants agreed that better cross-agency communication and training are needed to align on thresholds, documentation, and appropriate next steps. Teachers emphasized that unclear rules create uneven responses across classrooms and schools.

Representative Quotes

Administrator: "The rules changed, but the playbook didn't."

Law Enforcement: "We're asked to divert—but there must be somewhere to divert to."

School Resource Officer: "We need shared criteria so schools and cops aren't working at cross-purposes."

Special Education Staff: "Students bounce between systems when policy isn't matched with services."

Counselor: "Clarity lowers conflict and speeds support."

Teacher: "We lost tools but didn't gain alternatives."

Case Management / Navigation Void

Moderator Questions

Who owns the work of helping families navigate services?
What helps families actually get connected and stay connected?

Summary

All groups identified the absence of case management as a central failure point. Families are handed lists, not guides. Parents often lack time, transport, or bandwidth to chase multiple referrals. Schools step in informally, despite limited capacity.

Participants said a dedicated navigator who stays with the family—bookends calls, schedules, follows up after intake, and troubleshoots barriers—dramatically improves connection and continuity. Without this, students cycle back into crisis.

Representative Quotes

Administrator: "Without a navigator, referrals stall out."

Law Enforcement: "Families need one person who owns the follow-through."

School Resource Officer: "We shouldn't be the de facto case managers."

Special Education Staff: "Warm handoffs keep kids from falling through the cracks."

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Counselor: "Call together, schedule together, follow up together—that's what works."

Teacher: "When someone walks with the parent, the student shows up to care."

Trust, Relationships, and 'Go-To Adults'

Moderator Questions

How important are relationships in preventing or resolving crisis?
What does an effective 'go-to adult' look like in practice?

Summary

Relationships were described as the most powerful protective factor. Teachers and counselors emphasized that one trusted adult—consistent, available, nonjudgmental—can stabilize students through difficult periods. Programs and curricula matter less than the quality of human connection.

Law enforcement and SROs noted that relationship-based approaches diffuse tension and reduce calls. Administrators and Special Education staff said that naming and supporting 'go-to adults' within school structures helps distribute the workload and build resilience across the system.

Representative Quotes

Administrator: "Students with a go-to adult weather storms better."

Law Enforcement: "Trust lowers the temperature faster than any tactic."

School Resource Officer: "When a kid knows who to find, we get fewer crisis calls."

Special Education Staff: "Relationships teach regulation better than lectures."

Counselor: "A consistent adult is the best intervention we have."

Teacher: "It's the person, not the program, that turns kids around."

School as Default Crisis Hub

Moderator Questions

When other systems don't respond, what role does the school end up playing?
What are the limits of what schools can do?

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Summary

Educators reported that schools increasingly provide functions far beyond academics—de facto crisis stabilization, food and clothing support, transportation coordination, and paperwork assistance. While this ensures students aren't abandoned, it stretches staff and resources thin.

Participants stressed that schools cannot sustain these responsibilities alone. Without coordinated community partners and post-crisis follow-up, students return to classrooms without adequate stabilization, setting the stage for repeat incidents.

Representative Quotes

Administrator: "We take everyone; other systems can say 'no.'"

Law Enforcement: "Schools are holding the line while services catch up."

School Resource Officer: "We're called because there's nowhere else to go."

Special Education Staff: "We become the safety net by default, not by design."

Counselor: "We're doing triage and therapy in a setting built for learning."

Teacher: "My class becomes the place where every unmet need shows up."

Age-Based Gaps in Eligibility

Moderator Questions

Where do age thresholds create gaps?
How do misaligned rules affect students and families?

Summary

Special Education staff and administrators described misaligned eligibility cutoffs across education, behavioral health, and justice systems that leave youth without appropriate services—especially older teens who are too old for child programs and too young for adult services. Teachers observed students aging out of supports without viable alternatives.

Participants said aligning age thresholds and creating bridge programs would reduce service cliffs and prevent students from cycling back into school without stabilization.

Representative Quotes

Administrator: "The service cliff at 18 is real."

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Law Enforcement: "We see kids fall between systems because of birthdays."

School Resource Officer: "Eligibility lines don't match real needs."

Special Education Staff: "Age doesn't equal readiness; alignment would help."

Counselor: "Bridge programs would keep momentum going."

Teacher: "We lose seniors to the gap between child and adult care."

Normalization of Trauma

Moderator Questions

How does normalization of unsafe or chaotic environments complicate response?
What messaging or strategies help?

Summary

Law enforcement and educators noted that some families view violence, instability, or chronic neglect as ordinary. When trauma is normalized, external help may be declined or minimized, slowing intervention. Teachers said students from such environments may struggle to recognize danger or accept support.

Participants emphasized patient, relationship-based engagement and concrete descriptions of risk and supports. Building trust first, then introducing options, was viewed as most effective.

Representative Quotes

Administrator: "We start by naming what safe looks like."

Law Enforcement: "What's routine at home can be a crisis at school."

School Resource Officer: "We move slower when families don't see the risk."

Special Education Staff: "Normalize help-seeking, not the trauma."

Counselor: "Trust first, then choices."

Teacher: "I teach safety like I teach reading—explicitly, daily."

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Educator Training & Overload

Moderator Questions

What training and supports do educators need to handle behavioral crises?
How is burnout affecting classrooms and schools?

Summary

Teachers reported increasing exposure to severe behaviors without commensurate support. They asked for practical, ongoing training in de-escalation, classroom management, and trauma-informed practices. Counselors and administrators noted that staffing shortages and turnover amplify strain.

SROs and law enforcement emphasized joint training and shared protocols to align thresholds and reduce unnecessary crisis calls. Special Education staff highlighted the need for collaborative planning and access to behavior expertise to support general education settings.

Representative Quotes

Administrator: "Training must be practical and ongoing—not a one-off PD."

Law Enforcement: "Joint training builds shared judgment."

School Resource Officer: "Clear protocols reduce panic calls."

Special Education Staff: "General ed needs access to behavior expertise."

Counselor: "Staff wellness matters—burnout drives turnover."

Teacher: "Give me tools and backup, not just expectations."

Prepared by Guy Hummel
Senior Research Strategist
Prime46 Research and Consulting
September 30, 2025

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