



## **For Immediate Release**

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Success for All Students, Media Relations

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### **Three Mayors, Two Georgia State Professors and The Cobb County School District Partner to Launch Seven Play Therapy Rooms**

#### **Removing Barriers to Learning through Therapeutic Play**

**Powder Springs, Georgia** – National Children’s Mental Health Awareness Month was established for everyone to promote positive youth development, resilience, recovery, and the transformation of mental health service delivery for children, youth, and families with serious mental health needs. The Cobb County School District, through its Success for All Students (SFAS) project, has chosen to go beyond one month and focus on more than just those with serious mental illness. “A critical piece to overall academic achievement is to identify and address mental health issues through school-based services,” says Dr. Paulette Herbert, Supervisor of the School Social Work Department and SFAS Project Director. Cobb’s initiative provides school-based mental health and other intervention services aimed at decreasing discipline events, improving attendance, promoting academic achievement and ultimately, increasing graduation rates, aligning nicely with the state’s Department of Education goals. Success for All Students is funded through a federal Safe Schools/Healthy Students grant and is not associated with the school district’s general operating budget.

According to research, infants, toddlers and preschoolers with social and emotional needs who receive early intervention are more likely to complete high school, live independently, maintain

productive employment, and avoid pregnancy and criminal behavior as they mature. (Glascoe, F. (2000)).

Cobb County is joining the ranks of school systems across the nation that believe that intervention is key and is establishing play therapy rooms in seven of its elementary schools: Dowell, Due West, Kennesaw, McCall Primary, Pickett's Mill, Powder Springs, and Still Elementary. An official ribbon cutting ceremony will be held on May 12 at Noon in the Media Center at McCall Primary School. Mayors Patricia Vaughn, Mark Mathews and Tommy Allegood will be on hand to officially cut the ribbon, along with principals, counselors and other school officials and administrators. "Cobb County School District's Success for All Students Program is on the cutting edge of public education's response to understanding and working with students holistically. Their focus on creating therapeutic playrooms and offering play therapy training and supervision to school-based mental health professionals offers developmentally-appropriate opportunities for children to work through the struggles that keep them from learning and achieving," notes Dr. Lauren Wynn, PhD, LPC, NCC, RPT-S, Clinical Assistant Professor in Georgia State's College of Education, Department of Counseling and Psychological Services.

This collaborative effort involves superintendents, principals, teachers, counselors, community mental health practitioners and local municipalities. "Play therapy is a highly effective treatment modality for children. By working with local schools and communities in creating school-based play therapy rooms, we are ultimately increasing access for students in need. This increased access to social, emotional and behavioral support helps students build healthier relationships, improve adaptation in the classroom and ultimately become more receptive to learning," states Matt Yancey, Project Manager for the grant project. "The Success for All Students project currently funds 11 licensed mental health therapists who are based in the 35 schools in northwest Cobb (Kennesaw, Acworth and Powder Springs) area. There are also three family support specialists on staff who work on a team alongside the therapists, school counselors, school nurses and administrators and go into the homes and work with the students' families, all free of charge. Since the implementation of the project among the more than 450 students who have received school-based mental health services, we have seen a 46% decline in discipline events in general, and in just the past year, we have seen a decrease of 39% of

students placed on juvenile probation, a 24% decrease in truancy and a 31% decrease in school fights in our project’s targeted areas,” continues Yancey.

Play therapy, or play counseling, as it is often referred to in education settings, is a developmentally appropriate intervention for children ranging in age from preschool to high school (O’Conner, 1991). Because schools are a microcosm of society, school-based mental health practitioners regularly work with children who experience interpersonal, emotional, and behavioral difficulties that interfere with learning as a result of stressors in their lives (e.g. trauma, natural disasters, abuse, illness/death, disabilities, divorce, addiction, etc.). And, as schools become increasingly diverse, play therapy offers a multi-culturally sensitive modality because play is a universal, natural way of being for children (Drewes, 2005), it does not require verbalization (Gil & Drewes, 2005), and it allows children to express their unique views of themselves, others, and the world around them (Kottman, 2003) in a safe and non-threatening environment.

“Social and behavioral competence in young children predicts their academic performance in the first grade over and above their cognitive skills and family backgrounds.” (SAMHSA 2010). This means that early intervention plays a major role in future graduation rates. This certainly supports one of the six strategic goals established for the State Department of Education – increased graduation rates, decreasing dropout rates, and increasing post-secondary enrollment rates.

“Mental illness is now the leading cause of disability for all persons 5 years of age and older. The most recent U.S. Surgeon General’s report on mental health described the shortage of appropriate services for children as a major health crisis and estimated that, although at least 1 in 10 of all children suffer from emotional and behavioral problems severe enough to impair normal functioning, less than half receive any treatment” (U.S. Public Health Service, 2000).

#### About Success for All Students Project:

Providing prevention and intervention strategies that reduce the risk factors that can come between children and their ability to learn – both in the classroom and at home is the mission of

the Success for All Students project (SFAS), a Safe Schools/Healthy Student federal grant initiative under the direction of Dr. Paulette Herbert, School Social Work Supervisor for Cobb County and SFAS Project Director. Dr. Herbert wrote and received the \$8 1/2M grant in July of 2008. [www.cobbsuccessforall.com](http://www.cobbsuccessforall.com)

*About National Children's Mental Health Awareness Day:*

*In 2006, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA) Center for Mental Health Services launched an annual national initiative called "National Children's Mental Health Awareness Day." Awareness Day is designated as a day in May of each year to coincide with May is Mental Health Month. This day presents an opportunity for children's mental health initiatives within SAMHSA and Awareness Day cosponsors and supporters to promote positive youth development, resilience, recovery, and the transformation of mental health services delivery for children and youth with serious mental health needs and their families. The goal is to integrate mental health into every environment that impacts child development from birth; nurture the social and emotional well-being of children from birth; look for and discuss milestones of a child's social and emotional development from birth. For more info, go to [www.samhsa.gov/children](http://www.samhsa.gov/children).*

*Additional Resource/Registered Play Therapists:*

*Dr. Lauren Stern Wynne, PhD, LPC, RPT-S ([lwynne@gsu.edu](mailto:lwynne@gsu.edu)) -*

*Dr. Joanna White, Ed.D., Professor and Chair, Department of Counseling and Psychological Services for Georgia State University ([jwhite@gsu.edu](mailto:jwhite@gsu.edu))*

*Sources:*

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