Editor's Note
Schools were struggling to meet students' mental health needs even before the pandemic. In this Spotlight, evaluate what schools can do to shift their approach to mental health supports; look through the lens of those often forgotten; assess new statistics surrounding child abuse and what some schools are doing about the changes; discover tips for connecting with students of color; and learn strategies to support teacher mental health and forming community relationships.

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Student Mental Health
Mental Health Problems Loom For the COVID Generation. Here’s What Schools Can Do

By Arianna Prothero

The nation’s schools were already struggling to meet students’ mental health needs when the pandemic hit. How can schools rise to meet students’ ballooning needs in that area as a massive school reopening gets underway?

To be sure, it will be difficult to balance mental health support with an equally massive academic recovery. But child development experts say it’s a balance schools must attempt to strike if they want students to regain their academic footing after an unprecedented time of disruptions, stress, and trauma.

An infusion of federal COVID-19 relief money will help, but how those funds are used will be pivotal. And experts say that schools cannot just focus on the students they know are in crisis; they must bolster supports for all students as well as staff members.

Even before the pandemic, mental health disorders, such as anxiety and depression, were on the rise among children and adolescents and many schools were struggling to keep pace with that demand. Suicide rates among children 10 and older had also climbed significantly since 2007, making suicide the second leading cause of death among adolescents before the pandemic.

And the pandemic certainly hasn’t made things easier for kids. Felecia Evans, a principal at Lander Elementary in Mayfield Heights, Ohio, just outside Cleveland, said her students are struggling with family housing loss, job loss, food insecurity, and just general anxiety about what may come next. Thirty percent of Evans’ students come from low-income households.

“My student support team, myself, my school psychologist, the school counselor, my assistant principal, we meet every week with our ‘high watch list’ of kids,” she said. “And it’s kind of changed the nature of my work. We used to spend a lot more time being able to talk about teaching and learning and now it’s really trying to problem solve and help people get access to resources.”

Nationally, the number of young children and adolescents going to the emergency room because of a mental-health crisis has shot up during the pandemic, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. More students are asking for services through their schools, an EdWeek Research Center survey of teenagers found. Twenty-one percent of high schoolers said that during the pandemic they felt for the first time they would benefit from school-based mental health services.

But professional organizations such as the National Association of School Psychologists, the American School Counselor Association, and the National Association of School Nurses say that there are not enough support staffs in schools—at least not now.

NASP recommends a ratio of 500 students per school psychologist, but the national average is actually closer to 1,500 to one. The American School Counselor Association recommends a ratio of 250 students to one school counselor, but the national average in the 2018-19 school year, the most recent year for which data was available, was 430 students per school counselor. Only about half of the nation’s schools have a dedicated full-time nurse, while the National Association of School Nurses advocates for one full-time nurse in each school building.

How federal relief money can help

Some states and districts have already committed to using their share of the $129 billions in federal COVID-19 relief aid to hire more school psychologists and counselors.

While some districts may be reluctant to hire new staff, whether it be school psychologists, counselors, social workers, or nurses, with funds that will run out in a few years, it may be a bet worth making, said Rob Coad, a school psychologist and a member of the National Association of School Psychologists’ School Safety and Crisis Response Committee.

Once schools, students, and parents get something they find valuable, he figures, it can be hard to take away.

“Our hope is that as you use this stimulus money to build support in schools, [these services] become normalized, and then the sites and ultimately the district see the value in it, and they reallocate and protect money to continue that over the long haul,” he said.

There are many other ways schools can expand their mental health services with the help of federal aid, such as using telehealth to connect students to mental health-care providers and training for teachers and staff on how to identify and respond to children who may be struggling with mental health issues, said Phyllis Jordan, the editorial director at FutureEd, a think tank based at Georgetown University.

“Another issue: You’re going to have some
discipline problems this year,” said Jordan. “There are going to be kids who have behavioral outbursts, and you’re just going to have kids who are out of practice at being in school who are just not behaving properly. And the worst thing a school can do is flush them all out with suspensions or harsh discipline. There is going to have to be some attention and training on issues like restorative practices and ways of coping with these issues that kids are going to have.”

For districts that haven't invested in a social-emotional learning curriculum, now, with this infusion of federal dollars, would be a good time to do so, said Jordan.

Schools can also tap personnel or volunteers from their community or a program such as AmeriCorps to mentor students, said Jordan. Research has shown that positive relationships play an important role in developing students’ ability to cope and learn.

Jordan also recommends that schools consider either starting or stepping up teacher home visits, which are a powerful way to develop relationships with families and gain a thorough understanding of what students are facing in their home lives and the supports they have outside of school.

If schools are not in a position to go on a hiring spree or invest in, say, a new social-emotional learning curriculum, there are other steps they can take to make a difference, said Coad. “This is a difficult time to try to start over and establish a new curriculum because students and teachers have been asked to pivot yet again.” Schools have more capacity to help students than they may realize, he said. “If a school is struggling, it’s probably more of a process of reallocating resources rather than not having them. We have to remind our fellow professionals about the skills that they have that help us screen and triage students that are in need.”

School partnerships with community mental health providers are another strategy for bolstering the supports students can access through school.

Finally, climate surveys are a low-resource tool schools can use to assess the mental health needs of their students as they return to classes at the end of summer, said Jordan. Even if a school already uses school climate surveys, Jordan recommends passing a survey out at the start of the academic year and adding additional, pandemic-specific questions to it.

**On mental health, schools must move from responding to preventing**

Whatever route schools go, they should invest in prevention as well as in responding
“I don’t want anyone to think that if we do self-awareness, that we’re going to get rid of depression,” she said. But social-emotional learning can teach children how to name and express what they are feeling. “I think having emotional literacy is really important, just as important as academic vocabulary.”

Identifying emotions is key to tackling the tough ones, said Andrews, something that students—and oftentimes even adults—need help learning how to do.

SEL exercises such as “feelings circles” and “mood meters” can give students the space to examine their emotions and develop the vocabulary they need to express them and ask for help when they need it.

Another crucial piece to providing mental health supports school wide is teacher well-being.

“We can’t have healthy students if we don’t have a healthy education workforce,” said Hoover. “And so that is one thing that schools should be thinking about as they are considering how to support student mental health. They first have to assess and address educator well-being.”

One way the Tulsa school system has tackled this was by setting up a hotline specifically for teachers and principals to call when they’re stressed or overwhelmed.

At Lander Elementary School in Ohio, principal Evans believes giving teachers breathing room and time for collaboration is an important part of well-being. She has eked out more time for planning and professional development for teachers during the pandemic by reorganizing the entire school day and week. Her campus has been teaching students in-person for most of the school year.

When they started in September, Evans lumped the school’s special courses for each grade—physical education, music class, art, and maker spaces—into a designated day during the week. For example, on Monday, all 1st graders start and end the day with their home teacher, but spend the rest of the day in special classes and lunch. On Tuesday, the schedule rotates to the 2nd graders, and so forth.

This system frees up a four-hour block of time, including lunch, for teachers in each grade level once a week. They use the time to meet with their other grade-level teachers and game out an academic plan for the upcoming week, reflect on what’s working and what’s not, discuss students who are struggling, participate in professional development, touch base with parents, and conduct one-on-one assessments for the few students who are learning remotely.

“Mental Health First Aid: Action Plan

Mental health first aid is instruction that teaches people, such as teachers, to identify the warning signs of mental health problems and how to respond using the steps laid out in the acronym ALGEE, developed by Mental Health First Aid Australia.

- Approach the person, assess, and assist with any crisis
- Listen and communicate nonjudgmentally
- Give support and information
- Encourage the person to get appropriate professional help
- Encourage other supports

SOURCE: Mental Health First Aid Australia

“I have seen them grow as collaborative teams because they don’t feel like they are on an island or on this constant treadmill,” said Evans. “With the curve balls that COVID has thrown us, just being able to count on ... consolidated time with a team of people has been important for them.”

Evans also moved back the start time for students’ school day. Students and teachers used to start at the same time, and giving teachers an hour in the morning to prepare before the kids arrive has also helped with teacher self-care and morale, she said.

While Evans said her school could benefit from more direct mental health resources (at the top of her wish list is on-site, five-day-a-week therapy for students and families), this new schedule has gone a long way to provide more support for Lander’s teachers.

And it’s been popular with teachers, like Nicole Rucci-Macauda, who teaches 3rd grade.

“I think that’s helped everybody’s mental health because you’re not as rushed,” she said. “You have time to look deeper into other things—to meet with parents, to meet with a counselor for one of your students and talk about strategies and things like that.”

The union was hesitant when she pitched this reordered schedule summer 2020, Evans said, but the teachers have since embraced it. And Lander Elementary will continue to operate on the same schedule, with minor tweaks, next school year.
Keeping schools connected during COVID-19 and beyond

How one organization’s embrace of the cloud led to short and long-term solutions in education
When schools throughout the country transitioned to online learning in March 2020, they had to quickly address two challenges. First, they had to rapidly provision devices to students, teachers, and staff and make sure the entire school population was connected to the internet. After deploying these devices, they needed to ensure employees had access to the school’s network so they could access files and applications and continue to collaborate with one another from home.

The South Central Regional Information Center (SCRIC) had to address both of these challenges on an extremely large scale. SCRIC provides technology to 50 school districts across three Boards of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) in the south-central region of New York State. Twenty-seven of those school districts are supported by a Managed Information Technology Support (MITS) model in which SCRIC collaborates with one of the BOCES, Broome-Tioga (BT) BOCES, to handle all Information Technology (IT) administration and management decisions, allowing district leaders to focus on their primary task: educating students.

To support this network of students, teachers, and administrators, SCRIC and the SCRIC/BT BOCES teams needed to immediately provide desktop access for remote work. One of their priorities was getting all administrative employees access to the network as soon as possible. At the start of the pandemic, network access was particularly important for finance staff.

“It just so happened that COVID-19 lined up with the end of our fiscal year,” says Philip Sage, manager of project design and development for SCRIC. “April is a busy time of year for our business office. They needed access to our financial systems to issue purchase orders and do billing. Getting them onto our machines was really important.”

However, VPN accounts would not work for the unique situation of the COVID-19 pandemic.

“It takes time to set up hundreds of VPN accounts, and there is more risk involved by setting up a VPN from a home machine into our network,” says Sage.

SCRIC also didn’t want a solution that would require extra hardware, which would take time to procure. With pressure mounting to quickly solve this issue of network access, SCRIC needed a turnkey solution.

Turning to the cloud

SCRIC decided to turn to a cloud-based solution, Amazon WorkSpaces, to provide staff with desktop access. Amazon WorkSpaces is a desktop-as-a-service (DaaS) solution that provides users with virtual desktops, or WorkSpaces, they can access from any supported device — anywhere, anytime.

Amazon WorkSpaces was the ideal choice for SCRIC because it fit into the organization’s cloud-first approach to education.

“We seek to adopt the native, cloud way of doing things, rather than pushing everything we already have on premises here, as it is, into the cloud. For every project we do, we first consider how we can do it more effectively in the cloud.”

Philip Sage, Manager of Project Design and Development, SCRIC

Security was also a key factor in SCRIC’s decision. Unlike VPN accounts, Amazon WorkSpaces allowed SCRIC to control the access that administrators had to the network, removing the risk of setting up hundreds of VPN accounts on home devices. Amazon WorkSpaces gives employees a true in-office experience from home, complete with the security and the capabilities they would find in the office.
Without the need to purchase and install hardware or deploy complex virtual desktop infrastructure, SCRIC could install DaaS solutions quickly, which was critical during the rapid transition to working from home in March. SCRIC/BT BOCES deployed 270 Amazon WorkSpaces in a single weekend, providing 10 Amazon WorkSpaces for each of the 27 school districts in their MITS model. SCRIC had a total capacity of 530 Amazon WorkSpaces — 10 for each of the 50 districts.

“The ability to just flick a switch and have all that in place to support staff was really great,” says Sage. Amazon WorkSpaces has helped SCRIC and its partner districts in both the short and long term.

“Amazon WorkSpaces ended up being a really good stopgap to help us get something out really fast, something that could be really useful,” says Sage. “It gave the organization time to understand who would be working from home for the long term, who would be coming back into the office, and what kind of long-term supports they would need to put in place.”

From a tweet to a partnership

Another benefit of turning to Amazon WorkSpaces was the responsive and thorough support from Amazon Web Services (AWS) during rapid deployment. The SCRIC/BT BOCES team recalls a moment early in the deployment of Amazon WorkSpaces when they wanted to increase the limit on the number of their virtual desktops. Needing a fast response, they turned to social media to contact AWS.

“We worried that we weren’t going to get approval for the limit increase on time. But we jumped on Twitter and reached out to AWS. Sure enough, we had a couple people respond right away,” Sage says.

Andrew Defoe, technical business development manager, end user computing for AWS, reached out to SCRIC on LinkedIn saying he heard they were looking for some support. According to Ben Kolb, network engineer at BT BOCES, Defoe’s response was swift: “He said, ‘I’m the right guy to talk to; let me put you in touch.’ That morning they had worked everything out for us.”

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Philip Sage, Manager of Project Design and Development, SCRIC

The result of this brief Twitter encounter was the development of a long-lasting, collaborative relationship between SCRIC and AWS. AWS works with various educational services agencies, and SCRIC has now joined the AWS Partner Network (APN), which helps companies successfully build AWS solutions through technical and business trainings, marketing support, and more.

As an APN Partner, SCRIC regularly collaborates with the AWS direct team and partner team to develop and deploy other cloud solutions to improve educational services for its partner districts.

“Going down the partner path with AWS has given us an opportunity to be a leader throughout New York state,” Sage says. “We are on the leading edge in our educational community, which is exciting.”

Looking toward the future

As school districts look toward the fall and the start of a new school year, SCRIC is working with AWS to consider adopting cloud-based services that will support students, teachers, and staff in the long term, whether they are working from home, in a school, or in a hybrid setting.

When schools initially transitioned to online learning, students could not access certain applications on their Chromebooks. For example, south-central New York high school students supported by SCRIC have many science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) applications they use for their career and technical education (CTE) courses, including Adobe Creative Cloud, AutoDesk AutoCAD, Revit, Inventor, SOLIDWORKS, and Unity3D.
These applications, which include computer-aided design (CAD), mechanical engineering, and electrical engineering apps, are often only available to students in a computer lab on school property.

“You simply cannot run those applications on Chromebooks, nor are the devices powerful enough to properly support the apps,” Kolb says.

SCRIC is considering an application streaming service like Amazon AppStream 2.0, which would allow students working from home to access needed applications from any device. This way, students can get the tools they need for these specialized classes, regardless of whether they are in the classroom or at home.

Leveraging Amazon AppStream 2.0 can also help SCRIC evolve the way it approaches education beyond the pandemic. By providing students access to these applications anytime, anywhere, from any device, schools can save physical spaces like computer labs for other purposes. They can also save money on hardware costs. Students who might need extra time to complete assignments (whether due to absences or 504 accommodations) will be able to do this work from home, without relying on school labs that are only open during specified hours.

“AppStream 2.0 is the perfect solution to solving some of these scenarios,” says Kolb.

**Enriching education**

For SCRIC, an accelerated move to the cloud and cloud-based solutions has been one positive that has come out of the turmoil of the pandemic.

“Going down the partner path with AWS has given us an opportunity to be a leader throughout New York state. We are on the leading edge in our educational community, which is exciting.”

Philip Sage, Manager of Project Design and Development, SCRIC

SCRIC sees a clear connection between its collaboration with AWS on various solutions and achieving its mission of empowering schools by delivering innovative technology solutions and exceptional support.

With standardized solutions across its school districts, SCRIC can also put more energy into providing an even better learning experience for students.

“We are here to help our learners learn and our teachers teach,” Sage says. “And that has been the mission of everything we are doing with AWS. How do we improve the ability for the teachers to get access to their materials easier, share their materials easier, have faster and better infrastructure? Everything we’re doing behind the scenes is trying to position technology to make their lives a little easier.”

_This piece was developed and written by the Center for Digital Education Content Studio, with information and input from AWS._
‘They Already Feel Like Bad Students.’ A Special Educator Reflects on Virtual Teaching

By Catherine Gewertz

Tray Robinson teaches English/language arts and science to special education students at Andrew Hill High School in San Jose, Calif. While teaching remotely during the pandemic, he’s seen some of his students struggle mightily to adapt to new ways of learning, while others thrive. His conversations with Education Week have been edited for clarity and length.

Our freshmen are failing P.E. And they are all failing P.E. for the same reason: Because P.E. is using [the video app] Flipgrid. They perform an activity, a workout or whatever, and it records them. You need to be able to record this workout, post it, and upload it for your teacher to view it. At one point, I decided I was going to host my class via Flipgrid. I scrapped that idea after two weeks, because for my students, Flipgrid was impossible.

I could use it perfectly on my own. But whenever I was trying to use it with my students, it derailed the whole class. Everything went wrong. That is the difficulty of just the software. It is not that the kids won’t do the work. It’s not that the kids won’t try. It’s disheartening for them when they fail because they can’t figure out how to turn it in. They can’t figure out how to turn it in. Heartening for them when they fail because they already feel like bad students. They feel bad about how they learn. They’re sitting home struggling with basic things they think they should be able to do. We’ve expected entirely too much from them and given them too little. The things they’ve ascribed to themselves as their failures in education have not been their own failures. It’s been a failure of the education system that’s been assigned to them.

I have this one student. He’s on the autism spectrum. I have several students on the spectrum, and many of them struggle with changes to their established learning routines.

The digital learning format requires a lot more technological interactivity. He suddenly needed to use the computer for everything, and he couldn’t follow all of the steps. He becomes frustrated. He has many people at home, but there is no one to explain how to do it. The more frustrated he gets, the more he wants to back away from it. He felt like a failure, and I got these alarming messages: I’m gonna drop out, my life’s over. It was terrifying.

And I can’t get my eyes on this kid [because his camera is off], I’ve never seen him in person, and I couldn’t tell, are you serious? Are you just blowing off steam? His six teachers, and counselors and administrators, all have email flying, trying to establish the best way to serve this student because he was not struggling this way in person.

We ended up switching him off of digital assignments to paper. He checks in for the lecture portions and gets whatever it is he’s going to work on. He does that on paper, and he takes a photo and submits it, or turns it in personally on campus.

But some kids are thriving [in remote learning]. If you’re in a classroom [in person], and you asked something, you said it out loud. But if you are in my Zoom classroom, and you need to ask me a question, you can type it into the chat window. And that’s the way that I get most of my questions.

Another of my students has a processing disorder that causes extreme reading and speech difficulty. He struggles with 2nd grade sight words when he reads alone. But he’s just crushing it at school right now. I think it’s partly because he’s at home, so he isn’t embarrassed in front of other people. And partly because his family has direct access to see what he’s doing and how to help him.

Now he’s the first one to talk in our sessions. He’ll go, can I talk to you in a breakout room? Can I stay after so you can help me with my reading? For once, I feel like this kid is happy in school.

He came to me today at the beginning of my class, and he said [in a private chat message], I have a question. What happens when two galaxies collide? Like, where did that even [come from]? Let’s all look it up. He said, my mom has been getting me books, and I’m reading them, but the words are too big. This is a kid who doesn’t participate, and doesn’t really speak out in person, because he struggles with reading and speech.

So here, he asked me question after question after question. Because he’s asking me behind the veil of a screen, he doesn’t worry about how he sounds, he doesn’t worry about anybody else seeing this. And he knows if he
asks, I will answer him. So he asks me, and I give him an answer. And we look at it together. And there he goes off with his next question. And this made my day today.

[Teaching during the pandemic] has made me reevaluate what it is that I do and what I am responsible for as a teacher. As special education teachers, we tend to say that we are responsible for our own. You know, I deal with my kids and my caseload.

But I’m looking at the greater picture and I see that education needs its special education teachers to work across party lines. I want to be in the room where it happens, at the curriculum table when discussions are happening, so that every curriculum includes methods for every learner and is coordinated with district technology, training, and special education practices.

These kids are going to come back to school in the fall, and school is going to take off at the normal speed. They’re going to be in person. They’re going to have their regular class sizes. They’re going to have the regular class loads. Our teachers are already talking about, how do we come back the way that we were before we left? We cannot come back the way we were before. That system was broken.

Published on June 1, 2021

Child Abuse Cases Got More Severe During COVID-19. Could Teachers Have Prevented It?

By Sarah D. Sparks

If teachers see signs of child abuse, they have both a professional duty and a legal obligation to report it, to ensure children get help. A year of extreme family stress coupled with more remote learning has highlighted how damaging it can be when teachers can’t fulfill that safeguard role.

University of California, Irvine, researchers found that reported cases of suspected child abuse in one large, unnamed county in the Golden State fell during the pandemic—but the severity of actual child abuse cases rose over that time. And teachers and other adults at schools made up the biggest hole in the safety net for children during this time.

The pandemic shutdowns and widespread economic instability since early spring 2020 raised parental stress; caused strain on family budgets; forced families to crowd together for quarantines, telecommuting, and remote schooling; and limited social and mental health supports for parents.

The researchers studied monthly reports of suspected maltreatment from county social services from March to December in 2019 and 2020, and compared these data to data in the same periods from county child abuse clinic medical evaluations, which are conducted when suspected abuse is considered severe enough that a child needs a doctor’s examination and potential treatment.

From 2019 to 2020, the total reports of suspected child abuse fell more than 24 percent during the period from March to December, from more than 25,400 to about 19,300, and the number of children suspected of being mistreated fell nearly 29 percent, from more than 33,000 to just over 23,600.

While reported abuse dropped, the confirmed evidence of abuse rose by 30 percent from 2019 to 2020, based on clinic medical reports during that time. The proportion of suspected child abuse cases that were considered severe enough to need medical evaluations and intervention rose from 10 percent before the pandemic to 17 percent during it.

“By the time children are identified, the abuse they have suffered is more severe than it otherwise would have been,” said Stacy Metcalf, a clinical research coordinator at the University of California, San Francisco, and a doctoral researcher at U.C. Irvine, in a presentation on the study at the Association for Psychological Science virtual conference last week.

By the time children are identified, the abuse they have suffered is more severe than it otherwise would have been.”

STACY METCALF
A CLINICAL RESEARCH COORDINATOR, THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN FRANCISCO

Teacher observations needed

Manded reporters in schools and day-care facilities made up a third of all those who reported suspected abuse during the study in 2019, but that percentage fell by more than half in 2020, to only 16.4 percent. Police, social workers, and even people such as neighbors, who were not required to report, became more likely to be the ones to spot suspected child abuse.

One reason for the dropoff in reports was that teachers and others at schools simply had less contact with students overall, due to school closures and remote classes. Child abuse reporting generally dips during the summer, when children already have less contact with teachers and other mandated reporters in schools, and researchers found
that summer showed a smaller—though still significant—difference in reporting from the summer of 2019 to 2020.

Some of the signs of child abuse that teachers are trained to look for—including social isolation and poor hygiene—became hard to differentiate during the pandemic, and actual bruises became much easier to cover up in video conferences than classes.

As schools reopen, Metcalf expects an “exponential increase” in the number of families and students identified as needing support services related to abuse and neglect. States such as Delaware have started to change their mandated-reporter training to add more clarification of the signs of abuse and neglect that can show up in remote classes, such as self-harming behavior, defensive behavior toward adults, and signs of neglect in the home.

Teachers and administrators can also improve lines of communication for students. For example, in a randomized controlled trial just before the pandemic, the national child abuse prevention group Childhelp’s Speak Up Be Safe curriculum significantly increased secondary students’ understanding of potentially abusive situations at home and on campus and how to reach out to adults who can help them at school.

Published on March 31, 2021

Q&A: Meeting the Needs of Students Of Color In a Time of Collective Trauma

By Evie Blad

The experience of living through a pandemic, and the immediate and long-term mental health needs resulting from 2020, may be quite different for some students of color than for their white peers, educators say.

For one thing, in communities across the country, Black, Latino, and Native American populations have had significantly higher death rates than white populations due to COVID-19.

Even as many haven’t stepped foot in a classroom for months, students also have participated in emotional protests over racial injustice in policing and witnessed a divisive presidential election. And Asian students, in particular, have seen surging reports of hate-related incidents in their communities in recent months.

As schools predict an increased need for mental health supports for all students, they should incorporate a cultural lens into their responses, said Janine Jones, a professor of school psychology at the University of Washington.

Students may be more likely to engage with supports, like counseling, if they feel a sense of belonging at school. And subtle signals, like microaggressions, can have the opposite effect for students of color, who may not feel like their experiences and identities are recognized at school, Jones said.

Jones’ work focuses on culturally responsive school psychology and supporting resilience in children of color. She spoke with Education Week about how schools can support students from all communities after an unprecedented year of disruption and upheaval.

This conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

Q: What are some ways schools have fallen short in supporting the emotional well-being of students of color?

Oftentimes, students of color have been left out of the true understanding of what students need to feel a sense of belonging in their school environment. And there are elements of emotional well-being that students of color experience challenges around that schools have historically not noticed.

Culturally responsive practices honor and value the cultural and racial identities of youth in schools. These practices pay attention to those well-being indicators [like whether or not students have trusting relationships with teachers] that need to be addressed that often get overlooked or missed when we do kind of a universal approach to supporting students.

Q: What are some examples of some ways that schools could be more intentional about noticing these things?

So many times, we do things where we establish curricula, like social-emotional learning curricula, that have been developed and normed based on mostly white populations. And they are steeped in values that include individualistic kind of approaches or beliefs of, “If you practice this skill by yourself, you’re likely to achieve better outcomes.”

These things that are developed or estab-
lished based on the values and beliefs of the majority population, which has historically been white, are very individualized, and they’re very focused on kind of the “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” kind of approach. But most communities of color are people that are collectivist, meaning they don’t think about themselves individually, they think of themselves as a representative or part of a community of people.

So when we have interventions, or social emotional-learning curricula, that are solely focused on practicing an individual skill or technique, but not in relationship with other people, we miss a lot. So many of the challenges that students of color experience are typically in relation to other people, because students of color are often racialized and they are treated differently based on their appearance or their race. And there are additional layers of stress, and lack of belonging, and mistrust that result from being treated differently.

**Q: It almost sounds like schools are speaking a different language than their students sometimes.**

We have what we often refer to as “color-blind approaches,” [where adults in schools might say], “We see people as humans, and we describe what they need based on what everybody needs.”

And there are some needs that many people that have not been racialized or minoritized, they don’t see because they’ve never had the experience.

**Q: Can you explain a bit more about microaggressions and racialized treatment?**

I have this graphic that explains it. A Black student walks into the classroom and the teacher tells them, “Oh, you should be on time because you need all the time we have to learn the material.”

And in that, there’s not only a microaggression, but also stereotype threat, which is this concept where a student of color knows and has awareness of stereotypes, and they fear meeting the stereotype. ... And so then the student says, “My gosh, they probably think all Black people are late now.” And they’re concerned about fulfilling that.

But then I talk about that same student going and sitting down and then hearing the, “You need all the time we have to learn the material.” And that is leaning into the stereotype of Black people and not being as smart.

**Q: For students of color who have more direct mental health needs—or who might want to access some of those more-intensive supports at school—how does that collective mindset play out in how they choose to engage with services?**

In some places, they’re going to seek [counseling and support services] more likely in community environments. It might be through their church, or through their community mental health center outside of a school setting, because those are places where they might see someone who looks like them, or who markets themselves as somebody who offers services that address racism and difference and experiences with microaggressions or stereotype challenges.

There are practitioners who help people cope with those things. And so, families with youth of color that are experiencing racism in their school settings, ... they’re going to look for practitioners that say that that’s what they offer.

**Q: Students of color sometimes talk about being viewed through a deficit lens, that even well-intentioned adults can sometimes focus on their concerns about what students need rather than the strengths they bring to the classroom.**

How does that framing affect students when they need to access services or supports at school?

I think we need to flip all of our practice for school psychologists. For one, much of what happens with school psychologists is they get referrals for treatment, or intervention or placement, because of a problem. So identifying that problem is part of the established practice, rather than taking a perspective of, “What are their strengths? And how can we ensure that we’re building upon the strengths before addressing any weaknesses in a student’s experience?”

So as we’re coming back from the pandemic, educators need to come from the recognition that all of us have experienced a trauma—and it’s been a chronic and enduring trauma over this past year—and that we all need love, and care, and support, and encouragement, and less pressure.

We should return [to school] by having every day start with some positive affirmation. Every day should start with practicing some mindfulness or some social-emotional learning skill, like breathing exercises, and using it in relationship with one another. So, not just doing it yourself, but doing it in community and making it a part of being able to center yourself before you begin engaging in any learning activity.

**Q: What are some ways students of color have experienced the pandemic and protests over racial justice differently than their white peers? And how might schools be mindful of that?**

This is a harsh statement to say, but I do believe that, for many students of color, they’ve gotten a break [while learning remotely] from the historical microaggressions that they’ve been experiencing. And, you know, those who didn’t feel a sense of belonging or didn’t feel a sense of community ... didn’t have to fake or pretend to be something else.

I have watched my own 17-year-old and her friends. Over the course of the year, since George Floyd’s [death in police custody], they got a voice in a different way. And they were able to feel a sense of not only internalized empowerment, but also community empowerment. They were able to witness not just Black youth standing for Black Lives Matter, but also white youth and their friends and the people that were pretty much quiet before.

So they want to go back, but they also want to go back better. They want to go back to a place where they feel like they belong and where people are listening.

But there are also ways [some students of color have] dealt with remote learning. Some teachers had these expectations of students being on video and participating in the same ways that they would in the classroom. That affected a lot of youth of color who are in environments that may not be optimal for learning, and they...
didn’t want to expose their homes, and they didn’t want to have people see their living conditions and things like that. ... There was a lack of awareness of that.

Q: For many students of color, their communities were hit harder by the pandemic. They’ve seen higher rates of fatalities and virus cases that many officials have tied back to systemic inequality. How should schools engage with that grief in a culturally responsive way?

I feel like having the space and opportunity to talk about it, about the losses, and then be able to honor the people that are gone, is a really important way to bring something special into the classroom, so that students’ whole selves are met. ... For example, for Mexican students, the Day of the Dead is a day where you honor ancestors and people that have passed on. ... Giving kids the voice to be able to say, “This is how I’m living my life in respect of my ancestors’ life, or my great-uncle, or my cousin who just died from COVID.”

To have these discussions would be just a really powerful way to honor the experience and how painful this is. I keep hearing about people [getting sick] every single day. The circle is closing in.

Q: In some cities, we’ve seen that parents of color have a lot of distrust in schools, and that’s made them reluctant to send their children back to in-person learning. How does trust play into families’ willingness to engage with these kinds of emotional supports at schools?

Trust has to be earned. And we’ve had decades and decades and decades of not being able to trust fully unless that was the norm or the culture of the school already.

So the family engagement practices, those need to be tripled. And I would recommend that the parents have voice in those efforts, ... [that schools] create opportunities for them to share how they would like to be engaged.

There’s a long history of efforts that have been thwarted by school personnel saying that families are “just not responding” or they’re “just not available.” And that has often been done to Black families and Black parents more than anyone. It has to do a lot with [schools’] behavior and misinterpreting behavior of parents and of their children.

It’s not pleasant to be a parent getting only calls from a school or emails from a school when your child is misbehaving, but nothing positive. And so all those practices have to be flipped—start with the positives, the strengths, connecting on a real personal level.

Q: When you talk about misinterpreting children’s behavior, do you mean seeing behavior as defiance when a kid is really maybe distracted or emotional?

Yes. And what we know about trauma behaviors is that oftentimes children who have experienced trauma, or are experiencing trauma, behave in ways that are less predictable.

And for teachers who have not had related experiences ... they will interpret the behavior in a way that needs to be disciplined, rather than a way of calling in a student and finding out what’s the root source of the problem. The root source is often pain, not intending to be disrespectful. ... Kids can show depression through anger and irritability. And we miss that

Q: If you were to give a pep talk to a school counselor or psychologist who’s going to start their first year next year—when we’re still kind of figuring out how to recover from all of this—what would you tell them?

I would say, if we take care of the adults, we will be able to take care of the children. Recognize that much of adverse childhood experiences come from adult behaviors, adult decisions, and adult misinterpretation. And so if we not only pay attention to the social-emotional needs of the kids, but also of our teachers ... that will help the whole community.

We all have elevated anxiety. It’s not just the pathology of an anxiety disorder. Everybody has more anxiety. So let’s treat it as if everybody needs support.

Additional Resource
9 Tips for Creating Effective Community Partnerships Around Students’ Mental Health (Downloadable)

Published on May 24, 2021

Helping Students Bounce Back From a Disrupted Year: Strategies For Schools
By Sarah D. Sparks

The pandemic has caused widespread disruptions in many students’ school experiences, repeatedly changed their formats for learning, and isolated them physically from teachers and classmates. As educators work to return students to full-time, in-person learning, they will need more than just academic interventions. They will also need to help students reconnect and get back into the schooling mindset.

In doing so, newcomer programs—intended to provide intensive support for immigrant and often English-learner students who may come to U.S. schools with interrupted formal education and stress or trauma—may prove an important model.

“A lot of the techniques and the strategies, the pedagogies that are used with newcomer schools, we can be using with every kid now that they’re coming back to school,” said Audrey Cohan, senior dean for research and scholarship at Molloy College in New York, who studies newcomer programs. This includes a focus on accelerating students rather than remediating them; providing social-emotional and mental health supports; and reestablishing school habits and norms that help students reconnect with their school community.

“It’s not what we lost during the pandemic, but it’s, what did we learn from the pandemic?” Cohan said. “What positive experiences did the kids find; how did the everyday chores and the everyday responsibilities turn into new learning that maybe we didn’t consider as important before?”

“I think all kids came away with new skills and new understanding and teachers have to have a chance to help them process it,” she said.

Studies tally up educational losses

UNESCO estimates that among students who should be in 3rd grade worldwide, the ed-
ucational disruptions caused by the pandemic have reduced the share of students who read proficiently on grade level by 10 percentage points, or 14 million, to 49 percent of children that age.

In terms of time, the UNESCO researchers calculated that U.S. schools lost less than 10 percent of their total 2020 instructional time (through to November 2020) to full school closures caused by the pandemic—significantly less than in neighboring Mexico, where schools were fully closed for more than half of instructional time. But once researchers accounted for time lost to partial closures, including schools forced to move to half-days or -weeks, or those only able to serve certain grade levels, the share of lost school days with synchronous instruction grew to 35 percent to 54 percent.

While the pandemic has been unique in both the scale and ongoing nature of its educational disruption, it does show similarities to the effects of other major natural disasters.

“While [Hurricane] Katrina was a different kind of disaster, there are parallels in the effect on students’ lives,” said Douglas Harris, an economics professor and chair in public education at Tulane University, as well as director at the Education Research Alliance for New Orleans, which has studied schooling in the region in the more than 15 years since that hurricane. In both the pandemic and widespread natural disasters like Hurricane Katrina, Harris said, “Students were thrown out of school ... and schools tried to grapple with how to serve students remotely.”

Students were isolated from friends. Some had parents who lost jobs, got sick, or died, he added.

“And while in Katrina, students were in-person,” Harris said, “in both [the hurricane and the pandemic], they were forced into different environments where they didn’t necessarily have relationships.”

And research from disaster recovery suggests children bounce back faster educationally when they have both academic and mental health supports and community connections in the months and years following the disaster. Harris and his colleagues found that by about two years after the disaster, students who had lived through school displacement during Hurricane Katrina had returned to their expected academic trajectory before the storm. But he noted that students continued to show signs of trauma and mental health issues for years after that.

“It’s hard to separate the effects of just covering less content from the psychological effects of falling out of the routines and habits that put students in an academic mindset for learning,” Harris noted.

Schools can help students recover more quickly if they build on skills that students have learned during this year, be it their experiences of helping at home or their virtual skills developed in remote classes, to improve the way they learn, Cohan said.

“Students during this time didn’t have time to submit everything or do everything in the traditional way that we might have expected before as teachers,” Cohan said, “but we’ve had to think of new ways to figure out if the kids mastered what they needed to master and they move on. So when we start to think about the re-establishment, what can we get rid of that was very traditional and not helpful? And what did we learn from the pandemic that we can keep?”

Summer newcomer program yields best practices

Dalton public schools, in northwest Georgia, developed a program for students who are newcomers to the United States, in response to an influx of unaccompanied immigrant children from Central America. The district typically gets 75 to 100 newcomer students each year.

“The first thing that is most important for someone who comes in with interrupted schooling is that we start building their rela-
tionships,” said Caroline Woodason, the director of school support for the 8,000-student school system. “That is the first and foremost foundation of our program, and I think that’s the same with COVID during the pandemic. You heard so much about students who had relatives passing away, who were feeling unsafe, and this year we’ve been so isolated. So we made it a priority to be back face-to-face as much as possible and rebuilding relationships.”

Just out of the first wave of the pandemic, the district was one of the few in Georgia to keep an in-person, districtwide summer program for newcomer students. For five weeks, secondary students in the program worked on recovering course credits, while students as young as preschool received enrichment designed to accelerate them academically and relieve their feelings of isolation.

To avoid contagion, the program had universal masking, symptoms checks, and cleaning regimens. The 300 students in the program were kept in groups of eight to 10 that saw only their teacher and other cohort members, but who were able to use playground equipment, receive visits from mobile zoo and museum programs, and do enrichment activities meant to help them bond with their cohort. At the secondary level, students’ cohorts were developed around the subjects they needed to focus on, such as algebra or U.S. government, to allow for more intensive tutoring.

The summer program both allowed the district to provide extra academic and emotional support for some of its most vulnerable students and to pilot best practices to use with all students through in-person cohorts and virtual remote platforms during the school year. There were no cases of COVID-19 or quarantines required during the summer program, Woodason said.

“You heard so much about students who had relatives passing away, who were feeling unsafe, and this year we’ve been so isolated. So we made it a priority to be back face-to-face as much as possible and rebuilding relationships.”

CAROLINE WOODASON
DIRECTOR OF SCHOOL SUPPORT,
DALTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS,
GEORGIA
How to Help Students Take a Mental-Health Break This Summer

By Angela Duckworth

What should I encourage students to do this summer for their mental health?

I’m not a clinical psychologist, but here’s something I can recommend from a piece I just wrote for Character Lab as a Tip of the Week:

What’s one thing you hope the young people in your life do this summer?

I recently asked a version of this question to the grandfather of one of my students.

Without hesitation, he leaned forward and said with conviction, “I’d say, get off those screens!”

I couldn’t agree more.

What will young people look back on this summer and remember? Will their highlight reel be an endless stretch of mornings, afternoons, and evenings in their bedroom, faces down, staring into their phones? For too many students, this has been a necessary reality.

My fondest hope for young people this summer is that they spend as many hours as possible screen-free, talking to people in three dimensions rather than two. The blue canopy sky above has much more to commend it than the blue-light glow of a phone.

Recent research shows a remarkably strong link between green space and mental health. Young people who grow up near more greenery—literally more vegetation in their immediate neighborhood—are less likely to suffer from depression, anxiety, and a range of other mental-health afflictions. This is true whether children are growing up in cities (think parks and street trees) or in rural communities. And the dose-response relationship between greenery and mental health holds even when controlling for socioeconomic status and other risk factors.

What’s so special about nature? Many things, probably. One is that natural beauty tends to grab our attention “modestly” as some cognitive scientists put it. The sun, moon, and stars call to us gently, inviting us to observe and reflect and sometimes filling us with awe. In contrast, social-media feeds, automatically advancing Netflix episodes, and pop-up ads are attention bullies—forcing us to effortfully resist them.

Don’t let the young people in your life spend this precious season glued to their devices. You love them too much.

Do plan a picnic in the park, a hike in the woods, or even a walk around the block. And give young people the freedom to explore on their own. “I think that I shall never see,” Joyce Kilmer wrote, “a poem lovely as a tree.”

Angela Duckworth is a behavioral-science expert offering advice to teachers based on scientific research.

How Students Want to Reimagine Education Next Year

By Larry Ferlazzo

With all the talk of “reimagining education,” how would students reimagine education next year?

Back in February, when “learning loss” was the “phrase of the day” in education circles, Neema Avashia and her students wrote Students Respond to Adults’ Fixation on ‘Learning Loss.’

They’re back today to take on a new buzz phrase, “reimagining education.”

“What Do We Do Next?”

Neema Avashia is an 8th grade civics teacher in the Boston public schools, where she has taught for the last 18 years. She was a 2013 Educator of the Year in the city of Boston. The illustrations have been published with the permission of the student artists and their parents:

I asked students to reimagine education. Here’s what they said...

The stakes were high for my last unit of this school year. Students would be coming to school in person five days a week for the first time since March 2020. A third of my students would be attending in person, while the other two-thirds continued to learn online. I would be tasked with “simulteaching,” which meant trying to be two teachers at once—one supporting in-person learning and one supporting remote learning, though those, in fact, are actually two entirely different jobs.

I knew that I needed to create a unit that first and foremost felt healing for the young people re-entering the building. A number of my students have been hit hard by the pandemic. They’ve lost family members. They’ve struggled with their mental health. My unit needed to support them emotionally and to help them reconnect with school, their teachers, and their peers. This also meant that the content of the unit needed to be highly relevant and engaging. I did not want the act of learning to feel...
like a power struggle; I wanted it to feel like something kids enjoyed doing. Finally, I needed to structure the unit in a way that allowed me to meet the needs of two different sets of students: those who were in person and those who were remote.

I decided to create a unit entitled “Reimagining Education.” The pandemic has shown all of us the ways in which our education system fails to meet the full range of needs of our students. The question for all of us has been: What do we do next?

I wanted my young people to have the opportunity to weigh in on this conversation.

The Structure and Content Of the Unit

The unit had three phases. Phase 1, Reflection, involved having students create their own educational autobiography, in which they reflected on high and low points in their education, transformative-learning experiences, and relationships (both positive and negative) that have shaped their schooling experience. Students also conducted empathy interviews with peers to better understand how school can be a very different place for different kinds of people.

Phase 2, Research, involved giving students time to investigate what works and doesn’t work about American education. Young people listened to podcast episodes from Code Switch and This American Life about school closures and segregation. They explored the websites of schools all over the country that are approaching education in innovative ways, like High Tech High, the MET School, The Roses from Concrete School, San Francisco International School, and Purdue Polytechnic. They listened to TED talks from thinkers like Chris Emdin, Bettina Love, and Jeff Duncan-Andrade talking about what schools aren’t doing well right now and what steps schools can take to shift their practice. And they heard from guest speakers—policy makers and district officials—talking about what needs to happen for education to be more equitable and more supportive of all students in our city and state.

Once this body of knowledge had been established, we moved into Phase 3, Design. During this phase, students were tasked with designing their own schools from scratch, using what they understood about their own experiences with school, as well as what we’d gathered from our research, to build a school that would work better for all young people. This design process involved creating every-thing from the school name to the mission, vision, and values to the daily schedule to the design of a classroom. Young people could work independently or in groups, but their ultimate goal was to build out a wholly different vision for education than the one they themselves have experienced.

So … What did students say?

On schedules

No student’s school design involved starting before 8:30 a.m., a full hour later than school currently begins. Some began their days as late as noon. Most students built in a transition period at the start of the day that gave young people time to eat breakfast and ease into the school day, instead of jumping right into class. Their schedules included time for recess, longer lunch periods (40 minutes instead of 25), and 10-15 minute breaks between classes. Some students sought to take fewer classes at a time but to have them for a longer amount of time in the day. Others wanted shorter classes, with time at the start or end of the day to review and work on what they’d learned. A clear pattern I noticed in the schedules was an effort to reduce the intense level of pressure and urgency that drives so much of in-person schooling at present.

On course offerings

Students are begging for classes that are more relevant to their lived experience. Overwhelmingly, kids designed schools in which
history and knowledge of self was central. Some included classes in Black and Latinx history. Others included ethnic-studies courses. One student designed a pair of classes called “Learn About the World” and “Learn About Yourself,” with equal time given to each of those topics. Multiple students included “life skills,” “adulting,” or “financial literacy” classes in their schedules, in which students would learn how to manage their money, do taxes, apply for jobs, and manage a household. No student said that learning literacy or math or science wasn’t important, but they wanted those subjects held in the balance with classes whose relevance to their own lives was patently clear.

On their ideal teacher
Consistently, students sought out teachers who spoke more than one language so they could communicate effectively with a range of families. They wanted teachers who were funny, kind, patient, and knowledgeable. They sought teachers who came from backgrounds similar to their own, who could relate to their lived experiences. They wanted teachers who had both the time, and the willingness, to listen.

On the perfect classroom
The classrooms young people designed were vibrant and cozy. There were beanbags and couches instead of desks. The walls were covered with posters affirming the identities of all young people. Rooms were filled with natural light, plants, and the occasional class pet. Technology in classrooms was up-to-date and of the highest quality (not a Chromebook to be found!).

On support
Students recognized clearly that mental health must be a priority in schools. In addition to guidance counselors, many students built support systems for students that included mentors and advisories. Others included academic supports like two teachers per class or after-school tutoring. And some students were insistent that schools have food pantries, clothing, and housing support on site for families. They wanted teachers who had both the time, and the willingness, to listen.

On grading
Most students advocated a move away from letter grades, which they felt discourage their own lives was patently clear.

On the one thing they would change if only one thing could change
On this question, there was not consensus. Some students wanted to get rid of standardized testing. Others wanted better food in the cafeteria. Still others felt like a shift in the schedule would have the biggest impact. But one answer struck me as both simple and profound. The student argued that the biggest change schools could make would be, “Honestly, to just listen to what the students need. Listening will help you better understand how they can have a better learning environment and also grow a bond between teacher and student.”

Reflections
What has struck me most as I look through these final projects is how little, in some ways, young people are asking us to change and yet how profoundly difficult it seems to be to get our school systems to change.

Young people want later start times. They want a more humane schedule in which they have opportunities to take a deep breath and to socialize with their peers. They want us to teach them content that fills them with meaning and purpose and that leaves them with a better understanding of who they are and the context in which they will live their lives. They want teachers who will listen to them, and be patient with them, and who share elements of their lived experience. They want classroom environments that are comfortable, rather than sterile. They want schools to be built at a scale that supports, rather than impedes, deep relationship-building. They want meaningful, actionable feedback, rather than demoralizing letters and numbers and scores

I thought, when I started this project, that students might completely explode the idea of schooling. If I’m honest, that’s often what I find myself thinking we need to do. Instead, what my young people are saying they want from us is school ... but a more supportive, humane, and relevant version of it. They aren’t asking for anything more than precisely what they deserve and what we should have been giving them all along. Which begs the question: Why do we continue to be unable to do it?

Thanks to Neema and to her students for their contributions!

Larry Ferlazzo is an English and social studies teacher at Luther Burbank High School in Sacramento, California.
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