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Student Well-Being

EDITOR'S NOTE

A supportive school environment can promote student well-being and help students to thrive both inside and outside of the classroom. This Spotlight will help you uncover how sports coaches can connect their athletes to mental health supports; explore how one school district is addressing the rising student suicide rate; learn what supports districts can provide to help students traverse middle school; and more.

OPINION

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Sports Coaches Want More Training on How To Address Young Athletes' Mental Health

By Arianna Prothero

As the youth mental health crisis deepens, a majority of youth sports coaches say they want more training on how to support their athletes' mental health. That's according to a survey by the Aspen Institute, Ohio State University, philanthropic organization the Susan Crown Exchange, and Nike.

The survey found that only 18 percent of coaches say they feel confident that they know how to connect their athletes to mental health supports, and just 19 percent said they are confident they can identify off-field stressors for athletes. The survey includes coaches of competitive and community-based teams in addition to those who work in K-12 schools.

"Mental health is clearly a need around the country right now. There is a mental health crisis particularly for kids, and it's something that coaches aren't prepared for, but they want to be better prepared for," said Jon Solomon, the editorial director for the Aspen Institute Sports and Society Program.

—Ting Shen/The Dallas Morning News via AP

Schools in the United States earned a D-minus grade in 2022 in an international ranking from the Physical Activity Alliance for how well they facilitate access to physical activity for students. Research shows that physical activity, such as participation in sports, improves mental health.

Educator coaches more confident in how they can help

The survey broke out responses for school coaches by those who are educators and those who are community members. Educator coaches are a bit more confident that they know how to connect athletes with mental health services.

Nearly a quarter of educator coaches strongly agreed that they are confident they can link athletes to mental health resources, compared with 16 percent of noneducator coaches. Twenty-nine percent of coaches who are also educators said they were highly confident they can identify mental health concerns among athletes, compared with 23 percent of their coaching peers who are not educators.

Coaches who are educators also were more likely to have participated in training around mental health than coaches who are not educators—71 percent compared with 54 percent. Sixty-eight percent of educator coaches said they had received training on "suicide protocols" while 44 percent of noneducator coaches responded similarly.

Training on social-emotional learning followed the same trend: 69 percent of coaches who are educators had received training in SEL, compared with 49 percent of noneducator coaches.

About half of school-based coaches work in their schools as educators, while half come from other professions and may be a parent of an athlete or a volunteer—a shift from previous generations, according to the report, when most coaches also worked as full-time educators in their schools.

Sixty-seven percent of coaches overall said they want additional training on mental health.

Coaches can be early-warning system for mental health problems

Coaches—whether for a school, a community-based recreational sport, or a competitive team—can play an important role in an early-warning system for spotting kids and teenagers who may be struggling, said Solomon.

"That doesn't mean that coaches now should become trained psychologists," he said. "But if you think about it, coaches are on the ground with so many of these players in ways that teachers aren't. Teachers have so many students, so they can't potentially build the relationships that a coach could do on a team of 15 to 20 kids who you see every day at school at practices."

That training could include information on what clues or red flags to look for in youth, knowing what questions to ask players, or how to create a safe space for students to open up about what might be bothering them, said Solomon.

The survey included 10,000 school-based coaches, community-based coaches, and coaches for travel and competitive teams from every state.

Schools in the U.S. earn D-minus For physical activity

The findings appear in the Aspen Institute's annual State of Play report, which aggregates data, reports, and studies from a broad swath of organizations to capture a comprehensive

picture of youth sports and physical activity. Among the other findings highlighted in this year's report:

- U.S. schools earned a D-minus grade in 2022 in an international ranking from the Physical Activity Alliance for how well they facilitate access to physical activity for students. That D grade means only 20 percent to 39 percent of schools provide daily physical education or recess, as well as regular access to facilities for physical activity and equipment and an "everyone plays" approach to physical activity.

- The number of high school students participating in unified sports—in which people with and without intellectual disabilities play on the same team—grew substantially from the 2018-19 school year to the 2020-21 school year, from 5,500 athletes in three sports in 10 states to 48,000 athletes in 15 sports in 20 states.

- The number of high school students participating in adapted sports—which allow for modifications for people with disabilities—declined by 51 percent over the three years leading up to the 2021-22 school year.

- Tennis and pickleball gained popularity among children and teens over the pandemic. Tennis grew by 679,000 kids between 2019 and 2021, according to data from the Sports & Fitness Industry Association. Pickleball participation—a sport that is described as a blend of tennis, ping pong, and badminton—grew by 462,000 kids between 2019 and 2021.

- Participation in tackle football declined by 29 percent from 2016 to 2021, while flag football increased by 15 percent, changes likely fueled by growing concerns about concussions in contact sports. ■

—Kasia Bogdanska for Education Week

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Students Train to Spot Peers With Mental Health Struggles And Guide Them to Help

By Catherine Gewertz

The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified the mental health struggles that were already proliferating among young people. Many schools are trying to expand their rosters of adult specialists who can provide support. But some are tapping an additional source, too: the students themselves.

School districts are training teenagers to spot early signs of mental health problems in their peers and connect them with adults who can help.

The practice isn't new: It has its roots in longstanding work to prevent suicide and school shootings and foster emotional and physical safety at school. But training young people to help spot trouble, in close partnership with adults, is being embraced anew as the pandemic ladles unprecedented demands onto school psychologists, social workers, and counselors.

Sofia Mendoza is one of the students who's trained to play this role for her classmates. She does her work as part of a "Hope Squad" run by her school, Hilliard Davidson High, outside Columbus, Ohio. Sofia said it's rewarding to serve as such an important resource for her peers.

"Some students won't get help because they're just afraid to ask for it," said Sofia, a senior at Davidson. "But if a peer knows, and if their struggle is seen and heard, then they're able to say, OK, yes, I do need the help. And we can get them to go to an adult themselves."

Students as eyes and ears On the ground

In the Hilliard City district, dozens of students are trained to serve on Hope Squads in each building that serves students in 6th through 12th grades. They watch for signs like social isolation or feelings of hopelessness, and persuade those students to get help from trusted adults in the school. They also learn to monitor their own emotions and take care of themselves, seeking support from adults when they need it. Each squad gets guidance from a team of trained adults, said Mike Abraham, the district's director of student well-being.

The district began the Hope Squad work four years ago, along with an array of other social and emotional support programs, when its leaders saw a spike in suicides, depression, and anxiety, Abraham said. The squads have provided important support during the pandemic.

Hilliard refers far more students to a nearby children's hospital for psychiatric support than other nearby districts of its size, a statistic Abraham cites with pride. "It means they're getting the help they need," he said.

Nationally, one of the best-known programs that trains people to spot mental health struggles, Mental Health First Aid USA, has seen a spike in demand for its programs during the pandemic. Millions of adults—from firefighters and hospital staff to former first lady Michelle Obama—have taken its courses, which were designed 20 years ago by Australian researchers and adapted in the United States by the National Council on Mental Wellbeing.

More than 550,000 K-12 staff members have taken its 6- to 8-hour courses, which focus on noticing signs of mental illness or substance abuse in other adults or in young people, and more than 125,000 teenagers have taken the "teen" training, said Tramaine EL-Amin, who leads MHFA USA's strategic initiatives.

Trainees learn to use what's known as the "ALGEE" protocol—Assess for risk of suicide or harm, Listen nonjudgmentally, Give reassurance and information, Encourage professional help, and Encourage self-help and other support strategies.

Research on these early-spotter programs generally focuses on how the training affects those who take it. Studies find that the programs can improve trainees' ability to recognize mental illness and build their confidence in helping those who need support. In a study set for publication this year, Johns Hopkins University researchers found that more than two-thirds of the students who take the MHFA teen training report that they use the skills to manage their own stress and to help peers who are in need, EL-Amin said.

Asking students to notice the signs: an undue burden?

Research is thinner on how much the trainees' intervention helps those in distress. One 2018 analysis, conducted by researchers who collaborate with the Australian founders of Mental Health First Aid, found a "small

improvement" in the amount of help provided to those with a mental health problem. A 2018 study on the Hope Squad program found that more than one-quarter of students who sought help from their counselors for suicidal feelings had been referred by Hope Squad members.

Some administrators express doubt about the wisdom of involving students in identifying young people with mental health struggles. The Paterson, N.J., schools have been stepping up their early-warning-signs training of adults in the last few years: More than 600 staff members have been trained, said Cheryl Coy, the district's assistant superintendent for special education and services. But she wouldn't extend the training to students just yet.

"I think it's too much of an additional layer to add on," she said. "Many students don't realize the level of stress they're under right now. It's like a soda bottle: Shake it up, and when you take the cap off, it explodes."

Suzanna Davis, the vice president of operations and programs at Grant Us Hope, which partners with Hope Squad to provide training to 175 schools in Ohio and Indiana, said she had the same hesitation when she was a high school principal and was considering adopting the program.

"I asked students, is this too much to take on?" she said. "But I realized that they're having these conversations with their peers on a daily basis. In the absence of formal training, they very much carry the weight on their shoulders that they have to fix their friends' problems. If we're not engaging them and giving them the right tools and training to engage in those conversations, we're missing the boat."

Strong adult support: key To program success

Experts, and district leaders who have opted to train teenagers, caution that key conditions must be in place to ensure the programs provide appropriate support for everyone involved.

Schools must make sure there are enough trained adults to provide a skilled, supportive team for students to lean on. Schools that wish to use MHFA's training for teenagers must commit to training 10 percent of their adult staff, EL-Amin said. To do Hope Squad training, schools must partner with a mental health provider in their community, Davis said.

Staffing shortages currently plaguing schools during the pandemic can complicate that picture. The ratios of mental-health specialists to students were already insufficient before the pandemic. On average, there is only one school psychologist for every 1,200 students, far from the 1-to-500 ratio recommended by the National Association of School Psychologists. There are currently 427 school counselors for every student, but the American School Counselor Association recommends one per every 250 children.

Ratios like those, while many mental-health vacancies in schools are also going unfilled, don't bode well. They suggest that schools risk relying on insufficiently trained adults to provide support for children in distress and to supervise teenage student mental-health trainees, said Kelly Vaillancourt, the NASP's director of policy and advocacy.

The community mental health groups that partner with districts are strained past capacity too, noted Kelly Davis, the associate vice president of peer and youth advocacy for Mental Health America. So while there's been a big upsurge in the need for services, and in interest in youth-training programs, there is a danger that children who are struggling "could be referred to nothing," she said. Policymakers must redouble efforts to staff schools and feed the pipeline of trainees for mental health professions, she said.

Abraham, from the Hilliard district, urged districts to pair teen training with the purchase of an after-hours notification system. At night or on weekends, if his teenage spotters need to report a friend in serious trouble, or frightening comments from a peer on social media, they know to call the Safe School Helpline, which connects them with appointed employees in their district who can take swift action.

In Collier County, Fla., the district operates a suite of interlocking programs designed to support students emotionally. Some are exclusively carried out by adults, who form communication webs about students' attendance and well-being. In others, the students lead, with teams of adults backing them up.

One program trains elementary students to be "friendship ambassadors" who check specially painted "buddy benches" in their playgrounds for kids who seem to need a companion. Another taps middle school students to ensure that no one's eating alone in the cafeteria. These students aren't trained to spot early signs of mental illness, but their work aims to build connections that can help when a student is in distress.

"Sometimes we forget how our students can help" complete the picture of support at their own schools, said Kamela Patton, Collier County's superintendent of schools. ■

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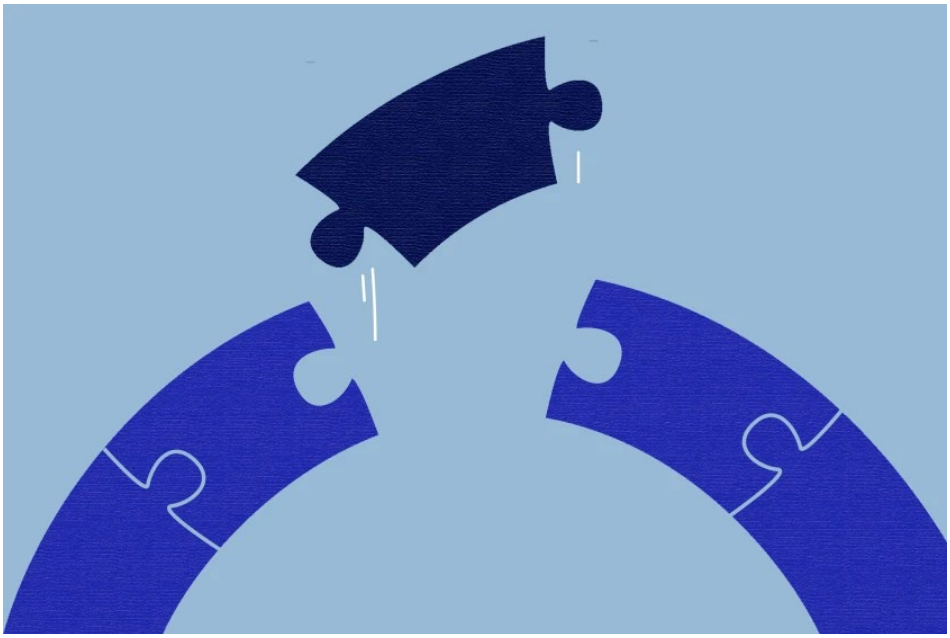
After a Rash of Student Suicides, This School District Stepped Up

By Denisa R. Superville



—Nuthawut Somsuk/iStock/Getty

A spate of student deaths by suicide in 2019 sent the Cherry Creek, Colo., school community into a deep despair.

"I thought we might all lose our minds at the time," said Tony Poole, the Cherry Creek district's assistant superintendent of special populations. "The feeling of hopelessness, and fear, and rage that you are not able to save these kids really pushed us to start thinking outside of the box."

After watching in dismay as the number of beds at in-patient treatment or alternative education programs for adolescents dwindled — from 77 in the community to 16 viable options in the span of 11 years— Poole made a pitch to state education officials for help. The community needed to expand access to treatment for students struggling with serious mental health challenges, ranging from anxiety and severe depression to suicidal ideation. The state officials told him there was little they could do.

"They said, 'You know, honestly, the only way you are going to get day-treatment spots is if you built your own,' " Poole recalled. "I think it was kind of an off-hand comment. But I stepped back, and I thought, 'OK, if that's what it's going to take, then we'll do it.'"

This summer, the nearly 55,000-student Cherry Creek district, in the Denver suburbs, broke ground on a $15 million mental health day-treatment center, in partnership with two local medical experts, Children's Hospital Colorado and the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Colorado School of Medicine Anschutz Medical Campus.

When the program opens for students in fall 2023, it's expected to provide the kind of critical mental health care for students that's so hard to come by, even as the nation faces a youth mental health emergency.

Rates of sadness and hopelessness among adolescents were climbing before the pandemic. But the isolation from social distancing and disrupted schooling and routines took a sledgehammer to students' mental and emotional well-being. Forty-four percent of students said they felt sad or hopeless in 2021, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and nearly 40 percent said their mental health suffered during the pandemic. In December 2021, U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek H. Murthy warned of a mental health crisis among youth.

Dr. K. Ron-Li Liaw, Mental Health-in-Chief at Children's Hospital Colorado, one of Cherry Creek's partners on the day-treatment center, said the hospital system has seen a sharp surge in emergency room visits from parents seeking help for their children. The hospital system reported that it had also seen an 88 percent increase in emergency room visits for behavioral health this year compared to the first half of 2019.

"It's on the mind of every superintendent, every principal, every teacher—it's the mental health concerns of the kids in their classrooms," Dr. Liaw said. "This is sort of a first step for us."

A 'unique' response to a crisis

Cherry Creek officials are hoping the mental health day-treatment center will fill a void for children who need immediate help and whose parents have had to resort to stopgap emergency room assistance or whose treatments have languished because insurance coverage has run out or does not cover such care.

While the district is not seeing a spike on its suicide risk assessments, which it has administered for years, students are scoring higher in areas that require referrals for more intense and immediate treatment, such as self-harm and suicidal ideation, district officials said. And the five publicly reported student suicides in 2019 are still deeply painful losses.

"When your child needs this kind of help, and you go on a waiting list because your insurance can't find you a placement, or the school district can't find you a placement, it's terrifying," Poole said. "A lot of times, the emergency rooms can't give them the care either, and so they just get released, and they get sent back to school, where teachers, and school psychologists, and school social workers have to try to keep them safe... The human toll is stunning on everyone involved. And then, God forbid, we lose a kid."

The day-treatment program, which will be located in a two-story facility, will be divided into three wings to target three different levels of care: severe, moderate, and transition.

Each child will have an individualized treatment plan, and students will be divided into two groups, from 4th grade through 8th

grade and 8th through 12th. (Eighth grade will be split into two groups because maturity varies so widely, Poole said.)

At the most severe level, which is closest to a partial hospitalization program, students will spend most of their time getting clinical help, in group and individual therapy, with the goal of reducing the emotional problems with which they are struggling, said Dr. Bruno Anthony, a professor of child psychiatry at the University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus. The amount of schooling will be limited for students at the severe level and be based on what they can handle.

At the moderate level, students will continue to have clinical interventions, while their schooling will increase to about half their time, Dr. Anthony said.

When doctors determine that students are ready to return to regular classes, they'll move to a "transition wing," which "starts to look a little bit more like regular school," Poole said.

"There's a straight hallway, there's lockers, there's a square classroom," he said. "They'll have their regular classes—social studies, language arts, math, etcetera. That transitional wing will feel a lot more like regular school, and the entire focus here will be on, 'hey, we are getting ready to go back to school.'"

At this level, students may even spend a day in their typical classrooms, outside of the center, Dr. Anthony said.

"That kind of tiered program is really unique, and isn't, I don't think, really anywhere else in the country," he said.

The transition level will be an important component of the program because educators frequently complain that students often return to school before they're ready and schools are ill-equipped to help them ease back into a classroom setting.

"That's the design that these folks came up with: We talked about what's wrong with current day-treatment programs, and how we could we do it better, " Poole said. "We think that's pretty unique as well."

While treatment plans are individualized, students will attend five a days a week, with the length of the day hewing closely to a normal school day, from around 8:30 a.m. to 3 p.m., Dr. Anthony said. Students will also be able to get care for eating disorders and substance abuse.

A program for a child in the severe wing may look something like this: A family will check in with the student around 8:30 a.m., give an update, and discuss any concerns they have with staff. Students will then be divided by age, and they'll work on identifying triggers to their mental health challenge, including depression or anxiety.

> "It's on the mind of every superintendent, every principal, every teacher—it's the mental health concerns of the kids in their classrooms."
>
> **DR. K. RON-LI LIAW**
> Mental Health-in-Chief,
> Children's Hospital Colorado

The center will use a lot of exposure therapy and help students develop tools to deal with triggers. Students may have individual therapy, group therapy, as well as family therapy, Dr. Anthony said. He is hoping to integrate music and art therapy into the program as well.

"Often other programs like this that are in the community are more like babysitting for the students, and they just don't do much in terms of actual treatment," Dr. Anthony said. "But here, by bringing together these different partners we are able to say, 'We know this has been well worked out. We have data behind it which shows it works.' I think that's what's really attractive to the school system to say let's really put something in place, something that really has been shown to work."

Another big difference from traditional day-treatment programs is the family's involvement in students' treatment. That's not always possible when treatment centers are far away from home. But it will be easier for a parent to participate in their child's treatment and spend more time understanding the program if it's nearby, in the student's home district, Dr. Anthony said.

"We are really very serious about having family involvement with this program as well. We realize that the progress works because things are worked out in the home setting as well as schools," he said. "We really want to have a very significant family therapy involvement at all levels."

At full capacity, the center is expected to provide treatment to about 60 students at a time. The clinical portion (the psychologists, psychiatrists, therapists) will be staffed by Children's Hospital and the University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus, while the Cherry Creek district will provide the school staff and design the educational component. The district and the medical providers will take into account input from family and youth advisory teams as they continue to hammer out details on the final program.

A clinical researcher will also track outcomes for different populations of students, Dr. Liaw said.

From a vague idea to a plan

When Poole said the district would build its own day-treatment program, he had no idea what would come next.

He floated the idea of putting the center on the district's 2020 bond election and letting voters decide. With a lot of projects vying for attention, Poole wasn't even sure the center would make it on the final bond measure, or pass. But it passed with one of the highest rates in the district's history, he said.

One of the first things Cherry Creek administrators did was to assemble a group of about two dozen district mental health professionals who had backgrounds in day-treatment or residential care settings and assigned them two big tasks. The first was to find another school district that's building or had built a mental health day-treatment center for its students; the second was to consider what a perfect program would look like, including the building's design and medical and educational components.

On the first question, they didn't find examples of districts doing what Cherry Creek was proposing. On the second question, the staff said they'd build a place with a warm, welcoming, and inviting interior that did not feel institutional; one where staff would work with students based on the severity of their conditions; and a place that would allow students to step down slowly and transition back to their regular home schools—an often missing piece in many day-treatment programs.

The responses influenced the color-scheme the district chose and other design elements, such as including rough textures that students

> That's the design that these folks came up with: We talked about what's wrong with current day-treatment programs, and how we could we do it better."
>
> **TONY POOLE**
> Assistant Superintendent
> Of Special Populations,
> Cherry Creek, CO

can run their palms over to help them calm down. There's also an outdoor climbing wall, exercise areas, and no hard corners that students could use to harm themselves.

But there were still more questions. Among them: how to find the right medical partner and how that relationship would work given that school districts, hospitals, and psychiatry departments don't have long histories of working together.

"I think we also had questions about how would we bill insurance," said Superintendent Christopher Smith, who was chief of staff to then-Superintendent Scott Siegfried when the day-treatment center was proposed. "What would the intake process look like? That's why we knew we needed to get with a group that was experienced [in] this. We also knew what we were doing was broken, so we had to find a different out-of-the box way to help."

They're still working through some of those questions. The Cherry Creek Schools Foundation, for example, will help cover the treatment costs for students who do not have insurance so that no student would be denied care based on their ability to pay, district officials said.

Dr. Liaw and Dr. Anthony said they jumped at the opportunity when they saw Cherry Creek's request for proposals because they, too, have seen adolescent mental health needs skyrocket while community options for treatment plummet. The hospital and the university already have several physical and mental health partnerships with local school districts, including with the Aurora and Durango school systems.

"Our heart is in prevention and early intervention," Dr. Liaw said. "It would be a dream for all of us to not have children have to go to the emergency department unless there was a true emergency for their mental-health condition and challenges. We feel very strongly that the right place for support and care is where kids live, and learn, and connect, and play, and where families can easily access services and expertise in the right time. "

"Families trust school personnel for a whole host of other issues that are important to their families," she continued. "We want to be there, too."

Though the groups are only about two months into the process, there's a lot to sort out: like how to comply with federal privacy laws, such as the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), which protects patients' medical information, and the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), which safeguards students' education records.

Dr. Liaw said those are critical aspects to get right because they'll allow schools and the medical professionals to get students into care as soon as possible.

Bold expectations meet harsh realities

Poole and other Cherry Creek officials are painfully aware that when the mental health day-treatment center is up and running it will not meet the needs of every child who requires help.

"That will hurt," Poole said. "Acuity has to be the number one decision-maker. That will drive what we do. That and fit—fit for the program."

If this program works, it could be the first of many such treatment centers the district will build.

"This isn't going to solve the mental health crisis," Poole said. "It won't solve the mental health crisis in Cherry Creek. It won't solve the mental health crisis in Colorado. It can be a start. It can be a model for other school districts in Colorado. It can be a model for other schools around the nation if it works—we hope it does."

The district has ramped up investments in mental health and social-emotional learning supports for students in recent years.

It has about 180 school psychologists, social workers, and staff providing mental health services to schools, and this year it added 12 full-time staff to work with schools at a cost of $1 million. It also recently hired a social-emotional learning coordinator.

The district is also using a grant from the state education department to add counselors in grades 1 through 5, according to Steven Nederveld, Cherry Creek's mental health director. (They're available in high and middle schools.)

Cherry Creek is also expanding partnerships with other health providers, with the goal of ensuring there's a full-time or part-time school-based therapist in each of its 67 schools, he said.

It's also contracted with Hazel Health, a San Francisco-based telehealth program, to offer free teletherapy to students in 6th through 12th grades, beginning in December. About 30 percent of the clinicians with Hazel are bilingual and about half identify as people of color. That's important in a district where students of color make up about half of the enrollment. Students will be able to see a therapist within 24 hours of contacting the company, Nederveld said.

"That's just another way we are trying to bring connections to partners to ensure that students have more access to mental health services when needed," he said. "The lack of access is definitely a big concern. ... So a 24-hour turnaround time when we refer students is something that we think is going to be critical, especially when a lot of our students are struggling with something that needs pretty immediate attention."

The doctors are also clear that while they're optimistic about the success of the day-treatment program, it will take a lot more to reach all those who are struggling.

"I think we all feel pretty strongly that as soon as we open the program, within a short period of time, the program will likely be full," Dr. Liaw said.

Smith, the Cherry Creek superintendent, said addressing the mental health crisis requires an all-hands-on-deck approach, but K-12 has a critical role to play.

"I don't think any of us can do anything alone," Smith said. "I have 54,000 kids that show up every single day, and I am responsible for every single one of them. I absolutely believe that it's part of our role, 100 percent."

But I don't think it's our sole responsibility to meet every single one of their needs," he continued. "That's a community effort." ■

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Middle School Is Tough for Kids. Here's What Districts Can Do to Help

By Sarah Schwartz

The critical middle school years can be a tough time for kids—and the pandemic magnified some of those challenges. A new research brief aims to give districts strategies for helping students through.

The report from Chiefs for Change, a bipartisan network of state and district leaders, outlines the unique academic and social-emotional support that middle school students need, and how schools can set up systems to provide it.

Research has shown that academic achievement in middle school can predict later success, and that poor attendance and behavioral issues in these years can be early signals that students may struggle in high school.

Intervening in middle school is especially important now, said Maria Vazquez, the superintendent of Orange County Public Schools in Orlando, Fla., and a member of Chiefs for Change.

During this period, students are figuring out their identities and, ideally, setting themselves up academically for the more-challenging work of high school. "That's difficult enough," Vazquez said. "And then you throw in all these other factors related to the pandemic? That's the perfect storm."

In Orange County, students dealt with the stressors that kids across the country felt during the first few years of the pandemic—the difficulties of remote learning, caring for younger siblings, parents losing jobs, and fear about how getting sick might affect their families, Vazquez said.

Districts shouldn't assume that having returned to school buildings erases the effects of these challenges. Last year, when kids were back in classrooms, Orange County surveyed students about their sense of belonging in school. In middle school, less than half of students said they felt that sense of belonging—a drop from the year before.

"We said, OK, this can't just be the pandemic," Vazquez said. The district has since built on its previous efforts to engage middle schoolers socially and academically.

Here are a few of the strategies recommended by the Chiefs for Change report.

—E+/Getty

Intentionally set students up for high school academic success

The report recommends aligning middle school curricula with high school readiness standards, and building partnerships between campuses to help identify students who might need extra support during the transition.

In Orange County, the district has worked to both fill in any gaps that students might have when they get to middle school, and to give them a head start on high school courses, Vazquez said. One way it does that is through tutoring: Middle schools offer tutoring programs in reading and math, and access to high school courses like Algebra, geometry, languages, and advanced science courses.

Give staff the tools for relationship-building, and make sure teachers know about extra resources

Student-teacher relationships are important at all grade levels, but especially in middle school, the brief notes. Research has shown that young adolescents can be intimidated by the middle school experience and have a deep desire to feel like they belong within a school community.

One way to address this is to create interdisciplinary teacher teams that all work with the same students and plan together. The report also emphasizes the importance of guidance programs.

Orange County had all of the right staff in the building, Vazquez said: social workers, guidance counselors, and psychologists. But they still weren't seeing students access these services when they needed support.

This year, they're involving teachers in that process—not to do the work of counselors, but to provide that key referral step.

"Our goal is to have 80 percent of all of our staff trained on mental health first aid, so that they can understand the signs of when a child is in distress, when a child needs help," she said.

Create opportunities for parent involvement in a new landscape

The transition to a bigger building and a more complex schedule isn't only intimidating for kids.

"Middle schools tend to be larger and more complex than elementary schools, making it more difficult for parents and caregivers to figure out where or how to become involved," the brief reads.

Chiefs for Change recommends a few options that can help orient parents to a new, bigger school and the benchmarks that their kids will need to meet. They can sponsor events like workshops on graduation requirements, or hire dedicated staff who are assigned to check in with families periodically. ■



Finding One's Anthem in Fine Arts Education

Do you know that voice inside your head? The one that helps you make decisions, guides you to the best choices and ultimately leads you through life? Sometimes, it's best to completely ignore that voice and let someone else make the decisions for you.

Chan'nel Howard was certain she was going to work for the Social Security Office after college, but when a mentor set up a blind interview for her with a fine arts director of a school district, her life's anthem was written for her. Now, she leads the Fine Arts department at Baltimore City Public Schools (BCPS) and is advocating for the power of creative expression to support students' social-emotional learning.

Developing Life Skills Through Music Education

"I've always loved music. I can't think of a time where I didn't think about music," says Howard.

As a child, Howard would direct the Sunday choir that played on her radio, then go outside and direct the neighborhood kids in a choreographed dance. She recalls having various anthems for the different phases of her life, from "Scrubs" by TLC when she was with her friends to Mary J. Blige's "My Life Is Just Fine" when she got married.

It was when Howard attended an open house at Baltimore's Western High School (WHS), one of only two all-girls public institutions in the country, that she had an epiphany of what music truly meant to her.

Howard recalls, “On the visit, they talked about the school, had some ladies singing, a person playing the piano and I thought that was cool, but the thing that grabbed me was when the marching band came out. It was a marching band, and it was all girls. Girls playing tuba, girls playing baritone horn, girls playing drums. You could have bought me for half a grain of rice and two lentils. That would have been it. When I saw them, I knew this is where I had to go. I wanted to come to this school and do that thing, and that's what I did. I went to WHS, and I think that was it for me.”

Being raised by a strict grandmother, Howard was no stranger to accountability, but at WHS, she learned a different level of responsibility to her peers in band. She had to show up every day and be fully present in order to work together.

“Any collaborative skills I have as an adult, I owe to the process of learning how to talk to people to figure out how music sounds to one another and how to transpose the various instruments’ sounds into one piece of music,” explains Howard. “But at the time, I had no idea what I would be doing in my life and didn't know how the skills that I was getting as a musician would play out.”

More Than Just a Fine Arts Camp

Currently, BCPS struggles to implement a systemic and sequential approach to fine arts education. In one part of the city, one can find a thriving art community in the schools, while in another part of the city, there is barely a full-time art teacher on the clock. Elementary students are supposed to have a broad exposure to all of the arts, and middle and high school students are to have the opportunity to choose a specialty and build upon their skills.

This is not the reality in BCPS.

Howard is working to change that by leveraging every possible existing structure as well as building new ones. Using the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds that had been provided to supplement learning loss, Howard spearheaded a six-week summer camp that merged the power of the fine arts with the necessity of social-emotional development.

More than 100 K–8 students were immersed in fine arts for seven hours each day, taking 11 fine arts classes over three-week rotations.

“Fine arts is the vehicle that we used during the summer to help do everything,” says Howard. “Not a lot of things. It was everything. If we felt like kids needed to have the opportunity to emote a little more, we did more in-depth teaching in an art form. If we felt like kids needed to be able to develop the words and maybe be a little bit more empathetic, we pushed that through the theater curriculum.”

What Howard witnessed was the necessity of empowering kids’ own voices. She explains, “Many altercations between students took place on the playground or during down time, not in their classes. Students just didn’t know how to use their words to solve their problems.”

The opportunities Howard provided to use the fine arts to help students develop socially and emotionally only validated Howard’s drive to push for equitable fine arts opportunities for her students.

“They deserve it, and it's critical,” she explains. “The fine arts are critical to every part of their development; not just their cognitive development, but for the sake of them being humans. They need that. We need to provide opportunities to teach kids to communicate better with one another, and empirical research is starting to show that students who have more immersion in art opportunities do better on standardized tests!”

A Focus on Musical Expression

Communication is a key component to social-emotional growth, but when the pandemic forced students and teachers apart, Howard was left asking, “How can we reimagine art education for visual arts, for music, for dance, for theater? How are we going to do that?”

In a serendipitous moment, music educator Rod Hamilton sent an email to Howard asking about a program called Soundtrap just seconds after she herself was researching it. Hamilton had explained his success using the program and asked to purchase more seats–a request that Howard excitedly granted with one condition: Hamilton would help write the curriculum. From then, BCPS went from 500 to more than 6,000 seats.

Soundtrap provided a way for students to work together to produce music when displaced by the pandemic.

It was the thing that we needed in that moment to where I didn't know where it was going to grow, or how fast, or whether or not it was going to catch on," says Howard. "To now, where teachers are asking for it. We started Soundtrap in high school, then we did it for middle school, and now we've pushed it into elementary. Soundtrap brings in the elements of composition and the basics of music composition and music theory. It provides an engaging way to bring this content into elementary schools."

BCPS uses Soundtrap for music, theater, dance, technical theater and soundboard development, and they are exploring ways to bring Soundtrap into the other content areas, including the core classes. The curriculum that Hamilton helps write keeps up with current trends, especially music, in order to better connect with students. According to Howard, students need to be immersed in relevant and challenging curriculum so that they have an understanding of how to apply the key knowledge and skills.

"My goal is, by the time kids get to middle school and high school, they are facilitating their own learning. They're having a conversation about what they're being taught, and the only way they can do that is by having that full expanse of exposure in terms of opportunities that start in elementary school through middle school and into high school," says Howard.

An Anthem, a Calling, and a Destiny

"Fine arts allows students to explore the most intimate parts of themselves, and in terms of music and art, it's very personal. They're very, very vulnerable spaces for kids because they are the most honest that you'll ever see them–when they are creating," says Howard.

From Fine Arts Camp to Soundtrap, Howard has found her own life's anthem in her students' creations.

Her passion is contagious, and her fierce love for fine arts education is simply a means to demonstrate the love for her students because she knows the success she herself has experienced when given a fine arts education. She knows that the students of BCPS deserve the same.

"Baltimore City Public Schools have some of the most creative, some of the most imaginative, most talented kids and teachers that you'll ever have the opportunity to meet," says Howard. "I feel like the call that is on my life is a divine one, and so being able to serve these teachers, students and their families in that way always brings me to tears."

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Does SEL Make Students Ready for Work? We Asked Educators

By Lauraine Langreo

Educators overwhelmingly say that teaching social-emotional skills in the classroom is helpful for students' career readiness.

Eighty-four percent of teachers, principals, and district leaders said they believe the social-emotional learning conducted in their schools has a "positive" impact on students' "soft skills," according to an EdWeek Research Center survey of 824 educators conducted from Sept. 28 to Oct. 1.

The survey results suggest that even though SEL has run into political pushback in some communities, educators still believe that it's important to teach students how to control their emotions, empathize with others, set goals, persist through challenges, and think creatively.

"Whenever we speak to what SEL is, and as we define SEL for our teachers, we are explaining that SEL skills are essential to success in school, work, and in life," said Juany Valdespino-Gaytán, the executive director of engagement services for the Dallas Independent school district. "And we explain that when employers are looking for potential employees, they are looking for these skills that they know that they need in order to be successful when working with others."

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> **JUANY VALDESPINO-GAYTAN**
> Executive Director of Engagement Services, Dallas Independent School District

Some business leaders say that these "soft skills," or interpersonal attributes, are arguably more important than "hard skills," or job-specific knowledge.

"It's the soft skills, like thinking critically or problem-solving analytical skills, the ability to work in teams, communication—those are all the top skills that employers say that they most value and need in their workers," said Maud Abeel, associate director for the nonprofit Jobs For The Future.

In Dallas ISD, where SEL has been an intentional classroom practice since 2016, Valdespino-Gaytán said teachers have recognized that teaching SEL skills has been really helpful, not only because it makes student interactions better, but also because they've seen improvement in students' academic achievement.

Still, not all educators are on board. Fourteen percent said teaching SEL in the classroom has a "neutral" impact on students' soft skills and 2 percent said it has a "negative" impact, according to the EdWeek Research Center survey. About a dozen of 270-plus comments in the open-ended response section of the survey were also critical of teaching social emotional learning skills in the classroom.

"SEL is a waste," said a high school history and social studies teacher in Arizona in the open-ended response section of the survey. "We continue to teach students to be sensitive and soft. Young people no longer know how to overcome obstacles. They cry about it, ask someone else for help, or act out irrationally.

"If we, as educators, stopped holding these kids' hands, stopped allowing them to retake, make up, and pass just for showing up, maybe we would see a more hardworking, self-reliant generation," the respondent continued. "Failure is failure, learn to recover."

For Abeel, it's surprising to hear that educators would hold that view on SEL. Both she and Valdespino-Gaytán reiterate that SEL skills are vital.

"It's imperative to help people understand that we're not talking about teaching a separate set of 'woke' skills," Abeel said. "We're really talking about foundational inter- and intrapersonal skills that are essential to human development." ■

OPINION

Published March 27, 2022

Mental Health Crises Are Bombarding Our Schools. Here's What We Can Do

By Daniel Coles, Tala Manassah & Cassie Schwerner

—Peter DeWitt via Canva

Entering year three of the COVID-19 pandemic, we are seeing a cascade of crises in our schools. Students and educators are feeling overwhelmed, anxious, despondent—and, too often, isolated and unheard. The crisis is most acute in hard-hit communities of color.

The American Academy of Pediatrics has declared the state of children's mental health to be a "national emergency." In addition to social isolation, it notes that more than 140,000 children—1 in 500—have lost a caregiver, with youth of color disproportionately impacted. Suspected suicide attempts by adolescents have jumped 31 percent, the CDC reports.

Teachers tell us that their students are behaving in ways they've never seen before. Two out of 3 educators say students are "misbehaving" more than they did in 2019. After all the blows that families have sustained, this is a signal that children need help. We must act now and we must act boldly to mitigate the negative impact of the devastation or risk a spiraling crisis for years to come.

Teachers say they know why their students are acting out. Nothing in teacher education programs has prepared them for the mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual demands they now face. An EdWeek survey found teachers were "sacrificing their lunch periods to cover unsupervised classrooms, monitor lunch lines, and get behind the wheel of school buses." They often can't do the work they went into the profession to do. A principal told us that his teachers would love to dive into rich explorations during Black History Month, but "there's absolutely no bandwidth for that."

Principals themselves are feeling besieged. A National Association of Secondary School Principals survey found that 42 percent of principals had accelerated their plans to leave the profession. With teachers, students, and families in crisis, some principals find their jobs have become unrecognizable. One assistant principal told us that all he did in December and January was COVID contact tracing.

Addressing these crises requires new priorities. We need to make school a place that prioritizes connection, community, and joy. It's time to adopt what Shawn Ginwright calls a "healing-centered" approach. Rather than viewing trauma as an isolated experience, a healing-centered approach is holistic and collective: It calls on us to work together to address harms and make positive change. Moments of crisis can also be moments of opportunity when properly seized. The pandemic, while affecting us each differently, is a uniquely shared experience. This is a teachable moment: We can bow our heads and submit to the devastation or we can honor those who have been lost by using this as a moment to double down on teaching our children what our society is most in need of: generative connection, deep empathy, and skill building around collective action and mutual aid.

Prioritizing community and healing is a necessary prerequisite for academic learning. This crisis has demonstrated that the mental health—and academic progress—of young people depends on the caring relationships they build at school. We humans are evolved to be part of a community, to be interdependent and interconnected. Without community, we cannot thrive.

Building community begins with the clear intention and action of district and school leaders.

Here are eight strategies district and school leaders can use to build community and facilitate healing.

- **Offer school staff structured opportunities at least once a week to connect with each other**, share thoughts and feelings, collaboratively problem solve, practice strategies to bolster their mental health, and find joy. Just like students, teachers need to be seen, heard, and cared for.

- **Support teachers in creating a**

caring classroom. Teachers need time to connect with students. Listening, being present, and naming and normalizing students' feelings can help them process. A caring classroom also includes creating community agreements and values, making time for play, and using culturally sustaining practices so that every child belongs.

- **Ensure that every student participates in a community-building circle once a week—at least.** Here, students can listen to each other and reflect on what is happening for them. They can practice strategies that can sustain them over their lives, such as mindfulness and feelings identification.

- **Let students lead the way.** Encourage students to facilitate their own structured gatherings where they and their classmates can share, problem solve, affirm each others' cultures and lived experiences, and practice skills they find helpful. In the process, students can gain a sense of agency within the school community.

- **Bring healing and joy through art.** Dancing, singing, drama, painting, woodworking ... The evidence shows that engaging in the arts—simply for the experience and pleasure of it—is therapeutic. Yet many schools, especially in underresourced communities, have extinguished this opportunity. Make art a regular part of every child's school experience.

- **Train all school staff in social and emotional learning and restorative approaches.** SEL skills like active listening, empathy, and conflict resolution are helpful in interactions among students, families, and colleagues as we collectively cope with loss and uncertainty.

- **District and school leaders need support, too.** Make it a priority to care for yourself. Gather regularly with a few colleagues with the explicit purpose of mutual support. This community can become a source of inspiration and rejuvenation for you.

- **Look ahead.** The hardship we are experiencing—and our disconnection from each other—obviously goes far beyond the school walls. Support staff, students, and fellow school leaders in looking at the big picture—and envisioning the life, the community, the world, that you would like to see. As Ginwright notes, the ability to dream and imagine are key in maintaining our hope and sense of well-being. Hope enables us to take urgently needed action. "In this unfolding conundrum of life and history, there is such a thing as being too late," said the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr."This is no time for apathy or complacency. This is a time for vigorous and positive action." ■

Daniel Coles is the senior program manager at Morningside Center for Teaching Social Responsibility. Tala Manassah is the deputy executive director at Morningside Center, and Cassie Schwerner is the executive director.

OPINION

Published August 10, 2022

How Trauma-Informed Practice Made Me a Better Teacher

By Melody Hawkins

All young people have experienced loss over the past two years—loss of physical access to school, to teachers and friends, to school activities and playtime. And many have lost loved ones to COVID-19 or endured financial hardships. Even before recent high-profile school shootings, the nation had seen a rise in gun violence during the past few years that had injured or killed many students. I have seen the evidence of this close to home where I live in Knoxville, Tenn.

Last February, a star science student I mentored every day was killed because she was in a location when gun violence erupted. Her death has left an indelible scar on her friends and me. She was just one of five students at my school who were killed by gun violence that semester. Seeing the word "killed" written here stings, but it is necessary as I highlight the impact of trauma in our schools.

What do teachers do when so many students have trauma—and when we feel it ourselves?

Teachers need to learn who their students are, what they are going through, how they cope, and how to tap into their perseverance to address any deficit to achieve the outcome they want.

Through trauma-informed teaching, teachers consider how trauma can affect learning and introduce approaches to better manage our own responses. Trauma-informed instruction asks teachers to be mindful of our emotions so that we do not trigger student anxiety; to encourage students to express themselves and work through their emotions; and to model social and emotional skills such as empathy, cultural awareness, and patience. It helps me establish and maintain a stable, nurturing environment that reflects what I want to accomplish in the classroom.

Through this lens, I am less likely to get upset or take things personally. I can be aware of my feelings and bias. I can be the adult in the room and determine how best to respond and foster relationships with my students.

I remember a time when a student, who I suspected had struggles at home, walked in to my honors class late. Violating the school dress code, she was wearing a hoodie that covered her head. Understanding that behavior is communication, I took that to heart when I saw her enter class. So rather than be punitive, I just told her, "Glad you got to class today. Here's what we're talking about."

While other students were working independently, she didn't touch her paper. I walked over and asked a question that required more than yes or no: "I notice you haven't started your work. How are you feeling today?" She said she was feeling bad, and I asked if something happened. We stepped into the hallway for privacy, and she told me she just had an argument with her mom.

—DigitalVision Vectors/Getty

> "When employers are looking for potential employees, they are looking for these skills that they know that they need in order to be successful when working with others."
>
> **MELODY HAWKINS,** How Trauma-Informed Practice Made Me a Better Teacher

I told her that learning science is a good way to take her mind off other things. After our talk, the student completed her work. The experience reinforced my reasons for teaching—to help students do well no matter the challenges they face outside of school.

When I see students struggle, I remember teachers who had strong social and emotional skills that made me feel most welcome. They wanted to know: "Who are you? How are you?" They had high emotional intelligence. They were passionate, empathetic, and welcoming. They modeled responsible decisions that helped me manage my emotions.

I also recognize that there are times when students need professional help. We have many students for whom mental health support is neither easily accessible nor openly discussed—this is particularly true for many Black and brown students and immigrants. It's critical that we support healing and growth in our communities and in our schools. We must work closely with our counselors and mental health experts to lessen stigma and make help more accessible.

Educators also need support systems. We need to teach ourselves the same SEL lessons that we teach our students. Providing support and care for others affects us, too, and we need to allow ourselves to seek help without apology or judgment.

One of our biggest challenges is that teacher-preparation programs and in-service learning have not always focused on trauma-informed approaches to learning. Fortunately some colleges of education are beginning to infuse this into their preparation programs and there are a wealth of online resources, many of which are available for free, to learn additional strategies to best support our students' success in and out of the classroom. Among them are modules that explore the impact of trauma on students and help teach students empathy and other social and emotional skills.

It is also important to remember there is no one strategy for helping our students heal from traumatic events. Our students are still children, even though they might sometimes act older than their years. We have a responsibility to let them know that they are loved, to provide structure in a predictable environ-

ment, and to nurture their strengths. That requires us to keep our tone steady, not single out students, and ask reflective questions that can help steer the conversation to safe ground.

Today, even as I grieve the student we lost to gun violence and the pain her death has caused our community, I am uplifted by the students who are here. When I see her friends, we hug, talk, and laugh. Sometimes we share our love for her by wearing a shirt with her face on it. Sometimes we feel a silent connection with each other. At these times, I know that supporting our community's mental health isn't just something we should do. It's something we must do. ■

Melody Hawkins taught 8th grade science at Vine Middle School in Knoxville, Tenn., for seven years and now serves as an administrator at Austin-East High School a few blocks away. She was recently named the 2021 grand prize winner of the National University Teacher Award, which recognizes the nation's most inspiring teachers.

RESOURCES ON TRAUMA-INFORMED PRACTICES AND SEL FOR EDUCATORS THAT HELPED ME

- CASEL's strong background tools and research on SEL for classrooms and schools.
- Learning for Justice's website, which provides useful lessons and educational resources to support conversations about equity and empathy through a cultural lens and apply it to trauma.
- ACEs Aware toolkit, which provides screening information and trainings.
- Harmony SEL and Inspire at National University (where I am currently enrolled in a doctoral program), which offers no-cost SEL resources and professional learning opportunities, including online modules that explore the impact of trauma on students and teach students empathy.

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