—DigitalVision Vectors/Getty

Wellness

EDITOR'S NOTE

Wellness isn't a passing fad; it has become a permanent transformation. This Spotlight will help you understand federal data reflecting trends in children's health; learn how to protect kids at greater risk of illness from COVID-19; explore how teachers can support traumatized students; cultivate ways to offer students hope despite troubling news; discover a tool to help prioritize student well-being; and more.

OPINION

Published March 14, 2022

Are the Kids All Right? What New Federal Data Say About Child Well-Being

By Evie Blad

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Rates of children's physical inactivity, misbehavior, and unmet health needs shot up during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic alongside concerns about parental stress, according to a new analysis of federal data on child well-being.

Meanwhile, the numbers of children diagnosed with depression and anxiety stayed on pre-pandemic trendlines, growing steadily between 2016 and 2020.

In findings with significant implications for the work of schools, researchers at the U.S. Health Resources and Services Administration examined a trove of parent-reported data collected between 2016 and 2020. They analyzed five-year trends and looked for statistically significant increases between 2019 and 2020 in an effort to identify problems that may have been worsened by the pandemic and the continuation of troubling patterns that predate the national crisis.

Examining 36 different indicators of child well-being, researchers also saw increasing rates of parental job transitions during the first year of the pandemic.

"Today's study confirms what all too many of us know and feel in our daily lives: COVID-19 was an exceptional burden on the mental well-being of our nation's families, including kids," U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary Xavier Becerra said in a statement in response to the study, which was published Monday in JAMA Pediatrics, a journal of the American Medical Association.

But it's premature to draw a definite causal link between the changes in data and the pandemic, the authors wrote. The survey questions are fielded between June and January each year, researchers cautioned. And some questions, about issues like health care, asked parents to look back 12 months, which means their 2020 responses may reflect pre-pandemic experiences.

Challenges in meeting student needs

The data come as school districts grapple with growing student needs by creating new mental health programs, connecting families to community resources like food pantries, and improving methods of identifying and supporting students experiencing homelessness. Schools are aided by an unprecedented infusion of federal relief aid, but district administrators say they still face significant hurdles, like staffing challenges.

In his March 1 State of the Union Address, President Joe Biden pledged to ease some of those concerns by working with Congress to allow schools to bill Medicaid for mental health services and by cutting red tape on telehealth programs, which are used in an increasing number of schools.

The study's authors used five years of data from the National Survey of Children's Health, a nationally representative survey completed by parents and guardians of about 175,000 randomly selected children from birth to 17 years old in all 50 states and the District of Columbia.

"This analysis provides an opportunity to evaluate the nation's progress (or lack thereof) in improving the health and well-being of U.S. children and their families, including the first opportunity to use the [survey data] to investigate potential effects of the COVID-19 pandemic," the study's authors wrote.

Among the key findings:

- Children's diagnoses of depression and anxiety continued to climb in 2020, keeping pace with a trend that emerged in the years prior to the pandemic. Between 2016 and 2020, the number of children diagnosed with anxiety grew by 29 percent, and the number diagnosed with depression grew by 27 percent.

- Despite those growing needs, the analysis detected no statistically significant uptick in the portion of children who received mental health treatment over the last five years. In 2020, 80 percent of children who needed mental health care received services, the survey found.

- The analysis found a 21 percent increase in children with behavior or conduct problems reported by their parents or caregivers between 2019 and 2020, echoing anecdotal concerns educators have shared with Education Week about students' social skills, self-control, and emotional maturity.

- The proportion of children who received preventive care visits dropped by 9 percent between 2019 and 2020 after remaining relatively stable the previous four years. Reports of unmet health-care needs also grew; 3 percent of respondents reported unmet needs

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> — Dan Leffingwell, Superintendent, Noble Local School District

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in 2016, a number that stayed relatively stable until it spiked to 4 percent in the 2020 surveys, the analysis found.

- Children's physical activity continued a decline that started in the years prior to the pandemic. The number of respondents who say their children got an hour a day of physical activity decreased by 18 percent between 2016 and 2020.

- The number of parents who reported "coping very well with the demands of raising children" decreased in the years prior to the pandemic, but it dropped more significantly from 2019 to 2020. About 60 percent of respondents agreed with that statement on the 2020 survey, compared to about 67 percent in 2016. The most-recent survey was fielded as parents juggled remote work, employment disruptions, and closures of schools and child-care providers.

- The proportion of children whose parents "quit a job, declined a job, or changed jobs because of child-care problems" increased by 34 percent between 2019 and 2020.

Caution on drawing a firm connection to COVID

But the study's authors raised some caveats in looking at the data.

"Cautious interpretation of the 2020 estimates is warranted, and additional years of data are needed to determine whether 2020 was truly a turning point for certain trends and how long the indirect effects of the pandemic may last," they wrote.

Still, the findings echo other data points and conversations among educators.

For example, on a national survey of educators administered by the EdWeek Research Center in January, 39 percent of respondents said that "compared to prior to the pandemic in 2019, the social skills and emotional maturity levels" of their current students are "much less advanced." Forty-one percent said their students' were "somewhat less advanced" in those areas, and 16 percent said they were "about the same" as their pre-pandemic peers.

Educators attributed those concerns to interruptions in in-person learning time, a divisive political climate among adults, and family stressors, like parental employment issues. ■

—Jake May/The Flint Journal via AP

Kindergartener Quinn Bonk, right, helps her classmate Carter Fairley on a craft project during a Valentine's Day party last month at Thomson Elementary School in Davis on, Mich.

Published March 10, 2022

A New Imperative for Schools: Protecting Vulnerable Kids as Masks Disappear

By Catherine Gewertz

As the COVID-19 pandemic enters its third year, school and district leaders are facing a fresh set of challenges with mask mandates evaporating across the country. Now they must figure out other ways to protect medically vulnerable students, a high-wire act that requires great delicacy and carries a huge price tag—legally and medically—if they err.

Only two weeks after the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention relaxed its school masking rules, and as nearly every state is dropping its own face-covering requirements, many school districts are offering children two options: attend in person and mask if you wish, or learn virtually. Fewer and fewer schools are requiring others to mask to protect medically vulnerable children.

"Most districts right now seem to be saying, 'We're free of the onus of masking, and good luck to anybody who still needs it,'" said Ken Behrend, an attorney who represents several Pennsylvania families that successfully sued their schools for universal masking rules to protect their students, who have medical conditions that boost their risk of complications from COVID-19.

Legal and medical experts caution mask-optional districts against relying too heavily on virtual learning or voluntary masking as the only protections for students whose disabilities or medical conditions make COVID-19 a particularly threatening disease. They note that many children can't wear masks, or produce insufficient antibodies from vaccines, because of their medical conditions. Additionally, a long list of health challenges subject many people to increased risks from COVID-19.

Federal laws such as the Americans with Disabilities Act, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act require districts to provide "reasonable accommodations" and a "free and appropriate public education" for students with a wide range of disabilities. Legal experts said that districts may need to consider a suite of protections for such students, including, in some cases, requiring some people to mask around them.

"It can't just be, 'School is back to nor-

mal, and if that doesn't work for these kids, they can learn at home,'" said Dr. Sara Bode, a pediatrician who is the chair-elect of the American Academy of Pediatrics' Council on School Health.

"It has to be, 'I have kids at higher risk, so what additional mitigation measures can I use to ensure they're safe?' "

Using the now-familiar list of standard mitigation measures—vaccination, frequent COVID testing, social distancing, hand-washing and improving air quality—can also play a part in keeping at-risk students safe, she said. Bode encouraged district and school leaders to reach out to families, asking if there are any health conditions that warrant additional safety measures. Conversations can then begin with them and their doctors to find solutions, Bode said.

That outreach should go beyond a school's roster of students who have individualized education programs under the IDEA or Section 504, she said. Many additional children might need safety plans because they have conditions such as serious asthma, or they have at-risk families members at home.

For school districts, these carefully customized plans pose yet another challenge in a two-year period that's been tougher than any in recent memory.

Ken Greene, the assistant superintendent for student services in the Barrow County school district, in Winder, Ga., said his district isn't offering virtual learning to most students, so he's working on in-person solutions for at-risk students.

He's updating the district's inventory of children with disabilities and other medical conditions that might put them at risk, and working with families to come up with solutions. His district is mask-optional, but Greene said he'd be willing to consider requiring small groups of staff or students to mask around a particularly vulnerable colleague or peer.

"We're trying to be sensitive to students and staff and meet needs in ways that seem reasonable, and hoping we're on the right side of the law," he said.

In the Willis Independent school district, 50 miles north of Houston, Superintendent Tim Harkrider said he doesn't see required masking as an option, even if it's applied to just a few people. Texas doesn't allow it—although an imminent court ruling could change that—and his school community wouldn't tolerate it, he said.

"What it boils down to," he said, "is what can you offer a child with a disability in a regular setting without infringing on other people's desire not to wear masks? It's a gray area that sits there, and no one wants to touch it."

Lawyers who often represent school districts, and those who specialize in the rights of students with disabilities, caution that drawing a clear line in the sand over limited masking could backfire on districts.

Mark Bresee, whose California law firm represents 500 school districts in the state, including San Diego Unified in its bid to defend its vaccine requirement, said districts likely have "a very high bar to clear" if they argue that medically at-risk students have only two options: schools that are mask-optional or virtual.

There's precedent for protections that are shouldered by a group, not just an at-risk individual, Bresee said. If a child has a peanut allergy, "you can't just say, 'You assume the risk, no one has to modify their behavior in any way to aid in protecting you,' " he said.

But there's also a limit to what parents can demand, and districts have the right to claim that some accommodations pose an undue hardship, Bresee said. Federal law envisions individualized solutions, reached through compromise, he said.

Adam Wasserman, a California lawyer specializing in disability-rights cases, advised districts to think carefully about discrimination claims that could arise from making virtual learning the only option to mask-optional in-person schooling.

"We have to be careful when we start removing clusters of students and putting them in their own spaces," he said. "We know separate is not equal."

In Wasserman's view, reasonable accommodations could include districts enhancing online instruction with 1-to-1 aides. But they should focus on keeping children in classrooms, using mitigation strategies like improved air quality and hand-washing to boost safety. Requiring others to mask around certain students, he said, "could also be considered a reasonable accommodation."

KEEPING MEDICALLY VULNERABLE KIDS SAFE: HOW SCHOOL LEADERS CAN HELP

- Reach out to families now to ask about children's medical conditions
- Aim for individualized safety plans
- Don't rely exclusively on virtual learning
- Prioritize keeping children in classrooms
- Use multiple safety strategies
- Don't rule out limited masking as one piece of the solution

Districts edge onto difficult legal terrain

Behrend said districts must recognize that the CDC's guidance doesn't align perfectly with federal laws' required protections for medically at-risk students.

"The idea that it's just up to the kid and their parents to make sure a kid masks, that falls in line with the new CDC guidance, but it ignores ADA [Americans with Disabilities Act] requirements," he said. "This could get districts into trouble if they're not mindful of it."

Even with a flurry of lawsuits over masking and vaccine requirements, the law is not entirely clear yet on the question of just what districts must do to protect vulnerable students if masks are optional, lawyers told EdWeek.

They noted the differing messages emanating from two closely-watched cases.

In Texas, a three-judge panel of the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals dissolved a lower-court order halting Gov. Greg Abbott's ban on local mask mandates. In its unanimous December ruling, the panel suggested that students with disabilities could find sufficient protection in measures such as good ventilation, voluntary masking, distancing, plexiglass dividers, and vaccinations.

But the 8th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals said, in an Iowa case, that parents would probably win on their argument that mask requirements are a reasonable accommodation for students with disabilities. Gov. Kim Reynolds' ban on mask mandates, it said, shouldn't be interpreted to mean that masks can't be required when they're needed to protect such students. ■

—iStock/Getty

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How Teachers Can Support Traumatized Students (and Why They Should)

By Sarah D. Sparks

Trauma can come in response to a single, intense event like a natural disaster or repeated toxic stressors such as abuse or homelessness. Whether a child develops problems with thinking, self-control, and interpersonal relations as a result of trauma depends on more than just the traumatic event or events. It's also driven by whether the child has healthy, supportive relationships that can help them regain a sense of safety.

"Because the pandemic has gone on so long, we're really functioning in a space where all the adults in the system, as well as all the kids need help to figure out how to move forward," said Micere Keels, an associate professor of comparative human development at the University of Chicago.

In that respect, the pandemic has created something of a perfect storm, with children experiencing illness or death in their families, financial and housing instability, and adult stress that has put children at higher risk of abuse or neglect. And for months at a time, many students experienced school closures or remote instruction that provided less connection to typical school support networks.

Keels and other experts discussed ways schools can support students who have experienced trauma on Wednesday, as part of the "Examining the Evidence" series, a partnership between Education Week and the Annenberg Institute's ED Research for Recovery project.

Experts, including the American Academy of Pediatrics and the U.S. Surgeon General, have warned that the pandemic has sparked a national emergency in child mental health problems, including rising rates of self-harm among children and adolescents.

If teachers react to a student's behavior by itself, the response can be more intense and punitive—particularly if the teacher also is coping with trauma or stress.

"The problem with trauma is we can't always see it. It's not like a broken leg where ... they're wearing a cast and you can act accordingly, knowing they are not yet healed," Keels said.

When it comes to psychological and emotional trauma, she added, "most of us walk around trying to be as if everything is OK, and so you don't realize which students are coping with what negative, traumatic and distressing experiences."

Gigi Dibello, the coordinator of Project AWARE, a trauma-informed instruction program at the Woonsocket education department in Rhode Island, said it's not enough for teachers and school support staff to try to identify trauma based on symptoms or behavior. Woonsocket schools survey all students to identify which students have or are coping with traumas like the death of a family member or housing instability.

Keels said school leaders and educators should focus on ensuring students feel physically, psychologically, and emotionally safe at school, while also helping them become mindful of their own emotions.

If, for example, a student lashes out or behaves out of character in response to a teacher or peer, Keels said a teacher can help de-escalate the situation by acknowledging a student's distress and asking them to take a few focused breaths.

"You can just give [distressed students] a little nudge, say, I see you, and I can get to you after if you can just make it through this class period," Keels said.

"Quick little statements like that, if the teacher has a relationship with the student, that helps the student engage their self-control in the moment, knowing you are going to come back to them after."

Monique Smith, the director of diversity, equity, and inclusion at Chicago public schools, said schools should shift their mindset from the "what" to the "why" when explaining rules and processes to both teachers and students. She said helping people feel more ownership and agency related to both what they are learning in school and behavioral rules can help them feel more secure and engaged during periods of instability.

"We want students to believe that what they are doing is purposeful. No one wants to just perform a task out of compliance, and students are no different," Smith said. "We have to give them that space."

Ongoing adult training needed

Ongoing training and support for teachers and other adults in a district is critical, Smith said, because staff stress and turnover has also increased during the pandemic. For example, the district now trains all staff to support executive function and mindfulness in students.

Just before the pandemic began in 2020, Woonsocket public schools implemented Project AWARE, a school-based mental health structure to train teachers in strategies to build supportive relationships with students and use "conscious discipline" rather than simply reacting to students in the moment. The project also provides peer support and problem-solving networks to help teachers to manage their classes and their own stress.

Gigi Dibello, the coordinator for Project AWARE, said the program proved crucial

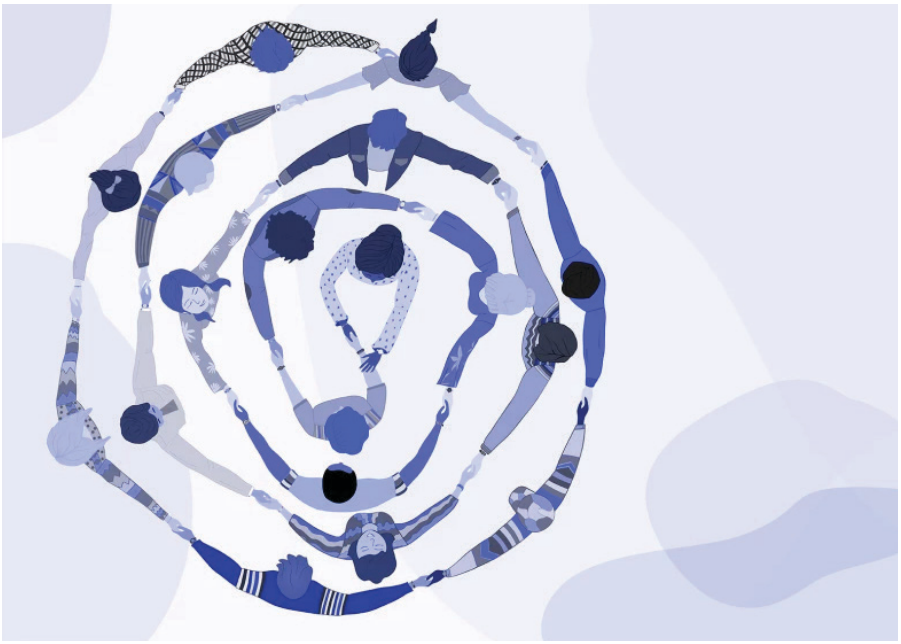
when the district coped with pandemic disruptions and student disengagement and depression. The district trained all of its elementary teachers and half of the secondary teachers in trauma-informed practices, including suicide prevention and first aid for mental health crises.

The district also created a professional learning community for teachers around trauma-informed instruction and trained paraprofessionals, office secretaries, custodians, bus drivers, and other support staff to identify and support students dealing with toxic stress.

Among the educators' recommendations:

- School and district leaders should use policies and practices that are responsive to the kind of developmental challenges trauma can create.
- In schools that have experienced sudden, large increases in the number of students experiencing trauma, teachers may need to adapt moderately intensive "tier 2" interventions, normally used for small groups of students, to entire classes.. For example, they could use reflective essay writing to encourage students to process stressful experiences.
- Social workers and counselors can block out certain times of the day to bolster teachers' capacity to promote positive mental health in classrooms and support children's self-regulation skills.
- School security staff should learn trauma-informed de-escalation strategies.

"If there's a silver lining to the pandemic, it's that it's given all of us a shared experience of trauma," DiBello said, adding, "it's also created a shared urgency around mental and behavioral health that is unprecedented and indisputable." ■



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How to Help Students Cultivate Hope When Worrisome News Is Stressing Them Out

By Sarah Schwartz

In many classrooms, teachers have always taken time to help kids process the events going on in the world, dissecting the big stories that students might see in the news or hear their parents talking about. But it's been an especially steep task for teachers to take on these past few years.

Teachers have fielded students' questions and heard their fears about the COVID-19 pandemic. They've talked to their classes about the murder of George Floyd and the ensuing protests against racism and police brutality. When thousands of people stormed the Capitol in January of last year, teachers helped students understand the facts and work through their feelings.

Now, some teachers have found themselves once again answering questions about an issue making headlines: the Russia-Ukraine crisis.

On Monday, Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered troops into two separatist territories in Ukraine. The United States and other countries have imposed sanctions against Russia, in an effort to deter Putin from moving troops further into Ukraine and escalating to war. The U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has said that the world is "facing a moment of peril" over the crisis.

The situation may seem far-removed to many students in the United States. But in some classrooms over the past few weeks, teachers have been fielding questions about why the conflict started and what will happen.

Often, students aren't just curious about these events—they may also be afraid, anxious, or even have feelings of hopelessness. Teachers can play a critical role in supporting students as they process these emotions, said Kathleen Minke, the executive director of the National Association of School Psychologists.

"As an adult, you can help them. You can acknowledge their feelings, you can normalize what they're feeling," she said.

Education Week spoke with Minke about how teachers can support students emotionally when discussing scary or trou-

bling news—and what teachers can do to help students stay hopeful.

This conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

How can teachers know when to bring up something in class that's happening in the news?

We're in very interesting times at the moment, with teachers feeling a lot of external pressure about what they can and cannot talk to kids about. We see a lot in the news from school board meetings I think that teachers are feeling a lot of pressure around that.

But in general, teachers know a lot about students' developmental levels and what they're prepared to think about and talk about and what they're not. As a teacher, you want to think about who your kids are, first of all. For example, in the current situation, we're not seeing U.S. troops being deployed, but that could happen. And if you're working in a school, or in a system, where there's a large percentage of military-connected families, you're going to want to be a little bit more careful and sensitive to the kinds of stressors that those kids, in particular, might be experiencing.

With individual kids, you're always looking for changes in behavior: a student who typically presents as sunny and happy and enthusiastic suddenly becomes more withdrawn. Kids come into school suddenly very tired or sleepy, unable to concentrate. Those kinds of changes in behavior would be important to look for.

And how do you start that conversation with an individual student if you are seeing those kinds of changes in behavior?

You want to be pretty forthright and just say, "Here's what I have noticed about you over the last couple of days. I'm wondering if everything is OK, or if there's something you would like to talk about." You try not to make assumptions. As an adult, whether you're a teacher or a school psychologist or a parent, you want to give the kid space to talk with you, and to let them know that you are interested in what they have to say.

Often, social studies teachers bring up current events in class and try to teach some history or context. Should this be woven into instruction? Or should discussing these events be more like emotional processing, which should be handled by others—like a student's school counselor?

> "Kids are very perceptive. They're paying attention to what's going on around them. Every child has experienced some disruption to their pre-COVID lives, and that's certainly having an impact."
>
> **KATHLEEN MINKE**
> Executive director of the National Association of School Psychologists

I think it depends on the developmental levels that we're talking about. When you're talking about high school kids, they're hearing things, they're seeing things on the news. Younger kids as well, but certainly in a high school setting, current events are really important to connect to what they're studying. Those connections can actually deepen the students' understanding of why certain things are happening and why it matters.

With younger kids, again, you usually want to take your cues from the kids themselves—as far as how much they are seeing and hearing, whether they understand the things that they're seeing and hearing, and then offering them some ideas and possibilities for how to manage or cope with their emotions.

How can classroom teachers partner with school psychologists to do some of this work?

Teachers are the absolute frontline of recognizing when a student is struggling—whether they're struggling academically, or they're struggling emotionally and behaviorally. When they do notice changes in behavior or unusual behaviors for a particular child, talking with the school psychologist [can provide] some feedback on what they're seeing. And then developing a plan for whether or not that child needs additional attention is really important.

From your experience working with school psychologists, what are the current issues that students are most worried about, or that instill feelings of hopelessness?

Kids are very perceptive. They're paying attention to what's going on around them. Every child has experienced some disruption to their pre-COVID lives, and that's certainly having an impact. Kids are also resilient. But that doesn't mean that they may not need some assistance in making sense of the things that they're experiencing.

Usually, you have a sense of hopefulness if you feel like you're able to impact something. With younger kids, it may be a simple thing of, we're going to make cards and send them to people [with COVID] who aren't feeling well. That may be one thing that you can do that helps with coping. With older kids, they may be volunteering in the community or other ways of supporting their community as a way of taking action. Not simply letting things happen to them, but feeling like they have some agency and some mastery over the things that are happening to them.

You talked about agency. Are there other ways that teachers can help cultivate hope about the future?

We all have to think about how we talk to kids and how we manage our own emotions. Kids are always watching, as we know. What they need to see from the adults in their lives is positive coping strategies for themselves.

It's not about pretending like nothing is wrong or pretending like this hasn't been an extraordinarily difficult couple of years. But it is about being careful about what you say in front of children, so that you're presenting to them your "coping self," rather than your own feelings of despair. That should be worked out with other adults, not really worked out in front of children, because, again, reassurance and reaffirming students' sense of safety is the baseline of helping kids cope. They need to know that the adults in their lives are managing things, that they're safe, that, yes, things are difficult, but we can do hard things. ■

The New Academic Frontier: INDOOR AIR

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A student's health and wellbeing is directly affected by the conditions of school facilities. Unfortunately, too many students are walking into buildings that fall short of air quality standards. All children deserve to learn in places that are safe and healthy, while also nurturing their intellectual growth, social engagement and emotional well-being.

School district leaders across the country are working together with Protect|ED to clean the air and provide a safe and healthy school environment. The Protect|ED team is comprised of healthcare, education and manufacturing professionals who have come together to support and empower K-12 school communities. As a trusted partner, Protect|ED takes this responsibility seriously and works to support schools that share their commitment to improving the air students, faculty and staff breathe every day.

Air Quality & Cognitive Function

The importance of air quality goes beyond health benefits. Clean air has been shown to impact cognitive function in students as well. By ensuring students have clean air to breathe, schools can better position students for future academic success.

According to Harvard's T.H. Chan School of Public Health's "Schools for Health" report, contaminated air may hamper learning by compromising brain development, triggering illnesses that impact attendance and disrupting students' attention. In fact, there is a direct correlation with test scores:

- According to a study from the London School of Economics, tracking 2,400 university students who took 11,000 exams at multiple locations over multiple days, poor air quality compromised test results even when pollution levels fell well below EPA standards.
- In a Texas school district, test scores rose after 66 schools were renovated to improve air quality, including removing mold and improving ventilation.

Over the course of a K-12 education, a child will spend more than 15,000 hours at school. Classrooms, cafeterias, libraries and gymnasiums, even when cleaned to high standards, are reservoirs for biological and chemical contaminants.

Children have lungs that are still developing and narrow airways, so it is critically important to ensure the air they breathe is clean. By improving air quality, schools are better able to keep kids learning in the classroom, reducing absenteeism while having a positive impact on academic performance.

FAST FACTS

An estimated **46%** of U.S. public schools, (about 60,000 school buildings,) **faced air-quality challenges prior to the pandemic**.

— Harvard's T.H. Chan School of Public Health's "Schools for Health" Report

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Long before COVID-19 emerged, the Environmental Protection Agency **described air quality** in many schools as a ***"serious health threat."***

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NanoStrike™ is an inactivation technology that does not simply trap pathogens, it eliminates them, disinfecting the air. MERV filters and other HVAC filters only trap micro-organisms. They do not destroy hazardous air particles.

Protect Against COVID-19 & More

The U.S. K-12 education system has been plagued with poor air quality for decades and the rise of COVID-19 has only compounded the issue. While the pandemic may wane, the need for better air quality in our schools remains. From highly contagious germs to dangerous mold spores, schools have a responsibility to address these pervasive health issues and protect the wellbeing of students and teachers.

Over 60 clinical and lab studies show that Protect|ED's *NanoStrike™* units inactivate airborne micro-organisms up to 99.99 percent, providing the first line of protection against viruses and bacteria such as COVID-19, influenza, strep and more.

Scientists are predicting that COVID-19 will never fully disappear and that it will become an ongoing virus that continues to evolve. The scientific community is urging schools to provide safer indoor environments to protect students and keep new variants from emerging.

In addition, mold, dust, soot, pollen and chemical contaminants are known to exacerbate asthma and allergies, which is a significant issue for many school-aged children. In fact, one in 13 school-aged children suffer from asthma. Before COVID-19, asthma alone accounted for 13.8 million missed school days annually. Unless schools rectify their air-quality issues, students with asthma and allergies will see their symptoms worsened simply by being at school.

Hays Consolidated Independent School District

In late December 2021, Hays Consolidated Independent School District in Texas installed more than 1,800 *NanoStrike*™ units. These units are now placed in every classroom in the district, as well as nurses' offices, reception areas, extracurricular rooms, gyms, cafeterias and libraries to help reduce airborne contaminants.

Tobias and Fuentes Elementary Schools, as well as Dahlstrom Middle School, were among the campuses in the district most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Installations began at Tobias Elementary, which was a high priority for the district. In September 2021, more than 10 percent of the campus tested positive for the coronavirus, triggering a full campus closure.

Hays CISD was the first district in the area to take a closer look at its indoor air quality.

> *" The pandemic sort of was that catalyst to really get people thinking about indoor air quality a little harder. Our district aims to be proactive as we think of creative solutions to keep kids and staff safe and in the classroom."*
>
> — Max Cleaver
> Hays CISD's Chief Operations Officer

The investment was approved by a 6-0 vote by the Hays CISD school board with funding coming from federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER). The actions taking by the school board go far beyond the pandemic and will support indoor air quality for years to come.

Since the installation of the units, the school has seen a seen a significant difference in the quality of the air.

"We could tell a major difference, especially with the scent of the air, after day one," said Tim Savoy, Chief Communications Officer for Hays CISD. "We put the unit to the test in a building that was built in the late 1800s, and the *NanoStrike*™ removed that musty scent within hours."

The Time Is Now

With a deep knowledge of air quality technology and the K-12 landscape, combined with expertise from respected health experts, Protect|ED helps school districts to take a more deliberate approach in improving the quality of the air. Protect|ED serves as an extension of a school's operations team, helping leaders navigate concerns to ensure students are learning in a safe, healthy environment that supports their academic success.

Here are a few of the *NanoStrike*™ features that are particularly appealing for school districts:

- The unit is slim, lightweight (10 lbs.) and can be easily mounted on a wall. It's portable, requiring no installation costs.
- The *NanoStrike*™ unit requires no maintenance and consumes less energy than a standard household lightbulb. There are no filters or bulbs to replace.
- While it comes with a seven-year warranty, its effectiveness does not degrade over time.
- It is also extremely quiet and will not disrupt the learning environment.

The federal government has approved $176 million in emergency COVID relief funds for K-12 schools. This new funding is intended to help states and school districts safely reopen schools, effectively address significant learning loss, and take other actions to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on the students and families who depend on our K-12 schools. With Air Quality improvements as an allowable expense, this is the ideal time for schools to intervene and protect the health of students.

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Published February 23, 2022

States Aren't Meeting Students' Needs, Wide-Ranging Analysis Shows

By Arianna Prothero

How are states doing when it comes to the constellation of education policies that support students' social, emotional, and academic development?

Not so good, according to a state-by-state policy review by The Education Trust. That is especially the case regarding equity priorities and making key data accessible to families and communities.

A new analysis by the nonprofit research group—in partnership with the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, or CASEL—examined policies around school discipline; wraparound services; educator diversity; professional development; rigorous and culturally sustaining curriculum; and student, family, and community engagement.

While states performed well in some areas but faltered in others, one consistent theme emerged from the analysis: states consistently fell short on collecting data to measure and disseminate the impact of their policies publicly.

"States have a long way to go when actually reporting on discipline rates, when reporting on survey data about community and family engagement," said Sarah Mehrotra, a data and policy analyst for The Education Trust, in an interview with Education Week. "Parents are hungry for this data. And states across the board need to do a better job reporting this out."

Only one state, California, met benchmarks for data collection around discipline—including publicly reporting district-level data on offenses and punishments, the number of students who have been expelled more than once, and breaking down the data by race and gender as well as English learner, socioeconomic, and disability status.

Just three states—California, Idaho, and Rhode Island, as well as the District of Columbia—publicly report information collected through surveys and school climate data on how engaged students, families, and local communities feel in their schools.

Nine states report data on high schoolers' participation in advanced coursework—such as Advanced Placement, dual enrollment, and International Baccalaureate programs—broken down by demographic groups.

When it comes to wraparound services that help students and families get health care, housing, and other social and academic supports, the research group found that 12 states require districts to assess the needs and strengths of students and school systems to identify both gaps and available supports in community services.

While 21 states publish annual school-level data about the racial makeup of their educator workforce—either in an online dashboard, school report card, or in a report on educator workforce diversity—only two states, Connecticut and Delaware, publicly share annual school-level data on retention rates among teachers of color.

"We also scanned most of these categories for whether states had set goals—do they have goals around family engagement? Do they have a goal around wraparound services?" said Mehrotra. "In many cases, the answer was yes, but then there is no data to actually measure progress toward these goals."

Other key takeaways from the analysis include:

- Nineteen states allow for corporal punishment. In 15 states that ban corporal punishment, laws remain weak around the use of restraints to control student behavior—for instance, there are no requirements that staff be trained in de-escalation of conflict and the use of safe restraints.
- Discipline policies on the books can be out of sync with more recent state policy developments. Tennessee and South Carolina, for example, do not ban corporal punishment yet both states also give guidance and training on restorative discipline practices.
- Most states still allow exclusionary discipline, such as suspensions and expulsions, for minor, nonviolent rule-breaking such as defiant behavior.
- No state requires schools to meet the 250 students per counselor ratio recommended by the American School Counselor Association. Delaware, however, has passed a law that will eventually require schools to meet that ratio.
- Most states with so-called critical race theory bans don't have formal systems in place to include parent voice at a high, policymaking level.

For each policy area, The Education Trust scored states on a range of considerations, such as whether the state set clear goals, provided adequate funding and training, and collected and reported data.

The findings from The Education Trust's analysis are presented in an interactive map that shows where states are on a continuum for each key policy area and it allows comparisons among states. ■

OPINION

Published October 15, 2021

Wellness Can't Be Just Another Task for Teachers to Do

By Beth Pandolpho

As we settle into the third school year that has been impacted by the pandemic, my social-media feed has been dominated by books, articles, webinars, and smartphone apps offering the promise of "educator wellness." I'm all for educators being well, but I do have a problem with this pursuit of wellness being placed squarely on the shoulders of already overburdened educators.

As an instructional coach for grades 6-12, I witness the strain my colleagues are under every day and I am endlessly frustrated that it's beyond my control to provide them with the support and relief they deserve. Teachers should not be tasked with the additional job of pursuing their own wellness, just so they can trudge through yet another week of school in their N95 masks surrounded by students, hoping they don't bring COVID-19 home to their families.

Plus, teachers are still recovering from the frustrations of the past school year when they had to try to motivate, engage, support, teach, and assess students virtually. Not only did the technology entail what for many was a new set of skills to master, but teachers also often found themselves facing a screen full of black boxes. Had students simply turned their devices' cameras off, or were they not there at all? Teachers wanted so badly to do a good job, and although they were working long hours, there were few signs of success.

This year, teachers want their students back at school, and kids absolutely need to be back at school. But that just brings new challenges. At the most basic level, how do teachers quickly learn students' names at a social distance when everyone's faces are mostly covered by masks? How do teachers master unfamiliar names when they can't see a student's mouth move nor can they stand closer to hear them more clearly? How do teachers forge meaningful connections with students when our school systems have not created space for healing from the personal traumas suffered over the past year and a half?

In spite of these obstacles, school is marching on, pretending to be business as usual when all of us on the inside know that nothing is as usual. Standardized tests are back this fall with a vengeance, measuring "learning loss"—an arbitrary and deficit-oriented term—and prompting already weary teachers to frantically run on the hamster wheel to "catch students up." Policies that emphasize compliance and control at the state and district levels are firmly in place, and school schedules remain as rigid and unforgiving as ever.

—DigitalVision Vectors/Getty

> "At the most basic level, how do teachers quickly learn students' names at a social distance when everyone's faces are mostly covered by masks?"

Professors Justin Reich and Jal Mehta remind us that what our students and teachers need most is "healing, community and humanity." Addressing those matters, they write, "is not peripheral to the academic mission of school, it is a vital part of such a mission."

Fortunately, teachers have long known that supporting students' social and emotional well-being is foundational to learning, and they are doing the best they can for their students despite an inflexible system. But again, who is taking care of the teachers' social and emotional well-being? Apparently, according to self-proclaimed wellness experts, teachers are supposed to be doing that as well. And we wonder why teacher burnout has been a long-standing issue.

Lora Bartlett, an associate professor at the University of California, Santa Cruz, who studies the teaching profession, reminds us that even before the pandemic, more than 40 percent of teachers left the profession by their fifth year, and 8 percent left the profession annually, according to federal longitudinal data. "The most common reason teachers give for voluntarily leaving the profession is dissatisfaction with school or working conditions," Bartlett wrote.

I'd say wearing a mask all day amid a throng of unvaccinated children with the constant threat of a COVID-19 outbreak and the looming concern of a pivot to virtual instruction certainly constitute unsatisfactory working conditions.

If we want teachers to remain in the profession, state departments of education, school districts, and parent groups must step up. The way to support the people who are taking care of our children is for others in the education community to pool their resources and consider doing some of the following:

1. Schedule all after-school meetings virtually or even asynchronously if possible. After a full day of teaching in a mask, teachers deserve to breathe easier and perhaps even attend meetings from home.

2. Offer stipends when asking teachers to offer their time for additional duties during the school day and beyond. (A shortage of substitute teachers has prohibited release-time during the school day and thus increased after-school meetings for teachers.)

3. Create and prioritize time in the school day for teachers to plan together. Collaboration eases the planning burden on teachers, and collective efficacy impacts student learning.

4. Ask for and act upon feedback from teachers regarding school schedules and building protocols; no one knows better than teachers what will most benefit them and their students.

5. Extend extra sick days to teachers for the purposes of mental health and family issues for their continued service under extraordinary circumstances.

6. Provide wellness opportunities for teachers to choose from such as free mindfulness apps, health-club memberships, and yoga classes as additional support.

The teaching profession can't afford to lose the expertise of senior teachers who mentor our newer teachers, nor can it afford to lose newer teachers who can in turn bring fresh ideas to seasoned teachers. There is so much that we can't change about the pandemic, but what we can do is offer our teachers autonomy, respect, flexibility, and gratitude as these are not finite resources; we just need to get our priorities straight to be willing to provide them. ■

Beth Pandolpho is an instructional coach in central New Jersey and a former high school English teacher. Her book I'm Listening: How Teacher-Student Relationships Improve Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening *was published by Solution Tree in 2020.*

OPINION

September 8, 2021

How to Prioritize Student Well-Being This Year

By Angela Duckworth

How can I make student well-being a priority this year?

As schools reopen their doors this fall, everyone's well-being—teachers and students alike—is top of mind. Here's something I wrote recently about the topic for Character Lab as a Tip of the Week:

According to Google Ngram, which tracks the popularity of words and phrases in books, well-being is having a moment.

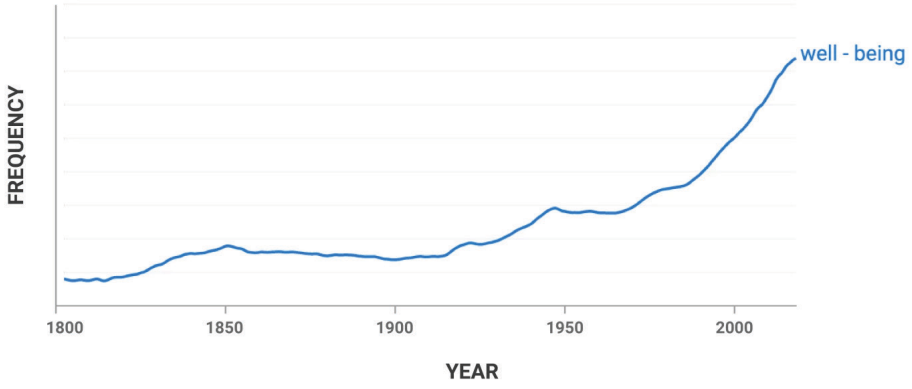
But the moment, I think, will last the millennia. Because a concern for well-being is not a passing fad—it's a permanent transformation.

Around the globe, policymakers are prioritizing well-being. Why? Because our lived experience as human beings matters as much as the bales of cotton, kilowatts of energy, and gigabytes of information that we, as a society, produce each year.

And the pandemic has only added to the concern, for adults and children alike. How are the young people in your life feeling right now? Are they thriving, languishing, or somewhere in between? Do you know?

Because you cannot manage what you cannot measure, Character Lab created the Student Thriving Index. Administered each fall, winter, and spring using Qualtrics to over 100,000 middle and high school students nationwide, this self-report questionnaire separately indexes social, emotional, and academic dimensions of well-being.

Here are some of the questions:



SOURCE: Google Books Ngram Viewer

- In your school, do you feel like you fit in?
- In your school, is there an adult you can turn to for support or advice?
- How happy have you been feeling these days?
- Do you feel like you can succeed in your classes, if you try?

While keeping individual student responses confidential, we aggregate responses at the school level to create dynamic dashboards for the educators in our network. At a glance, schools can see how the young people in their community are feeling.

Researchers use the same anonymized data to answer such urgent questions as what is the effect of remote schooling on adolescent well-being? (Answer: not good).

Some might argue that well-being is for wimps. I don't think so. The hardest-working people I know care a great deal about their own well-being and that of others, too. You're far from your best when you feel isolated, sad, insecure, or bored. And the country of Finland, famous for their gritty culture, is also the happiest country in the world.

Don't think that going back to school means leaving feelings behind. It is only possible to keep calm and carry on when we feel seen, heard, and cared about.

Do use the Student Thriving Index as a conversation starter with the young people in your life. Consider answering the questions yourself, too. What's most important is what happens next, which is talking about why you each answered the way you do. Let well-being have its moment—it deserves our attention. ■

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

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