

—DigitalVision Vectors/Getty

Student Well-Being

EDITORS NOTE

Student well-being, mental health, and social-emotional learning are threatened by the ongoing pandemic as well as natural disasters. In this Spotlight, learn how educators are teaching SEL skills during COVID-19, how teachers can help students grieve from a distance, and how classrooms can maintain student connection virtually from six feet apart.

Teaching the 'New' COVID-19 Social-Emotional Skills.....2

A New Layer of Trauma for the Nation's Children: Dangerous Wildfires.....3

Triaging for Trauma During COVID-19.....5

Helping Students Grieve From a Distance.....7

OPINION

A Back-to-School Plan Built Around Student Connection9

Here's How to Protect Students' Mental Health.....10

First Things First: Trauma Sensitivity Before Initiatives11

Published on September 2, 2020, in Education Week

Teaching the ‘New’ COVID-19 Social-Emotional Skills

By Sarah D. Sparks

Learning is a social activity, but how can kids learn social skills when they can’t fully engage in person? Of the districts whose reopening plans Education Week has analyzed, less than a third plan to include at least some in-person classes. But their students and teachers will have to interact with one another while wearing facial masks and staying six feet apart to limit the spread of the COVID-19 respiratory disease.

Ensuring that students continue to develop critical social-emotional skills in a socially distanced world will require administrators and teachers to not just rethink existing approaches to social learning but also teach children to navigate the new social skills that are needed for life during the pandemic.

“So much of typical [social-emotional learning] programs and practices have included a lot of face-to-face interaction between students and between students and adults,” said Justina Schlund, director of field learning for the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, or CASEL. “It’s being able to work together closely to solve a problem or to talk about their emotions and their experiences. So I think it’s going to require a lot of creativity on the part of our schools and educators to think about how they’re communicating SEL during this time.”

Here are some key recommendations for school and district leaders when planning in-person social learning during the pandemic.

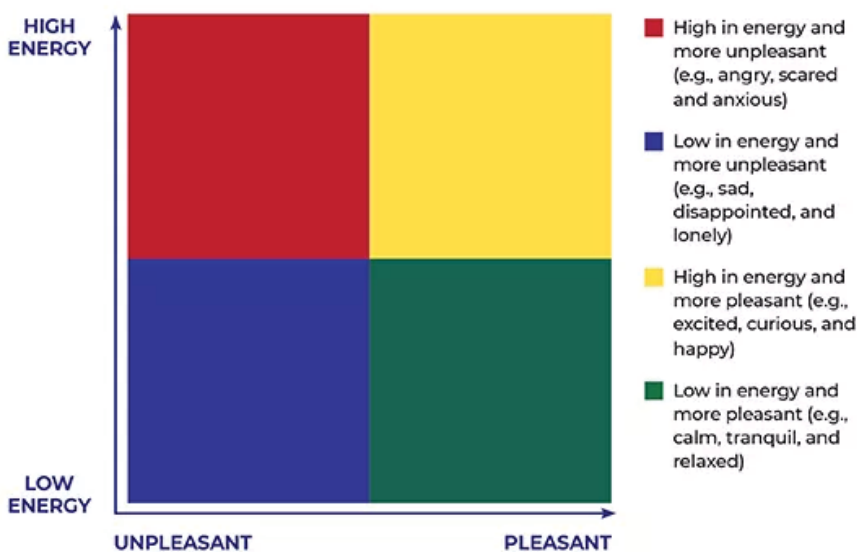
1. Evaluate the risk of keeping (or changing) existing activities

Research on the coronavirus, which causes COVID-19, suggests it spreads easily both in the air and on surfaces. Studies of so-called “super-spreader” events suggest loud speaking and singing in enclosed areas increases the risk of transmitting the virus, as well as close contact for 15 minutes or more.

Problematically, personal protective equipment such as facial masks can significantly interfere with students’ ability to engage in social learning. One new study found: “Covering the lower half of the face reduces the ability to communicate, interpret, and mimic the expressions of those with whom we interact. Positive emotions become less recognizable, and negative

Practicing Emotional Intelligence

The Mood Meters is a tool used to help students recognize, understand, and express their emotions beyond just “good” or “not good.” The tool also helps them develop empathy for others.



SOURCE: Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence

emotions are amplified. Emotional mimicry, contagion, and emotionality in general are reduced and (thereby) bonding between teachers and learners, group cohesion, and learning—of which emotions are a major driver.”

Teachers and administrators can balance the need for safety and social engagement by considering four things: the viral load associated with an activity, its duration, the educational and social value of the activity, and the maturity of the students doing it. For example, loud talking and singing tend to disperse more viral particles into the air, while small-group projects conducted outside can be lower risk. Some common social-emotional learning activities, such as filling a “kindness bucket,” in which students write down good deeds they have done for others, would change little in a socially distanced classroom.

Similarly, older grades may have more flexibility in providing students with social activities.

“I think that the hardest part from being in an elementary school is everything is hands-on and everything is based off of social interactions,” said Colleen Perry, a coordinator for the City Connects student support program at Pottinger Elementary in Springfield, Mass. The majority of students in the Springfield district are from low-income families. “I feel like in a high school, you’re more aware of your own personal space; you can socially distance ... whereas in an elementary school, I get hugged probably 300 times a day ... and it’s fine, I love that, but we can’t do that right now.”

Even so, high-risk activities can be tweaked to lower their likelihood of contagion without fundamentally changing their value. Studies have

Show your students how strong they really are



With Studies Weekly's Well-Being Curriculum



Preview it **FREE**

store.studiesweekly.com/well-being

Identifying Emotions

We all need to pay attention to how we are feeling. When we are happy or sad helps us understand how we are feeling. We need to know how we are feeling, it helps us identify our emotions, we can tell people how we feel. We are happy or sad helps us understand how we are feeling. We need to know how we are feeling, it helps us identify our emotions, we can tell people how we feel.

There are times when we have more than one emotion. This is called a mixed emotion. Listening to our emotions helps us understand how we are feeling.

Labeling Emotions and Emotional Vocabulary Words

There are many words we can use to tell others how we are feeling. These words describe our emotions. These emotion words come in five categories. They are joy, sadness, anger, fear, and disgust. We use these vocabulary words to describe our feelings so others can help us. These words also help us understand others. Using the right words to label our feelings helps others know exactly how we feel.

Communicating Emotions

Talking to other people can help you identify how you are feeling. It can also help people understand how you are feeling. When we understand our own emotions, we are more kind. We are also more understanding of others. You can communicate how you are feeling with your body language. You can do the same with your facial expressions. You can express your feelings through emotion vocabulary words. Using words to tell others how we are feeling is the best way to communicate how we feel.

Recognizing Emotions in Others

Recognizing how other people are feeling is important. You need to be aware of what others around you are feeling. When you know how others are feeling, you can show them empathy. Empathy is having similar feelings because you have been through a similar experience. Showing empathy helps you create strong friendships.

To understand how people are feeling, we follow some steps.

- First, when we talk to others, we watch their faces and their body language. We listen to the tone of their voice.
- Next, we infer, or make a guess, about their feelings based on what we see and hear.
- Then, we ask questions. If you see someone smiling, you can infer that they are feeling happy. You could ask them, "Are you having a good day?"

Emotional Vocabulary Words Help Us Describe Our Feelings	JOY	FEAR	SADNESS	DISGUST	ANGER
happy - excited - ecstatic - overjoyed - passionate - cheerful - good - thrilled - satisfied - tender - pleased - content	anxious - nervous - cautious - uneasy - threatened - fearful - shocked - panicky - frightened - unsure - horrified - terrified	sad - alone - sorrowful - heartbroken - upset - let down - miserable - unhappy - hurt - dissatisfied - lost - disappointed	regretful - lashed - mortified - apologetic - pilled - secretive - embarrassed - guilty - silly - ashamed - remorseful - sorrowful	annoyed - resistant - irritated - boiling - frustrated - irate - upset - enraged - seething - betrayed - mad - disgusted	

“

I think that the hardest part from being in an elementary school is everything is hands-on and everything is based off of social interactions.”

COLLEEN PERRY

COORDINATOR, CITY CONNECTS STUDENT SUPPORT PROGRAM, POTTENGER ELEMENTARY, SPRINGFIELD, MASS.

found, for example, that the risk from singing or talking goes down significantly if people do so at a lower volume. When in-person role-playing is not safe, virtual social simulation games—already used to support students with autism or other challenges with social interaction—can also be used to help students practice dealing with social interactions and resolving conflicts.

2. Identify ways to support students emotionally at a distance

Social distancing in and out of schools has removed traditional ways students and teachers alike relieve stress, so experts say educators and support staff should more actively check students' emotional health and teach alternative methods to cope with isolation and anxiety.

“With elementary school students, they can't always communicate how they feel verbally, but you can tell by how they interact with you physically. Sometimes a kid, if they're sad, they'll come up and hold your hand or they'll want to sit next to you, really close, or they'll want to hug you,” Perry said. “So it's just trying to teach them, ‘you can still do that with your family, but with us, we have to verbally say things to each other,’ and just trying to teach kids the words to use.”

Many schools already use so-called “color checks” to take students' emotional temperature: green for alert and ready; yellow for anxious or excited; red for angry; blue for sad, sick, or tired. In a distanced classroom, teachers

said students need more explicit language and cues to express how they feel.

Social-emotional learning doesn't necessarily have to be something that happens in close proximity to a student, said Nancy Duchesneau, a SEL researcher for the Education Trust. “It can be around expressing that you care about a student; allowing students to have opportunities to express themselves, verbally but also in writing assignments that allow them to show their voice,” she said.

3. Help students adapt to new social norms

The pandemic has radically changed social norms in and out of school, and social-emotional learning should help students learn new skills to navigate interactions.

“It's still important in this context to think about how to establish consistency in routines and schedules, to develop supportive relationships with students and ... to plan opportunities that are built into the regular academic day to learn and practice social emotional competency,” said Justina Schlund, the director of field learning for CASEL.

For example, children in early grades may not yet have learned to measure distances and will need more explicit instruction to maintain proper distance, such as sitting on pre-measured carpet pieces or holding a rope with knots marking safe space.

Incorporating social-emotional instruction into academic classes can help ground the lessons, according to Julie Donovan, a supervising social worker for the Springfield, Mass., public schools. English and language arts teachers there have adopted a curriculum during the closures this spring that embeds social skills instruction into reading lessons.

“So, they're explicitly teaching, say, taking turns, how do you turn and talk to your partner, and modeling that throughout the lesson, but in the meantime you're also teaching that objective of the [English language arts],” she said.

Teachers and counselors have given students a crash course on the new social rules of life in a pandemic, from proper spacing and hand washing to how to adapt normal interactions with friends for the pandemic era.

“I usually do a lesson on proper touching; you know, not everybody wants a hug, so we can do a fist bump or we can do an elbow tap or we can do a high five,” Perry said. “So now, when we go back to school ... we're just adapting our lessons so instead of a fist bump, we can do waving from a distance or an air hug.” ■

Published September 15, 2020, in Education Week

A New Layer of Trauma for the Nation's Children: Dangerous Wildfires

By Catherine Gewertz

The coronavirus has shattered the familiar routines of life and school for students and teachers across the country, and subjected millions to the stresses of illness, lost jobs, and isolation. But in 10 Western states, thousands of children and the adults who educate them are reeling from yet another layer of trauma: wildfires.

In some districts, children who'd been chomping at the bit to see their friends at school have been told they'll be stuck at home learning on a computer, for the time being. In some places, schools have shut down entirely, unable to manage remote instruction or distribute grab-and-go meals. In the worst cases, families have had to flee as flames drew too near for comfort. Some have returned to intact homes; others only to ash and scattered belongings. Still others are living with question marks, unable to return home.

Added to the pandemic's already derailed sense of normalcy, these new fire-driven disruptions have experts worried about how much stress children can handle.

“When it comes to trauma, the old saying, ‘What doesn't kill you makes you stronger,’ isn't true,” said Robin Gurwitch, a professor of psychology at Duke University who studies the effect of trauma on children. “It's a cumulative impact.” The more trauma people experience, “the more at-risk they are for health and mental impacts.”

Laurie Combe, the president of the National Association of School Nurses, said her members in wildfire-affected areas are reaching out to families to check on their health and safety, but also to connect them with emotional support. “We're really concerned about the multiplying effects” of COVID-19 and the wildfires, she said.

Shifting School Plans

A huge swath of the country is contending with wildfires that could affect school plans. As of September 14th, 87 large fires chewed



—Eric Risberg/AP

One child lassoes another at an evacuation center in Canby, Ore. The two children are staying in RVs with their families after leaving their homes due to the fire danger.

through 4.7 million acres in 10 states, according to the National Interagency Fire Center. More than 30 people died, and entire towns have been decimated. In California, Washington, Oregon, and Colorado, evacuation orders drove families from their homes.

The effects of the fires are light in many regions, with only a pale gray haze in the air. But in others, that haze has thickened and grown yellow or orange, sending air-quality meters into unhealthy or hazardous territory.

Federal air-quality ratings range from 0 to 500, with any rating over 150 “unhealthy” or worse. The air-quality rating in Spokane, Wash., near several large fires, hit 499 on Sunday, and the school district, which planned to offer families remote and in-person options, pivoted to all-remote instruction on Monday. News sites in Oregon post running lists of schools closing or shifting to remote instruction because of poor air quality or other hazardous fire-related conditions. Even some schools that reopened for in-person instruction decided to restrict children to indoor-only activities, a difficult decision when COVID-19 safety measures emphasize outdoor gathering and good ventilation.

Liz Pray, a school nurse in Moses Lake, Wash., 175 miles east of Seattle, said poor air quality led her district to switch from a hybrid model to all-remote learning on Monday, after only three days of instruction. But she’s worried about how she and her colleagues will balance COVID-19 and wildfire-related health issues when schools bring students back to campus.

“A lot of our return-to-school plan depends on open windows, going outside for breaks,” said Pray, who described the gray sky outside her office window as “apocalyptic” even though the closest fire is 100 miles away. The air-quality rating there was 300. “We’re going to have to decide which is the lesser of two evils: wildfire smoke or the risk of COVID exposure.”

Pollution from wildfires is risky for children with asthma and other respiratory ailments and allergies, and those with cardiovascular problems, experts said. The American Academy of Pediatrics has warned that children are more susceptible than adults to lung damage from wildfires’ smoky air because their lungs are still developing and their airways are narrower.

Triggers for Many Children

The effects of the wildfires will touch far more children than those who must flee their homes, experts said. Even if they live far from one of the fires, hearing their parents or teachers talk about the fires, or seeing images of charred homes online can upset

“

A lot of our return-to-school plan depends on open windows, going outside for breaks. We’re going to have to decide which is the lesser of two evils: wildfire smoke or the risk of COVID exposure.”

LIZ PRAY

SCHOOL NURSE, MOSES LAKE, WASHINGTON

children, experts said. That’s especially true for children who have experienced other wildfires, or pandemic-related traumas such as losing a loved one or having to move. “Disasters mean there will be triggers,” Gurwitsch, the psychology professor, said.

That means parents and teachers can anticipate a range of responses in children, from temper tantrums and clinginess in the youngest to irritability and concentration problems in older children, she said. And teachers will have to adjust their expectations, recognizing that students will not be able to absorb lessons and assignments the way they usually do.

Melissa Brymer, who studies child trauma as the director of terrorism and disaster programs at the National Center for Child Traumatic Stress, a joint project of Duke University and the University of California-Los Angeles, said it’s important for teachers and parents to hold conversations with children to acknowledge their worries and correct any misinformation they might have. Adults can reassure children by describing the plans they’ve developed to keep them safe. She also suggested that adults help children feel more hopeful by doing something positive, such as writing notes of thanks to firefighters or donating canned food to evacuated families.

Canceled Instruction

In districts hard-hit by wildfires, those kinds

of considerations are a long way off. Brent Barry, the superintendent of the 2,500-student Phoenix-Talent school district, 15 miles south of Medford, Ore., said half of the families he serves and 10 percent of his staff members have lost their homes to a fire that ripped through 3,200 acres starting Sept. 8, the day before his schools were set to reopen. His school buildings, thankfully, were spared, but most are without water and electricity, so they can't provide remote instruction, Barry said. Nonetheless, the district managed to set up several meal-service sites, including one in a local Home Depot parking lot.

"Our role right now is just to meet our families' basic needs," he said.

Three hundred miles to the north, where a fire has charred 187,000 acres so far, Oregon's Santiam Canyon schools had been set to begin Sept. 10, even as the fire burned at a safe distance. But the winds changed that, and the blaze roared down local streets, forcing families to flee in the middle of the night. Many have lost their homes.

"It's traumatizing, the magnitude of what's happened in the blink of an eye," Todd Miller, the district's superintendent, said on a phone call from the cab of his white Dodge Ram pickup truck. As he drives the streets, sizing up the damage, he's got a chainsaw in the back, "just in case" a charred tree falls and blocks his way. He was relieved to find all three of his schools—a K-5, a 6-12, and a brand-new middle and high school—thick with smoke inside, but otherwise undamaged.

He's not sure when he can reopen his schools, even for remote instruction. Right now, his focus is on his students and their families. Some are still fighting to save their homes or searching for lost loved ones. Others will return to homes without power or water, or too smoke-choked to live in.

"I'm just extremely concerned about my students' mental health," Miller said. "The COVID crisis alone, that isolation and lack of structure, the problems kids faced with abuse or [getting] food, were already huge challenges. And now we've got most of our kids with this new traumatic event. It's a hard thing to say as a superintendent, but I told my families, right now school is the least of your worries." ■

Education Week librarian and data specialist Maya Riser-Kositsky contributed research for this story.

— Getty + Laura Baker/Education Week



Published September 2, 2020, in Education Week

Triaging for Trauma During COVID-19

By Sarah D. Sparks

To say educators should expect rough emotional weather this fall is an understatement.

Regardless of whether they return online or in-person, students will start school this fall amid a perfect storm of ongoing trauma: a nationwide pandemic, economic instability, and racial unrest over police killings, as well as months of anxiety and isolation caused by school and community shutdowns.

Before the pandemic, federal data suggested nearly half of all U.S. children had been exposed to at least one traumatic event, and more than 20 percent had been exposed to several. Studies from across health and education fields have found that students who experience sustained traumatic stress, known as "adverse childhood experiences," are more likely to have academic and behavioral problems in school and cognitive and emotional difficulties outside of it.

By this summer, more than 3 in 4 school social workers in a national survey reported that a majority of students at their schools needed serious mental health supports in the wake of the pandemic and school closures.

"We've been told if we do basic [social-emotional learning] for these kids, everything's going to be fine. While that may be enough for upper-middle and upper-class schools, it's not going to be true for these schools with major capacity issues," said study co-author Ron Avi Astor, a pro-

fessor and chair of social welfare at the University of California Los Angeles's graduate school of education. "Everything we do there may not be effective if you don't organize and build capacity, not in a crisis mode ..., but for the long-term, like you would in a war."

Traditional aspects of trauma-sensitive instruction—such as using a whole-child approach, rethinking student discipline and other policies, and promoting a sense of belonging for students—had already started to gain traction among schools before the pandemic. But the new and disparate contexts for learning this fall will make it both more challenging and more critical for teachers to identify and support the students struggling with toxic stress.

Here are a few ways schools can address student trauma as schools reopen.

1. Expect distress, but don't pathologize students

"I think there's a danger that schools will pathologize kids. I think teachers are going to see a lot more extreme behaviors, but that's not necessarily kids experiencing [post-traumatic stress syndrome]," said Mary Walsh, a professor of counseling and developmental psychology at Boston College. "We know all kids are being affected by the pandemic, this fluid, traumatic event, but only about a third of kids who experience trauma develop serious issues that can be-

come PTSD. If we put the right protective factors in place, kids have enormous resilience.”

Walsh advised teachers to work this fall with each other and school counselors and social workers to review the academic, social-emotional, behavioral, and health status of each student in their incoming class.

Online classes may even offer new opportunities to get a read on students. Some schools are asking counselors to sit in on academic subject classes, such as math, to check students’ engagement and emotional temperature while the teacher focuses on instruction.

Colleen Perry, coordinator of City Connects, a student support program, at Pottenger Elementary in Springfield, Mass., said she and other school counselors held weekly video conferences for K-5 students in the spring in which they could sing and play games with classmates. They plan to continue this fall.

“It was really nice because we interacted with students that we normally wouldn’t have interacted with because we never knew that they really needed as much interaction,” she said. “In school, they were the quiet ones, ones that really weren’t seen as high-needs kids just because they didn’t act out in their behavior.”

2. Coordinate holistic supports to remove sources of toxic stress

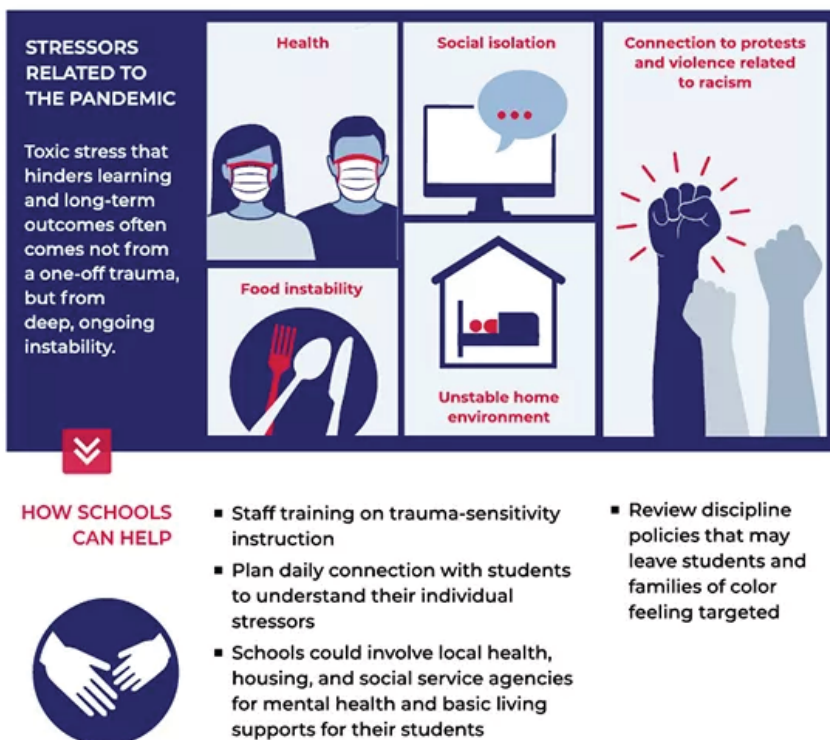
The toxic stress that hinders learning and long-term outcomes often comes not from a one-off trauma, but from deep, ongoing instability, particularly relating to a child’s home and family. In Astor’s survey from earlier this summer, more than 60 percent of the school social workers also reported that more than half of students at their school had “profound, immediate, urgent needs” related to health problems, food instability, and individualized student tutoring.

“To do a trauma-informed-care school where everybody’s focused on great interactions, but 80 percent of your kids are hungry, doesn’t make sense,” Astor said.

Schools can help to buffer students from these stressors by coordinating with other agencies and community groups to provide a multi-tiered system of academic, social, and basic living supports. Districts from Bucksport, Maine, to Los Angeles, Calif., are connecting students to online mental health and sometimes school clinic services.

In Salem, Mass., where a majority of students are students of color or those from low-income families, school and city agencies have been working to create more substantive supports for vulnerable students. The shutdowns this spring “exacerbated all the barriers that existed before

Sources of Traumatic Stress



SOURCE: Education Week reporting

Icons: Getty

for a lot of our kids who have experienced systematic oppression and injustice,” said Ellen Wingard, the director of student and family support at Salem public schools, leaving teachers and staff concerned about students and families who were struggling.

The pandemic provided the incentive to get a long-planned interagency initiative off the ground. The school district, mayor’s office, local health, housing and social service agencies, and community organizations launched a website and initiative called Salem Together to provide wraparound supports to children and their families.

“We were able to pretty quickly put into place a protocol for all teachers to reach out to their kids and ask a few simple questions—Are you OK? Do you need food? What’s going on with your family?—and the system could report back to support staff and all our partners and coordinate a ton of volunteers ready to help,” Wingard said.

Beyond streamlining help to students, Wingard said the initiative has also provided an outlet for teachers and the community who wanted to support each other. “It gave us a way to know what

was going on so we didn’t feel completely helpless,” she said.

The district is bracing for rising unemployment and housing instability this fall in addition to the pandemic, and the district’s leadership team, principals, assistant principals, and special education coordinators have been receiving additional training on trauma-sensitive instruction in the runup to school restarting in mid-September.

3. Consider unintended consequences of school policies

Protests this spring and summer for racial justice following police killings of black people have reignited concerns about disproportionate discipline practices in schools, as well. A new Education Trust study on equity issues in social-emotional development found students and families of color strongly valued social-emotional development in schools but considered school policies and services to be focused on “fixing” them rather than supporting them.

Some students of color have already been

subject to harsh discipline for not fully participating in remote learning during the school shutdown this spring. A 15-year-old Michigan student was jailed for not completing remote homework when a judge found that violated her probation. Education Trust researcher Nancy Duchesneau, an author of the Education Trust study, said that while students are less likely to experience overt exclusionary discipline like suspensions in an online classroom, teachers may more easily exclude students they consider disruptive or overlook those who are not actively reaching out online.

As school leaders develop policies and norms for new remote and socially distanced classrooms, it is important to build in ways to help students and families feel safe and respected. For example, Duchesneau recommended limiting the use of dress codes for home learning, and suggested allowing students to attend without broadcasting video, or teaching students how to set up a virtual screen behind them that can protect their privacy if they feel uncomfortable

allowing others to see them or their home environments.

4. Promote a sense of belonging

Finding ways to identify and leverage students' strengths rather than deficits can bolster their resilience to stress.

"Students—and especially students of color and students from low-income households—have been stepping up in many ways during this time: taking on caretaking duties, becoming more active in protests against police brutality and racial injustice," said Duchesneau of Education Trust. "Adults in schools really need to understand that these skills may not present in a very particular way. If you have a student who has a lot of caretaking duties at home and comes into school every day, but may miss a homework assignment here or there, instead of seeing that student as deficient in their self-management skills, educators should be recognizing that strength."

To ease anxiety, particularly among stu-

dents who are unable to see their peers outside of school, teachers can build in time during remote classes for students to talk to each other or to share concerns about their lives in and out of school.

Koslouski worked with Massachusetts elementary teachers last year to create professional development curriculum and training in trauma-informed instruction and with administrators to review school discipline and other policies. Teachers now are using both online class meetings and parent-only online meetings to provide strategies on how parents could recognize signs of trauma and manage their own and their children's stress.

"I think we need to be really clear that what happens now with regard to our relationships and social connections can change the brain and build in resilience for kids," said Wingard of Salem public schools. "We're in a place where we need to empower and acknowledge the incredible strengths of our kids, even the kids who have experienced trauma." ■

Published May 19, 2020, in Education Week

Helping Students Grieve From a Distance

By Arianna Prothero

Phillip Perry was a principal who lived and breathed his school. He attended every ballgame and pep rally at G.W. Carver Middle School. And when his colleague, Karen Hassell, would visit his building, she radioed for Perry because he was never in his office—preferring to be in the classrooms and hallways with students.

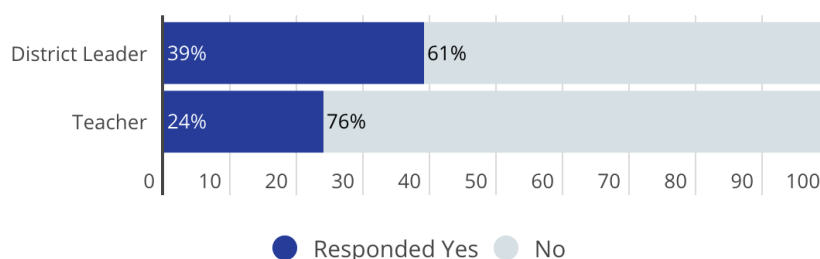
Perry died March 31 of COVID-19 at age 49. His decline was swift, catching students and teachers at the Waco, Texas, school off guard.

"People were shocked and devastated," said Hassell, who works for Transformation Waco, a school improvement initiative at Carver. "For students, for many of them, this was probably the first person they knew to pass away."

While Perry was new to the job at Carver, having started at the beginning of the 2019-20 academic year, he had deep roots in the community. He grew up in Waco and worked previously as an assistant principal in the district.

Now Carver, like dozens of other schools across the country, is grappling with how to help students not only say goodbye to beloved educa-

Have teachers in your district received training on how to talk to students who are grieving the death of a loved one?



SOURCE: EdWeek Research Center survey, 2020

tors, but also conceptualize the loss.

"We are worried about how [students] will react when they return to a school building and they have a new principal," said Hassell. "They left for spring break and they never got to see Mr. Perry again."

As fatalities from the coronavirus pandemic

rise, so, too, does the likelihood that schools will have to confront a death of a staff member, parent, or even a student from COVID-19. Principals, teachers, and school mental health support staff face unique challenges in helping students navigate their grief and fears in the era of stay-at-

home orders and social distancing.

Even for a veteran school psychologist like Benjamin Fernandez, who works for Loudoun County Public Schools in Virginia, and helped his district respond to the September 11th terrorist attacks, the pandemic presents new stressors he is trying to figure out how to respond to. Among them: simply not having the answers.

"My daughter asked me, what did you do with your first pandemic?" he recalled. "And I was like, 'kiddo, this is my first pandemic.'"

Novel Virus, Novel Challenges

One of the biggest challenges for educators is how to memorialize someone who has died when social distancing rules prevent students from gathering.

Funerals and other rituals that bring people together to remember someone are far more than a formality, they're an important part of the grief process and fulfill a deeply human need.

"Now that the funerals are only for immediate family and they can't come together, it has made it incredibly difficult for people in terms of their grieving response," said Christina Connolly, the director of psychological services at Montgomery County Public Schools in Maryland. "Then you have the fear of someone [else] dying on top of it."

Schools need to have a plan in place for honoring a staff member or student who dies, she said. Otherwise, students may take it upon themselves to organize their own gathering without taking proper precautions. Connolly's district learned this first-hand.

Shortly after the pandemic closed schools in Montgomery County, a student died from an unrelated incident, and dozens of grieving friends gathered in a park, flaunting social distancing guidelines and the governor's orders banning large crowds. Police had to break up the gathering.

Although not the same, virtual memorials can help fill that need to grieve communally, said Connolly. Students can make videos honoring a staff member's life.

This can be a stand-in until students and staff can gather again, said David Schonfeld, the director for the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement.

Schonfeld, a leading national expert on school crisis management, said he is getting calls from school leaders across the country asking how they should plan to memorialize a deceased staff member.

"You don't have to get together and hold up candles," said Schonfeld. "You have to just figure out how to create community. You can do that remotely. More formal commemoration can wait. Those [ceremonies] are to make sure you aren't

“

Now that the funerals are only for immediate family and they can't come together, it has made it incredibly difficult for people in terms of their grieving response. Then you have the fear of someone [else] dying on top of it.”

CHRISTINA CONNOLLY

DIRECTOR OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SERVICES,
MONTGOMERY COUNTY PUBLIC
SCHOOLS, MARYLAND

forgetting about the person who dies—you won't forget. So focus first on the acute grief.”

Educators also need to be prepared for the fact that school closures may delay students' ability to fully process a death in their school community.

Denial is a normal reaction to death, said Franci Crepeau-Hobson, a professor of school psychology at the University of Colorado Denver and a specialist on crisis response and intervention. Because students haven't been in school—or at least in their school buildings—they may not fully comprehend the loss of a friend or teacher until they're back in their physical classes and that person is not there.

Educators also need to be on the lookout for when a healthy grief response veers into something unhealthy, said Crepeau-Hobson. But that is much more difficult for teachers and support staff who are only interacting with students through video conferencing, phone calls, or emails.

"That's the crux of the issue—it's tricky enough when we've got them around us physically," Crepeau-Hobson said. "The way we go about it in the school setting is close monitoring and checking in with the individual but also primary caregivers, teachers, and other people who know the kiddo. How do we do that virtually? Frequent contacts with the family, with the individual. And if you've got a whole classroom of kids who are impacted because they lost a teacher, it does mean regular check-ins with those kids and their families."

During those check-ins, school personnel need to be on the lookout for students who "seem kind of stuck and not starting to move forward

and learning to live with the loss" said Crepeau-Hobson. They should pay particular attention to students who already struggle with depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, or a previous loss. While keeping in mind that the vast majority of students are going to be fine in the long run, the point to be concerned, Crepeau-Hobson said, is when the grief is long, pervasive, and extreme to where it's interfering with a student's day-to-day functioning or meeting developmental milestones.

"It's not a clear black-and-white line in part because there's no set grieving period for people," she said. "It's really kind of a judgment call. We do expect people to be sad and to have difficulty paying attention. We do expect to see academic performance drop off."

But schools must brace for other suffering unique to a pandemic: that students, at least in some hard-hit areas, will be coping with several deaths within their families or school communities.

"Those [deaths] become more than additive, they almost multiply each other," said Schonfeld. "In some communities, children are experiencing multiple losses related to the pandemic and that can be particularly challenging and overwhelm children because they haven't processed or coped with one loss, and then there is another loss," he said. In addition: "Children are not just grieving death, but the loss of stability, safety, and graduation ... children grieve those other losses as well."

This can be very difficult for teachers, who often don't know what to say to grieving students because of a lack of training on the issue, said Schonfeld. A recent Education Week Research Center survey found that only 29 percent of educators said that teachers in their district have received training on how to talk to students about the death of a loved one.

'We Don't Need to Reinvent the Wheel'

While the coronavirus pandemic is a once-in-a-century crisis, school leaders are not in entirely uncharted waters, say experts.

Schonfeld reminds principals and superintendents seeking his advice that many of them have had to deal with a student or staff death happening over the summer while students were out of school. And there's lessons they can draw from that.

For example, it's important to tell students what happened quickly before rumors and misinformation about the death spread, said Schonfeld.

"We don't need to recreate the wheel here," said Fernandez, the psychologist in Virginia. "What can we do to our current processes so we can use them remotely?"

A reading specialist for his district, named Susan Rokus, died from COVID-19 in late March. She was

73 years old and the first coronavirus-related death in the area, according to local media.

School and district-based mental health providers don't have the same access to students since school buildings closed in mid-March, so the district has taken the approach of "empowering the caregivers," said Fernandez, by supplying them with informational documents on how children and adolescents grieve.

"The caregiver training was a very specific training that we had developed and sent out to families basically helping them understand the facts," he said. "Helping them know what those common reactions are, across all ages, as well as how to respond. What kind of simple things that families can do to help their child through this challenging time and then when to get help."

That approach is especially helpful as the academic year comes to a close, said Jill Cook, the assistant director of the American School Counselor Association. Schools should prepare parents with tools to help their children over the summer as they become even more disconnected from schools, which are a major source of mental health support for children in many communities.

"One of the things schools can do as they begin to wind down here is provide information and resources to families and students about coping strategies, about community resources, if something happens and they feel like they need more help," she said.

Routine is an important source of comfort for children in riding out the emotional turmoil that comes with the death of a loved one, and the summer break threatens to up-end routines even further, she said.

In response to Principal Perry's death in Waco, the school offered grief counseling to students and teachers as it normally would, just online instead of in-person. School leadership is working with students to plan some kind of memorial for Perry.

In the meantime, the school, whose mascot is a panther, has been using the tagline "paws up for Perry" as it tries to keep students motivated in their remote learning. It's giving students decals with the tagline printed across a heart with a pawprint.

"We have tried to keep his spirit alive," said Hassell. "I think it's important to acknowledge that he was a vibrant member of the school community and that he was taken from us too soon. We want to honor what could have been—I think he would have done great things at Carver." ■



—Taylor Callory for Education Week

OPINION

Published September 9, 2020, in Education Week

A Back-to-School Plan Built Around Student Connection

How connection can empower learners

By Jill Gurtner

We know that there is much we won't be able to control this coming school year. We also know that this is the world we are

being called to help prepare our young people to enter. We should be equipping them to build a more sustainable future, one where the decisions we make now recognize the value of living beings for many generations to come. To do so, we must give our students the safety to connect with each other and their learning communities—even if they must do so online.

At my community school, we have chosen to ground our back-to-school approach in deep, meaningful connections between students and staff and root our learning partnerships in the things that matter most to our learners in their communities. Our experiences with a learner-centered, community-grounded approach have demonstrated that when students develop a strong sense of identity and agency in one area, they are able to transfer the strategies they develop to other contexts. This strategy has proven effective even as the pandemic has challenged it.

This fall, we will keep every student connected to a small and stable advisory group that serves a purpose well beyond simply providing a "home base" and a space for announcements. This structure gives students a sense of belonging, validation,

and a deeper understanding of themselves as learners. It is the place where each individual develops their sense of self, their strengths, their natural talents within a group, and their ability to collaborate.

Only by accessing the support of others can students master the skills to thrive within a diverse community. Maintaining this advisory space through our emergency closing this spring was a lifeline for many of our learners—students and adults.

Each student will also join a learning cohort based in one of two interdisciplinary learning strands that will integrate English/language arts, math, science, social studies, wellness, and the arts. One cohort (Growing Our Futures) will utilize our school garden and a study of philosophy; the other (Coming of Age) will be grounded in a study of human relationships and youth agency.

Each strand will have an online course to foster the predictability and flexibility necessary to learn, while ensuring that students can successfully navigate an online learning environment. Additionally, each strand will offer students the opportunity and support to connect—either synchronously online or face to face as we are able—to their own identity, the experiences of others, and to a learning community. Together, our students become better readers, thinkers, designers, communicators, and problem-solvers.

In the middle of the summer, I joined a few of

Forget Mindless Memorizing! Strengthen Students Through True Stories!



Hear Ruby Bridges reflect on her struggles during school desegregation as a 6 year-old.

[Civil Rights Activist: Ruby Bridges](#)



Then help your students learn from young Ruby's experience through meaningful discussion:

1. What can you do to encourage others to be brave?
2. How can you support others when they face challenges?

Hear more stories of courage and hope.

[Primary Source - Video Interviews](#)



YOUR STUDENTS CAN DISCOVER THEIR PLACE IN THE WORLD!



Students learn about their world and environment through well-being discussions:

1. How does your physical environment impact you?
2. If a community cannot meet people's basic needs, what problems occur?

Learn More at socialstudies.studiesweekly.com

EMPOWER YOUR STUDENTS THROUGH SOCIAL STUDIES!



EXPLORE
Kalpana Chawla

OVERCOME
Harriet Tubman

COMMUNICATE
Fannie Lou Hamer

UNITE OTHERS
Larry Itliong

ADVOCATE
Susan B. Anthony

GROW
Rachel Carson

PERSEVERE
Geronimo

LEAD
Martin Luther King Jr

DREAM
Thomas Edison

COLLABORATE
Wright Brothers

Order Today! store.studiesweekly.com

my colleagues for a “weeding party” in our school garden. It was the first time I had seen and interacted with some of them in a non-digital format in months. What a joy it was to connect, even at a distance.

As we each worked to cultivate the soil in our part of the garden, I learned of the extraordinary planning they were doing for the fall. Each educator had considered the likely constraints and challenges we all would face. But they had found purpose in what mattered most—preparing our students for the real issues they are facing—and had connected with others to realize this purpose.

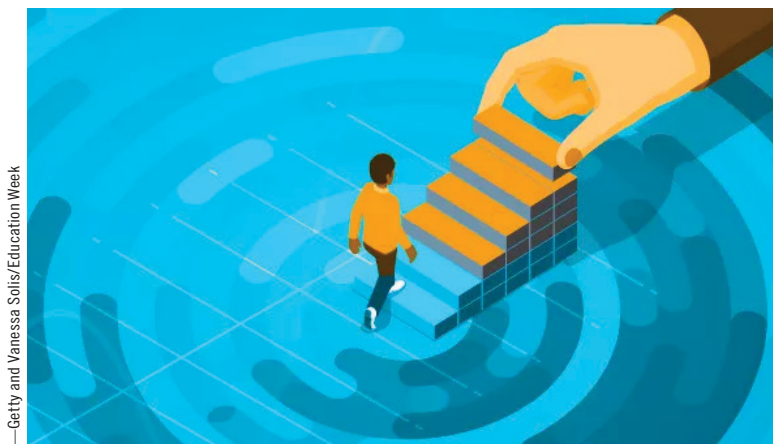
All around the country, school leaders like me are creating and updating plans to prepare for an uncertain school year. Incredible passion, care, and dedication are going into this work. And there is also fear—a lot of fear.

Schools all over the country are being put in truly untenable situations with an unimaginable amount of responsibility. Because we all tend to turn to what we know best in times of uncertainty, we leaders are often relying on a set of tools that are not well designed for the current context, and the stakes are high. I have been a part of plenty of planning meetings with well-intended leaders driven by fear and limitation as well, lately.

What a contrast I experienced in that school garden. Both groups were dealing with enormous uncertainty and legitimate fear. Both are made up of intelligent, dedicated, passionate people who care deeply about young people. It seems the difference lies in what is driving the decisions. As humans, we have both an incredible capacity for fear and an incredible capacity for creativity. As educators charged with preparing our young people for what will surely be a future of continued uncertainty, we must choose wisely.

By focusing on connections to make the learning environment “safe enough” for every learner to engage in the productive struggle of learning, we are honoring that the deepest learning is rooted in real-world challenges. But we must also remember that it is joy and a sense of belonging that fuel that productive struggle. Every school community must foster that safety to allow for the risk of learning and growth. I am not sure there is anything more valuable that we can model for our young people. ■

Jill Gurtner is the principal of Clark Street Community School in Middleton, Wis. She has been a high school administrator for more than 25 years. Previously, she taught high school science.



— Getty and Vanessa Solis/Education Week

OPINION

Published July 23, 2020, in Education Week

Here's How to Protect Students' Mental Health

Research suggests a number of ways to strengthen those all-important teacher-student relationships

By Heather C. Hill

Of the many worries troubling educators this summer, one of the most pressing is: How do we safeguard students' mental health as we go back to school?

We know that some students will arrive for the new school year deeply affected by the COVID-19 pandemic or by ongoing racial injustice in the United States. Others will simply be distressed by the “new normal” of school and community life.

Schools can and should screen for and respond to trauma. But even when trauma is not evident, students benefit from mental-health protection. Making sure teachers have strong relationships with their students provides such protection and fosters a fertile environment for learning.

Research suggests ways that teachers can build these important relationships—even virtually, since we now know that many schools will start the new school year online. Studies at the college level indicate that relationship-building in a digital environment may take extra effort. But it can be done, and the existing research from face-to-face settings is a good place to start.

Researchers often characterize teacher-student relationships based on:

- The degree of teacher sensitivity and attunement to children's needs
- The consistency of teacher-student interactions
- The level of trust between teachers and students, and
- The amount of scaffolding the teacher provides for student academic growth.

Several classroom-observation instruments, including the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) and the Culturally Responsive Observation Protocol (CRIOP), measure these interactions.

Teacher-student interactions matter quite a bit for a range of student outcomes. Sensitivity, consistency, trust, and scaffolding support students' engagement and effort, more peaceful relationships with peers, better academic outcomes, and fewer risk-taking behaviors.

Strong relationships with teachers can be especially protective for some students. For example, relationships with stable, caring adults have been shown to mitigate the risks of poverty. As with so many features of American education, however, the students who most need this re-

source may not be the ones who most often get it. In some (but not all) studies, nonwhite students reported worse teacher-student relationships than white students in the same school.

Given the importance of teacher-student relationships, one would expect a robust literature evaluating programs intended to improve them. This is not the case. A few recent, high-quality studies do, however, provide evidence for several promising approaches.

One approach focuses on improving teachers' own mental health. Matthew Hirschberg and colleagues at the University of Wisconsin-Madison found that randomly assigning a group of aspiring teachers to a preservice course on mindfulness reduced those teachers' implicit bias and fostered their provision of emotional, instructional, and organizational support to students. The 22-hour course emphasized kindness, compassion, and managing one's emotions. Another mindfulness program, CARE for Teachers, saw similar results.

Still another approach aims to create emotional bonds between teachers and students. A study led by Jason Okonofua at the University of California, Berkeley, found that a short course in empathy cut student-suspension rates in half over the school year and also improved teacher-student relationships among students who had been previously suspended. Another study, led by Hunter Gehlbach, now at Johns Hopkins University, showed that when high school students and teachers received information about shared interests and personality traits, Black and Latinx students experienced improvements in end-of-quarter grades. This program draws from the social-psychology adage "likeness begets liking" and suggests that simple activities designed to reveal similarities between teachers and students may build understanding in classrooms.

None of the above programs teaches classroom management or pedagogical techniques; instead, they help teachers to process stressful situations with more ease and to remain open-minded about and empathetic toward students.

Another way to address teacher-student relationships is through directly addressing pedagogy. My Teaching Partner, a one-to-one coaching program based at the University of Virginia, uses self-recorded video and an observational rubric to help teachers reflect on teacher-student interactions and plan for improvements. Evaluations of the secondary school version of this program have shown

strong impacts on the emotional, instructional, and organizational support provided to students, on student engagement, and on student-test scores. In one study, the program also eliminated the racial gap in disciplinary referrals between Black and non-Black students.

Culturally responsive pedagogies strongly emphasize teachers caring for and connecting with students and may be particularly useful in improving teacher-student relationships. In the Double Check program, also from the University of Virginia, coaches helped teachers review and then improve their use of culturally responsive teaching practices. As compared with teachers in a control group, teachers randomly chosen to receive coaching engaged in more proactive classroom management, experienced more cooperation from students, and were less likely to refer Black students for disciplinary action.

Schools not able to begin new programs right now might consider other changes to classrooms that have shown promise in correlational studies (rather than the more rigorous causal ones). "Looping"—the practice of keeping students and teachers together for more than one school year—is one of these. A correlational study by Brown University researchers found that having a repeat teacher improved student achievement at all grade levels and in high school boosted attendance and reduced disciplinary infractions. On the other hand, studies also show that in general teachers are less effective when teaching new grade-level material, so the decision to loop might be a difficult one for schools.

Several correlational studies also suggest the importance of establishing effective classroom routines early in the year. Strong classroom routines may reduce teacher-student conflict, encourage student engagement, and enable a caring classroom environment.

In the coming school year, teachers face monumental challenges, including providing instruction across a mix of face-to-face, virtual, and asynchronous settings. Amid the disruptions almost sure to come, motivating students to engage and persist—work that starts with creating trusting relationships—will be more critical than ever. ■

Heather C. Hill is a professor of education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and studies teacher quality, teacher professional learning, and instructional improvement. Her broader interests include educational policy and social inequality.

OPINION

Published August 16, 2020, in Education Week's Finding Common Ground Blog with Peter DeWitt

First Things First: Trauma Sensitivity Before Initiatives

By Matthew Fleming

It is no secret in public education that administrators and teachers often complain about the increasing number of initiatives. Every year, new ideas are piled on in order to tackle, and hopefully mediate, very real challenges and performance issues. And while the list of initiatives grows longer with each passing season, the list of successes, for the most part, does not.

The result has been an exponential growth of new programs, protocols, and projects that are assigned for every classroom teacher and site administrator. For most districts and schools, there are more options than the average ice cream shop has flavors, except that educators today are expected to consume every single one. The resulting malaise of apathy and burnout has been called "initiative fatigue" (Freedman, 1992). This term is at least 30 years old and now describes an entrenched reality for millions of education professionals in the United States.

How is it that we find ourselves with so many initiatives and so little success? Is there something that is holding our students back despite our best efforts at applying systemwide, research-based solutions?

The short answer is that we are facing an epidemic. It is not COVID-19, although SARS-COV-2 has not helped, but it is something that is actually more pervasive and which attacks our students' bodies and minds with equally devastating results. In the United States, it is estimated that over half of children have experienced at least one significant trauma in their lives. These events have life-altering implications, contributing to the anxiety, depression, and even suicidal ideation well into adulthood (Filmore, Crouch, 2020).

And while the research into the long-term mental-health effects upon children is just beginning, the primary instrument used to assess childhood exposure to trauma was introduced a quarter of a century ago to identify correlation between childhood trauma and obesity. Setting

aside that half of all adolescents are estimated to have at least one mental-health condition, the top five health risks for children are all strongly correlated with the experience of traumatic events. There is no escaping the fact that childhood trauma affects every aspect of a person's mental and physical health (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2010).

It is no longer a question as to whether or not our students arrive at the schoolhouse carrying the baggage of trauma. They most certainly do. As educators, we also need to understand what this means. Several studies in the last decade have shown that the experience of adverse childhood experiences does exceptional damage to cognitive function. And the more trauma experienced, the greater the deficits in learning (Blodgett, & Lanigan, 2018). Some studies now indicate that slightly more than 1 in 5 American children has experienced three or more major life traumas before the age of 17 (Bethell, Newacheck, Hawes, & Halfon, 2014). Yet most of these students will not be assessed, nor will they receive any therapeutic interventions. The result is impaired cognitive function and increased barriers to learning across all academic disciplines.

What then are we to do? Most school systems rely upon parents and teachers to report when students are experiencing learning deficits. Our experience shows us that this is inadequate. Children who carry the effects of trauma may present with obvious behavioral issues or as if they have severe learning disabilities, while others may be largely successful. A child who has experienced poverty, food insecurity, and neglect from infancy may have missed critical stages in language development, which will hamper their ability to comprehend academic writing. Many times, teachers, parents, and the students themselves struggle to understand why they are experiencing difficulty. That's the way it works with trauma. Trauma affects mental processes and functions that are unseen, often guarded by a sense of shame and guilt. And it can take years to unravel the complex wounding given the best-case scenario.

If we continue merely to add more ideas and programs to our instructional models and strategies, we will continue to miss this point. Many states, like mine, require that our instructional models be research-based. But what does that mean, really? Presumably, these practices showed promise with certain, carefully selected sample groups of students and teachers. The parameters of the studies were clear and inviolable. But, for the most part, these studies ignored the messiness of such things as trauma exposure. Again, several studies have



—Getty

indicated that exposure to three or more of these adverse childhood experiences is significantly correlated to issues with concentration, language processing, school engagement, and overall academic success (Bethell, et al., 2014; Blodgett, & Lanigan, 2018). When a student's memories of trauma are triggered, the primary centers of language and visual processing are affected. How then can we expect traumatized children to respond to instruction that has been developed for those who do not experience such disruption?

The heart of the matter

We spend a great deal of time and treasure attempting to improve instruction. Most of us could easily develop a list of 5-6 initiatives that our system expects us to use. I came up with seven off the top of my head while writing this. I get it, we need to address the specific learning needs of English-language learners and students with disabilities. Cultural understanding is crucial in our schools. But, what if we truly made mental health and healing of childhood trauma a priority?

Most of the schools where I have worked offered minimal mental-health support. When I was an elementary principal with nearly 1,000 students, we had to share a therapist with several other schools. Think back to the statistics I mentioned. If they stayed true with my school, then there were more than 200 students with significant trauma. Does that sound like a reasonable caseload for one therapist?

Consider this: New research into positive childhood experiences suggests that therapeutic intervention improves the traumatized child's situation dramatically. Where a child with significant adverse experiences has a greater risk for almost every negative outcome from prison to premature death, those for whom positive experiences are created are more likely to thrive and reduce the trend, even if their environment continues to present adversity (Crandall, Miller, Cheung, Novilla, Glade, Novilla, Magnusson,

Leavitt, Barnes, & Hanson, 2019).

We are in the midst of a crisis that is in reality an enormous opportunity. Even though trauma is pervasive and creates enormous challenges for our students, we might be able to change things if we are willing to shift our resources strategically and develop partnerships with mental-health resources in our communities.

Will addressing trauma be the "silver bullet" that solves all of our achievement woes? Probably not. But, I must ask, would we ignore any other problem that affected more than half of our students this way? We would fight with everything we had to re-

move anything that created such a barrier to learning for so many children. Yes. Cost is a factor. But it is past time to look for creative solutions.

I encourage you to listen to the stories our students have to tell. We might well discover that what preoccupies their daily thoughts is not what we are thinking about when we come to work in the morning.

We can always do more. ■

Peter DeWitt is a former K-5 public school principal turned author, presenter, and independent consultant who provides insights and advice for education leaders. This guest blog was written by Matthew Fleming, an administrator from the central coast of California who has almost three decades of experience as a teacher and principal at the elementary, middle, and high school levels.

Copyright ©2020 by Editorial Projects in Education, Inc. All rights reserved. No part of this publication shall be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted by any means, electronic or otherwise, without the written permission of the copyright holder.

Readers may make up to 5 print copies of this publication at no cost for personal, non-commercial use, provided that each includes a full citation of the source.

For additional print or electronic copies of a Spotlight or to buy in bulk, visit www.edweek.org/info/about/reprints.html

Published by Editorial Projects in Education, Inc.
6935 Arlington Road, Suite 100
Bethesda, MD, 20814
Phone: (301) 280-3100
www.edweek.org

EducationWeek®

SPOTLIGHT

Get the information and perspective you need on the education issues you care about most with Education Week Spotlights

The Achievement Gap • Algebra • Assessment • Autism • Bullying • Charter School Leadership • Classroom Management • Common Standards • **Data-Driven Decisionmaking** • Differentiated Instruction • Dropout Prevention • E-Learning • ELL Assessment and Teaching • ELLs in the Classroom • Flu and Schools • Getting The Most From Your IT Budget • Gifted Education • Homework • **Implementing Common Standards** • Inclusion and Assistive Technology • Math Instruction • Middle and High School Literacy • Motivation • No Child Left Behind • Pay for Performance • **Principals** • Parental Involvement • Race to the Top • Reading Instruction • Reinventing Professional Development • Response to Intervention • School Uniforms and Dress Codes • Special Education • STEM in Schools • **Teacher Evaluation** • Teacher Tips for the New Year • Technology in the Classroom • Tips for New Teachers



VIEW THE COMPLETE COLLECTION OF EDUCATION WEEK SPOTLIGHTS

www.edweek.org/go/spotlights