CRPE
REINVENTING
PUBLIC EDUCATION

Student mental health and well-being:
A review of evidence and emerging solutions

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About this series

This report is part of a series that aims to definitively assess the best available evidence on how the Covid-19 pandemic and its aftermath has affected America's students. The series is part of a broader effort, the Evidence Project, which aims to elevate research that can help inform school systems' responses to the pandemic and increasingly, pandemic recovery.

Since 2021, the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) has compiled hundreds of studies and convened panels of experts to interpret what the data show in three key pandemic-related areas. Those include the pandemic's effects on students' academic progress and emotional well-being, and the specific impact on students with disabilities. We will update these assessments and potentially add more topics as new data become available.

These "consensus panel" reports aim to present a coherent account of what we know, don't know, and need to know at this stage of the pandemic and pandemic recovery. The reports are designed to help school system leaders, community leaders, policymakers, researchers, philanthropies, the media, and others to define ambitious goals and clear metrics that ensure our education system meets every student's needs over the coming years.

The initial series of consensus panel reports informed CRPE's inaugural State of the American Student report, which published in fall 2022. That report outlined the contours of the crisis American students faced during the pandemic and offered a path to recovery for all students—which must include building a new and better approach to public education that ensures an educational crisis of this magnitude cannot happen again.

This report and subsequent publications, including future State of the American Student updates, will track progress toward repaying every student the educational opportunities they are owed after this traumatic and disruptive period. Our goal is to provide an ongoing assessment of student needs and a look forward toward recovery and renewal.

About the Center on Reinventing Public Education

The Center on Reinventing Public Education is a research organization at Arizona State University's Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College where transformative ideas are rigorously examined and tested, and research informs action. We are truth tellers who combine forward-thinking ideas with empirical rigor. Since 1993, we have been untethered to any one ideology but unwavering in a core belief: that public education is a goal—to prepare every child for citizenship, economic independence, and personal fulfillment—and not a particular set of institutions. From that foundation, we work to understand what it will take for public education to meet the needs of every student, in order to inform meaningful changes in policy and practice.

Overview

Schools in the U.S. opened in the fall of 2022 looking more "normal" than they had since the Covid-19 pandemic started. However, many young people still suffer from the repercussions of the pandemic. Much of the national debate regarding school supports has focused on troubling student achievement trends. But recovery efforts cannot be limited to mathematics and reading achievement. The closure of school buildings, combined with pandemic-induced health, economic, family, social, and political challenges, created significant threats to the mental health and well-being of young people, as well as the adults who educate them. The pandemic led to missed opportunities for students to develop their social and emotional competencies, and it had clear, negative impacts on the mental health of many young people.

Though neither the origins nor the solutions to these challenges are the sole responsibility of schools, educators are nonetheless essential partners in addressing them. With that responsibility in mind, CRPE convened a panel of education and youth development experts in summer 2021 to review emerging evidence on the pandemic's impact on the mental health and well-being of young people and on their opportunities to develop socially and emotionally in K-12 schools. Our review of dozens of studies and surveys revealed that during the first year of the pandemic, a significant portion of young people experienced negative impacts on their mental health and well-being and on their opportunities to develop key social and emotional competencies. To better support young people and educators, the panel recommended in 2021 that the field should: better understand students' diverse experiences; develop innovations for addressing social well-being; engage directly with communities; and create new ways of assessing SEL goals and learning environments.

In the year since the initial report, additional evidence of the pandemic's effects has mounted. At the same time, evidence regarding the many other threats to the well-being of young people has highlighted the importance of understanding and addressing factors such as systemic racism and the role of social media. To deepen our understanding of these issues and inform potential solutions, CRPE reconvened an expert panel in summer 2022 and continued to gather new data around youth mental health and wellness.

The 2022 panelists included: David Adams, chief executive officer at the Urban Assembly; Catherine Bradshaw, professor at the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia; Robert Jagers, vice president of research at the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL); and Velma McBride Murry, professor at the Peabody College and the School of Medicine at Vanderbilt University.

The panelists arrived at three calls to action that reflect the challenges and opportunities young people are facing. Specifically, they called for policymakers and advocates to:

1. **Embrace technological innovations that can improve student well-being while still honoring the fundamental need for human relationships.**

2. **Overcome turf wars and divisions; embrace "big tent" thinking for social and emotional development and well-being support.**

3. **Build new, integrated monitoring and response systems to address the urgent needs of young people.**

New evidence deepens cause for concern

Since the panel last met in 2021, many new studies underscored the evolving youth mental crisis. Some key findings include:

- More than 1 in 7 young people reported experiencing "a major depressive episode" in 2021.

- As of April 2022, 70 percent of public schools reported that since the beginning of the pandemic, the percentage of students seeking mental health services at school had increased.

- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported that emergency room visits due to suicide attempts among girls aged 12-17 were over 50 percent higher in the spring of 2021 compared to the same time in 2019.

- In a 2021 survey of more than 34,000 LGBTQ+ 13-24 year olds, 45 percent reported that they seriously considered committing suicide in the previous year.

- According to the CDC's Youth Risk Behavior Survey Data Summary & Trends Report, 57 percent of teenage girls in the U.S. felt persistently sad or hopeless, and 30 percent seriously considered suicide.

- Throughout the pandemic, schools tried but often struggled to marshal the human and material resources needed to support increasing numbers of students facing mental health and social and emotional well-being challenges. This was especially true for rural schools and those enrolling large shares of students who live in poverty.

- Although many school reopening plans prioritized young students over older ones, evidence suggests that adolescents were more likely than their younger counterparts to experience negative mental health effects from school closures.

- Teachers, who have a daily presence in the lives of young people, reported rates of stress that were nearly two times pre-pandemic levels.

Some but not all of these issues can be traced back to 2020, when schools closed and most young people missed out on opportunities to develop socially and emotionally amid peers and trained educators. Schools are a primary place for students to learn and apply skills such as self-regulation, teamwork, and social awareness – a set of competencies often referred to as "social and emotional learning" or SEL. These competencies are crucial for helping children and adults navigate societal challenges, and they are essential for preparing students to succeed in school, work, and civic life. When schools closed, students' relationships were disrupted, as were their opportunities to participate in activities – both in the classroom and beyond – that build teamwork, resilience, and other aspects of SEL. The pandemic's impacts on mental health and on SEL are distinct but related, and it is critical that our recovery efforts address both.

The severity of the challenges facing America's young people was reinforced in October 2021 when the U.S. Surgeon General took the unusual step of declaring a national emergency in child and adolescent mental health. This severity, however, has been rising for years. Even acknowledging the shock of the pandemic, most of the new and worrying data are consistent with a trend that long predates 2020. Rates of suicidal ideation among Black, Hispanic, and

white girls, which had been declining throughout the 1990s, began to rise at a rate of about 3 percent annually in the mid to late 2000s. A 2017 Pew Research survey of drug use and health found that the reported rate of feelings of depression among teens had increased by 56 percent from a decade earlier.

This crisis also isn't solely the result of school closures or the experience of living through the pandemic. Youth mental health is deeply embedded within wider risk and resilience factors that influence a young person's developmental trajectory. Systemic racism is a profound risk factor for Black, Hispanic, Indigenous, and Asian young people. Anti-gay and anti-trans bias, including political debates and legislative actions, are also significant stressors. Another potential contributor to young people's struggles is the growing prevalence of behaviors that can be harmful on social media. Although these platforms can help young people find and form communities and express themselves, a recent meta-analysis of 14 studies found that social media use increased among young people during the pandemic and was associated with increased anxiety and depression. These and other stressors and risk factors collect and compound, influencing young people in ways that are complicated, variable, and often impossible to disentangle.

Put simply, the pandemic did not cause but has both illuminated and exacerbated an extremely complex set of challenges that defies simple solutions.

Both simple assessments and simple remedies are misguided

In 2022, the panel re-emphasized the complexities of the present challenges facing youth and those who support them. Simple policy changes, even if welcome, will likely be inadequate on their own. Evidence from the last year only reinforced this perspective.

As noted above, pandemic school closures cannot be blamed for the declining markers of youth well-being in the years leading into the pandemic. The relationship between school closures and harm to students' well-being during the pandemic is not straightforward, either. Isolation and disruption harmed many young people, and the concerning mental health outcomes discussed above might be at least partially attributable to these factors. At the same time, a study released in December 2022 reported teen suicides plummeted in March 2020, when the Covid-19 pandemic began in the U.S. Teen suicide rates remained low throughout that summer before rising in fall 2020, when many K-12 schools returned to in-person instruction. The authors also indicated that returning from online to in-person schooling was associated with a 12 percent to 8 percent increase in teen suicides. They suggested that exposure to bullying during in-person schooling could be a contributor, particularly for the most vulnerable youth. Combined with other reports of improvements in students' mental health and well-being during remote schooling, these findings point to a need to understand home and school learning environments and to modify those environments to meet individual students' needs.

Some changes to legislation and practices that were enacted in response to the pandemic, some of which were funded by federal Covid-19 relief money, paint a complicated picture. Recent research suggests that these policy changes and funding sources may have contributed to improved SEL opportunities for students. As of August 2022, states had directed approximately $1B toward initiatives related to SEL, well-being, and related supports for students and staff.

This funding was used for a variety of activities including professional development and the adoption of SEL curricula, but we do not yet have evidence regarding the effectiveness of these investments on improving student outcomes. Moreover, it is likely that many such opportunities are not offered equitably, as was the case before the pandemic.

Amid the warranted focus on the well-being of youth and resources to support them, the panel noted that it can be easy to overlook the stress on the caregivers, educators, and healthcare providers who support young people. RAND reported in January 2022 that principals and teachers reported frequent job-related stress at twice the rate of workers in other professions. A study that examined teacher burnout found significant relationships between anxiety about Covid-19 and stressors associated with the demands of their teaching job, communications with parents, and support from administrators. The same study found no relationship between teacher burnout and demographic characteristics such as race/ethnicity and teaching experience. Of course, educators are not the only group that experienced threats to mental health. A survey of parents published in 2021 found that the percent of parents reporting high stress increased significantly and remained above pre-pandemic levels throughout 2020. One panelist noted that the support systems students often rely on, including healthcare providers, community-based organizations, youth advocates, and advocacy centers, are also likely stretched well beyond their capacity and resources.

Understanding challenges, risks, and resources beyond school

The panelists stressed that impactful solutions will require more evidence on the many intersecting contexts that shape young people's social and emotional well-being and their web of support, in and out of school. They identified three particularly salient areas for deeper inquiry.

First, the panel discussed the field's limited understanding of the connections among students' social contexts; their academic, social and emotional outcomes; and the broader political and cultural environment. The stresses from pandemic-related school closures, systemic racism, and other factors almost certainly interact and build on one another in ways that neither scholars nor educators fully understand. As such, educators lack clear, evidence-based instructional strategies to support young people dealing with these overlapping stressors.

Second, the lack of evidence on how social media and ubiquitous online communication affect young people's well-being makes it difficult to promote healthy approaches to using these tools. Young people's heavy reliance on social media and other online forums has amplified the need to equip them with the skills and dispositions to use and interpret media appropriately. Misinformation and disinformation about Covid-19, systemic racism, and other societal trends may exacerbate stress that many young people are already experiencing. A recent poll found that 9 in 10 young people don't trust the information they see on social media, which is promising. But the ever-changing nature of online engagement points to a significant need for evidence-based approaches to helping students use technology in healthy ways.

Finally, the panel noted that we lack strategies for replacing the many youth-centered organizations that failed to resume operations after closing. After-school programs and other organizations are vital to youth support in many communities, and they are a valuable source

of opportunities for young people to develop supportive relationships and engage in activities that promote social and emotional development. We do not yet have systematic data on how much pre-pandemic operations have resumed or whether other resources have been made available to young people. Without a more systematic account of the gaps that emerged, it is hard to strategically direct resources to communities to rebuild lost resources.

Comprehensive solutions to address students' well-being are rare

Despite nearly universal recognition of the social and emotional challenges that students are navigating, the panel noted too few examples of innovation and systemic solutions. Gathering such evidence will require systematic data collection and assessments of effective responses by schools. Both of those require time – for interventions to be designed and implemented at scale, and for student outcomes to materialize in measurable ways.

Several factors might be contributing to a relative lack of innovation and systemic change. First, decades of research on education reform, including initiatives that focus on SEL, suggest that implementing large-scale changes is enormously complex. The urgency associated with tackling pandemic-related youth mental health and SEL concerns may have led schools to adopt programs and practices that can be quickly integrated. One panelist has observed many school districts turning to packaged, "off-the-shelf" SEL solutions (which may last only as long as the federal relief funding) instead of engaging in the deeper and more complex work of integrating SEL into core teaching and learning practices. Research on school-wide SEL strongly suggests that to be effective, these efforts must be integrated into the broader work of the school and accompanied by supports such as high-quality professional learning opportunities for teachers.

The panel also expressed concern that in many communities, educators and leaders believe that time spent on SEL could crowd out time for academic instruction. Yet, evidence does not support this zero sum perspective. Academic learning is inherently social and emotional, and integrating all those aspects can effectively promote whole-child development. Indeed, SEL is foundational to core academic instruction. Instructional tools that promote integration, along with communication strategies to help educators build support in their communities for whole-child learning, could be enormously helpful.

Rising conflict around teaching the history of racial oppression in America, the language of inclusion, and the subsequent conflation of those issues with social and emotional learning is also hampering the ability of schools to respond to student needs. Educators, principals, and superintendents are navigating these conflicts with few road maps, and many are worried that certain actions will ignite a storm in their community. A fall 2022 survey of school system leaders revealed the extent of these concerns. Roughly one third reported that they had paused or modified services. SEL and mental health supports were among the services most affected.

Still, rays of hope have emerged. The panel noted that some teachers and administrators are paying deliberate attention to young people's agency and giving them greater voice and choice in their learning and development.

Educators, after seeing families, caregivers, and community groups step in to support young people in the pandemic, more readily see them as partners in young people's learning and development. One national initiative that aims to better partner schools and families is Leading

with SEL, which provides advocacy and engagement resources to school and parent leaders seeking to lead such work locally. Other districts and schools have adopted SEL assessments that establish a common language around skill development. The results of those assessments can help inform the coordination of SEL services across instructional activities, behavior supports and other aspects of school life, such as individual goal-setting for students.

The call to action: More integrated strategies to address diverse needs

The panel concluded the discussion with a note of optimism but urgency. Rather than suggesting a focus on individual classrooms, schools, or programs, they insisted that the change must be at the systems level. They issued a three-part call to action.

1. **Embrace technological innovations that can improve student well-being while still honoring the fundamental need for human relationships.**

Technology to support learning took center stage during the pandemic. Teachers, schools, parents, youth advocates all tried new tools. Many of these accommodations did not work well for all students. However, this crash course also revealed opportunities to support young people in developing their social and emotional competencies. As we noted in our first report, technology holds potential to substantially scale support resources. Virtual parent-teacher meetings ease the burden for parents to engage with their child's educators. Virtual counseling sessions make counseling more accessible to students who live in communities or attend schools that are short on counseling capacity, and telemedicine has shown promise as an approach to reducing absenteeism. Technology lessens the stress of engagement for some students. Asynchronous learning techniques, such as posting lectures online to be viewed independently, can open up time in the school day for more interactive discussion and collaborative engagement, which can be facilitated in ways that support SEL.

Cultivating and establishing quality relationships among young people and between young people and adults is a central need, and it can happen online in the right context. As Julia Freeland Fisher, director of education at the Clayton Christensen Institute, recently wrote, educators and students need technology that "offers a mix of more interactive learning experiences and various forms of virtual mentorship, career exploration, and support." Schools will need better technology to be ready for the next emergency, but it will be crucial that they consider how technology can promote well-being and SEL by supporting rather than replacing in-person interactions.

Key questions as we seek to prioritize relationships in technology-rich environments:

• What SEL and mental health challenges are technology best suited to help solve?

• For whom are technology solutions best suited? How do different young people experience technology solutions, and how can advances in technology be leveraged to adapt to these differences?

• How can those who develop or select technology tools for use in schools help ensure that technology doesn't replace human connection but instead facilitates it?

2. Overcome turf wars and divisions; embrace "big tent" thinking for social and emotional development and well-being support.

SEL is often framed as a distinct concept that competes with other associated initiatives like restorative justice, positive behavior interventions, combating absenteeism, attending to mental health, anti-bullying, school climate improvement, character education, or mindfulness. This competition, the panel argued, is not helpful to the overarching goal of social and emotional health and development.

The panel also argued that education leaders should take a holistic approach that includes all of these different but aligned efforts to cultivate social and emotional well-being in schools and the community. Similar to how some school systems have recently undertaken exercises to sketch the profile of a graduate, schools should consider the profile of a citizen. What kind of person do they hope young people in their community will grow up to be? This effort must avoid narratives that appear to pit SEL against other critical goals of education. As a recent report from the Aspen Institute argued, efforts to prepare young people for the workforce and for citizenship, while also helping them develop a sense of self, can be mutually reinforcing. Communicating with all stakeholders about these connections could not only help prevent the politicization of SEL but also counter the belief that promoting SEL necessarily detracts from schools' academic goals.

In addition to identifying the big-picture outcomes that communities prioritize for their students, districts and other institutions must collaborate with families to help young people develop in specific areas such as conflict resolution, emotional regulation, and responsible decision-making.

The hope is that a more holistic definition of youth success can also help rally other stakeholders (like businesses, religious institutions, schools, city governments) to see their shared role in young people's long-term success, and help combat the perception that SEL initiatives are add-ons that compete for scarce time with academic learning.

Key questions as we engage broad coalitions of support for SEL and well-being:

- How should school systems and other organizations define success, and how do they integrate that definition with academic and career success?

- What policies and practices will promote this integrated vision of success? (e.g., SEL practices that can be integrated into academic instruction; supports for students' mental health; improved supports and working conditions for educators.)

- How can we mobilize other community-based organizations to support the integrated vision of student success? In light of the political and legislative threats to SEL and other curricular issues, SEL supporters and advocates will need to connect with other organizations and groups – including those who might not share the same political perspective – to collaborate in supporting all learners. Organizations that provide after-school programming, for instance, could be valuable partners in both providing and advocating for the programmatic and policy changes that are needed.

3. Build new, integrated monitoring and response systems to address the urgent needs of young people.

As the pandemic stretched from the spring of 2020 to the summer and then fall, it became clear that many young people were suffering. As we shared in our 2021 report, researchers, health care facilities, and, in a few places, districts and states were able to gather and analyze data on the well-being of young people but the evidence was fragmented, incomplete, and difficult to act on. It is now very clear that, by and large, our communities do not yet have the systems in place to monitor and respond to the urgent needs of our young people or to understand in what ways and how well they are developing essential social and emotional competencies to thrive in good and hard times.

New York City does a bi-annual assessment of students' social and emotional competencies, which then map students' strengths and strategies onto SEL inputs across the school. In Pennsylvania, Allegheny County has created an integrated data system that connects school data and local public health data. Analysts have then used these data to examine relationships among chronic absenteeism, mental health, and involvement with the county's Department of Human Services. This type of integrated system could help policymakers and educators understand and connect many of the factors that are influencing students' well-being, in a way that avoids placing the entire burden on the school system.

Key design questions related to monitoring supports and outcomes are:

*   Who is best positioned to design and manage a community-wide data system dedicated to youth well-being and development? Who is already doing this work, and how have they used the system to help schools and other agencies address the well-being of young people ?

*   Who else should be marshaled to the effort besides the school system? What measures will take best advantage of a community's resources?

*   What measures need to be tracked, and what barriers need to be overcome to enable policymakers to develop and administer these measures?

*   How can we monitor outcomes to inform changes in policy and practice?

*   What guidance and resources can be made available to educators, families, and young people to help them generate appropriate, useful insights from data? How can we prevent violations of privacy or other inappropriate uses of the data?

The panel of mental health and SEL experts emphasized that the social and emotional well-being of students today is a serious concern that defies simple solutions. Helping young people right themselves emotionally will require many individuals, organizations, and agencies to organize around a unified vision of what success looks like for young people and to build the tools to measure progress toward that vision. The panel also recognizes that the field has a great deal more to learn about this deeply complex set of issues.