COVID-19 Showed Us How Important It Is to Focus on Adolescent Well-Being: Here Is What School Systems Should Do

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Introduction

"You start to notice kids that have been doing well just fall off or don't show up for a few days. When you reach out, they're forthcoming that they're struggling with something at home or they're feeling depressed and overwhelmed." – High school math teacher, Rhode Island

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on adolescent well-being and mental health has been well documented. In one striking statistic, suicidal ideation and suicide attempts among adolescents were about one and a half times higher after the onset of the pandemic compared to the year before. These additional stressors did not affect youth equally; adolescents of color and those from low-income backgrounds have been disproportionately impacted.

While schools have responded with new programs and routines, our interviews with families and teachers in four New England high schools that serve low-income communities (see inset: Data Collection and Methods) expose how ill-equipped New England schools were to address adolescent well-being during the pandemic. This raises troubling questions about how well it was being addressed before the pandemic.

Specifically, our interviews reveal that as adolescents suffered, under-resourced families looked to schools for help that didn't come. While teachers made heroic efforts, they reportedly felt unprepared to deliver the support students needed. And schoolwide efforts were often inconsistent or limited.

States and districts should be using this as an opportunity to reassess how they support adolescents and their families. This doesn't require radical redesign, fancy technology, or additional staff. Schools can make important changes with the resources they currently have. Specifically, school systems should:

- Tap community assets to dramatically deepen supports for the well-being of young people and their families
- Give teachers mentorship and support in social-emotional learning, not just training materials
- Use leadership and data to make sure social-emotional well-being a schoolwide priority

The need for social-emotional support has never been more pressing. While students re-engage with peers and teachers—some of whom they have never met in person—concerns about the Delta variant, increasing homelessness and housing instability, and ongoing calls for racial justice persist. If adolescents don't receive the social-emotional support they need, they will be forced to manage the stressful challenges of life with a half-empty toolkit—and those consequences could be long-lasting.

Data Collection and Methods

In partnership with the Barr Foundation, the Center on Reinventing Public Education conducted longitudinal interviews with ten teachers and seven parents across four school systems in Connecticut, Rhode Island, Maine, and Massachusetts between January and June of 2021.

Our sample was composed of three school districts and one charter management organization (CMO), which were selected to help us understand the experiences of marginalized students and their families. The school systems in our sample have a higher percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch than the average district in their respective state, and a higher than average percentage of students of color. Educators taught a range of subjects, including math, English, science, art, library science, and career and technical education. Three of the seven parents in our study had a high school student with a disability.

We interviewed families and educators for thirty minutes each month. The researcher started each interview by asking interviewees for updates from the previous month and then moved to a set of questions focused on one or two topics. These topics included, but were not limited to, student learning experiences, student and family well-being, teacher well-being, family and school communication, stimulus planning, college and career planning, and instructional innovation.

Adolescents Need Our Help, but Parents and Teachers Say High Schools Are Falling Short

For adolescents, isolation from social distancing and remote learning occurred precisely when they were focused on developing empathy and social skills. Prolonged isolation at this critical time could lead to less goal-directed behavior and a greater likelihood of addiction.

The pandemic has already impacted adolescents' abilities to learn, make decisions, and concentrate. In one study, students identified depression, stress, and anxiety brought on by the pandemic as primary impediments to learning. One parent confided, "I think that the long-term effects of this on kids' perception of school and the kinds of skills they will learn will far outlive [the pandemic]."

These challenges have heightened the need to support adolescent social-emotional well-being. Schools across the country responded by increasing their social-emotional support for students in response to the pandemic. But while students said that they are more likely now than before

the pandemic to have access to programs that help them when they are feeling stressed, 57 percent still don't have access to any services at all. A separate review of social-emotional supports in the 2020–21 school year found fewer than half of reviewed districts had practices or curriculum to address student well-being.

As adolescents suffered, under-resourced families looked to schools for help that didn't come

Three out of the four districts in our interview sample were in urban areas with high rates of COVID-19. The impact of the pandemic was especially felt by adolescents in low-income households and by adolescents of color, whose parents and caregivers often juggled multiple jobs or lost employment entirely. As families struggled, they had little additional capacity to support their children.

Parents across our sample recognized the need to support their adolescents and found themselves checking in more frequently about their childrens' school, social lives, and emotional state. But parents said they needed help. As one single father put it: "I'll get an email saying, 'What can you be doing better to support your kid?' And I'm like, 'I'm a single dad. I work six days a week. We got a roof over our head. We got food in the fridge. They got doctor appointments they go to. I am the support. What are you doing to support the kid?' What do they want from me?"

A Rhode Island parent, whose native language is not English, said that teachers urged her son, who is in self-contained special education classes, to return to school once hybrid classes were an option. But when he returned to school, the bullying he'd experienced before the pandemic resumed. In response, he opted to remain in remote classes—to the detriment of his learning. At a loss, his mother noted, "He did try going back, but he came home after a few days and said that he does not want to go [to school] anymore." A language barrier and her lack of understanding of the U.S. education system made it challenging for her to secure the social-emotional support her son needed from school. This was starting to affect his motivation. Previously he wanted to enroll in a two-year college after graduation, but now he is planning to "just find a job and start working," a decision she found troubling. "I don't really agree with that route," she confided.

Teachers reported feeling unprepared to deliver the support students needed

While teachers made heroic efforts to support students in every district we profiled, many lacked the support and training to fully help their students.

Every teacher in our four-district sample said they'd received training in social-emotional learning, but none found the resources sufficient. A teacher in Maine expressed frustration that educators were supposed to play the role of "social workers," supporting students' social-emotional well-being "with little training or support." The teacher admitted, "There is no school wide expectation around social-emotional learning."

A Connecticut-based English teacher was skeptical that the training she received was sufficient to meet her students' needs. "We had SEL training. There was a big, fat Google folder shared with us. It had everything from ice-breakers to more substantial lessons, and teachers were run through a PowerPoint. Which I guess is supposed to make us proficient in SEL?" Her doubts extended to the protocols she was expected to implement. "We use a 'Mood Meter' to locate students' emotions," she shared. "Students are asked to pick a color. The kids are like, 'You don't have a color for how I'm feeling right now, because I'm black inside.' My students are asking, 'Miss, where's "violent"? Because that's how I feel right now.' "

This teacher's concern only grew as she witnessed how stress from the pandemic contributed to violence within her community. "There's this weird stuff going on in several communities [as a result of anxiety and social unrest]," she shared. "I see ripples of it here." She reluctantly added, "The suicide protocol got kind of slippery. There I am, essentially in their bedroom [via Zoom] having a conversation, and they tell me they don't feel like getting out of bed today. How do I interpret that, as a mandated reporter?"

Not all teachers reported feeling overwhelmed, however. For some, a combination of training, schoolwide support, collaboration, and flexibility gave them the tools and confidence to support students. Reflected one teacher in June 2021: "I think the main goal for next year is actually culture rather than academics. I can't expect students to drop everything at the door and think, 'I'm in English class.' I have to teach the whole student, give them a chance to express themselves, to bring their full self to class." The teacher went on to explain a range of ideas for her to "blend academics with social and emotional learning," informed by her own research, ideas gleaned from peers, and new schoolwide protocols.

Schools tried to address adolescent well-being, but efforts were inconsistent or limited

Schools tapped new and existing programs to support social-emotional well-being, yet these ultimately had limited reach or were insufficient to address the challenges facing adolescents.

Advisories were a common way for districts to deliver social-emotional support to students in the 2020–21 school year. In this model, schools used a regular class period to check in with students. One parent said that daily check-ins with the advisor had been instrumental for her daughter, who has a 504 plan and suffers from anxiety. The daughter's advisor offered daily encouragement. The parent noted, "It's designed to be a way for kids to have somebody other than their parents to check in with about academics and social-emotional stuff." However, districts in our sample were not always able to maintain advisories as schedules changed between hybrid and in-person learning.

Teachers tried to connect with their students outside of advisories, but these efforts weren't consistent. In Rhode Island, a teacher said that some, but not all, had started incorporating check-ins into classroom routines: "Some teachers start with student well-being in the beginning of the class. They'll ask a reflection question or a quick opening question like 'How are you feeling, from one to ten?'"

Two districts implemented new programs or expanded existing ones to offer one-on-one support to students and families. One used stimulus funds to launch an afterschool program where staff worked directly with youth. A teacher who was part of the effort explained, "I think 80 percent of it is relationship building, trust building, coping with emotional mental health issues," while 20 percent is focused on academic tutoring.

Another district expanded an existing program that assigns a case worker to identified families. They have a weekly standing meeting, but families can reach out any time with questions or concerns. One father who was a part of the program described how it helped him navigate teacher demands: "I can call or text [the case worker] and say, 'Look, I got an email about [my child] not doing good in math.' I tried to respond and get some answers, but the teacher didn't get back to me. Then they will reach [the school] and they will get back to me." Unfortunately, both programs had limited reach and funding could not be sustained for the tutoring program.

In one Boston high school, we saw an inkling of the kind of whole-school effort that will be necessary for youth to have access to sustained, robust support. The high school combined check-ins, advisories, schoolwide expectations, and wrap-around support for families. One special education teacher described a survey that teachers could fill out if they identified student or family needs—internet, housing, mental health—and the administration would follow up. "If there's a concern about a student, we'll document it on a form which goes directly to a team [made up of] the school psychologist, the social worker, the school nurse. There's always someone that I can go to as a teacher if I have a concern about a student." The teacher said that social-emotional awareness is "a part of the school culture" and implemented throughout the school—not just inside the classroom. "The way that we talk at school is in a very therapeutic language. We say things like 'the story I'm telling myself,' or 'the way I'm feeling right now,' or 'what is happening in my body is. . .'"

Informed by their experiences in 2020–21, the school is adding a new dean in the 2021–22 school year to support the social-emotional well-being of students. The dean will oversee the school's social-emotional curriculum and act as an additional point person for students and teachers.

Conclusion: Building a System of Support

As teachers reflected on what they hoped the 2021–22 school year would look like, support for student social-emotional well-being topped the list. It is not too late for schools, districts, and states to invest in proactive, systemic social-emotional support for adolescents. States and districts have a historic opportunity to use stimulus funds to implement lasting changes. While many districts have prioritized supporting students' social-emotional well-being, the scope of the challenges confronting youth and their families demand creative new approaches, not more of the same. Going forward, we recommend that districts:

- **Tap community assets to dramatically deepen supports for the well-being of young people and their families:** Many schools around the country are already working to increase their investments in students' social-emotional well-being by setting aside regular time for advisories where youth build close relationships with peers and a trusted adult, or by implementing restorative justice and other culture-building programs that can support student well-being. These are good places to start, but are unlikely to

address the scope of the challenges youth confront. Innovative partnerships between community-based organizations and schools could complement school-level initiatives while expanding the web of support. The Boston Community Learning Collaborative, for example, offers an integrated continuum of services to support the well-being of Black and Hispanic students and families in Boston. The initiative is staffed by community members, who are more likely to share a cultural background with students.

- **Give teachers mentorship and support, not just training:** Teachers want to support the well-being of their students but they need materials, time, and dedicated adults in the building who can mentor them. Schools could tap counselors or community-based organizations to give teachers ongoing support and guidance.
- **Use leadership and data to make social-emotional well-being a schoolwide priority:** Schools can signal the importance of well-being through dedicated staff and leadership, like the Boston school that hired a new dean to oversee social-emotional supports. Districts can also consider tracking and publicly reporting indicators of social-emotional well-being. While not a widespread practice, it helps create the expectation that the entire school is responsible for youth well-being.

If school systems do not act now, the consequences will persist long beyond the pandemic.

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