

The Student Mental Health Crisis

Anxiety and depression are on the rise among today's students, causing school districts to become more aware that improving student mental health is as important as keeping students physically safe. Reports indicate that approximately 10 million students ages 13 to 18 require some level of professional help for a mental health condition. Good mental health is critical for children to have success both in school and in life, but those who are struggling may not have access to the treatment they need.

To combat this, many schools today are incorporating social and emotional learning (SEL) into the curriculum. By promoting empathy in the classroom through SEL teaching, schools can help build a stronger climate for their students. These soft skills—such as learning to manage emotions, showing empathy for others, and making responsible decisions—can help children better understand their emotions. SEL can also improve a child's state of mind and ability to focus, which can boost academic achievement. By integrating SEL practices into teaching, educators can enhance these important skills while creating a safe and supportive classroom environment.

It's also recommended that schools provide mental health services to address a range of student needs. Recognizing that schools have a limited capacity to provide these services, districts should strive to create comprehensive school-based interventions and coordinate mental and behavioral services for students. In order to meet the needs of today's students, school leaders should focus on creating a safe and nurturing school environment, supporting the physical and mental health of children, fostering their social and emotional well-being, and being prepared to address teen suicide through effective communication and support.

School Leaders Are Taking Action

School districts across the country are using student safety platforms as part of a more holistic approach to identify students who need interventions or require additional academic, social, physical, or emotional support services. These platforms help support students whether they're learning remotely or in a physical classroom, offering educators the peace of mind that students are being protected in the virtual environment—24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year. Districts are implementing these services and programs, including SEL and PBIS (positive behavioral intervention and supports), to create supportive learning environments that give students skills to navigate their lives and appropriately deal with the challenges they face. Our 1GPA contract is a way for school districts to utilize our student safety services, helping those who are interested in expanding their digital safety net save both time and money.

Districts are also working with their local community resources to extend wrap-around services to students in need. School leaders often involve local law enforcement professionals, social workers, and health professionals as part of their overall student safety plan, making supporting student safety and well-being a community goal.

Millburn Township Public Schools in New Jersey is taking a proactive approach to student mental health, using a student safety platform to help watch over the district's students around the clock. "We have medical, health, and wellness professionals and guidance counselors who provide for our students' wellness," said Dr. Christine Burton, the district's superintendent, "but oftentimes when students are having a crisis, it doesn't happen during the school day. It happens after hours, during holidays, or other times they're off campus."

All principals and board members were involved with the platform selection process, and the local police department also played a role in those early meetings. “We worked together to create a plan of policies and procedures,” said Evan Abramson, director of technology. “That way, anytime an incident occurred, everyone would immediately know what to do and how to act upon it.” By working in partnership with its surrounding community and implementing the student safety platform, the district can effectively protect its students. “We understand that it takes a village to raise a child,” said Abramson.

SEL is a critical facet of education for Millburn Township Public Schools and radiates across all students, teachers, clubs, parents, and community stakeholders—all of which understand that the well-being of students comes first. This commitment strengthened further during the COVID-19 pandemic, when students were learning from home. During that period, the district leaned especially hard on its student safety platform to alert it to potential issues being shared via email or in Google Docs. “When we got the alerts, we were able to provide services to students immediately,” said Abramson.

Protecting Students in the Digital World

Widefield School District 3 (WSD3) relied on a team of school counselors spread across 16 different campuses to oversee the social and emotional health of its students. Because these counselors wore many different hats, finding the time for one-on-one interactions with students was difficult at best. A student feeling emotionally unwell on a specific day, for instance, couldn’t always get the needed face time with a counselor.

“We may have had a student in crisis, but we really wouldn’t have known about it,” said Carlos Lopez, director of technology for the district. Helping to support students’ social and emotional well-being across diverse educational settings isn’t easy, which is why WSD3 decided to add a student safety platform to its technology lineup. The district adopted its platform nine years ago, and Lopez said it paid for itself within just a few days of implementation when a high school student sent potentially suicidal emails from a school restroom. The student safety platform flagged the problem and alerted administrators. “We had an administrator in the restroom within minutes,” recalled Lopez, “checking on the student to make sure everything was okay.”

“Historically, students had personal contact with counselors and individuals who were in a position of trust,” Lopez said. Thanks to larger classroom sizes, the adoption of educational technology, and the fast-paced society that we live in, that dynamic has changed considerably over the last few years. Add remote learning, social distancing rules, and school closures to the equation, and the need for a friendly watchdog that can help districts monitor their students’ mental health becomes even greater.

While youth behavioral health is a leading concern for schools nationwide, it is of particular importance for educational institutions in Idaho. The second-leading cause of death for Idahoans aged 15- to 34-years-old, suicide touches many educational institutions and their students and families every year in a state where the suicide rate is 58% higher than the national average. Nampa School District is no exception and is working to help students successfully balance the demands of a good education with healthy behaviors in a region of the country where that’s not always easy to attain.

Knowing the risks that its students face, and the fact that their socioeconomic status may be more challenging than that of students in other areas, the district is working hard to prevent suicides, self-harm, violence against others, and other tragic events from occurring. “We decided that we’re not just going to sit back and let this happen,” stated the district’s Director of

Communications and Community Relations, Kathleen Tuck. “We’re going to figure out a way to deal with it effectively.” Along with launching a suicide prevention training program, the district uses a student safety platform to identify students who might be in trouble and in need of help.

Many organizations involved with student mental health believe that schools and districts must build out more comprehensive student services in order to support students’ physical and mental health. However, this is not the sole responsibility of school districts—it requires a community-based solution, including communitywide conversations involving students, parents, and educators about academic and social pressures. We must all work together to ensure that our students are safe and healthy.

About the Author

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