



Student Voice Matters at the U

Last month NBC Nightly News hosted a special, *Kids Under Pressure: Covid-19's Toll On Learning*. The special gave insight into the effects that the pandemic - resulting in school shutdowns and transition to online learning - had on students in the K-12 space. The twist was that the story was told through the lens and voice of children.

We checked in with our Director of Social Emotional Learning to get her take on the primetime special, and to gain knowledge of the on-going support U Prep Schools has provided students, staff and families throughout the transition.

When asked her perspective on the special, Mrs. Pearson shared that, while the specifics covered were not shocking, she was delighted by the fact that the study gave way to student voice. "Uplifting their point of view" she said, "offered a more accurate standpoint and brought validity to the research. And, "similarly" she expressed, "the data shared {in the report outlined on NBC} supports the levers we pulled early on in the pandemic, and confirms that we are on the right track at U Prep."



Through U Prep's own research via survey to students, staff and families, we discovered gender disparities when responding to trauma. Young women reported a greater impact while the perception from the data is that young men didn't feel as much pressure. After digging however, the SEL team discovered that the young male students did in fact suffer but were less likely to share with detail. Mrs. Pearson noted that, "this lends itself to the reality of how culturally, our system is set up with barriers that discourage young men from expressing their pain, discomfort and trauma." To combat that fact, and other challenges found, social-emotional teams were established at each school for a laser focused approach. The teams, consisting of culture administrators, counselors, school social workers, parents and students support programming that offers resources to the entire community around social and emotional wellness.

This culture of support does not happen in isolation, so our network has enlisted support from partners such as Black Family Development and Karlin J. Tichenor & Associates who stand at-the-ready to push in and serve the entire U Prep community. We realized the importance of supporting our staff upon surveying the masses. We began to infuse in a normal school day and during professional development training, the practice of normalizing being aware and the importance of communicating when one is not *okay*. We found creative ways to support our staff in the virtual space, as they just as their students, missed communing with one another. Zoom Yoga, Mindfulness training, quarantine scavenger hunts, contests, virtual karaoke and other non-academic activities were the gateways to reconnecting with colleagues.

While we experienced a tumultuous year filled with unknowns and ever-changes, several positives were realized. One of the greatest improvements is the increase of our parent engagement. It is currently at an all-time high. Parents have mentioned that they feel heard, and that school leaders have availed themselves throughout the process. They appreciate the assistance that school social workers have provided to support them in the ideals of the school in the home space. Families have expressed their gratitude for the intentionality with which schools have hosted Parent University sessions, and town halls, and give them the freedom to express real needs and/or concerns. As Mrs. Pearson stated during the close of our interview, “education doesn’t take place without relationships”, and those relationships must ebb and flow between parent, student, staff and community.

In all, the circumstance of the pandemic, while challenging at times, thanks to the support from our social-emotional learning leaders was pivotal in building trust and strengthening relationships throughout the U Prep community. One of our team members expressed, “SEL saved our kids’ lives!” We are proud of the work we continue to do to support our students, families and staff. When we return to in-person learning, many of the strategies and structures put in place during the shutdown will remain, and student voice will be at the helm.

To view the NBC special, “Kids Under Pressure: Covid-19’s Toll On Learning” click [here](#).