COVID-19, Remote Learning, and
Students' Social-Emotional Development

Every child's path to adulthood—reaching developmental and
emotional milestones, learning healthy social skills, and dealing with
problems—is different and difficult. Many face added challenges
along the way, often beyond their control. There's no map, and the
road is never straight. Vivek H. Murthy, Surgeon General of the United States

Indications are that the COVID-19 pandemic has taken a toll on mental health and social emotional functioning. Added to this is the impact of events that have underscored social injustices.

For many students, the pandemic cut off access to normal interactions with peers and others outside of their family, and the racially-charged climate has produced social and emotional conflicts. For those already experiencing behavior, emotional, and learning difficulties, the concern is that the events have exacerbated their problems. Here we briefly highlight some ramifications for schools as they pursue initiatives to promote social emotional development.

Impact on Students' Social and Emotional Development

While we await a solid body of research on the pandemic's impact on students, the effect on mental health is widely viewed as extensive. In this context, 77% of surveyed school district leaders state that students' social-emotional development has been hindered, and about half of surveyed teachers report needing to spend more time providing students social-emotional support (Schwartz et al., 2021).

During the pandemic, technology (e.g., online instruction, social networking) played a significant role in connecting students with others (Wright & Wachs, 2021). While the pros and cons associated with intensive immersion in technology and social media continue to be debated, technology did enable students to interact with others outside their home. The impact of such online interactions on social-emotional development is under study, but there is no uncertainty about the role positive in-person interactions play in all facets of development (Orben, Tomova, & Blakemore, 2020).

Absenteeism is seen as making a bad situation worse. Research prior to the pandemic reported chronic absenteeism is associated with lower social engagement and with poorer social-emotional skills. Early into remote instruction, nearly a quarter of students were considered truant, and teachers reported much lower levels of student engagement. Research conducted during the pandemic reports that students absent more than a few times scored significantly worse on multiple social-emotional outcome measures (Santibañez & Guarino, 2021).

Currently, schools are reporting absentees and missing students
in greater numbers than before the pandemic.

What factors protect and what factors exacerbate coping with social-emotional challenges?

As the pandemic lengthened, psychological distress was moderated by closeness with parents. Teachers who provided social support also were associated with fewer negative mental health outcomes and greater student resilience to loneliness and isolation (Cooper et al., 2021). Clearly, the role of parents and school staff in fostering youngsters' well-being cannot be overstated. At the same time, a critical aspect of this supportive relationship is the well-being of the parents and staff. In a time when so many students require additional emotional support, greater attention is being given to caretaker compassion fatigue and emotional burnout (Pressley, 2021).

With respect to technology, at the beginning of the pandemic many students reported they preferred online instruction, and some performed better academically. Over time, however, the negative effects of remote learning on mental health and academic performance commonly were reported (Hamilton et al., 2021). This is consistent with prepandemic studies which linked greater screen time with lower levels of curiosity and self-control, more distractibility, difficulty making friends, less emotional stability, difficulty to care for and inability to finish tasks (Twenge & Campbell, 2018).

As expected, difficulty in coping during the pandemic was exacerbated for students with histories of learning, behavior, and emotional problems, and opportunities to help such students were reduced. For example, students with social anxiety may have temporarily avoided stressful social interactions through online instruction, but the lack of opportunities for controlled exposure to triggering stimuli interfered with countering their anxiety. And, on returning to in-person instruction, the concern is that they will feel heightened levels of anxiety and increased feelings of alienation (Morrissette, 2021).

> With respect to online instruction, students with special educational needs were overall more likely to report feeling disconnected from the school and less likely to engage. Schools were faced with a significant challenge in providing the usual special education support in an online format. Many students had to go without their usual supports and services for some time while schools struggled to adapt to online instruction. And, when online services were made available, the quality was uncertain, and some supports, of course, require in-person intervention.

In addition to the COVID-19 pandemic, events related to social injustices exacerbated coping with schooling. The impact probably was felt disproportionately and differentially by students from traditionally marginalized racial groups. For example, the combination of remote learning and racial justice protests contributed to students from low-income households and students of color reporting increased feelings of being depressed, stressed, or anxious. At the same time, families of some students of color reported that remote learning offered a welcome break from the racism prevalent in schools and, as a result, they were considering keeping their children out of in-person schooling (Hamilton et al., 2021).

> Clearly, more impact research is needed on students, differences among subpopulations and on best practices for schools to address social and emotional concerns.

What's Planned to Address Concerns About Social and Emotional Development?

In the fall 2020, the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) surveyed a nationally representative sample of 477 school districts with respect to their plans for supporting students' social-emotional learning and well-being (DeArmond, M., Chu, L, & Gundapaneni, P., 2021). The researchers report

> *(1) Most district plans (66 percent) mentioned students' social-emotional learning and well-being; (2) When it comes to supporting students, district plans were more likely to focus on creating safe environments (47 percent) than teaching social-emotional skills (31 percent). Of the approaches we reviewed, advisories and morning meetings were the most common ways districts supported students; and (3) Despite the clear interest in students' social-emotional learning and well-being, we also found very few districts (7 percent) taking a system-wide approach to collecting data on how their students were doing.*

Given current priorities it is not surprising that district plans were more likely to focus on creating safe environments than supporting social-emotional development. It is also noteworthy that more urban than rural schools included plans for addressing social-emotional concerns.

And while the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) offers opportunities for systemic changes, the legislation does too little to end the long-standing marginalized and fragmented approach to supporting and reconnecting with disengaged students and families (Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports, 2018). And the way relief funds are being used to enhance mental health services for students, and the way MTSS, PBIS, and Community Schools are being adopted also perpetuates limited approaches to the multifaceted and complex problems schools are trying to address at this time (Adelman & Taylor, 2020).

Going forward, there are calls for a more systematic approach to fostering social-emotional learning (SEL), especially as a tool in coping with and recovering from the pandemic (Cipriano et al., 2020; Varghese & Natsuaki, 2021). For example, the SEL WikiWisdom Forum (2020) worked online with 644 educators to generate a set of recommendations to the California Department of Education – see
https://www.beyonddifferences.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/WikiWisdom-BeyondDifferences-report-digital-7.6.2020_compressed.pdf

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About Moving Forward

Our Center stresses the many natural opportunities and "teachable moments for coping with challenges and promoting social-emotional development" in classrooms and schoolwide. More broadly, we recommend that concerns about addressing the well-being of students, staff, and families require transforming existing student and learning supports into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system – see
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/newinitiative.html.

Such a transformation entails fundamental systemic changes – see
>*Improving School Improvement*
>*Addressing Barriers to Learning: In the Classroom and Schoolwide*
>*Embedding Mental Health as Schools Change*
all three can be accessed at
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html

Concluding Comments

After exploring the impact of COVID-19 and remote learning on students' social and emotional development, Payton Ward concluded:

> *Looking to the future, it is essential that educators and policymakers support their students in ways that not only facilitate safe, equitable, and empathetic learning environments, but that centrally emphasize responsiveness and adaptability to an ever-changing societal landscape and student body*.

Our Center finds that what is needed is a fundamental, systemic transformation in the ways schools, families, and communities work together to (a) address major barriers to learning and teaching and (b) promote well-being (including a major focus on fostering social-emotional development). Such a transformation is essential to enhancing achievement for all, closing the achievement and opportunity gaps, reducing dropouts, and increasing the likelihood of schools being prized as treasures in their neighborhood.

To do less is to make values and legislation committed to every student succeeding simply rhetorical statements. As John Dewey wisely proclaimed:

> *What the best and wisest parent wants for his (her)*
> *own child that must the community want for all its children.*
> *Any other idea ... is narrow and unlovely;*
> *acted upon, it destroys our democracy.*

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NOTE: CDC offers strategies for schools and home to create a positive social and emotional climate and support social and emotional learning and for supporting the well-being of educators and students.

Social and Emotional Climate and Learning https://www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/sec.htm

Toolkit for Schools: Engaging Parents and Families to Support Social and Emotional Climate and Learning https://www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/sec/sec_toolkit.htm

Supporting the well-being of educators and students https://orau.gov/HSC/SHB/healthy-schools-toolkit/index.html

For more, see our Center's Quick Find on *Social and Emotional Development* http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/p2102_05.htm