

(6/3/26) **This continuing education resource is from the national Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports at UCLA**

### Featured

**(1) Can we reduce polarization in our school?**

**(2) Summer learning and social-emotional functioning**

And, as always, you will find

**(3) Links to more resources**

**This community of practice Practitioner is designed for a screen bigger than an iPhone.**

**For discussion and interchange:**

**>Can we reduce polarization in our school?**

**We received the following from a high school student:**

“The increased polarization between students on campus is negatively impacting the ability to express opinions and developing interpersonal skills.... This polarization is creating unnecessary division among students, and in many cases, they feel like there isn’t a safe space for them to share their opinions. It is harming our mental health, as there is a fear of being “canceled” simply for having a certain perspective on a topic. It’s also ruining the chance to build deep relationships: things are either black or white, and people are afraid to be in between.... We want to create a program that unites students and gives them a safe space to talk about different issues....”

This raises the questions:

*How widespread is this situation?*

*What are schools doing about it?*

We immediately thought about the work of John Rogers, a UCLA professor, and his online resources.

See

><https://seis.ucla.edu/news/political-conflicts-are-having-a-chilling-effect-on/>

><https://idea.gseis.ucla.edu/publications/educating-for-a-diverse-democracy/publications/files/diverse-democracy-report>

Here’s an excerpt of his take on these concerns:

...For young people to participate meaningfully in a diverse democracy, it is essential that they are able to join with others from different backgrounds to identify shared problems, build complex alliances, and take action for the common good. This is challenging work that requires they are familiar with the full story of our nation’s history.

That story embodies diverse experiences and cultures. It proceeds from the acknowledgment that race and racism have shaped and continue to shape American life. Young people need exposure to inspiring examples of groups working on their own and in coalitions to address these problems as well as exposure to ways that racist structures and practices too frequently have prevented or limited such efforts and diminished the life chances of fellow Americans. But, more than exposure, young people need opportunities to talk with one another about how, in light of these stories, they

can move forward to forge a more promising future. Public schools are uniquely positioned to support such learning....

It is hard work to lead high quality lessons on sensitive and often painful topics in American history and contemporary life, particularly when students come to these lessons with different cultural experiences, histories, and political stances. Ideally, teachers are provided with training and encouragement from district and civic leaders to lean into this work with skills and commitment. The lagging support in Purple and Red communities for teaching about diversity and the history of racism means that many young people will be less prepared to participate in an informed and thoughtful way in our multiracial society....

While principal commitments matter greatly, they are not sufficient on their own. District leadership matters. We found that efforts by district leadership to emphasize democratic education can make a sizable difference....

Public schools should be places where all students feel welcomed and respected, and experience opportunities to forge deeper understandings of critical issues, deliberate with evidence and through mutual regard, and envision ways to act together to create a better world....”

### Comments from the Field:

We sent this to a couple of colleagues to see what they suggest:

(1) “With the complete chaos caused by and inflamed almost daily by Washington D.C., this student represents millions of students who feel the same sense of isolation and anxiety. This generation wants to step up, but they are not certain what to do. This is what I would say to the student:

Thank you for taking the time to share your concerns. What you describe is real, and you’re not alone in feeling it. Many students are experiencing that same tension – the sense that it’s harder to speak openly, that things feel more ‘black and white,’ and that relationships are suffering because of it.

The fact that you noticed it and want to do something about it says a lot about your leadership. The good news is that you don’t have to fix the whole school to make a difference. In fact, the most effective way to start is small. You might consider bringing together a small group of students – maybe 5 to 10 people – who are willing to listen to each other, even if they don’t agree. The goal isn’t to debate or convince anyone to change their views, but to create a space where people can actually talk and be heard without fear of being judged or ‘canceled.’

Before you begin, it’s important to set a few simple ground rules together. Things like: no interrupting, no personal attacks, speaking from your own experience, and keeping what’s shared in the group private. Those kinds of agreements are what help people feel safe enough to open up. It can also help to start with conversations that build trust rather than jumping straight into the most divisive topics. For example, you might begin by asking questions like, ‘When do you feel heard at school?’ or ‘What makes it hard to speak honestly?’

As people begin to listen to each other, you can gradually move into more complex issues, even discussing what might be done beyond the group. One simple structure that works well is to have one question at a time, give each person a minute or two to speak without interruption, and then ask the group what they heard that surprised them. That keeps the focus on understanding rather than arguing.

I would also strongly encourage you to identify one adult at your school – a teacher, counselor, or staff member – who you trust and who can support you by helping secure a space and being available if needed for the group. They don’t need to lead the group, just support it and support you. If there are groups like this already meeting in your school or community, see if you can join them. I will add this - if the school will not allow the development of a small discussion group, perhaps a small group can begin in your community at a community center, public library, place of worship, recreation center, or if those are not possible, then consider a virtual group meeting.

If this begins to work, regardless of the form, place, and type of meeting, you can always grow it over time. But even creating one space where students feel safe enough to speak honestly and listen to each other is a meaningful step. It can be a small test of change. That’s how change starts.

I appreciate you raising these issues, and I greatly admire your willingness to seek ways to address your concerns and the concerns of numerous other students in a constructive manner.”

(2) "This isn't a student issue - this is a societal issue. It's easy to put others into categories based on how they look or what they believe. It's much more difficult to get beyond those superficial categories and try to build understanding. I found a couple of videos on civil discourse that may be helpful.

The first one is about a school system that teaches civil discourse and has 'ground rules' for having safe and supportive conversations. It's called *Building Community Through Empathy and Civil Discourse*. Perhaps a counselor or social worker at this student's school could help to establish this type of effort? I would hope that there is an adult in the school that is willing and interested in taking this on for the sake of improving the school environment.

Another video I found civil discourse in terms of communication problems in the field of medicine. It gives several great examples of how communication can shut down when people try to argue for what they believe is right rather than listen to one another. You can find this video at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EFBE\\_5QijmU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EFBE_5QijmU). It explains that "civil" doesn't mean polite, but rather means 'respectful'. One of the respectful ways to connect with others is to listen and be curious about their thoughts and beliefs. Ask questions. Seek to understand. This doesn't mean you must change your own beliefs. It means you need to respectfully consider others' opinions....which can be difficult at times. Bottom line, polarization is in the eye of the beholder. Skills to get beyond polarizing issues can and should be taught in our schools. This student is insightful enough to understand that something must be done to help students navigate these difficult relationships. I would hope s/he continues to seek out adult help and isn't afraid to ask a teacher or administrator for support."

*What's your take on this student's concerns?* Send comments to [Ltaylor@ucla.edu](mailto:Ltaylor@ucla.edu)

### **For discussion and interchange:**

#### **>Summer learning and social-emotional functioning**

From: *The effects of summer learning on social-emotional and behavioral outcomes*

...Summer learning programs are an important and widely-used policy approach to support children in obtaining academic remediation or accelerating academic progress. In the United States, approximately three-quarters of public schools administered summer programs as of 2022. While prior research has synthesized the impacts of summer programs on students' mathematics and reading skills, the impacts of summer programs on social-emotional and behavioral outcomes, like absenteeism, academic motivation, and social skills, are not well understood. Yet, SEL outcomes are critically important for students' overall educational performance and workplace success....

Popular summer learning program features, like a focus on supportive adult relationships, enrichment and socialization opportunities, as well as resources such as healthy meals and exercise, could all be expected to strengthen school engagement and academic behaviors. Summer programs could also be expected to bolster students' academic skills, which could set up a positive recursive cycle of academic success and in turn improve academic motivation and attitudes...

In reviewing research on summer programs, the finding that summer learning programs of the kinds evaluated in the literature tended to have positive effects on SEL outcomes leads to questions about mechanisms that may have contributed to these impacts....

The current meta-analysis provides supportive evidence for the notion that summer learning programs can potentially support a number of important SEL outcomes alongside bolstering academic achievement. Because many kinds of programs are effective at improving the outcomes targeted, it likely makes sense for programs to align their content to the areas where students would most benefit from support, both academic and non-academic.

From a policy perspective, demonstrating success at enhancing SEL outcomes, such as attendance and school conduct outcomes that are both important and feasible to measure, could be vital for strengthening the case to policymakers for broadening summer program access. As researchers are increasingly recognizing the importance of SEL skills, we expect the number of summer learning programs targeting and measuring these outcomes to continue to grow, with the ultimate goals of supporting all students' holistic academic and SEL development and outcomes.

## Center Comments:

### Expanding the Case for Summer Programs for Students

Not surprisingly, a substantial body of research highlights the many potential benefits of well-designed summer programs. Such initiatives can address academic, social-emotional, and transitional needs for students, particularly those facing systemic barriers.

*Academic Benefits* – Summer programs can enrich learning and prevent (or even reverse) summer learning loss.

*Engagement and Motivation* – When summer programs use hands-on, experiential learning and connect learning to real-world contexts and interest, they encourage creativity and exploration and enhance student motivation. For many students, especially those who struggle in conventional settings, this can shift attitudes toward school and learning more broadly. They can also help re-engage students who have become disconnected from formal learning processes.

*Supporting Transitions* – Summer programs are particularly valuable during key transition points, such as entering kindergarten, moving to a new grade or school. Students benefit from opportunities to:

- Become familiar with new environments and expectations
- Build relationships with peers and staff
- Develop confidence and readiness for entering new situations

Programs that intentionally focus on transitions can reduce anxiety and enhance subsequent school attendance, engagement, and functioning.

*Social, Emotional, and Developmental Gains:* As noted in the above article, effective summer programs extend beyond academics. They can contribute to whole-child development by:

- Promoting effective social interactions
- Building resilience, self-regulation, and confidence
- Offering enrichment activities in arts, sports, STEM, and community engagement

*Equity Considerations* – There are barriers to summer program availability, access, and attendance. These include:

- Financial costs
- Limited availability in certain neighborhoods
- Lack of awareness among families
- Transportation difficulties
- Competing family or work obligations
- Limited culturally relevant or engaging programming

These barriers disproportionately affect students from low-income households, non-English speakers, those in rural or underserved urban areas, and other subgroups.

What are you doing this summer?



I'm doing a language immersion course and leadership camp. What about you?



I asked for a course in Sleeping and another in Video Games, but my parents have other plans for me!



## Some Resources

### Strategies for enhancing availability of summer programs

>Learning Policy Institute (2025) *How States Are Expanding Quality Summer Learning Opportunities*

### Planning and Implementation Guides

>Wallace Foundation *Summer Learning Toolkit*

>NWEA (2024) *Practical Guidance for District Leaders*

### Research on benefits

>*Investing in Successful Summer Programs* (2019)

>RAND/Wallace (2020) *National Summer Learning Project* (longitudinal study)

>NWEA (2024) *Research on Effective Summer Programs*

### Evidence of inequities

>National Academies of Sciences (2019) *Shaping Summertime Experiences*

>National Academies of Sciences (2019) *Report on Summer Learning*

### For more on this, see our Center Quick Find:

>*Expanded Learning Opportunities -- After-School & Summer Programs*

### >Links to a few other relevant shared resources

What students lose when school becomes a political battle ground

Teenagers on what has shaped their political beliefs and values

Taking the Heat Out of Politically Charged Classroom Discussions

Fostering Civil Discourse: Difficult Classroom Conversations in a Diverse Democracy

Impact of summer programs on the outcomes of disadvantaged or ‘at risk’ young people: A systematic review

To solve chronic absenteeism, let’s make school a place where students really want to be

School Mental Health Experiences and Preferences Among Black, Hispanic, and Multiracial LGBTQ+ Youth

344,000 U.S. Children of All Ages Lived in Foster Care in 2024

## A Few Upcoming Webinars

For links to the following and for more webinars, go to the Center's Links to [Upcoming/Archived Webcasts/Podcasts](http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/webcast.htm)  
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/webcast.htm>

- 6/3 How technology is reshaping childhood
- 6/4 Hidden costs of special ed vacancies
- 6/8 Nurturing Independence in Kids
- 6/9 Elements of effective coalitions
- 6/10 Understanding Loneliness and Building Social Connections
- 6/11 Collecting prevention data
- 6/16 Prevention ethics
- 6/16 Collaboration for prevention impact
- 6/17 Strong Teacher-Student Relationships
- 6/17 Providing Tier 1 Classroom and Behavior Management Feedback
- 6/17 Youth mental health and well being /
- 6/24 Federal investments in whole child wellbeing
- 7/22 Engaging youth voices to improve prevention
- 8/12 Strategies for Supporting New Teacher Happiness and Success
- 9/29 Leading Teams: Building Capacity for Teacher Leaders

**How Learning Happens** (Edutopia's series of videos explores guiding all students, regardless of their developmental starting points, to become engaged learners).  
**Unpacking the Impacts of Structural Racism on Youth** (Webinar recording)

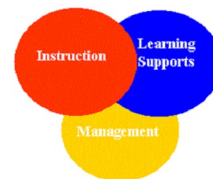
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## The Case for Systemic Redesign of Student/Learning Supports

Fundamental, systemic redesign is urgently needed for how schools address factors interfering with learning and teaching. Immediate action is essential to move beyond crisis driven responses toward a cohesive, proactive, and equitable system of student/learning supports.

For guidance and resources on how to pursue this transformation, see the  
>[\*National Initiative for Transforming Student and Learning Supports\*](#).

**Equity of opportunity is fundamental to enabling civil rights; transforming student and learning supports is fundamental to promoting whole child development, advancing social justice, and enhancing learning and a positive school climate.**



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### To Listserv Participants

We hope you will share this resource with others who may find it helpful.

And let us know what's going on to improve how schools address barriers to learning & teaching and reengage disconnected students and families. (We can share the info with the over 140,000 on our listserv.)

**THE MORE FOLKS SHARE, THE MORE USEFUL AND INTERESTING THIS RESOURCE BECOMES!**

**Send resources ideas, requests, comments, and experiences for sharing to [Ltaylor@ucla.edu](mailto:Ltaylor@ucla.edu)**

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**For those who have been forwarded this and want to receive resources directly, send an email to [Ltaylor@ucla.edu](mailto:Ltaylor@ucla.edu)**

>Looking for information? (We usually can help.)

>Have a suggestion for improving our efforts? (We welcome your feedback.)

**We look forward to hearing from you! Contact: [Ltaylor@ucla.edu](mailto:Ltaylor@ucla.edu)**

#### **THIS IS THE END OF THIS ISSUE OF THE PRACTITIONER**

*Who Are We?* Our national Center was established in 1995 under the auspices of the School Mental Health Project (which was established in 1986). We are part of the Department of Psychology at UCLA. The Center is co-directed by Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor and now is named the *Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports*.