



THE STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH PANDEMIC



COVID-related school closures and remote instruction, which have **disproportionately impacted** students of color, have raised high-profile concerns about increased gaps in opportunities to learn.

But in a **recent speech**, U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona highlighted a different kind of concern, about anxiety, depression, and other types and manifestations of mental illness.

“Our schools must offer increased access to mental health supports for students, wrap-around programs, meaningful and authentic parent and family engagement, and interventions for those students who felt the impact of the pandemic more bluntly than others,” he said.

During the pandemic, these social and emotional challenges have increased exponentially in what the U.S. surgeon general has called a “**youth mental health crisis**” and the American Academy of Pediatrics has described as a “**national state of emergency.**” In the U.S., youth emergency room visits for suspected suicide attempts rose **51 percent between 2019 and 2021** for adolescent girls and 4 percent for adolescent boys. A **review** of 36 studies from 11 countries (the U.S. included) found that pandemic-related lockdowns were associated with “adverse mental health symptoms (such as distress and anxiety) and health behaviors (such as higher screen time and lower physical activity) among children and adolescents.”

In essence, as COVID has spread, a pandemic of student mental health has followed in its wake, exacerbated by the isolation imposed by shutdowns necessary to limit the spread of

COVID-19.

“It certainly is a traumatic time, on so many fronts,” NEPC Fellow and University of Colorado professor Elizabeth Dutro said during a July 2020 Q&A for this newsletter:

Some children are mourning loved ones who have died of COVID-19 or are grappling with the fear that an ill family member may not get well. Many have seen one or both parents lose their jobs and felt the impact of compounded economic hardship. Further, we know that none of these impacts have been equally distributed. Communities of color are disproportionately taking the brunt of this pandemic in the US, for reasons embedded in centuries of systemic oppression. The pain and grief that students of color are carrying as we move through these months, particularly Black students, is further magnified by the ongoing murders of Black people that are fueling crucial recent protests against police violence and amplified movements for anti-racism and systemic change.

Schools can help. In her [work](#), Dutro has found that when teachers use writing instruction to share their own challenges, students tend to follow suit, leading not only to increased levels of engagement in literacy but to the development of more healing and trusting relationships in the classroom that are conducive to student learning and well-being.

A [summer research institute](#) at the Cuba Independent School District in New Mexico resulted in student researcher recommendations that included heightened access to mental health services for teens even when school is not in session. Specifically, the students recommended the expansion of behavioral circles, healing and restorative justice circles, the introduction of therapeutic service animals in schools and other areas of the community, additional opportunities for students to interact with trusted adults in diverse settings (such as hikes), and the creation of in-school meditation rooms where students can take a break if they get overwhelmed.

In noting some of these same needs, Secretary Cardona emphasized the importance of ensuring that “lack of mental health or other supports” do not “lead to exclusionary school discipline practices for students who are suffering from trauma.” Similarly, in a [Q&A for this newsletter](#), NEPC Fellow [Kathryn Wiley](#) of the University of Colorado and Century Foundation policy associate [Michelle Burris](#) expressed concern that remote learning technologies might facilitate and encourage such exclusion. Schools might rationalize that students can use hot spots and devices acquired during the pandemic to learn from home rather than completely missing out on instruction during suspensions and expulsions.

Wiley and Burris explain that schools should instead consider trying to head off discipline issues by employing federal COVID funds to expand wraparound services, such as counseling, that address the underlying causes student misbehavior. The expansion of such services is one of the recommendations made by more than 500 education researchers who signed onto a [2020 consensus statement](#) on helping schools recover from the pandemic.

NEPC Resources on Social Context of Education

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