TeachME PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT
CEUs for Teachers and Educators

Exploring Practices that Enhance School Health and Well-Being

Part 1:

Introduction

In order for students to learn, they need to feel safe. Safety is a necessity for focus, basic brain function, and any type of emotional growth. Placing a priority on health outcomes, too, has been shown to be correlated with higher grades and other success markers for students at schools who completed health and exercise initiatives.

If we focus on helping our students learn social and emotional skills and create the secure, welcoming environment that they need in order to grow, children will exhibit higher engagement, learn better, and ultimately have a higher chance of growing into the people we need them to be.

Section 1: What Defines a Safe, Healthy School?

In order to know how to build a safe and healthy school, it's important to start with a good understanding of what a healthy and safe school is—and why it's important to create that type of support for students in their formative years.

What is a safe, supportive, and healthy school?

Safe and supportive school environments are those that surround students with an atmosphere of protected encouragement—which is important because it's that type of environment that best helps children engage fully in their community and in their studies. In other words, it's the type of environment best suited to help students get the most out of their schooling and grow in the most productive and healthy way possible so they can aspire to be truly productive members of society (CDC, 2020).

Supportive, safe, and healthy schools connect children to one another and their families. These schools educate children about healthy physical, nutritional, emotional, and mental practices. In schools that prioritize supportive safety measures, researchers believe that students enjoy protective factors that can reduce the risk of sickness and unintended social consequences for young people (CDC, 2020).

Safe schools tend to employ adults that are empathetic, educated, and motivated to provide an atmosphere of comprehensive care for students. Safe schools may have associations to help students going through particularly turbulent periods or counselors trained in trauma recovery to help young people cope with stressors. While safe and

supportive school environments have been demonstrated to be integral for the formation of all students, these types of nurturing environments are expressly helpful for young students of the LGBTQ community or students in other demographics that tend to be the victims of bullying and discrimination (CDC, 2020).

What are the benefits of establishing a safe and supportive school environment?

As researchers have delved further into the reasons why supportive school environments are conducive to productive, effective learning styles, they have learned that there are many benefits of safe environments for students. These benefits include:

- Fewer occurrences of risky health behaviors (e.g., safe sex practices)
- Reduced stressors for students, which can assist with positive mental health behaviors
- Less inter-student violence on school campuses
- Lessened use of drugs and alcohol by the student population
- Higher class attendance
- Higher likelihood that more of the student body will attend and graduate college (CDC, 2020)

Clearly, there are direct safety benefits of increasing school security, promoting safe habits, and reducing occurrences of risky behaviors. A renewed focus on school health initiatives may be less obviously necessary; which leads us to wonder about the true importance of school health in addition to school safety measures (CDC, 2020).

Why is focusing on school health initiatives so important?

According to recent surveys and census data, approximately 133,000 schools and campuses across the United States of America provide shelter, education, activities and safety to almost sixty million children. These students attend school to learn traditional school subjects en route to their higher education or career goals, of course—but these schools, as a primary environment for children during some of their most formative

years, can also provide a setting in which children can learn and practice healthy behaviors that will set them up for a lifetime of success (CDC, 2019).

Because more and more children are suffering from obesity and related illnesses (the percentages of young people with obesity have skyrocketed over the past several decades), many researchers are turning to schools to help children target and unlearn unhealthy behaviors. While this is good for general health, it's also good for educational initiatives. Children who are overweight or who have other unhealthy behaviors or illnesses tend to miss school more often. This can lead to lower standards of achievement, less confidence with educational projects or aims, and even result in fewer opportunities as these children graduate from school and begin to navigate adulthood (CDC, 2019).

What are the specific, accomplishable components of safe and healthy schools?

According to the CDC's Healthy Schools initiative, there are several different components that go into a safe, healthy school. These components include (CDC, 2021):

- **A structured, formal system of health education.** In order to help students, teachers, and your entire academic community prioritize healthfulness, it's key to ensure they all know what being healthy means and the different tools they have available to them to complete their wellness goals. For young students, it can be very helpful to simply add this to their daily or weekly lesson plans. However, any planned educational experience that helps students make high-quality, safe, and effective health decisions can go a long way toward a healthy culture at your school. It's important to ensure that these programs are taught by trained teachers who are qualified to provide this instruction.
- **An environment focused on nutrition information and services.** It's easy for students to understand the concept of nutrition in theory without understanding that their daily choices constitute ways to practice healthy eating. If a school is able to invest in healthy choices in its cafeteria as well as fun, bright, and attractive messaging throughout common eating areas about exactly how to make good food choices, the entire community will benefit. Examples of this type of messaging and resources might include nutrition posters on the wall, vending machines and kiosks that offer relatively healthy food, meals that feature foods that meet best practices for nutrition standards, and rules about the types of

foods and beverages that can be sold on or just off school campuses. There should also be a focus on ensuring that all school health teachers and nutritional personnel have ongoing professional development and the resources to ensure that they're providing the most recent, updated knowledge for their students. Additionally, all members of the academic community - including teachers and administrators - should practice modeling healthy behaviors, and all students should be able to access free water for drinking during the school day .

- **An emphasis on teacher and administrator wellness.** There are many reasons that it's important to ensure that the staff at your school practice healthy behaviors. For one: Students are more likely to follow their teacher's nutritional advice if they see that the adults at their school are also performing healthy activities. More importantly, however, are the more overarching effects of employee wellness initiatives on the health and happiness of the employees themselves. If school employees eat and move healthily, they will be far more likely to be excited, enthusiastic, and proactive about their jobs as educators. Therefore, for both their own personal success as well as that of their students, it's key for employees to eat healthily, exhibit an active lifestyle, manage their stress levels, and avoid practices that could lead to injury. Programs that help instill wellness behaviors in staff, as well as students, could include policies, benefit programs, and supports around campus that help raise awareness of health and provide easy, actionable, and low-cost or free resources to help the staff members meet their personal health and happiness goals. (As a final benefit, it should be noted that employee wellness initiatives tend to pay for themselves by reducing teacher turnover and cutting the costs associated with substitute teachers).

- **An understanding of the importance of a healthy emotional and social climate for the entire school campus.** While it can be difficult to understand the practical benefits of investing in an improved social or emotional school climate, it's becoming clear through current advances in childhood psychology research that nothing is more important than the invisible stressors and aspects of a school that can negatively or positively influence a child's development. The specific emotional and social climate of a school can impact everything from the way that students choose to participate in activities at their school, form relationships with their peers, and invest in their own academic importance. These factors will make or break a child's chances of success.

- **Continual investments in the physical environment of a school.** The physical surroundings in which students learn, play, and communicate may have a significant effect on their mental health. To this end, it's important that schools take steps to keep their campuses in good physical condition. This may require renovations to ensure that buildings are well-ventilated, fences to ensure that buildings and recess areas are safe, and regular inspections of school property to ensure that the campus is environmentally safe (e.g., not full of mold or pesticides).

- **Updated, accessible, and helpful health services.** In addition to providing resources to children when they need emergency care or first aid, schools should provide regular assessments and management information for more subtle or chronic conditions—from diabetes to depression. Schools should go one step further than this and provide health services that concentrate on wellness promotion and the prevention of chronic or acute health conditions. It's important to remember that for some students, their school hours may be the only time that they come into contact with qualified healthcare providers; so it's a great idea to have professionals on staff from school nurses and educators to even physician assistants or visiting dentists. Ensuring that your health services department also covers the types of mental health occurrences that a student might routinely face—such as anxiety and stress—will also go a long way toward promoting a healthy environment at your school.

- **Available and accessible counseling and psychological services.** Elementary, middle, and high school all constitute periods of time in which young children and teenagers are vulnerable and experiencing many formative situations during their most volatile growth periods. In order to ensure that these students have all of the support and resources available to become the people they need to be, schools should have staff psychologists and other professionals who can help with mentoring, counseling, assessing, and more. However, schools should go beyond this, even, and offer regular group counseling sessions, community support services, ongoing assessments for students and staff, and prevention and intervention programs to help identify mental or physical health issues and provide support before the issues escalate and cause harm to an individual or the entire academic community.

- **Systemic community involvement by all academic persons.** In order for a school to be truly healthy, it should engage in partnerships with local organizations and

businesses. This has a win-win effect for all involved: The businesses should receive more name recognition in the community, the students will gain an idea of what it's like working in the real world, and the staff at your school can help delegate responsibilities to other responsible adults in the area. To accomplish many of the health aims suggested in this course, it may indeed be necessary for a school to partner with local fitness, health, social service, or faith-based organizations.

- **Engagement from all of the families who are part of your academic community.** In order to support students in the most comprehensive, effective manner possible, it's vital to ensure that the families of all students are as involved as possible. This helps teachers experience a shared responsibility for student wellness and results in better outcomes for the children. In order to help ensure that parents feel that they can support their child's development, school staff members should do everything in their power to help parents feel welcome. Schools should create free, engaging, and accessible resources and prioritize open lines of convenient communication. This may take a lot of work but will result in ongoing family engagement that will provide many benefits over the course of a child's life.

- **A focus on physical activity and education.** On the face of it, a regular school day is filled with sedentary activity. While, to some extent, this may be necessary, schools should work to ensure that students have the opportunity to experience physical activity several times throughout their day—and create an interest (e.g., supplying programs or resources) in extracurricular forms of physical activity. Whether your school decides to reflect national standards in physical education, staff involvement, and community engagement in terms of physical activity or your school opts to create its own standards, it's important to invest in this area. Why? Strong levels of physical activity help cognitive function and assist students as they grow in knowledge, healthy behaviors, fine motor skills, emotional intelligence, self-efficacy, sportsmanship, and more. Schools should seek to provide resources on an informal, amateur level as well as provide support from certified, licensed, and endorsed physical education specialists.

How does a healthy school climate enhance learning?

The benefits of a healthy school climate are plentiful, and it cannot be emphasized enough how nutrition, physical fitness, and overall wellness impacts students in a

positive way. While schools are often thought of as places where students must spend their time learning, it is also well documented that healthier students learn more efficiently and are happier overall.

Most people can see how establishing a healthy school environment or climate may benefit young students in forming healthy habits that will help them avoid risky behaviors or even chronic conditions. In addition to this, it is also crucial to realize that healthier students absorb and retain information better and that investing in your school's health climate will help your community reach its education goals. This may be particularly important when it comes to getting all of the members of a school community—e.g., administrators, investors, parents—interested in and committed to healthy school practices (Revile, 2018).

Teachers who are involved with educating and supporting children from disadvantaged backgrounds or communities report that their students exhibit myriad health issues, from asthma to poor eyesight and teeth that hurt. It's impossible not to acknowledge that students who have issues with their eyesight or who are experiencing pain may have a difficult time keeping up with the rest of class. A teacher faced with helping an entire classroom learn despite differing obstacles of varying severity is faced with a nearly impossible task (Revile, 2018).

Many schools are seeking to tackle these issues by setting up clinics and free or low-cost basic health care opportunities for their students. However, not all schools have the time, money, or other means to make this happen. Unfortunately, this results in a lack of equity and reliable access to resources between children who come from disadvantaged backgrounds and those from higher socio-economic situations. When we extrapolate the healthcare advantages that well-connected children often have and the associated educational benefits, we're forced to face the fact that many children simply won't have the energy, information, or resources to succeed (Revile, 2018).

As members of school staff tasked with making sure that students succeed, we need to help establish reliable access to safety and health information and resources for each member of our academic communities. One team working toward this initiative at Harvard has theorized that the best way to do so is to consider the school as merely a part of the wider community when it comes to the availability of resources. For example, in order to get students the healthcare resources they need, it's likely going to be necessary to partner with local businesses such as hospitals and exercise studios, instead of managing all of the necessary logistics and expertise in a more insular way. It's also of vital importance to create more 'connective tissue' between students and parents and

between families. Simply by leveraging the wisdom inherent in each family, a school may be able to tap into resources that it already has at its disposal (Revile, 2018).

In one case study illustrating this point, a community created a nonprofit partnership between its primary school system and local dental and vision care facilities. Among other activities, all students immediately received both vision and dental screenings. The majority of students were found to require vision or dental interventions. As a result, 60% of the student body received discounted glasses; 85% received necessary dental work (Revile, 2018).

This is obviously not a simple or inexpensive undertaking, but schools can widely benefit from these practices. This Illinois school district immediately saw a huge advantage of this healthcare initiative: The number of misbehavior referrals that their school offices received decreased by 72 percent. In addition, the students at the schools in the district started to score higher on both their math and English grades (Revile, 2018).

Along the same lines, a school in California started to implement school wellness measures in 2012. Staff members decided to focus on spreading knowledge and facilitating health-and-exercise practices throughout their campus, and really investing in parental engagement in both their students' academic and wellness aims. When Stanford University researchers looked into the progress of these schools, they found that the students benefiting from these programs were more involved in community and extracurricular events, which was shown to have a positive effect on student productivity and mental health. In addition, the researchers believed that the access to increased numbers of health centers on elementary school campuses was associated with a boost in the overall behavioral health of the entire academic community (Revile, 2018).

These studies illustrate that a whole-person, whole-family, holistic approach to health, exercise, wellness and academia will be worth it. The entire community will be happier, more productive, and more successful with their educational aims (Revile, 2018).

What did the COVID-19 pandemic teach us about the state of school health and safety—and the necessity of investing further in these types of aims?

To start, students did not need another reason to be anxious about going to school. There are already myriad social, academic, and personal stressors that young people

suffer on a day-to-day basis regarding their education and school community (Mortice, 2020).

Across the United States, students' experience of the pandemic varied widely. Some younger students going through more impressionable years may forever be traumatized by the events of the year. Others may take what happened more in stride. The basic overarching experience of knowing—very suddenly— that going to school and being in close proximity with others was likely unsafe will infiltrate the daily experiences of millions of children going forward (Mortice, 2020).

This will only make it more crucial that we work to alleviate children's stressors and enhance obvious safety efforts in order to ensure that no children feel actively in danger as they go about their school days. However, it's also key to recognize that for many students, this pervasive sense of danger is not necessarily new (Mortice, 2020).

The COVID-19 crisis exposed the many weaknesses that have existed in our educational infrastructure for a long time. As far back as 2011, the EPA speculated that approximately 46% of public schools in the United States exhibited conditions that could lead to poor, even sickness-inducing interior environmental conditions. These conditions could include lead paint, asbestos, unsafe sources of water, poor heating and cooling systems, and more. Another report found that some 36,000 schools across the nation are in need of an upgraded HVAC system simply for safety, not to mention comfort. A 2017 assessment performed by the American Society of Civil Engineers rated United States schools at a D+. For a long time now, it's been known that investment in our schools is much lower than it needs to be (Mortice, 2020).

Unfortunately, one of the reasons that we as a country have not taken more decisive action is rooted in our historical pattern of under-serving the marginalized. While middle-class, white parents might be shocked to hear of the poor conditions in many American schools, these are hardly new pieces of information for many lower-class families and people of color. The fact that many of the schools in the United States that receive fewer resources and exhibit worse conditions are the ones that tend to serve students of color only goes further to worsen the performance disparity and lack of equal opportunity we see between races (Mortice, 2020).

For example, schools that serve students of color tend to be in areas that have high levels of air pollution, fewer nutrient-rich options for lunches, and reduced resources for healthcare. Even before the pandemic, this meant that students attending these schools got sick more quickly and went far longer before their conditions received any attention.

In some cases, this has had devastating results: On at least one occasion, extremely poor (moldy and unventilated) conditions at school have led to exacerbation of symptoms, triggered symptoms (e.g., asthma), and resulted in students being sent home suffering. In turn, students were forced to miss school without attention or care (Mortice, 2020).

When COVID-19 hit, schools that had the resources and infrastructure in place to send students home with significant support systems in place often did; or, alternatively, more affluent schools were able to figure out how to keep children on campus in some kind of at least slightly protected way. For many students in lower-income, more poorly-maintained schools, they were either left to struggle with how to navigate remote learning on their own or asked to face the danger of attending school in-person every day (Mortice, 2020).

Section 1 Key Points

- The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted issues with the health and safety systems of our schools, but those issues had likely already been there for a long time.
- Students need to be safe in order to be able to concentrate on their studies.
- Healthy students learn better, so it's worth it for all of our schools' stakeholders to make overall health a priority.
- The importance of safe and healthy schools has come into focus on a national level recently—leading to many states initiating legislative action to prioritize healthy schools.

Section 1 Discussion Questions

- How safe do you think your school campus is? How healthy are your students, on average?
- What do you think COVID-19 did to expose the strengths or weaknesses of your system?
- Think back to the last time you were sick. How much did you feel like getting done? Were you able to function at your best?

Section 1 Summary

We can all focus on making it easier to be healthy at school—-and all start taking responsibility for ways to make students feel welcomed and safe whether they're on campus or learning remotely. Teachers, parents, and administrators have specific responsibilities and strengths when it comes to overall student health and happiness. In the second section of this course, we will turn our attention to the discrete ways that differing educational professionals can increase the safety of our schools.

Section 2: Keeping Children Safe: A Shared Responsibility

Keeping our campuses and our students safe is a responsibility that must be owned by all school staff, all families, and, indeed, every member of our communities. In this section of the course, we'll summarize the actions that teachers, administrators, and parents can take in order to increase school safety and security.

First, however, we'll take a look at where we are.

What is the current state of school safety in America?

In 2018, a survey of public schools in the United States reported that the vast majority (95%) had implemented at least one of the following security measures (NCES, 2020):

- Monitoring or locking doors to ensure controlled access to the campus or to school buildings
- Installing security cameras around the school campus
- Requiring that school staff and faculty wear picture IDs
- Enforcing a strict dress code of their students (or requiring uniforms)
- Randomly searching or sweeping student storage for illicit objects and substances

This increased attention to security matters was a response to increasingly worrisome national trends. For example (NCSL, 2019):

- In 2018 alone, 23 school shooting events took place in the United States which caused death or severe injuries.

- Between 2016 and 2018, violent school incidents increased by almost 115%.
- Researchers have not yet been able to establish one universal, reliable profile of a school shooter

In spite of these unsettling facts, researchers do believe that there are specific and effective ways that schools can mitigate or entirely prevent violent acts in schools. Governmental policymakers have begun to implement many of these strategies, particularly over the past decade; and individual school districts have opted to increase school security measures as well (NCSL, 2019).

For example, recent action has included (NCSL, 2019):

- **Legislative motions at the state level.** In 2018, 43 states proposed almost 400 bills or resolutions aimed at increasing school safety. These proposals focused on many different aspects of school security, from infrastructure upgrades to the hiring of protective staff. Many states have considered making safety and well-being training for school personnel mandatory, such as training on racial biases, school climates, suicide prevention, and mental and physical disability awareness.
- **Investigative motions at the federal level.** Previous presidential administrations have led investigations into school violence with the goal of recommending and implementing specific policies to reduce, mitigate, or prevent school violence. Under these initiatives, various commissions have studied the efficacy of providing on-campus mental health services, school coordination with local law enforcement, and the net result of positive behavioral intervention for students who need help.

What are the specific aspects of the school setting and experience that teachers can prioritize to create warm, nurturing, welcoming (and safe!) classroom environments?

Above and beyond the steps that are needed to ensure that the entire academic community values health and wellness, it's important to take steps to create a warm, welcoming, and safe atmosphere in each individual classroom. Why?

When students feel safe in their academic environments, they are much more likely to take the types of beneficial risks that are often needed for personal growth - both

intellectual and emotional. The safer they feel, the higher potential they have for academic success (Robbin, 2019).

In order to create this type of nurturing environment, schools and teachers need to consider the following elements (Robbin, 2019):

1. **Safety.** Children cannot learn effectively if they do not feel safe. This is clearly demonstrated in Maslow's Hierarchy of needs. To make children feel safe in a classroom, they need to both be convinced that no physical harm will come to them while they're at school and feel that they are accepted as they are at all times. This can take significant emotional growth and strength, which is why it's important that your school has a culture of mental wellness throughout its entire campus. To maintain a safe classroom, school staff should focus on creating a clean classroom environment, keeping the school at a comfortable temperature, and ensuring that students have access to all of the materials they might need for success at any time. In addition, students should practice protocols and routines for less-than-ideal or dangerous circumstances on a regular basis, so they feel prepared should something occur that requires a specific response

2. **Inclusivity.** Once all students in your classroom feel safe, it is crucial that they feel included. If a students don't feel like they are accepted as part of a peer group, they're going to have a hard time learning; at least subconsciously, they're going to be wondering why they don't fit in, and they will struggle to enjoy the same levels of support that other (perhaps more included) students will enjoy. As a result, it's vital that teachers, students, and administrative staff make targeted efforts to include all members of the academic community, regardless of their specific race, gender, sexual orientation or preferences, socio-economic status, ethnicity, or religious backgrounds. While schools should start with reducing more obvious displays of aggressive non-inclusion, it's important to go beyond that to ensure that there are no traces of discrimination and the school community is in fact welcoming of everyone who wishes to learn. In an individual classroom environment, a teacher can work to help students understand others and the different backgrounds they present with as well as what walks of life they have gone through.

3. **Cultural relevance.** One step in particular that teachers can take in order to create a welcoming, inclusive, and universal environment is to invest in lessons that are culturally relevant. Above and beyond helping your students en masse open their minds to people who may be different from them in specific ways, this will allow

students who may have experienced marginalization to see themselves in the lessons and texts you present. If students identify with elements within your curricula, they'll attribute more meaning to your content - which will make it easier for them to have enthusiasm for learning.

4. **Value for the choices students make.** If students are as involved as is appropriate with the various decisions that go into their education, they will be more interested and able to take charge of their learning experience - which will set them up for a lifetime of being able and excited to prioritize education and growth. Why? People - including students - are more invested in the choices that they personally make. If you as a teacher are able to provide more shared ownership through small decisions throughout a student's day (or week, or semester), your classroom overall will be more enthusiastic about your learning journey.

What are specific steps that parents can make to do their part toward creating a safe, secure, and welcoming school environment?

While parents are not school staff, what they do has an impact on more than just their own child—so they have a responsibility to the entire academic community to make reasoned choices about the way that they engage with their child's academics. Share these strategies with the parents at your school to increase safety from every angle of your community. Such actions include (Bradford, 2021):

1. Request that parents actually read emails, follow your school's social media, and/or pick up when a school representative calls.
2. Ensure that parents at your school have access to your school's written policies and that they have some kind of incentive to review these policies from time to time so they are familiar with how your school works.
3. Schedule and follow through with regular conversations between parents and both teachers, administrators, and other parents.
4. Encourage parents to speak openly with their child or children about the stressors they may be experiencing at school. Encourage the parents, also, to keep a close eye for any shifts in behavior that they may notice in their child. That way, both school staff and parents can anticipate and provide support for students during difficult times.

5. Finally, ask that parents keep the school apprised of all medical, behavioral, or significant life events that occur that could affect their child's health. This should happen shortly after any such event occurs, and should also include a full review and update of each child's official records on a yearly basis.

What are specific actions that administrators can take?

Administrators may have a different relationship with students, as compared to the teachers, and may (as a result) also be able to use their time for different types of priorities—such as taking more responsibility for the organization of school-wide health and safety initiatives, concentrating on research and fundraising, and coordinating with the larger community to ensure that students have all of the resources that they need. Administrators of schools can help incorporate routine safety checks and assessments of and for all students, meet with parents, conduct surveys of the academic community, and initiate and participate in task forces to learn from and act upon the results of these surveys (Texas A&M, 2019).

In order to work toward a comprehensive sense of safety and security in schools, many schools will work together to form a school-wide safety plan.

What is a school safety plan?

The safety of the school environment is crucial both for maximum efficiency of student learning and growth, but also for teacher retention. Therefore, to support students in the best way possible and to help ensure that teachers feel appreciated and their well-being is a priority, it's vital to conceive of and execute school safety initiatives (McGrath, 2020).

One study that sought to probe into the most effective types of organizational and safety initiatives a school can implement found that there are four specific aims that schools should consider in order to prioritize school safety and wellness, including the following (McGrath, 2020):

- A concerted investment in personal and professional development for all staff members
- An emphasis on the formation of friendly, productive relationships and collaborations among school staff

- High and realistic expectations for the health, happiness, wellness, and academic outcomes for all students
- A safe learning environment

The researchers concluded that each of these aims supports overall student success in their own way, yet we tend to place most of our focus on student expectations. Recent years have shone a light, in particular, upon the necessity of school safety. Issues such as unfortunately-increasing numbers of shooter incidents, natural disasters ramping up in intensity, and the recent worldwide pandemic have only exacerbated these issues and shown us precisely where we aren't doing too well in terms of school safety (McGrath, 2020).

The Pew Research Center conducted a study concluding in early 2018 that found that some 57% of students (and teachers, and administrators) were afraid that a mass shooting event could occur at their school. Almost one in four students described themselves as 'very worried' that this could happen. When parents were surveyed, researchers found that 63% were concerned about the same thing. This type of anxiety can preclude students from paying attention to their studies—and the health benefits of being under chronic stress can result in physiological symptoms that can destroy a young person from the inside out. Less dramatically, heightened anxiety that danger will befall them at school also leads to students skipping class more frequently (McGrath, 2020).

These conclusions have been corroborated by other studies. 2017's National Youth Risk Behavior Survey reported that almost 7% of students said that they had skipped school at least once because they felt unsafe. This data shows us that amping up our schools' safety efforts can help students feel safer and reduce both stress-based health concerns and the likelihood that a student will opt to stay at home for safety (McGrath, 2020).

The types of school efforts needed may include (McGrath, 2020):

- Hiring professionals, such as counselors, nurses, and psychologists, to be on staff full- or part-time
- Ensuring that students have equitable and convenient access to their services
- Installing and maintaining systems geared toward increasing school security
- Implementing and practicing emergency communications and practices

In short, every school needs a school safety plan (McGrath, 2020).

Pew Research Center conducted another 2018 study aimed at student perception of school safety measures. Teenagers at schools across the nation confirmed that they saw the following school safety initiatives as the most effective (and, therefore, the most efficient at reducing student stress, at the very least) (McGrath, 2020):

- The expansion of mental health resources for all students
- Measures aimed at eliminating or controlling gun use
- The use of functioning metal detectors

When developing a specific school's safety plan, policymakers should start by seeking out what the community most fears, what would most alleviate those fears, and ways to help students overcome or dismiss those fears (McGrath, 2020).

Other elements of a school safety plan should include (McGrath, 2020):

- Ongoing anonymous surveys and assessments.
- The implementation of threat assessment programs
- Equitable access to mental health professionals

What is a student threat assessment program?

One of the hallmarks of a school that is both healthy and safe is one that prioritizes a clear path to help students, school staff, and families realize that they need help (and when they need help). Taking time to assess each student's mental and physical health and provide any needed interventions may be a precautionary measure for many students; however, for others, this type of forward-thinking approach may signify the difference between productive and disadvantageous or even harmful formative years (McGrath, 2020).

A student threat assessment program is one that is staffed by many professionally-trained people from several different disciplines (e.g., a doctor, a therapist, a nutritionist, etc). When students go through this program and exhibit signs of potential illness or proclivities toward harmful behavior as noted by the professional multidisciplinary team, the program will include and provide resources for interventions. These interventions should not be punitive; instead, the focus should be on reorientation, growth, and education. If a student is in or approaching a crisis state, a threat assessment program

can go a long way toward preventing any unfortunate events that could occur if that student had not received timely and appropriate care (McGrath, 2020).

What types of avenues are needed to help students report threats?

A safe school environment must include some way for students to report any suspicious or dangerous behavior that they observe. After all, you can train school staff to monitor student behavior or even invest in a state-of-the-art CCTV system, but some students will learn to elude observation. Very often, the best or only source of information regarding unhealthy or harmful behaviors of students is other students (McGrath, 2020).

Recently, the United States Secret Service conducted a study that sought to learn as much as possible about what occurred during the lead-up to mass school shooting events. The Secret Service discovered that before an incident, perpetrators generally tell at least one other person about their plan. In fact, in over 75% of the cases that the Secret Service examined, attackers had confided in a sibling, friend, or schoolmate regarding their plans for a school attack. Unfortunately, since the attacker generally confided in a peer (e.g., a young student), the researchers found that even if the confidant did file a student report, the administration generally didn't take it seriously or take any resultant action (McGrath, 2020).

One threat reporting tool that can help students feel safe telling school officials about any suspicious behaviors or statements is an anonymous two-way tip submission system—preferably, a texting submission system. This will ensure that students always have a very practical, simple, on-the-go, and reliable way to send information to their school and that the student can be confident that they will not experience any adverse consequences of "telling on" a potentially violent or suffering peer. In the past, these types of systems have been very effective for helping researchers and schools identify harmful patterns of online violence or dangerous internet activity. Of course, school personnel have to decide that reading and responding to all submitted tips is worth their time. It will be important to make sure that there are staff resources allocated for reviewing tip submissions and investigating anything that requires action (McGrath, 2020).

These types of discreet, accessible tip submission programs can be used to prevent attacks as well as to alert school staff of a situation where a student needs help but does not know where to turn.

How can we promote school security for our remote or online students?

An increasing number of students rely on the internet and remote instruction programs for their education. Our duty to keep these children safe and welcome them into our larger learning communities is not lessened because they are not physically on campus. Yet it can feel somehow less intuitive to give these children the care they need (Starr, 2021).

In order to extend a critical sense of safety to students learning remotely, establish the following practices (Starr, 2021):

- Students should never share personal information, photos, or their location with anyone online—particularly a stranger. This includes passwords.
- Students should be told that if they receive messages that make them feel uncomfortable, they do not need to respond to those messages—and they should immediately alert a trusted adult.
- Students should always ask parents before downloading new software to their devices.
- If possible, parents should always be nearby when children are using the internet or completing online learning (at least during the earlier years).
- Teachers should debrief parents about which types of software students will be using, as well as the basic capabilities of the software.
- If possible, schools should help students that don't have Wi-Fi install Wi-Fi in their homes.

Section 2 Key Points

- Parents need to be aware of everything their students are doing in school—online or otherwise.
- Teachers, administrators, and parents all need to take responsibility for school safety.
- Elements such as a threat assessment system and an accessible tip hotline can go a long way towards keeping schools safe.

Section 2 Discussion Questions

- If students feel uneasy about something they see at your school, what are the current practices in place for them to find safety?
- How open have your school officials been with your students' parents regarding the planned response to any threats?
- Do you feel like your school is serving your remote students with specific, supportive safety plans?

Section 2 Summary

From effective threat assessment systems to tip systems and more, there are ways that we can increase school security. This should be an initiative that schools take on to increase student safety, of course—but it should also be acknowledged that an investment in a safe school is an investment in community peace of mind and associated higher rates of success.

Section 3: How to Work Towards a Healthier School Environment

Now that we've discussed the nuts and bolts of what makes a school climate safe, it's time to talk about how we can provide a healthier environment for our students. As we discussed in Section One, the link between healthy students, higher engagement and academic success is becoming impossible to ignore.

There are many steps we can take to help our students make healthier choices. Some may be obvious, such as revamping the school's cafeteria offerings, but others may be more subtle. While it may not be possible to make all the needed changes immediately, there will always be steps that can be taken in a positive direction. During the planning and implementation phases of long-term strategies, there are many practical ways we can educate our students about nutrition, exercise, energy, and more.

One important first step for schools is to collect baseline health data from the school community and then create a plan for improvement catered to specific school needs.

How do you measure, create, improve, and sustain a positive and supportive school climate?

Before school officials will be able to implement practices and policies to work toward a healthier environment, they must know where they are starting from. Moreover, they must have some idea of how to complete continued assessments of the school climate and culture, so they can know if they are improving in this area. This will also enable schools to recognize what strategies are working and need to be continued, as well as those that need to be revised.

One way to determine a good baseline (or further improvements) for school climate and culture is to gather data from the various members of the school community. Asking for feedback and data from key groups such as parents, students, administrators, and teachers on an ongoing basis will help give school personnel the information they need to continue working in the right direction (Newman, 2021).

Interested in assessing your school's culture and climate? Here are five steps to consider implementing that will help you do just that (Newman, 2021).

1. **Identify the people who have the most leadership and authority at your school.** This may seem obvious since in theory this would likely be school administrators or teachers who have seniority and experience. However, in actuality, those most invested in the school community need to identify the individuals with the greatest capacity to make helpful change when it comes to creating a healthy school environment. From this point of view, perhaps it will become clear that administrators and teachers aren't the best choices for this role, as each group of people will have many other responsibilities (e.g., teaching, running the campus) that cannot be disregarded or minimized in order to concentrate more fully on community health. Instead, hiring a professional or providing professional development for a specific subset of school staff who can work together as the leaders of your school's health initiative may be more successful. For example, you may identify the go-to counselor, psychologist, and/or other health specialist to take the lead. That person (or persons) can coordinate assessments, introduce new health-oriented strategies and initiatives, and be responsible for ongoing improvements to the school's culture in cooperation with the rest of the school staff.

2. **Identify the key data points that your school wishes to collect and focus on for initial improvements.** Improving your school's culture will require focusing on

many different areas, but it's impossible to cover everything at once if improvements are to be successful and sustainable. Especially in the beginning, it's a good idea for school leaders to determine the areas of focus that they wish to prioritize in the first phase, which may include family involvement, school diversity, or school-wide procedures and regulations. The team that's planning your school's experiences in this arena should decide on the metrics that they need to collect and share this information with the students, families, and staff of the school.

3. **Determine which tools and resources you have at your disposal to work toward your stated aims.** In order to accurately measure your school's climate and culture, you could use several strategies. For example, you could use an already-existing survey - there are many widely available on the internet - to assess how well your school is doing according to several health metrics. You could also assemble a focus group of students, parents, and staff to help you assess the efficacy of upcoming projects or strategies. Additionally, more observational data, such as attendance and any available health information, can be evaluated to draw a more simple baseline regarding how you're doing.

4. **Analyze your baseline data and come up with a plan for success.** The data you're able to pull from your surveys, observations, or focus groups is only as good as what you're able to learn from this data! It's important to schedule and take as much time as you need to learn from the data that you find and to put together strategies based on that specific data. Get the data, organize it, analyze it, and then come up with a strategy; it's essential that the steps go in that order! Use your data to figure out where your efforts will go the furthest in terms of building towards health success for every member of your school's community.

5. **Implement measures to help you work toward your goals and keep every member of your community accountable for incremental growth.** After you have developed specific goals that will help you work toward a healthier school environment, you'll need to brainstorm specific practices and realistic measures that will help your community work toward those goals. The people in charge of this effort will need to prioritize your efforts, figure out which resources your school needs in order to succeed, and come up with an accountability system in order to ensure that everyone knows what needs to happen at all times.

While these elements can take work to implement and sustain, creating a healthy environment in your classroom will reduce worry and anxiety in your students (and, as

an invaluable side effect, in other teachers and staff members as well). Working to include all students, value their opinions, and create a physically and emotionally safe environment in your classroom will transform your students from passive learners to active ones.

It should be noted that in order to promote a holistic sense of health for school children, we need to start by giving them a healthy environment—not just increasing the number of available nutrients and fiber at the school cafeteria or expanding physical fitness. While these components of overall health are very important, it's also key to build our student's confidence, ensure the rooms they study in are inviting and the relationships they build are favorable, and give our students the room to grow and learn about positive choices. Only then will our students be able to take ownership of their own health (Robbin, 2019).

Next, we'll go over some practical ways to make this happen. Consider implementing one or more of the following in your classroom, and watch your students as they become happier and healthier! (Robbin, 2019)

1. **Write, observe, and maintain very clear and enforceable classroom expectations and rules.** While this might not sound like the most fun or freedom-allowing action, doing this early simply helps students know what to expect throughout their days - which is a hugely important facet of helping students feel safe. Not only will students worry less about what they will do, but they'll also have an idea regarding the ways that the rest of their community will behave. This will further allow students to trust that they will be okay and that it is safe for them to concentrate on their studies instead of waiting for the unexpected to occur. In order to feel like this is less of a dictatorial action and to help your students feel respected and involved, it may be a good idea to involve them, very early in the year, as you create class rules and expectations together. Since people invest more in their own decisions, allowing the creation of class expectations to be a group activity will make it more likely that your students will abide by the rules you all create. Finally, consider phrasing your rules and guidelines in the positive, not the negative. This makes for a more encouraging atmosphere and will emphasize the intended behavior instead of the rule-breaking activity. (For example, instead of making 'don't disrupt the class during quiet time' a rule, consider writing 'focus on your work until you're completely done, then ask the teacher for more information' or something like that!)

2. **Establish clear procedures to help students understand the norms of your classroom.** In addition to establishing predictability and expectations for your students, it's a good idea to help students follow routines as they move throughout their day. This will help them know exactly how to request feedback, submit work, understand how you award grades, and more. As a result, your students won't have to expend valuable mental energy trying to figure out how to complete routine classroom behaviors on a regular basis; and, when they do need to do something that is outside of their personal realm of experience (e.g., contact you for further help), they will know exactly how to do so. Where coming up with class expectations and rules could be a fun and valuable group activity, listing concise class procedures will more likely be an action you complete on your own, make available to the class, and update throughout the year as it becomes clear that students need enriched procedures

3. **Invest time and effort into Social-Emotional Learning.** Social-emotional learning (SEL) refers to a student's ability to understand the specific ways in which our emotions influence and impact our development, our growth, our ability to make good decisions, and the ways we interact with each other. As a teacher, this means that it's definitely worthwhile for you to focus classroom time on helping students identify, acknowledge, and work through their feelings. You can also include instructions on processing stress and clearing one's mind when frustrating emotions can cloud judgment. Some of this can be done through group work, especially when safe spaces and boundaries have been established in the classroom.

4. **Making room for student choice.** This, too, is a historically underemphasized piece of healthy learning. Allowing students to make certain choices when appropriate invites them to be more enthusiastic and comfortable in their learning environment. However, you do have to work to strike a balance between overly-permissive teaching behaviors and environments in which students have too little ownership over their activities. Ways to strike this balance will depend on your teaching style, but may include allowing students to decide how they will present or showcase information they've learned (e.g., an oral presentation versus an art project), the type of content within a certain subject they wish to study (e.g., a specific historical figure versus a more general historical event), or even which problems they must solve (e.g., give them a 20-question set, tell them they need to pick 15).

5. **Building some element of flexibility into the day.** This may seem counterintuitive, particularly after the emphasis that we've placed on building routines and procedures into your students' day. However, while repetition may build a student's sense of safety, it can also get boring after a while! To combat this effect, plan on a few more spontaneous or flexible occurrences at least every once in a while. This will also help your students put lesser-used practices in motion and grow to understand that life is unpredictable, setting them more at ease when unplanned things happen in their life outside of school.

One of the foundations for making healthy choices is having a strong foundation of social-emotional learning. SEL is a key part of both human development and modern education. It's also a process by which young people learn to glean and apply new information, learn to manage emotions, and learn to accomplish their goals and connect with others (CDC, 2021).

If you think about it, many of the underlying factors that can contribute to an unhealthy lifestyle are driven by unfavorable relationships, poor mental health, unmet goals or difficult emotional times. While the practical logistics of getting children good food and exercise resources are important (and we will touch on them soon), enhancing a student's comfort level with SEL is also vastly important as they navigate their present and future circumstances (CDC, 2021).

Schools can implement measures that promote SEL and work in congruence with SEL strategies to build toward an overarching sense of student wellness and safety. The CDC has developed recommendations for supporting student SEL (which provides a good foundation for student nutrition and physical activity), supporting student nutrition (which in turn promotes SEL), and supporting student physical activity (which also promotes SEL). As you can see, these various strengths and practices all form a positive feedback loop—which can make healthy growth easier to continue once begun (CDC, 2021).

We'll look at each set of recommendations in turn.

Strategies for promoting student SEL, per the CDC, include (CDC, 2021)

- Developing a curriculum that goes out of its way to emphasize the types of competencies that promote SEL. This includes ensuring that lessons are appropriate on a developmental level for each age bracket of students - and that

all lessons exhibit cultural relevance to help build each student's worldview and to ensure everyone feels welcome and represented.

- Making sure that SEL aims are featured in all academic areas, through each aspect of each academic area—e.g., in practice and in assessment. Teachers can work to create these opportunities by ensuring that each lesson includes time for developing relationships and understanding the perspectives of others.
- Understanding the need for teacher and administrator professional development—and understanding the link between professional development and the level of support a teaching staff is able to provide for a school's student body. Specific SEL-appropriate training might include strategies to help teachers and other school staff members be effective role models and to teach them how to apply helpful emotional strategies while working to support students who may be going through a rough time.
- Prioritizing the formation of a safe and inclusive campus for every single young person on campus. This will require building empathetic relationships, communicating effectively, and respecting diversity.
- Reaching out to form positive relationships with the local community and with all of the families of the students at your school. This will help each student feel welcome and help build a more comprehensive support system to ensure that all students have what they need to succeed.

Strategies for promoting student nutrition, per the CDC, include (CDC, 2021)

Since nutrition impacts a student's energy, attention, and thinking processes, a school's food and nutrition policy can have direct effects on how a student might be able to experience the benefits of social-emotional learning. Since this is the case, the CDC recommends the following practices in order to harness the potential benefits of nutrition for SEL:

- Make sure that your students have enough time to eat—e.g., no 15-minute lunch windows! This will ensure that your students have the opportunity to pick high-quality food options, rest, socialize with their peers, and actually digest their food.

- Provide high-quality nutrition education for your students, including information about the link between emotion and eating habits. Students need to know how to recognize when they're hungry and when they are full—these are not pieces of knowledge that everyone innately has.
- Allow teachers to eat meals with their students. This can help teachers build and strengthen healthy relationships with students, and can help teachers model healthy eating habits for the young people in their care.
- Make it easy, subtle, and private for students to access the subsidized food plans at your school. The students who benefit most from reduced-price or free meals are often the most aware of the possible stigmas that arise from accessing these options. Don't make it easy for other students to pinpoint people who are receiving additional help and care.

Strategies for promoting student physical activity, per the CDC, include (CDC, 2021)

Researchers have performed study after study showing that the physical activity we routinely perform has a strong link to our health and happiness. Leveraging physical activity awareness, resources, and support in your school will help your students have a better experience with social and emotional learning aims.

In order to accomplish this, school leaders should work toward the following (CDC, 2021):

- Fully realizing the value of physical education. In recent decades, PE and gym classes have fallen to a lower priority level. In reality, having the opportunity to move our bodies on a regular basis increases our ability to express ourselves, challenge ourselves, enjoy ourselves, and form healthy relationships with our peers.
- Integrating physical activity throughout a student's day, rather than for one class period only. Students of all ages need opportunities for free and guided play, exercise or sports instruction, as well as the socialization that comes with these activities.

- Giving teachers space and support to model a physically active lifestyle for their students by ensuring that they have the time to walk and lightly exercise throughout their day.
- Ensuring that all students and community members are aware of the ease and accessibility of fun and healthy movement. This can be accomplished through constant communication about free or low-cost events or activities that promote healthy movement.
- Prohibiting any form of physical activity as a punishment or withholding physical activity as a punishment - e.g., running laps as a form of discipline, or not being able to participate in a recess period because of punishment.

Are there other health-related factors that have an impact on academic achievement?

Now that we've discussed general strategies for laying a foundation for good student health, we can delve further into effective strategies for high-quality physical fitness.

Aside from proper nutrition and all-encompassing safety, there are other ways to help ensure that your students have an engaging and nurturing educational experience. For example (Clark, 2017):

- **Incorporate physical fitness into your lesson planning.** Over the past two decades, researchers have seen more and more that a high aptitude for fitness or simple practice of physical fitness correlates strongly with high levels of academic achievement. For example, in one 2013 study, a group of middle school students exhibited higher scores in fitness—and also in both social studies and math. A New York Times article probing the same phenomenon found that children who have higher levels of daily physical activity are able to focus better, can perform simple tasks more efficiently, have higher retention of new ideas, and can solve problems more quickly. Moreover, students with higher levels of physical activity also scored higher on standardized tests. More recently, other studies have shown that there's a connection between regular exercise and better blood flow to vital organs, including the brain.

  Specific ways to make this happen include:

- Seeing how creative you can get with replacing stationary desk work with (literal) mobile learning. Students can go on walks as they discuss texts instead of sitting in a circle; you can take field trips and explore local historical sites instead of watching a video presentation about an event.
- Incorporating practical exercise information and concepts into other subjects that your students are learning. For example, in science, you can discuss metabolism, basic nutrition and physiology, and calorie breakdowns. In math, you can discuss the rates at which Olympians run, or the distances people have biked in famous races.
- Being a positive role model for your students simply by mentioning physical activities you have incorporated into your lifestyle can help impact how your students choose to spend their time. For example, bringing up your favorite sport from time to time or visibly spending your lunch break going on a walk can reinforce physical activity reminders in a very real way.

- **Be strategic about how you schedule your students' days, insofar as you're able.** A reliable routine reduces stress in humans, so keeping your students' days relatively similar from day to day can help them remain calm and know precisely what to expect. Researchers have even noted that regular changes in the organization or flow of a student's day can correlate with negative trends in academic performance. Overall, students seem to do better when there is consistency. We can take a step further, even, and schedule specific periods of didactic activity versus solo study versus periods of movement and conversation at the times of days when young children and teens are likely to have the most energy. For example, researchers have found that students who attended math class first thing in the morning, as opposed to later in the afternoon, tended to have higher grades. Surveying your students, paying attention to the energy that they have, and allowing them natural time to rest and recharge throughout the day will have benefits if you use this information to strategically plan your schedule.

  Specific ways to make this happen include:

  - Sticking to a routine
  - Introducing more rigorous or complex subjects earlier in the day
  - Avoiding over-scheduled days for young children and teens

- Allowing consistent, reliable breaks for rest and community-building activities throughout the day.

Of course, food will always be a factor as well. Researchers have hypothesized that consistently healthy meals could boost student achievement by approximately four percentile points. Although we understand the benefits of good nutrition, it is not always easy to provide healthy meals because of the expense and the logistics involved in delivering them. However, there are steps that can be taken.

Some quick practical tips may include (Clark, 2017):

- Ensuring that tutors and teachers have a budget for healthy snacks during smaller group or individual learning sessions
- Launching social media campaigns targeted toward prioritizing healthy food options
- Reducing the difficulty and cost associated with healthy food options—e.g., finding ways to offer subsidized fruit, perhaps by partnering with a local grocery store, instead of or in addition to more processed dessert and snack options
- Incorporating practical nutrition information into a student's curriculum—the biology of micro and macronutrients, for example, or the fascinating history of avoidable nutrition-based diseases (e.g., rickets, anemia, and scurvy)

How to introduce healthier options into the cafeteria

The nutritional value of choices available in your school cafeteria is likely already a hot-button issue at your school. Parents want healthier choices for their children, children need to have good reasons to choose healthier food, and food needs to be as affordable as possible to ensure true accessibility for every student on campus.

This may seem like a tall order. It is! However, it doesn't have to be impossible—and there are certainly many ways to gradually improve if a full cafeteria overhaul isn't immediately in your school's budget.

Here's how to incrementally strategize to ensure that healthy meals are provided at your school (Vanco Education, 2021):

1. **Ask for feedback from the staff, students, and families.** Send out regular surveys to students who eat in the cafeteria as well as those who don't—and to every

member of the school community. Ask what they like about your school's options. Ask what they'd like to see. Ask what they'd be comfortable paying, or why they don't eat in the cafeteria. Your school community can only make the cafeteria a truly valuable resource if you know what your specific population of students most requires, so learning that information is a necessary starting point.

2. **Start optimizing common stressors and services.** While it's key to prioritize the specific cafeteria practices that your population mentions, there are likely universal frustrations and issues that most school attendees experience in the school lunchroom. As you're waiting to get survey responses (or if you receive unhelpful or mixed data), concentrate on figuring out ways to speed up service in the lunchroom, to create a database of allergens, a simple way to manage student monetary balances for lunch programs, and gradually notching up the quality and nutritional balance of the offerings your school has.

3. **Make sure that every member of the school staff—from teachers to administrators—has information about the subsidized lunch programs that your school may offer.** Often, the people who would most benefit from these types of programs are the ones least likely to ask for this help. Parents may only feel comfortable asking a specific, trusted member of school staff for assistance; or a teacher who has invested in a relationship with a struggling student and family may need to broach the subject. In any case, it's key that any staff member that a parent is able to approach will be able to provide all of the information needed.

4. **Make it worthwhile for every student to sign up for the school lunch program at some level.** There are many reasons why students and their families may prefer to pack lunches from home. Your goal should be to make a school lunch cost-efficient and valuable (e.g., tasty and genuinely nutritious) enough to make opting for a school lunch a no-brainer for most families. Try spreading the word among your families that there are communal and nutritive benefits (in addition to basic convenience) for students when they eat at school. For example, if a large amount of the academic population regularly eats a school lunch, it will be easier for your school to keep associated costs very low. Try offering inexpensive, nutritious, and culturally varied foods that you can tie in with social studies lessons, or connecting home economics aims with cafeteria initiatives. Tapping into government programs, partnering with local food-based businesses, and otherwise making it very easy, affordable, and attractive for students to get

reliably good food in the cafeteria will be well worth the time spent to accomplish such goals.

5. **Make the cafeteria an integral part of the school community.** Invite teachers, school administrators, and even parents to eat with students on a regular basis. Give tours of the cafeteria, place posters around the school hyping fun, unique, and novel cafeteria items, and more. Anything you can do to spark interest in sharing good meals together will strengthen your community and make it easier for your school to continue prioritizing high-quality food for your students.

6. **Invest in a very good salad and soup bar.** Providing a salad bar will not only give students exposure to fruits, vegetables, vitamins, and other nutrients, but also offer an opportunity for them to try new things and be creative in their food choices.Schools can partner with a local farm to provide inexpensive, high quality produce. By offering unique combinations of greens, fruits, cheeses, and vegetables students can learn to think outside of the box when it comes to interesting ways to build balanced salads. Providing soups, chili, or stews can also be a very efficient and effective way to offer a filling and nutritious meal. Pairing rich, well-flavored, unique soups with bread and fruit can be a strategic, healthy, and cost-effective way to feed a large group of students.

7. **Make healthy snacks available between classes.** If your cafeteria is open between meals as a study hall or community area, keep nutritious and relatively shelf-stable options out for easy, low-cost (or free) access during the day. Having fruits, vegetables, or healthy dips available can reduce reliance on expensive, sugary vending machine snacks and fuel children's growing bodies throughout long, work-intensive mornings and afternoons.

How to prioritize health for remote students

Increasingly—and particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 upheaval—more and more students are opting to study at home (or they are experiencing situations that may make this necessary). Our schools need to find ways to support their health, too, even though it will be from a distance.

Schools vary in their ability to offer resources to students and families during remote learning. They may provide technology sources, school supplies, student meals, or other needed items or services, or such offerings may be extremely limited.

Regardless of the resources provided, it's key that our remote students still feel supported as they grow in health and happiness.

Here are a few tips that you can echo throughout their coursework, in any materials you send home, and when talking with students and their parents (LJWorks, 2020):

1. **Getting sleep is more important than they think.** It can be difficult for at-home students to create healthy boundaries around school time and the rest of their daily lives. It can be easy to procrastinate on online coursework until later and later into the evening, resulting in excessive late-night blue light exposure and correspondingly weaker sleep. Remind your students that it's important to shut down the computer at a reasonable time: Failing to get enough sleep can impair brain function, lower a child's ability to focus, and make it more difficult to make good decisions the next day.

2. **Don't just study from the couch, if at all possible.** It's true that one of the perks of an at-home education is the ability to complete work and take calls from anywhere, and it's important to take advantage of that! However, for many reasons, it's a good idea to have a specific spot for your students to do the bulk of their schoolwork. This can help students create and maintain school/life boundaries, can help them manage screen time, and even help them improve their posture and spine health (e.g., if they're sitting at a chair instead of slumped over on the couch).

3. **Tell your students to drink water throughout the day.** If possible, sending them a school-branded water bottle could be a fun way to help them feel connected to the school and each other—and, that way, you can set goals with a universal measurement. Even if school personnel know they will have a hard time helping remote students with specific nutrition goals, it is easy to encourage students to drink more water. Drinking water is important for virtually every bodily function—and this simple healthy act can help influence a child or a family to make other healthy choices throughout their day.

4. **Help give remote students an active way to be social.** If your students are already sitting through numerous video chat meetings for school presentations, groups, and more, adding on video calls to chat with their friends as well results in excessive screen time (and a lot of sitting time). While there's nothing inherently wrong with that—and, in many cases, this may be somewhat unavoidable—if you can help your students figure out ways to have fun and safely

get their bodies moving, this will help with their overall health and happiness. Setting group fitness challenges, helping them navigate group calls that they can tune into while walking, brainstorming local, safe, and accessible activities that students can complete together (e.g., visiting an outdoor park, or similar), and other such outside-of-the-box activities can make a big difference.

5. **Practice physical activity together, over Zoom.** If it works with your schedule, an easy way to help your kids be more active is to see it happen! Finding ways to stretch over Zoom, use hula hoops or jump ropes, or exercising as a class to class a fun, accessible Youtube workout can help increase community and promote physical activity in a remote setting.

6. **Remind your students that taking breaks and reducing stress are positive, productive activities.** Whether the underlying reasons for a student's remote education are themselves stressful or more routine, it's key to remember that an at-home education does not necessarily translate to an easier experience. And, as discussed above, it can be difficult for a student or an entire family to feel that it's okay to set down the books and do other activities, especially if their school space and living space are the same. Chronic stress is very detrimental to young bodies, and all stress counts—not just dramatic or acute stressors. Make sure that your students take breaks often. Setting up some kind of classroom break accountability tracker could help your students appreciate that taking time to recover at the end of a long day—or to take a minute or two to breathe in the middle of a long one—are not only healthy but necessary strategies.

Section 3 Key Points

- Effective assessment is important. Asking your community for feedback, and setting up ways to analyze the data and work with what you've learned is far more important than jumping into action uninformed.

- Social-emotional learning is a process by which young people learn to glean and apply new information, learn to manage emotions, and learn to accomplish their goals and connect with others, and it is critical in ensuring overall student health.

- Starting simple can be wildly efficient: Ensuring your students are getting good sleep and good snacks can jumpstart more than you probably think!

Section 3 Discussion Questions

- Is your school serving its remote students as well as it is possible to do so?
- Do you ever eat in your school's cafeteria? What do you know about the school's nutrition options? Would you want to eat there?
- Do you think you have the freedom to tweak your students' schedules to incorporate movement and avoid stress? Why or why not?
- Does your school seem well set up for efficient social-emotional learning?

Course Conclusion

When it comes to ways to increase the efficacy of our school initiatives, there's nothing quite like the positive feedback effect of investing in safety and healthiness first. Start by listening to and learning from your school community members about their health needs, and try brainstorming ways to meet as many of those requests as possible. Before you know it, your entire academic community will benefit from working and studying on a safer, more healthy campus.

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Part 2:

Introduction

The past year has not been easy for teachers—but even in the pre-pandemic era, teaching was one of the most high-stress professions, yet one with the least amount of professional support. There are several reasons that teachers are exposed to heightened levels of stress in the workplace. For instance, teachers are often taught that their own health and happiness is, at best, second on their list of priorities, with anything related to student success taking the number one slot. In addition, teachers often have to deal with the issues that their students are facing, which include a world of varied stressors—from trauma and poverty to learning difficulties, bullying, and other troubling situations. On top of all of that, teachers need to manage the logistics of teaching every day, which has changed drastically over the past decade—not to mention, in the last year.

The emotional needs and stress levels of teachers are being overlooked, and it's leading to extremely poor teacher retention rates, bad experiences for students, and an overall lack of respect for teacher health and happiness. Schools, administrators, and teachers alike need to realize that teacher wellbeing must be a priority.

Case Studies: The Presence of Stress in Teachers' Lives—and the Relative Simplicity of Proactive Stress-Reducing Solutions

In one school, the administrators decided that giving a stressed-out teaching staff a peaceful and comfortable teaching room or lounge would be worth the up-front investment. Teachers described the current room as one that was outdated; in particular, they noted that the room tended to be a place furnished mainly by items that people no longer wanted in their own homes. This contributed to a dingy, faded look in the teaching lounge that did not help with daily rejuvenation or relaxation. The school decided to renovate the room, purchasing modern, beautiful furniture, painting the walls bright colors, and setting aside a small monthly budget to replenish the snack cupboard and to invest in good coffee. The result? Teachers flocked to the teaching lounge, spent more time collaborating together, and felt that they had a place of respite in their own school (Graham, 2021).

One study, designed to assess the ways that teachers in rural Alabama experience and cope with stress, used open-ended interviews to learn more about the factors that affected Alabaman teachers on a day-to-day basis. This study occurred well before the pandemic and therefore did not include the numerous issues associated with distance learning. In particular, the researchers were looking for stressors that they knew were likely red flags for leaving the teaching field. After the initiation of the study, the

researchers decided to incorporate self-evaluations, as well. At the end of the study, after analysis of the data, the researchers concluded that the teachers' stress stemmed mainly from the ways in which they were expected to get work done juxtaposed with the lack of resources and support they received from their school (Tolliver, 2019).

Section 1: The Importance of Healthy, Happy Teachers

Mental health is important; yet, for many populations, it's severely underemphasized. One such population includes grade school teachers, who work tirelessly for the mental health and growth of their students but may not have the time or resources to take care of themselves. While teachers and school districts alike tend to focus more on the health and happiness of their student populations, research and anecdotal evidence are showing us that unhappy, unhealthy teachers are detrimental to student success (and, clearly, not good for the teachers themselves and the overall school environment as well).

While some may realize the clear repercussions of failing to support teachers and their wellbeing, the downsides may not be clear to all. Fortunately, there are clear benefits that will follow from marked investment in teacher health, and these factors demonstrate just how important taking care of teachers really is.

Teacher Wellbeing

There are many potential definitions of teacher wellbeing, but perhaps a good working one is as follows:

Teacher wellbeing is the way that teachers react to both collective and individual events (social, environmental, and physical) that affect them, their colleagues, and their students. While teacher and student wellbeing are often linked, it's important to distinguish them. For example, while it's been demonstrated that happier teachers teach more effectively, leading to heightened student performance, it's essential that we don't prioritize teacher happiness solely based on the benefits that students receive. Teacher wellbeing and fulfilment is affected by the levels of support they enjoy from their schools, their satisfaction with their teaching experience, mental and physical stressors, as well as other factors (Porter, 2020).

Why is it important to take care of the health of teachers?

When speaking of overall health and well-being, very simply, if teachers are struggling with a couple of mental health or bodily health issues, they are not going to be able to

focus on their students—at least, not entirely. If teachers experience depression or anxiety, if their joints are achy,or if they feel physically ill because they do not have the time and resources to rest and nourish themselves, their teaching efficacy will suffer. They will not have the energy to focus on their students, and they will not have the creativity and persistence they would otherwise be able to use for the benefit of those in their care.

In addition, consider the fact that the primary goal of teachers is to help their students grow into happy, healthy, and productive adults. A teacher does this through thoughtful instruction, but a teacher also contributes to this goal by modeling happy, healthy, and productive behaviors. If a teacher is suffering from poor mental or physical health, and it is addressed in a compassionate manner, that can normalize that suffering for students, who may then realize that their own physical and emotional struggles can be acknowledged and managed.

Even young students are suffering, and according to some studies, as high as 25% of grade school students may have “diagnosable mental illness, yet 40% don’t seek help.” (Best Colleges, 2021) Students with undiagnosed mental illnesses have a much harder time learning new information, keeping up with their peers, and mastering the skills necessary to proceed through school. In addition, students with depression and anxiety are much more likely than their peers to simply drop out of school (TwoSigmas, 2019). Teachers who work with these young people on a daily basis often feel frustrated and overwhelmed, which contributes to their own sense of wellbeing.

While the importance of teacher health has not been prioritized in the past, linking teacher health to student health may be an effective way to demonstrate the importance of teacher health within your school district (TwoSigmas, 2019).

Recent studies are showing us that teaching is among the most stressful professions. Educators routinely report that their work conditions and mental health is not good—and recent worldwide events have only exacerbated the situation. Teachers operate under high levels of stress for significant periods of time, often without support and while in fact acting as support for other stressed individuals. Teachers are receiving fewer funds to perform increasingly specialized tasks, and their mental health is dwindling. These trends will cause the teacher shortage to continue and may result in very poor educational outcomes for students over the coming years (TwoSigmas, 2019).

Teachers and Adverse Mental Health Right Now in the United States

What is the current state of teacher wellbeing in the United States?

The past few years have thrown into stark light stressors that had been plaguing teachers for a very long time. It exacerbated existing issues—while creating more. However, it's important to realize that this clearly indicates that teachers have been suffering from mental health issues for years.

In 2020, the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence conducted a survey, asking over 5000 United States teachers about their emotional experiences during the pandemic. After tabulating the results, the researchers found that teachers en masse had spent over a year fighting upsetting emotions on a daily basis. These emotions included anxiety, fear, worry, overwhelm, and sadness. Any one of these emotional stressors would have resulted in poor teacher wellbeing; instead, instructors were expected to overperform while battling all five (Brackett and Cipriano, 2020).

Many of these heightened stressors make sense considering the circumstances. For one, some teachers had to educate not only their students but their own children as well. As one teacher commented, "My vision of finally having someone else take care of my own kids' education, even virtually, was smashed to smithereens. This requires 100% parent involvement, actually 200% because my kids are in two different grades!" (International Board of Credentialing and Continuing Education Standards, 2020)

This required superhuman effort shone a spotlight on teacher wellbeing, which was long overdue. In 2017, three years prior to the onset of the pandemic, researchers conducted a similar study where they surveyed 5000 United States teachers. At that time, the five most common emotions reported were frustration, stress, tiredness, happiness, and feeling overwhelmed. While 'happiness' is obviously a pleasant emotion, the other four aren't positive—even if a sense of daily fear had not yet crept into the average teacher's experience (Brackett and Cipriano, 2020).

When the 2017 study probed deeper into the reasons, perceived or documented, that teachers felt overwhelmed and stressed, it was noted that teachers felt unsupported. They reported a lack of awareness on the part of their administrations about the resources that they needed. The teachers felt that no one else understood the increasing demands of more and more diverse students, the heightened importance given to testing and testing results, an ever-changing curriculum, and the lack of balance teachers were able to strike between life and work (Brackett and Cipriano, 2020).

Again, this is not a new phenomenon. In fact, a pre-pandemic study found that almost a third of teachers tend to leave the profession and seek other work entirely within the first five years of teaching full-time (Garcia and Weiss, 2019).

Other salient pre-pandemic stats include (Ferguson, 2019):

- 84% of administrative school leaders and nearly 75% percent of school teachers reported themselves as being stressed.
- 49% percent of education professionals stated that their workplace had a negative influence on their ability to optimize their mental health.

An executive of one charity that seeks to provide support for mental health for teachers stated that because of harsh accountability structures, “Overwork has become normalized, and education professionals don’t feel trusted.” Lack of trust and increased work hours are two incredibly detrimental factors when considering optimal mental health. This professional said that a reform of the way that we hold teachers accountable to working hours would be necessary in order to give teachers a chance to relax with, at least, the few free hours that they had (Ferguson, 2019).

The lack of high-quality rest that teachers were experiencing has affected the student and parent experience with school. Prior to the pandemic, we were already seeing a ‘vicious cycle’ of teachers who were experiencing high levels of stress, unconsciously providing a lackluster experience for students as a result, which (of course) led to a lack of enthusiasm or obedience from the student, which (naturally) led to heightened stress for already-overwhelmed teachers (Ferguson, 2019).

How did 2020’s COVID-19 pandemic specifically impact the mental health of teachers and the state of the teacher shortage?

In short, it didn’t help; far from it. One March 2019 study assessed the pressure on educators that the pandemic produced. When the pandemic hit, teachers were expected to make the shift to remote or hybrid instruction very quickly, with hardly any warning, and, in many cases, with little support (Diliberti, Schwartz, and Grant, 2020).

In other cases, teachers were expected to continue teaching on-site even through a public health crisis, again, with little support—and little protection. None of this contributed to teacher wellbeing, and it showed (ASCD, 2021):

- Of the public school teachers who decided to leave the profession in early 2020, an overwhelming percentage cited COVID-19 as the reason for their choice.

According to exit surveys, these teachers cited the sudden switch to a remote environment, drastically longer hours, technical glitches that they had to navigate themselves, and other issues as the reasons they quit their jobs.

- Teachers who quit and continued alike noted that their expected work hours increased significantly after the onset of the pandemic, with an average work week approaching sixty hours. (Pre-pandemic, the average teacher workweek was much closer to a traditional forty hours). This increased workload was expected, sudden, and was not, in the majority of cases, associated with any increase in pay.
- Many of the teachers who quit due to the pandemic did so with no job lined up, or took a job with less pay and no insurance or retirement benefits.
- In October of 2020, approximately 25% of surveyed teachers noted that it was likely that they would leave teaching by the end of the 2020-2021 school year.

Going into the pandemic, the United States was already facing a shortage of teachers. If even a fraction of those surveyed (and their peers) go on to follow through with their plans, the teacher shortage and our national ability to support students will worsen considerably (ASCD, 2021).

The Stressors Teachers Routinely Face

What are classic symptoms of stress?

If we can't recognize teacher anxiety and stress, then we'll have a hard time doing anything about it. Here are a few symptoms of the type of stress we need to help teachers avoid:

- Irritation
- Feelings of inadequacy
- Constant headaches
- Recurring insomnia
- Loneliness
- Withdrawal from community
- Conflicts with other people

- Lack of focus
- Difficulty concentrating
- Increased desire to skip school

While some of these may be obvious, others are less so. In every case, these symptoms are not fun in themselves, and can also exacerbate other stressors or make it much less pleasant for teachers to do their jobs (American Institute of Stress, 2020).

How can teachers and school communities effectively manage stress?

The road to recovery begins partially with an understanding that every teacher, on balance, is currently both stressed and exhausted. Teachers and administrators both need to learn how to develop and manage emotional skills, particularly the ability to recognize other people's feelings and stressors and understand the consequences of emotional burnout (International Board of Credentialing and Continuing Education Standards, 2020).

Administrators need to listen more to teachers and encourage them to state their needs honestly. Another recent survey, one that asked teachers how they wanted to feel in addition to how they were currently feeling, found that—perhaps unsurprisingly—teachers en masse want to feel respected, supported, effective, inspired, valued, and happy. Administrators must take immediate steps to ensure that teachers are in a better position to experience these feelings. This gap between how teachers feel and how they want to feel presents an enormous opportunity for administrators to support teachers overall and to find a way to make those wished-for emotions a reality. Practical steps that administrators and teachers can take to support general wellbeing will be discussed in a later section of this course (International Board of Credentialing and Continuing Education Standards, 2020).

What factors lead to teacher stress?

In order to figure out how to support teachers better and reduce their stress as effectively and naturally as possible, it's key to know what the main factors are that lead to teacher stress. Per one study, the most common factors that drive stress just from their students' behavior include (International Board of Credentialing and Continuing Education Standards, 2020):

- Student hostility toward teachers

- Lack of student attention during class
- Student noise during class
- Student lack of effort during class
- Lack of student preparation for class
- Student hyperactivity
- Lack of student regard for school rules
- Students damaging school property
- Students being hostile toward other students
- A student lack of interest in learning

These types of behaviors, which are increasingly common, can induce a great deal of stress and anxiety for teachers.

Students who have mental health issues tend to act out, disengage, or cause disruption in their classrooms. We're learning that at least one in five children will likely have a mental health illness—diagnosed or undiagnosed—over the course of his or her lifetime. Teachers feel a responsibility to help students move through their struggles—and, of course, extremely practically speaking, teachers need to manage the logistics of working with children who have various needs throughout the day. Often, they're doing so without adequate resources, which only heightens teacher stress and makes it impossible to optimize student performance (International Board of Credentialing and Continuing Education Standards, 2020).

Why does emotion management matter in terms of improving or managing teacher stress and wellbeing?

Grade-school classrooms are environments in which emotions can constantly run high. As a result, both teachers and students suffer, especially when emotions escalate and it becomes a chronic situation. Teachers need resources and knowledge to manage the emotions of growing young children, as well as their own emotional states. The more that teachers understand how to manage student emotions and their own, the better that they can provide support for their students and be less stressed themselves (International Board of Credentialing and Continuing Education Standards, 2020).

Emotions may seem superficial, but the types of emotions that one constantly has will impact a person's ability to learn. Crucial mental faculties such as memory and attention are influenced by the type of emotions that a person regularly experiences. If students experience joy and curiosity, for example, those students are more likely to be engaged in what they experience on a day-to-day basis. Conversely, emotions such as fear and anxiety make it really hard for a student to focus on problem sets or dense paragraphs of text. Teachers need to have specific training and resources to help children who are experiencing anxiety and fear, as well as trauma (International Board of Credentialing and Continuing Education Standards, 2020).

In addition, teachers who are experiencing high levels of stress and emotional strain have a more difficult time making rational, wise decisions. This can impede the learning progress of equally stressed-out students and lead to poor educational outcomes. Giving teachers the tools necessary to understand and support their own emotions as well as those of the young people in their care will be absolutely critical over the coming years in order to give teachers a fighting chance at success—not to mention health, happiness, and wellbeing (International Board of Credentialing and Continuing Education Standards, 2020).

Why do administrators need to take more ownership over the well-being of both students and teachers?

Giving teachers the informative resources to care for themselves and their students is very important. However, that also places an additional responsibility on already-overworked teachers to take on yet more work. In order to create lasting, impactful change that actually benefits those who need it most, school administrators need to take responsibility for the wellbeing of every person in their educational communities (International Board of Credentialing and Continuing Education Standards, 2020).

One professor who has spent years studying teacher wellbeing has said: "Administrators set the tone in their building for how teachers are perceived and supported. Prioritizing teacher well-being and giving higher rates of recognition and positive feedback to teachers versus criticism and judgment helps set a positive tone." (International Board of Credentialing and Continuing Education Standards, 2020)

In order to make teacher wellbeing a true priority, we need to not only give them professional development, supportive programs, and other needed resources, we need to work hard to provide them with the downtime, space, and respite they need to thrive. We also need to invest in the beauty and ergonomics of our environments to

keep them healthy and bright—for both students and teachers (International Board of Credentialing and Continuing Education Standards, 2020).

What does the research say are the specific chronic stressors that teachers face?

For better or for worse, teacher wellbeing has come into the limelight in the past several years. Several institutes have begun long-ranging studies into the needs that teachers have and the chronic stressors that they face. According to at least one recent study, the most universal sources of heightened stress that serve to directly combat teacher wellbeing are (Cox, Solomon, and Parris, 2018):

- Increasingly unrealistic daily demands of their job
- The limited resources that teachers have to accomplish their set goals
- The lack of professional development teachers often have
- The lack of personal autonomy that teachers enjoy with respect to their career trajectory
- Poor school climates

Over the past few decades, the academic world has narrowed its focus from holistic student achievement to student test scores. This provides teachers with very clear, if unrealistic, goals. Teachers are expected to assist their students in achieving ever-higher test scores. If students fail to accomplish this (increasingly unrealistic) goal, the scrutiny for this perceived failure falls more and more on teachers (Cox, Solomon, and Parris, 2018).

Teachers are also expected to navigate mental health crises with the students directly suffering from them. Teachers need to meet the unique demands and needs of the families of each of their students, which can involve considerable time and effort to be able to understand complex family dynamics. As the trend toward diverse, personalized teaching styles continues, teachers are expected to produce consistently creative, engaging educational experiences for stressed students without much support to do so from their schools (Cox, Solomon, and Parris, 2018).

Lack of school support for teachers is also increasingly pervasive. The focus is on the students (and their scores); teachers are expected to work toward the perceived best benefit for their students, determined by state, district, and administrative guidelines, without having much say in what the greatest benefits should be. According to another

study, teachers overwhelmingly feel like their opinions do not matter at all while they are at work—a factor that directly impacts whether professionals are likely to feel satisfied with their careers (Cox, Solomon, and Parris, 2018).

Finally, when teachers feel like they are unable to meet the holistic needs of their students, teachers suffer, as well. If a student is going through a tough time at home, needs specialized support at school, or otherwise requires additional care, their teacher is meant to be one of the first people to notice and recommend a plan of action. However, many teachers simply do not have the experience, knowledge, or the resources themselves to provide care for their students—which, clearly, is not in the benefit of the student, but also wreaks havoc on the teacher's mental health (Cox, Solomon, and Parris, 2018).

What are the direct costs if teachers are struggling in this area?

We know that when teachers are overly stressed, this leads to poor outcomes for students—and, of course, for the stressed teachers themselves . However, what are those direct repercussions?

The long-term effects of chronic stress can be devastating. The short-term effects of acute stress can also make it much more difficult for teachers to support their students well. The costs of teacher stress and poor teacher wellbeing can include:

- Poor health outcomes for teachers, including depression, anxiety, headaches, issues with sleeping, daily fatigue, increased irritability, and difficulty focusing on their projects, tasks, and students (Spencer, 2018).

- Increased teacher absences, including prolonged vacations, sick leave, or instances where teachers simply quit due to their poor experiences. Those teachers who do not proactively choose to take time to rest will require a greater amount of time to recover when their stress catches up to them, so, even if the teachers in your school district are not doing this or are not allowed to do this, teacher absences will build up over time (Spencer, 2018).

- Increased use of substitute teachers, which directly costs schools large sums of money and results in poor, disjointed, and less effective experiences for elementary school students. Increased teacher turnover also means that schools need to spend more effort recruiting, hiring, and training new teachers—which costs time and money, and also results in a potentially subpar experience for students in need of consistent support (Spencer, 2018).

- Teachers' stress gets passed on to their students in at least some form (and, usually, in several forms). If teachers are chronically stressed, their students usually begin to feel an increased level of mental and emotional strain—and the adverse physical symptoms of stress are passed to a young, growing population. This will both indirectly and directly affect students' ability to thrive during their formative years (Bolkan, 2018).

What does research say about the specific needs that teachers have right now—post-pandemic, but also just for the best outcome regardless?

The 2020-2021 COVID-19 pandemic highlighted many weaknesses in current school systems. In order to move past this crisis in the best way possible, it will be necessary to learn from the hardships of the pandemic to provide more support in the ways students and teachers find most crucial.

With the rapid shift to remote or distance learning triggered by the Covid-19 response, many existing inequalities among schools in the nation (and even within specific communities) came to light. These harsh realizations expose many ways that teachers need to be supported. Among these include the following (Hamilton, Kaufman, and Diliberti, 2020):

- When educators nationwide had to figure out how to support students and families through remote-only solutions, it quickly became clear that there were gaps in teacher training for this type of occurence. Teachers realized that although they received some support in learning how to set up basic remote classrooms, they did not have the support or training necessary to meet the needs of every group of students—particularly, those students with disabilities or students without reliable internet access.

- During the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers who were able to continue teaching reported that they were not able to complete all of the intended activities per their curriculum due to heightened time spent troubleshooting technical details and scrambling to provide remote solutions for their families. This resulted in lackluster educational experiences for their students.

- Principals, students, and families alike noted the distinct lack of hands-on learning for students during the pandemic, which caused teachers to struggle to brainstorm at-home activities for remote students. Teachers also noted that a large part of their job, being able to support and assess the emotional and social well-being of their students, depended on personal contact. As such, teachers worried that they

were not able to monitor their students' health and happiness in the way they'd been able to previously, which caused heightened strain for the teachers.

- While many schools across the nation professed goals to be more prepared for the next emergency and to increase resources for student and teacher mental health, many schools have emerged from the pandemic with no concrete plans to make this happen.

The same study provided recommendations for school districts in the wake of the pandemic. These recommendations included (Hamilton, Kaufman, and Diliberti, 2020):

- Consistent, comprehensive professional development for teachers, including preparation and background support for the complexities of distance learning. This includes training for teachers who will be expected to support and teach vulnerable groups of students in a remote capacity.

- Local policymakers (and academic funders) need to make sure that there is practical support for those who may not have access to the resources necessary for remote learning, including internet connectivity and reliable technology. Administrations also need to ensure that high-quality classroom materials are available to distribute to each child in a timely manner, whether through physical shipments, easily accessible pickup locations, or simply through easy-to-navigate online access.

- Educators also realized that they will need help brainstorming and executing strategies to keep students engaged and motivated throughout long periods of remote learning. Schools need to help teachers and students alike source hands-on opportunities such as labs and internships that are locally available to the students, as well as community-centric opportunities.

- The pandemic revealed that many schools do not have the communication infrastructure in place for teachers to quickly contact families and schools in the event of an emergency. School administrations need to create better communication plans and ensure they have updated contact information at all times for everyone involved.

Researchers are also expecting that 2021 and beyond will bring key challenges in terms of teacher wellness. These challenges include (Repta, 2021):

- **Ergonomics**. While proper ergonomics for teachers has always been an issue, in 2020, the shift to at-home ad-hoc teaching setups meant that teachers were often

forced to resort to sitting in uncomfortable kitchen chairs and at slightly too-high dining room tables. At home, our arrangements are often meant for either aesthetics or comfort—not for long work hours. Changing rapidly to this new, less-optimal structure created physical challenges for teachers that have already resulted in painful issues. Even teachers who are back in classrooms tend to spend lots of time sitting, and increasingly less time moving around. This reduced physicality leads to pain and suffering, especially if a teacher needs to sit in an awkward posture due to poor equipment or forced angles. Between bad seating options, inappropriate tech setups, and other poor instances of implemented ergonomics, teachers are not exactly set up well to have great bodily health when teaching.

- **Vocal health**. Many physical therapists are noticing that they are getting new referrals for teachers who need help with their voices. Over 2020 and 2021, teachers were asked to teach with, in some cases, at least one or two physical barriers between them and their students—e.g., a mask, a plastic wall, or even a computer with a less-than-optimal microphone (or students at home with suboptimal speakers). In addition, their students wore masks, which can also make it more difficult to hear what others are saying. This has caused teachers to need to speak up loudly and repeat themselves often. Teachers already had an extremely vocal job; these heightened barriers and requirements did not help. Some teachers have been able to put in requests for voice amplification systems—or even, simply, microphone upgrades—but tight school budgets have not traditionally had room for such perceived luxuries, especially not in the time of a pandemic. Advocates for teachers are now pointing out that even expensive voice amplification systems are less costly than waves of teachers who need to take time to recover due to voice dysfunction. Practical workshops to help teachers recover from voice dysfunction or to exercise their voices properly and safely—through targeted exercises and appropriate training, as well as mandatory and observed vocal rest periods—should also be a strategy that schools follow to protect teachers' voices.

- **Trauma**. While the entire world will sustain at least some measure of trauma from the pandemic, the specific type of trauma that teachers experienced will leave a mark on them for years to come. It's important to remember that everyone reacts to trauma differently. Teachers who broke down and quit during or after COVID-19 were manifesting one reaction to trauma. The teachers who stayed on were not necessarily less traumatized, and the most dramatic effects of their trauma could

be yet to come. Between the constant fears that everyone faced related to COVID-19, the minute-by-minute changes that teachers were not only expected to react to but guide others through, and the fact that many teachers were asked or required to work outside their comfort or safety zones, teachers have experienced an incredibly challenging year. Schools need to expect waves of resultant trauma reactions. While every school year presents its challenges, in 2020-2021 teachers feared for their lives. Many felt trapped in their jobs or felt like they weren't in control of the support they could give to their students. It will be vital to be proactive about making sure that teachers (a population perhaps unused to asking for support) have the resources they need to cope. Schools need to validate their fears and take steps to place protective measures in place so teachers can feel confident and creative again. Even if administrators or parents feel like these measures are no longer needed, the goal should be to alleviate the trauma response of all teachers before considering the pandemic to be a thing of the past. One concrete step that administrators could take to help teachers in this way is to consider allowing teachers to teach in the venue or format most comfortable for them. If this is not possible, consider having a temporary trauma counselor on staff, and prioritize giving teachers enough time to meet with this professional as needed.

- **Burnout**. While all teachers are in danger of burning out, the higher stressors and workloads associated with the pandemic have only accelerated the timeline in which most teachers meet that threshold. For one example: Teachers didn't get the (very necessary) emotional break in 2020 that they needed to fuel the 2020-2021 school year—leading to depleted energy stores, which, in many cases, simply made it impossible to get through the school year, either at all or with any semblance of pre-pandemic success. The heightened anxiety and increased responsibilities associated with being a teacher during the pandemic meant that many teachers did not, in effect, get summer, winter, or spring breaks. One poll of a thousand American teachers, taken between the months of August and September 2020, found that most teachers rated their readiness and rested-ness to start the school year at an all-time low. (In most years, the majority of teachers, given a similar poll, felt a high percentage of readiness to jump back in. In 2020, most teachers rated their readiness at less than 5 on a scale of one to ten). Starting a pandemic school year already overwhelmed, stressed, and depleted will not and has not ended well for teachers. Continuing this trend of burnout will increase the teacher shortage, and it will be necessary for schools to prioritize teacher rest and recharging. In the next section of this course, we will examine

potential ways that schools can practically provide this type of support (Repta, 2021).

Section 1: Reflection Questions

- What would you say is the average state of wellbeing of the teachers in your school?
- Do you think that the students in your school are suffering as a result?
- Are any of the direct stressors that your teachers are facing potentially easy to solve?
- Does your school have any room in its budget to focus on even smaller teacher wellness upgrades?
- Is your school facing a teacher shortage? Why?
- Does your school have adequate supports in place for new or suffering teachers?
- Think about the past year. What specific stressors did your teachers have to face due to COVID-19? How many of those stressors will still be factors going forward?

Section 1: Key Points

- Teacher wellbeing is connected to student performance.
- The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted numerous stressors that teachers face and exacerbated many, but stress and burnout are issues teachers have been facing for a very long time.
- Working to support teachers and help them through times of stress requires an understanding of both mental stressors—e.g., symptoms and factors of burnout—and physical stressors—e.g., voice overuse and poor ergonomics.
- There are direct costs—including financial costs—of a lack of support for teacher wellbeing.
- It is very possible for teachers to be stressed at a problematic level without necessarily being aware that they are in need of help.

Section 1: Summary and Conclusion

While teaching has never been easy, the sudden requirements and quick changes in direction triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic have made it very clear that intervention is needed in order to avoid driving teachers away from their jobs. This intervention cannot come only through suggestions to teachers to increase their self-care practices on top of their ever-growing workloads. Schools and administrators need to focus on real change and getting teachers concrete resources and support that will invest in teacher care in a practical way. This will lead to benefits for the entire academic community. It's crucial to realize that teacher stress is multifaceted, actually harmful, and has been increasingly growing over the past years; it isn't just a 'pandemic thing,' and if we don't take action, a lack of support for teacher wellbeing will contribute to a widespread lack of healthy, experienced teachers ready to nurture the next generation of learners.

Section 2: How to Safeguard the Well-Being of Teachers: For Teachers and for School Administrators

As we've seen, the health and well-being of teachers is directly linked to the success of their teaching abilities; yet, teacher health and happiness is far from the priority that it should be. Furthermore, when any type of solution for teacher stress does come into the limelight, the only solutions proposed tend to focus on the idea that a teacher is responsible for his or her own levels of stress. According to many, all teachers need to do is increase exercise, meditate, join a support group, or manage their time and emotions better in order to be healthy and happy (Cox, Solomon, and Parris, 2018).

While, of course, these types of self-care actions certainly don't hurt, the fact that they exacerbate the idea that teacher wellbeing is the sole responsibility of each individual teacher may be hurting teacher health trends as a whole. Schools need to be aware that elements of their own institutional structures and environments may be the direct cause of teacher stress, and, as such, that institutional change (or heightened institutional support) is the most helpful way to help teachers thrive (Cox, Solomon, and Parris, 2018).

It's time to learn more about teacher wellness and promote self-care as well as strategic institutional changes. Teachers should have the time to take care of themselves as well as the support and resources they need for mental and physical health, professional development, and classroom proficiency (Cox, Solomon, and Parris, 2018).

Here are several ways that schools and administrators can work to help support teachers through stressful times and situations—and, critically, reduce stressors overall. We don't have to wait for teachers to be overextended and suffering to show them the care they deserve. For example, many schools are proactively taking steps to address systemic issues that often result in teacher stress (as well as other adverse effects, such as lowered value to students). These powerful upgrades that smart schools are making and recommend are:

- **Create support and mentorship programs at your school.** There are only a few states in the nation that require schools to support their new teachers with special attention. Many schools do, anyway, regardless of state rules, but the fact that it isn't a requirement allows for a lack of uniformity of onboarding experiences—and means that this type of support is the first thing to go in the face of, for example, a global pandemic. In the past, researchers have reported that establishing mentorship practices and support programs at schools is effective in helping increase the satisfaction of teachers, lower the rates at which teachers leave schools, and even boost test scores for students due to more efficiency and efficacy on the part of the teachers (International Board of Credentialing and Continuing Education Standards, 2020).

- **Start by protecting your teachers' most basic needs.** Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs clearly states that we cannot expect teachers to carry out higher functions such as creativity and support for others if they're struggling with very primal needs and emotions such as fear, anxiety, or even hunger or illness. As you're thinking about implementing upgrades to invest in teacher wellness, start with very simple gestures that will impact your teachers every single day. For example, consider scheduling time for teachers to have sole access to the bathroom, or (if resources allow) designate one bathroom as adults-only. If you have any new mothers among your staff, give them the time and private space to pump milk. If you don't have the resources for a dramatic refresh of the teacher's lounge, at least prioritize a regular supply of good coffee, hot chocolate, and a thrifted couch or two so your teachers can feel comfortable (Farber, 2020).

- **Build acknowledgment and community-building efforts into your more practical, logistics-oriented meetings.** Teachers need community; they also need to feel like their perpetual hard work is being acknowledged, and students don't always provide this affirmation. You can invest in teacher community and teacher affirmation by setting aside a few minutes at the beginning of each staff meeting

for celebrating recent accomplishments, sharing stories about recent achievements, or just taking time to connect as human beings. Starting off community and teacher relationships on a high note will make it easier for teachers to reach out to their colleagues later when they need support to make it through more difficult chapters of their teaching career (Farber, 2020).

- **Survey your teachers regularly—and act on the results of the surveys.** Sometimes the quickest way to know what change needs to be enacted is to simply ask. Instead of imposing stress-reducing changes that your administrators think would help teachers, ask the teachers what changes they would like to see! Of course, your school will receive some impossible requests; but your school will also receive many actionable suggestions that will improve the lives of the entire teaching staff. Create an online wellness-focused survey, and send it out to your school's teachers on a regular basis. Commit to fully analyzing the results of the survey and making changes to implement teacher suggestions or working in the direction of those suggestions. In some school districts that have implemented regular teacher wellness surveys, concrete post-survey changes have included regular quick lectures for the teachers on teacher-chosen subjects (including positive psychology and mindfulness); an on-site or virtual yoga instructor, and a quickly-assembled yoga corner in the staff lounge; and quicker, more efficient staff meetings (Pole, 2020).

- **Make sure your teachers have the option to take a break when they really need to.** In one school system in Nashville, the teaching staff has gone the extra mile to ensure teacher relief when needed through the creation of a 'tap out' system. Through this system, if a teacher gets overwhelmed over the course of the day, the teacher can send an SOS text and another teacher will come to manage the classroom for a brief respite (five or so minutes). Often, this is enough time for stressed-out teachers to gather themselves enough to keep on going through the day, instead of having to be 'on' all the time (Pole, 2020).

- **Don't be picky about the way teachers spend their time—or about tracking teacher work hours.** With modern teaching, we can usually assume that teachers spend a lot of extra time working, even if we don't see it. As one expert put it, teachers—usually without argument, with tacit understanding—"put in an incredible number of hours early in the morning, late at night, and during the weekend." Because we know this is the case, it would be a nice (and logically merited) teacher perk to enjoy some slack in terms of tracking work hours or

mandatory time spent on the school campus (or visibly online). As long as it's evident that a teacher is managing his or her job functions well and is there for the students, schools should not place an added stress on the teachers to be present for forty hours a week or place additional time-tracking to-dos on their plate (Pole, 2020).

- **Check-in with your teachers quickly, informally, and regularly.** Instead of having stressful one-on-ones between administrators and teaching staff on an infrequent basis, prioritize a relationship and rapport between administrators and teachers that involves frequent conversations about workload and well-being. This shows that administrators care about teachers as humans and that a twice-yearly check-in is not just another part of an administrator's to-do list. Especially if these meetings are spontaneous or informal, an administrator should always open these quick conversations with something positive, and end by offering and planning practical support (Pole, 2020).

- **Make sure that your teachers have scheduled planning time.** A modern teacher's work life is continuing to grow, blurring the lines constantly between work life and personal time. More and more, teachers are expected to be available for students or be actively teaching during their 'regular' 40-hour week, with planning and providing less active student support expected outside of regular hours. Teachers need time to relax, decompress, and spend time with their families during their personal time—they don't need extra hours of unpaid work. In one Nashville school, the principal recognized this and developed a teacher schedule that included regular blocks of teacher time (while other teachers managed groups of classrooms engaged in quiet study) so groups of teachers could actively collaborate and prep during the workday. He ensured similar blocks of teacher downtime during the day to give teachers access to professional development. As the principal noted, this decision took some creative planning but was ultimately a win-win which "improves our school's instructional capacity, student learning, and culture and climate." (Gonser, 2021)

- **Create a climate of wellness and self-care.** Administrators can remind teachers of the importance of self-care and anti-stress practices as much as they like, but it's important to create an atmosphere where taking a moment to care for oneself is routine. As administrators, you need to both set an example for this type of lifestyle and realize that you need to step in and make it possible for teachers to do so as well. For example, it's a good idea to encourage teachers to set

boundaries around their personal time by not answering emails during the evenings and weekends; so refrain from sending emails or make it very clear that you do not expect answers during those periods of time. Offer your teachers a fifteen-minute break to take a walk across campus during the day, and, as an administrator, make sure that you do so yourself as well to normalize the practice (as long as you've offered to help other teachers do so as well) (Gonser, 2021).

- **Look for visible signs of stress among your staff.** It may be the case that you have on your teaching staff individuals who don't like asking for help or don't realize how stressed they are. It can be difficult to realize this on one's own, and many teachers are extremely ambitious, extroverted people who don't like to admit that they need a moment of quiet. If you know that someone on your staff needs help but may not be ready to ask for it, find a creative way to get them the support they need without being condescending. For example, you could invite them to lead the teaching staff in a (very simple, mostly silent) meditation; you could ask them to proctor an easy exam so they have a minute to relax; you could ask other teachers to help reduce their workload, or you could even be more direct and just give that teacher a little extra time off. Doing so may require more effort on your part and on the part of the teachers providing support, but could reduce the chances of the stressed teacher burning out or getting very ill without much notice (Gonser, 2021).

- **Dedicate time to answer teacher questions at the end of each of your school meetings.** There are some districts that already do this very well, but there are others where teachers constantly feel like they don't have enough information to do their jobs because the staff atmosphere isn't conducive to asking practical questions on a routine basis. Administrators need to be prepared to answer staff questions, even if they feel like they're answering the same inquiries constantly. (Administrators should also read between the lines, if this is the case, and take steps to provide proactive support if certain questions are brought up on a repeating basis) (Pole, 2020).

- **Whenever possible, give your teachers the choice to educate as they see fit.** If your teachers can choose—when it makes sense—to offer in-person or online instruction, to organize their lessons in a certain way, or to make other necessary adjustments regarding their teaching practices, that will both make their lives easier and help them be willing to work with more hard-set administrative rules when they do exist (Pole, 2020).

- **Make sure that staff and educators feel safe - and give them space and time to heal together.** Having a staff of teachers that is cohesive and communicates well because they go through common experiences together is invaluable for a school. Sometimes, schools (and teachers) tend to focus too much or exclusively on the creation of strong, valuable relationships between students and teachers. Any professional connections between staff members are expected to occur on their own time. However, modern teachers barely have any free time; when they're at school, they're typically expected to be teaching or on-call for student support, and in free moments teachers tend to grade papers or prepare for class so they don't have to do that while at home. One small school in Nashville decided that a strong staff with emotional and social connections was worth prioritizing. This school set aside a specific time during a teacher's school day to engage in small teacher groups as a way to ensure that each teacher has adult support during the day. This helps teachers grow professionally, develop higher emotional and social skills, and helps them feel supported by their peers—key markers of people who are happy in general, but particularly at work! Teachers who have been part of this experience have reported that they feel liberated and validated. In these teacher circles, they have the chance to share what's working for them and what isn't—and they often find that they can share work or partner up with other teachers to serve students more efficiently, simply because they're more aware of the challenges everyone is facing (Kent Teach, 2019).
- **Give teachers a way to assess their own stress levels to see them growing or fading over time.** We can assume that teachers are stressed. In the post-pandemic era, this is a particularly safe bet. However, teachers themselves often tend to overlook their own wellbeing to focus more on their students—it's a self-effacing characteristic that has led many caring people to want to be teachers in the first place. Giving teachers some kind of objective assessment, metric, or data to help them realize how stressed they are and that they need help can enable teachers to justify taking the time to take care of themselves. Teachers who are well aware of their stress can benefit from this type of assessment, too—as hard data can often be used to legitimize self-care strategies, particularly for those who might consider teacher self-care a waste of time or something that should happen solely when teachers are at home. One school system in Wisconsin decided to learn more about the science of well-being and the ways people can grow their wellness skills. They theorized that academic skills can be learned—so, naturally, self-care ones can be learned as well. This school made an app available to their teaching staff that supported teacher well-being through guided daily practices that were

developed according to the principles of learning science, and they decided to track biological and mental signs of stress among their staff for fifteen weeks. After the fifteen-week period ended, the teachers at their school reported lower psychological distress, less loneliness, more self-compassion and mindfulness, and more excitement about their purpose as teachers at their school (Kent Teach, 2019).

- **Provide teachers with the opportunity for professional development—but the right type of professional development.** Giving teachers the opportunity to grow their skills and advance in their careers is integral to teacher happiness and well-being, and teachers should have the ability to choose to specialize in anything that they find practical and meaningful. Along these lines, one school in Indianapolis decided to take this idea a step further and train all willing staff members in specific student-centric connection and well-being strategies—teaching the staff about best practices for navigating trauma and instability, and how to guide students through an uncertain time. The teachers who went through this program reported that they felt better equipped to provide their students with more holistic academic support and mentorship. When students asked questions of them, the teachers were better prepared to provide mindful answers. While this investment did not directly contribute to teacher wellness, it did so indirectly because teachers were more informed about how to manage trauma responses and lead people through uncertainty and they felt better equipped to provide care for their struggling students (Kent Teach, 2019).
- **Give teachers the science-based tools they need to reliably build healthy, happy relationships.** So much of successful teaching depends on the relationships a teacher is able to forge. Their students will learn from them better if they feel like they can trust their teacher, for example, and teachers will feel happier and more supported if they feel like they're connected with their fellow teachers. However, building relationships can be hard. It doesn't necessarily come easily for every personality, and even outgoing people have days where they find it tougher to reach out and solidify relationships with people in their environment. One school district realized that the relationships in its school were too important to leave up to chance. The school administrators decided to redesign the way that they built their learning environments as well as the ways that they supported their teachers with resources to prioritize relationship formation—based on the science behind this concept. Much like the previous example, this school decided to give all interested teachers access to a professional development seminar addressing the

science behind relationships, and how relationships can contribute to a strong foundation for effective learning. The school also made resources available to teachers that helped them understand (and reference) the ways that emotions are linked to cognition and, ultimately, to human connection. The teachers learned more about stress and bonding hormones, why safety and belonging are vital parts of a child's school experience, and more essential contexts that the brain needs in order to learn properly. This school also decided to invest more into research on developmental relationships and other ways to expand the support its teachers could offer students and each other. For example, it gave teacher-specific guidance to help form crucial relationships—such as the best way to express concern for a student, fun yet empathetic ways to check in on students, and the most efficient ways to challenge others to grow in a caring way (Kent Teach, 2019).

- **Make it clear that perfectionism is not the goal for your staff.** As perfection is not achievable, striving for it generally only leads to overwhelming, unattainable standards for already-stressed teachers. Try your best to encourage a culture of celebration for the things that your staff has been able to do right, and foster creative growth through mistakes when they inevitably occur (Kent Teach, 2019).

Addressing Obstacles and Concerns as Administrators Improve Conditions For Their Staff

Increasing the health and happiness of your teachers is not something that will happen in one month, semester, or year—it will be an ongoing project that you'll need to consistently refuel and re-evaluate over time. Here are a few tips to make your project as feasible as possible in the face of common obstacles (Kaiser, 2020):

- At the beginning of your teacher wellness initiative, establish set goals that are measurable and specific—e.g., creating a tap-out system or upgrading the teacher's lounge area—that have deadlines attached to them. Also set calendar dates in the future with reminders that will prompt you and your staff to take stock of how much you've been able to accomplish.

- Use employee feedback more often and more strategically. Incorporate suggestions from teachers and staff into each program you launch and each upgrade you make.

- As you move through planned changes and upgrades, assess the resources that you already have available in your community. Take advantage of internal skill sets

and any relationships your school already has. For example, if one of your teachers is a proficient yogi, ask that individual (and provide compensation and time) to lead the others in lunchtime flows.

- Consult with the health plan provider that your school uses. In many cases, it's simply not feasible to offer teachers better healthcare or more varied options. However, in some cases, it is—and even if it requires some tough budgetary decisions, doing this can both show teachers that you value them and literally make it possible for them to take optimal care of themselves.

How to Write an Effective Teacher Emotion Management or Wellbeing Survey that's Designed to Work

It will be key for your success to spend time crafting a survey that will actually help you help your teachers. Your teachers need to feel heard—and you need to have good data to work with to make sure that your updates and changes are as effective as possible (Spencer, 2018).

If you're writing a survey, here are some simple tips to make sure that it's as actionable as possible (Spencer, 2018):

- Keep it short. Teachers are busy.
- While prioritizing brevity, include a succinct message at the top of the survey stating its purpose. Tell teachers that you will be using their answers to make practical changes around your school (and then follow up on that).
- Make sure that it's very clear that the surveys you distribute are entirely anonymous.
- Include a clear mix of questions that are about very short-term, actionable changes—desired perks that may be available in the teacher lounge, or strategies to address specific stressors that teachers anticipate over the next month—and a few questions that are much more overarching, regarding the next few years of planned strategic upgrades or investments.
- Include some logistics-centric questions, both to convey that you're really planning teacher wellness benefits and to help you actually execute your plans. For example, you could poll your employees about the times they have available for a trauma seminar, or you could ask them on which day of the week they'd rather have access to a mental health professional.

How can teachers manage self-care themselves and work towards supporting their fellow teachers?

While it is critical to shine the light on things that administrators and schools could focus on so as not to require teachers to do even more than they're already doing, it would be remiss not to address a few strategies that teachers can adopt in order to boost their own well-being. The following suggestions address practical ways that teachers can work to manage their own self-care and help fellow teachers who may be struggling as well, when they have the ability to do so (McClintock, 2020).

- **Focus on controlling the controllable.** During the COVID-19 pandemic, many teachers were tasked with the impossible. They often experienced heightened anxiety because there was simply too much to do. Even in non-pandemic years, it's impossible to predict or manage how you spend every second of your time, or what will happen in the near or far future. Things that you can control include your mindset, what is and is not on your priority list, what you watch and listen to, the way you cultivate and protect your mindset, and how you move your body (even if you only have a few minutes each day to dedicate to exercise or meditation, for example). It can help boost happiness to concentrate on the things that we can control and work on our priorities as much as possible while letting go of things that either don't matter as much or are simply not in our control.
- **Prioritize self-care and mental health, even if you don't feel like you are having issues in this area.** This is a situation in which a pound of prevention is worth an ounce of cure. As stated elsewhere in this course, the people who go into teaching are often naturally geared toward focusing on and helping other people. You may not spend a lot of time considering your own mental health. Now's a great time to start. Whether it's helpful to speak with your loved ones about your mental health, prioritize daily movement, or even just put together calming or happy music playlists, all teachers likely need to consciously invest a little in their own health and happiness. It's clear that schools need to revamp their own systems in order to make sure that teachers have more resources and more time, but it's also important for teachers to realize that prioritizing actions such as spending even a short time on a hobby they love on weekends is important—and related to the quality of one's mental health.
- **Be as compassionate toward yourself as you can be.** Particularly if you happen to have tendencies toward low self-esteem, it can be very easy to focus on the mistakes you've made or the things you aren't able to do right now. As much as

possible, try to avoid doing this. Think about the goals that you're working toward, the things you are able to do well, and the people you're helping by showing up to your job every day. Even if it seems insignificant, the way we talk to ourselves and think about our accomplishments matters a great deal. At the very least, if you're able to practice and model self-compassion, you'll be better able to do the same for the others around you.

- **Prioritize reasonable expectations.** If you're being asked to do more, you simply won't be able to get everything done that you've been able to do in the past. If you're being asked to learn something new and perform a new task at the same time, you're not going to do it perfectly the first time. Consider your workload and your aptitude as honestly as you can, as well as your energy and your emotional health levels. With all of this information in mind, set realistic goals that are accomplishable—and repeat this exercise on a frequent basis. Heightened expectations followed by reasonable underperformance lead to increased angst, anxiety, and self-esteem issues that could have been otherwise avoided. If someone else is placing unreasonable expectations upon you, it may be time to discuss healthy, acceptable expectations with that person so that you aren't sprinting to get things done all the time—a surefire recipe for burnout.

- **Learn how to communicate well.** One cause of unreasonable expectations is poor communication or miscommunication. Part of communicating well is telling your colleagues and supervisors when you're having a difficult time. This may not feel good; it requires vulnerability, trust, and a supportive working environment. However, reaching out to someone who you feel you can trust and letting that individual know that you are struggling will likely result in help coming your way (and, at the very least, will result in you no longer feeling alone or like you're keeping an increasingly-pressurized secret).

- **Don't apologize unless an apology is truly appropriate.** Much of the time, young professionals—teachers included—apologize for things that aren't really problems, or aren't really their fault. As you're evaluating ways to improve your communication skills, consider thinking about how often you apologize, and think about ways you can lower that number. Apologizing may seem like a good way to end a conversation about a problem, but it ingrains in people's minds that you were actually at fault for the problem, even if you were just saying it to be nice. Even worse, after apologizing all the time, it's easy for us to start subconsciously thinking that perhaps we were at fault. It's certainly a good practice to apologize

for things we do that hurt or inconvenienced others (or at other times in which apologies would logically follow), but try to avoid saying you are sorry simply as a nicety or a way to end a conversation.

- **Try to set aside a dedicated workspace for your teaching activities.** Having a dedicated workspace can help you be more productive—and it can also help you shift more easily to rest and time with your family after a day of work, especially when working from home. Having enough room to have a designated workspace may not be possible, but doing something to physically shift from work to your personal life can help you create and enjoy that mythological balance. If you're able to set aside a corner in your home for your desk and computer, excellent; but, even putting on a literal 'work hat', walking around your home with shoes on when you're 'at work', or something else to that effect can help let your brain know which hours of the day are work hours, and which are more geared for rest and relaxation, can help you stop thinking about work when the work day is over.

- **Set hours and create healthy boundaries.** If you're working from home or if you enjoy a more flexible work schedule, enjoy that framework—don't allow your school or your colleagues to interpret that as 'you work all the time.' Make it clear to your coworkers and your students the specific hours you can be reached. Also, make it clear that you will not be quick about answering emails outside of office hours or on the weekend. If your school has a culture in which this is expected, it might be time to work with your fellow teachers to have a conversation about the detrimental effects of zero downtime with your school's administration.

- **Work with a therapist, even if you don't believe that it's necessary for you to do so.** A therapist can help you identify stressors, establish ways to move more healthily through a stressful time, and even monitor your mental health to ensure that you're able to take action or take advantage of intervention strategies before anything truly harmful occurs. Your health is worth the time it takes to go see a therapist on at least an infrequent basis. Check with your school's healthcare provider as more and more health plans are including at least introductory therapy sessions. Not surprisingly, this particular practice has become increasingly more common in the past year.

What trends can we expect going forward in terms of teacher needs, health, and wellbeing?

As we move forward, we have the opportunity to both learn from what has happened in the past and meet or get ready for the new challenges that the future has in store for us. To help learn from the past and meet new trends with confidence, experts have taken time to predict mental health challenges and paradigm shifts that we will all shortly encounter. Some of these trends and challenges are (McClintock, 2020):

- **We will see budgetary line items that indicate the prioritization of employee mental health.** As study after study is successfully able to link staff health and happiness to productivity and output, employers—including school administrators—are realizing that it's worth it to very literally invest in their staff's wellbeing. One study recently out of the American Psychological Association found that companies that support their employees' mental health with practical benefits, tools, and strategies enjoy 53% more motivation from their studies. Another study out of Deloitte saw a return on investment of 400% in terms of workplace mental health tools and strategies. While these particular studies were not teacher-centric, schools that invest in staff wellness will likely see similarly increased outputs.

- **We will see an increase in employee resource groups.** For teachers, in particular, the line between work and personal life is blurring. Aspects and factors of employee and teacher life that were previously kept strictly compartmentalized are, for better or worse, merging. While organizations and companies across the board are urging employees and teachers to place boundaries between work and personal life in order to maintain balance, other workplaces are leaning into this work-life status quo—in hopefully beneficial ways. One such way is through the creation of employee resource groups. These smaller employee communities allow employees to connect with other people in their workplace who share interests or experiences. These types of groups—also known as affinity groups—could range from groups for parents to LGBTQ ally groups to groups that provide mental health support. Employee- or teacher-centric support or resource groups should not replace administrative efforts to support teaching staff but can provide teacher-teacher support as a parallel strategy.

- **It's expected that mental health will start to be a 'dinner table' conversation among families, especially those with school-age students.** As a result of this shift in mental health awareness and acceptance, younger classes of students will be

equipped with behavioral health knowledge and vocabulary that teachers have not seen in the past. This can be a good thing, but can also raise expectations on teachers to provide mental health support for their students while suffering from stressors themselves.

- **Teacher wellness will receive more of the limelight.** As one of the groups of professed unsung heroes of the pandemic, teachers received heightened appreciation, at least for a time, from parents nationwide who were suddenly tasked with assisting with their children's education. At the same time, however, the increased demands on teachers led to teacher burnout and educators leaving their jobs en masse. This juxtaposition of appreciation, higher stress, and a mass exodus of educators have led at least some districts to realize that they need systems in place to protect their most important asset—teachers. Because of this, we do expect to see at least some increased teacher support in the way of more funding for professional development and greater support for mental health within school districts.
- **We'll see an increased focus on mental health education.** Going forward, researchers believe that students and teachers alike will receive a more targeted and holistic (as well as, hopefully, practical) education on mental health. Whether this comes in the form of professional development for teachers, expanded health classes for students, or school-wide seminars is unclear; however, the impacts of trauma and stress on students and teachers alike make it clear that school communities need to shed greater light on the importance of mental health. In the future, we believe that schools will see that mental health education is a way to make sure that students have access to the skills necessary to keep themselves happy and healthy--and to ensure the same outcome for their peers. This will help give the next generation of teachers the skills to thrive throughout the next large-scale stressful situation that our communities encounter.

Section 2: Reflection Questions

- Did any of these practical suggestions regarding teacher support and stress reduction surprise you?
- Is your school already targeting any of these strategies?
- Do any of these seem impossible? Why or why not? If they do seem impossible, is there anything you and your school can do to work toward ensuring these strategies are possible?

- Which of these strategies do you think would have the largest impact in your school? Why?
- Is there any way that you and your school can start to prepare for the next challenges or wellbeing trend that we see coming? What about unforeseen challenges?

Section 2: Key Points

- Obtaining, listening to, and acting upon teacher feedback is a necessary step in the process toward creating needed teacher support systems.
- Sometimes, the needed changes are smaller than we may think. There's a lot to be said for ensuring that teachers have access to such amenities as good coffee and comfortable chairs.
- Working on communication, collaboration, and community will be key for creating a healthy atmosphere at schools.

Conclusion

As with every profession, teachers face various stressors due to the nature of the work they do on a daily basis. However, other professions often have built-in support systems that we simply don't see in the field of education, where teachers are often expected to be superheroes. In addition, we've tended to instill in teachers the idea that the health and happiness of their students and families come far before their own wellbeing. We're now seeing the repercussions of this way of thinking.

While the COVID-19 pandemic and the traumatic stressors that came along with it certainly did not help matters, recent circumstances have shed light on the distinct lack of support for teacher wellbeing that has been a problem for a long time. We cannot continue to think that teaching is simply a stressful occupation, and that stress comes with the territory. We also cannot continue to believe that any stress-reduction techniques and strategies need to fall solely to the ever-overwhelmed teachers. Instead, schools and administrators need to address the reasons why teachers are stressed and experiencing burnout. We need to step up our support for overloaded teachers, help them create healthy boundaries between work and life, and create healthy environments at school that enforces a culture dedicated to wellness in the workplace.

Ultimately, this hard work should go a long way toward investing in not only our teachers, but our students as well.

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Part 3:

Executive Summary

Initiatives focused on improving aspects of students' well-being in schools—such as addressing childhood obesity, preventing bullying, and restricting schools' use of exclusionary discipline—are gaining momentum. However, such efforts are often implemented in silos, without recognition of their interconnections. To advance the common goal of improving social, health, and academic outcomes for all students, coordinated efforts that integrate multiple components of healthy school environments are needed. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child (WSCC) model presents a framework illustrating the interconnected nature of 10 elements of a healthy school environment: health education; physical education and activity; nutrition environment and services; health services; counseling, psychological, and social services; social and emotional climate; physical environment; employee wellness; family engagement; and community engagement.

Although state laws and regulations address many elements of the WSCC model, these policies are fragmented and are not yet integrated to best support the whole child.

This study was built on the need to better integrate the WSCC framework in policy and the recognition that policymakers prioritize issues they see as critical given finite resources. The study aimed to identify policy opportunities to promote the overall WSCC framework through interviews and focus groups with state policymakers (e.g., state board of education members, state legislators), educators (e.g., teachers, school administrators, school health professionals), and students.

Key Findings

- **Across stakeholder groups, emotional and mental health and school climate and culture emerged as key priority issues that are foundational to healthy schools.** Although stakeholders discussed a broad range of topics related to healthy schools and touched upon every component of the WSCC model, all three stakeholder groups identified emotional and mental health and school climate and culture most frequently as priority areas. Stakeholders also noted that addressing other student needs (e.g., nutrition, physical activity and others) often requires addressing mental health issues first.
- **Many stakeholders viewed other elements of healthy schools as less pressing or already addressed.** Stakeholders suggested that while all students would benefit from support addressing mental health, social-emotional skills, and school climate, other student needs (e.g., safety, food insecurity) can vary dramatically by school and district.

- **Schools struggle to address student trauma, according to educators and policymakers.** While many in both groups focused on the impacts of poverty, immigration status, and community violence on youth, several educators emphasized that students, regardless of their socioeconomic level, have significant emotional and mental health needs and may experience trauma. Several students also referenced traumatic events such as school shootings and student suicides, although they never used the term "trauma."

- **Educators and policymakers focused on stressors outside of school, while students emphasized school-related sources of stress and anxiety.** Policymakers cited addiction issues as a challenge for students and their family members, and educators frequently emphasized the impact of parents' mental health or chronic health issues on students. Both educators and policymakers drew explicit connections between parental addiction, or other types of parental hardship, and student attendance. In contrast, many students attributed high levels of stress and anxiety to demanding academic environments.

- **All stakeholder groups emphasized the need for increased availability of trained and qualified school personnel to provide support for students' emotional and mental health needs.** Educators and policymakers mentioned the need for more funding to hire additional support staff such as counselors, social workers, and mental health professionals. Educators and students said support staff should be able to dedicate more of their time to working directly with students instead of spending time on paperwork and administrative tasks. However, students said they are often more likely to seek emotional support from teachers than from other school support staff, because they find teachers more approachable, or easier to connect with based on their existing relationships. Policymakers and educators stressed the importance of training teachers how to address students' social and emotional needs and interact with students who have experienced trauma.

- **Educators and policymakers view social-emotional skill development as an important step to address student needs.** Educators and policymakers viewed social-emotional skill development as critical to developing students' "coping strategies" for effectively dealing with their own mental health issues, as well as "what's going on in the world nowadays." They cited gun violence, fear of deportation, and other forms of community trauma as concerns for students today. Though policymakers and educators discussed the importance of social-emotional skills for academic, career, and life success, this surfaced as the highest priority topic for educators in particular. Students mentioned social-emotional skills only once, in the context of "life skills" that could help them better cope with stress. Stakeholders noted that social-emotional skill development could also help improve school climate and student relationships.

- **Stakeholders recognize the impact of teacher stress and anxiety on students.** Educators, policymakers, and students identified teacher stress and anxiety as an issue that impacts teacher relationships with students and other staff. Policymakers noted that teachers become frustrated when they do not have the necessary training to meet the breadth of students' needs. Educators highlighted the stress teachers face as a result of making low salaries while their job duties continue to increase. Policymakers and educators said teachers need more professional development and training to fully address the breadth and depth of student needs. Students and educators noted that teachers experience stress and said their relationships with students suffer when they do not feel supported by their administrators.

Recommendations and Next Steps

The findings from this study have clear implications for advocates working to promote any aspect of healthier school environments. Although students, educators, and policymakers touched upon nearly every aspect of healthy schools as defined by the CDC's Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child framework, only a handful of topic areas emerged as areas of need. Specifically, all stakeholder groups focused on mental health and school climate as clear leverage points in need of additional policy attention that can provide the foundation for achieving healthier schools more broadly. To this end, we offer healthy schools advocates and policymakers the following recommendations for using the findings in this report:

- **Identify the linkages between mental health and/or school climate and other aspects of healthy schools.** Just because stakeholders are focused on these two elements of healthy schools does not mean that advocates working to improve nutrition, physical education, or health services in schools cannot make progress in those areas. Instead, consider mental health and school climate as entry points for demonstrating the interconnected nature of healthy schools. For example, given connections between nutrition, physical activity, and behavior, momentum around reforming school disciplinary policies may also be a platform for increasing attention to standards related to school meals, recess, and movement in the classroom.

- **Recognize that students, educators, and policymakers discuss mental health and school climate differently, and tailor messaging appropriately.** Although the stakeholder groups all coalesced around these topics, specific priorities varied. For example, while policymakers shared high-level concerns about student mental health—discussing, for instance, the negative effects of social media use, and the research surrounding adverse childhood experiences—educators zeroed in on specific types of trauma that students may experience and the need for training in trauma-informed practice. Students, on the other hand, emphasized the need for supportive relationships and increased awareness, among both teachers and other students, of mental health issues to reduce the stigma associated with seeking help. Build buy-in from these groups by focusing on each group's priorities and adopting their language when describing these domains.

- **Build coalitions across healthy school domains.** Stakeholders clearly understood the interconnections between healthy school domains; however, they also described the uncoordinated nature of these issues (e.g., school climate and school health) within their schools. Given policymakers' need to prioritize among competing issues, due to limited time and resources available to address all issues simultaneously, healthy school advocates are better positioned when they bring a unified message, rather than competing to prioritize any given domain.

Introduction

The notion of educating the whole child, in which students and their accompanying needs become the center of education structures and mechanisms, is far from novel. In the early 20th century, education reform pioneer and philosopher John Dewey first challenged the traditional notion of education by suggesting that its purpose needed to extend beyond rote academic learning to one in which individual students' strengths are identified and their needs are addressed (Dewey, 1907). Yet, over a century after Dewey launched the progressive education movement, debate remains regarding the role of schools in addressing students' needs. At issue is how schools, challenged by limited financial resources and time, can become environments that address students' numerous social, emotional, and physical well-being needs while still providing a standard academic education.

Policymakers tasked with providing the guidelines under which schools must operate thus face critical barriers to shifting how schools can move beyond academic learning. With finite resources, most prioritize what is viewed as the primary purpose of education (academic achievement) over other issues, despite the known interrelations between achievement and well-being (Tyack & Cuban, 1995; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2018b). This prioritization changes, however, when crisis events bring certain elements of childhood well-being into everyday conversations (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). For example, in response to growing concern about rising rates of childhood obesity and the potential role of school-provided nutrition as a factor, Congress passed the Healthy, Hunger-Free Schools Act of 2010. It renewed federal attention toward, and expanded federal funding for, school meal programs, authorized the U.S. Department of Agriculture to update school meal standards and create new standards for all food products sold on school grounds (i.e., outside of the National School Lunch and National School Breakfast programs), increased access to healthy food choices for low-income children, and expanded school district wellness policy requirements (Piekarz et al., 2016).

In response to various high-profile school shootings in the 1990s, and increasing rates of youth suicide in the 2010s, policymakers identified bullying as a key factor. By 2015, all 50 states and the District of Columbia had approved legislation requiring schools to address this behavior. More recently, a landmark study (Fabelo et al., 2011) demonstrated a significant association between exclusionary discipline (e.g., suspensions and expulsions) and later involvement in the justice system ("school-to-prison pipeline"). This study, and others that have followed, also shed light on discipline disparities, noting that certain student populations, including black students and pupils with disabilities, are disproportionately impacted by exclusionary policies. In response, a growing number of states have enacted new laws restricting schools' use of exclusionary practices.

Although each of these policy movements addressed a critical and imminent need for students in schools, they did so in siloed and often contradictory ways. For example, current state anti-bullying legislation often focuses on setting up school-based disciplinary consequences for children who engage in the behavior (U.S. Department of Education, 2011), while school discipline reform is establishing new limits on how discipline can be applied. Further, neither school discipline policies nor anti-bullying policies recognize the critical role other factors of student well-being, such as nutrition and physical activity, play in a student's propensity to engage in bullying or other behaviors that schools need to address (Putnam, Tette, & Wendt, 2004).

It is critical to understand and acknowledge the interdependent nature of all elements of a student's well-being, how such factors relate to academic achievement and overall ability to succeed, and the school's role in promoting such factors. In 1987, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) first launched the Coordinated School Health (CSH) framework, which emphasized the importance of addressing child well-being in school settings. The CDC, in partnership with ASCD (formerly known as the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development), released the Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child (WSCC) model in 2014, which expanded on the CSH approach to emphasize a strong alignment of health and education policy and practice. As shown in Figure 1 below, the WSCC model places the child at the center, and challenges educators to ensure that every child is safe, healthy, challenged, supported, and engaged—the five tenets of the whole child (Lewallen, Hunt, Potts-Datema, Zaza, & Giles, 2015; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2018a). The model emphasizes that the health and education communities must coordinate policy, process, and practice to improve student learning and health. The new model updates and expands upon the CSH framework to better integrate, and promote greater alignment between, student health and learning. Finally, the WSCC model emphasizes the importance of leveraging community input, resources, and partnerships in supporting students (Chiang, Meagher, & Slade, 2015).

Figure 1. The Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child (WSCC) Model

The WSCC model presents a comprehensive, integrated view of the conditions for learning in schools; however, it is not yet reflected in state-level policies (Chriqui et al., *forthcoming*). Although state laws and regulations address many elements of the model, these policies are fragmented and are not yet integrated to best support the whole child.

This study aimed to identify policy opportunities to promote the WSCC framework which addresses this fragmentation. We engaged key stakeholders, including state policymakers (e.g., state board of education members, state legislators), educators (e.g., teachers, school administrators, school health professionals), and students in semi-structured interviews and focus groups with the following goals: 1) determine their respective and overlapping priority areas within the WSCC model and 2) explore their understanding of the connections among WSCC components.

Methods

The stakeholders who participated in this project, and the methods used to learn about their perspectives, are described below.

Sample

This study included three groups of stakeholders representing different levels of the educational system: state policymakers, educators, and students. As shown in Figure 2, our sample members reside in 27 states/territories.

Our sample of 23 policymakers consisted of 19 state board of education members[a] (two of whom were also district superintendents), three state legislators, and one legislative staff member. The 23 policymakers reside in 15 states/territories.

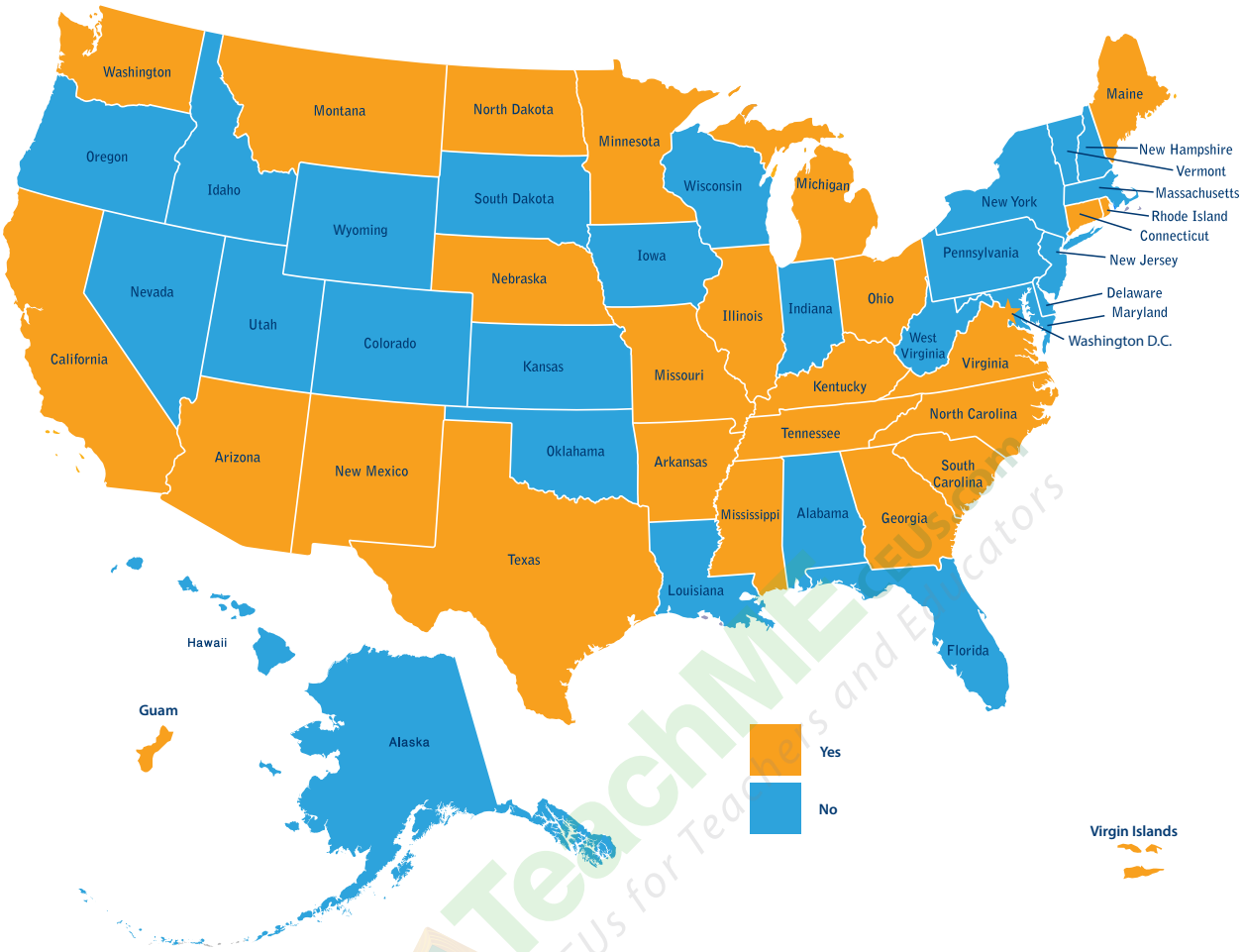
Our sample of 14 educators consisted of four principals, four teachers, three school nurses, and three school social workers. They reside in 11 states/territories.

Lastly, our sample of 27 students, all youth delegates to National 4-H, ranged in age from 14 to 18 years old. They reside in nine states/territories.

Two partner organizations, the National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE) and National 4-H, helped coordinate logistics for focus groups (described below) and facilitate recruitment efforts. Several other professional organizations—the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL), American Federation of Teachers (AFT), National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP), and the U.S. Department of Education's School Ambassador Fellowship Program—helped facilitate recruitment by referring us to potential key informants.

[a] Two individuals included here were other attendees at the conference where policymaker focus groups were conducted. They both worked at education nonprofit organizations. Although we did not turn away anyone who wanted to participate in the focus groups, only policymakers were contacted for follow-up interviews.

Figure 2. Geographic Representation of Study Sample



Data collection procedures

The Child Trends research team conducted in-depth, semi-structured focus groups and interviews to learn about stakeholder conceptualizations of healthy schools—including (1) the most essential elements of a healthy school, (2) their perspectives on the most critical school health issues that need to be addressed, (3) how those issues are related to other aspects of school health, (4) current policy opportunities, and (5) barriers and facilitators to successful policy implementation. Data collection occurred between November 2017 and April 2018. Policymakers participated during the earlier part of that period, with the last policymaker interview completed in early February 2018, shortly before the school shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, FL. Students and educators all participated in the weeks and months following that event (mid-February through April 2018).

For policymakers and students, the data collection occurred in two phases. First, the research team conducted a series of initial one-hour focus groups with each stakeholder group, where each session included 11–14 participants divided into small groups of 4–6 for activities and discussion. These focus groups included a small group activity that involved asking participants to create a visual representation of a healthy school (see Figure 3) as well as a large group discussion to flesh out observed themes.

Figure 3. Policymakers' Visual Representation of What a Healthy School Looks Like Today (green) and What It Could Look Like in the Future (pink)

The research team conducted phone interviews to expand upon initial findings from the focus groups. The research team also conducted phone interviews with educators. Student interviews tended to be shorter, lasting 15 to 30 minutes, whereas policymaker and educator interviews were longer, lasting 30 to 60 minutes. Participants (and their parents, if applicable) provided written consent/assent prior to the focus group discussions and verbal consent/assent prior to the telephone interviews. All interviews, except those conducted with state legislators and legislative staff, were audio-recorded with participant consent/assent and transcribed from the recordings shortly after they took place.

Analytic approach

The research team used both an inductive (emergent) and deductive (*a priori*) approach to analysis, by creating an initial coding scheme based on the content of the earliest focus groups and interviews, and then mapping that coding scheme onto the WSCC framework and revising it to ensure coverage of all key topics. Although stakeholders responded to a range of questions, the findings presented below largely reflect responses to the following questions, designed to elicit stakeholder priorities regarding healthy schools:

- What do you think are the most important elements of a healthy school?
- What elements of healthy schools do you think are most pressing/need the most attention right now?

- If you could make one change in your school/enact one policy/introduce one piece of legislation aimed at promoting healthy schools in your state/district, what would it be/include?

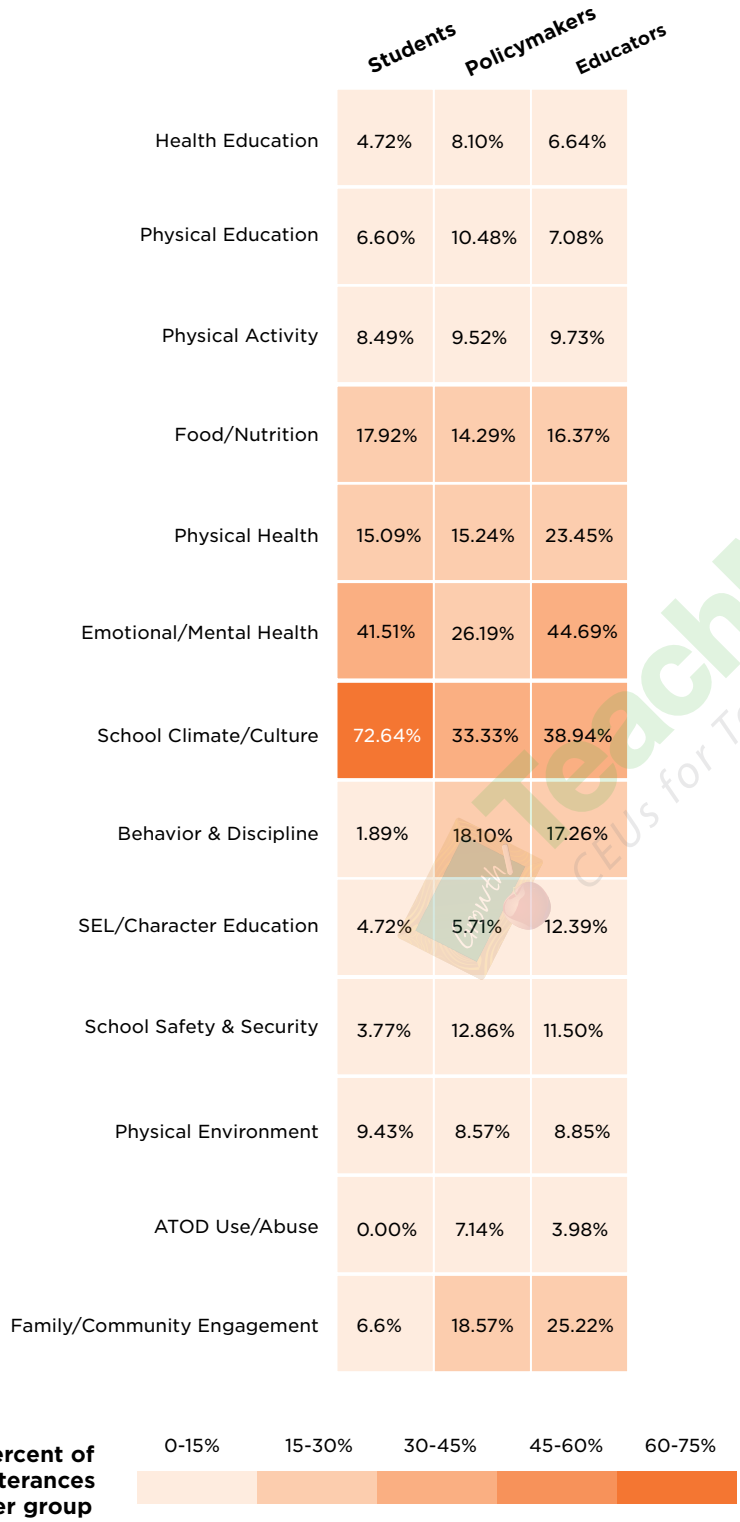
Follow-up interviews included member-checking questions, both to test the research team's interpretations and conclusions based on the focus groups, and to provide participants an opportunity to add to those interpretations. For instance, we asked, "At the focus group, it sounded as though many people thought X. What do you think about that? How well, if at all, does that reflect your own thoughts or experiences?" We also asked, "At the focus group, not many people talked about Y. Why do you think that is?"

Results

Snapshot of topics discussed by stakeholders

Stakeholders discussed a broad range of topics related to healthy schools, touching upon each component of the WSCC model. Figure 4 presents topic frequencies by stakeholder group, reflecting instances where stakeholders raised a topic organically and instances where the research team introduced a topic for member-checking purposes. Frequencies are presented as the percent of total excerpts (i.e., coded chunks of text) that address each school health topic by stakeholder group. Note that percentages sum to greater than 100 because each excerpt typically addresses more than one topic. As is evident from the figure, the three stakeholder groups emphasized both overlapping and distinct topics. All three groups discussed emotional and mental health, and school climate and culture, more than any other topics; however, the time spent discussing these topics varied by stakeholder group. For instance, students very clearly focused on school climate and culture, and emotional and mental health, nearly to the exclusion of all other topics—with 73 percent of student excerpts including some reference to school climate and culture, and 42 percent including some reference to emotional and mental health. The only other topics that students discussed with any frequency were food and nutrition (18 percent of excerpts addressed this topic) and physical health (15 percent). On the other hand, policymakers discussed culture and climate in 33 percent of their excerpts, and emotional and mental health in 26 percent of their excerpts, and spent the rest of their time discussing quite a few other topics (e.g., family and community engagement, 19 percent; student behavior and discipline, 18 percent; physical health, 15 percent; food and nutrition, 14 percent). Finally, educators were similar to policymakers, in that they emphasized school climate and culture (39 percent) and emotional and mental health (45 percent), but also addressed numerous other areas of school health (e.g., family and community engagement, 25 percent; physical health, 23 percent; student behavior and discipline, 17 percent; food and nutrition, 16 percent). Despite the timing of the student focus groups, less than a week after the Parkland school shooting, school safety and security was one of the *least* frequently discussed topics among students (only 4 percent of student excerpts included mention of this). Moreover, this topic was discussed about *as frequently* by policymakers (13 percent) as by educators (12 percent), even though policymaker interviews concluded prior to that event, and educator interviews began after.

Figure 4. Heat map showing the percent of total excerpts (i.e., coded chunks of text) that address each school health topic, by stakeholder group. For example, 73 percent of all student excerpts address some aspect of school culture and climate. Note that percentages sum to greater than 100 because each excerpt typically addresses more than one topic.



Our Categories	WSCC Model
Health Education	Health Education
Physical Education Physical Activity	Physical Education & Physical Activity
Food/Nutrition	Nutrition Environment & Services
Physical Health	Health Services
Emotional/ Mental Health	Counseling, Psychological, & Social Services Employee Wellness
School Climate/ Culture Behavior & Discipline SEL/Character Education	Social & Emotional Climate
School Safety & Security Physical Environment ATOD Use/Abuse	Physical Environment
Family/Community Engagement	Family Engagement Community Involvement

As noted in the methods section, topic codes were initially created from the qualitative data itself, and subsequently mapped onto the WSCC framework. As a result, although the topic categories used for the stakeholder analyses incorporate all the categories from the WSCC model, the two sets of categories do not align perfectly. For instance, whereas the WSCC model uses a single category to capture all aspects of school climate, our research team used three separate categories to address different aspects of school climate. And, whereas the WSCC model has a standalone category for employee wellness, our research team included employee wellness as part of the emotional and mental health category, because stakeholder comments about employee wellness focused specifically on stress and anxiety rather than other aspects of wellness.

Below is a brief description of each topic category used in the stakeholder analyses. These descriptions are not comprehensive but instead provide an overview of the types of content coded under each category:

- **Health education:** Formal health education related to nutrition, active lifestyle, sex education, or other relevant topics (but not including social-emotional learning (SEL) because that was coded as a standalone category).
- **Physical education:** Access to formal physical education at different grade levels and across schools; frequency of physical education; amount of time for physical education; physical education learning standards.
- **Physical activity:** Access to/amount of time for physical activity at school (e.g., throughout the day or week), and issues related to recess.
- **Food and nutrition:** Availability of, and healthy options provided in the context of, school breakfast, school lunch, and non-mealtime food/beverages sold or served at school (e.g., vending machines, classroom parties, etc.); amount of time to eat/timing of lunch; hunger/food scarcity; access to healthy foods in the community.
- **Physical health:** Chronic health conditions (e.g., asthma, diabetes, food allergies); concussions/head injuries; eating disorders; illness; obesity; hygiene/basic needs (e.g., cleanliness, clothing-related needs); pregnancy/sexual health; sleep; vaccinations; vision-related needs; dental needs; abuse/neglect.
- **Emotional and mental health:** Attention deficit disorder (ADD); attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD); depression; loneliness; stress; anxiety; suicide; trauma; social-emotional skills.
- **School climate and culture:** Social-emotional climate; school culture; sense of community/unity; positive vibes; bullying; harassment; discrimination; stigma (e.g., for seeking mental health services, or receiving free or reduced-price lunch); aggression; fighting; supportive relationships (among students, between students and staff/faculty, and also among the adults in the building); student engagement. Also includes references to school uniforms.
- **Behavior and discipline:** Attendance; disruptive behavior; classroom management; school-wide routines and procedures; exclusionary discipline; multi-tier systems of support, including response to intervention (RTI) and positive behavior support (PBIS); supportive discipline approaches (e.g., restorative practices).

- **SEL and character education:** Explicitly teaching SEL or character education—either as a standalone class, or informally, by integrating it into other content areas.
- **School safety and security:** Safety concerns, including violence at school, internet safety, and transportation safety, as well as security measures such as arming teachers, metal detectors, and buzz-in systems. Also includes emergency plans and procedures, and risk assessment plans and procedures.
- **Physical environment:** Physical aspects of the school building and campus, including: aspects related to accessibility; air quality; water quality; chemical hazards; cleanliness; rodents and pests; gardens; material resources (e.g., books, paper, technology); maintenance (e.g., leaks, broken bathroom stall locks); infrastructure (e.g., ability to withstand an earthquake); and available space/portables (i.e., temporary building structures on school grounds). [Excludes physical aspects of the school building that are specific to safety and security, such as metal detectors, which were coded under school safety and security.]
- **Alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs (ATOD) use and abuse:** Alcohol, tobacco, marijuana, methamphetamine, opioid, or other drug use/abuse.
- **Family and community engagement:** Engaging parents, families, and/or the broader community, including both the reasons for doing so and methods for engaging these individuals/groups. (Excludes community partnerships, which were coded under emotional and mental health or physical health, depending on the type of partnership discussed.)

State-level policymaker perspectives

State-level policymakers covered a lot of ground in their responses to questions about priority areas, referencing both traditional school health topics and other topics included in the WSCC model. They discussed broad social determinants of health (e.g., poverty), specific health issues (e.g., chronic disease, opiate addiction), and a range of issues related to the learning environment in schools (e.g., exclusionary discipline, school safety, school climate). Despite the breadth of perspectives, policymaker priorities coalesced around the emotional and mental health needs of students. Policymakers also discussed school climate and culture extensively. Although only a few policymakers explicitly identified school climate and culture as a priority, others repeatedly introduced this topic into the conversation and described a healthy school climate as fundamental to healthy schools. Across multiple priority areas, policymakers emphasized personnel availability, qualifications, and professional development.

Emotional and mental health

State-level policymakers raised concerns about students and families struggling with addiction, students who have experienced or are experiencing ongoing trauma, and worrisome trends that seem to link increases in certain mental health issues (depression, anxiety) with increases in the use of technology and social media, particularly. Related to these concerns, various policymakers discussed the need for more school-based addiction and mental health counselors and more professional development opportunities for these support staff. For instance, one state legislator noted, “Our state has underfunded not just the number of counselors in our schools, but also professional development opportunities. We don’t curtail intentionally, but we don’t provide sufficient funding.” When asked what one policy she would enact, given the opportunity, a state board of education member said, “Well, the policy would be that it’s mandated that school districts

have addiction and mental health counselors on staff. And then the other part of it is that there's actually resources to pay for that." Another state board of education member echoed this, adding that "We need to do something huge to get more people going into mental health as it relates to education. Because we need more specialists in the schools."

In addition to ensuring the availability and accessibility of support staff, policymakers discussed the need for more training for teachers. One noted that teachers need more training to readily identify warning signs related to bullying, suicide, and other issues. Several policymakers discussed the need for more training to address and support students who are dealing with emotional or mental health challenges. One state legislator noted, for instance, that teachers rarely receive coursework in trauma-informed instruction. A state board of education member shared that it would make "a huge difference" if teachers were provided with training on how to "just interact" with students who have experienced trauma. Overall, one state board of education member effectively summed up the sentiments expressed by policymakers regarding students' emotional and mental health needs: "I don't think we have very good systems. And sometimes it goes beyond a teacher's level of expertise. And that's, I think, where teachers get frustrated because they don't know where to go or what to do."

Social-emotional skills. In the context of discussing students' emotional and mental health needs, several state-level policymakers raised the idea of "resilience" or referred to students' social-emotional skills. For instance, referring to trauma that students may have experienced, one state board of education member said, simply, that we need to help students "work through that so that they can all be resilient." Other policymakers more directly addressed students' social-emotional skills, such as this state board of education member who shared concerns about rising suicide rates among teenagers:

> What we are really, really driving at is the fact that our suicide rates have gone up. Looking at the data, since the introduction of the iPhone, there's been some really interesting social and emotional trends.... We all have our Facebook and Snapchat presence where everything in our life is wonderful and beautiful and our families are all smiling and enjoying Christmas dinner together, but then—and kids do the same thing at their level—the next post can just be an absolutely vicious, heartless attack....
> As superintendent, when I'm subject to those, it's hard to absorb those. *But when you're a troubled teenager and you don't have the tools or the confidence, that's just really hard* (emphasis added).

> Beyond mental health concerns, policymakers discussed SEL (social-emotional learning) as a means of prevention and as a means of reducing the use of exclusionary discipline in schools. For instance, one state board of education member noted during a focus group discussion that although there are systems currently in place to address bullying once it occurs, we need to move toward preventing bullying in the future. This policymaker suggested that the way to do this is by helping students develop social skills and learn how to communicate with one another in a healthy way. To reduce the use of exclusionary discipline, one state legislator emphasized a desire to eliminate suspensions and expulsions for students under age 8 and

suggested that the way to do this is to provide professional development on SEL to all teachers and school staff. "In schools where SEL is in place, they hardly have office referrals anymore because teachers have learned other techniques for dealing with students," she said. "They understand that the student who keeps getting up isn't being difficult, but is anxious." This legislator pointed out that teachers are not always equipped to address the social and emotional needs of children and, therefore, more teacher training is needed in this area.

A state board of education member echoed this sentiment, highlighting the need for more teacher training:

> I don't think that… teachers are prepared when they go into the classroom, through colleges and teaching institutions that exist, to provide a child everything that they need….They get so hung up in doing discipline, that we don't get to address the social-emotional problems, the other issues that the children need to be successful later on in life.

Overall, policymakers discussed students' social-emotional skills—and the need for schools to deliberately develop these skills in students—again and again, not only in the specific ways described above, but also more generally, as an element of healthy schools that needs to be addressed alongside others. Policymakers clearly communicated the perception that social-emotional skills are fundamental to preparing students to learn, pursue college and careers, and ultimately grow into successful adults.

School climate

State-level policymakers repeatedly mentioned school climate and culture in conversations about healthy schools. A few identified this as an area in need of attention right now, whereas others discussed it as something more fundamental to healthy schools and thus important, but perhaps not pressing. Policymakers highlighted three specific aspects of school climate as critical to healthy schools: relationships between students and caring adults, school leadership, and teacher wellness.

Among the few policymakers who identified school climate and/or culture as an area in need of attention right now, each had a unique rationale for why this is a priority. For instance, one state board of education member expressed concerns about the ability to retain effective teachers and emphasized building a positive school culture to address this problem. In response to our question about one policy that she would enact to promote healthy schools in her state, this policymaker said: "I think that it would focus on the way [school] leaders…can retain teachers by, again, building positive school culture, building teacher leadership, which trickles to a positive place for students." A state legislator identified school climate as a priority for a very different reason—a perception that, increasingly, students need a safe and supportive place to counteract the turbulence in their lives and in society more generally. She cited myriad societal issues, including families struggling with drug addiction, and anger and hostility being expressed through politics, and said, "A school needs to feel like a very safe place for kids…a place that's embedding [in children] a belief in themselves and in their communities, [where] people care about them and are there to help them succeed."

Relationships between students and caring adults. State-level policymakers viewed the relationships that students form with caring adults at school—whether teachers, support staff, or administrators—as central to healthy schools. In part, that seems to be because these relationships play an integral role in providing that safe and supportive environment as a buffer against the stressors in students' lives. For instance, one state board of education member said:

> We have so many forces, not to be negative, but things coming into play on students today who come to school that we need to change, we need to rethink the way we do school. Relationships that students have with their faculty and at school, the relationships in the building really create the community for the whole child, for the whole school, and create a healthy school.

Similarly, another policymaker spoke of the need for schools to provide support to students who might not receive it elsewhere. "For some students that's the only adult that cares for them, at school."

On the other hand, policymakers also emphasized caring relationships as an important mechanism for identifying students' physical and mental health needs. A state board of education member said:

> Teachers are the staff members in our schools that are closest to students on a daily basis, so, of course, they have relationships with their students and the quality of those relationships in and of itself can define a healthy school environment.... I think they are also in a unique position to watch the child change over time. So, if there is an improvement in health or a degradation in health, they have that unique opportunity to see the child almost daily where even a physician or any kind of health worker, they just may even see them once a year. So, I think in monitoring the physical health of students, they also play a role. I would also add that the mental health of students is also something that teachers pay close attention to and have their finger on the pulse [of], both for the individual student and in the aggregate.

School leadership. State-level policymakers overwhelmingly felt that the administrators in the school building play a central role in creating healthy schools. "Well, culture trumps pretty much everything, and culture is established by the adults in the school. And, obviously, the teachers are not the most significant person; the most significant person is the leadership." Although some policymakers discussed relatively small steps that school leaders take to set the tone in the building (e.g., communicating a sense of pride in the school),others discussed the importance of thoughtfully and intentionally "building healthy relationships and a healthy culture and a healthy climate," and communicating a clear vision of what it looks like to address the needs of the whole child. For instance, in response to a question about the role of *teachers* in creating a healthy school, one state board of education member said:

> Well, I would definitely agree that teachers are a component, they're a stakeholder in promoting healthy schools. But I also would subscribe or promote the fact that they need a leader who is a leader to promote a healthy school culture in multiple aspects, not just academic, but with the culture of the school, the awareness of students' mental health needs, developmentally appropriate pedagogy, [and] culturally relevant pedagogy. So, yes, teachers are critical because the teacher makes the difference in the classroom; but the leader makes the difference in the building.

Policymakers also said the quality of school leadership can greatly affect the quality of the teachers, which in turn influences student outcomes. For instance, when asked what one policy he would enact to promote healthy schools in his state, one state board of education member said:

> It's not a policy, but I would take control over who the principals are because my outstanding principals do create outstanding cultures and great places for kids.... Everybody likes to talk about how important teachers are, and they are. They're absolutely critical. But I

> know if I get the right principal in a school, healthy teachers will show up there. Somehow it happens. They get attracted. They hunt them down. They find them. And unhealthy teachers figure out a way to leave [because] they don't fit and that just ripples out across the student body and the connections with the community, and it is the pivot point.

Another important way that policymakers perceived school leadership as having an impact on school climate, and ultimately on students, is through leadership support of their teachers. Policymakers clearly articulated that when teachers feel supported by their administrators, it improves the school climate:

> The principals set the tone for the building [with] their policies, the way they support their teachers, or don't support the teachers. Their priorities become very important in the individual classrooms. If you have a principal who is supportive of mentoring, supportive of their teachers and what they need—who takes time to find out what the individual problems are, [and] give those teachers the support they need—the building feels more like a family than an institution.

Teacher wellness. Although policymakers did not emphasize the idea of "teacher wellness" to the extent that educators did (below), several policymakers said teacher wellness "trickles down," in that teachers are better able to demonstrate care and support of students, and are more likely to stay in the classroom, when they themselves feel supported. Policymakers highlighted specific aspects of administrative support for teachers that are critically important for healthy schools—namely, promoting opportunities for teacher leadership within the building, and ensuring that teachers have the resources and training they need to effectively meet their students' needs. Although these factors are not typically considered components of teacher wellness, policymakers perceived a connection between teacher leadership opportunities and job satisfaction. They also perceived a link between teachers having the resources to contribute effectively and feeling a sense of professional self-efficacy.

Only one policymaker discussed the need for administrators to promote teacher leadership, but this state board of education member emphasized the point several times, arguing that teacher leadership opportunities are critical for retaining effective educators. "Our teacher leaders whose needs for leadership and excelling and excellence aren't met in the classroom, they leave the classroom.... We've got to promote teacher leadership...so they stay, which promotes a positive culture of the building," the board member said.

Several policymakers discussed the need for administrators to ensure that teachers have the resources, professional development, and other supports needed to effectively meet the needs of their students. One state board of education member said teachers feel supported when they "feel like they have resources and that they have training and that there's a place to go to get answers or brainstorm answers.... Otherwise, they can't do their job and the end result is...teachers are frustrated and that doesn't work."

Another policymaker also said the availability of resources to address students' myriad needs has an impact on teachers:

> I know from my experience—not on the state board but as a practitioner—when we moved into one district in putting in school-based health centers that addressed issues of physical health, some mental health, dental, and vision, some of the schools were really, you walk in and get that sense of this is a strong, caring environment. Yet, adding that component really was a win-win for the school because teachers so often were frustrated with kids [whose health needs] they couldn't address.

Educator perspectives

Like policymakers, educators discussed a wide variety of topics covering all elements of school health, including physical activity, physical health, food and nutrition, and emotional and mental health. Educators' conversations touched on issues ranging from the importance of students having access to free breakfast to the impact of mandated recess times on staffing, scheduling, and playground equipment. However, they did not identify all of these topics as priorities.

Educators named emotional and mental health as a clear priority and said supporting students' social and emotional development is a key focal point within this broader topic. They also spoke frequently about specific mental health issues facing students and their families, and the need for schools to support and respond to students' needs. They frequently discussed school climate and culture, but did not identify this as a priority. Instead, they said school climate and culture is a critical element of creating and maintaining a healthy school environment. Educators also discussed several topics related to mental health and school climate, including the availability of support services, staff training, and creating positive relationships between students, staff, and administrators.

Mental health

Educators frequently spoke about trauma and its effects on students. While many mentioned students experiencing trauma due to living in poverty, experiencing homelessness, or worrying about deportation, a few said that students at all socioeconomic levels experience trauma. School shootings, suicides, and parents struggling with addiction or other mental illnesses, for example, can cause trauma for all students, several educators said. Additionally: although the stressors facing students at opposite ends of the socioeconomic spectrum can look very different, students may very well experience the resulting stress in similar ways. For example, while one single mother may work two or three jobs to make ends meet, another may be a high-powered professional who also works long hours. As a result, one child might have to stay with different relatives after school and the other may have a full-time nanny, but neither child feels connected to their parent. "We can't underestimate those different pressures," one principal said. "They're different but they result in the same kind of emotional stress on our students and their families."

Educators also suggested how schools can support students who have experienced or are experiencing trauma. Many said that school staff and teachers need more training, both in-service and pre-service, to better understand the impact of trauma on students and to help implement trauma-informed strategies and policies. However, one teacher also noted that even after her school did trainings on trauma-informed practices, she felt that other school policies contradicted what she saw as a trauma-informed approach that is meant to make students feel more comfortable and able to learn.

> Having classes and knowing that, OK, overnight there was a lot of gun violence, it's on the news, you know about it. But then when they come the next day, I'm more of a soft, like, "OK, school's now a safe place. Come on, you have your ear buds in, you're working, you're quiet." And then I feel, in my mind, I'm being trauma-informed. But then it's counterintuitive to what the school expectation is. "There's no ear buds in class, there's no putting your hood up while you're doing your work," which may be a comfort for some students. So, it's been very hard for me to balance school expectations with being trauma-informed. And so, it's confusing not only to myself as an educator, but then to the students as well.

Several educators emphasized the need to focus on prevention and "recovery…back to a state of 'normal,'" in addition to intervention—both in terms of traumatic community events such as school shootings as well as individual mental or emotional health issues.

Educators frequently highlighted specific mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and suicide. Some noted that instances of anxiety disorders, depression, and ADD/ADHD among students have steadily increased, though they did not always agree on what has fueled this change. A few educators suggested explicit connections between anxiety, trauma, or parental hardship and attendance. As one school nurse explained:

> There's several students in my school that had parents that have an addiction issue. They are late for school chronically.... So, mom will get up early, go to the clinic, get [a] dose [of] medication, come home and sleep. That's what methadone does to you. And then get her children up to get them to school an hour late. They're chronically late.

One school social worker noted that, especially with younger students, attendance and lateness often result from parents who struggle to have the "strength" to get their children to school. This "all ties back into schools having those added support people in their districts to be able to help these families that are struggling."

However, another social worker said that she and the nurse at her school closely track attendance and would like to create a program for students who are chronically absent. It would focus on "the importance of attendance, of how to organize your day so you can get here, and some type of coping skill. Because obviously, if they're missing, it's a coping skill of the anxiety about being at school."

Social-emotional skills. Educators clearly identified emotional and mental health as a priority, with many speaking extensively about the need to build social-emotional skills, or "coping skills," and provide support for students experiencing trauma. These skills are most likely to have an impact on students' health and wellness, they said. Many educators discussed coping skills for students experiencing personal or community trauma as well as those with specific mental health diagnoses. "I know SEL is recently coming to the forefront but not fast enough, especially in light of things that are happening in society and in schools," a special education teacher said. This educator went on to say that we need to explicitly teach and support the development of "coping mechanisms" to help students deal with challenges they encounter in and out of school.

Others spoke more generally about students needing coping and social-emotional skills to equip them to navigate peer relationships, social media interactions, and their own feelings and stress levels. Several educators highlighted relationships between emotional and mental health and elements of physical health, such as exercise and nutrition. As one principal said, "How do we see

the stress and the anxiety and the depression and the anger manifest? Well, we see it manifest in destructive behaviors. How would resiliency and positive coping manifest? I think they manifest in exercise and healthy living and those kinds of things." One teacher said the food and physical activity, or lack thereof, that students have access to "contributes to how they're behaving…so it becomes this revolving issue."

Despite educators identifying strengthened social-emotional skills as one of the most pressing needs, they also described significant challenges to addressing this need. Many said schools and districts focus so heavily on test scores, academics, and accountability measures that not enough resources are made available to spend on SEL. One principal identified accountability measures as a key determinant in how resources are allocated and prioritized, stating:

> We're held accountable for kind of superficial things, like graduation rates. We value test scores over so much. So, because all of your outcomes are these very superficial, low-correlating-to-success pieces, then your input becomes just as shallow…. Now, what if we were being held accountable for how well you prepare students for life, and success had to deal with how well a kid did two to three years after [leaving school]? Well then, your inputs would change…. How well can they overcome adversity? What are their resiliency factors? We would start putting in resources that would actually help them be prepared.

Along with accountability measures that focus solely on academics, many educators noted that teacher training programs limit their teaching scope to academic subjects, providing little to no training on topics such as SEL. As one special education teacher said, teachers "coming out of college are not equipped to teach social skills. They're not. It's not their verification area. And looking at the college prep programs, they're barely touching on that." Educators also cited the significant challenge of trying to address students' social-emotional needs and teach coping skills without adequate training and preparedness, even if their schools do implement an SEL program. The same special education teacher said her school purchased an SEL curriculum but it went largely unused because there was "no training provided to any teachers, no feedback, no monitoring of the program, no evaluating of the program. It's just there."

Educators said a variety of limited resources create obstacles to addressing social-emotional skills in school. Of these resources, educators most frequently mentioned a lack of time, with many explaining that subjects not tested for accountability are often cut down or completely removed from the school day. Some also mentioned a lack of money for hiring staff, training, and providing therapeutic tools. But as one teacher pointed out, time is unique in that it is "one thing…you can't create more of and you can't get it back once you lose it."

Additionally, many educators noted that there are often "environmental factors that are causing a lot of difficulties for students and hindering the development of their coping skills or causing some trauma and triggers for them." In such cases, educators said, there might be a limit to what schools can do given that they only have students for a portion of each day.

School climate

Several educators linked social-emotional skills with a positive school climate. Many participants stressed the importance of empathy and listening skills in fostering a respectful, positive climate. While most educators did not specifically mention school climate as the most pressing issue area, they often described it as a central element of healthy and supportive learning environments. One principal said:

> It's the individual's feeling that they belong and that they have a place there. And so that starts with how they're treated and ends with how they're treated. It's all about how you treat people. And that's where your principal and the leaders of the school say, "This is OK here, and this is not," and you stick with it. It's not OK to talk to each other this way; it's not OK for teachers to do it. And then you model that and you make sure that it's happening .... And so, when that becomes kind of the norm people feel more valued, and if people feel valued they're likely to perform better because of that sense of knowing that they have that place there.

Several other educators echoed this perspective, saying students as well as staff must practice social-emotional skills such as empathy to create a positive climate. Many educators agreed that staff and administrators should model positive interactions and respectful relationships for students, who often learn by example. "I think kids are always watching how we react," one teacher said. "It filters [down to] how the administration interacts with the staff, how the administration interacts with each other, how the teachers interact with each other.... And then it filters on down to the students."

One principal said teachers at her school had completed extensive trainings on nonviolent communication "so, that we are modeling, and then we are actually teaching directly to our students how to communicate with one another in a nonviolent way. And it's really being empathetic and identifying what that other person's need was that they were trying to [have] met."

Educators also said teamwork and collaboration among staff are integral to a healthy school, as are opportunities to model these skills for students. While some participants talked generally about needing a "comprehensive team approach" among staff, several educators specifically mentioned the importance of collaboration between clinical and instructional staff. Several support staff members said teachers resist letting their students leave class to receive clinical services, but that building relationships between clinical and instructional staff and ensuring teachers understand the role of clinicians could alleviate this problem. One principal said school climate involves collaboration among staff at all levels, citing an example of a custodian helping a student who was misbehaving:

> [The student] wasn't acting as he should, and I had him step back [into] the hall. Well, when I stepped back into the hall, my custodian had already gotten him a breakfast because he realized the child hadn't eaten. His whole morning was topsy-turvy, and one thing it's because he hadn't had breakfast. And so it just warmed my heart to know that... somebody was already taking care of that friend... and was sitting down and talking to him in the foyer. It's that kind of atmosphere that we've got to build in our schools, that everybody's here for the same reason, and that's to ensure that the kids are ready to learn. And we do whatever it takes... It's everybody.

Educators frequently discussed relationships in the context of healthy schools, particularly emphasizing relationships between school administrators and school staff, and linking these to a school's ability to meet students' needs. Participants said that having school administrators who are supportive and respectful of teachers and other staff "makes all the difference in the world in caring for our students. Not having an [administration] that's supportive kinda cuts you off at the knees [because] … you feel like you can't do your job effectively." A few participants mentioned that teachers may also need support from the school administration related to self-care. "You make sure that the kids have what they need to handle the academic load, and the teachers as well," one principal said. "So, it's kind of understanding the ebbs and flows of a school year—when to push, when to pull back." He said he addresses this in his school by adding a day off for teachers in the fall and making self-care a focus of professional development.

Educators identified various sources of teacher stress, including the increasing amount and variety of demands placed on them, being "on the front line" dealing with challenging students, and needing to work a second job due to low salaries. Regardless of the source of stress, many educators emphasized its negative impacts on students, ranging from teachers losing patience with students to leaving the profession due to "a lack of…self-efficacy," which some educators said was connected to statewide teacher shortages.

Relationships between staff and students. In addition to strengthening ties between staff and administrators, participants highlighted the importance of building relationships between staff and students. While many educators described positive relationships between staff and students as a key part of creating a healthy school and a supportive climate, several also said that developing strong relationships with students can help staff identify subtle "warning signs" that a student is experiencing personal or family challenges. As one teacher said:

> If we have a healthy school environment where we're concerned about all the kids… no one's slipping through the cracks. You know that the kid's able to get lunch, or you know when he's not having lunch… You'll hear about the family problems. They're moving. They feel comfortable telling you that they don't have their work because it's in a box somewhere. A healthy school environment will lend it to you.

Another principal explained that while certain events make it clear that a student needs support, "there's the [students] that you might not know their story. And that's where you say, 'Huh, this person's having [a] drastic change in grades,' or they quit the cross-country team or whatever. Those are also hints that you need to maybe delve deeper and seek some interaction with them." If staff can identify problems earlier and connect the student with the services they need, some educators believe that they may be able to prevent bigger issues later. Indeed, many educators said they would like schools to be more proactive and engage in more prevention efforts, but that this is not always feasible given limited support staff, limited funding, and limited time.

Support staff and access to services

Many educators highlighted the need for more support staff in schools, including counselors, social workers, psychologists, and nurses. With so many students dealing with mental health issues or experiencing trauma, educators emphasized that they need the funding to hire more support staff to meet the level of student needs in their schools. Many participants specifically mentioned that they don't have enough full-time support staff or that the support staff they do have spend much of their time focused on administrative tasks. As one principal said: "I share a social worker with other schools. I share mental health counselors with other schools. In the

context of a time where up to 25 percent of my kids are diagnosed with an anxiety disorder of some sort.... So, I got a big piece of toast and a little bit of jam, and I'm trying to figure out how to cover it all."

Some educators said their staff must triage student needs or that they don't have enough support staff to address both prevention and intervention. Participants noted that they would need more funding to hire more support staff. A school nurse said that not having resources to hire qualified staff for support positions could mean that improperly trained staff would be making decisions about student care. "In our school district, a lot of the elementary schools do not have access to a medical provider in the school. The school secretary is making decisions on when a student might need an asthma inhaler." Even if states have laws that delineate which staff can legally administer medications to students, for example, schools often end up with unauthorized staff filling those roles if funding is not appropriated to hire the required staff.

Limited availability of support personnel within schools means that teachers and other school staff often need to make referrals and create partnerships with outside organizations or government agencies to direct students to the appropriate type of care. However, several participants said schools should provide wrap-around services to address students' emotional, mental health, and sometimes physical health needs. Even schools that have community partnerships would prefer to provide those services within the school building, they said, because it streamlines the process and increases the likelihood that students will ultimately receive what they need. As one principal said:

> Even with all of the supports, we know we're missing kids and we're missing families because... you've got to get them out to the Advantage behavioral center to do an intake before they can start seeing them. That get[ting] them out there falls apart. It doesn't get done.... And so, we're looking to figure out ways... to bring all those services here. So, when I've got the parent and the student in the building and there's crisis and we need to intervene or we're aware of something, it'd be a one-stop shop in here.

A few educators felt that models such as community schools, multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS), or Response to Intervention (RTI) might more effectively coordinate and deliver services to students based on their identified levels of need. Many participants also recommended offering school-based services beyond mental health to help parents and families, not just students. The services described ranged from linking them with free laundry and showers to food pantries and attendance information.

Student perspectives

Students discussed a wide range of topics related to healthy school environments, dividing the topics into what they described as the "tangible" (such as healthy food choices or physical activity) and the "intangible" (such as positive vibes and supportive relationships with adults and peers). They said tangible issues have a huge impact on the health of the school environment and the school's impact on the greater community. For example, one student said that the soy burgers

served at her school did not properly fuel students' bodies. Another said she was concerned about the negative impact her school's use of Styrofoam plates for meals was having on the environment. Students also said that intangible topics, such as establishing supportive relationships with peers and adults, are more difficult to address but, ultimately, are more pressing at this time. They cited emotional and mental health, as well as school climate and culture, as priorities for creating healthy schools. In particular, students emphasized the importance of strong adult-student relationships and said these pave the way for positive emotional and mental health as well as a positive school climate. Peer relationships are important as well, students said, noting that both types of relationships affect their emotional and mental health and their perception of the school climate and culture. However, they did not identify peer relationships as a priority for creating healthy schools.

Emotional and mental health

Stress and anxiety. Students said that often stress and anxiety stemmed from academic pressures, regardless of whether they were high-achieving or struggling in class. High-achieving students felt significant pressure from their peers, especially when making comparisons about who is the smartest or who makes the best grades. One student described the pressure of competing with her peers: "I have a lot of anxiety, and I stay up until at least midnight three times a week working on homework, because it takes me a while to do things because I work through and I read it a few times. And then there's other kids that can read it once and then get through it." On the other hand, students struggling to catch on to academic content felt pressure to succeed and frustration that they might learn better if their teacher adapted to different learning styles. "Not necessarily all the teachers recognize that students have different ways of learning. And sometimes it's just very difficult for some people that may be slower on catching up on some terms," one student said. "I feel like if more teachers could be more aware…of different learning styles and learning disabilities, that would be something I'd like to change in my school."

The strength of a teacher-student relationship and awareness of emotional and mental health, as well as the rigors of a particular learning environment, could make the difference in whether a student felt stressed and anxious or challenged and supported. Another student identified large class sizes as an obstacle to receiving one-on-one attention from a teacher, as well as a significant source of stress for students and teachers: "For my grade, there's packed classes, so the teacher can't really get around to everyone. So, if there was less people in the class, I feel like [students] would have more time to understand the stuff they're learning, then they wouldn't be so stressed out and it would really help more with mental health as well." Across the board, students said they wanted a high-quality, challenging educational environment, without the stress they commonly experienced in pursuit of academic success.

Relationships. More than anything else, students talked about the importance of having caring and invested teachers, or, more broadly, someone they trusted to talk to. Teachers, rather than counselors, were most often identified as students' go-to source for support or advice. They expressed a strong preference for confiding in teachers because, in their eyes, counselors were too busy with paperwork to provide the level of attention needed to cultivate a deeper relationship. Students also shared an interesting perspective on genuineness and whether adults in their school sincerely cared about their needs or whether their behavior simply reflected their job description. One participant said, "When you go to a counselor, it's almost like they have to care, they're being paid to care. And then the teacher, it's like… that's not the purpose of their job. That shows that they're really going out of their way, and that they really do genuinely care, and it's not just

because it's their job." Another participant rationalized that the number of counselors versus teachers likely explained why students preferred to seek a teacher's support, "[One] guidance counselor can be very biased coming into a situation, even if they are a guidance counselor. But … we have 13 to 14 teachers who have different opinions and you can feel which one you're most comfortable with. Because not everyone is comfortable talking to one guidance counselor." Other students shared that their schools did not have counselors, but that teachers filled the role by fostering strong relationships with students and providing emotional support, in addition to academic support.

Students acknowledged that more of their peers increasingly struggled with stress, anxiety, and depression. But they also experienced vulnerability when trying to navigate emotional and mental health issues with peers, they said, because they feared they would be judged for seeking help. Students wanted more support and understanding from their peers but said adults seemed better equipped to provide support when needed. One participant said:

> At least teachers at my school are gonna wanna talk to you and be friends with you regardless [of whether] you change from freshman year to junior year …. And so, I think teacher-student relationships are far more important than peer relationships just because if you do have a serious problem, whether it's abuse at home or even just a small problem like someone hurt your feelings. The only person who can genuinely do something about that or is gonna know what to do about that or the next step to take is gonna be an adult.

Despite recognizing adults as the best resource to provide emotional and mental health support, one student said that the way teachers and counselors coordinated support services often put students in an even more vulnerable position with their peers.

> I just think pulling a kid out in class … makes them vulnerable, because it shows everyone else that they're going to talk to the counselor. And there's not really a coverup for that. If you have a physical illness and the nurse calls you, you can be like, 'Oh, my stomach hurts,' or, 'Oh, I fell.' But there isn't really a coverup for going to the counselor, you know? They would pull them out in the middle of class, the counselor would. And I honestly believe that made it worse, because that's basically screaming, 'I have a problem,' like, 'I'm struggling.'

Mental health education. Students said that though a trusted adult could make a difference to a student's emotional or mental health, all stakeholders involved—students, parents, teachers, and counselors—could benefit from more education about emotional and mental health issues. Most students expected their schools to focus on physical activity and nutrition, but they felt that mental health education was completely neglected. One said: "Kids don't know that it's extremely healthy for you to talk out your problems with someone you can trust …. With all of the shootings and things like that … it just shows if you don't talk things out, it can mentally affect you in the long run."

Another student stressed the importance of earlier education about emotional and mental health issues for students as well as for parents. Another lamented that teachers treated students differently if they were diagnosed with a mental health concern, and felt that teacher education about emotional and mental health could help ensure that they treat all students fairly. "Their mental illness does not define them as a person and it shouldn't change your opinion [of] them. You should treat them just like every other student but be aware [of] the fact that they need some more emotional support than the others and that's OK. I think everything starts with education and awareness."

Students felt that even school counselors could benefit from better training on how to support students with whom they may not have close relationships. One student recounted a time she sought help from her counselor:

> I talked to one my friends and she was saying how she didn't feel safe at home … so, I brought it up to the school counselor, and it was limited to what she could do to help. It was a tricky position to be in, and then I really didn't know what else to do and I just kind of felt alone in that issue … I didn't know what to do to be a supportive friend for that.

> Another student said, "[One] time, I got a panic attack and the only thing [the counselor suggested] was paint something or draw something. I mean, I don't feel like that will help me. I had to help myself to calm down."

> Students seemed to share a feeling that if students, parents, teachers, and counselors better understood emotional and mental health issues, they might respond to those issues more appropriately, which would help foster more trusting relationships.

> Although students described physical activity and nutrition as a critical focus of healthy schools, they felt that schools already focused on these areas. They also said that in many cases, nutrition and physical activity could not be addressed successfully without shifting greater attention toward mental

health concerns and how those issues are interrelated. Several students noted that physical health is closely related to mental health and said students needed a better understanding of this and support to address emotional and mental health concerns. This support would involve coping mechanisms as well as life skills to address stress, anxiety, and depression. One student explained:

> I really believe one of the biggest problems America is having with teenagers is obesity. And I really think that, yes, the lack of physical activity is a problem. But I really think that stress-eating and depression and things like that, all really add up to a bigger problem than just the physical aspect of it. So, I really think just going back to that emotional support, if you have that emotional support, you're more likely to have a life full of happiness. You'll know healthy stress relievers and you'll be able to have adults that can [share] … "I went through this and this is how I dealt with it."

Students explained that kids know the benefits of exercise and healthy eating, but often encountered humiliating experiences in their physical education classes (such as their grades being tied to how fast they could run a mile). They also mentioned struggling with a lack of strong relationships either at home or at school to support healthy food choices and needing help to develop strong self-esteem.

School climate and culture

Caring and invested teachers and administrators have a significant impact on students' emotional and mental health, participants said, and on their perception of their school climate. Students identified adult-student relationships as a priority, despite the impact of peer relations on their perception of school climate. Students described an ideal school climate as being friendly and

welcoming, full of "positive vibes," "unity," "understanding," and "an attitude of wanting to be there."

Relationships. Students described administrators as the key to setting the tone and providing supportive relationships for both teachers and students. One student described her school's recent change in leadership:

> I know for my school, personally, it's the principal that basically runs everything. But sometimes our principal doesn't really like doing … interactive stuff with her students. … We got a new principal this year, but the last one, she would go into the classes. …She was interested in her students and their well-being. She went up to you. She asked you how you were. She made sure you were OK that day. And this [new] principal, she stays in her office. She does paperwork. That's all she does the whole year.

Students felt that personal feedback from teachers as well as administrators made them feel valued and acknowledged. One student described how important it was to feel she had a voice in her own educational experience:

> We have [a] quarterly reflection [where] they ask us what we liked about the semester, what we didn't like, and things that we can change. … My principal … reads every single one, and she makes a note and she gives it back to us. And she lets us know personally, 'I really appreciated that.' And you know that she read it, because she wrote you a note on it, responding to what you just said.

Students also pointed out that teachers' behavior influences the level of trust students feel and whether they see teachers as someone they can talk to. One participant explained, "I understand people have bad days, but … I think that if teachers were aware that students pick up on so much—the way you talk, the tone of your voice, your body language. We, as teenagers, pick up on that. And we can tell when you're mad at us, or we can tell when you don't like us."

Another student presumed that teacher frustration stemmed from a lack of support. "Some of the teachers don't get enough support; they're angry, they take out their anger on us."

Students said that a school's positive or negative climate often trickles down from the tone set at the top, the level of support teachers receive from their administrators, and the quality of relationships between adults in the building.

Structural elements. While caring administrators and teachers clearly made a difference in students' perceptions of their school's climate and culture, students said their school's structure either hindered or fostered a positive school climate. Students expressed feeling siloed by grade or achievement level, and most commonly identified academic tracking practices as an obstacle to getting to know more of their peers. One student described the separation this practice creates, saying:

> Our school is split up into support, regular, medium, honors, [and] AP classes … They categorize you in these classes. When I was in elementary school in a different county, our classes weren't split out like this. We were all mixed in. … I was in second grade and I could read, but my friend could not. And so …instead of reading my own books, I would help him read. And that was just something that I did, and that's how we became closer friends. But now, in high school, we're split. And these AP students … create this idea in their heads that they're better, or that people

> who aren't in AP classes are slower or dumb. And these are words they've used, so I'm not trying to put anyone down, but that's what they do. And I think that the separation is creating this separation within our schools … between people.... Students don't like the idea of crossing over the different cliques. But, I think the separation created those cliques, in a way, because you tend to hang out with people you're in classes with.

Another student shared that academic tracking created separation not just between students of different levels, but between students and their teachers or administrators. "They divide us into honors and regular, [and] I think the honors students … get more help from teachers. The teachers and principals listen to what they have to say. Because they have higher expectations."

Although students perceived academic tracking as the cause of cliques and silos, they also identified some structures within their schools that helped to foster stronger adult-student relationships, resulting in a more positive school climate. One student described her school's "smart lunch" program, which divided a 90-minute lunch period into three sections. In one section, students were assigned to a teacher with whom they could work on homework and tackle academic challenges before having to go home. The other two lunch sections allowed students to take a mental break and provided the freedom to choose whether to hang out with friends or to have some quiet time to themselves. This structure ensured that students had at least one adult from whom they could seek support; however, this didn't limit students' ability to seek support elsewhere. "Teachers are assigned kids, but it's not like you can't go in for help from a teacher if you're not assigned to them."

Another student described a different system, also designed to build strong teacher-student relationships:

> Once a week, we have this thing called "seminar," which essentially, it's like an accountability classroom, I guess. And you stay with that teacher from your freshman year to your senior year, and you meet with them once a week …. You have assignments, but regardless of those assignments, that teacher is specifically in that classroom for you. So, hopefully, you would make a bond with them, and they're allowed to get you out of class if you need to be out of class. They're your go-to person. And I really think …it's really effective.... I know that if I need someone, I have someone.

Bullying. Students did not identify peer relationships as a priority for healthy schools, but did share that peer relationships had a significant impact on the school climate. It is possible that students did not label this as a priority because, aside from desiring more teacher support to address bullying, students felt a sense of responsibility to drive change in their peer relationships. They did acknowledge bullying as an issue and said this is one issue that they did not always feel that teachers addressed well. Students said bullying could result from something small—like a student's clothing, or the ability for students to choose their own lockers, which tends to lump groups of students together—or from something more serious such as seeking help for a mental health concern. Students from large and small schools discussed the difficulty of navigating these challenges and the importance of having trained professionals to help, because, as one participant said, "bullying leads to depression, which leads to suicidal school students."

Student engagement. While students identified bullying as an issue with which they needed adult support, they also shared a desire for an attitude shift among their peers. "We kinda take it for granted," one student said. "We have the attitude of, 'Oh, we have to go to school today.' If we could get to more, 'We get to go to school today,'" then the school's climate and culture might improve significantly.

They also said that creating unity among students cannot necessarily be done through policy; every student has to bring a positive attitude to the table. They explained that while teachers and administrators can influence a positive school climate with encouragement, smiling, and developing strong relationships with students, creating "positive vibes" among the student community requires individual-level introspection and commitment on behalf of students who affirm: "This is going to be a good day;" "I'm going to be respectful;" and, "I'm going to support people today."

Cross-stakeholder analysis: priority topics

While there was significant overlap in priorities across stakeholder groups, there were also key differences in the way each group discussed each topic. Emotional and mental health, along with school climate and culture, surfaced most frequently across all three stakeholder groups as priority areas to address to create healthy learning environments. Though these two broad areas came up the most overall, each group prioritized them slightly differently.

For educators, school climate and culture was seen as crucial to a healthy school environment, although it was not an explicit priority area. Instead, emotional and mental health was the top priority for educators.

Policymakers generally prioritized emotional and mental health as well, but some also viewed school climate and culture as a priority. Many policymakers also prioritized elements that cut across issue areas such as professional development, qualifications, and training for teachers and school staff.

Finally, students overwhelmingly emphasized relationships—especially with teachers, but also with peers—and discussed ways in which these relationships influence emotional and mental health as well as school climate and culture.

Emotional and mental health

Educators and policymakers frequently mentioned trauma and the need for training on trauma-informed practices. While many in both groups focused on the impacts of poverty, immigration status, and community violence on youth, several educators emphasized that students, regardless of their socioeconomic level, have significant emotional and mental health needs and may experience trauma. Several students also referenced traumatic events such as school shootings and student suicides, although they never used the term "trauma."

Many educators and policymakers also spoke extensively about social and emotional skills in the context of mental and emotional health. They often mentioned the need to develop students' "coping strategies" for effectively dealing with their own mental health issues as well as "what's going on in the world nowadays," including gun violence, fear of deportation, and other forms of community trauma.

Though policymakers and educators discussed the importance of developing social-emotional skills for academic, career, and life success, this surfaced as the highest priority topic for educators in

particular. Students mentioned social-emotional skills only once, in the context of "life skills" that could help them better cope with stress.

Policymakers cited addiction issues as a challenge for students as well as family members, and several educators and policymakers drew explicit connections between student attendance and parental addiction, or between student attendance and anxiety. However, educators more frequently emphasized the impact of parents' mental health or chronic health issues on students, with several framing the topic as an equity issue. In contrast, many students attributed high levels of stress and anxiety to demanding academic environments.

All stakeholder groups emphasized the need for increased availability of trained and qualified school personnel, such as counselors, social workers, and mental health professionals, to provide support for students' emotional and mental health needs. Educators and policymakers mentioned the need for more funding to hire additional support staff. Educators and students said support staff should be able to dedicate more of their time to working directly with students, instead of spending time on paperwork and administrative tasks. However, students said they are often more likely to seek emotional support from teachers than from other school support staff, because they find teachers more approachable, or easier to connect with, because of their existing relationships. Policymakers and educators stressed training teachers to better address students' social and emotional needs and to strengthen their ability to "just interact" with students who have experienced trauma.

School climate and culture

All stakeholder groups identified school climate and culture as a crucial element of a healthy school, at times equating a healthy school with a healthy school climate. Social-emotional skills and relationships within the school building surfaced among members of all groups as important aspects of school climate and culture. For instance, educators discussed ways in which social-emotional skills can influence school climate, by highlighting the importance of both students and staff treating everyone in the building with empathy and respect. They also noted that staff and school leaders should model this behavior for students through positive interactions.

Students focused somewhat more on the impact of peer relationships on school climate, highlighting the need for more bullying prevention and for students to be less judgmental of their peers; they also emphasized that individual students' attitudes and actions play an important role in the larger school climate. Students uniquely highlighted academic tracking as a practice that creates divisions among peers and contributes to a culture that is not equally supportive of all students. However, at least one educator and one policymaker discussed the practice of separating special education students from their peers and the effect this has on school climate.

All stakeholder groups cited the role of school leaders in creating a school's climate. Policymakers and educators said school leaders set the tone in the building and, as a result, have a strong impact on school climate.

Policymakers, educators, and even students said there is a "trickle-down" effect in schools, such that when teachers feel supported by their administrators, students end up feeling supported by their teachers. Students did not speak extensively about the role of school administrators; however, several said that students notice when administrators are genuine and that this is evident when they take the time to interact directly with students.

Educators, policymakers, and students also identified teacher stress and anxiety as an issue that has an impact on teacher relationships with students and other staff, though they did not necessarily characterize the source of teacher stress in the same manner.

Policymakers noted that teachers become frustrated when they do not have the necessary training to meet the breadth of students' needs. Educators highlighted the stress teachers face as a result of making low salaries while their job duties continue to increase. However, policymakers and educators said teachers need more professional development and training to fully address the breadth and depth of student needs. Students and educators mentioned that teachers experience stress and said teacher relationships with students suffer when educators do not feel supported by their administrators.

Broader school health topics

As noted earlier, stakeholders discussed a broad range of topics related to healthy schools beyond those identified above as priority areas. They articulated several reasons, outlined below, why emotional and mental health, including social-emotional skills, and school climate, should take precedence over more traditional school health topics (e.g., nutrition, physical activity):

1. Some stakeholders shared that more traditional school health issues have received more attention in the past, or sufficient progress has been made in those areas, and it is now time to shift attention toward the priority areas identified above. One student said, "At my school, physical health is a big thing, so I'm not worried about that. What worries me at my school is mental health; a lot of kids don't know where to go or who to talk to when they have a problem." An elementary school principal echoed this idea, saying that in her state, health education, physical education, and healthy meals have all been addressed through legislation: "It's already in place. So, like in [my state], I know it is. I can't speak for other states. But for us, we're there, it's the way we do business and this next piece is the social-emotional piece."

2. Stakeholders also suggested that certain issues need to be addressed first, before others can gain traction. For instance, a high school principal said mental health issues must become a priority so students are able to make healthy choices and sustain healthy lifestyles:

> We have a student that's going through depression. One of the coping mechanisms could be eating right, exercising, and things of that nature. But I'll never get to that. I'll never sustain those good decisions, and behaviors, lifestyles, and practices if I don't deal with the depression first, the anxiety first, the high levels of stress first. And I think some of those pieces are leading to barriers in making healthy lifestyles. I think it's centering themselves in a good place, which will lead to sustained healthy decisions and choices and lifestyles, versus saying, 'Hey, we want to promote running' without the context of dealing with the psychological impediments to that.

Similarly, a state board of education member emphasized that school culture needs to be addressed first, before we can effectively address other aspects of healthy school environments. "A healthy [school] culture is a very effective prevention tool," he said. "Simply doing a lot of prevention activities in a culture that has toxic elements will not be very effective."

3. A state board of education member recommended that social-emotional skills be prioritized over issues related to diet and exercise because the former are more closely tied to long-term success:

> The research that's come out that really links the social-emotional wellness to the ability to learn and the ability to succeed just is so much stronger. Because, of course, people can have bad nutritional practices and never exercise and still go out and get a job and be able to support themselves and their families. There's other kinds of consequences for it, but …. If you don't have strong social and emotional skills, if you don't have an environment where kids feel safe to learn, then getting to that successful adult is much more of a struggle as opposed to, like I said, people having bad nutrition habits or bad activity habits.

4. The same policymaker also suggested that the educational system should prioritize helping students develop social-emotional skills because they are *skills* and can be very challenging for students to hone without adequate support. She argued strongly that, whereas a person can potentially improve their physical health by making better choices for themselves given some basic knowledge about what is healthy and what is not, it's much harder for a child to solve their own emotional problems without first developing the requisite social-emotional skills:

> Another dimension of it is that, for the physical health, so nutrition and activity kinds of physical health education, there's a lot of ability for a person to make decisions that can change that, like a person can decide to eat healthier, a person can decide to exercise more. The social-emotional wellness seems different in that we're talking about a lack of skills in the person, so that person can't solve that problem on their own. So, it seems like a different type of need…. If a person has a hard time managing their anger or a child has some kind of trauma-informed background that leads them to act in a certain way, them solving that problem on their own … it just seems less likely. It seems like it more needs to be a system kind of solution.

5. Finally, several policymakers made a strategic argument for prioritizing social-emotional wellness over other components of school health. One state board of education member considered what issues could garner broad buy-in from both ends of the political spectrum and noted that because soft skills and drug prevention both relate to career readiness, these could be areas "where you could get broad agreement and you might be able to gain some traction." Another state board of education member made a slightly different point, noting that needs vary widely from school-to-school and district-to-district. Although safety may be a pressing issue for some schools and food insecurity may be a pressing issue for others, this state-level policymaker said, "If we want a policy that would probably hit all schools, it would be the social-emotional issue… [because] if you're trying to have an impact at a state

level, if you're only addressing a subset of the schools in terms of safety, you're not gonna have that state-level impact." She went on to say that she has observed positive movement in education in recent years, and that we need to ensure that this continues:

> I feel like things have been changing in the last maybe 10 or 15 years towards more focus on the individual child and awareness of his emotional skill. And whether that's completely been integrated in the college prep program for teachers or in the way schools are administered, I think those are the things we're in the middle of and some people are doing it really well, and some people aren't doing it as well. But I feel like we're in a slow transition. And that's why it's important to use the policies that get made at the state level; they're gonna help either solidify the direction we're moving [in] or take us back in another direction.

Discussion

To understand how stakeholders are thinking about healthy school environments, and to identify their respective and overlapping needs and priorities, we conducted in-depth, semi-structured focus groups and interviews with a diverse set of state-level policymakers, educators, and students. Across stakeholders, there was broad agreement that school climate and culture is the backbone of a healthy school. Additionally, despite the breadth of topics the three groups discussed, there was broad consensus that students' emotional and mental health is an area in need of attention. The fact that the three groups converged around emotional and mental health, broadly speaking, suggests that this area should be prioritized to improve the health of schools.

Given their unique lenses, it is not surprising that policymakers, educators, and students had somewhat different perspectives about why it's important to address students' emotional and mental health needs. Their views also differed about which specific emotional and mental health needs require the most attention. For instance, policymakers shared concerns about broad societal trends, such as the opioid epidemic, mental health problems associated with increased use of social media, and the impacts of trauma and adverse childhood experiences. Educators also emphasized trauma, but they discussed specific examples of the kinds of trauma experienced by students in their communities and the need for school staff to receive training related to trauma-informed practice. Students, on the other hand, focused primarily on stress and anxiety related to academic pressure, and on stigma associated with seeking mental health support.

Stakeholders articulated various ways that emotional and mental health intersects with more traditional school health topics. For instance, several noted that emotional and mental health issues can lead to unhealthy eating or serve as impediments to physical activity. Others discussed various strategies for identifying and/or addressing students' emotional and mental health needs (e.g., ensuring that caring adults are available to provide emotional support, helping students develop social-emotional skills so they can cope with emotional challenges, and hiring school leaders who prioritize addressing students' emotional and mental health needs along with their academic needs). They said each of these strategies could also have a positive impact on school climate. In addition, although stakeholders said teacher stress can trickle down and have a negative impact on students, there was also a perception that when resources are not available to meet students' needs, teachers may experience stress. Thus, there is a potential connection between addressing students' emotional and mental health needs and improving teacher wellness.

Further, stakeholders consistently emphasized not only the role of mental health professionals in addressing student needs, but also the importance of better equipping teachers to address

students' emotional and mental well-being. Stakeholders expressed a desire to establish a culture of health in schools rather than relegating students' emotional and mental well-being to health professionals.

The overlaps between emotional and mental health and other elements of healthy schools suggest that addressing students' emotional and mental health needs could serve as a "leverage point" for promoting the WSCC model as a whole. It could improve integration of multiple components of healthy school environments, which are currently siloed, to advance the common goal of improving social, health, and academic outcomes for all students. In other words, intervening to address students' emotional and mental health needs has the potential to concurrently and subsequently trigger change across other elements of the WSCC model. At the same time, there is no single strategy that will magically elevate all schools to the ideal level of health; however, focusing on emotional and mental health may simultaneously address an area of greatest need and provide the leverage to improve multiple aspects of school health.

To some extent, recent news events clearly influenced our conversations with stakeholders. It is likely not a coincidence that the number of educator quotes touching upon trauma was high and that educator interviews all took place in the weeks and months following the Parkland school shooting. Interestingly, however, the comments that directly addressed the shooting were not necessarily about trauma. For instance, one principal brought the event into the conversation to talk about challenges to helping students grow socially and emotionally:

> I was really struck with the whole, the reaction to the shooting in Florida, listening to our politicians and some of those folks that were in powerful positions. Some of the rhetoric that they used after that incident where our children and people who were grieving were listening, I really was struck, like, "How do I help my students slow down enough to be perceptive enough to understand what their words might do to somebody else?" And so, we are, in my opinion, lacking the models for our young people to really hear multiple sides of the story, and being aware of what we say and do and how it affects somebody else.

It is worth noting, too, that policymakers also discussed trauma during their focus groups and interviews, which had all concluded just prior to the Parkland shooting.

Limitations

We spoke with stakeholders from across the country and in U.S. territories to explore their perspectives on school health. Despite their geographic diversity, participants were a self-selected group who likely chose to participate given their interest in this topic. The perspective of student participants may not reflect the "typical" student perspective. Student participants were all in high school; therefore, the perspective of students at lower grade levels is not reflected here. Additionally, student participants were all youth delegates to a National 4-H conference, and their focus on anxiety related to academic pressure, for instance, may have limited generalizability beyond students who share certain characteristics with youth delegates to National 4-H (e.g., other students who actively seek out youth development opportunities). Moreover, most of our policymaker participants were state board members, with only three state legislators and one legislative staff member. The views of governors, chief state school officers, and executive-level secretaries were not reflected.

Recommendations and Next Steps

The findings from this study have clear implications for advocates working to promote any aspect of healthier school environments. Although students, educators, and policymakers touched upon nearly every aspect of healthy schools as defined by the CDC's Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child framework, only a handful of topic areas emerged as areas of need. Specifically, all stakeholder groups focused on mental health and school climate as clear leverage points in need of additional policy attention that can provide the foundation for achieving healthier schools more broadly. To this end, we offer healthy schools advocates and policymakers the following recommendations for using the findings in this report:

- **Identify the linkages between mental health and/or school climate and other aspects of healthy schools.** Just because stakeholders are focused on these two elements of healthy schools does not mean that advocates working to improve nutrition, physical education, or health services in schools cannot make progress in those areas. Instead, consider mental health and school climate as entry points for demonstrating the interconnected nature of healthy schools. For example, given connections between nutrition, physical activity, and behavior, momentum around reforming school disciplinary policies may also be a platform for increasing attention to standards related to school meals, recess, and movement in the classroom.

- **Recognize that students, educators, and policymakers discuss mental health and school climate differently, and tailor messaging appropriately.** Although the stakeholder groups all coalesced around these topics, specific priorities varied. For example, while policymakers shared high-level concerns about student mental health—discussing, for instance, the negative effects of social media use, and the research surrounding adverse childhood experiences—educators zeroed in on specific types of trauma that students may experience and the need for training in trauma-informed practice. Students, on the other hand, emphasized the need for supportive relationships and increased awareness, among both teachers and other students, of mental health issues to reduce the stigma associated with seeking help. Build buy-in from these groups by focusing on each group's priorities and adopting their language when describing these domains.

- **Build coalitions across healthy school domains.** Stakeholders clearly understood the interconnections between healthy school domains; however, they also described the uncoordinated nature of these issues (e.g., school climate and school health) within their schools. Given policymakers' need to prioritize among competing issues, due to limited time and resources available to address all issues simultaneously, healthy school advocates are better positioned when they bring a unified message, rather than competing to prioritize any given domain.

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