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Students' Health, Mental Health, and Well-Being Worsens Over the Past 10 Years: Summary of the August 2024 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Report (Part IV)

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[Students' Health, Mental Health, and Well-Being Worsens Over the Past 10 Years: Summary of the August 2024 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Report \(Part IV\) - Project ACHIEVE](#)

*[To listen to a synopsis and analysis of this Blog on the “**Improving Education Today: The Deep Dive**” podcast on Spotify. . . hosted by popular AI Educators, Angela Jones and Davey Johnson: [CLICK HERE for Angela and Davey’s Enlightening Discussion](#)]*

Dear Colleagues,

Introduction

To each there comes in their lifetime a special moment when they are figuratively tapped on the shoulder and offered the chance to do a very special thing, unique to them and fitted to their talents. What a tragedy if that moment finds them unprepared or unqualified for that which could have been their finest hour.
Winston Churchill

We interrupt this program (our current Blog Series) to “go backwards to go forward.”

Last week, the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) released its “Prevention Report” addressing ten years of longitudinal data from the nationally-administered [Youth Risk Behavior Survey](#). This Report focuses especially on a comparison of the Survey’s 2021 and 2023 data, as well as the data across the last ten years.

The Press Release stated:

New CDC data released today (August 6, 2024) highlight improvements in mental health among some United States teens, including decreases in the percentage of students feeling persistently sad or hopeless.

However, the report also highlights concerning increases in the percentage of teens reporting experiences of school-based violence and absenteeism due to safety concerns.

Today’s report provides a detailed analysis of the health behaviors and experiences of high school students across the nation, comparing 2021 and 2023 [Youth Risk Behavior Survey](#) data. The 2021 data are drawn from a year when schooling was still substantially disrupted due to COVID.

The report also provides 10-year data trends by sex, race and ethnicity, and sexual and gender identity. As students head back to school, these data are critical to highlighting the challenges faced by millions of young people so that communities can better address their health and safety.”

It is critical to recognize that the 2021 to 2023 “improvements” are minimal, and that they most likely reflect any improvements occurring from 18 months of pandemic-related home isolation and the “re-opening” of schools and more normal social interactions.

The most important thing to reflect on are the current percentages of students experiencing social, emotional, behavioral, and mental health challenges. . . and the continuing impact of bullying and harassment.

Let’s also remember that, as of April 2023, at least 204,000 U.S. children and teens lost parents or other in-home caregivers to Covid-19.

More specifically, the Youth Risk Behavior Survey Data Summary & Trends Report: 2013–2023 cited the following:

Mental Health

- 40% of students overall are experiencing persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness
- 53% of female students are experiencing persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness, and of those have seriously considered suicide
- 42% of Hispanic students feel persistently sad or hopeless (from 46% to 42%), 26% experience poor mental health, 18% have considered suicide, and 16% have made suicide plans
- 10% of Black students have attempted suicide

Conflict and Violence at School

There are increases in the percentage of students reporting violence and safety concerns at school or on the way to school:

- Increases in the percentage of students who were threatened or injured with a weapon at school (7% to 9%).
- Increases in the percentage of students who were bullied at school (15% to 19%).
- Increases in the percentage of students who missed school because of safety concerns either at school or on the way to school (9% to 13%).

In 2023:

- Nearly 2 in 10 female students experienced sexual violence, and more than 1 in 10 had been physically forced to have sex.
- More than 3 in 5 LGBTQ+ students experienced persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness during the past year, and more than half had poor mental health during the past month.
- Nearly three in 10 LGBTQ+ students were bullied at school, and one in 5 LGBTQ+ students attempted suicide during the past year

Social Skills Training Must Anchor Every School’s SEL Initiative

Clearly, our children and adolescents continue to be emotionally fragile, experiencing a wide range of social, behavioral, and mental health issues.

From a multi-tiered perspective, these students need core, strategic, and—some—intensive services, supports, and interventions.

But the foundation to these more intensive interventions involves core social skills training that is based on cognitive-behavioral and social learning theory research.

Indeed, every student in this country needs to learn the interpersonal, social problem-solving, conflict prevention and resolution, and emotional awareness, control, communication, and coping skills that only an evidence- and cognitive-behaviorally-based social skills program can provide.

Thus, not all social skills programs are equal.

And the social skills instruction needs to occur every year, throughout the year. . . beginning at the preschool or kindergarten level.

The importance of core cognitive-behaviorally social skills instruction for all students—taught in their classrooms by their classroom teacher as part of the school’s classroom management and self-management program—is that the instruction:

- Has the potential to significantly enhance students’ social, emotional, and behavioral self-management proficiency;
- Has an additive effect. . . so that students with effective social, emotional and behavioral skills in elementary and middle school have the great potential to be more successful in these areas in High School; and
- Is the foundation that is used as the anchor for all strategic (Tier 2) and intensive (Tier 3) multi-tiered services, supports, and interventions.

During this Summer, we have highlighted many of the characteristics and applications of a sound evidence-based, cognitive-behaviorally-based core social skills program:

July 27, 2024

Are Schools Really Prepared to Address Educators’ Biggest Behavioral Student Concerns Right Now?
“We’ve Got Serious Problems and We Need Serious People”

[\[CLICK HERE to LINK to BLOG\]](#)

June 22, 2024

Does Your School’s SEL Program Teach Social Skill Behaviors, or Just Talk About What Students “Should Do”? If We Taught Reading the Way We Teach SEL, None of Our Students Would Learn How to Read

[\[CLICK HERE to LINK to BLOG\]](#)

What Does “Evidence-Based” Really Mean? A Free White Paper Explains

But we would like take “one more step” beyond our Blogs.

We have written a White Paper that specifies the essential evidence-based characteristics of a sound cognitive-behaviorally-based core social skills program.

Using the evidence-based Stop & Think Social Skills Program as an exemplar, this White Paper also identifies the evidence-based characteristics for any school-wide Positive Behavioral Support/Social-Emotional Learning (PBSS/SEL) system. In addition, it defines and discusses why social, emotional, and behavioral self-management is the primary student goal and outcome of a PBSS/SEL system.

The White Paper is free. You can download it from the “Stop & Think Products WebPage”:

[\[CCLICK HERE to Find White Paper on this Page\]](#)

While there is always a risk in advocating for a specific product. . . especially by the author (educators seem to react negatively to what they see as self-indulgent marketing). . . know that I am doing this (and providing the White Paper) in the interest of giving Educators the specific information that they need relative to (a) implementing effective PBSS/SEL systems, and (b) effectively teaching students social skills.

For me, it is really all about the students and staff. . . I’ve been writing this free Blog for over five years. . .

At the very least, you can use the White Paper to compare your current programs to see how they “stack up” to the evidence-based components and characteristics that we know are needed. . .

Or—if you are currently researching SEL programs to implement—these characteristics can help you compare a number of programs so that you ultimately make an informed decision.

Know, in addition, that we developed the Stop & Think Social Skills Program in the early 1990s, because there was virtually nothing available in this area in the schools. After implementing it in hundreds of schools for almost a decade, the Program was designated evidence-based by the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) in 2000. . . and, later by CASEL in 2002.

We are proud of the student, staff, and school social skills outcomes we have demonstrated over the past 20 years. But we also know that it is much more important that schools choose the “right” evidence-based program for them. . . tracking its success over time.

Summary

This past week, as I was consulting at one of my School Climate Transformation Grant schools, they asked me to observe and review the files of a seventh grade student who had just moved into the District.

The file review took almost two hours, and it contained information from four different school districts, along with different sets of legal documents changing the student’s guardianship four different times.

The adolescent was raised by alcoholic and abusive parents who were also on drugs. One eventually was incarcerated. He lived for a time with his grandfather. . . and for some of that time, they were homeless.

He attempted suicide “a number of times,” and was hospitalized for this at least once. And he had been in therapy for years.

I would love to say that this young man was the exception amongst his peers. But after ten years, working on two five-year Grants in this part of the country, I know that this is not true.

As a school psychologist, I am privy to more background information than most educators. But it doesn’t take too long as a teacher—even on the first day of school—to know that “something’s up” with one or more students as they begin to teach and realize that the student is “not ready.”

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s Youth Risk Behavior Survey Data Summary & Trends Report: 2013–2023 once again validated that the mental health of many High School students remains on edge.

Students are feeling sad and hopeless, suicide and suicide risk is far too high, students of color and from the LGBTQ+ community are disproportionately affected, bullying and other safety concerns remain prevalent, and female students are experiencing sexual violence and physically-forced sex.

From a multi-tiered perspective, these students need core, strategic, and—some—intensive services, supports, and interventions. And research and practice clearly demonstrate that the foundation to these more intensive interventions involves core social skills training that is based on cognitive-behavioral and social learning theory research.

But there is still confusion by what is meant by “evidence-based.”

Critically, an evidence-based social skills program helps students—from preschool through high school—learn comprehensive social, emotional, and behavioral self-management skills that are essential to every Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) school initiative must have to be successful.

Said a different way: Students need to learn (a) the skills involved in recognizing, controlling, and communicating their emotions; (b) the skills involved in maintaining positive and productive thoughts, beliefs, expectations, and attributions; and (c) the skills involved in demonstrating prosocial interpersonal and social problem-solving interactions.

This needs to start, for all students, in preschool and kindergarten, progressing each year through high school. While it will not prevent all students’ challenges and challenging behavior, the social skills instruction and learning provides a foundation that more strategic or intensive services, supports, and interventions can be built on.

We have precious little time to help our students address these social, behavioral, and mental health needs. And we do not have the time to waste on approaches that will not deliver needed outcomes.

Too many students are beginning this new school year with social, emotional, and behavioral challenges. We, as educators, need to be on the look-out for these students, and we need to ensure that our schools are using sound supports and interventions.

I hope this Blog (and the others cited) will become a “discussion piece” at your first faculty (or other) meeting of this new year.

PLEASE download (see Link above), read, and consider the PBSS/SEL White Paper.

Let’s work together to make this the most successful school year that you have ever had. . . for your students and yourselves.

Best,

Howie