



# AN OPPORTUNE MOMENT

We Can Solve the Mental Health Crisis in Young  
People with Stimulus Bill Funds and Existing SEL and  
Mental Health Solutions

PROJECT  
**WAYFINDER**





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**We are at a critical moment in the state of education and mental health in the United States.**

Educators and policymakers now face fundamental decisions with the potential to transform what schools can be for this generation—and all that follow.

This white paper emerged out of a collective passion for the opportunity contained in this moment. It was produced in the fervent hope that our education system will blossom from adversity, and reimagine itself as an all-embracing support system for children, youth, and young adults. As we present the best solutions our collective expertise has to offer, we ask you to be open to new possibilities that could shift educational practice and structures and improve outcomes for millions of students.

Everyone involved in the creation of this white paper has been deeply invested for years in social and emotional learning, mental health system reform, and equity-focused education. We have worked to build mental health and SEL programming at the elementary, secondary, and post-secondary levels. We are deeply committed to further research, development, and implementation of transformative wellness-centered approaches to education.

In times like these, we acknowledge the great challenge that accompanies urgency of action. Our hope is that this work eases the pressure of decisions yet to be made, and provides concrete ideas for moving forward—along with a touch of inspiration in this moment of uncertainty.

Sincerely,



**Patrick Cook-Deegan**  
*Founder & CEO,  
Project Wayfinder*



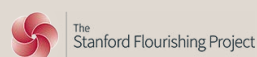
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# 1

## The Problem: a Significant Rise in Adolescent Mental Health Issues Due to the COVID-19 Pandemic

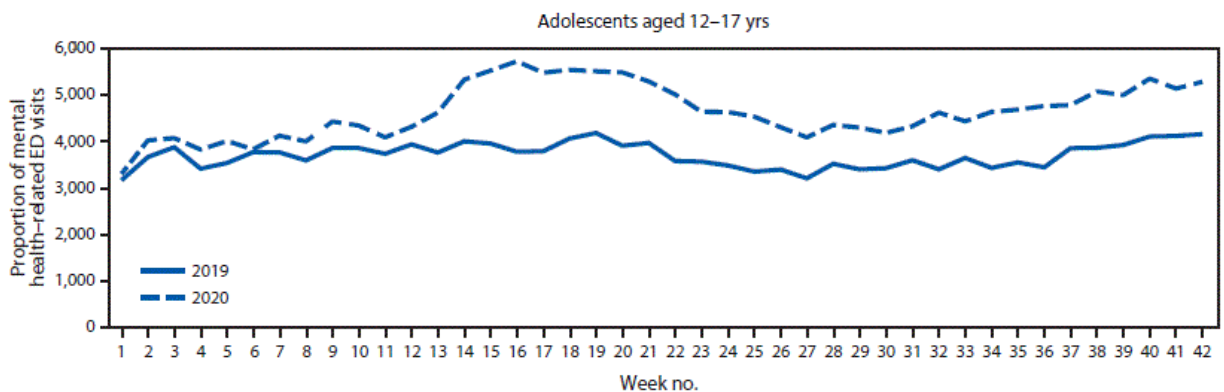
The COVID-19 pandemic has caused the largest sustained interruption the US education system has ever seen. Since the start of remote learning, absenteeism has more than [doubled](#), expanding [learning gaps](#) that further exacerbate issues of access and [equity](#) for historically marginalized student groups. The other negative effects the pandemic has had on learning are complex and numerous and will likely take years to fully address. In addition to academic challenges, one of the most pressing concerns is adolescent mental health.

Prior to the pandemic, overall mental health among young people was already in a state of rapid decline. Studies have shown a steady rise in anxiety and depression among teens, as well as a rise in suicidal ideation and suicide attempts. From 2007 to 2012, anxiety disorder diagnoses in children and teens [rose](#) by 20%, and researchers estimate that roughly one third of youth between the ages of 13 and 18 experienced one of a [variety](#) of anxiety disorders. From 2005 to 2014, the percentage of clinical depression diagnoses also [rose](#) by 37%, an increase of [more than half a million](#) individuals. Additionally, the CDC [reported](#) that, from 2007 to 2017, the number of deaths by suicide nearly tripled among children aged 10-14, and increased by 76% for youth aged 15-19. By 2017, suicide had become the second leading cause of death among all young people aged 15-24. It remains so today.

At a time when many students were already struggling, the pandemic cut off access to key social support systems and brought grief, loss, and financial hardship to [hundreds](#)

of thousands of families. CDC [reports](#) from October 2020 show notable rises in feelings of persistent sadness, isolation, and hopelessness during the pandemic, and a related spike in the number of mental health-related emergency room visits among children and teens.

### Mental Health-Related ED Visits, 2019–2020



[Source](#)

Challenges caused by the pandemic have not affected all communities equally. The CDC has reported significantly [higher rates of infection](#) among communities of color due to inequities in education, income, and healthcare access, among other factors. Additionally, [barriers to](#) technology access, difficulty in [access to public services](#) normally provided by schools, and [more remote learning](#) for Black, Hispanic, and Indigenous students (especially those from low-income households) have resulted in an **estimated tripling** of the pre-pandemic academic achievement gap in K-12 education. Furthermore, studies have shown that the pandemic is [most likely](#) to worsen mental health for youth with preexisting mental illness or higher vulnerability to mental illness, including those who have experienced maltreatment, trauma, and low socioeconomic status. At the college and university level, inequalities and inequities have [disproportionately affected](#) students and staff of color.

The pandemic's effects on mental health are unlikely to disappear anytime soon. A 2021 [study](#) conducted by the [Making Caring Common Project](#) at Harvard University reports that 61% of American teens have experienced "serious loneliness" since the start of the pandemic. Moreover, [early international surveys](#) suggest that the pandemic is likely to have dangerous, long-term mental health effects on school-age children and teens. In May 2020, over 8,000 middle and high school students in China completed surveys that incorporated the Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9) and the Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD-7) questionnaire. [These surveys](#) reported a sharp increase in anxiety and clinical depression symptoms among children and teens. Similarly, during the initial lockdown in Bangladesh, parents of children aged 5–15 [reported](#) high rates of moderate to



severe depression, anxiety, and sleep disorder symptoms among their children. And in Italy and Spain, both children and parents [reported](#) a rise in stress levels, with parental stress worsening behavioral and emotional symptoms among children. Based on these surveys and [research](#) on loneliness and social isolation, experts predict that the effects of the pandemic could have negative consequences for the mental health of young people for years to come. However, with sufficient mental health support and overall adjustments to educational practices, **schools have a unique opportunity to help mitigate these adverse outcomes.**

Many school districts have already begun work to address the mental health crisis among teens, and those that had already taken measures have ramped up their efforts. In fact, since January 1, 2021, [Alabama](#), [Alaska](#), [Arizona](#), [Connecticut](#), [Hawaii](#), [Illinois](#), [Indiana](#), [Massachusetts](#), [Minnesota](#), [Mississippi](#), [New York](#), [Oklahoma](#), [Oregon](#), [South Carolina](#), [Texas](#), and [Tennessee](#) have introduced bills to launch or expand funding for preventative mental health measures, including social and emotional learning ([SEL](#)) curricula and trauma-informed training in public schools. Additionally, [New Jersey](#) and [Vermont](#) have officially named “SEL Days” in March to promote the teaching and awareness of social and emotional learning among educators, institutions, and communities.

However, finding and funding real solutions to the youth mental health crisis will not be simple. Given the complexity and severity of the situation, school districts face difficult choices regarding how to allocate resources to support their students and communities through rapid social and educational transitions. Fortunately, Congress has passed a number of acts that give schools additional financial resources and options for funding programs that support student well-being.

## 2

# Building a Plan: How to Fund Mental Health and SEL Support in 2021

The US Congress has passed two historic bills to address the pandemic's effect on the educational system. In addition to provisions made by the 2020 [CARES Act](#), Congress recently passed [The American Rescue Plan Act of 2021](#), which includes the largest education stimulus in US history. The American Rescue Plan (ARP) allocates approximately \$168 billion of the national budget to K-12 and higher education for addressing lost learning, educator wellness and stability, and comprehensive school reopening plans.

The ARP grants the vast majority of total funding, \$123 billion, to public K-12 schools for plans that address learning loss and the transition back to in-person learning. It gives another \$2.75 billion to private schools to do the same. However, state education agencies have authority over a portion of the funds. These agencies may hold about 10% of total funds and are required to spend at least 5% on learning loss, 1% on afterschool programs, and 1% on summer learning. The rest goes directly to districts. Additionally, K-12 schools will receive \$10 billion from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) for COVID-19 screening tests for students, staff, and teachers.

The American Rescue Plan requires that at least 20% of funds be used to address learning lost due to the pandemic and that schools make public plans for reopening campuses. It clarifies that these plans must address students' academic, social, and emotional needs. In order to meet student needs, the ARP [explicitly](#) recommends the use of funds for "providing mental health services and supports."

The CARES and ARP Acts make further provisions for institutions of higher education

to support pre-authorized [activities](#), including developing mental health services and supports and creating additional programs to address needs associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. They also set aside funds to support specific high-needs groups. These provisions are outlined below.

**\$40 billion** for higher education, most going to public/non-profit colleges and vocational programs. Additional support for institutions serving historically marginalized groups.

**\$2.75 billion** for governors to allocate to private schools

**\$1 billion** for national service programs that support response and recovery

**\$7.2 billion** for the [E-rate program](#), which expands Internet connection for homes and libraries

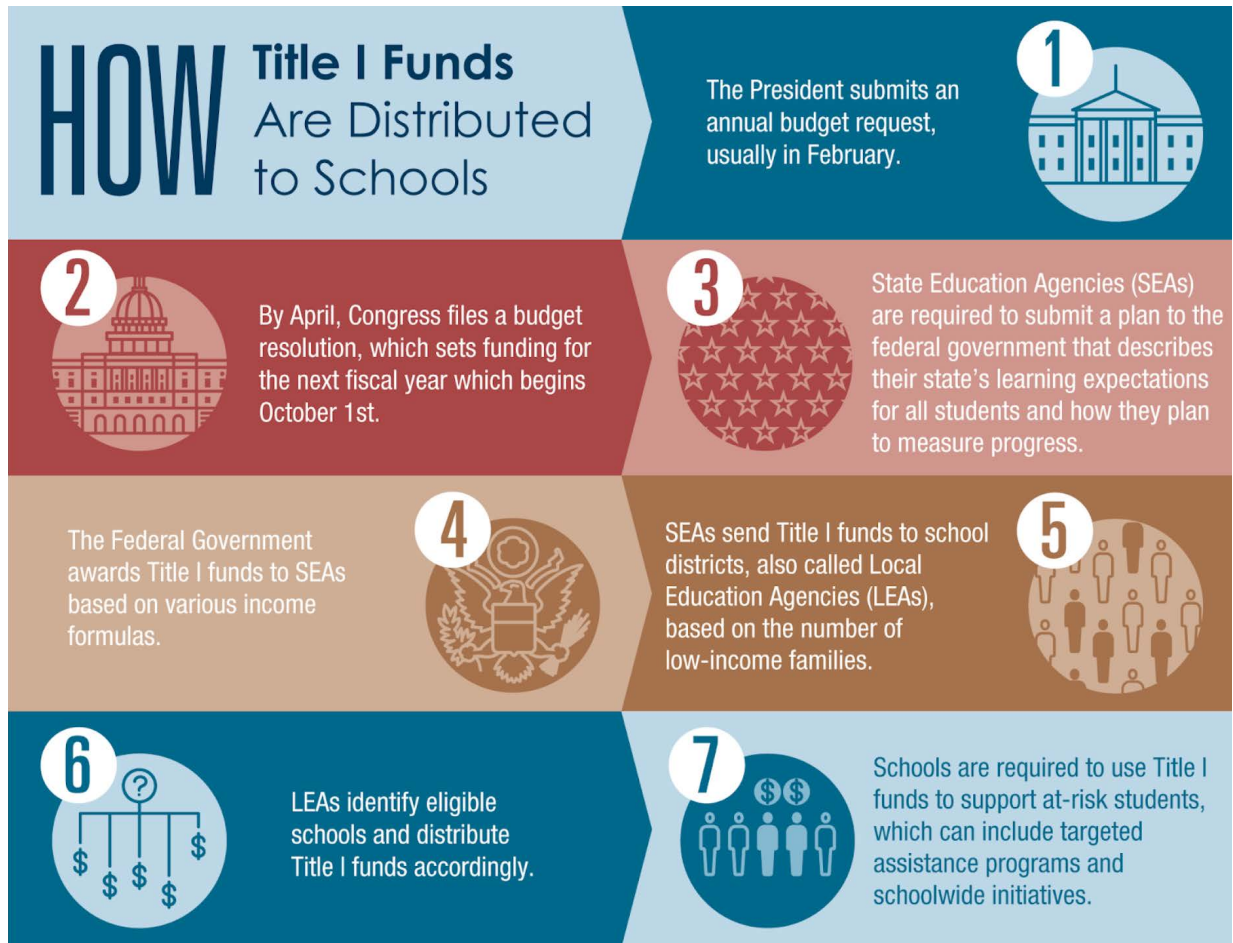
**\$3 billion** of additional funding in support of students with disabilities

**\$800 million** for education and wraparound services for students experiencing homelessness

[As of](#) March 24, 2021, \$81 billion of total ARP funding has been available for K-12 schools to spend on drafting and implementing reopening plans. The remaining third of funding will become available once schools submit their plans.

K-12 education funds from the CARES Act and the ARP will be distributed according to [Title I](#) funding formulas. Title I recognizes that it requires more educational resources to meet the needs of students living in poverty and therefore prioritizes funds for schools with the greatest financial need. [Four formulas](#) determine how much grant money schools are allocated per student, based on the percentage of students living in poverty and—in the case of the most targeted formula—how the school’s state has allocated education funding. These formulas, listed from least to most restrictive, are as follows: The Basic Grant Formula, The Concentration Grant Formula, The Targeted Assistance Grant Formula, and The Education Finance Grant Incentive Formula.





[Source](#)

### Basic Grants

School districts with at least 10 students and 2% of the student body living below the poverty line will receive Basic Grants. Most districts nationwide, even very affluent ones, will receive funding through this formula. Historically, around 45% of Title I funds have been awarded as Basic Grants.

### Concentration Grants

To qualify for Concentration Grants, districts need to have at least 15% of the student body or 6,500 students living below the poverty line. These grants are given in addition to Basic Grants, and in the fiscal year 2014, they accounted for 23% of Title I funds.

### *Targeted Assistance Grants*

While both Basic Grants and Concentration Grants give the same amount of money for each child living in poverty, Targeted Assistance Grants offer a higher percentage of Title I funds based on the number of qualifying children in a district. So, the higher the percentage of children in poverty, the more Targeted funds the district receives per child. In recent years, roughly 9% of grant money has been distributed according to the Targeted Assistance formula.

### *The Education Finance Grant Incentive*

In addition to Basic, Concentration, and Targeted grants, districts are also eligible to receive funds through the Education Finance Grant Incentive (EFGI) formula. The EFGI formula is the most restrictive of the four and prioritizes funding for two categories of school districts: districts in states that have met “good finance” criteria by equitably distributing state funds and resources to education, and districts in states that have not met “good finance” criteria, but serve a high percentage of students in poverty. According to recent measures, about 23% of Title I funding is distributed through the EFGI formula.

### *How Schools May Choose to Use Relief Funds*

The majority of federal relief funding determined by Title I will go directly to districts to use as they see fit. Districts have full discretion to use this funding for any resource or activity allowed by education policy. Outlined below are some of the activities and resources on which districts may choose to spend their relief funding.

Coordination with local, state, tribal or other entities to help slow the spread of Covid-19

#### **Mental health support services**

After-school and summer learning programs

School facility upgrades, especially HVAC systems, to help slow the spread of Covid-19

Resources for principals to address Covid-19 at their school sites

Hardware and software needed for remote and hybrid learning

Curriculum and programming to help address learning loss, particularly among students living in poverty, learning English, living in foster care, experiencing homelessness, or living with disabilities

District preparedness supports

School re-closure planning

Researched approaches to address learning loss, including assessments and distance learning equipment

Personal protective equipment (PPE) and cleaning/sanitation supplies

Staff training on proper use of PPE and best practices for sanitation

Educational leaders must now decide how relief funds will be allocated across their districts, weighing the needs of district and school personnel as well as those of students and families.



# 3

## Addressing the Adolescent Mental Health Crisis

District and university leaders have a number of options for supporting student mental health. Some of these options can be implemented relatively easily with little to no funds or adjustments to school schedules. These may involve offering after school training for students, staff, and/or families or adjusting attendance policies to make provisions for students to access off-campus services during the school day. However, to fully address current mental health challenges, many schools will likely need to integrate mental health support into their curriculum. This, in turn, raises questions of how to best incorporate these supports within the school day—reevaluating busy schedules to make the much-needed time.

To be clear, creating and/or altering master schedules that maximize student learning and teacher planning is a complex task. But to make well-informed decisions in time for the fall, education leaders will need to figure out how to fit mental health supports into the existing structures of their school day.

The transformational [benefits](#) of doing this hard work are clear. While an estimated 50% or more of schools already have blocks of time set aside for advisory, homeroom, freshman/senior seminar, health class, or similar programs that could be used to address mental health, many schools do not. For those that do, these blocks of time are often [underutilized](#).

Furthermore, while teachers may be aware of the importance of supporting the mental health of students, they already face a long list of important responsibilities. Most lack the time, resources, and training to independently create or implement mental health solutions in addition to their hefty workloads.





# 4

## SEL in the Context of Reopening Schools

At its core, SEL promotes the development of five core competencies: **self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, relationships skills**, and **social awareness**. These competencies can be taught explicitly through curricula and reinforced by campus culture and policies as well as afterschool and supplementary programming.



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For SEL and mental health initiatives to succeed, they must be intertwined with a broader effort to transform how schooling works. They cannot be treated as “nice to have” addenda to academic curricula. The COVID-19 crisis has caused significant turmoil in schools, but it has also provided the opportunity to rethink how schools operate.

Since mandatory schooling began a century ago, there has never been such a tremendous interruption of the educational system as the one caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, crises hold great potential for change: a moment of transformation—a moment in which it is recognized that a decisive intervention can and must be made. Instead of trying to go back to normal, educators can use this crisis to effect change in schools, elevating SEL and student well-being.

Overall, [prioritizing SEL](#), teacher well-being, and student-teacher relationships can make schools more supportive of their students and staff. Additionally, allowing greater autonomy for students and teachers (including less mandated testing) supports intrinsic motivation for learning and promotes more authentic development.

As schools reopen and consider the possibility of what learning might look like going forward, they have a once in a lifetime opportunity to make an enormous positive impact on student mental health. With high school students gaining independence and beginning to contemplate the future, schools can and should do more to promote individual purpose and support student mental health. In doing so, they can help students uncover their own strengths—and figure out how they can use those strengths to build a fulfilling life and give back to those around them.

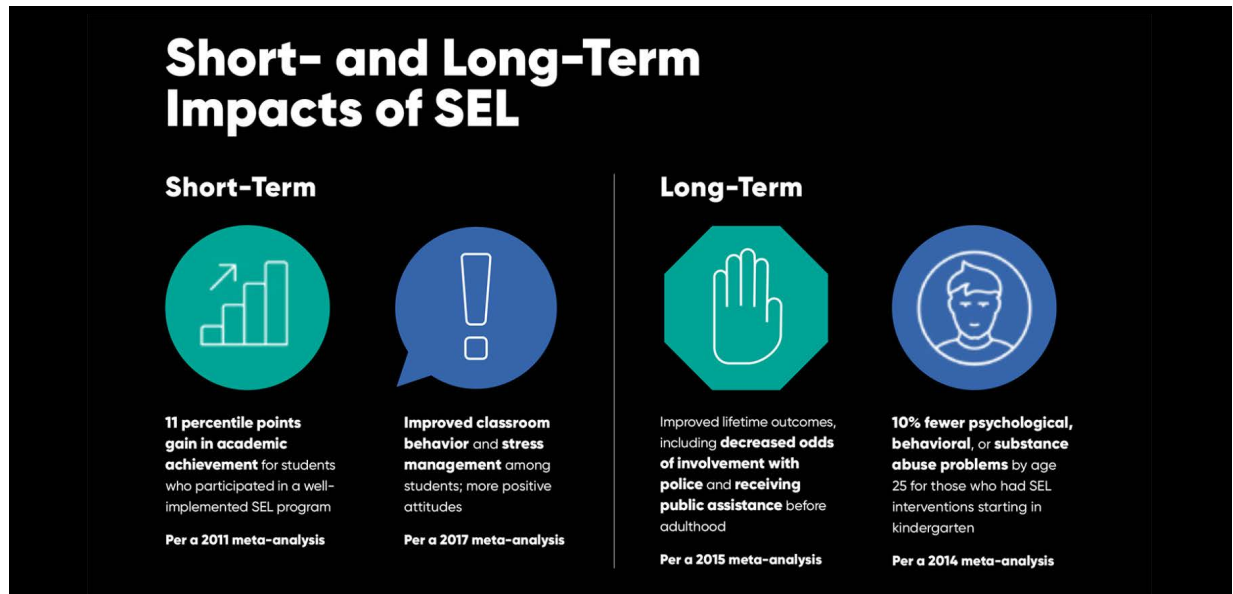
# 5

## The Growing Need for Comprehensive SEL

Students are struggling, and schools have the responsibility to help. School psychologists are stretched thin and unable to have enough impact on their own. Despite the [American School Counselor Association recommendation](#) of a 250:1 counselor-to-student ratio, the average [school psychologist has around 1200 students on their caseload](#) and, in some areas, well over 2000. As a result, psychologists are able to tend to little more than IEP meetings and the most severe mental health crises. A comprehensive, equitable approach to supporting the emotional well-being of students is long overdue, including both the provision of clinical services when needed and serious efforts aimed at mental health education and crisis prevention.

In order to support students' mental health, schools must incorporate a public health approach to make mental health part of the fabric of their institutions. Schools must begin their efforts to address students' mental health by training teachers, staff, and administrators to recognize signs of struggle, emotional distress, social isolation, and trauma. By doing so, K-12 schools will be better positioned to address and/or prevent mental health struggles.

In addition to ensuring school teachers and staff are well-educated on mental health and its impact on student learning, one major step schools can take to address mental health is to adopt and implement [culturally responsive](#) social and emotional curricula. [A meta-analysis](#) of 213 K-12 schools nationwide has revealed that **students from schools with dedicated SEL programs demonstrate significantly improved emotional awareness, healthier relationships, and stronger academic performance—and show significantly lower rates of anxiety, behavioral problems, and substance abuse.**



[Source](#)

Of course, students' needs change with age, and schools' approaches to mental health will vary. So far, adoption of SEL has been fairly successful at the elementary school level. And though principals and district administrators of middle and high schools [have expressed](#) a commitment to offering social and emotional learning programs on their campuses, most do not have any set SEL curricula. Meanwhile, many colleges are [just beginning](#) to officially acknowledge the importance of SEL and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) at their institutions. At all levels, schools can and should do more to introduce serious efforts to support mental health, including adjustments to school-wide practices, changes to classroom curricula and structures, and creation of (additional) extra-curricular or supplemental supports.

The US Department of Education (DOE) has [recognized](#) that "SEL can encourage self-awareness and mindfulness, which may ultimately translate to more thoughtful and engaged citizens," and has named **SEL as a key component to supporting students through the COVID-19 pandemic and back into the classroom**. It encourages the use of SEL curricula that incorporate research and action on social issues, which can empower and uplift students with historically marginalized identities, including students of color, students with disabilities, and students who identify as LGBTQIA. The DOE has also acknowledged that, in order to support the development of foundational skills, social and emotional learning must engage students in conversations about race and diversity.

Years of research and observations by the [Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning](#) (CASEL) and the [American Psychological Association](#) have also demonstrated that inclusive, culturally responsive SEL instruction can produce dramatic results for improving students' mental health around the country. As part of comprehensive, [whole-child](#) approaches to reopening schools that promote not just academic achievement but overall success, schools need to consider social and emotional learning as a through-line of their curricular and programmatic plans.



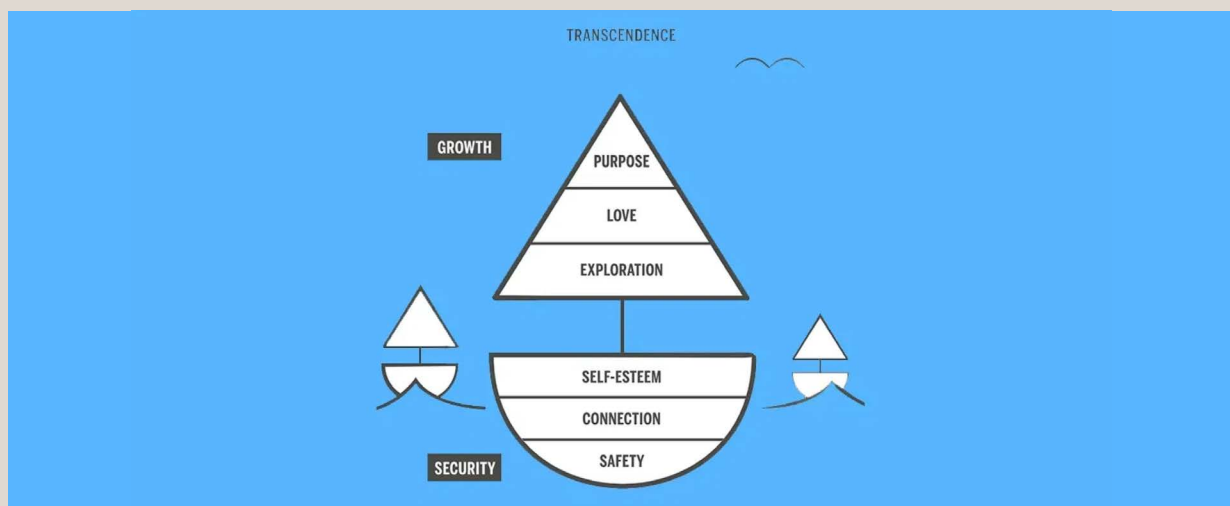


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## 6

# Authentic Belonging & Purpose Can Drive Student Progress

Middle and high school are ideal times for healthy human development. Author and cognitive scientist at the University of Columbia, [Scott Barry Kaufman](#), imagines healthy human development as a boat supported and driven by basic needs and powered by higher psychological and self-fulfillment needs, as illustrated below.



Source, Illustration by [Andy Ogden](#).

Drawing on Dr. Kaufman's work, schools can support students in building strong foundations by helping them find a sense of **belonging**. This is a key developmental task in early adolescence and must therefore be the focus of middle school SEL and mental health programs. In later adolescence, high schools must power students' progress by guiding them toward articulating and defending a sense of **purpose**.



[Project Wayfinder](#), born out of the design thinking institute the [Stanford d.school](#), addresses the shortage of quality SEL curricula at the middle and high school levels. Their curriculum developers have created a three-year series on [Belonging](#) for middle and early high schoolers that includes over 60 hours of in-class programming and additional activities, discussion topics, and project ideas to deepen learning. Together with the [Purpose](#) series, the high school Wayfinder curriculum includes 100 lessons that are easily implementable by teachers over a four-year high school experience. Each curriculum is designed to be delivered in class by a trained teacher. Project Wayfinder's summative and formative student surveys have shown that **students who complete the Belonging and Purpose curricula are four times more likely to feel optimistic about their future.**

## BELONGING CURRICULUM // Grades 6-9



### BELONGING 1: SELF

Understanding, valuing,  
and accepting ourselves

Who am I? What do I love?  
How can I be comfortable with who I am?  
How can I like myself?  
How can I achieve what I want to?  
How can I be with hard emotions?  
How can I care for myself?  
How can I be kind to myself?



### BELONGING 2: COMMUNITY

Understanding, valuing,  
and accepting each other

Who are my friends?  
What support do I have and need?  
How can I connect beyond labels?  
How can I recognize my biases?  
How can I meet new people?  
What and who am I grateful for?  
How can I connect to places and nature?



### BELONGING 3: ACTION

Proactively building  
belonging in our lives

How can I challenge myself and grow?  
How can I build new, healthy habits?  
How can I have difficult conversations?  
How can I build deeper relationships?  
How can I open myself up more to others?  
How can I be an upstander?  
How can we equitable communities?

## PURPOSE CURRICULUM // Grades 10-12



### PURPOSE 1: SELF Grade 10

Uncovering who we are  
+ the gifts we have to offer

Who am I? What is my story?  
How does my identity change in context?  
What do I value? What brings me joy?  
What are my strengths?  
How can I use my strengths to help others?  
What stories am I telling myself?  
How can I grow from challenges?



### PURPOSE 2: COMMUNITY Grade 11

Exploring the world's needs  
+ how we can contribute

How am I connected to the world?  
What and who do I care about?  
How am I shaped by the world around me?  
How am I already making an impact?  
What needs do I care about?  
What matters to me and why do I care?  
How can I contribute to others?



### PURPOSE 3: ACTION Grade 12

Learning skills to navigate  
our lives with purpose

How can I make purposeful decisions?  
How can I stay connected to my purpose?  
How can I achieve my goals?  
How does my identity impact my journey?  
How can I connect to a network of people?  
How can I reach out to new people for help?  
How can I deal with uncertainty + change?

These curricula are evidence-based, and rooted in the research of a number of leading scholars in the field—experts like Dr. Bill Damon and Dr. Heather Malin of the [Stanford Center on Adolescence](#) and Dr. Kendall Cotton Bronk of the Adolescent Moral Development Lab at Claremont Graduate University.

### *Belonging in Early Adolescence*

Middle school is a time of significant developmental transitions: biologically, socially, and emotionally. As such, it is the perfect time for educators to help students find a sense of belonging.

Project Wayfinder’s three-year curriculum on belonging defines the word as building a meaningful foundation through connection with the self and with others. [Research](#) has demonstrated that students **who lack a sense of belonging** are at an elevated risk of mental illness, psychological distress, low self-esteem, poor physical health, and feelings of loneliness and hopelessness. On the other hand, young people who feel they belong have been shown to have higher levels of self-esteem and self-efficacy, better stress management, stronger relationships, higher levels of motivation and achievement, and greater feelings of satisfaction, happiness, and optimism.

Project Wayfinder works closely with tens of thousands of these students to better understand the modern student experience and gather feedback on what works. Some students express mostly positive feelings toward school. Among those who do, the overwhelming commonality is a strong connection to one or more teachers. Students who voice negative feelings about school report feeling bullied, and feel unable to safely be their true selves. One voiced the theme of these complaints succinctly, saying simply, “I don’t feel connected to my peers.”

#### **STUDENT REFLECTIONS ON BELONGING**

“I don’t feel like I can be  
**authentically me**”

“I got **bullied** ‘cause  
I have a Samsung  
phone and not an  
iPhone”

“I **don’t feel connected**  
to my peers”

“I don’t feel  
connected to **my**  
**teachers**”

“I don’t want to go to  
school ‘cause I have  
a zit on my face and  
**I’ll get teased**”

“I don’t know who  
I go to when I’m  
**struggling**”



**An Opportune Moment**

By using SEL curricula to enable students to find and nurture a strong sense of belonging, educators can support young people in promoting empathy for others, building a strong community and a better understanding of themselves, their emotions, and their personal values. This is the key developmental task to be accomplished in early adolescence.

*Purpose in Later Adolescence*

[Dr. Bill Damon](#) at the Stanford Center on Adolescence defines purpose as “a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at the same time meaningful to the self and consequential for the world beyond the self.” Implemented at the high school level, purpose learning holds the potential to support students’ lifelong wellness and to help them define and achieve personal success.

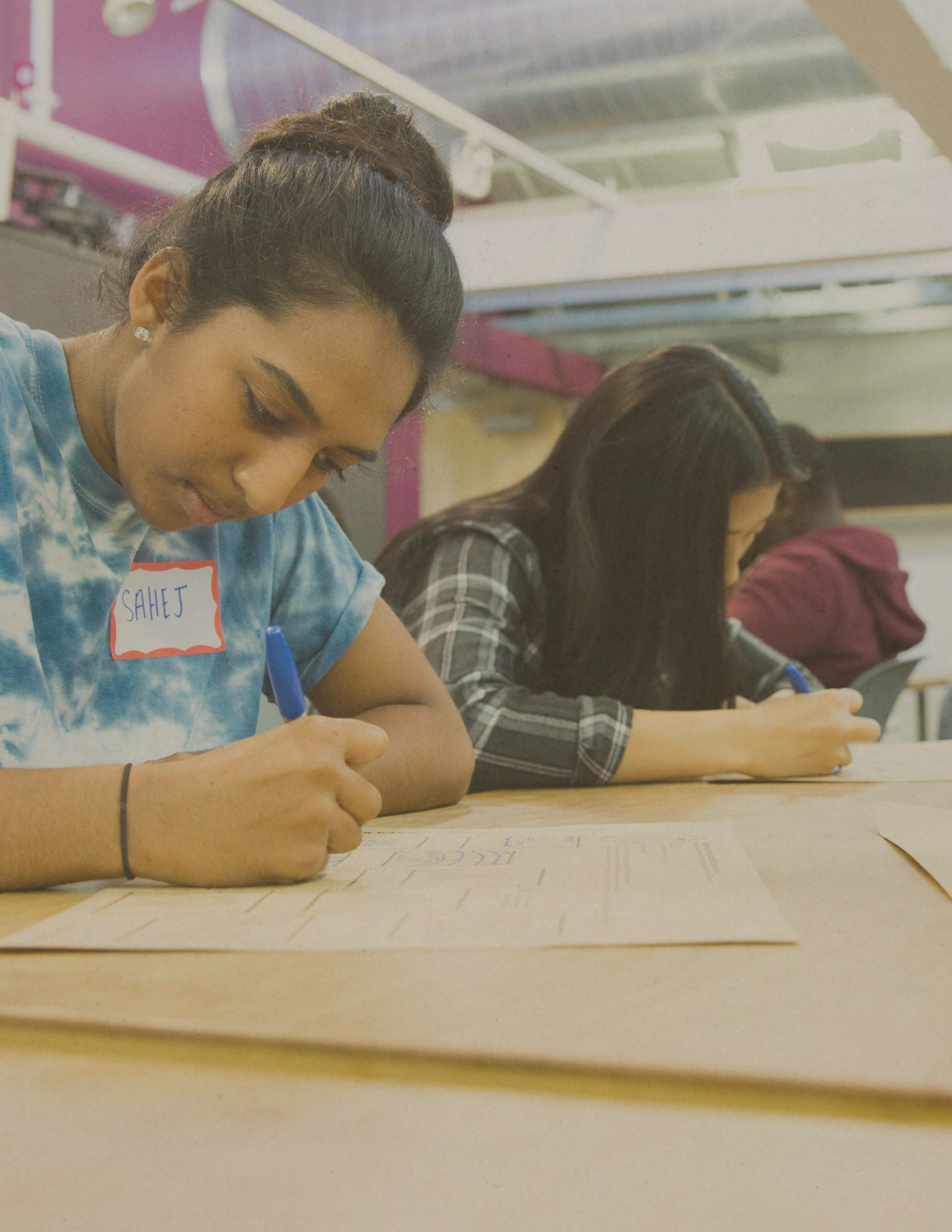
In addition to gathering students’ thoughts on belonging, Project Wayfinder has also uncovered a number of barriers students face to feeling a sense of purpose. Students’ insights point to external and internal pressure to succeed, overwhelm, and a general lack of understanding of learning and direction.

STUDENT REFLECTIONS ON PURPOSE	“I’ve <b>lost hope</b> that school can be fun”	“I <b>don’t know why</b> I’m learning any of this”
	“I don’t know who I want to be vs. who I’m <b>supposed to be</b> ”	“My parents and teachers put so much <b>pressure</b> on me”
	“You know like in <b>factories</b> where it’s just the same thing all day, every day? That’s what it’s like”	“My friends come to me when they’re feeling suicidal. I’m <b>not a therapist!</b> ”

[Research](#) has shown that purposefulness fosters positive [identity formation](#) and healthy attitudes toward [diversity](#). Young people who feel purposeful also demonstrate lower levels of [antisocial behavior and bullying](#) and a lower likelihood of engaging in [risky behaviors](#). Purposefulness is also a key determinant of academic success in high school and beyond. Students with a sense of purpose in their work tend to have stronger [academic engagement](#), and stronger [self-regulation](#). Studies show that purposeful, engaged, and self-regulating students also achieve higher Grade Point Averages overall.

The benefits of purpose continue long past high school years. Individuals who seek purpose report greater [happiness](#), [psychological wellness](#), [resilience](#), [hope](#), and overall life [satisfaction](#). Purposeful adults also tend to have better physical health and [longer lifespans](#), with lower risk of Alzheimer's disease, heart attack, and stroke. Experts have further [suggested](#) that the earlier a person determines their sense of purpose, the earlier they are able to enjoy such benefits. Laurence Steinberg, a leader in the field in childhood and adolescent psychology, [maintains](#) that the teenage years are among the last significant chances for adults to help young people forge healthy, meaningful paths in life.

Kendall Cotton Bronk, author and Associate Professor of Psychology at Claremont Graduate University, [states](#) that approximately **one fifth of high school students (and one third of college students) feel that they are living lives of purpose**. But by modeling purpose, focusing on strengths, encouraging outreach, fostering gratitude, and centering the bigger picture, adult mentors can make a huge impact, helping young people form personally meaningful goals and live purposeful lives.





# 7

## Implementation of Mental Health Supports and SEL in Middle Schools

Adolescence begins when most students enter middle school, ushering in a time of rapid brain [restructuring and development](#) rivaled only by the early childhood years. Neuroscience research shows that these brain changes can lead to difficulties with self-regulation, heightened emotional volatility, increased awareness of and sensitivity to others' emotions and to social dynamics, and greater reward-seeking and pleasure-seeking behavior, particularly around peers. These changes help to explain why middle school can be such a challenging time.

The incorporation of a high-quality social and emotional learning curriculum supports the core developmental needs of middle schoolers and helps them to become more effective students. As they experience rapid neurological growth, middle schoolers become intensely curious about their emotional lives, their evolving identity, and their peer relationships. SEL curricula that speak to these interests tap into existing motivation, offering tools to manage emotional volatility, make better choices in peer relationships, and improve self-regulation abilities.

High-quality SEL programs also address the pervasive decline in middle schoolers' academic engagement, learning, and connection to their school. SEL delivered by trained school staff provides both the skills and [developmental relationships](#) necessary to increase student success and protect against the greater mental health risks associated with adolescence.

The abundance of research on SEL has led many middle schools to publicly acknowledge



SEL's importance, even placing social and emotional learning goals on a par with academic ones. Yet practice lags behind, with most middle schools lacking the foundations to implement SEL effectively.

So, how can middle school become a place of rich social and emotional learning? There are several considerations:

**Teacher Development:** The most important task in improving student mental health and incorporating SEL in middle school is teacher education. At present, few teachers have been trained in or feel prepared to teach social-emotional skills. To develop comfort and mastery in this area, teachers need access to curricula, training opportunities, and ongoing communities of practice both within and beyond their schools. Ultimately, education in SEL practices provides teachers a toolset for forming mentor-like relationships during advisory period and helps them offer more effective academic instruction.

**Elevation of Teacher Leaders:** There are already some teachers whose interest in social and emotional learning has made them trusted, informal mentors to students or even colleagues at their schools. These teachers could be offered SEL implementation leadership roles and given the time and resources to share their skills with fellow teachers. Relatively minor changes, like increases in prep time, small professional development stipends, and availability for peer-to-peer coaching, can make these in-house experts effective SEL leaders within a school and increase teacher buy-in.

**Advisory:** Advisory periods, which are commonplace in middle schools, are commonly used for quiet study or administrative announcements. However, they are the most opportune time for SEL in most middle schools. Schools without advisory periods can use “club” or study hall time as a substitute.

**Improved SEL Curricula:** An effective SEL curriculum for middle schoolers taps into their curiosity about peers by using conversation, skits, games, and other interpersonal approaches. It should speak to their curiosity about identity as it develops along multiple lines, to their intensifying emotional lives, and to their challenges in understanding healthy relationships. It should focus on the fundamental developmental need of belonging, without which middle schoolers often feel unsafe and unable to see their full potential.

**Shift in Disciplinary Approach:** Disciplinary incidents can be social-emotional signals. They can indicate gaps in social-emotional skills (such as emotional

regulation or peer conflict resolution), and are prime SEL teaching opportunities. In addition, because middle school is a key time for identity formation, how a student experiences discipline will impact their sense of self. Bringing an SEL lens to disciplinary incidents will decrease the chance that students feel punished or excluded by the school while pointing to specific ways that SEL skill gaps can be addressed in those who struggle most.

Middle school can and should be a time of engagement, in which students develop positive relationships with teachers and other adults at school as they seek new adult inspiration beyond their family systems. With effective SEL programs in place, middle schools can minimize the distractions that may result from unresolved social or emotional issues. These programs also provide the opportunity for further cognitive development, which in turn enables deeper learning. Seen this way, middle school SEL can build the habits that enable a successful transition to high school, including a secure sense of belonging, the ability to regulate emotions, and the knowledge to understand and manage interpersonal relationships.



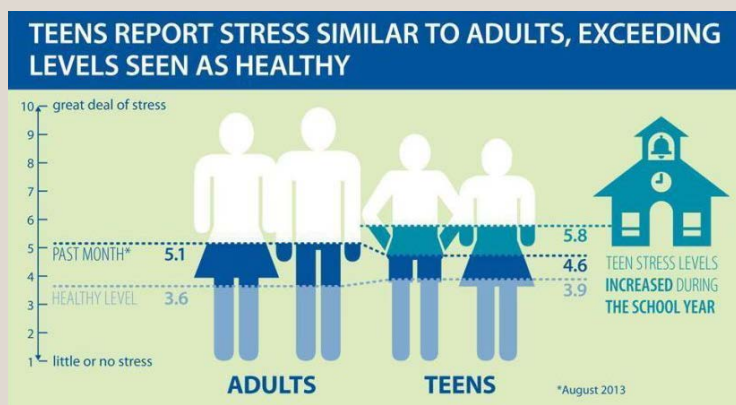




## 8


# Implementation of Mental Health Supports and SEL in High Schools

Reports of anxiety and depression are at an [all-time high](#) among US teens. The National Institute of Health estimates that roughly [one third](#) of high school-age teens will experience an anxiety disorder, and the [Child Mind Institute](#) estimates 14.3% of teens suffer from clinical depression. Research shows that high school students who suffer from depression are [twice as likely](#) to drop out before graduation and [20 times as likely](#) to commit suicide. A study by the American Psychological Association also notes that high school students are the [single most stressed out](#) demographic in the US while school is in session. A significant percentage of this population self-reports feeling depressed, overwhelmed, or exhausted as a result. Consequently, the need for mental health supports and services and the integration of social emotional learning at the high school level is greater than ever.



[Source](#)



A woman with curly hair, wearing a light blue button-down shirt, is sitting and talking to a group of students. The students are sitting on the floor, and their legs and feet are visible in the foreground. The background is a plain wall with a window.

The [Jed Foundation](#) has been helping with this important work for years, providing transformational mental health planning, programming, and consulting services to hundreds of American colleges and high schools. Their [Comprehensive Approach](#) to mental health promotion and suicide prevention is a systematic public health strategy that schools can use to assess and strengthen policies, programs, and systems to support emotional well-being and prevent suicide. It focuses on seven key domains: developing life skills, promoting a positive school climate, building social connectedness, encouraging help-seeking behaviors, improving recognition of the signs of distress, ensuring student access to effective mental health treatment, and establishing crisis management procedures.

The combination of this overarching framework with local, school-based knowledge is crucial. As such, school districts may benefit from increased strategic planning efforts and technical assistance around mental health and suicide prevention.

JED's school-based programs are considered best practice in the field and its Comprehensive Approach is consistent with recommendations from the [Suicide Prevention Resource Center](#), [CDC](#), [National Academies of Sciences](#), [Mental Health Technology Transfer Center Network](#), and the [National Center for School Mental Health](#), among others. Program [impact data](#) confirms significant improvements in school approach and student outcomes at participating schools.

### *Key Challenges of High School SEL Implementation*

Unfortunately, in addition to some of the struggles shared by middle school educators, high school administrators often encounter unique challenges while implementing new SEL programs. From Tim Taylor, the Executive Director of the Small School Districts' Association:

“SEL at the high school level is complex. It is often overlooked until there is a tragedy at the school. This fall, students will be coming back to school after a pandemic with lots of trauma-induced issues. High school leaders need to revamp their SEL approach and implement a quality program in order to successfully take on this challenge.”

Key challenges that high schools face when trying to integrate SEL curricula include:

**Insufficient Instructional Time:** The high school school day is tightly regulated and affords little time for SEL content. At elementary and middle schools, SEL is often interwoven into core content areas, but this is much harder (if not impossible) at the high school level.

**Lack of Student Engagement:** Studies show that high schoolers tend to be less engaged in SEL classwork than elementary level and middle schoolers. In fact, student engagement in all subjects is [lowest among high schoolers](#), and a majority of teens associate high school with feelings of [fatigue and boredom](#).

**College Admissions Pressure:** SEL courses are ungraded and do not play a role in the college admissions process. Consequently, students, parents, and teachers are generally less likely to prioritize these courses, despite their proven academic benefits.

**Lack of Teacher Training:** Like middle school teachers, high school teachers are trained and prepared to teach specific core content and elective subjects. Unfortunately, very few teacher education programs include a focus on SEL integration. At the high school level, teachers also face the additional pressure of preparing students for college. While some teachers may seem reluctant to incorporate SEL into their curricula, perceived resistance is often due to a lack of targeted training and ongoing support resources.

**Lack of Quality Curricula:** Many high school administrators have no preferred SEL curriculum—mainly because so few quality programs exist. As a result, teachers are often asked to develop and teach their own SEL courses in addition to their

other work. As a result, most high school SEL classes are scattered, not grounded in research, and/or largely unavailable to school districts lacking the time and resources to develop their own lessons.

### *Prioritizing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in High School SEL*

In its [ED COVID-19 Handbook](#) for the incorporation of SEL in schools, the US Department of Education highlights the importance of engaging students in “intentional conversations related to race and social emotional learning.” It recognizes that SEL grounded in equity can help historically marginalized student groups feel valued and seen by their schools and by the education system more broadly.

Project Wayfinder specifically aims to address the lack of strong curricular solutions with its *Purpose* series, which integrates life skills, career development, SEL, and DEI into one curriculum. According to Dr. Diann Kitamura, Superintendent of Santa Rosa City Schools:

The gaps our children are experiencing academically and social emotionally cannot be met with another checkbox SEL curriculum. It has to be interwoven with real world events, core classes, work around racial equity, and acknowledgment of the lived experiences of our students’ everyday lives. In other words, SEL cannot be another thing disconnected from everything else. It has to be done thoughtfully and wisely.

To that end, it is vital to acknowledge that SEL has had the least success among young men and students of color. In order to reach high school students equitably and effectively, high school SEL curricula must:

1. Connect and respond to real world events
2. Reflect the authentic experiences of our students, which clearly includes addressing racial inequity
3. Encourage and support meaningful action for the issues today’s students care about
4. Engage students holistically, to leave them feeling seen, heard, and valued

Research highlights the importance of considering all of the cultural contexts in which SEL is developed and taught at schools around the country. Young people need to have mentors in school with whom they identify, and educators need to be attuned to cultural differences in emotional expression and values. In discussing key emotional concepts in SEL, such as conflict resolution and gratitude, responsible programs should invite conversations about differences in approach, rather than assuming homogeneous experiences.

### *Bringing it All Together: Making SEL Work for High Schools*

Although high school clearly presents its own challenges to SEL integration, schools can take the following concrete steps to establish successful programming:

**Use Engaging, Real-World Curricula:** Too often, high schoolers disengage from SEL because it feels divorced from the real world. To succeed, SEL must be relevant, engaging, and real. During this past year, students have witnessed social, political, and racial upheaval. It is imperative that SEL curricula address these real-world events, how they have impacted students, and their influence on daily life. To be engaging, lessons must incorporate students' realities, including those from the past year.

**Rely on Well-Designed Lessons:** Most high school SEL curriculum was developed in the 1990's or early 2000's, when social media and the Internet were far less prevalent than they are today. But today's SEL programming must be as well-designed as attention-grabbing competitors such as Snapchat, TikTok, and Instagram to keep students engaged.

**Start with Personal Relationships:** Research definitively shows that a strong interpersonal connection between student and teacher is the key to effective SEL programming. Unfortunately, SEL programs often delve straight into content without first developing the relationship between student and teacher, but SEL curricula need to be grounded in relationships in order to succeed. At the end of the day, if a young person does not want to be mentored, no amount of mentorship will work. You need a genuine connection between the mentor and mentee for the relationship to succeed.





# 9

## SEL and Mental Health Support in College

Systems and practices in higher education differ significantly from those in elementary and secondary education, but research by the Society for the Teaching of Psychology, a division of the American Psychological Association, shows that post-secondary school students with greater social and emotional competence perform better and enjoy better mental health (just as in elementary and secondary education). While anxiety has been shown to be the most significant barrier to academic buoyancy and resilience, incorporation of SEL principles at the university level can help students manage anxious feelings and develop healthy coping behaviors.

Overall, developing a campus-wide culture of compassion and prioritizing programs, policies, and systems has the power to provide a mental health safety net for students. This includes cementing crisis management procedures, providing culturally competent access to mental health care, and promoting help-seeking behavior.

JED Campus is an initiative of The Jed Foundation that provides structure, recommendations, technical assistance, and long-term access to expert resources and support to help colleges and universities implement a comprehensive approach to supporting student mental health. Key elements include student and school-level data collection, strategic plan development, and reporting to provide transparency on impact and equity.

Integrating curricular, co-curricular, and extracurricular programming that supports student well-being alongside clinical and coaching services is indicated, particularly as it relates to belonging, purpose formation, and community building. As part of a comprehensive approach to mental health support integration, educators in higher ed can incorporate elements of SEL and meaningfully contribute to the mental well-being of their students.





# 10

## Moving Forward

In so many ways, this is a unique time in education. Schools are equipped with the information and resources they need to make a tremendous impact on student mental health as the nation emerges from the COVID-19 pandemic—and for years to come.

Trauma-informed practices, social and emotional learning curricula, and wraparound mental health services have proven effective in schools nationally and abroad. Though they take time, money, and resources to implement, research has shown they can be incredibly effective at scale.

Childhood and adolescence are times of great growth and great struggle. COVID-19 has only introduced new challenges. But the good news is that K-12 schools and colleges now have access to the SEL curricula, support services, and financial resources to make these crucial changes.



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