

Addressing Learning Loss by Supporting Student Mental Health in School Settings

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As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to affect families across Texas, children are showing increasing signs of distress, anxiety, grief, depression, and thoughts of suicide. These emotional reactions not only impact children's health and well-being, but their education, too. The student mental health and school safety laws passed in 2019 by the Texas Legislature can help prevent and address learning loss stemming from mental health concerns and help students heal from trauma, but it will take additional action from the Texas Legislature in 2021 to help school districts turn those laws into the successful practices that protect students from the harmful and long-lasting impacts of the pandemic on their education and well-being.

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Social-emotional and mental health concerns among children are rising – and they are getting in the way of student learning.

COVID-19 has created and exacerbated challenges for children throughout Texas. Millions of Texas families are facing food insecurity, housing challenges, loss of health coverage, and poverty due to job loss and lower incomes.¹ Students struggle with isolation, disappointment, and frustration as they continue to be separated from their friends, activities, and even their teachers. Families, teachers, and mental health providers are reporting increases in signs of distress, anxiety, grief, depression, and thoughts of suicide among students.

Data below offer a snapshot of the challenges children and families in Texas are experiencing during the pandemic.

¹Waco Herald Tribune (Jan. 1, 2021) [Ray Perryman: An economic perspective of compassion](#)

Families in Distress	
Food Insecurity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2.5 million households in Texas reported not having enough food to eat in November - double the reports made prior to the pandemic.² Households with children were most likely to report not having enough food to eat.³
Housing Insecurity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> As many as 1.66 million households in Texas are at risk of eviction.⁴ Families with children are especially at risk of losing their housing.
Employment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> More than 3.8 million Texans have applied for unemployment benefits since March.⁵
Mental Health Concerns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 13.3% of adults in the U.S. reported new or increased substance use as a way to manage stress due to the coronavirus.⁶ Reports of depression symptoms and serious psychological distress in the U.S. are triple the level measured in 2018.⁷
Health Coverage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An estimated 659,000 Texans became uninsured from February to May, 2020 as unemployment soared amid the COVID pandemic.⁸
COVID-19 Cases	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Two million confirmed Texas cases recorded as of early January 2021.
COVID-19 Deaths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 30,000 confirmed deaths in Texas as of early January 2021

² Texas Tribune (Dec. 7, 2020) [Texas food banks may be less equipped to help hungry households in the new year](#)

³ Texas Demographic Center. 2020. [Texas's Most Vulnerable Populations](#)

⁴ The Aspen Institute. Aug 2020. [The COVID-19 Eviction Crisis](#).

⁵ Texas Tribune (Dec. 7, 2020) [Texas food banks may be less equipped to help hungry households in the new year](#)

⁶ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2020) [Mental Health, Substance Use, and Suicidal Ideation During the COVID-19 Pandemic – United States, June 24–30, 2020](#).

⁷ Studies reported in "[The Surprising Mental Toll of COVID](#)" published in *Scientific American*, December 2020.

⁸ Families USA (2020). [The COVID-19 Pandemic and Resulting Economic Crash Have Caused the Greatest Health Insurance Losses in American History](#)

Children in Distress	
Social Isolation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Almost half - 47 percent - of public school students in Texas were not attending school on campus in January 2021.⁹
Emotional Concerns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nearly 4 in 10 parents of public school students in Texas reported issues with their child’s emotional health and well-being in the fall of 2020.¹⁰
Mental Health Concerns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Texas counseling clinics and hospitals report large increases in students seeking help for anxiety, depression and thoughts of suicide.¹¹

For this policy brief, we spoke with several educators, school support staff, and mental health providers who are working on the frontlines in Texas schools. Those interviews revealed major themes regarding the effect of the pandemic on students:¹²

- Students are struggling with disappointment, isolation, and grief over the losses they are experiencing. *“Being away from friends is devastating for some of them.”*
- Students are worried they may expose their grandparents, great-grandparents, or parents who have serious illnesses and are at-risk. *“Students are balancing fears of failing their classes with fears of the virus.”*
- There are a lot of students who are disengaged, even when they are showing up for remote classes. Others have stopped attending at all, including students who had been doing well academically until they were not. *“Kids are falling away. Something is going on that’s keeping them from engaging.”*
- The adults in students’ lives are stressed and overwhelmed, too – parents and caregivers, teachers, school counselors, and even school administrators. *“Families’ lives have turned into a tailspin. Teachers are being pushed to keep going like things are normal, but things are not normal.”*

All students are affected by the disruption caused by the pandemic— but students who were already marginalized are affected more. Students who struggle with social-emotional concerns have more difficulty concentrating on their schoolwork; they are less likely to persist when facing a challenge; and absent services and support, they are less likely to be successful in school. Groups

⁹ [Texas Public Schools COVID-19 Data](#) - State level data report for week ending Jan. 17
¹⁰ Raise Your Hand Texas. (2021). Perceptions in a Pandemic: Texans’ Support for Public Schools Grows
¹¹ Dec. 22, 2020 Texas Tribune article [As pandemic grinds on, Texas students increasingly feel alone and scared, and some are thinking about suicide](#)
¹² Based on conversations with members of the Social Emotional Learning Alliance of Texas (SEL4TX)

of students most at risk for struggling during the pandemic include those who had pre-existing mental health concerns, students living in poverty, students of color, and those with a prior history of trauma.

- Mental health concerns among school-aged children in Texas were prevalent and rising before the pandemic, with feelings of hopelessness, depression, suicide attempts, and suicide deaths all increasing in recent years.¹³
- Sixty percent of Texas public education students were identified as economically disadvantaged prior to the pandemic (2019-20 school year).¹⁴
- Sixty-five percent of Texas public education students were students of color in 2019-20 (12.6 percent Black and 52.8 percent Hispanic).¹⁵
- Nearly one in five children in Texas (19 percent) is believed to have had two more adverse childhood experiences prior to the pandemic.¹⁶ An estimated forty percent of children in Texas had experienced one or more adverse childhood experiences in 2018.¹⁷

The more challenges in a child’s life, the more likely the pandemic will have long-lasting negative effects on their education and well-being. When children are exposed to significant, prolonged, or multiple challenges, they can experience physiological changes in their brains and bodies that can lead to lifelong problems in learning, behavior, and physical and mental health. This means that children can continue to feel the negative effects of the pandemic even after the pandemic has ended.

Supporting the mental health of students in school will play an important role in addressing the “COVID slide” – and buffering students from future risk.

Educators are bracing for pandemic-caused learning loss among students, or the COVID-slide. The separations between teacher and student and reliance on technology that is not always available are widely recognized factors contributing to learning loss, but they are certainly not the only factors that are interfering with students’ education. The social-emotional concerns children are experiencing are known to cause problems with concentration, memory, motivation, and decision-making – which all affect their ability to learn.¹⁸

¹³ Texas Youth Risky Behavior Surveillance Survey (2017); HHSC (May 2020) [Report on Suicide and Suicide Prevention in Texas](#)

¹⁴ Texas Education Agency (2020) [Enrollment in Texas Public Schools 2019-20](#)

¹⁵ Texas Education Agency (2020) [Enrollment in Texas Public Schools 2019-20](#)

¹⁶ Child and Adolescent Health Measurement Initiative. [2018-2019 National Survey of Children’s Health \(NSCH\)](#) data query.

¹⁷ Child and Adolescent Health Measurement Initiative. [2018-2019 National Survey of Children’s Health \(NSCH\)](#) data query.

¹⁸ National Child Traumatic Stress Network. [Essential Elements of a Trauma Informed School](#)

Schools must address the root cause of a student’s learning loss, otherwise their interventions will not be effective. The issues underlying facing a student who, for example, is struggling academically after starting a new school where she doesn’t feel like she belongs after having to move in with relatives because her mother lost her job, will not be addressed using state-of-the-art instructional techniques or tutoring. Instead, she needs a school where intentional efforts are made to make all students feel safe and supported; where adults in the school recognize when a students may need a little bit of extra support, such as a daily check-in and check-out at the beginning and end of each school day to see how she is doing; and where, if the student needs more specialized help, teachers know how to connect the student and her parent to services.

Experts in both education and mental health promote the use of multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) to provide academic and behavioral support for all students based on their individual needs. This coordinated approach can be used even when students are attending school remotely to both prevent and address mental health concerns that affect student learning.¹⁹ Multi-tiered systems of support include:

- **Creating safe and supportive school climates** in which students feel valued, respected, and physically and psychologically safe and have caring and supportive relationships with students and school staff. A positive school climate is the product of a school’s attention to teaching and modeling behaviors that are expected; using positive behavior interventions, such as restorative practices, to address challenging behaviors; and encouraging and maintaining respectful, trusting, and caring relationships throughout the school community no matter the setting.²⁰
- **Helping students develop important skills that protect them from many of the risks created by the pandemic and other challenges in their lives.** This includes skills like managing emotions, establishing and maintaining positive relationships, making responsible decisions, and coping with challenges and stress in healthy ways.
- **Connecting students with mental health services in school or in the community.** Some students will require additional services and support to help them learn and heal. It’s important for adults within a school to recognize signs that students might need more help. Students who struggled before the pandemic are most susceptible and should receive targeted attention, but given the widespread challenges stemming from the pandemic, it’s important for schools to recognize students with no pre-existing concerns who are struggling, too.
- **Addressing student misbehavior through teaching, not punishment.** Problems often manifest in academic and behavior challenges, and it’s important that schools have

¹⁹ Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, (2020) [Returning to School After a Crisis: A Guide to Supporting States, Districts, Schools, Educators, and Students through a Multi-Tiered Systems of Support Framework during the 2020-2021 School Year](#)

²⁰ The National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments. [School Climate Improvement](#)

systems in place to identify students who are struggling and respond in ways that address underlying concerns. Traditional educational and discipline strategies will not help a student whose challenges are rooted in mental health or trauma. Schools with positive climates tend to use proactive, instructive, and restorative approaches to student misbehavior rather than traditional punitive discipline approaches that use negative consequences to address student misbehavior, such as taking away recess, suspension, and expulsion. Harsh, punitive, and inconsistent disciplinary practices are associated with negative school climates in which all students tend to feel less safe, connected, and supported and have poorer academic outcomes.²¹

Texans understand the important role mental health plays in student learning. A recent poll conducted by Raise Your Hand Texas found:²²

- Almost 7 out of 10 parents said it's extremely or very important for schools to “provide support for students’ and teachers’ emotional health and well-being “as part of COVID response. [emphasis added]
- The majority of Texans (64 percent) viewed a “lack of access to social-emotional and/or mental health support” as being a barrier to student learning among low income students and on the basis of race. Among Black respondents, the rate was even higher (81 percent). [emphasis added]

Schools will play a critical role in helping students recover from the challenges that were created or made worse by the pandemic – but they need the Texas Legislature’s help.

In 2019, the Texas Legislature passed SB 11 by Senator Larry Taylor and HB 18 and HB 19 by Representative Four Price, laws that require school districts to take a various steps to create safe and supportive learning environments and prevent and address mental health, trauma, substance use, and suicide concerns among students. These and other laws passed by the Texas Legislature in 2019 offer great promise in helping districts provide students with the conditions needed to promote student engagement and services to support students with mental health concerns both during and after the pandemic.

Key provisions of the 2019 laws include:

- Directing districts to provide students with safe and supportive learning environments that use multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) to address prevention and intervention of

²¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. [School Connectedness: Strategies for Increasing Protective Factors Among Youth](#).

²² Raise Your Hand Texas. (2021) [Perceptions in a Pandemic: Texans’ Support for Public Schools Grows](#)

mental health, trauma, substance use, and suicide concerns within school settings and support students returning to school following a mental health crisis.

- Establishing a School Safety Allotment that provides districts with a funding stream to support mental health programs and strategies, emergency preparedness, and facility safety.
- Requiring regional education service centers (ESCs) to develop inventories of mental health resources that are available to schools in their respective regions, including training and technical assistance services; school- or community-based prevention or intervention services; and sources of public and private funding that is available to help schools address the mental health of students.
- Requiring TEA to develop a Statewide Plan on Student Mental Health to increase the availability of effective school-based interventions and community referrals.

In 2019, the Legislature did not provide school districts with adequate resources to support the implementation of mental health-related provisions in SB 11 and HB 18. Inadequate infrastructure within the state to assist districts in implementing effective safe and supportive school strategies and a lack of funding for districts to help put safe and supportive school strategies into practice limit the impact SB 11 and HB 18 will have on supporting the mental health of students affected by the pandemic. District leaders, school support staff, and especially teachers don't have the time to figure these things out on their own. They need "push and play" resources they can use to support students while they are in school.

Below are steps the Texas Legislature can take this legislative session to help make sure schools in Texas have the tools and resources they need to ensure the social-emotional effects of the pandemic among students do not lead to long-term learning loss and mental health concerns.

Recommendations to the Texas Legislature

1. **COVID-19 response and relief efforts must include the use of school-based strategies that target the social-emotional and mental health needs of students.** At least ten other states used the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act to create or expand mental, behavioral, and social emotional services and supports.²³ State leaders in Texas should leverage existing and future federal COVID-19 relief funds to assist school leaders in planning for and implementing comprehensive safe and supportive school strategies that include mental health services and supports, including:

²³ Connecticut; Minnesota; Nebraska; New Jersey; New Mexico; North Carolina; Rhode Island; Tennessee; Utah; Vermont ([National Conference of State Legislatures' CARES Act Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund Tracker](#))

- a. **Direct TEA to include efforts targeted within its COVID-19 response efforts that address barriers to student learning associated with stress, anxiety, grief, and psychological distress related to COVID-19 and other adversities.** Addressing the negative social and emotional effects of the pandemic on student learning will complement and enhance the other interventions included in the agency's exceptional item request regarding "Ensuring Equitable Opportunities through Targeted Supports."
 - b. **Provide districts with enhanced guidance and technical assistance.** District leaders need guidance in developing schoolwide practices and procedures that are grounded in research to prevent short- and long-term learning loss among students due to social-emotional effects of the pandemic. While some districts have robust practices and procedures in place to support the mental health of their students, many others will find themselves in unfamiliar territory.
 - c. **Provide districts with funding to implement SB 11's safe and supportive school programs that provide for multi-tiered interventions that support student mental health.** Fund SB 11's Safe School Allotment for the 2022-2023 biennium and require districts to use at least 75 percent of the allotment to support SSSPs components targeting school climate, social and emotional aspects of student learning, and behavioral and mental health..
2. **Leverage the state's Economic Stabilization (Rainy Day) Fund and federal COVID-19 relief/recovery funds to provide school mental health infrastructure grants to districts to develop and implement comprehensive school mental health plans.** Just as the Legislature used the Economic Stabilization Fund (ESF) in SB 500 in 2019 to provide districts with school safety infrastructure grants the Legislature should use the ESF to provide school mental health infrastructure grants to districts seeking to develop and implement comprehensive plans to address the social, emotional, and behavioral needs of students using research-based practices, prioritizing districts located in under-resourced communities.
3. **Use SB 11's mental health resource inventories, statewide plan on student mental health, and behavior threat assessment data to guide future policymaking.** While delays in the reporting and/or releasing of information called for in SB 11 are understandable in light of the pandemic, the information will be critical in identifying how schools are responding to significant mental health and behavioral concerns among students and the resources that are available across the state to help schools address student mental health and provide safe and supportive school climates.

- 4. Support families to support students.** Housing insecurity, food insecurity, economic instability, violence, and lack of access to health care all threaten students' education. State leaders should provide a health insurance option to low-wage adults by accepting federal Medicaid expansion funding; fully fund health programs that support parents, such as Healthy Texas Women, Family Planning Program, and community-based mental health and substance use treatment and recovery programs; and invest in Prevention and Early Intervention (PEI) programs and leverage federal funding available under the 2018 Family First Prevention Services Act.

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