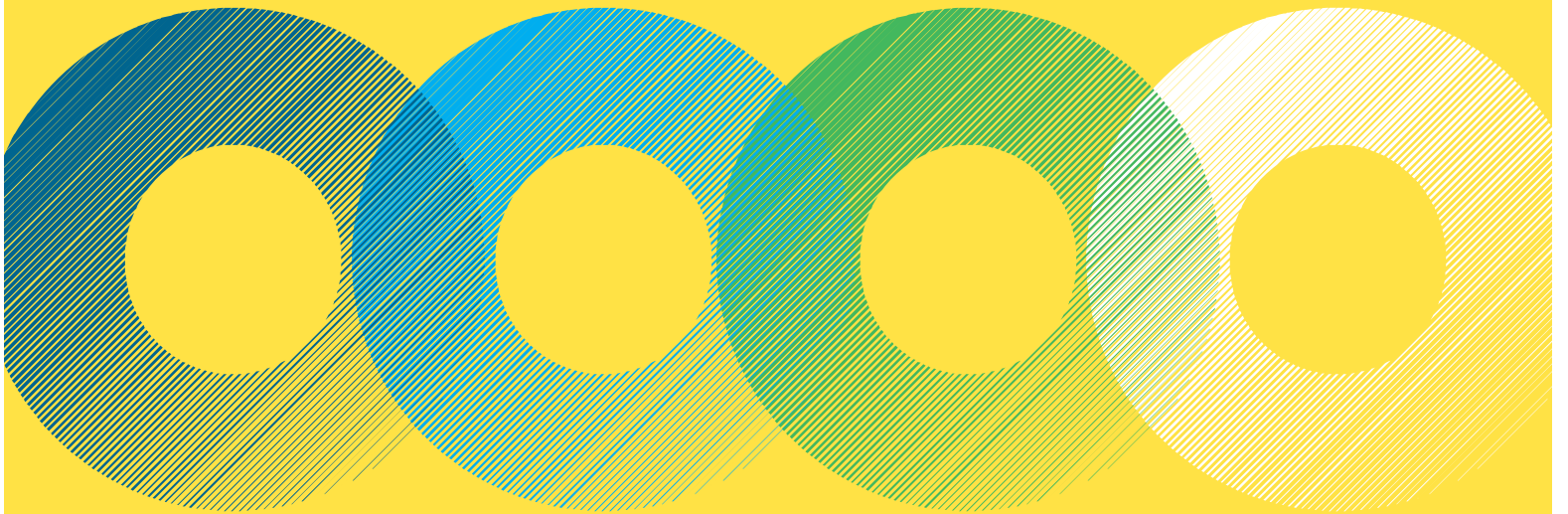


2023-2024 EDUCATION GUIDE

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Social Belonging and
Academic Engagement



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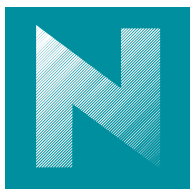
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Mental Health

Creating a sense of **IDENTITY**



by **RICK BRANSON, ED.D.**, *Executive Director* ➤ Connecticut Association of Independent Schools (CAIS)



urturing student mental and emotional health is rapidly becoming one of the most important issues educators are facing. Emerging from

the Covid-19 pandemic, schools have quickly recognized and are developing responses to the increasing challenges regarding student mental and emotional health.

The data on this crisis is compelling coming from both the CDC Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) (2011-2021) as well as the Community and Belonging Survey of Students (2022). In addition, United Educators, which provides liability insurance and other products to 1,600 universities and independent K-12

schools, reported in its recent 2022 Top Risks Report that student mental health ranks seventh and made the list for the first time.

Drawing from these and other data sources, it is clear the mental and emotional health of students is a significant concern for both schools and parents. Independent schools are actively engaging in the work to support both students and parents as they navigate this issue.

Debra Wilson, President of the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS), sees this across the independent school spectrum. “I think we are seeing students truly struggle with living healthy lives right now, and I think independent schools are uniquely situated to help students and families

tackle issues surrounding student mental health. From almost every independent school’s founding, their missions reflect a commitment to developing the whole child.”

“I see it more as a challenge for our schools to better understand and meet the needs of the moment, which are clearly different from what we have seen before,” adds Wilson. “It will require schools to be more tightly coordinated between parents, teachers, administrators and counseling staff, but it will also call for us to better articulate and help students explore what it means to live healthy, successful and meaningful lives.”

This requires an investment from schools. “Schools are investing in mental and social-emotional health curricula

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(e.g., suicide prevention training) to offer more in-depth training to advisors and faculty,” says Charlanne Zepf Bauerlein, an upper school counselor at Greenwich Academy. “Independent schools have the benefit of smaller size classes, allowing faculty to discuss students at weekly or monthly review meetings, flag anyone of concern and refer them to the school counselor.”

Where did this surge in both diagnoses and concern occur? In part the response is an aftershock of the pandemic, but the trend was happening before 2019. The CDC’s YRBS states: “As we saw in the 10 years prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, mental health among students overall continues to worsen, with more than 40 percent of high school students feeling so sad or hopeless that they could not engage in their regular activities for at least two weeks during the previous year—a possible indication of the experience of depressive symptoms.

We also saw significant increases in the percentage of youth who seriously considered suicide, made a suicide plan and attempted suicide.”

The response, as suggested by Kossouth Bradford, a school counselor at The Foote School in New Haven, is “teaching students effective coping and problem-solving skills [as] invaluable mitigation strategies in relation to one’s overall mental health. Having a strong sense of cultural identity, feeling connected to others and identifying reasons to live (family, friends, pets etc.) are protective factors that can decrease suicidal risks.”

The CDC also reported the trends show that subsets of students have very different experiences, some better and some far worse. Specifically, the CDC reported that in 2021, almost 60 percent of female students experienced persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness during the past year and nearly 25 percent

made a suicide plan.

Another subset identified by the CDC are LGBTQIA students and those who have ever had a same-sex partner. The CDC reported, “They were also significantly more likely to experience all forms of violence. The differences in terms of mental health, compared to their peers, are substantial. Close to 70 percent of LGBTQIA students experienced persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness during the past year, and more than 50 percent had poor mental health during the past 30 days. Almost 25 percent attempted suicide during the past year.”

Helping students feel a sense of belonging or connection is crucial, as Bauerlein explains. “In addition to encouraging their child to join an affinity space or participate in assemblies like the Anti-Defamation League’s *Names Can Really Hurt Us* program, it’s critical for school counseling and health and

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seriously thinking about suicide: 31.6 percent of those students sleeping fewer than five hours reported a suicidal attempt compared to 10.2 percent of those students sleeping more than eight hours. The Independent School Health Check's dataset was collected from fall 2018 to spring 2022, except for fall 2020 and spring 2021 due to the pandemic. The ISHC database includes responses from more than 27,000 students across 73 high schools.

Managing sleep requires education, oversight and self-reflection, according to Bradford. “Educating teens on the importance of sleep and helping them recognize that healthy sleep habits will increase the likelihood of them achieving the goals they might have for themselves, both academic and social, and it will help them feel better in general. Encourage them to record or reflect for a week on how they feel, their productivity and the quality of their work and interactions in relation to how much sleep they are getting, and assist them with their time management skills if they are staying up late because they are not utilizing their time wisely.”

Parents can help children get adequate sleep by managing their schedules, role modeling thoughtful scheduling, and teaching them to manage their time and prioritize rest and sleep. Of particular significance is managing technology—especially social media—at times of sleep, advises Bauerlein.

“Schools have been struggling with the sleep issue, especially over the last 20 years, as homework and after-school extracurriculars and college sports recruitment have amped up. Students are getting home later and have less time on weekends, staying up too late as a result. Some schools have altered the school day hours in order to align more closely with the natural sleep wake cycle of adolescents—starting the school day later so teens can sleep in.”

Students are hearty consumers of social media. From the Belonging Survey, 33

percent of students are on social media each day for one to two hours with 25 percent engaging two to three hours and 14 percent engaging three to four hours a day. In short, the Belonging Survey showed that students who are getting less sleep appear to be spending either more time on homework and on social media.

According to the Piper Sandler Taking Stock of Teens Survey, TikTok remains the favored social media platform for students so far in 2023, with 37 percent of the market share. Beyond TikTok, Snapchat (27 percent) and Instagram (23 percent), students are also consumers of Netflix and YouTube.

The challenge for parents is regulation. “Some practical strategies to reduce use begin with encouraging parents to see smart phones as potentially toxic ‘comparison machines’ that manipulate us into watching things like incessant ads and staying on social media platforms at any cost,” says Bauerlein. “Tech can be tremendously positive, but we know teens say they feel worse about themselves after using social media apps. We (adults) are the best role models for tech use for our kids.”

The CDC illuminated a specific gender difference. While both boys and girls are digital consumers, boys tend to spend more time on games while girls spend more time on social media. The CDC also stated that girls were more likely to be electronically bullied than boys.

Parents can help, according to Bradford. “Inform your daughter of the statistics regarding social media use,” he says. “Knowledge is power. Provide opportunities for your child to experience success and a sense of competence and confidence in other areas of their life to mitigate the negative effects of social media use. Sleep hygiene, movement/exercise, and healthy eating habits all significantly impact mood and well-being.”

HOW ADULTS CAN HELP STUDENTS

Connectedness is important for students,

both with adults at school and adults at home. Building connections and fostering engagement is positive as demonstrated by the CDC report: “School connectedness, defined in this report as feeling close to people at school, has a long-lasting, protective impact for adolescents well into adulthood on almost all behaviors and experiences included in this report. In 2021, female students, students of color, LGBTQ+ students and students who had any same-sex partners were least likely to feel connected at school, indicating less protection for these groups.”

Julie Foy, Director of Student Services and Support at Waterside School in Stamford, agrees. “Maintaining an open line of communication is one of the best ways for parents to engage with their child’s school. It’s important for parents to be present in their child’s daily school routine; check in with their child’s teachers, seek out support from the school counselor for strategies and interventions that can be used at home, and find opportunities to get more involved in the school community.”

Finally, experts identify communication among students, parents and school personnel as one key to successful mental health for students.

“Communication is key,” says Bradford. “Letting teachers or the school counselor know your concerns is a great first step. Depending on the severity and urgency, the school might feel they can support the student with their resources and/or the parents, and the school might conclude that outside clinical support is needed. The school counselor or wellness coordinator and pediatrician are great resources for parents in regards to therapists, books and online mental health sites.”

Bob Mattingly, Executive Director of the Center for Spiritual and Ethical Education, notes the value of an independent school in the current climate. “Growing up in 2023 is not an easy job, nor is being a parent. Independent

schools are an invaluable tool in light of today’s challenges. Each independent school is different with a mission that makes it uniquely equipped to be a great place, not for all children, but for those families for whom the school’s mission is a great fit. Thus, unlike schools that are an expert on children, in general, independent schools come to know and be an expert on your child.”

Independent schools are structured in unique ways that maximize the support for students, says Bonnie Ricci, Executive Director of the International Council Advancing Independent School Accreditation. “Supports that are in place include small advisory groups that meet regularly and frequent meetings of teams of teachers to identify students who are struggling and develop action plans to monitor and support those students.

Independent school faculty are expected to develop curricula that pairs academic content with the social-emotional needs of students. With these structures in place, families benefit from independent school communities where students are cared for, valued and known.”

Recent research shows the need for immediate and effective action. It is critical that students, parents and school personnel address the challenge together. Creating meaningful connections among community members as well as helping students create their own meaningful connections are essential to support all students, especially the most vulnerable. We begin with relationships; as we might not have the answers, relationships and communication have the opportunity to lead us there.

NOTES:

The Community and Belonging Survey was conducted pro bono by Kevin Graham, President, Lookout Management; Steve Piltch, Director of the School Leadership Program at Penn Graduate School of Education; John Gulla, Executive Director of the EE Ford Foundation. In all, 96 independent schools participated (80 American and 16 Canadian), involving 22,297 students enrolled in grades 9-12.

The CDC Youth Risk Behavior Survey 2011-2021, a national survey, conducted by CDC, provides data representative of 9th through 12th grade students in public and private schools in the United States. The YRBSS includes national, state, territorial and freely associated state, tribal government, and local school-based surveys of representative samples of 9th through 12th grade students.

