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EDUCATION

Atlanta schools expand mental health resources as students continue to struggle post-pandemic



Pace Academy's Read4Respect program promotes healthy social attitudes, which support student wellbeing. Using children's literature as a foundation, Lower School students discuss preventing bullying and name-calling, respecting differences, understanding equity and valuing diversity.

BYRON E. SMALL

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The pandemic, which closed schools and pushed students into online classes, also made a troubling trend worse. Rates of depression and anxiety and other mental health issues among children increased during the pandemic and have continued as schools reopened,

according to experts.

The pandemic disrupted lives and daily routines as it shut down the institutions and programs like sports, clubs, summer camps and other youth activities that supported children's' education and social development, according to Anna Bacon Moore, head of school at The Howard School.

“There's data that said anxiety in particular among youth was trending down, but that was very, very early on,” she said. “Since we returned back to a more typical school setting and more pre-pandemic life, we have seen an increase in anxiety in youth, depression in youth.”

The pandemic caused the interruption of normal social growth, emotional growth, intellectual growth, according to Chris Pomar, head of school at the Swift School in Roswell.



Chris Pomar, head of school, The Swift School
BILLY HOWARD

“We basically had three years in a row of really unusual and difficult and challenging school years for kids,” said Pomar. “The 2020 school year ended with most kids home for the last three months and isolated. They were only connected to their teacher and their classmates by a screen, if they were lucky enough to be in a school that offered it or live in a home where that was a possibility.”

Local schools are doing more than just talking about mental health. Many are channeling time and funding into programs and resources to address these issues among their students.

One of the first steps many are taking is surveying their students to get a handle on their feelings and their perceptions of the issues they face.

“We administer a survey to students and staff that asks questions around wellbeing,” said [Megan Pacheco](#), executive director of Challenge Success, a Stanford, California-based company that partners with schools to implement research-based strategies that promote student well-being and engagement with learning. “Some of the data that we've been seeing over the last year in that survey is students reporting increases in stresses that are related to mental health issues.” She noted these findings are consistent across all student groups, with school staff reporting increasing concern about student mental health.

Pace Academy is among those employing anonymous surveys to benchmark itself. It wants to “see how kids are feeling, what are the issues, and what (problems) are raising concerns,” said [Fred Assaf](#), head of school at Pace Academy.

The mental health picture



The pandemic, which closed schools and pushed students into online classes, also made a troubling trend worse.

25.2%

Estimated prevalence of depression in children and adolescents globally

20.5%

Estimated prevalence of anxiety in children and adolescents globally

2X

The amount by which symptoms of both disorders increased during the Covid-19 pandemic compared to previously

Source: “Global Prevalence of Depressive and Anxiety Symptoms in Children and Adolescents During Covid-19” A Meta-analysis, JAMA Pediatrics, Aug. 9, 2021

31%

Increase in ER visits for suspected suicide attempts, ages 12-17, in the U.S. 2020 compared to 2019

50.6%

Increase in ER visits for girls between February 21 and March 20, 2021

3.7%

Increase in ER visits for boys between February 21 and March 20, 2021

Source: “Emergency Department Visits for Suspected Suicide Attempts Among Persons Aged 12-25 Years Before and During the Covid-19 Pandemic - United States, January 2019-May 2021”, Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

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Schools are hiring more counselors and these professionals are taking a more active role engaging with students.

“What's critical in this time is that there is a mindset shift with counseling becoming a proactive wellness-oriented experience, and not reactive,” Moore said.

Pace Academy has four full-time counselors and also contracts with a consulting psychologist. In addition, other school officials have basic training in counseling and therapy, according to Assaf.

“Those teams are meeting all the time to talk about the mental wellness of the community and what's needed,” he said. “I would say we're doing similar things on the workforce side with the adults in our community, as well with our teachers and educational professionals to make sure that we're meeting their needs as well.”

The Swift School, which specializes in the education of students with dyslexia and related learning disabilities, also hired a second counselor, according to Pomar.

Their job is to “be aware of and keep track of any social-emotional issues, but also just be an extra set of compassionate eyes and ears on campus for our students,” he said.

“At the beginning of the pandemic we went from a part-time to a full-time counselor,” said Foster Soules, principal of The Schenck School, which also specializes in the education of children with dyslexia.

In addition to responding to requests from students for help, the counselor has launched a program of small groups geared to different social needs that can range from making friends to dealing with



competitive situations.

Foster Soules, principal of The Schenck School

COURTESY FOSTER SOULES/THE SCHENCK SCHOOL

Schools are also making greater use of older students to mentor younger ones. Pace's Middle School Brunch Club connects high-school girls with their middle-school counterparts.

The Mount Vernon School created campus-based Collaborative Care teams comprised of counselors, nurses, learning coaches, and divisional leaders. These groups focus on family engagement, academic balance, mindfulness, stress management and prevention, and healthful living, the school's CEO [Brett Jacobsen](#) said.

A specialized institution such as Gracepoint School in Marietta, which caters to dyslexic students, are better able engage with children due to smaller numbers of students both on campus and in individual classes, according [Kevin Williams](#), director of student life.

“We have one-on-one time that is really possible here in this setting,” he said. “We have opportunities to meet with our kids more often and check in with them, which provides stability for those seasons where it's tough.”

Schools are experimenting with a range of support programs for student mental health. One of the most popular of these is the creation of a wellness center, according to Pacheco.

“It's a welcoming, comfortable place for students to go and access support or just when they need a mental break throughout the day,” she said.

The shift in focus on mental health is an important step forward for schools. Along with a greater openness to discussing these issues with students has come a greater awareness of faculty and staff mental health.

“If schools aren't thinking about faculty and staff wellness right now, they're really missing the mark,” said [Nina Kumar](#), co-founder and CEO of Authentic Connections, a company which uses scientific surveys and a holistic approach to improve well-being in schools.

Rising rates of burnout and anxiety reported by faculty will in turn impact students, who depend on them for both education and support, she added.

The greater awareness of mental health issues in general has developed some avenues that few would have imagined. Talk about depression or even suicide and your smartphone's AI will ask if you need help and even volunteer to dial a suicide prevention hotline for you.

“The fact that we're talking about mental health and mental wellness more now is a positive,” Moore said. “Pre-pandemic, while it's certainly something schools discussed, now it's more of a nationwide accepted discussion.”

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