



What was Lost, What Was Recovered

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Abstract

There is nowhere in the world that has not been touched by the trauma of the Covid pandemic which started in the early months of 2021 and persists as a looming threat to our health and well-being as individuals and communities. We are engaged in trying to understand what was lost to us in this pandemic and how we can begin to recover from this trauma. No where are these questions more pertinent than in the educational institutions that care for and hold our children. The focus of this presentation will be to look at data we have about what was lost in schools in the hope that it will point to ways in which we can recover.

Keywords: *Social Emotional Learning, Flourishing*

1. Introduction

One can look at data with very different lens, which will then tell a different story. The lens of this paper will be on the social emotional grounding that we all need in order to flourish and what the authors see as the foundation of academic performance. Without social emotional skills, it is very challenging for a child to be a productive learn.

It is important to start this conversation as to why it is so hard for schools, as systems, to respond to the social and emotional needs of our children. In the United States, some of the reasons given include a) this is the role of the family not the school, b) we cannot afford it, c) learning is our priority, and d) we do not know how to do it. This lack of attention is reflected in the structures of our schools.

If scores in english language arts in a school were above the district average, people would line up to take credit. Great parents, great teachers, great professional develop, great principal, great ELA district coordinator, great chief academic officer, and great superintendent. If the scores were below the district average, those on the lost above would be expected to work together in some systematic manner to drive change, or would point fingers at each other for not carrying their weight.

When it comes to social emotional learning, there is no system formula, but lots of questions. Is it the teacher's responsibility? The principals? The social worker? The school counselor? The parents? The health educator? The nurse? Each school, each district, and even each state has a different answer and none of them are systematically coherent.

It should come as no surprise, therefore, that our response to the emotional trauma that this has the pandemic imposed on our children (and teachers, parents, families) lacks coherence. In this essay, we will use a case example from a district in a metropolitan area to give a data oriented voice to the challenges to childrens' well being the pandemic created. We will then use this case to frame suggestions as to how systems could re-organized to more effectively support efforts to support social emotional learning and emotional well being among our children.

2. The Case

A Metropolitan School District in the United States conducted internal studies on the impact of Covid. In the Spring 2021, they saw increased stress and anxiety levels. There are a number of areas where the impact of Covid and other factors are negatively impacting students behavioral and mental health. According to the county's Interim Study Report compiled in Spring 2021, Secondar School students'



stress levels increased from 5.8 in fall 2019 to 7.3 in fall 2020. The primary cause attributed to this increase was the lack of separation of school and home in a virtual setting. In other words, doing school from home denied students the opportunity to decompress between the demands of school and the responsibilities associated with one's home environment.

According to the county, in which this school district resides, their 2021-2022 Youth Survey [1] found that, although rates of stress, anxiety and depression have been rising since 2015, the pandemic accelerated increases in those rates (this year's data did prompt a more intentional approach of providing lessons, interventions and parent education on socio emotional learning).

What the survey found was that:

- 17.8% of 6th graders report feeling stressed most/all the time
- 62.3% report experience stress a little or some of the time in the month prior to the survey
- Female students reported more feelings of stress most/all the time 22.7% v 12.2% of male students.
- 33.1% 6th grade students reported feeling sad or hopeless every day for two or more weeks in a row during the prior year (39.5% females v 26.3% male)
- 20% students reported having been bullied; 3.9% reported bullying others.
- 12.2% reported cyber bullying (13.7% females, 10.6% male)

Upon return to in person classes, the system like many in the country faced significant challenges with chronic absenteeism and behavioral issues. The State in which this district resides, defines chronic absenteeism as missing 10% or more of a school year, 18 days or more. According to an informal survey of Superintendents within this state, conducted in March 2023 and presented to the State Board of Education on March 23, 2023, 25.3% of the school in the state have issues with chronic absenteeism which is a 2-4% increase over the years prior to the pandemic.

According to the County's Opioid Response Plan [2], in this state, for the first time in 2021 opioid related deaths exceeded the total number of vehicle and gun related deaths with a year over year increase of 60% between 2019 (1630) and 2021 (2660). In the County there have been 100 fatal overdoses a year since 2015, in 2021 93% were due to fentanyl and the highest risk 18-34 year olds. Recently the impact has been seen in younger ages.

A common concern expressed across the United States is focused on the "learning loss" children will have to overcome as a result of lost school time during the pandemic. This data makes it clear that the learning loss is not just in academics. It is also in the social and emotional development that schools provide which helps our children become effective and engaged citizens.

Each school and district engages in a variety of actions to do something. This county and their schools instituted an aggressive education and parent awareness program including in school curriculum, town halls and parent nights. Increased access to mental and behavioral health services, provided mental health training for students, made changes to daily schedules to help reduce stress (e.g., more check-in times, longer recess) and made the existing social emotional learning curriculum available online. For this district socio-emotional learning is the basis for building the essential life skills for students to become healthy adults able to work well and relate to others in their communities, and understand their own socio emotional needs and mental well being, including seeking help when needed.

The state's Department of Education in its guidance standards released in 2021 [3] defines Socio Emotional Learning as "the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships and make responsible and caring decisions."

As a result of the Interim Report on the impact of Covid-19 on teaching and learning, this district implemented a SEL Screener. Students 3-12 are screened semi-annually (fall and spring) for SEL to assess self awareness, self management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision making. Parents may opt their children out of the screening. Parents receive the report and



offered tips on how to review the report with their child, as well as skill building strategies. The report is used by staff to identify needs for tiered interventions.

All elementary schools have a 20 minute morning meeting which includes greeting, sharing, a group activity and morning message. Middle and high schools have advisory time built into the schedule to allow students to develop these skills at least once a week. SEL lessons are also provided to parents through the parent resource center and individual school Family Engagement Events. The availability of a telehealth services in multiple languages has been received with great success. In the first two weeks, an average of 55 students signed up daily with their parent's permission.

It is clear that this district took the impact of the pandemic on the well-being of students and their families very seriously. Their response was comprehensive and multi-faceted. These steps may well lead to much bigger changes in the creation of school system that is focused on creating sustainable conditions in which all of their children can flourish as learners and socially competent individuals. If successful, it could stand as a model for other districts to follow. If we do, we will serve our children better when we make the latter an articulate goal of our educational systems, systematically collected data that captures our progress towards that goal, reported on the changes we are making in response to that data, and stayed engaged in the iterative process of change needed to create and sustain system change.

3. Conclusion

Let's imagine that we commit to having 95% of our children to leave our systems career and life ready. In addition to the academic scores we currently have to assess that learning, we would also identify the manner in which we evaluate career readiness and what are the core social emotional skills that are aligned with being life ready. Imagine that we articulate the curriculum we are using to facilitate the acquisitions of these skills across the spectrum of development. Furthermore, imagine that we make progress on these scores a central part of superintendent, chief academic officers and principals annual evaluations. Evaluations that included plans of action for continual improvement.

It is our core contention that the pathway to recovery from this trauma is to not treat this moment as a crisis to be managed but an opportunity to create systems that work better in the service of our children.

References

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