

The race to 'fix' schools has ignored emotional learning | Opinion

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Opinion

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Harry Vincenzi, for the Inquirer



Techniques to help students' emotional health can be built into other school lessons, writes education psychologist Harry Vincenzi.

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Philadelphians constantly hear that our city schools are failing academically. One step toward resolving that problem: developing a skills-based emotional education program.

Many institutions, such as Kaiser Permanente and UCLA (Mental Health in Schools), support the view that programs to improve students' emotional health are necessary to cope with today's problems and eventually improve test scores.

Philadelphia has made large investments to improve literacy and math. Strategies that focus on instructional approaches to improve test scores have been going on for decades — but they are not enough. The National Assessment of Education Progress (2017) found that Philadelphia test scores declined since 2015 and those scores were significantly lower than in other big cities. Combined with mixed Pennsylvania System of School Assessment 2018 results, they indicate a new approach is needed.

Recent national surveys have found that many students suffer from loneliness, low self-esteem, depression, and trauma. And these problems are surging as 32% of teens have an anxiety disorder, reported loneliness has increased to 39%, and suicide rates for girls have doubled since 2007.

Forty percent of Philadelphia students are overweight or obese, which can impact school performance and has been linked to depression. Across the nation, when some students have anxiety or self-esteem issues, it can lead them to emotionally damage other students. In a 2017 article for the New York Daily News, clinical psychologist Jennifer Powell-Lunder describes how some female students use social media to undermine their peers' self-esteem and social networks with disturbing effect.

These problems are not going away, and one reason is that 70% of adolescents see depression, anxiety, and bullying as among their major concerns. No one thinks bullying is OK, but it is still pervasive in our society. The sooner students learn skills to have more control over how they feel, the less likely they will hurt other people or engage in self-sabotage. It would also address many common situations that may provoke anxiety in teens including test taking, sports, performances, and social interactions.

Today, we know enough about emotional health to teach children skills that will help guard them against years of negative thoughts and eventually behaviors. The skills would come from research-supported approaches, such as mindful meditation, cognitive behavioral therapy, and therapies that target the mind-body relationship, like deep breathing. This could begin in first grade, teaching mindfulness, and continue through 12th grade. Goals can initially include improved concentration, behavior, and problem solving. As they get older, students can learn skills to cope with anxiety issues and addictive behaviors, such as unhealthy cravings for substances or food.

The curriculum should teach concrete techniques that will help students as they change developmentally. And it can be incorporated into the school day without undermining instruction in basic skills. The program would provide teachers with specific exercises and activities to help students' master new skills. For example, one of the goals of mindfulness is the ability to stay in the moment, helping to stay more focused in school. As students master skills, they can be combined with other strategies as part of an instructional lesson.

It is a win-win situation for teachers, school psychologists, and counselors as they can help students improve their ability to learn. Staff can also use those skills to help cope with their own life concerns.

Large urban systems like Philadelphia can work with private foundations to develop a curriculum. But to help all schools, the state needs to develop a curriculum, redirecting some of the millions of dollars in funding spent yearly on testing. A preventative program would eventually be more cost efficient as health-related problems are reduced. Leaders in education, mental health, and politics need to work together and support programs that will create a new generation of healthier students. There is no quick fix, but the resources are available and America's self-destructive behaviors will not go away until they are addressed.

Harry Vincenzi, Ed.D., is a licensed psychologist and retired Philadelphia school counselor. His blog <https://createahealthyamerica.com> focuses on issues that undermine emotional and behavioral health.

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