

AUGUST 2020

## IMPACTS TO WELLNESS/ MENTAL HEALTH

### Can We Design Schools for Better Mental Health?

Students and educators across the U.S. have geared up for school in a very different way this fall. Long lines at big retailers to purchase school supplies and clothing have been replaced by online orders. The excitement and anticipation of seeing who is in your homeroom or walking through new school doors for the first time will be missed this fall. Students won't have the experience of walking the halls and seeing friends they haven't seen in months. Instead, parents are preparing bedrooms, kitchen tables, and living rooms for distance learning. Teachers are designing virtual classrooms and developing Bitmojis in hopes of forming a virtual connection with a new group of students. Parents and educators are hoping that children will engage and not fall further behind than they may have when stay-at-home orders forced schools to go virtual last spring. Students are also feeling the pressure of uncertainty and a new way of learning in isolation. The fall of 2020 kicks off a new season of challenges for our society, and we need to find ways to support students and educators as they navigate this new normal.

#### CHILDRENS' MENTAL HEALTH AT STAKE

While most parents are concerned about their children falling behind in their education, the larger more lasting impact of COVID-19 may be on the mental health of children as they

are secluded from their peers, seeing their parents struggle with unemployment and financial instability, and potentially experience death and loss due to the pandemic. Students are facing ever-growing levels of depression and anxiety as the crisis continues to turn normalcy on its head. Mental health experts across the country agree that the pandemic, social isolation, and uncertainty are Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) on their own and that these conditions may exacerbate existing mental health issues in our community. It is becoming more and more apparent that school districts need to expand their mental health services. The Youth Liberty Squad, a youth leadership program through the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) created to provide students with the tools to become the next generation of social justice leaders, recently published a study called "School vs. Home: School-based Mental Health is a Civil Right," which concluded that *over half* of California students may be in need of mental health services amid this pandemic. The study revealed that 22 percent of students reported receiving mental health services before the pandemic. It is estimated that an additional 32 percent of students who were not receiving mental health services prior to the pandemic feel they may now need these services. The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) recommends a ratio of 1:500 for



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implementation of the Comprehensive and Integrated model. However, budget deficits and cuts will hinder school districts' efforts to hire more counselors and psychologists, leaving mental health advocates concerned that thousands of students in California won't receive the mental health support they need.

#### **STRESS ON EDUCATORS**

When considering mental health in our PreK-12 schools we must not only consider students, but we must also consider the educators and leaders who are guiding and delivering the educational programs. Many teachers are part of an aging demographic, so we can expect some of our educators will not return this fall because they have been directly impacted by COVID-19. A greater number will be impacted by the loss of a loved one, by the emotional hardships of social confinement, the stress of refining and adapting their skill to a virtual environment, and by the increased anxiety caused by economic uncertainty for their families. We cannot expect educators to return to us in the fall without mental and emotional needs resulting from their grief, economic anxiety, and personal loss. Great schools begin with great leaders. The mental health, positive outlook, and self-confidence of these school leaders are equally critical, and they will also need care and support.

We must recognize that many of our teachers and leaders do not yet possess the skills to effectively respond to this new student trauma. It's also important to note that our schools have rarely prioritized the mental and emotional health needs of our adults. And we must understand that skills for self-care and response to trauma are not acquired in a day or two of "professional development." We are facing a long-haul mental health triage to support our teachers and staff so that they, in turn, can support our students and deliver equitable, accessible education.<sup>1</sup>

#### **DELIVER THE SERVICES OUR STUDENTS DESERVE**

California State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tony Thurmond and Linda Darling-Hammond, president of the California State Board of Education, are pushing school districts to hire more counselors, psychologists, and social workers to help students through the pandemic. Thurmond recently stated, "We owe our young people. We have to be there for them, despite the difficult circumstances we face. Let's deliver the services our students deserve."

Thurmond hosted a two-hour mental health panel on July 10, 2020 where experts offered suggestions for how districts can find money for mental health services, including working with local nonprofits, transferring money from police contracts, obtaining federal funding through the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) or applying for grants through foundations. With the lack of available professional support and an increasing demand for services, we need to ask ourselves: How can we design spaces to support struggling students and teachers? How can we insert ourselves into the discussion of improving student's mental health? How can we have a positive impact on the mental health of our schools? And how do we do this on limited budgets? One strategy is in reimagining a traditional counseling center as a dynamic *wellness* center.

#### **MAKING WELLNESS A PRIORITY**

Student Support Services often have a stigma associated with them. They are rarely welcoming and are often carved out of an administration space where students are forced to do a "walk of shame" to receive the services they need. This stigma prevents students from making the decision to access the services, regardless of how much they



**Casa Robles Student Center, San Juan Unified School District, HMC Architects**

are needed. Wellness centers should be celebrated and accessible. Pushing these spaces out toward the students, away from the administration buildings is one strategy to making them more accessible. Co-locating student services and learning resource centers is an effective way of celebrating the space for elementary-school children. Students waiting to access the services will be in a bright, open space with comfortable seating in a relaxed environment. If relaxed, students may be more receptive to the services they receive. At the high school level, co-locating college and career centers with counseling services can be effective in removing the stigma, making the space desired—and again, relaxed and inviting. Design matters in these spaces. The investment in making these spaces welcoming, comfortable, bright and accessible speaks to the investment in the services that are offered in these areas.

We should also consider upgrading staff support spaces. This may include providing additional areas for staff to recharge during breaks while still being socially distanced. Schools may also consider updating existing lounges to provide the respite educators need to refocus as students make their way back to campus. Simple upgrades like a fresh coat of paint in a soothing color could also be an appreciated gesture to let the teachers

know that they are valued while on this journey.

#### **TELEHEALTH IN SCHOOL**

At HMC, we are learning from our [healthcare research](#) that the fear of contracting the novel coronavirus in the healthcare setting has allowed for telehealth services to be widely used and accepted. Will telehealth services be used in the PreK-12 environment during remote/distance learning scenarios? Post-pandemic, we believe there is an opportunity in the school setting to create small private telehealth stations where students can link up with counseling professionals to receive the support they need. On site, small spaces or offices could be subdivided into multiple telehealth stations. It seems feasible that schools and districts may look to move counseling staff off-site to protect their own health while plugging in to provide services to students in need. This may also be a strategy to increase the caseload within a district. A pool of psychologists and counseling staff currently working from their homes could occupy offsite district offices (once stay-at-home orders are lifted) to support multiple school sites, creating efficiency in the delivery of student services. In a depressed economy, there is no question that schools will be seeking ways to create efficiencies. The answer, however, cannot be to cut these much-needed services.





**Clearwater Elementary School, Perris Elementary School District, HMC Architects**

### TAKE LEARNING OUTDOORS

Expanding the physical space used for education beyond its brick-and-mortar facilities may not only help schools meet physical distancing requirements aimed to protect students' physical health but also promote better mental health.<sup>2</sup> In California we are fortunate to have a mild climate where outdoor activities aren't limited by season. With concerns over the spread of the virus indoors, this push to outdoor learning will have a positive impact on students' mental health and wellness. Being outdoors has the effect of lifting your mood and lowering anxiety. When outside, students experience a more positive mental attitude and better cognitive function. Some students also experience a boost in creativity. We see this as a great opportunity to invest in the design of outdoor learning environments. The same effort and rigor design teams spend in detailing buildings should now equally apply to the outdoors. Architects and landscape architects will have the opportunity to work closely together to create dynamic outdoor spaces that will become regularly programmed for use by teachers and students throughout the year. According to Green Schoolyard of America, "Repurposing outdoor spaces is a cost-effective way to reduce the burden on indoor classrooms while providing fresh air, hands-on learning opportunities, and the health benefits associated with increased access to nature."<sup>2</sup>

### DESIGN FOR ELEVATED MOOD

As architects and designers, we need to continue implementing and advocating for strategies that have been acknowledged and recognized over the years. For example, there have been numerous studies that highlight the importance of natural light on students and teachers. The power of natural daylight and color on the human psyche should be emphasized in PreK-12 facilities. Not only does daylight help students learn and retain information but it is also a natural mood elevator. Natural sunlight increases the release of serotonin, which is commonly referred to as the happy hormone. This helps elevate the moods of students and teachers, as well as keep them focused and calm in their learning environment.

Color theory is the idea that the colors a person is surrounded with can have an effect on the person's health—whether physical or mental. Color psychology is based on the idea that the colors a person is exposed to can have an effect on that person's emotions and even on the individual's health. Updating or implementing a new color palette for specific rooms on campus is a low cost/high impact solution.<sup>3</sup>

### SUMMARY / DISCUSSION

Students must be mentally and emotionally ready to learn. Distraction, acting out, and student disengagement are not caused by



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laziness or poor parenting. These behaviors are the autonomic responses of bodies filled with the stress hormone cortisol. They are the result of fear and anger, anxiety and grief.<sup>1</sup> Our children have experienced many changes in the last five months and in many cases are still trying to process those changes. COVID-19 and the transition away from traditional learning has had a profound impact on the mental health of our students. When students return to a physical school campus it will be after months of limited social interaction, physical distancing, and online learning. Students will need to adjust and acclimate to how school looks. They may face increased stress and anxiety as they transition from “Safer at Home” to learning at school again. Just as post-pandemic life will include taking the temperature of students as they enter the campus, access to learning must begin with immediate and continuous vigilance of student mental health for readiness to learn.<sup>1</sup>

## REFERENCES

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