

Opinion: Students need mental health support for COVID-19 trauma

Gretchen Dziadosz

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The COVID-19 pandemic poses tremendous challenges to American education, and there is a new crisis looming — a generation of traumatized children.

Not only have children suffered learning loss, the pandemic is causing unprecedented levels of homelessness, housing and food insecurity, and fear. Students are struggling with physical, cognitive, social and emotional trauma symptoms as the pandemic continues.

Disruptions to traditional learning have completely changed the daily routines of students, lessened peer interactions and, in some cases, added stress to unhealthy situations at home.

While it seems that children are less physically susceptible to the virus, they are more deeply affected by some of its most adverse consequences.

One Atlanta student lost [both of his parents](#) to COVID-19 in four days' time. One New York City transport worker union [reported](#) 100 members who were killed by COVID-19, leaving behind about three dozen children without a parent.

While no one appears to be tracking parental deaths nationwide, there is no doubt tens of thousands of American children have experienced this horrible loss. In New York state alone, [one study](#) estimated that between March and July 2020, 4,200 children experienced a parental death and 325,000 children have been pushed into poverty or near poverty as a result of the economic downturn.

Pre-pandemic, over [1.3 million](#) American children were already homeless. That number has certainly risen — and continues to rise — without further federal stimulus assistance. As more families plunge into poverty, children's food and housing insecurity increases.

We know trauma impacts the educational success of students. A [study](#) of Mississippi children displaced by Hurricane Katrina showed displaced children were more likely to have lower academic performance and to engage in more negative behaviors than non-displaced students.

All students need more mental and emotional support than ever due to the pandemic, and schools must be prepared with trauma-informed services to handle the onslaught.

Even before the pandemic, mental and behavioral health disorders have been an underlying problem, with an estimated [one in five](#) American children experiencing a mental or behavioral disorder according to the American Psychological Association. Unfortunately, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, only [20% of those children](#) received mental health care.

Educators have long recognized that social-emotional learning is a critical component of learning, although it is not measured in high stakes standardized tests.

We must put more systemic measures in place to support the social and emotional health of our students.

Schools need to support students with wraparound services. This usually involves a support from a mental health professional who meets with the child's support network to implement the best plan for the child.

Research shows schools need to support emotional well-being so learning can occur. The pandemic, coupled with the national racial reckoning, has made appropriate support for students of color more important than ever.

We know public schools are underfunded, and many school districts do not have enough mental health support available to students. That's why there must be clear changes, including the implementation of trauma-informed curricula and financial support from lawmakers to ensure our schools have what they need to weather the COVID-19 storm, especially in the communities that have struggled the most.

There is one bright spot. [Research](#) has also shown the community schools model has better served students and communities, as local organizations, businesses and partnerships help to maintain wraparound student services that are critical during the pandemic.

Students succeed when policymakers and school officials work together to address the whole child, including factors that may be unrelated to what's happening in school but which impact learning all the same. A failure to act may mean a lost generation.

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