



The State of Mental Health: K12

EVERFI

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2020 cast a bright and illuminating spotlight on health and wellness, and amplified an already critical need for awareness and resources dedicated to mental health.



Over the past several years, we've seen mental health move from a topic often viewed as private, to emerging as front page news. We've seen it play out in business, with the American Heart Association convening a [roundtable of CEO's](#) to discuss the importance of investment in mental health. We've also seen it emerge as a key CSR focus, with organizations like [Morgan Stanley](#) and [HCA Healthcare](#) leveraging their brands and resources to make an impact.

Economically, there is good reason for prioritizing mental health, and organizations are wise for investing their resources accordingly. Data from the [World Health Organization](#) shows that depression and anxiety cost the global economy \$1 trillion dollars each year in lost productivity. And for every dollar invested in mental health treatment there is a \$4 return on investment.

This report is part one of a three part series that highlights insights related to mental health across the lifespan, focusing on K12 students and educators, college students, and adults. By understanding the current state of mental health across all populations, policy-makers, educators, industry leaders, and society at large can identify opportunities for action.

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1 TRILLION DOLLARS

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*World Health Organization

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K12 STUDENTS AND TEACHERS

The Pre-COVID Landscape

At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, society acted to secure physical safety — including physical distancing, staying at home, and shuttering businesses and schools. As we enter into 2021, and the promise of a vaccine brings with it some hope of going “back to normal” we continue to wrestle with some of the lingering effects on socialization, academic readiness, and well-being.

Student mental health, even prior to 2020, was an already critical issue compounded by systemic challenges. According to the [National Institute for Mental Health](#), 1 out of 3 adolescents have an anxiety disorder, and 1 in 10 have experienced a depressive episode. Additionally, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, 35% of adolescents received their mental health services exclusively from school. Throughout the pandemic, educators,

families, and mental health experts alike expressed concern over the lack of protective factors that exist for students outside of the school setting— especially as it relates to mental health resources.

Even when school is in session, resource constraints exist— for instance, according to the [National School Counselor Association](#), the recommended student to counselor ratio in the US is 1 counselor for every 250 students— but the average ratio is 1 counselor to 430 students. This often puts counselors in a position where they are overtaxed and under-resourced, and students in a position where they may not have access to the mental health resources that they need. Such systemic challenges highlight the importance of mental health education, and creating opportunities for students to gain literacy and information around coping, seeking help, and recognizing signs of mental health challenges in themselves or others.

This awareness has led 44 states to have [state educational laws](#) that address mental and emotional health. Most recently, Florida became the third state (alongside Virginia and New York) to mandate mental health education by enacting a requirement for all students in grades 6 or higher to receive five hours of mental health education each year.



The US recommended student to counselor ratio: **1:250**

The ACTUAL student to counselor ratio:

1:430

Research has also shown that investment in SEL (social and emotional learning) can have a significant return on investment. One study found that for every dollar invested in SEL programs, there is \$11 return in long term benefits. Research has also found that students who have access to high quality SEL programs are better prepared for jobs, and that investment in SEL can increase academic achievement and reduce disciplinary issues in students.

Among educators, mental health is also a topic that is top of mind. It is an issue that for the past two years has been ranked in the EVERFI Educator Survey as the top issue most impacting students, and 99% of educators believe that it is very or extremely important to include education on the topic in their schools curriculum. However, from a resource standpoint, less than half believe that their school has the resources necessary to support student mental health.

The Emerging Impact of COVID-19

One of the key focus areas since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic has been its impact on mental health—particularly for youth. While researchers and experts are still unclear on the magnitude of impact COVID-19 will have, early data insights show reason for concern. An EVERFI survey of over 11,000 students conducted in 2020 found that since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, 38% of students were more concerned about their mental well-being, 47% more concerned about their academic preparation, 35% more concerned about the amount of time that they are spending online, and 33% more concerned with their social connectedness. Additionally, 54% of students reported that they feel more isolated, and 51% reported feeling more stressed.

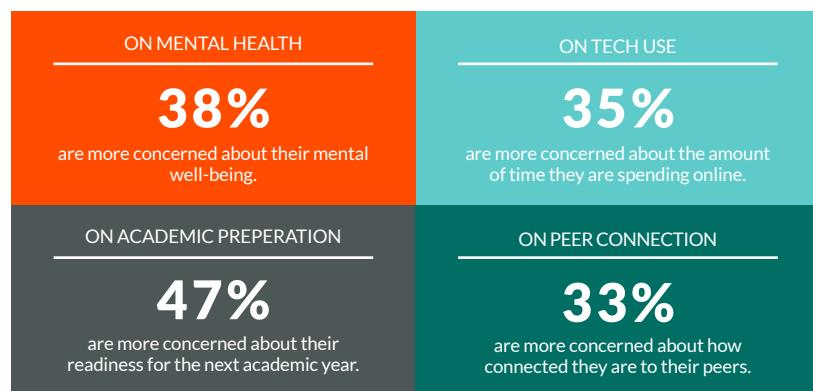
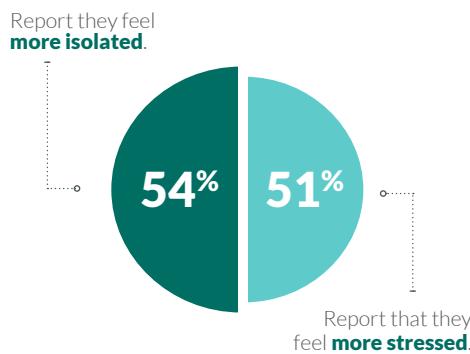
Additional research highlights even more dire concerns related to suicidality: data from Mental Health America found that in September 2020, over half of 11-17-year-olds reported having thoughts of suicide or self-harm more than half or nearly every day of the previous two weeks, and that 9.7% of youth in the U.S. have severe major depression, compared to 9.2% in 2019. As highlighted by the Kaiser Family Foundation, “existing mental illness among adolescents may be exacerbated by the pandemic, and with school closures, they do not have the same access to key mental health services”.

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11,000 Students on The Impact of COVID-19



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Mental health promotion and prevention interventions aim to strengthen an individual's capacity to **regulate emotions**, enhance alternatives to risk-taking behaviours, **build resilience** for difficult situations and adversities, and **promote supportive social environments** and social networks.

- [World Health Organization](#) ”

Future Implications

There are several factors required to begin mitigating what many experts are viewing as a crisis, and they involve intervention across the spectrum of mental health needs. First, research must continue to assess the impact that COVID-19, school closures, and economic challenges have had on both youth and their family units. This includes an exploration of strengths and any positives that have emerged, particularly as it relates to resilience among youth.

Second, resources must be allocated to ensure that mental health services are not only available, but easy to access for any youth and families who may be in need. Legislators have begun to advocate for government involvement, including the recent penning of a letter to the National Institute of Mental Health in which 14 [Senators](#) urged them to prioritize the study of the coronavirus pandemic on youth mental health

Also of critical importance is the significant mental health challenges being faced by educators. Educators are often viewed as the first line of defense towards recognizing mental health challenges in students, yet have limited resources focused on preserving and protecting their own mental health. Research has found that the development of self-management and self-awareness skills among educators can lead to decreased internal suffering and burnout or symptoms of depression, increased job satisfaction in both teachers and school leaders, increased life satisfaction, and more positive relationships with students ([Mitani](#), 2018; [Tsouloupas, et. al.](#), 2019; [Troy et. al.](#), 2010; [Bracket et. al](#), 2010; [Mahfouz](#), 2018). As society explores ways to prioritize student mental health, we must also identify opportunities to resource and support our educators, school counselors, and those working in the educational sector.

Finally, additional focus must be placed on mental health education as a mechanism for strengthening the skill-sets of youth, and to cast a wide net of educational support around them. The [World Health Organization](#) has found that “mental health promotion and prevention interventions aim to strengthen an individual's capacity to regulate emotions, enhance alternatives to risk-taking behaviours, build resilience for difficult situations and adversities, and promote supportive social environments and social networks.” By creating pathways for youth to receive mental health information early, they will have the skills and knowledge necessary to understand warning signs, know where to go to seek help, and identify strategies that they can implement to combat mental health challenges.

At a time when resources are finite, now is the time to act, and corporations have a role to play alongside nonprofits and educational institutions. By educating on concepts related to mental health early, and making resources easy to access and navigate for those in need of care, the public, private, and nonprofit sectors can join together to make a difference.

Each year, EVERFI reaches millions of students with education on critical topics like mental health.

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