



**SUPPORTING STUDENT MENTAL
HEALTH AND WELL-BEING
DURING THE SCHOOL DAY**

A CASE STUDY



NATIONAL ALLIANCE FOR
**PUBLIC
CHARTER
SCHOOLS**



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In response to the pandemic, schools have identified a growing need to provide mental health services. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, “70% of public schools reported an increase in the percentage of their students seeking mental health services at school since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic,”¹ and 76% of schools reported increased staff concerns about students “exhibiting symptoms such as depression, anxiety, and trauma.”² Additionally, school staff have identified impacts of the pandemic on student behavior, with 84% agreeing that the pandemic negatively impacted students’ behavioral development as evidenced by increased classroom disruptions, disrespect toward teachers and staff, and misbehaviors outside of the classroom.³ Teachers have also reported a higher percentage of students distracted in school and struggling to interact with peers,⁴ such that there is a growing need for strategies to keep students engaged and motivated.⁵

This case study examines the question: How might we better support student mental health and well-being?

Methodology

From January through June 2023, we visited 10 schools, either in person or virtually, to learn more about initiatives and policies schools have implemented to support student mental health and well-being. During these visits, we interviewed school staff, administrators, students, and parents about programs and practices in place at schools that helped support student mental health and well-being. We also conducted interviews with charter associations and authorizers, as well as members of the Diverse Charter Schools Coalition. In addition, we surveyed nearly 150 public charter school leaders and 100 public charter school teachers and support staff throughout the country.





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Strategies

Public charter schools have levied a variety of strategies to address student mental health and well-being and help students recover from the pandemic.

Strategy	Examples
Increasing supports from school counselors and social workers	Schools hired additional counselors or social workers to reduce the ratio of social workers from 1:220 to approximately 1:110.
Implementing teacher training	School leaders provide professional development specific to social skills and mental health. Counselors train teachers to identify gaps in students' mental health and socializing abilities.
Embedding nonacademic skills into the school day	Schools embed nonacademic skills into curriculum and instruction to encourage positive nonacademic behaviors. Schools offer stand-alone nonacademic skills classes or extracurricular activities. Schools schedule advisory or morning meetings to discuss student well-being.
Using alternative disciplinary methods	Schools adopt restorative practices where, as an alternative to suspending or expelling students, students may participate in a disciplinary program that focuses on reflection. The programs may include peer-to-peer mentoring and community service.
Creating physical spaces for students	Traveling wellness buses offer yoga and mindfulness activities to the 19 campuses within a charter network. Schools designate separate locations within the building for students and staff to go when they need wellness breaks during the day.
Expanding data collection	Schools expanded and made better use of data to get a picture of the whole child. Schools collect school climate and safety data.
Offering wraparound services	Students and families can contact a designated administrator who is responsible for pairing the student or family with the resources they need, such as health care, rental assistance, or food insecurity.



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Embedding nonacademic skills into the school day

This case study focuses on one of the strategies we saw among the public charter schools we visited — embedding nonacademic skill development into the school day.

Student well-being encompasses multiple aspects of student health, “including students’ social and emotional wellness, relationship with peers and adults, and engagement in school.”⁶ All students benefit from certain features that contribute to student well-being, such as a positive school climate, but some students need more targeted supports.⁷

Student mental health needs can be delineated across a continuum ranging from general academic and behavioral supports for all students to more targeted or intensive supplemental instruction and intervention for specific students.⁸ As with student well-being, all students benefit from access to more general support integrated into their academics and larger curriculum, though some students may need more targeted mental health supports.⁹ The schools we visited identified these general support services as even more important in the aftermath of the pandemic, given that many students, particularly those in lower grades, did not receive as many opportunities to develop skills necessary for school and life (e.g., regulating emotions, taking turns, interacting with others at recess) during remote learning as they might have during in-person schooling.¹⁰ Providing these types of behavioral support services to all students has positive outcomes not only on mental wellness and students’ social skills and nonacademic behaviors, but also on students’ academic performance.¹¹

To meet the needs of their students, the charter schools have leveraged unique approaches to embed nonacademic skills into the school day in a way that caters to the specific types of students they serve and the resources to which they have access. Flexibility, autonomy, and adaptability have been instrumental in how charter schools have responded to their students’ mental health and nonacademic behavioral needs to incorporate nonacademic instruction and supports throughout the school day.

Embedding nonacademic skills into the curriculum

One strategy that schools used was embedding nonacademic skills into the curriculum. The way this looked varied depending on the school and its curriculum.

For instance, when asked about the transition back to school after remote learning, administration at Idaho-based Sage Middleton described the social and mental health impacts of the pandemic on their students as increased levels of fighting, tardiness, and vaping at school. The school leveraged its International Baccalaureate (IB) curriculum, which was selected by Sage Middleton’s management organization, Sage International,



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to address the rise in student behavioral issues. The school incorporated IB learner profile qualities (e.g., knowledgeable, open-minded, caring) in several ways to promote the whole child curriculum and support student well-being.¹² In particular, teachers encouraged students to apply the IB learner profile qualities to classroom assignments.

For one such assignment, students read a news article about a city in Texas where a large corporation was planning to rebuild parts of the city to build a sports complex. The sports complex could serve as a community center, but it also led to many families losing their homes. Students were tasked to apply their learner profile qualities while choosing a stance and corroborating their position on whether the city should have built the complex.

Assignments integrating the learning profiles helped students integrate critical thinking skills and encouraged them to consider diverse perspectives. More recently, the Sage Middleton CEO has noted a significant shift from tardiness and violence to students demonstrating learner profile qualities in the hallways, such as discussing and engaging with class assignments, writing poetry, and showing kindness to classmates.

As an extension of implementing the learner profile into curriculum, Sage Middleton also encourages students to use these nonacademic skills by rewarding them for exemplary modeling. Every month, Sage Middleton selects a skill or practice to focus its whole child curriculum. At the end of the month, the administration asks students to reflect on who showcased that month's skill well. This task requires students to reflect on the skill and provide a written example of how a classmate exemplified that behavior. By doing these activities, the school reinforces the use of these nonacademic skills.

At Florida's HIVE Prep, administrators opted for a different approach to embedding non-academic supports into the curriculum. Instead of embedding nonacademic supports into all subjects, HIVE Prep revamped its literature course at the upper grade levels to spend more time discussing social skills depicted by characters in the books they read, leveraging their autonomy in selecting and determining curriculum to best align with student need. Such skills also vary based on grade level. When selecting reading materials, the school intentionally selects those that have strong nonacademic skill content that teachers can reference and teach. Then, teachers can utilize passages that highlight qualities like inquisitiveness, by pausing and discussing what the behavior means and how students can apply those qualities in their own lives. Each grade level in middle school has a specific focus area. Sixth grade focuses on ensuring students feel cared for, don't feel alone or bullied, and feel like they're not isolated in unhealthy ways. Seventh grade focuses on self-reflection work and learning about oneself, and the eighth grade focuses on giving to others and engaging with the world.



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Using stand-alone classes to teach nonacademic skills

In addition to embedding instruction into the curriculum, both Sage Middleton and HIVE Prep provide stand-alone classes to explicitly teach nonacademic skills.

Every week at Sage Middleton, the school counselor goes into the elementary school classrooms and provides 30-minute lessons related to conflict resolution and management.

Similarly, at HIVE Prep, the administrators noticed gaps in social skills and other nonacademic behaviors at the elementary school level as students returned to campus from remote learning. The administration quickly adapted and took input from veteran educators to create a tailored character development program at the elementary level that targets social and emotional skills. At the kindergarten level, the curriculum targets skills the teachers identified as being most impacted by the pandemic, such as attention span, communication, and even eye contact. The skills are taught and emphasized during morning assemblies, skits, and stories, and the curriculum and content of these lessons are adapted based on the issues teachers see or any new priorities they may have. While this tactic has been piloted only at the kindergarten level, the school plans to iterate upon it for other elementary grades as well.

Using morning meetings and advisory to teach nonacademic skills

Several schools embed nonacademic skills into the school day by adjusting schedules to institute or revamp their “Advisory” period for secondary students (i.e., a non-content-specific period where small groups of students meet with a teacher or staff member)¹³ or morning meetings for elementary students (i.e., daily class meetings to start the school day)¹⁴ to increase the number of opportunities for students to interact with staff in nonacademic ways and further their relationships.

At Sage Middleton, in response to student behavior issues, the school hired a new staff member to focus on student behavior and culture and social-emotional belonging. This staff member creates lesson plans for the student advisors to use with their respective advisories each week. Last year, the school relied on lessons from a curriculum that included mindfulness lessons on topics such as developing attention, dealing with emotions, and listening to guide their advisory periods. While advisory is dependent on grade level, it provides opportunities for emotional check-ins, building community, and nonacademic skill development.



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Recognizing that students were struggling with social and self-management skills due to the pandemic, New York City-based DREAM extended its morning meetings by 15 minutes per day and increased advisory meetings from three days to five days a week. Doing so created more opportunities for relationship-building and an extra focus on nonacademic skill development. DREAM uses a curriculum that emphasizes skill development, community building, and language building. The administration selected the curriculum because of its alignment to DREAM's view that instruction in nonacademic behaviors should be intentional and embedded into everything it does. The administration is now seeing students engaged in more typical social interactions and has recognized that cultivating nonacademic skills supports academic success as well.

Similarly, as students returned to campus, teachers and administrators at Texas-based Uplift Education noticed heightened cases of anxiety, depression, and suicidal tendencies. Using a curriculum focused on skills like building positive relationships, managing emotions, and goal setting, Uplift implemented advisory every morning for 25 minutes. Academic directors and deans are trained by the Uplift network's social-emotional learning instructional coaches, who then train teachers. Throughout the week, during their advisory period, teachers guide students as they set goals, dive into Second Step's curriculum, participate in curriculum-related challenges, and reflect on established goals. Along with advisory, Uplift has embedded the "Uplift 5," a series of actions to include in every class including morning meetings, to ensure that social-emotional learning becomes a part of students' lifestyles. The series requires every class to begin with a warm welcome, followed by an emotional check-in. At one point during the class period, students are given the opportunity to take a movement break. Near the end of the class period, teachers direct a mindful moment where students reflect on that day's teachings. The class then culminates with an optimistic close-out.

Offering extracurricular activities to support learning

In addition to in-class learning, schools we visited are also using extracurricular activities and movement, which were limited during the pandemic, to help reengage students in learning and the school community. For example, Uplift Education hired a wellness director who develops wellness initiatives across its schools. One of the initiatives it has prioritized in the aftermath of the pandemic has been student activity and movement. It extended opportunities for extracurricular activities and physical education, both to help students work through the more pronounced issues they are experiencing and to help them build social experiences and healthier connections with one another.

Similarly, Burnham Wood, located in Texas, provides numerous extracurricular activities for students, ranging from athletics to the arts to STEM-focused projects. The school has found that students are now more motivated academically as they must maintain a certain academic standard to participate.



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“There’s something for every kid, and if every kid is doing something... the more you’re going to be focused on in the academics part. Athletics always supports academics. As a coach, I can personally tell that when we have our football players, it’s not no-pass-no-play. You have to have an 80 or above, and every single person is like, ‘Sure, no problem, I got it.’”

BURNHAM WOOD, ADMINISTRATOR

Staff also highlighted that providing extracurricular activities gives students greater opportunities to explore their interests and grow as learners.

Taking advantage of its Idaho location, when Sage Middleton opened during the pandemic, the school prioritized offering an outdoor extracurricular program, where students are taken on local excursions such as trekking, camping, or snowshoeing. The outdoor program not only enabled students to gather safely during the pandemic but also helped emphasize the qualities of IB learner profile and mindfulness. If a student cannot afford these trips, the school subsidizes them through grants and scholarships. Other teachers and parents have commented on how they see strong willpower, perseverance, and compassion illustrated in their students. These real-world experiences provide opportunities to supplement the curriculum.

Conclusion

Because public charter schools have autonomy over their curriculum and the ability to quickly adapt to changing student needs, they have been able to design and implement programs in response to the increased student mental health needs associated with the pandemic. To support student mental health and well-being, the public charter schools we visited implemented a variety of strategies designed to embed nonacademic skills and supports into the school day. These strategies included embedding instruction for character development in academic curriculum, providing stand-alone courses related to nonacademic skills and support, expanding morning meetings and advisory periods to cover nonacademic skills, and broadening extracurricular options to reinforce some of those skills. By providing intentional instruction on nonacademic skills, these schools are not only helping support mental health for their students but are also providing early interventions that may help schools and students avoid more intensive and potentially costly interventions down the road.¹⁵



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¹ “Roughly Half of Public Schools Report That They Can Effectively Provide Mental Health Services to All Students in Need,” National Center for Education Statistics, May 31, 2022, https://nces.ed.gov/whatsnew/press_releases/05_31_2022_2.asp.

² Ibid.

³ “More Than 80 Percent of U.S. Public Schools Report Pandemic Has Negatively Impacted Student Behavior and Socio-Emotional Development,” National Center for Education Statistics, June 6, 2022, https://nces.ed.gov/whatsnew/press_releases/07_06_2022.asp.

⁴ Julian Shen-Berro, “Student Behavior Remains Concerning Amid Covid’s Impact, Educators Say,” Chalkbeat, March 7, 2023, <https://www.chalkbeat.org/2023/3/7/23628032/student-behavior-covid-school-classroom-survey>.

⁵ Laura S. Hamilton, Julia H. Kaufman, and Melissa Kay Diliberti, “Teaching and Leading through a Pandemic: Key Findings From the American Educator Panels Spring 2020 COVID-19 Surveys,” RAND Corporation, June 22, 2020, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA168-2.html.

⁶ Kristen Carroll, Priyanka Patel, Ebony Lambert, and Melissa Steel King, Students Speak: A Snapshot of Youth Well-Being in the District of Columbia, Bellwether, 2023, https://bellwether.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/StudentsSpeak_Bellwether_April2023.pdf.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ J. A. Durlak, J. L. Mahoney, and A. E. Boyle, “What We Know, and What We Need to Find Out About Universal, School-Based Social and Emotional Learning Programs for Children and Adolescents: A Review of Meta-Analyses and Directions for Future Research, Psychological Bulletin (2023), <https://casel.org/what-we-know-and-what-we-need-to-find-out/>; “SEL and Mental Health,” CASEL, <https://casel.org/fundamentals-of-sel/how-does-sel-support-your-priorities/sel-and-mental-health/>.

⁹ Durlak, Mahoney, and Boyle, “What We Know, and What We Need to Find Out.”;

¹⁰ David Campos and Rocio Delgado, “This Fall, Prioritize Opportunities for Students to Socialize” (blog), ASCD, August 24, 2021, <https://www.ascd.org/blogs/this-fall-prioritize-opportunities-for-students-to-socialize>; Raquel Plotka and Ruth Guirguis, “Distance Learning in Early Childhood During the COVID-19 Crisis: Family and Educators’ Experiences,” Early Childhood Education Journal (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-022-01384-5>.

¹¹ Durlak, Mahoney, and Boyle, “What We Know, and What We Need to Find Out.”

¹² “The IB Learner Profile,” International Baccalaureate, <https://www.ibo.org/benefits/learner-profile/>.

¹³ “High School Advisory Program Models,” Enriching Students, <https://www.enrichingstudents.com/high-school-advisory-program-models/>.

¹⁴ Nick Woolf, “Morning Meetings: Cultivating a Culture of Care and Safety” (blog), Panorama Education, <https://www.panoramaed.com/blog/morning-meeting>.

¹⁵ School Mental Health Quality Guide: Mental Health Promotion Services & Supports (Tier 1), National Center for School Mental Health, January 2020, <https://publiccharters.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/ad885587f996b5ef3e63d656e4d4c60.pdf>.