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South Florida schools are taking the lead in addressing teens' mental health | Opinion

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SPECIAL TO THE SUN SENTINEL |

DEC 16, 2021 AT 9:12 AM



The pandemic and its effects have increased stress levels among children and teens, leading to the American Academy of Pediatrics to call children's mental health a "national emergency" in a statement in October. (Image Source/Getty Images/Image Source)

Today's students are experiencing stressors we could have never imagined in the past — vaping, social media pressure, unrealistic body image portrayals at every turn, online bullying, opioid addiction epidemics — just to name a few. To make matters worse, kids also had to deal with a lot of physical and emotional issues during the pandemic.

Many had family members and friends sick or deceased from COVID-19. More than 140,000 children in the United States [have lost at least one caregiver](#) to the virus, according to the journal Pediatrics.

With extracurricular activities, social activities and usual routines disrupted, students experienced profound social isolation at home in quarantine. Some children witnessed more domestic violence at home. Because they were more sedentary, many children dealt with weight issues during the pandemic. Families overall dealt with job loss, homelessness and food insecurity, which only contributed to the stress on kids.

And, as the American Academy of Pediatrics and other leading medical groups [declared in October](#), there is a national emergency concerning children's mental health. Grief, stress, anxiety, depression — all issues kids were dealing with before COVID — have hit critical levels since the start of the pandemic.

Many educators, understandably so, have expressed concern about “learning loss” due to virtual schooling and missed days because of the pandemic.

However, it is crucial to understand that we cannot address learning loss, test scores, graduation rates and academic performance if we do not address the physical and emotional stressors and distractions in students' lives.

The bottom line is that physically and emotionally well students perform better academically.

Now, more than ever, schools need comprehensive health education programs and full-service health clinics with medical professionals, onsite, who can address the physical and emotional health issues of students.

Bridging the gap with public-private partnerships

To address these voids and lift some of the burden off of schools, education leaders can lean on local organizations to develop truly effective health programming that resonates with kids.

As the founder and executive director of [Health Information Project \(HIP\)](#), I have seen the effectiveness of such public-private partnerships firsthand.

In 2009, HIP, which started in Miami-Dade, became the first, and remains the only, peer-to-peer comprehensive health education program for high school students in the country.

Since its inception, HIP's innovative model has trained over 12,500 11th and 12th grade HIP Peer Health Educators, who have served more than 260,000 9th grade students. Every year, schools continue to implement HIP, with a 100% program retention rate. Our programming is implemented in every public high school in Miami-Dade (all 55 of them) and reaches all 9th graders at each school. The HIP model has been [validated by research partners](#) at ImpactED at the University of Pennsylvania.

HIP is revolutionizing health education by transforming high school students into health teachers, with a mission to ensure that all kids are physically and emotionally safe and healthy.

HIP expanded to Broward's public high schools during the 2020-2021 school year and to Pinellas and Monroe counties during the 2021-2022 school year. HIP also partners with several private and charter schools across Florida.

Broward plans to expand HIP to all of its public high schools thanks to the vision of Dr. Valerie Wanza, Todd LaPace, Priscilla Ribeiro and David

Watkins, leaders in the Broward County Public Schools, who are making student health a priority.

The argument for peer-to-peer education

Unlike the traditional high school health class, led by adults, in the HIP program, high school students are the teachers. Instead of adults lecturing, using outdated textbooks, cheesy videos and scare tactics, HIP is innovative, science-based and relevant to teenagers.

HIP addresses critical health topics such as suicide, eating disorders, obesity, depression, anxiety, stress, bullying and abuse. The peer-to-peer model creates a safe space for discussion and teens feel less isolated and less alone.

[Research has shown](#) that adolescents are more likely to shift their thinking and behaviors if they receive health messages from peers facing similar pressures and issues. And at schools with HIP programming, students report, year after year, that they prefer to be taught these topics by kids their age.

With Miami-Dade, Broward and Monroe bringing HIP into their schools, South Florida can become a case study in health programming for the rest of the state and, eventually, the country.

If our community makes adolescent health, especially mental health, a priority, with effective public/private partnerships, we can start to recover from the physical and emotional wounds of this pandemic.



Risa Berrin is the founder and executive director of [Health Information Project \(HIP\)](#), a South Florida-based nonprofit that facilitates science-based peer-to-peer high school health education, transforming high school students into health teachers, with a mission to ensure that all kids are physically and emotionally safe and healthy.