



For the past two years, pandemic-related disruptions have created hardships for students and teachers alike. From unexpected building closures to remote and hybrid learning, solutions have proven difficult, especially for younger children.<sup>1</sup>

Though much has been written about the negative academic impacts of the pandemic, particularly mathematics and reading learning losses,<sup>2</sup> increasingly, educators and policymakers have made it clear that we must not minimize the importance of mental health and social-emotional learning (SEL).

Leading the way on this issue is the Department of Education (DOE). On Oct. 19, 2021, the department released extensive guidance on the subject in the form of a resource titled “Supporting Child and Student Social, Emotional, Behavioral and Mental Health.”<sup>3</sup> The report explains that much like physical health, positive mental health is essential to healthy living. By affecting how we think, act and feel, mental health plays a significant role in how we relate to others, cope with stress and make healthy choices.<sup>4</sup>

In an interview with NPR, Miguel Cardona, secretary of education, explained that the DOE’s recently published guidance concerning mental health and SEL was developed in response to the mental health challenges today’s students are experiencing.

“Before the pandemic, about 13% to 22% of school-age youth experienced some mental health challenge,” Cardona said. “Now researchers estimate that that number is up to 80%. Students have experienced a lot — not only isolation away from their peers but sadly, in many cases, loss of work for family members or loss of life in their families. So, our students are in great need right now.”<sup>5</sup>



Participants at Camp Invention use teamwork to solve engaging STEM challenges.

## An Integrated Approach to Mental Health and SEL

Intended as a resource to supplement the DOE’s COVID-19 resources for schools, students and families<sup>6</sup>, “Supporting Child and Student Social, Emotional, Behavioral and Mental Health” provides readers with helpful information and research-backed findings to improve students’ mental and emotional well-being.

As part of these findings, the DOE identified seven distinct challenges to providing school or program-based mental health support for students, along with corresponding recommendations:

| CHALLENGES  | RECOMMENDATIONS  |
|---|--|
| 1. Rising Mental Health Needs and Disparities Among Children and Student Groups | 1. Prioritize Wellness for Each and Every Child, Student, Educator and Provider                              |
| 2. Perceived Stigma is a Barrier to Access                                      | 2. Enhance Mental Health Literacy and Reduce Stigma and Other Barriers to Access                             |
| 3. Ineffective Implementation of Practices                                      | 3. Implement Continuum of Evidence-Based Prevention Practices  |
| 4. Fragmented Delivery System   | 4. Establish an Integrated Framework of Educational, Social, Emotional and Behavioral-Health Support for All |
| 5. Policy and Funding Gaps  | 5. Leverage Policy and Funding   |
| 6. Gaps in Professional Development and Support                                 | 6. Enhance Workforce Capacity  |
| 7. Lack of Access to Usable Data to Guide Implementation Decisions              | 7. Use Data for Decision Making to Promote Equitable Implementation and Outcomes <sup>7</sup>                |

While administrators and educators will benefit from reading the entirety of the DOE report, we found challenge No. 4 (Fragmented Delivery Systems) and its solution (Establish an Integrated Framework of Educational, Social, Emotional and Behavioral-Health Support for All) particularly insightful.

1. Kim, M. (2020, September 16). Families with young students struggle with distance learning. KQED. Retrieved from <https://www.kqed.org/forum/2010101879731/families-with-young-students-struggle-with-distance-learning>

2. Dorn, E., Hancock, B., Sarakatsannis, J., & Viruleg, E. (2022, February 28). Covid-19 and education: An emerging K-shaped recovery. McKinsey & Company. Retrieved from <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/education/our-insights/covid-19-and-education-an-emerging-k-shaped-recovery>

3. U.S. Department of Education. (2021). Supporting Child and Student Social, Emotional, Behavioral, and Mental Health Needs. U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved from <https://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/us-department-education-releases-new-resource-supporting-child-and-student-social-emotional-behavioral-and-mental-health-during-covid-19-era>

4. Ibid.,

5. Cardona, M. (2021, October 19). Kids' Mental Health Crisis is at a critical point, Education secretary Cardona says. NPR. Retrieved from <https://www.npr.org/2021/10/19/1047223095/kids-mental-health-crisis-is-at-a-critical-point-education-secretary-cardona-say>

6. U.S. Department of Education. Covid-19 resources for schools, students, and families. COVID-19 Resources for Schools, Students, and Families. U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved from <https://www.ed.gov/coronavirus>

Citing research published by Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor, co-directors of the School Mental Health Project at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), the DOE explains that often, the SEL and mental health support provided by teachers, counselors, school psychologists and social workers is siloed, and these professionals tend to “work in relative isolation from one another.”<sup>8</sup>

For younger students especially, the DOE found that additional complexity and risks exist due to variations in available resources, as well as mixed delivery settings including home, family and center based child care and school settings. Because our current systems focus on individual-level needs, sometimes community support mechanisms are left out of the equation, and schools struggle to “establish a comprehensive system of mental health support.”<sup>9</sup>

When possible, the DOE recommends schools implement a more integrated mental health support strategy that removes existing barriers among stakeholders, and instead focuses on collaboration. To enhance the effectiveness of this strategy, the DOE notes that educators have a responsibility to create learning and social environments that are safe and supportive.

“Educators foster safe and supportive environments by maximizing child and student connections, arranging engaging and successful learning, and being positively constructive in responding to the needs of children and students,” the report said.



*NIHF’s programming gives children the opportunity to explore, experiment and express themselves.*

Alissa Alteri, a first-grade teacher at Leverett Elementary School in Leverett, Massachusetts, agrees with this assessment. In an article published by Edutopia, she wrote about how she has worked hard to make her classroom a happy place for her students.

“I ask myself the following questions: What are my students’ favorite activities? What draws the most engagement in the classroom? What can I do to make these occurrences more frequent?” she said.<sup>10</sup>

To further support school districts and the children in their care, the DOE published a list of concrete steps educators can take to better implement an integrated SEL framework:

## Communicate Shared Priorities

- At the state and district levels, identify standards to support SEL and align these with existing initiatives/ standards (like those emphasizing educational support) to save time and avoid additional alignment-related work
- Develop schedules to prioritize time for (a) explicit instruction and support around SEL and behavioral health, and (b) careful planning for the integration of SEL practices within educational content

## Focus on Effective Teams

- Design a system of support driven by community voices, including children, students, families and community partners
- Include ways for educators to support each other and acquire and improve skills to address diverse child or student needs
- Co-design a comprehensive and contextual plan focused on strengthening mental health promotion. Bring on experts to the existing school or program improvement team or form a workgroup that has direct connection to the existing team

## Integrate Implementation Support

- District leadership should develop a training and coaching plan to increase the number of school or program personnel with SEL expertise to ensure everyone understands their role within an interconnected system<sup>11</sup>

## Supporting SEL Through Invention Education

Like the DOE, the National Inventors Hall of Fame® (NIHF) believes that SEL is essential for today’s students — especially as many across the country continue recovering from pandemic-related disruptions.

By developing authentic invention education curricula inspired by the lessons and stories of some of the world’s greatest inventors, our NIHF Inductees<sup>12</sup>, we are able to offer hands-on activities that promote understanding and collaboration.

7. U.S. Department of Education. (2021). Supporting Child and Student Social, Emotional, Behavioral, and Mental Health Needs. U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved from <https://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/us-department-education-releases-new-resource-supporting-child-and-student-social-emotional-behavioral-and-mental-health-during-covid-19-era>

8. Ibid.,

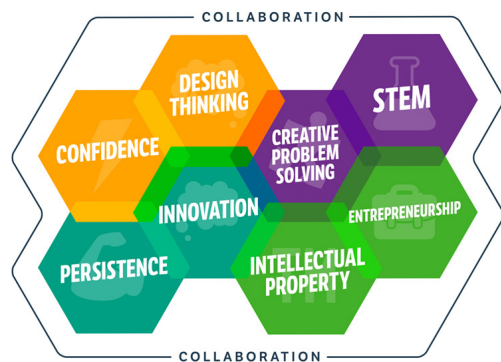
9. Ibid.,

10. Shea, A. A. (2022, March 7). Building a joyful classroom community. Edutopia. Retrieved from <https://www.edutopia.org/article/building-joyful-classroom-community>

11. U.S. Department of Education. (2021). Supporting Child and Student Social, Emotional, Behavioral, and Mental Health Needs. U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved from <https://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/us-department-education-releases-new-resource-supporting-child-and-student-social-emotional-behavioral-and-mental-health-during-covid-19-era>

12. The National Inventors Hall of Fame. Hall of Fame Inductees: National Inventors Hall of Fame®. Hall of Fame Inductees. National Inventors Hall of Fame®. Retrieved from <https://www.invent.org/inductees>

To achieve this, we've collaborated with our Inductees to identify nine essential skills and traits that unlock creative potential. We call this the I Can Invent® Mindset, and we use its principles to develop all our education programming.



*I Can Invent Mindset*

In turn, students who participate in our customized summer, afterschool and in-school programs learn that one of the first steps in creating an impactful invention is to consider the end user. By bringing their own ideas to life through hands-on invention, children learn to empathize with others and express themselves with confidence and build resilience as they work to overcome challenges.

A standout example of this comes from Florida's Pinellas County School District, which partnered with NIHF to implement our Camp Invention® summer program for both English language learner (ELL) and gifted and talented student populations.



*By working together, students in NIHF programs gain experience in SEL through hands-on activities.*

The supportive environment created at Camp Invention allowed all participants to feel comfortable and collaborate freely with their peers.

“One of the pieces of feedback from one of the [ELL] students that we received was that he finally felt he was in an environment where he felt safe to state his opinions and, in turn, to have his opinions or thoughts or critical and creative-thinking skills validated from the teacher,” Natasha Karac, English learners services director, said in an interview with NIHF.

To learn more about how NIHF can help your district create an engaging and integrated SEL strategy to benefit your students, we invite you to [contact us today](#).