

5 Key Findings with Action Steps to Improve the Well-Being of NC's Children



NORTH CAROLINA CENTER FOR
**RESILIENCE
& LEARNING**
PUBLIC SCHOOL FORUM OF NC

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The Challenge

Parents and teachers feel it, and institutions know it: North Carolina, like the rest of the nation, is facing a wave of mental health needs among its students. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, nearly 1 in 5 North Carolina students ages 8-15 years old already had a mental health disorder [in any given year](#). The needs have intensified since the COVID pandemic began. There was a 46% increase in youth experiencing one or more major depressive episodes between 2020 and 2021, and the rate of children discharged from emergency facilities with a behavioral health condition [increased by 70%](#) during the same time period.

North Carolina's children of color and LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer) youth are suffering disproportionately. A recent report found that LGBTQ high schoolers are more than [three times more likely](#) to consider or attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers. According to the 2021 Youth Risk Behavior Survey, Multi-racial students reported attempting suicide at a rate more than twice that of White students. Latinx, Black, and Asian students reported attempting suicide at rates more than 27%, 38%, and 65% higher than White students, [respectively](#). Our schools have a significant task to support their students and ensure that they do not fall through the cracks and can grow up healthy, happy and ready for the adult world ahead.

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This is as daunting as it is critical. Yet, the good news is that we know so much already about what works in schools to help our kids grow up safe, well, and successful. A key challenge is being clear about what we know so that we can actually use it.

What We Know About Positive Childhood Experiences (PCEs) and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

Children are shaped by their experiences. Positive Childhood Experiences (PCEs) help children grow up healthy, happy, and able to learn and behave at their best. However, Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) erode and impede children's wellbeing and healthy development, putting them at [increased risk](#) for illnesses and impairments for their whole lives. The impact of ACEs was first documented in the 1990s in a research study of over 17,000 people, showing that 64% of adults have experienced one ACE and 22% have 3 or more. The [study found](#) that the more ACEs a person had, the more likely they were to suffer from a wide range of physical, mental, social, and behavioral struggles. Since then, research has confirmed and [expanded upon](#) the [many different types](#) of adverse experiences that can negatively impact the development of children. What all ACEs have in

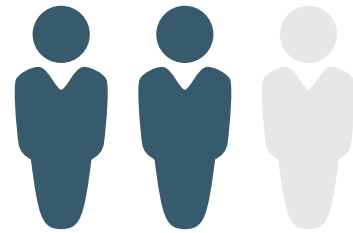
common is that they can deprive children of a sense of safety, love, and security in their lives and in their relationships with caregiving adults—which is to say they can deprive children of what they need to be healthy and to grow and thrive.

Adverse Childhood Experiences

Adverse Childhood Experiences, or ACEs, are potentially traumatic events that occur in childhood (0-17 years). Examples include: experiencing violence, abuse, or neglect; and growing up in a household with substance use problems, mental health problems, or instability due to parental separation or household members being incarcerated. ACEs are linked to chronic health problems, mental illness, and substance use problems in adolescence and adulthood. ACEs can also negatively impact education and job opportunities.

The field of neuroscience (the study of the brain and nervous system) has shown us how this happens - stress hormones that are released in the face of stressful experiences remain high even after an event has passed if children don't have secure caregiving relationships to turn to. Over time, this can lead to changes in brain structure and function, causing increased risk for mental, social, behavioral, and academic [problems](#). These children will react more quickly and strongly to even smaller stressors and are less likely to develop effective skills for calming down and solving problems with others. This ongoing stress in the absence of responsive caregiving support is known as toxic stress and often underlies symptoms of trauma in children. It is also a key piece of the connection that the Center for Disease Control (CDC) and others have identified between community support, health, [and success in education](#).

ACEs Statistics



By self-report, nearly 2/3rds of adults report experiencing a significant Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) before the age of 18, and more than 1 in 5 adults report experiencing 3 or more ACEs.

Positive Childhood Experiences

- The ability to talk with family about feelings.
- The sense that family is supportive during difficult times.
- The enjoyment of participation in community traditions.
- Feeling a sense of belonging in high school.
- Feeling supported by friends.
- Having at least two non-parent adults who genuinely cared.
- Feeling safe and protected by an adult in the home.

Evidence-Based Frameworks That Foster Safe and Supportive School Communities

The [impact of the COVID pandemic](#) has increased ACEs and the overall stress load [felt by many children](#), which is related to the soaring [youth mental health](#) needs we are now facing. Schools, like any social environments that care for children, can be places where a child experiences increased overwhelm, shame and isolation, *or* they can be places that foster PCEs—safe and supportive communities that provide the conditions necessary for learning and general success for **all** students – including physical and emotional safety, predictable structure, and a positive culture and climate where all feel valued and connected. The most effective frameworks that schools can use to become safe and supportive learning environments for their students are trauma-informed practice, culturally responsive practice, and social and emotional learning (SEL). These frameworks are inherently critical aspects of [the Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child \(WSCC\) Model](#), which the North Carolina State Board of Education [has adopted](#) to support the health and academic performance of North Carolina’s children. Each of these frameworks create systems and practices for supporting the universal needs of children across their diverse identities and circumstances.

Three evidence-based frameworks that foster safe and supportive school communities:

Trauma-informed practice



Culturally responsive practice



Social and emotional learning (SEL)

They are already referenced in current educational law, policy, and planning across North Carolina as in many other states, noting the extensive available evidence on what works. However, they are rarely and inconsistently defined or explained as to what they are, how they work, and why all schools need them.

- [Trauma-informed practice](#) involves understanding the prevalence and impacts of trauma and toxic stress, recognizing and responding to these impacts in ways which promote healing and health, and preventing future trauma. Trauma-informed schools operate with the understanding that stress reactions, underdeveloped relationships, and a need for more skills in managing emotions and solving problems, are often at the root of behaviors that disrupt classrooms and impede academic success. Because of this, punishment often doesn’t effectively address problematic behaviors, and can lead to worsening outcomes for students. To be a trauma-informed school means to engage in practices and policies which consistently address these roots, respond to students’ needs, and use discipline and consequences as part of a relationship-nurturing approach to [teach](#) students skills for success. This is crucial for children whose health and success are impacted by toxic stress and trauma, but trauma-informed practices create safe and supportive learning environments which help **all** children (those impacted by trauma and those impacted by more manageable stress) to build resilience and thrive in the face of life’s stressors. Trauma-informed practice is key for improving and [supporting student and staff mental health](#) so that all can learn and teach at their best.
- [Culturally responsive practice](#) involves employing education methods and practices that recognize, connect with, and build upon students’ cultural identities and lived experiences, both in terms of surface-level culture, and deep-level culture. Surface-level culture refers to recognizable foods, holidays, artistic styles, dress, language and customs which are commonly shared across a community. Deep-level culture refers to less conscious, foundational understandings about the



world, such as values, ideas about responsibility and respect, and ways of communicating that build or threaten trust. Culturally responsive practice draws on the cultural backgrounds and knowledge of students as assets in the classroom, so that everyone has space to contribute, feels valued, and can “see” themselves in the curriculum. Culturally responsive education maintains high expectations for all, while also incorporating specific learning styles and experiences in designing lessons and scaffolding [learning](#). Core culturally responsive practices for educators include getting to know individual students and their families to build positive connections and engagement; offering regular opportunities for students to respectfully share and listen to each other’s experiences, beliefs and perspectives; and building classroom and school cultures which recognize and value diversity. Equally important are becoming aware of and learning to question one’s own personal biases; and diversifying content, instructional practices and assessment methods to reflect the identities and strengths of [students in the classroom](#).

Culturally responsive education has been shown to help students [of all cultures](#) grow academically and socially in and outside of the classroom. All students benefit from culturally responsive practice because all students have a culture (or multiple cultures), and they benefit from content that is related to their individual experiences and that encourages them to appreciate and value others’. Culture is tied to identity, and a student needs to see and feel themselves included in the classroom and in their education in order to feel engaged and at ease enough to incorporate new information and take the risks necessary to grow and achieve. The process of learning is not so much like filling a bucket with knowledge, but much more like helping each student build bridges from what they have already learned through culture and personal experience, to connect with new knowledge and the broader world around them.

A growing body of [research](#) indicates that a lack of culturally responsive practice may be at the root of racial disparities in education. Having evolved from a largely unaddressed historical context of segregation and discrimination, our education system still tends by default to employ methods and practices which predominantly connect with and build upon the cultures and lived experiences of white children. With 55% of students in North Carolina’s public schools being students of color from a variety of cultural backgrounds, a majority of students are likely not receiving the type of educational practices [which best help them](#) learn the knowledge and skills [needed to succeed](#) in school and beyond. Providing an equitable education to all children requires intentionally making culturally responsive practice a standard in every classroom for all students.

- [Social and emotional learning \(SEL\)](#) is the way people gain and use the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to develop healthy identities, manage emotions, achieve goals, feel and show empathy, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions. A [growing body of study](#) across independent researchers has shown that “[all learning is social and emotional](#),” and that students, teachers, and schools experience a lot of benefits when SEL is integrated throughout a school’s curriculum and culture. Hundreds of studies from multiple countries, including the United States, and involving hundreds of thousands of students show that well-implemented SEL in schools [improves](#):

Academic and Future

Success:

- Students receiving SEL showed improvements in measures of achievement such as grades, math and reading scores, and standardized test scores, compared with those not receiving SEL
- SEL also increased rates of high school graduation, of earning a college degree, and of obtaining a stable job in young adulthood

School Safety:

- Students receiving SEL reported fewer incidents of bullying and victimization
- SEL also resulted in long-term reduction of aggressive and violent behaviors, and reduced likelihood of students becoming involved with police

Mental Health and Wellbeing:

- Students receiving SEL showed a decrease in anxiety and depressive symptoms
- They also showed more prosocial classroom behavior and positive attitudes about themselves and school
- Well-implemented SEL in school also [reduces burnout for teachers](#)

Surveys show that a majority of parents, teachers, students, and employers report being aware of the importance and benefits of increased SEL in schools. [A bi-partisan report](#) from 2015 highlights the evidence that SEL, also known by other names such as “soft skills” or “character development,” is key to closing the education gap and preparing all students for successful adulthood in the 21st century. SEL is a core aspect of both trauma-informed practice and culturally responsive practice in schools, and key to the combined success of both approaches in helping all students develop resilience and fulfill their potential.

Current State Policy To Address Student Mental Health

North Carolina has responded to the growing pool of clear and compelling evidence showing that SEL is critical to fulfilling the state’s duty and promise to provide a sound and basic education to all its students. In the fall of 2019, North Carolina joined over 30 other states (now over 40) in the Collaborating States Initiative, a community of practice supported by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) to help states [integrate SEL into education](#). North Carolina has an SEL Implementation Team including a broad cross-section of stakeholders who gathered input from young people and adults across the state in order to create a [clear vision](#) for what SEL is meant to achieve, grounded in research and evidence-based practice. This vision describes building a safe and supportive learning environment for every NC student, in alignment with the State Board of Education’s [Strategic Plan for 2025](#), as well as the Superintendent’s strategic vision known as [Operation Polaris](#). The Team is currently focused on thoughtfully scaling up implementation of systemic, high quality SEL across NC.

The leaders who are advancing SEL in the state are clearly aware of the innate connections between academic success, SEL, and issues of educational equity and mental health, including trauma, ACEs, and the need for culturally responsive education. Starting in 2020, the NC Department of Public Instruction (DPI) invited every school in the state to participate in the NC SEL and Educational Equity Project, which offers SEL training and reflection opportunities for teams of staff, as well as regular opportunities for representatives from all participating schools to meet together and exchange ideas and best practices. A total of 72 districts and charter schools participated in two cohorts of the project with each cohort meeting together for 15 months. As a result of that work, 32 of those districts and charter schools have continued to grow and learn together in an ongoing Community of Practice.

DPI describes the NC SEL and Educational Equity Project as part of the continued evolution of its [Project ACTIVATE](#) (Advancing Coordinated and Timely InterVentions, Awareness, Training, and Education). With funding from the federal government (known federally as Project AWARE), DPI's Project ACTIVATE has been piloted in specific NC counties, offering direct services for students, as well as workforce training to improve school climate, mental health awareness, prevention, and early intervention. In addition, Project ACTIVATE supports infrastructure development and evaluation activities in participating districts to generate best practices and recommendations for improving trauma-informed practices and school mental health across the state.



From lessons learned in these original pilot counties, DPI decided to offer SEL professional development and coaching to all districts, explicitly to “[foster systemic implementation](#) of SEL as a primary path to achieving the State Board of Education’s goals around educational equity, including elimination of opportunity gaps.” DPI says that it hopes participating schools will continue to meet, and expand and integrate SEL into their multi-tiered system of supports, to help them “adapt to the inequities heightened by the recent pandemic, and foster supportive relationships and [equitable learning environments](#).” Multi-tiered System of Support (MTSS) is a framework that aligns educational practice with diverse student needs through data-driven decision-making, evidence-based strategy selection, and systemic support for student success implemented at core, supplemental and intensive levels according to student need. Well-implemented MTSS is necessary for ensuring



that each student's educational needs are met and barriers to access are removed. [Research shows](#) that when SEL is integrated into MTSS that is implemented with fidelity and focused on increasing educational equity, it is an effective way of improving wellbeing, academic achievement, and long-term life outcomes for students across all socioeconomic and racial groups.

Project ACTIVATE also follows the recommendations of the [NC School Mental Health Initiative](#) (SMHI), a broad, multi-disciplinary partnership including educators, mental health professionals and parents, which gathers [research](#) to inform policy and foster the mental health and wellbeing of all NC students. As a part of this mission, SMHI works to share out lessons learned in Project ACTIVATE counties to districts throughout the state. The SMHI also operates in partnership with the SEL Implementation Team, at state, regional and local levels. This work aligns with the School-Based Mental Health Policy as developed by the State Board of Education and [as legislated](#) by the NC General Assembly in 2020. This policy requires all NC schools to have a school mental health improvement plan for developing and sustaining a continuum of services to promote mental health and wellbeing for students and staff, and a coordinated system of support in the school and community for students and their families. This policy also aligns with the State's [Five Year School Safety Plan](#) as created in 2021 by the Task Force for Safer Schools, which was established by general statute in 2016.

Moving Forward: What policymakers and constituents can do to support the whole child in North Carolina's schools

Clear references to the interconnectedness of student success and academic performance, social and emotional learning, mental health and well-being, equity and culturally responsive practice, and trauma-informed practice, are found throughout state education policy in North Carolina. Yet not all of these concepts are consistently and clearly defined. Social and emotional learning is defined both in the [State Board of Education's policy](#) complying with the NC General Assembly's statute on Character Education, and on [DPI's website](#). However, trauma-informed practice is frequently referenced without being officially defined. Culturally responsive practice is defined, but only sporadically through educator resources and not in official policy. The only explicit references to culturally responsive practice on DPI's website are listed as [resources for teaching American Indians](#).

DPI also sent out a bulletin in September 2020 inviting educators to the development of a [Culturally Responsive Teaching “Hub,”](#) but it does not appear that this hub is currently active.

In order to close the opportunity gaps still present among groups of students in NC, which have only [widened](#) since the pandemic, and to ensure that every student receives an education that will prepare them to succeed as adults, our policy-makers and institutions must clearly and consistently name and define the evidence-based models which will achieve these outcomes. They must also give clear and consistent reference to the evidence-base pointing to the importance and efficacy of these models, explaining why every NC student should receive an education that is trauma-informed, culturally responsive, and integrated with social and emotional learning, so that all students and staff have safe and supportive environments in which to learn and achieve at their best. It is important that our policy-makers and institutions do this so that it is clear to leaders, educators, parents, students and constituents what actions are being taken to provide effective and equitable education through our public schools, and the evidence showing the promising benefits of these actions when it comes to supporting the whole child.

Constituents can further these steps by sharing this brief and reaching out to their local school board members, the State Board of Education, and their representatives and senators in the NC General Assembly, at meetings, by phone and email, and over social media. Links where constituents can find this contact information are provided under Recommended Action Steps below. Our future as a state depends on the fulfillment of our commitment to support the success of each and every child through the proven guidance and understanding that the Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child Model provides. And our state education system’s ability to fulfill this commitment depends on its transparency, communication and consistency in integrating social and emotional learning, trauma-informed practice and culturally responsive practice into how North Carolina does public education.



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Our mission is to build resilience and success for all North Carolina students and educators. Using school-specific training and coaching, we seek to create safer and more supportive schools that champion the whole child, reduce the impact of

stress and trauma, and foster school communities where all feel valued.

The North Carolina Center for Resilience and Learning is a whole school, whole child framework working with districts and schools across the state to create trauma-informed learning environments that are safer and more supportive for ALL students. The Center aims to build understanding and awareness about trauma, stress, and their potential impacts while also helping schools focus on resilience, support, and safety for their staff and students.

To do this, our model provides two core components:

1. Professional development for educators on trauma and its potential impact on student learning as well as school-based strategies for building wellness and resilience for staff and students.
2. Ongoing coaching and technical assistance for a core team within a school to support moving past training and awareness and into action. Our coaches help schools to create and implement an action plan of resilience-building strategies tailored to the needs of their students, staff, and community.

Key Findings

1 North Carolina's children and adolescents are showing rising rates of mental health concerns, with LGBTQ+ youth and youth of color disproportionately affected.

2 A large body of research highlights that a wide range of Adverse Childhood Experiences, or ACEs, increase the risk of mental health problems for youth into their adulthood, and that Positive Childhood Experiences (PCEs), through secure caregiving relationships in families, communities and schools, can reduce mental health risk and improve outcomes for youth.

3 There are particular evidence-based practices which help schools increase PCEs and reduce risk factors for their students: trauma-informed practice, culturally responsive practice, and social and emotional learning (SEL).

4 These frameworks are inherently critical aspects of the Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child (WSCC) Model, which the North Carolina State Board of Education has adopted to support the health and academic performance of North Carolina's students.

5 These three frameworks are already referenced in current educational law, policy, and planning across North Carolina. However, they are rarely and inconsistently defined or explained as to what they are, how they work, and why all schools need them.

Recommended Action Steps for Policy Makers

To effectively use these frameworks to offer every North Carolina child the support and opportunity they need to be successful in their education and beyond, **we implore our policy makers and public institutions to do the following:**

- ✓ Clearly and consistently name and define *trauma-informed practice, culturally responsive practice, and social-emotional learning* in relevant laws and policies, consistent with the broad body of evidence referenced above showing how and why these frameworks improve outcomes for students across all backgrounds.
- ✓ Give clear and consistent reference to the evidence-base pointing to the importance and efficacy of these models, so that it is clear to leaders, educators, parents, students and constituents what actions are being taken and why.

Recommended Action Steps for Constituents

Constituents who want to support improved mental health and academic success for all of North Carolina's students can do so by sharing this brief and reaching out, at meetings, by phone and email, and over social media, to the following:

- ✓ their local school board members;
- ✓ the State Board of Education; contact the State Board of Education [here](#), and learn about its meeting schedule and how to attend [here](#).
- ✓ their representatives and senators in the NC General Assembly; learn how to contact your representatives and senators in the NC General Assembly [here](#).