Students’ struggles with mental health worsened by pandemic

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COLUMBUS – Educators working in low-income schools reported that 53% of students struggle with mental health issues, a problem that was worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic, according to a new survey from educational nonprofit First Book and Nationwide Children’s Hospital’s On Our Sleeves alliance.

Yet only 20% of the 967 educators surveyed feel prepared to support those struggling students, the study found.

By assessing the severity of the COVID-19 pandemic’s impact on students and providing guidance for educators, the two organizations hope to address what they say is an urgent need for mental health support in low-income schools, said Becki Last, First Book’s chief programming officer.

The survey, conducted between Dec. 13 and Jan. 21, surveyed educators serving students up to age 18 nationwide, including 50 who work in Ohio schools.

“These disparities for low-income communities or racially and ethnically diverse communities, they’ve existed before the pandemic, and the pandemic made them worse,” Ariana Hoet, clinical director of On Our Sleeves and a Nationwide Children’s pediatric psychologist, said. “We have to try to make these changes at the individual school level or the systemic level to help address students' mental health.”

A recent study by the U.S. Centers for Disease and Control and Prevention found that more than one-third of high school students reported experiencing poor mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic, and 44% of those students reported feeling persistently sad or hopeless for the past year.

The American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and the Children’s Hospital Association declared a national emergency in child and adolescent mental health last year as a result of increasing challenges caused by the pandemic.

After learning of this declaration, the nonprofit began reaching out to 525,000 educators in the United States who receive free First Book resources to hear directly from teachers, Last said. They then commissioned a quantitative study, and received nearly 970 responses that describe the severity of the mental health crisis in schools due to the pandemic.

Among educators surveyed, 72% reported that the pandemic introduced new mental health challenges to students, with high schoolers suffering more than young children. A majority of the educators, 85%, reported that mental health is a high or emergency priority this school year.

“Educators in our network are really calling for more mental health support, because they’re watching this crisis unfold live and in real-time,” Last said. “They’re seeing the mounting effects of grief, loss, instability and trauma and the visible impact of those factors on their students.”

First Book works with educators affiliated with Title I schools that receive federal aid for supplemental instruction or schools in which at least 70% of families make two times or less than the national poverty level ($55,500 for a family of four).

An unstable or difficult home life, hunger or food insecurity and isolation due to COVID-19 were the top three circumstances that contributed to poor mental health in children, according to the survey.

Children living in poverty typically experience stress, trauma, hunger and housing insecurity, Last said, and financial and social issues caused by the pandemic only worsened these problems.
"These kids are dealing with a lot and aren’t mentally ready to be in the classroom and show up ready to learn," Last said.

For students of color, especially Black and Asian students, the challenges of surviving in poverty and learning during the pandemic were coupled with the impact of systemic racism, Hoet said.

Many low-income families across the nation have struggled since the beginning of the pandemic, but the U.S. Census Bureau reported that non-Hispanic Black Americans had higher rates of economic hardships such as debt, housing insecurity and not having enough to eat than white Americans.

The CDC reported that people of color were hit harder than white Americans by COVID-19, resulting in higher deaths and hospitalization rates, Hoet said.

"All those things compounded and kind of exacerbated the effects of poverty that we were already worried about before the pandemic," Hoet said.

After learning that only 20% of educators felt prepared to support their students struggling with mental health, First Books created a free guide for educators with the help of behavioral health experts at Nationwide Children’s On Our Sleeves, a free pediatric mental health alliance.

The guide focuses on developing social and emotional competency in children, managing behavioral concerns, and promoting self-care for educators through classroom activities and free, evidence-based resources from On Our Sleeves. Within the first hour of being shared, First Book reported that the guide was downloaded by 3,500 educators nationwide.

"It’s not meant to replace the need for mental health specialists, but to give educators, who were yearning for something, a resource so that feel more prepared to help in any way that they can," Last said.

If these mental health issues continue and prevent low-income students from succeeding in school, it could have a lifelong impact on educational, professional, financial and social achievement, Hoet said.

After receiving responses from 967 educators in low-income schools across the country that show over half of students struggle with mental health, First Book and Nationwide Children's Hospital's On Our Sleeves created a guide for educators to support their students. FRED SQUILLANTE/ columbus dispatcher