

Student mental health: A crisis years in the making

Hope. School belongingness. More trained professionals. We know how to fix the mental health challenges facing American youth. So why aren't more schools putting those strategies to work?

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Robin Chenoweth: If you weren't paying attention before the pandemic, chances are you are now.

CBS News: There is an alarming new CDC survey of high school students finding 42% of them feel sadness or hopelessness and describe it as persistent.

Matt Richtel on Fresh Air: Among Black adolescents, we see suicide attempts leaping 80%, outpacing every other ethnic group. And you can see related statistics around visits to emergency rooms for self-harm, around increases in antidepressant use. There's hardly a category you can find related to mental health and mental well-being that has not spiked.

Robin Chenoweth: The headlines are stark. But people who work with youth and study mental health have seen this coming for years. Brett Zyromski has partnered with schools from Ohio to California, helping implement tools proven to avert the mental health crisis plaguing American youth. When the researcher and associate professor of school counseling walks into a school, he scans the scene.

Brett Zyromski: One of the things that I look for, is like, whose head is on the desk? Who's the one that everybody ignores? Who's the one that's apathetic and checked out? The most hopeless? Because that's the lowest level — that person doesn't see a way and doesn't feel like they can accomplish achieving that thing.

Robin Chenoweth: “That thing” might going to college or getting a meaningful job. Graduating from high school or simply having friends who understand them. Feeling like they belong and have something to contribute. For a growing number of youth, however, hopelessness, depression, sadness, distress, whatever name you want to put on it, have become persistent conditions. A report released in February by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention spells it out.

Brett Zyromski: One of the things that this report highlights is clear: The impact of the pandemic. It showed in a decade between 2011 and 2021, that there has been a 58% increase in feelings of sadness or hopelessness for our students that identify as female.

Antoinette Miranda: We're really able to show through this survey that they give, the Youth Risk Behavior Survey, that significant increases in a variety of areas for girls, much more than boys.

Robin Chenoweth: Antoinette Miranda is a professor of school psychology and chair of Ohio State's Department of Teaching and Learning. ...

Antoinette Miranda: And they particularly looked at girls and LGBTQ and saw these significant increases in sadness and depression and attempting suicides. ... And one of the articles called it that, a real crisis with our young women, young girls and women in k-12 education. ... I think it really is one that mental health professionals need to pay attention to, but more importantly, k-12 schools need to pay attention to at a time when there is a lot of legislation that is trying to squash the very thing that would help many of these girls.

Robin Chenoweth: None of these problems are new. If anything, experts say, the pandemic threw gasoline onto a fire that has been building for at least 10 years. If there is a silver lining, though, some experts say, it's that we know how to fix it. Tackling mental health challenges of America's youth requires leaders to have the will to act decisively, teaching educators how to give students hope and making schools a place where kids feel they truly belong.

Brett Zyromski: If you do that your D's and F's are going to be reduced, your grades are going to go up, graduation rates are going to go up, absences are going to go down, college enrollment rates are going to go up. We have this from the research. It's not like this is a guessing game. Like this is going to matter.

Robin Chenoweth: This is the Ohio State University Inspire Podcast. I'm Robin Chenoweth. Carol Delgrosso is our audio engineer. Meghan Beery is our student intern. Inspire is a production of the College of Education and Human Ecology.

The greatest problems facing today's youth are not the problems faced by their parents. Teen pregnancy has gone down. Cigarette smoking by teens is at an all-time low and young people are drinking less than their parents did. According to a New York Times report last December, the risks teens and preteens face now are more internal than external. The pandemic exacerbated issues like anxiety and depression that have been bubbling up for years. Assistant Professor Rhodesia McMillian is the co-principal investigator of a \$5.2 million grant led Associate Professor Scott Graves. It will provide more mental health services to students in Columbus City Schools — the first step to addressing the problem there.

Robin Chenoweth: Why did you apply for that grant?

Rhodesia McMillian: Dr. Graves and I applied for this grant from the U.S. Department of Education because of the increasing need for mental health services for our school aged children. And what he and I saw is that the coronavirus had a significant impact on the mental and emotional health of adults, alone. So similarly, our children, or students, they were not shielded from those stressors of the pandemic. And so now that COVID-19 has subsided in

many ways, we're beginning to see the full weight of the pandemic. And we've seen a significant increase in the need for interventions that address the social, emotional and behavioral health of our students. And this funding will provide us with the ability to fund graduate students to also help provide these services.

Robin Chenoweth: I'm curious as to how were you seeing those outcomes of COVID-19. Were you actually in the schools seeing that or were these things being reported to you from psychologists in the field?

Rhodesia McMillian: Dr. Graves and I both are very involved in the practitioner side, because in addition to me being an academic, I am still a school psychologist.

Robin Chenoweth: Are you actually working as a school psychologist within Columbus schools, at the same time, concurrently, as you are a professor at Ohio State?

Rhodesia McMillian: Yeah, I only do 10 hours a week, and that seems like a lot. ... But I'm genuinely motivated by the needs of our community and by the needs of our students. Everything that I do, everything that I do, whether it's being a researcher or being a practitioner, is student centered. And I would be remiss if I did not lend my support to Columbus City Schools. And so, yes, it's 10 hours a week. But it's enough and it's enough to make a small impact. ... And so I see firsthand what our students are grappling with. ... In Columbus, personally, I've seen an increase of students who are experiencing homelessness. Our students are reflections of what they are experiencing in their households, what they're experiencing in their communities. So, everything that we see going on in our communities around us, you know, our students are seeing that and experiencing that as well. ... This project proposes to partner with 10, high-need, pre-K through eighth grade elementary and middle grade schools. We estimate that this grant will serve as approximately 4,500 students each year of the grant project.

Robin Chenoweth: That's significant, because one of the biggest barriers to helping students cope is the extreme shortage of school psychologists, school counselors and school social workers. Ohio, for example, has just one school psychologist for every 1,084 students. The recommended ratio is 1 to 500. More psychologists and practitioners will allow more one-on-one, more group sessions dealing with anxiety and depression and more care.

Rhodesia McMillian: We can talk them through social emotional learning opportunities, how to cultivate healthy relationships, or how to meander, the school climate. Or how do you still manage the expectations of school, while perhaps dealing with certain stressors from home? And, so, as a school psychologist is more than just providing a mentorship or things of that nature. We are trained professionals to be able to guide those students through difficult life experiences.

Robin Chenoweth: In many ways, the pandemic has forced the issue. Some leaders have begun to prioritize the mental health of our nation's children. Federal grants like McMillian's and Graves' are one indicator.

Rhodesia McMillian: Education reform policy is shifting. We see that provisions are being made at the federal level with an increase in school psychologists, counselors and social workers. We see that in federal legislation. But it's not enough. We still need state education agencies and local education agencies to make specific policy shifts, such as creating wrap-around programming.

Robin Chenoweth: Programming with agencies and community partners that helps students to get housing, food and medical attention.

Rhodesia McMillian: Schooling is not what it used to be; we need all hands on deck.

Robin Chenoweth: Last year, Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine launched a program that provided behavioral health care to 16,000 low-income children. Other states, from Texas to Pennsylvania, have initiated similar programs. But for some of the nation's kids, getting mental health support has been a one-step-forward, three-steps-back ordeal. One of the CDC's most alarming findings was about the mental health of LGBTQ students, 25% of whom attempted suicide during the past year. The survey did not account for transgender youth. But Antoinette Miranda also serves on Ohio's State Board of Education and recently heard testimony to ban gender-inclusive bathrooms.

Antoinette Miranda: In 2022, there were 315 discriminatory, anti-LGBTQ bills proposed across the United States, of which 29 passed into law. Already in 2023, we have 340 anti-LGBTQ bills, many of them targeting transgender. So, we have conservative legislators spending an enormous amount of time on a group that is less than 1.6% of the population in the United States.

Robin Chenoweth: And while some groups argue that girls aren't safe in bathrooms where transgender girls can enter, 14% of all females surveyed by the CDC said that they been forced to have sex, the first increase in 10 years.

Antoinette Miranda: And I was really struck by the fact that, we're focused on that when girls in general are experiencing sexual assault — by boys.

Robin Chenoweth: No legislation has been proposed to protect and offer support to sexually assaulted female students. Meanwhile, the mental health of LGBTQ youth is at a critical low.

Antoinette Miranda: We already know that LGBTQ and transgender reports higher levels of suicide, higher mental health issues, homelessness, etc. We've already seen that spike in the state of Ohio that after this resolution was passed by the State Board of Education, their mental health needs have increased. Because there's a feeling that you're being targeted, that you're

being bullied, that people are seeing you as less than. So, it's no surprise that the mental health issues have increased. And, so, I think our focus on certain groups is out of whack.

Robin Chenoweth: What steps do you think need to be taken to help?

Antoinette Miranda: Well, one of the things that a lot of them talk about is making sure there's mental health services in the schools. And that means making sure you have counselors that are available, school psychologists that are available in the school. ... School connectedness is really important. With the pandemic, I think there has been a sense of many of our teens, regardless of whether you're girl, boy, LGBTQ, that there's a loss of connectedness in schools. ... Students felt disconnected. They didn't have available to them trusted adults, who could be mentors, be able to go to counselors. ... So schools, as they come back from the pandemic, are really having to try to put in place the school connectedness and making sure that students feel accepted, that there's a positive culture and climate that's occurring in the schools.

Robin Chenoweth: School connectedness. Brett Zyromski calls it school belonging. The CDC describes it as students feeling that the adults and peers in their schools care about them as individuals — not just about their learning. For kids to work through mental health problems, their schools need to become a haven, a community of support and belonging. But that's not what most schools are emphasizing post-pandemic, Zyromski says.

Robin Chenoweth: Do you think that the pandemic might have made us finally look at this as a priority, instead of as something we might get to if we have enough money and time?

Brett Zyromski: If you look at a district improvement plan, or a school improvement plan for almost any school district around this country, the first two things you're going to see are like math and reading. ... When I would go around the country and I work in different districts, I'm paying attention to what happens during the pandemic, after the pandemic, as far as, where are they investing their money? Where are they investing their time? Where do they invest in with their training with their teachers and their staff? And if the focus is entirely on math and reading credit recovery, then I worry about the kids.

Robin Chenoweth: It sounds to me like it definitely starts with leadership. You have to have a superintendent who — and probably even a school board — who are behind this.

Brett Zyromski: When the state is saying, we're going to do standardized testing every single year, and your math and reading scores are what you're going to get rewarded or penalized for, to have a school board and superintendent say, *and* we're going to impact those math and reading scores by focusing on the mental health and the holistic success for our students through executive functioning, non-cognitive skills, social emotional learning, that's going to be our core focus. I mean, that's transformative. ... If our students aren't really gaining and retaining what we're doing in our core classes, because they're struggling with these mental health issues, then this is party one to help take care of those mental health issues. It's not like seat time; we need to engage the time. We can extend the school day at summer school, but if

our kids aren't engaged during the time that they're at school, none of that will matter. And, so, what we're really trying to do is, is create engaged students who can learn. And, so, if we don't have engaged students who can learn, then they can sit in your class all day and frustrate you, and it's not really going to change anything. So, to me, it's really changing the culture of schools to where we all understand the impact and the power of this work, and we embrace it together. And we kind of move forward together on this.

Robin Chenoweth: So, how do schools and communities do that?

Robin Chenoweth: What do you mean, exactly, when you talk about school belonging?

Brett Zyromski: When we greet our students at the front door with their names, like that's the first step towards school belonging. That's not school belonging by itself. Like, that's what we should do minimally. And then we need to create an environment where the focus is on creating community and belonging. ... And so for adolescents in the school, it's really relationships with the peers, relationships with the teachers, and then an overall feeling towards the school: So you kind of think of those three areas, it's like, I got my peer relationships, I really am excited to go see my friends or see somebody at school; I got teachers who I feel like they actually know me, my name, they want to see me every day. They care whether I'm missing or there and they care about me as a person. ... But the teacher relationship is really, really the core of this.

Robin Chenoweth: Teachers who are good at this know their students very well and celebrate the uniqueness of each child. They don't just model acceptance and encouragement, but intentionally build it into the class culture, the activities, the lessons. They bridge home and school by engaging families — especially those of marginalized students like multi-lingual learners. They incorporate traditions that make students feel grounded and included. School belonging, feeling safe at home, having at least two adults to talk to who aren't your parents, even those community and religious traditions: Experts call those positive childhood experiences, and they are a sub-category of another set of buffers called protective factors. Google them. Because these all work like a kind of anti-venom against adverse childhood experiences — all the bad stuff that kids encounter. And the pandemic was certainly adverse.

Brett Zyromsky: The research is extensive, so broad around the way that those protective factors can buffer mental health issues, lead to academic success, lead to reduction in arrests, actually, and substance abuse. There's just a wide, wide range of research that shows a lot of mental, behavioral, social health outcomes from having protective factors.

Robin Chenoweth: It's also why schools from Pickerington, Ohio, to Hauneme, California, have put an emphasis on school belonging as part of their strategy to improve kids' mental health. Back to the kid face-down on the desk. If that child feels they are part of something larger — a community — they are more likely to engage and to strive. We know this. But we also know that if they are LGBTQ, or homeless, or multi-lingual, that can be harder to achieve. Those kids need extra support, those wraparound resources that Rhodesia McMillian talked about. But to

battle their mental health challenges, Zyromsky says, all kids need something more. And that is hope.

Brett Zyromski: Hope. We haven't really talked about hope...

Robin Chenoweth: Yeah, I was going to say, how do you, how do you give a kid hope? I mean, it's not like you can hand it to them on a platter.

Brett Zyromski: Oh, it's so exciting. So, Chan Hellman and Casey Glenn Grant wrote a book called *Hope Rising*. Anybody can get it. It's great. And, basically, hope's the belief that your future can be brighter and better than your past. And this is their words, by the way, you actually have a role to play in making your life better. So, the research around hope is, is robust.

Robin Chenoweth: I hopped online to take the Hope Score test, then read about Hellman, the co-author, who himself was homeless in high school. Certain people encouraged him to set goals, map out a plan, and then made him feel capable of doing it. He earned a PhD in psychology and eventually began researching how hope can transform anyone. Zyromski is a total groupie, especially given the science behind hope, and speaks all over the country about how to cultivate hope among sad and distressed kids.

Brett Zyromski: There's even research that shows when people get to law school, that hope is a better predictor of law school success than LSAT scores.

Robin Chenoweth: Bingo! Just what the kid face-planted on the desk needs to hear. A quote in the book, by Rick Snyder, resonates with Zyromski: "You can get there from here."

Brett Zyromski: That phrase is, is just to me, it's so encouraging: You can get there from here. Because what he's saying is that you have pathways. Let's explore those pathways, and then you can do it. If you think about what agency is, that willpower, it's cheerleaders. Someone has to say, not only here are all the pathways for you to get to that postsecondary option that you want to do, whether that be career or four-year college or trade, whatever. This is what you've decided you want to do — your passion areas. But you can do this. Even in higher ed, I think about how many of the students in our program, whether it's a master's program or doc student that says, somebody tapped me on the shoulder and said, "You can do this. You have to go do this, this program, because you're going to be great at that."

Robin Chenoweth: And that little boost is enough sometimes to push somebody to achieve.

Brett Zyromski: That's willpower. You have a reframe of your willpower.

Robin Chenoweth: So how important is that teachers, counselors, administrators do that for kids? Is that happening enough?

Brett Zyromski: No, I mean, it's not happening enough, I think, because we haven't been teaching it. Our administrators aren't learning it. Our teachers aren't learning it. Our school counselors aren't learning it, to be honest. So, we need to make sure that everybody is learning about the power of hope, that we're getting into all of our schools. Again, it should be in every district improvement plan, school improvement plan. It should be measured for every student. And then you should have interventions that are particularly focused on building hope for all of our kids. ... We know that it matters from elementary school all the way through college.

Robin Chenoweth: So, take heart. We can get there from here. We know what to do. Tear a page out from the book of Chan Hellman or Rick Snyder, or from Rhodesia McMillian, whose Hope Score is nearly perfect. She draws inspiration from the high schoolers she sees each week.

Rhodesia McMillian: Not only am I the type of researcher but I'm the type of human being that sees the glass as half full. ... The numbers are startling, the numbers are startling. But because I am around adolescents a lot, you know, there's still hope.

Call to action: To see a list of proven protective factors compiled by Ohio State counselor education doctoral students, and to see strategies for schools by the college's Center on Education and Training for Employment to bolster family engagement, thereby building school belonging, see the links in our episode notes.

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