

Mind the Gap: A Call to Action

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Short Communication

In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, findings indicate a significant gap in learning exists amongst students of all ages, backgrounds, and academic levels. This gap transpires despite teacher's and academic leader's best efforts to minimize disparities from the 1.5 years of virtual or atypical learning. Nevertheless, schools must now acknowledge this recent data and identify how they will address it moving forward. This Call to Action urges educational leaders and decision makers to put students first and #MindTheGap.

"Mind the gap" is a train/rail audible or visual warning frequently issued to rail passengers. The purpose is to remind passengers to use caution while crossing the spatial gap that exists between the train door and station platform. This warning exists in an effort to put passenger safety first. The same notion of #MindTheGap is being used in the educational context: to urge academic leaders and education decision makers to take a similar approach when looking at student learning loss. Asking students to traverse the disparity that currently exists between their current level of competence and the expected/grade level does not put students first and could result in a catastrophic decline of intellectual, mental and emotional wellbeing.

Current literature and recent findings note that stress in America is at an all-time high. The American Psychological Association (2020) [1] went so far to claim that the COVID-19 pandemic has created a national mental health crisis. The sheer magnitude and long-term consequences resulting from the pandemic is yet to be determined; however, data is showing that teenagers and young adults are of the most concerning population as these individuals currently report

elevated levels of stress and symptoms of depression (p. 3). Yet, this age group does not yet have the emotional maturity and/or skillset to navigate these fears and concerns. The vast majority of secondary-age students (8 in 10) viewed school as a significant source of stress leading into the 2021-22 academic school year (p.3). As schools continue to re-evaluate the current state of student mental and psychological health, it is urged that they consider these alarming statistics. These concerns tied to disrupted social norms/patterns illustrate additional cause for concern.

Social health and interpersonal connectedness become increasingly more important as young people age. Theorists have studied basic human needs which have long-standing implications in the educational context. Relatedness is a key component to self-actualization, and relatedness to peers becomes increasingly more important in the adolescent years. There is still much to be determined about the impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on young people's social health. Social norms changed as students were forced to interact with peers in an atypical fashion (quarantine and lock down). Furthermore, as society re-emerged to some degree of normalcy, it can be hypothesized there will be further social implications resulting from the inability to read emotion and/or connect with others due to limitations ascertained with masks. This concern, coupled with the mental health crisis is another component that academic leaders must consider.

The information and facts presented on young people's health and wellbeing will continue to be exasperated by the intellectual/academic decline. Preliminary data from

standardized state assessments illustrate that the average student is minimally one grade level behind his/her predecessor (cite). Whole-child wellbeing needs to be central to the conversation that academic leaders are having to best determine a course of action to move forward as they aim to minimize this disparity. Given that the majority of students are showing significant learning gaps, the approach needs to be multi-faceted and 'whole-child' centred.

The Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child (WSCC) model [2] is a student-centered framework supported by the CDC (2021) [3] which emphasizes the connections between health and academic achievement as well as the importance of evidence-based school policies and practices. Key collaboration efforts are needed from the fields of education, health education, counselling, community health services, family engagement, community involvement and public health advocates. These groups can work to build a unified and collaborative approach in order to #MindTheGap.

The growing need to support the social-emotional health of students may extend beyond the scope of what a district can provide and may benefit from various community psychological, psychoeducational, and psychosocial support services for assessments, programming, and select

interventions. Furthermore, there is an additional benefit when families and community groups are involved. The involvement of family and community members in schools is critical for students' health. Families may support and reinforce healthy habits at home, in- and out-of-school, and in the community. Community agencies and groups can cooperate with schools to provide essential resources for student health and learning with the aid of school officials. These examples reflect how WSCC partners positively engage with, and support each other in order to improve student learning to help #MindTheGap. This Call to Action urges public health and educational decision makers to recognize the current academic and mental health concerns of K-12 students and considers the WSCC model as a valuable resource to #MindTheGap and put their needs first.

References

1. American Psychological Association (2020) Stress in America 2020: A National mental health crisis.
2. Child (WSCC) Components of WSCC.
3. Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2021) Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child (WSCC).