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**SUPPORTING SEL AND  
STUDENT WELLNESS  
THROUGH BETTER  
LEARNING SPACE  
DESIGN**

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# Summary

The physical, social, and emotional well-being of students has always been important to their development both academically and outside of school. Students' well-being is a key factor in their ability to succeed in the classroom, in a career, and in life—and research shows that cultivating social-emotional skills such as self-management, social awareness, and responsible decision-making provides a foundation for safe and productive learning.

In the wake of the pandemic, student well-being is even more critical. COVID has taken a huge toll on students' mental, social, and emotional wellness. This has affected their ability to focus and learn in school—and it can have long-term implications for their health and safety.

In response to this challenge, many K-12 leaders have established programs and supports to improve student wellness. For instance, school systems have integrated social and emotional learning (SEL) into instruction, added school counselors and psychologists, adopted trauma-informed teaching strategies, taught educators how to recognize the warning signs of mental health disorders, and connected at-risk students with the help they need.

While these are all important strategies, the design of the learning environment itself plays a key role in either supporting or suppressing student well-being. This white paper explores the critical link between learning space design, SEL, and wellness—and it describes six important design principles for enhancing student well-being.

## AN URGENT NEED

Many students were already struggling with mental health issues such as anxiety and depression before the pandemic. COVID has only added to this challenge.

At least 200,000 children in the United States have lost a parent or other caregiver to COVID,<sup>1</sup> and the resulting trauma has had a profound effect on student mental health. One study estimates that anxiety and depression rates among children worldwide have doubled during the pandemic, with at least one in five children now suffering from these disorders.<sup>2</sup>

According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), in 2021 more than four in 10 students (42 percent) felt persistently sad or hopeless—and nearly one-third (29 percent) experienced poor mental health. More than one in five (22 percent) seriously considered attempting suicide, and one in 10 did attempt suicide. “These data bring into focus the level of distress many students are experiencing,” the agency said.<sup>3</sup>

The student mental health crisis is naturally affecting education. More than 75 percent of K-12 leaders surveyed in spring 2022 said their teachers and staff have voiced concerns about student anxiety, depression, and trauma, the *Washington Post* reports.<sup>4</sup>

## ADDRESSING THE STUDENT WELLNESS CRISIS

In response to these challenges, K-12 leaders have taken many steps to address student wellness in their schools, such as integrating trauma-informed teaching practices and SEL instruction into their learning environments.

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) has identified six core principles for implementing trauma-informed practices within schools, child care centers, and other public institutions<sup>5</sup> :

- **Safety:** Students who are dealing with trauma need to feel both physically and psychologically safe within the learning environment. This means the space itself must •be safe and secure, and the interpersonal interactions that take place there also must feel safe for students.
- **Trustworthiness and transparency:** Educators need to establish trust among students, and one way this occurs is when classroom operations and decisions are conducted with full transparency. For this reason, it’s important for educators to establish clear routines with students, so there are no surprises.

<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Chuck, Brenda Breslauer, and Cynthia McFadden, “More than 200,000 kids have lost a parent or caregiver to Covid. Efforts to help them have been haphazard.” NBC News, March 7, 2022. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/200000-us-children-lost-parent-caregiver-covid-efforts-help-haphazard-rcna16140>

<sup>2</sup> Lianna Matt McLernon, “Depression and anxiety doubled in children, pandemic study says.” Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy (CIDRAP) News, Aug. 9, 2021. <https://www.cidrap.umn.edu/depression-and-anxiety-doubled-children-pandemic-study-says>

<sup>3</sup> CDC, “Adolescent Mental Health Continues to Worsen.” <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/mental-health/index.htm>

<sup>4</sup> Donna St. George and Valerie Strauss, “The crisis of student mental health is much vaster than we realize,” *The Washington Post*, Dec. 5, 2022. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2022/12/05/crisis-student-mental-health-is-much-vaster-than-we-realize/>

<sup>5</sup> “SAMHSA’s Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach.” <https://store.samhsa.gov/product/SAMHSA-s-Concept-of-Trauma-and-Guidance-for-a-Trauma-Informed-Approach/SMA14-4884>

- **Peer support:** Building connections among students and helping them feel like part of a learning community is critical in helping them overcome trauma.
- **Collaboration and mutuality:** Student well-being is supported by the development of healthy relationships built on mutual respect not just between students and their peers, but also between students and their teachers.
- **Empowerment, voice, and choice:** Healing from trauma is enhanced when students are supported in shared decision-making, choice, and goal-setting—and when they're empowered to advocate for themselves in the classroom.
- **Cultural, historical, and gender sensitivity:** Being responsive and sensitive to individual needs and differences, and helping everyone feel welcome and included, is another important factor in helping students overcome trauma and feel safe.

There is a lot of overlap between the characteristics of a trauma-sensitive learning environment and the factors that research has identified as critical in helping students feel safe, supported, and connected to their school, which in turn improves their well-being.

As the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention observes: “School connectedness has long-lasting effects on health and well-being. Youth who feel connected at school are significantly less likely to experience health risks related to sexual health, substance abuse, violence, and mental health in adulthood.”<sup>6</sup>

These factors include...

- **Comfort and security:** When students are both physically comfortable and emotionally secure, they're more at ease: They can relax, block out negative thoughts, and focus more effectively on instruction.
- **Social connection and inclusion:** Citing research, the CDC notes: “Students who report feeling connected to, supported by, and respected by their peers demonstrate higher levels of engagement ... and report feeling more connected to their school.”<sup>7</sup>
- **Autonomy and choice:** Student autonomy and empowerment are also key factors. “When students feel their teachers are open to their ideas and allow them to make choices regarding their learning, ... they are more engaged in school, less disruptive in class, and report feeling a stronger sense of belonging,” the CDC says.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup>CDC, “School Connectedness.” [1] Elizabeth Chuck, Brenda Breslauer, and Cynthia McFadden, “More than 200,000 kids have lost a parent or caregiver to Covid. Efforts to help them have been haphazard.” NBC News, March 7, 2022. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/200000-us-children-lost-parent-caregiver-covid-efforts-help-haphazard-rcna16140>

<sup>7</sup>[CDC, “Peer Connection & Support.” <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/classroom-management/peer-connection.htm>

<sup>8</sup>CDC, “Student Autonomy & Empowerment.” [https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/classroom-management/student\\_autonomy.htm](https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/classroom-management/student_autonomy.htm)

SEL, which involves the acquisition of skills and competencies that help students understand and manage their emotions, develop and maintain healthy relationships, and make responsible decisions, plays an important role in establishing a learning environment that exhibits these characteristics.

According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), the five core SEL competencies are:

- **Self-awareness**, or the ability to accurately recognize one's own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior. This involves having a clear understanding of one's strengths and limitations, as well as having a sense of confidence and self-efficacy.
- **Self-management**, or the ability to regulate one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors in different situations. This involves setting and working toward goals, effectively managing stress, demonstrating self-discipline and self-motivation, persevering in the face of challenges, and maintaining a positive mindset.
- **Social awareness**, or the ability to understand and empathize with others. This involves recognizing social norms, appreciating and respecting people's differences, and engaging in responsible and inclusive behavior.
- **Relationship skills**, or the ability to establish and maintain healthy and positive relationships with diverse individuals and groups. Relationship skills include effective communication, active listening, cooperation, collaboration, conflict resolution, and empathy.
- **Responsible decision-making**, or the ability to make constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions. This involves evaluating the potential consequences of different actions, considering the well-being of oneself and others, making thoughtful and ethical decisions, and taking responsibility for one's choices.

When students learn these critical competencies, they are better able to cope with their own emotions. They're also more capable of showing empathy for and being kind to others, which creates an environment where everyone feels safe, comfortable, accepted, and included.

# How Learning Space Design Can Help

The design of the physical learning space plays an important role in either helping or hampering student well-being. In particular, educators can promote better well-being by creating flexible learning spaces that give students choices in where to sit, foster connection among students, and integrate comfort and inclusiveness into their design.

This idea is backed by research. For instance, a team of Australian researchers examined eight primary and secondary schools in that country and concluded that flexible learning spaces—characterized by a variety of furniture and seating types that could be configured in multiple ways to facilitate teaching and learning—increased student well-being by enhancing the students' comfort, movement, connectedness, and inclusivity.

"It was widely perceived that the teaching and learning taking place in [these] flexible spaces had a positive impact on the social and emotional well-being of teachers and students," the researchers wrote (Kariippanon et al., 2018).

The researchers found that flexible learning spaces were more comfortable spaces to learn in, because they gave students choices in where to sit—including not only traditional desks and chairs but also padded chairs, beanbags, and other soft seating options.

This resulted in higher levels of engagement and satisfaction with school. The researchers quoted one student as saying, "Instead of having to sit in chairs and sit up straight, we get to relax on the furniture, which is really comfortable, and so you get to learn better."

In terms of movement, the researchers found that the open spaces afforded by flexible learning spaces—combined with the changes to a more active and collaborative style of learning—encouraged more movement, which was beneficial to students' physical health and their emotional well-being. One student was quoted as saying, "We get to move a lot, and that's really comfortable because you're not always sitting."

In terms of connectedness, the researchers noted that this is achieved through high-quality relationships between students and their teacher and between students and their peers. Flexible learning environments fostered stronger relationships because they allowed for more movement, interaction, and collaborative group work. One student said, "I think I've made more friends with the group work. I know we've been in the same school for about three years, but with the group work, you become a bit closer."

And in terms of inclusiveness, the researchers observed that flexible learning spaces gave students more autonomy and accommodated those who were different or who had special needs more easily. One teacher said, "I've got a child in a wheelchair. I feel that it's such a more inclusive environment for him because everyone is sitting at different levels and there's no judgment. And, he can access everything in the room, because he's not getting through rows of chairs and tables."

"Flexible learning spaces were reported to facilitate student-centered pedagogy and self-regulation, collaboration, and student autonomy and engagement," the researchers concluded. "Modified spaces were reportedly more enjoyable, comfortable, and inclusive and allowed greater interaction."

# Six Key Strategies for Success

When designing learning environments that effectively support student well-being, here are six strategies to consider.

## ***Use highly flexible and easily movable furniture.***

Flexible learning environments with movable furniture that easily can be configured to support various group sizes and activities make it simple for students to work together to complete tasks and projects—which can foster stronger social connections between students.

## ***Give students plenty of choices in seating styles.***

Providing a variety of seating options—including not just traditional desks or tables but also fidget or wobble stools, beanbag chairs and other soft seating options, bistro-style chairs and tables, and even standing desks—empowers students to choose an option that works best for them. It allows students to “find their place” where they’re most comfortable within the classroom, which can help promote a sense of psychological safety and security—allowing students to relax and focus on instruction. It also promotes autonomy and self-management: When students have the freedom to make learning decisions for themselves, they feel more in charge of their own development.

## ***Design with students’ physical safety in mind.***

K-12 leaders can foster a sense of security by designing safe school environments that convey confidence yet also inspire learning, paying attention to elements such as controlling who has access to the building and ensuring visibility throughout all learning spaces. For instance, school planners and designers can create a safer environment by establishing clear sight lines within hallways and common areas and by avoiding nooks and recesses in which someone can easily hide. Incorporating open, airy spaces into the building’s design can also contribute to a safe and inclusive school culture.

## ***Use ‘learning zones’ to establish clear routines.***

One way for educators to build trust and among students and put them at ease is to establish clear and transparent classroom routines with them. Forming clearly defined learning “zones” within a classroom can help students understand where to go and what to do to accomplish various tasks, such as independent reading or small group work.



***Include features that help students regulate their emotions.***

Self-regulation, including the ability to manage stress, is one of the five core SEL competencies—and furniture that allows students to stretch, rock, and move can help them develop this skill. For instance, self-soothing furniture such as fidget stools can help students effectively manage their behavior, while squishy balls, bubble tubes, and other sensory objects can also help students relieve stress.

***Look for opportunities to incorporate the outdoors.***

Outdoor learning received a big boost during the pandemic as K-12 leaders sought to protect students and staff from infection. But there are significant benefits to learning outdoors that go beyond physical health. In fact, learning outside has been shown to reduce stress and improve students' emotional well-being.<sup>9</sup> Even bringing biophilic design into the classroom helps incorporate the outdoors.

## Overcoming the Effects of Trauma

Students can't learn effectively if they're anxious, depressed, or struggling with another mental health challenge. As K-12 leaders look for strategies to enhance student wellness and overcome the effects of trauma in students' lives, learning space design should play a key role in these efforts. Creating learning environments that promote choice, comfort, connection, and inclusivity can help advance student well-being and lead to deeper engagement in learning.

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<sup>9</sup> Gwen Dewar, "Outdoor learning and green time: How kids benefit from learning and playing in nature," Parenting Science, 2019. <https://parentingscience.com/outdoor-learning/>

# Supporting Research

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