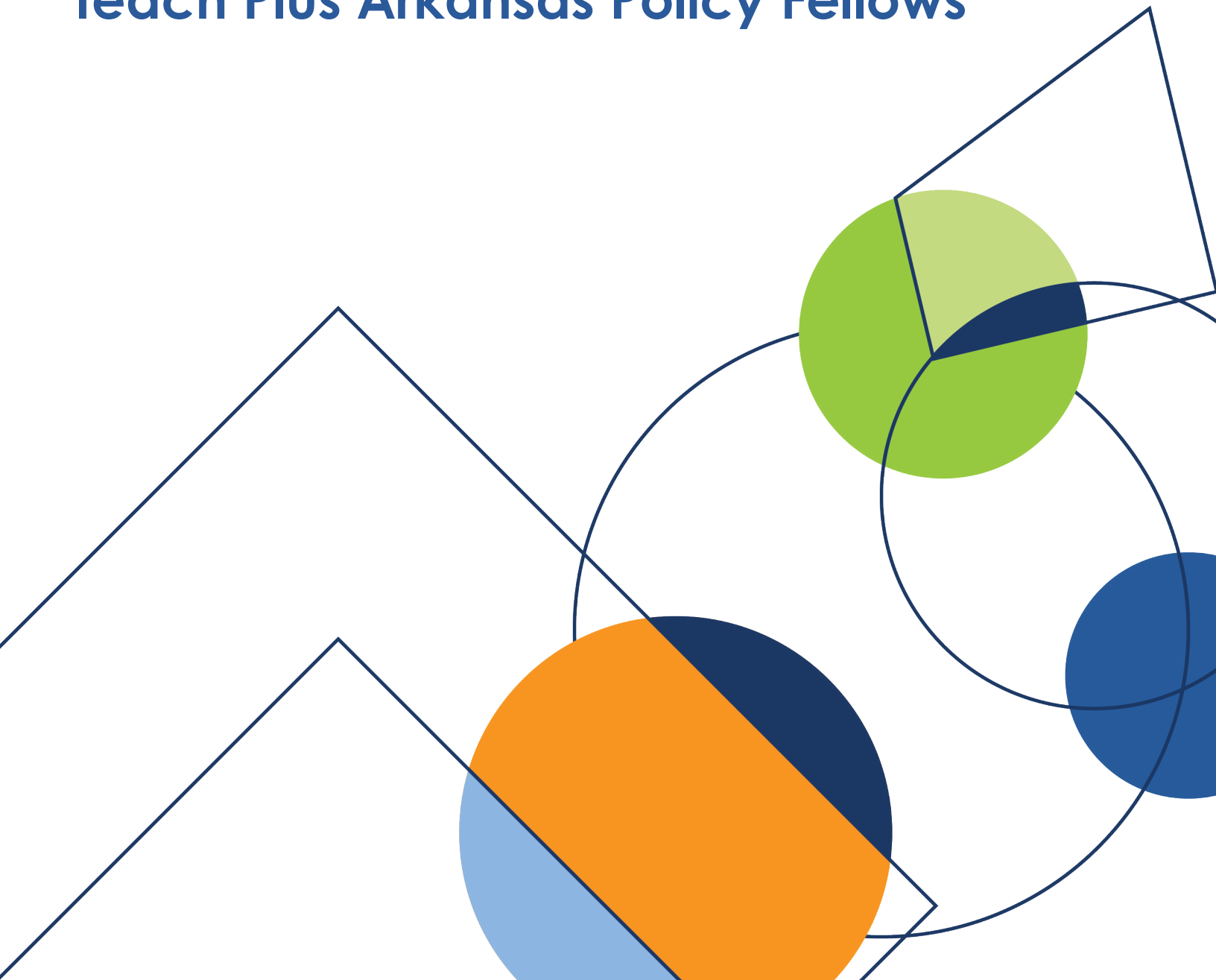




Strategically Addressing Student Mental Health in Our Schools

Recommendations from Teach Plus Arkansas Policy Fellows



Introduction

Social-emotional learning (SEL) and addressing the mental health needs of students have become prominent parts of the classroom setting. Interruptions to learning and the lack of support and access to resources that engage and support the whole child (socially, emotionally, and cognitively) have not only left students unprepared for school and life in general, but they have also contributed to the higher burnout rates our teachers are experiencing. Consequently, many educators are leaving the profession. What is the plan to support teachers and students when our counselors are already doing all they can? Are there other solutions that can be implemented to ensure we are providing adequate support for our students as well as our teachers? How can learning be top priority when the teachers are burned out, students are resistant, and the counselors have exhausted all outlets of intervention?

We are a group of Teach Plus Arkansas Policy Fellows who are deeply committed to our students' success and well-being. We teach in various parts of the state, including the Delta, Central, and Northwest regions. Our students come from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds, go to school in various educational settings, and live in rural and urban communities. We know that without mental health support, students who have lived through severe traumatic experiences may end up in alternative learning environments when that is not necessarily what they need. We also see the daily struggles of our school colleagues.

In order to deepen our understanding of social-emotional and mental health support across the state and the specific supports teachers believe will positively impact student success, we conducted a survey of Arkansas teachers in the winter of 2021-2022. In this brief, we present findings from our research and recommendations for policymakers on closing the current gaps of social, emotional, and mental health education and support in our state.

Findings

1. Schools and educators are committed to their students' social-emotional learning. Educators try their best to embed some form of SEL strategies into the daily academic day, but they need support.
2. Educators believe that professional development focused on mental health, trauma-informed instruction and the social-emotional learning of students and on-site mental health professionals, such as a student success coach, would be most beneficial in their ability to provide support to address the whole child.
3. Educators need to have protected time in their day to implement SEL.

Recommendations

1. Create school-specific mental health services, such as a coordinator/student success coach, in order to provide in-school support for students and professional development for teachers.
2. Protect teacher time to have SEL lessons and conversations with students and participate in relevant training.
3. Engage teachers in relevant training, such as Mental Health First Aid training, on how to authentically serve the SEL needs of students.

The Current State of SEL Support in Arkansas

In the 2021 report by the United Health Foundation, Arkansas ranked third in the nation with one of the highest percentages of children and youth with adverse childhood experiences (ACEs).¹ The report states that 22 percent of Arkansas children between the ages of 0-17 reported experiencing two or more ACEs. The Arkansas Department of Health also stated that children “who experience adversity in the first years of life are more at risk for negative social, emotional, educational, behavioral, cognitive, and health outcomes throughout their lives.”²

Arkansas has several solutions in place to try and address the mental health of our students. The G.U.I.D.E. for Life program, with the support of Arkansas counselors and educators, is designed to give K-12 students a plan – a literal five-step process – that they can follow to achieve personal success.³ However, there is little training provided to classroom teachers and educators on the G.U.I.D.E. for Life, little support for its use, and no protected time for schools to focus on SEL in the classroom. The program is mostly composed of standards that students should learn to become well-rounded citizens and it fails to provide consistency across grade levels, schools, and even from staff member to staff member due to the lack of resources.

Arkansas' Response to Intervention (RTI) model is “a multi-component, general education model, designed to identify students who may be at risk for learning or behavior challenges, offer support, and monitor progress.”⁴ Although RTI provides resources for teachers and staff to implement, it is not specific enough. As support for student behavior, RTI offers Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports (PBIS). There is little accountability for the implementation of the PBIS framework because it is not a requirement. Consequently, not all schools or districts adopt this framework. According to a focus group participant: *“Due to trauma from the pandemic and a general loss of interpersonal skills, the students lack the ability to process their emotions, and they are suffering. This has an [effect] on every part of their lives.”*⁵

Methodology

In order to better understand Arkansas teachers' experience with SEL, we surveyed 247 Arkansas teachers about how their schools are supporting students' social and emotional needs. Respondents included classroom teachers and educators from a variety of Arkansas districts, with a majority representing Arch Ford and Northwest Arkansas.⁶

1. The specific research questions were:
2. Do educators think their school is providing adequate social-emotional support for their students?
3. Do educators have time in their day to implement social-emotional learning for students?
4. What resources do educators need to feel supported in implementing social-emotional learning for students and themselves?

FINDINGS

1. Schools and educators are committed to their students' social-emotional learning. Educators try their best to embed some form of SEL strategies into the daily academic day, but they need support.

Fewer than half of our survey respondents stated that their school is providing adequate SEL support for their students.⁷ “[*Often*] parents and teachers are too busy or stressed to take the time to nurture students emotionally. Most are just trying to keep their head above water and survive the pandemic we all are experiencing.”⁸ Educators find SEL to be beneficial, but they need support themselves. “I have discussions with some students when there is time or space if there is a behavioral issue. [However,] I am currently using a reactive approach which is not the best approach, but it is where I am right now.”⁹ Many survey respondents indicated that they do not have time allotted during the day to implement SEL, and a majority of our survey participants indicated that having dedicated time for SEL would be beneficial in schools.¹⁰ One respondent said, “I talk to our students daily about social/emotional subjects. It’s informal so I am not sure how much is absorbed.”¹¹ Although educators are attempting to meet the SEL needs of students, they need support.

“I feel like we could always do better at helping our students in [the SEL] area. Our students need it now more than ever. If we first invest in them as a holistic person, then they will be more motivated and see better results in the classroom.”¹²

2. Educators believe that professional development focused on mental health, trauma-informed instruction, and the social-emotional learning of students and on-site mental health professionals, such as a student success coach, would be most beneficial in their ability to provide support to address the whole child.

Nearly 60 percent of our survey participants indicated that they would benefit from more professional development and training in social-emotional learning.¹³ “I would love to implement [social-emotional learning] in the classroom. However, training on how to deliver SEL to students would be helpful.”¹⁴ While educators support integrating SEL in their work, they do not feel fully equipped to implement it. “I personally think that students would benefit from social and emotional learning if teachers knew how to properly implement it,” highlighting the need for SEL-specific professional development.¹⁵ Teachers also feel that it cannot solely be their responsibility to address this need and/or to implement SEL. “We have a good SEL curriculum but I don’t feel that a good curriculum, one counselor lesson per month, and sporadic behavior counseling is enough for all students.”¹⁶ When asked if their school meets student SEL needs, one respondent said, “Somewhat on SEL because the groundwork is laid but classrooms need more intentional oversight for implementation,” showing the need for an SEL-specific role in schools.¹⁷ “[T]eachers have so much on our plates right now. A specialist that can dedicate their time to an SEL endeavor would be ideal.”¹⁸ Teachers and educators in schools see the need for and support SEL implementation, but districts and schools need to provide adequate SEL support for students and teachers to do so.

3. Educators need to have protected time in their day to implement SEL.

Time is a constant factor in the education world and being purposeful with how that time is spent can truly make an impact. *“Teachers have a hard time getting everything done that is required of them, so sometimes it’s difficult to address SEL as much or as often as you want/need.”*¹⁹ Investing time in SEL can encourage both students and teachers to have more purposeful interactions, which can lead to a more positive school culture. *“SEL: We talk about it and ways to implement it, but when do we have time to focus on SEL?” “[M]ore emphasis needs to be put onto our students’ SEL; time needs to be set aside for implementing strategies.”*²⁰ Because educators support the need for SEL in schools, they should have the time in the day to address it.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Create school-specific mental health services roles, such as coordinator/student success coach, in order to provide in-school support for students and professional development for teachers.

The CDC stated that social-emotional learning is one way to help prevent ACEs.²¹ Now is the time for schools and districts to invest in the social-emotional well-being of their students and staff. We recommend that schools and districts create and/or promote initiatives that fund SEL supporting roles. These roles would exist in addition to school counselors, who are part time in some elementary schools, are often occupied by administrative duties, and whose job mostly revolves around identifying students struggling with mental health. The professionals in these roles would function as multi-tiered instructors to help schools plan and develop SEL training and curricula that will become part of the daily practice rather than waiting for a lesson and/or a therapy session. They would coach instructors and students on successful outcomes pertaining to SEL, and as liaisons with parents. Having SEL-specific campus roles would alleviate some of the work done by teachers and instructors, and students would have an advocate in the building who is a source of SEL knowledge.

2. Protect teacher time to have SEL lessons and conversations with students and participate in relevant training.

Schools should protect time for teachers to practice their learning. An SEL-designated professional in the building could work with teachers to ensure they have the necessary SEL skills and practices that would benefit the academic learning environment. Setting 15-20 minutes aside to practice SEL skills can promote a safe environment for both teachers and students. According to the Child Mind Institute, *“Self-regulation is a skill that children need to be taught and [need to] practice.”*²² This can be achieved through SEL. As teachers become more proficient, so will their students. However, without the time to do so, it is difficult to ensure that students and teachers’ basic needs are met.

3. Engage teachers in relevant training, such as Mental Health First Aid training, on how to authentically serve the SEL needs of students.

If educators are to feel prepared to lead SEL with their students, schools and districts need to invest in their training. The right training would build classroom teachers' capacity to teach SEL strategies in the Tier I setting and reinforce what the school counselor and other SEL support staff have done/taught. Training would create a common language throughout schools and across the district. This would facilitate transitions for students, teachers, and staff, especially that of highly mobile students.

School and district training of educators and support staff in SEL would also help improve the implementation of programs currently in place. As previously mentioned, there is little training provided to classroom teachers on the G.U.I.D.E. for Life, little support on how to explicitly teach these skills, and little to no protected time for its implementation. Similarly, the RTI model also does not include explicit instruction for teachers and educators on how to teach the expected behaviors and since PBIS is optional, there is little accountability. Therefore, SEL training would offset some of the things the G.U.I.D.E. for Life and the RTI model are failing to provide.

Conclusion

Arkansas schools and districts must be held accountable in addressing the social-emotional well-being of students and educators. Our state understands the value of SEL and protecting time for SEL work, but it is clearly not enough to meet student needs. Additional investments in our educators and schools to support this work is critical. To provide a viable learning environment, we must meet the needs of our students and educators. With the right SEL training and support, we will empower our teachers while providing a brighter future for our students.

AUTHORS, TEACH PLUS ARKANSAS POLICY FELLOWS

Perla Andrade

Chase Fresneda

Kendria Jones

Christian Saavedra*

Cade Vallee

* Senior Policy Fellow

Stacey James McAdoo, Teach Plus Arkansas Executive Director

ABOUT TEACH PLUS

The mission of Teach Plus is to empower excellent, experienced, and diverse teachers to take leadership over key policy and practice issues that affect their students' success. Since 2009, Teach Plus has developed thousands of teacher leaders across the country to exercise their leadership in shaping education policy and improving teaching and learning, to create an education system driven by access and excellence for all. teachplus.org



teachplus.org/AR

@teachplusar 

facebook.com/TeachPlusAR 

ENDNOTES

- 1** United Health Foundation. (2022). *Explore adverse childhood experiences in Arkansas: 2021 annual report*. America's Health Rankings. Retrieved July 13, 2022, from https://www.americashealthrankings.org/explore/annual/measure/ACEs_8/state/AR?edition-year=2021
- 2** ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES. Arkansas Department of Health. (2017). Retrieved July 13, 2022, from <https://www.healthy.arkansas.gov/programs-services/topics/adverse-childhood-experiences>
- 3** ADE Division of Elementary and Secondary Education. (2022). *G.U.I.D.E. for Life*. ADE Division of Elementary and Secondary Education. Retrieved July 13, 2022, from <https://dese.ade.arkansas.gov/Offices/learning-services/guide-for-life>
- 4** ADE Division of Elementary and Secondary Education. (2022). *Response to Intervention*. ADE Division of Elementary and Secondary Education. Retrieved July 13, 2022, from <https://dese.ade.arkansas.gov/Offices/learning-services/curriculum-support/response-to-intervention>
- 5** Question: Is your student's school meeting their social-emotional learning needs? Is your student's school meeting their academic needs? Is your student's school meeting their needs around extracurricular activities? Is your student's school meeting their needs around family events? For the above, why or why not? (SEL, academics, extracurricular, family events, etc.) (open response)
- 6** Survey respondents included 247 educators from the state of Arkansas. Of the educators surveyed, 56.37 reported that their districts report to the Arch Ford cooperative, 32.84% to the Northwest cooperative, 7.84 to the Arkansas River cooperative, 0.5% to the North Central cooperative, 0.5% to the Northeast cooperative, and 1.96% indicated 'not applicable'.
- 7** Question: Do you feel your school is providing adequate SEL support for your students? (n=247) Responses: 'No' (22.7%) 'Somewhat' (37.7%) 'Yes' (39.7%)
- 8** Question: Is your student's school meeting their social-emotional learning needs? Is your student's school meeting their academic needs? Is your student's school meeting their needs around extracurricular activities? Is your student's school meeting their needs around family events? For the above, why or why not? (SEL, academics, extracurricular, family events, etc.) (open response)
- 9** Question: Following the previous question, how often do you model, discuss, or implement SEL per week?
- 10** Question: Do you feel you have time allotted in the day to implement SEL? (n=247) Responses: 'Yes' (53.9%) 'No' (46.2%). Question: If no, do you think you/your students would benefit from time allotted for SEL? (n=160) Responses: 'No' (0.6%) 'Maybe' (21.9%) 'Yes' (77.5%)
- 11** Question: Following the previous question, how often do you model, discuss, or implement SEL per week?
- 12** Question: Is your student's school meeting their social-emotional learning needs? Is your student's school meeting their academic needs? Is your student's school meeting their needs around extracurricular activities? Is your student's school meeting their needs around family events? For the above, why or why not? (SEL, academics, extracurricular, family events, etc.) (open response)
- 13** Question: What type of resources do you feel would support you in this area? (n=247) Responses: Professional development (57.1%) Trauma-informed profession development (45.3%) Adopting a curricula (25.1%) Having an SEL coordinator (46.2%).

14 Question: Following the previous question, how often do you model, discuss, or implement SEL per week?

15 Question: Is your student's school meeting their social-emotional learning needs? Is your student's school meeting their academic needs? Is your student's school meeting their needs around extracurricular activities? Is your student's school meeting their needs around family events? For the above, why or why not? (SEL, academics, extracurricular, family events, etc.) (open response)

16 Question: Is your student's school meeting their social-emotional learning needs? Is your student's school meeting their academic needs? Is your student's school meeting their needs around extracurricular activities? Is your student's school meeting their needs around family events? For the above, why or why not? (SEL, academics, extracurricular, family events, etc.) (open response)

17 Question: Is your student's school meeting their social-emotional learning needs? Is your student's school meeting their academic needs? Is your student's school meeting their needs around extracurricular activities? Is your student's school meeting their needs around family events? For the above, why or why not? (SEL, academics, extracurricular, family events, etc.) (open response)

18 Question: Is your student's school meeting their social-emotional learning needs? Is your student's school meeting their academic needs? Is your student's school meeting their needs around extracurricular activities? Is your student's school meeting their needs around family events? For the above, why or why not? (SEL, academics, extracurricular, family events, etc.) (open response)

19 Question: Is your student's school meeting their social-emotional learning needs? Is your student's school meeting their academic needs? Is your student's school meeting their needs around extracurricular activities? Is your student's school meeting their needs around family events? For the above, why or why not? (SEL, academics, extracurricular, family events, etc.) (open response)

20 Question: Is your student's school meeting their social-emotional learning needs? Is your student's school meeting their academic needs? Is your student's school meeting their needs around extracurricular activities? Is your student's school meeting their needs around family events? For the above, why or why not? (SEL, academics, extracurricular, family events, etc.) (open response)

21 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2022, April 6). Fast facts: Preventing adverse childhood experiences | violence prevention | injury Center | CDC. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Retrieved July 13, 2022, from <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/aces/prevention.html>

22 Child Mind Institute. (2022, April 14). How can we help kids with self-regulation? Child Mind Institute. Retrieved September 29, 2022, from <https://childmind.org/article/can-help-kids-self-regulation/>