



Vicki Abeles
Beyond the Race to Nowhere

Transforming School Is Key to Ending the Youth Mental Health Crisis

At this dire moment, we need to reduce the demands on our youth.

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KEY POINTS

- Many current interventions in response to the youth mental health crisis treat symptoms without addressing the underlying causes.
- In a national survey, over 80% of educators reported that emotional well-being is critical for academic success.
- To meaningfully address the youth mental health crisis, schools should give young people learning experiences that prioritize connection.

“Supporting the mental health of children and youth will require a whole-of-society effort.”—Surgeon General Vivek H. Murthy, 2021 Advisory on Youth Mental Health

In December, when United States Surgeon General Dr. Vivek H. Murthy made a [rare public advisory](#) on the mental health emergency facing young people, he joined the growing list of [health officials calling for immediate action](#) against this national crisis. “This is a moment to demand change,” Dr. Murthy urged.

In the months that followed, many schools responded by hiring extra counselors, implementing mental health screenings, and even implementing [self-care days](#) for students and teachers alike. Interventions like these are important, but they also miss something crucial: They focus on and treat the symptoms and impacts of mental illness without addressing the underlying causes.

We need a more unified national response to this emergency; a collective reckoning about the state of our kids and what we can do to help them.

That’s why on March 22, 2022, we’re hosting a national virtual conversation called [State of the Kids](#) to collectively support our young people in this present moment. We will hear from young people about the state of their mental health and learn practical steps and inspiring strategies for supporting health at home, at school, and in our greater communities. We invite parents and caregivers, students, educators, health care professionals, community leaders—all of you—to take part and help chart a healthier way forward.

Certain stressors negatively impact young people

One thing we can do to help young people is to reduce stressors that have a negative impact on mental health. Long before [COVID-19](#) exacerbated the current mental health crisis among children and teens, studies consistently found that a toxic culture of pressure and measurement is a [key culprit](#) contributing to student [stress](#), [anxiety](#), and [depression](#). Five years ago, my colleague Dr. Stuart Slavin, a pediatrician and then professor at Saint Louis University School of Medicine, studied the [mental health of high school students](#). He found similar symptoms of depression and anxiety with his own medical school students, but was shocked and disheartened to find that teens had worse mental health outcomes.

“In the schools I’ve looked at, I believe that high school is more demanding than medical school—teens are working harder, are [more stressed](#), and are getting [less sleep](#) than med students are,” said Dr. Slavin. He also found that school and school culture were the primary sources of stress and distress, not social media and smartphones, as some researchers have postulated.

Now, the pressure to catch up from the upheaval of interrupted learning during the pandemic has worsened this trend. Not only are suicides and mental health-related emergency room visits spiking among youth, but we’re seeing a startling [increase in school violence](#), from school fights to tragic shootings.

We need to prioritize well-being in the school environment

If we are to meaningfully address the mental health crisis among our youth, we need to systematically transform [the environment](#) of our schools—an environment that is exhausting and overstretching students, teachers, parents, and entire communities. An environment that does not value well-being as essential to learning.

So, how do we begin to transform a culture that is harming, not helping our children? How do we bring humanity to the classroom so that our students feel seen, supported, inspired, and excited to learn?

The well-researched tenets of social-emotional learning (SEL), are proven to be [beneficial for entire school communities](#). In a national survey, [over 80% of educators reported](#) that emotional well-being is critical for academic success. But this has to mean that the development of skills like self-awareness, social awareness, and responsible [decision-making](#) are built into the entire school experience, and not just siloed off with the occasional workshop, yoga class, or curricular add-on.

When Dr. Slavin found his medical students suffering from severe anxiety and depression, he and his colleagues decreased the academic workload, moved to a pass/fail grading system, expanded elective time, and found ways to give students more downtime. It worked: Students’ mental health improved—as did their academic performance.

We can and should do the same in our schools by backing off demands at this dire moment: We must ease up on grades and rankings and move to a pass/fail system to rid our schools of needless [competition](#) and the stress born of constant measurement. We must value and safeguard free time after school and on the weekends. By eliminating the second shift of homework and excessive time demands for extracurricular activities, we can ensure kids have the time and space to fulfill basic health needs like sleep and rest, play and exercise—all of which will support their ability to thrive.

Finally, we must provide our children with learning experiences that prioritize connection and [collaboration](#) and that deepen relationships between students, teachers, and the larger world. By turning the focus away from individual achievement, we can empower young people to find meaning and purpose as caring members of their community, which bolsters good mental health in turn. And we will also leave our kids better prepared to find their way in an unpredictable future in which skills like [creative thinking](#) and collaboration will be essential to succeed.

It’s time to wake up in 2022 to the gravity of the current situation and examine the place where our kids spend the majority of their time. Schools are human-made systems that profoundly and universally impact children of all ages, from all backgrounds, from all parts of the country.

For the sake of our children’s recovery now and for years to come, we must demand that our schools build back with well-being at their core.



Vicki Abeles is documentary filmmaker, author, and advocate whose films include *Race to Nowhere* and *Beyond Measure*.

Online: [Beyond the Race to Nowhere](#)

