

Beyond the Pandemic

As we approach the endemic phase of COVID-19's ire, many of our daily lives and routines are beginning to once again feel "normal." And while students are back in school, athletes have retaken the fields, and performers once again adorn our stages, some of our nation's children are far from being 'ok'. Parents, teachers and concerned citizens across our country are asking one another - "Why haven't many of our kids bounced back?"

However, anyone who is familiar with the social-emotional and wellbeing data prior to the pandemic is keenly aware that even before COVID-19 arrived on our shores two years ago, our country's youth were exhibiting troubling markers. Anxiety, mental health and depression were already taking its toll on many students and experts were struggling to find the root cause.

Rather than an isolated issue, I believe it is more likely a confluence of multiple factors; influences most adults my age never experienced when growing up. By attempting to put oneself in the shoes of an adolescent today, this attempt at perspective may help begin to explain why many of our nation's kids are "not ok." For example, benign earthquake drills that many of us once recall as customary rituals have unfortunately been replaced with intense lockdown exercises due to the prevalence of active shooter incidents. Comic books and baseball card collections have been swapped for the 24-7 constant barrage of TikTok and Snapchat social media platforms. When growing up I recall my call for concern for the environment focused on limiting aerosol hair spray purchases and saying goodbye to styrofoam McDonald's containers. Nowadays, our children are actually inheriting a planet where visible climate change is all around them that will undoubtedly impact their lives and futures. At one time trusted news anchors like Conkrite and Brinkley could be found by a simple turn of the dial on the TV. Now all one seems to find are hyper-partisan and divisive personalities from both sides that feed viewers anything but "news." And even more troublesome, real relationships and meaningful interactions seem to have been substituted for "digital friends" and "Instagram likes."

In fact, most kids nowadays have known no other world where a smart phone hasn't saturated their entire lives. Even prior to the pandemic 50 percent of teens admitted to feeling addicted to their mobile devices and most revealed that they couldn't focus on any task for more than two minutes without checking up on their social media streams (Common Sense, 2016). Bring on nearly two years of isolation, trauma and upheaval, the effects of COVID have seemed to compound and intensify this reality. Nationwide, chronic absenteeism rates have doubled since the pandemic (McKinsey & Co, 2022), emergency department visits for suspected suicides in teen girls is up 51% (CDC, 2021), and rates of student dysregulation and behavior have significantly intensified. Regrettably, almost one-third of high school students now struggle with persistent feelings of sadness and hopelessness (USDHHS, 2021).

Despite these concerning trends, I remain optimistic that locally we are on the path toward recovery. More and more attention and support is being resourced to assist students who are struggling, and our Walla Walla School Board has taken bold steps to help address these issues. Utilizing federal COVID resources, we have hired eight additional school counselors and five home visitors. We have partnered with Community in Schools to help bolster parent and family engagement, implemented student-led Sources of Strength programs at the middle school level, and are intentionally focusing on Social Emotional Learning (SEL) curriculum that bolsters student resiliency, grit, perseverance and self-worth. Our new Center for Children and Families provides the foundational experience for our youngest learners and we are continuing to engage students in clubs, activities, and athletics by removing

financial and other barriers. Student advisory groups are helping guide our decisions and priorities and we are witnessing remarkable leadership from our youth as we continue our efforts around building a culture of belonging and purpose for each and every child.

Additionally, passionate community partners and programs have joined us in this critical work. The Health Center, Reach Out, Catholic Charities, Children's Home Society, Friends of Children of Walla Walla, the County Health Department, and dozens of other individuals and agencies are rallying to support our kids and families in need. For those individuals or businesses who wonder what they can do, I encourage them to contact their neighborhood school - volunteer, read to a child, mentor a youth, provide internships in your business, coach a youth activity, or simply attend a sporting event or concert and cheer on our students. By coming together and rallying around our youth, I am confident that our path forward beyond the pandemic remains promising.