
A Teachable Moment: COVID 19

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Abstract: COVID 19 has created a national health emergency beyond compare. The impact of this pandemic may not be known for years. Educational leaders are called to look at procedures that assist families, students, and the community at large in bold new ways. These endeavors are often affected by the lack of clear guidance from the federal government as well as the health disparities that affect local communities. Educational leaders on all levels must update policies and services in order to address the psychological and physical impact of the pandemic as well as provide health services to protect American citizens of all ages and walks of life.

A pedagogue would describe the teachable moment as an unplanned event or idea that presents itself during an activity. It is a concept that is not part of the lesson plan but provides a teaching opportunity that should not be missed. The COVID 19 pandemic wreaked havoc around the world in 2020 resulting in national closures of businesses, churches, and schools across the United States. Children across the United States have witnessed and experienced death, anxiety, and depression associated with isolation and disease and the impact of this trauma runs deep. According to Cenat and Dalexis (2020), 1.7 billion students have been affected by school closure creating a higher risk for psychological and physical trauma, which leads to increased exposure to violence and neglect. This situation is often further magnified by drug and alcohol abuse and poverty. This article suggests the federal government needs to explore more ways to identify and assist our nation's youth through these stressful times.

It seems important to briefly review wellness through the COVID 19 pandemic, even though it is not included in important areas of student health as currently outlined by the federal government. Federal benchmarks for student health are outlined in the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Guidelines. These guidelines are used by state departments of education to provide direction for local school systems. When reviewing USDA guidelines, most commonly found in the local wellness policy, there is no information on student health other than nutrition education, competitive foods, USDA compliance, physical education, physical activity, stakeholders, and leadership/assessment. When considering current events, it becomes apparent that states and school systems are missing key aspects of student health and wellness that go beyond the scope of the USDA requirements and governmental guidelines.

Wellness is the quality or state of being in good health. Payne, Hahn, and Lucas (2013) outline wellness in terms of health equity and behaviors and the elimination of preventable disease through emotional, physical, social, spiritual, and intellectual health. When considering the many facets of wellness, there appears to be a number of important points for educational leaders to consider surrounding health in the face of diseases such as COVID 19. The Healthy, Hunger Free Kids Act (HHFKA) vaguely addresses areas that can be interpreted as intellectual health such as nutrition education. Physical health is addressed in federal directives through the lens of physical education. Yet, there is no mention of other areas of wellness such as emotional health, much less ways to obtain assistance in the services.

The USDA does not provide any instruction on student wellness in spiritual, social or emotional health. The word mental health is mentioned in Part 246 of the Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infant, and Children (SNAP) in August 2019 (prior to COVID 19). The only description this legislation provided is that low income households have a higher risk for mental health issues because of poor nutrition and health care disparity. The overarching theme for this legislation still lies in nutrition programs. On the USDA website, there is a COVID 19 link. This link lists local benefits for nutrition such as funding of food banks, increased SNAP benefits, and increased free school meal programs for all students to assist struggling families. Currently, the USDA does not share plans to help students and their families deal with the stress of quarantine, job loss, school attendance, and academic success. If the point of USDA wellness guidelines is to increase student health on the local level, the school system must consider ways to incorporate a well-rounded vision of wellness in their local policies. The failure of the United States government to address the effect and impact of disease on student wellness is another way to turn a blind eye on health disparity and youth trauma. As Cullen, Gulati, and Kelly (2020) point out, mental health resources are not normally provided or accessible to all populations. Further, the long-range impact of COVID 19 on obesity due to quarantine and increased sedentary lifestyles and graduation rates based on online instruction remains to be seen.

To delve deeper into the potential effect of current health issues such as COVID 19 on student success and academic programs, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was reviewed for areas of wellness. In addition to supporting health and activity through physical education, chronic disease management was only briefly mentioned. There was no discussion on spiritual, social, or emotional health in this document either.

Current events have impacted families around the country in a variety of ways. The USDA has provided nutritional programs to assist struggling communities with feeding programs and supplemental food resources. Yet it appears that programs designed to support areas such as spiritual, social, and emotional health have no directives from the federal government. Churches around the country have closed or modified their programs, and the full social and emotional impact of this pandemic may not be known for years to come. Singh et al. (2020) support this premise as they reviewed numerous articles on the emotional health of children during the pandemic. Isolation, previous mental health issues, and economic complications add layers of stress to already vulnerable households. Singh et al. (2020) advocate for avenues to support students and families during this stressful time. Services such as mental health counseling should be considered in order to help families cope during these stressful times.

The school wellness policy would be an excellent resource to provide a more comprehensive guide for state and local officials to provide community care for students through not only programs in nutrition, but also other aspects of student health. School nutrition programs are designed to meet the ever demanding stress of socioeconomic disparity in child nutrition, yet why do we need to limit federal guidance to just nutrition, physical education, and physical activity practices? Cullen, Gulati, and Kelly (2020) found that individuals with preexisting mental disorders were more likely to suffer trauma and were less likely to receive treatment due to health disparity during COVID 19. They further suggested more prevalent health interventions for those suffering from mental illness. Federal policy guidance and funding is needed to address these issues.

The teachable moment provides an opportunity for federal and local leaders to consider other arenas such as emotional wellness as part of what makes a child well. A future recommendation would be to consider adding federal components to the school wellness policy directives in the HHFKA to support student health across the spectrum of all areas of wellness. This measure would help narrow the gap of health disparity on the local level by providing federal monies and programs to those in need.

References

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