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Social-Emotional Well-Being for High School Students

Guidance for School and System Policy and Practice



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About This Report

In the United States, social-emotional well-being has become a priority, given that research has shown concerning mental health and well-being outcomes for adolescent youth. High schools and school districts have responded by expanding mental health and social-emotional supports. However, there is little research to understand the ways in which educational leaders—including superintendents, school district coordinators, and principals—organize practices and policies to support social-emotional well-being for high school students.

In this report, the authors seek to close this research gap by presenting findings from a multi-method, multiyear national study on social-emotional well-being initiatives, focusing on high school students. This report is intended for practitioners and policymakers interested in high school supports, district leadership, or social-emotional well-being. Researchers who study high schools, social-emotional learning, or district changes could also find this report helpful.

RAND Education and Labor

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Summary

Over the past decade, the social-emotional well-being of high school students has been a growing concern among educators, school and district leadership, and educational researchers. In response to this concern, high schools and school districts have expanded mental health and social-emotional supports for their students. In this report, we investigate these efforts, focusing on how school districts are organizing resources and priorities, creating policy, and enacting supports for the social-emotional well-being of high school students. We present findings on five research questions. These questions seek information about the social-emotional well-being of high school students, school practices that support students' social-emotional well-being, district practices that support students' social-emotional well-being, supports for minoritized high school students, and the challenges of and barriers to social-emotional well-being in high schools.

This report is intended for practitioners, policymakers, and researchers. The findings and recommendations will be useful in guiding those who are interested in improving their social-emotional well-being supports,¹ including school district and high school leaders. Furthermore, policymakers responsible for decisions around resources, legislation, or policies related to social-emotional well-being in primary and secondary schools could benefit from this research. Researchers who study high schools or social-emotional well-being might also gain insights from this report.

Key Takeaways

- High school students are struggling with anxiety, depression, apathy, and communication skills, according to educators.
- School staff—including mental health specialists, counselors, and support staff—are key to providing social-emotional supports for high school students.
- The role of mental health specialists is newer and precarious because these positions are often short term or subject to grant funding.
- School practices that support social-emotional well-being for high school students include team meetings, advisory periods, collaboration with outside mental health agencies, professional development for teachers, and connections between academic content and college and career readiness initiatives.
- School district supports for social-emotional well-being for high school students include staff hiring decisions (such as bringing in a director of mental health), superintendent

¹ We define *social-emotional well-being supports* as “a coordinated set of evidence-based programs and practices for enhancing social-emotional-cognitive development, positive behavior and interpersonal relationships, and academic performance” that promote *well-being*, defined as “satisfaction with life, fulfillment, and positive functioning” (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023; Jones and Bouffard, 2012; National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development, 2018, as cited in Mahoney et al., 2021, p. 1129).

encouragement of social-emotional well-being programs, and district-wide practices, such as school improvement planning that is inclusive of social-emotional well-being, the convening of district-wide meetings and committees, and professional development.

- Challenges at the district level include staff churn, disorganization, and lack of support from central office leadership.
- Equity practices include connections to district diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts; individualized supports for minoritized students; and equity-oriented clubs and safe spaces.

Recommendations

- Sustain funding and structural supports for mental health specialists and intentionally hire socially and emotionally competent principals, district leaders, and support staff.
- Design district-wide social-emotional well-being plans with high school students in mind by implementing research-based holistic supports to help students with key challenges (e.g., depression, anxiety, apathy, and communication skills).
- Conduct a district-level social-emotional well-being audit and use the audit results alongside formal and informal data to drive future social-emotional well-being practices.
- Weave equity efforts into social-emotional wellbeing practices, and bolster supports for students of color, female teens, and LGBTQ+ students.

Contents

About This Report.....	iii
Summary	iv
Tables.....	vii
Social-Emotional Well-Being for High School Students: Guidance for School and System Policy and Practice.....	1
Background on Social-Emotional Well-Being of High School Students	2
Study Methods	3
Findings and Discussion.....	5
Recommendations.....	19
APPENDIX A.....	22
Interview Protocol.....	22
APPENDIX B.....	24
Study Methods	24
APPENDIX C.....	31
Formal High School Social-Emotional Well-Being Programs	31
Abbreviations	34
References.....	36

Tables

Table 1. School Supports for Social-Emotional Well-Being for High School Students.....	8
Table 2. District Supports for Social-Emotional Well-Being for High School Students	12
Table B.1. Roles of Research Participants	25
Table B.2. Gender of Research Participants.....	25
Table B.3. District Locations of Research Participants, by U.S. Geographic Region	26
Table B.4. Participant District, by Urbanicity	26
Table B.5. List of Research Participants, by Name, Title, Gender, and Race or Ethnicity, Presented by School District Name.....	27
Table C.1. Programs Mentioned by Research Participants.....	32

Social-Emotional Well-Being for High School Students: Guidance for School and System Policy and Practice

Social-emotional well-being is of rising concern in the wake of four pandemics: coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), systemic racism, the economic crisis, and the climate crisis (Ladson-Billings 2021). Student social-emotional well-being plummeted during the COVID-19 stay-at-home orders in 2020 and 2021 and, as of this writing, remains at concerning levels (Gadermann et al., 2022; Goto et al., 2022). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) conducted a survey of a representative sample of nearly 17,000 U.S. public- and private-school students (CDC, 2021). Results showed that in 2021, one-third of high school students reported poor mental health. The survey asked students about “sad feelings and attempted suicide” during the previous 12 months. Many students (42 percent) reported experiencing feelings of hopelessness, and 22 percent said they had considered suicide. More worrisome, 10 percent of survey respondents had actually attempted suicide. There was some good news: Researchers found better mental health outcomes for those who reported connectedness with family, community, or educators (CDC, 2021; Jones et al., 2022).

Schools have responded to the rising concern about social-emotional well-being by expanding mental health services (Blad, 2022). Additionally, educators have increased their focus on relationships and well-being, and principals have stepped up their efforts to lower teacher stress through self-care suggestions (Klein, 2022). In short, the field of education has shifted social-emotional well-being from the periphery to the center (Bushweller, 2022). This change has important implications for the roughly 13,000 U.S. school districts that are now serving as sites of social-emotional well-being management, charged with expanding counseling staff, offering professional development for burned out and traumatized employees, and providing mental health services, along with their typical school district responsibilities, such as coordinating academics, maintaining buildings, and scheduling buses (Rizvic, 2023; Superville, 2023).

In 2021, the U.S. Surgeon General released an advisory on youth mental health issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Meant to “call the American people’s attention to an urgent public health issue” (Office of the Surgeon General, 2021, p. 5), the advisory presented eight recommendations for educators and school districts. The recommendations included suggestions that schools expand social-emotional learning (SEL) programs and other approaches to “promote healthy development”; “provide a continuum of supports to meet student mental health needs,” including suicide prevention and trauma-informed care; and “expand the school-based mental health workforce” (Office of the Surgeon General, 2021, pp. 19–20). Research suggests that these recommendations are, in some form and to a certain extent, being implemented in kindergarten through 12th grade (K–12) schools (Kennedy and Walls, 2022; Schwartz et al., 2022).

In this report, we focus on how school districts are organizing resources and priorities, creating policy, and enacting supports for the social-emotional well-being of high school students. We begin by briefly highlighting relevant literature on high school students' social-emotional well-being, equity-oriented social-emotional initiatives, and school districts. We then describe the study methods. The findings and discussion section is organized by research question. We present findings on the social-emotional well-being of high school students, school practices that support social-emotional well-being for high school students, district practices that support social-emotional well-being for high school students, supports for minoritized students, and the challenges of and barriers to social-emotional well-being in high schools.

This report is intended for practitioners, policymakers, and researchers. The findings and recommendations will be useful in guiding those who are interested in improving their social-emotional well-being supports, including school district and high school leaders. Furthermore, policymakers who are responsible for decisions around resources, legislation, or policies related to social-emotional well-being in K–12 schools could benefit from this research. Researchers who study high schools or social-emotional well-being might also gain insights from this report.

Background on Social-Emotional Well-Being of High School Students

Social-Emotional Learning in High School Settings

There is a strong connection between social-emotional well-being and academic performance in K–12 education generally and at the high school level specifically (Tan et al., 2018). Social-emotional well-being initiatives in K–12 settings are associated with stronger academic and well-being outcomes, which has been supported by decades of robust research (e.g., Durlak, Mahoney, and Boyle, 2022). Yet, how social-emotional well-being supports are delivered through programs, formal or informal curricula, and personnel varies (Jones et al., 2021). What is known about the implementation of social-emotional well-being supports is mostly confined to elementary and middle schools (Allbright et al., 2019; Prothero, 2021b) with fewer SEL interventions available for high school students (Grant et al., 2017). Formal SEL curricula (e.g., Second Step) use is on the rise, but again, we know less about high schools because research shows that elementary principals are more likely to report SEL implementation than their secondary counterparts. This gap in implementation signals a “continued need for more commercially developed and evidence-based SEL curricula . . . that are specifically designed for high school students” (Schwartz et al., 2022, p. 18).

Although there is a lack of formal SEL curricula in high school settings, experts agree that social-emotional well-being initiatives for high school students should incorporate particular factors. For example, some suggest that these initiatives ought to be developmentally appropriate and connected to a larger purpose, such as postsecondary goals or finding purpose in life (e.g., Immordino-Yang and Knecht, 2020; Osher et al., 2016; Sawchuk, 2021; Williamson, Modecki, and Guerra, 2015). Another factor to consider is whether and how high school social-emotional well-being initiatives should be inclusive of youth voice (DePaoli et al., 2018). Furthermore, policy advocates suggest that social-emotional well-being initiatives should be embedded in college and career ready programs, civics

education, or hands-on, collaborative projects (Berwick, 2020; Civic, Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, and Coalition for Career Development Center, 2022; Prothero, 2021a).

Equity in Social-Emotional Well-Being Policy and Practice

The field of social-emotional well-being has been critiqued for being hegemonic and whitewashed and for ignoring issues of equity by failing to attend to the needs of minoritized students and instead promoting a one-size-fits-all approach (Barnes, 2019; Hoffman, 2009; Kennedy, 2019; Simmons, 2019). Scholars and practitioners have paid more attention to equity-oriented social-emotional well-being in recent years (e.g., DeMartino et al., 2022; Foster, Louis, and Winston, 2022; White, Bristol, and Britton, 2024; Williams and Jagers, 2022), but these ideas remain mostly conceptual, lacking evidence or clear guidance on how school systems do or should organize social-emotional policy and practice for the well-being of minoritized students. This is a glaring research gap because we know that students of color experience a lack of caring in school (Cooper and Minness, 2014). There is also evidence that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and more (LGBTQ+) students greatly benefit from caring and supportive adults, which is associated with higher attendance and lowered feelings of depression (Zongrone, Truong, and Kosciw, 2020). To address this gap, a nascent body of research is connecting student-teacher race matching and social-emotional learning (Wright, Gottfried, and Le, 2017), and other newly developed research explores pedagogy and leadership that is focused on the social-emotional needs of diverse students (Barnes, 2019; Kennedy, 2019). Nevertheless, there is still a pressing need to understand how district leaders connect equity with social-emotional well-being initiatives (Kennedy and Walls, 2022), particularly for minoritized and high school youth.

District Leadership as a Policy Lever for Social-Emotional Well-Being

School district leaders are important policymakers. In addition to overseeing teacher evaluations, curriculum, management, and finances, these leaders make impactful decisions that affect the quality of students' educational experiences (e.g., Honig, 2008; Spillane, 1998; Wong, Coburn, and Kamel, 2020; Woulfin, Donaldson, and Gonzales, 2016). Most school district research examines the enactment of academic or accountability policy (e.g., Burch and Spillane, 2004). However, there is promising empirical evidence that school districts also play a central role in supporting social-emotional well-being in schools. The ways in which districts coordinate social-emotional well-being supports, policies, and programs through their messaging, resourcing, and professional learning have an influence on program implementation and uptake (Marsh et al., 2018; Schwartz et al., 2020). Despite this evidence, further research is needed to understand how school districts systematically provide supports and resources for social-emotional well-being initiatives (Domitrovich, Syversten, and Calin, 2017; Mahoney et al., 2021; Mart, Weissberg, and Kendziora, 2015).

Study Methods

Research suggests that young people are struggling with their mental health, but we have limited insights into how to support the social-emotional well-being of high school students. And, although

available research suggests that school districts have promise in regard to organizing supports and resources for social-emotional well-being, few studies have examined district policies and practices that bolster social-emotional well-being among students. Fewer have intentionally investigated the district-level provision of supports for high school students from an equity orientation. This study was designed with these gaps in mind.

Research Questions

In this study, we address five research questions, drawing on the perspectives of K–12 educators and leaders:

1. What do educators perceive as the social-emotional well-being needs of high school students?
2. How do schools support social-emotional well-being for high school students?
3. How do districts support the social-emotional well-being of high school students?
4. How and to what extent are social-emotional well-being practices for high school students equity-oriented or contextualized for minoritized students?
5. What challenges do educators and leaders perceive in providing social-emotional well-being supports for high school students?

Sample and Data Analysis

This report draws on data collected from 57 district leaders, school leaders, and high school staff, including teachers and mental health specialists. First, we conducted secondary data analysis of qualitative data collected during the academic year 2020–2021. The secondary data analysis included a pool of 41 participants, which was a subset of a larger pool from a previous study of school district leaders. We chose to include these participants because they specifically talked about high school supports. Analysis of these earlier study data was used to create a series of propositions about how school districts provide for the social-emotional well-being of high school students.

We elaborated on this study in 2024 by conducting 16 additional interviews. The goal of this additional research was to sharpen and illustrate themes related to high school student social-emotional well-being. Appendix A presents the semistructured interview protocol for these additional interviews. We coded data inductively and elucidated findings through a series of analytical memoranda. Qualitative data consisted of interview, document, and website analysis. See Appendix B for more information and details on methods, as well as tables that outline the study sample.

Trustworthiness and Validity of Findings

The trustworthiness of this report rests on four validity-verification strategies common to qualitative research. First, we conducted multiple rounds of analysis across the two phases of this study; here, we present only salient themes that emerged across both phases. Second, each claim or finding contained within this report was supported by, at minimum, three participants. Moreover, each claim or finding is supported by multiple perspectives from different districts or role types. Third, we include diverse perspectives from different types of school districts in varying regions and at

multiple levels of a school system (e.g., superintendent, school leader, teacher) to help strengthen the validity of our findings. Fourth, throughout the analysis process, we debriefed and discussed emergent themes.

Limitations

There are several limitations of this study. First, we spoke with only educators and educational leaders about social-emotional well-being for high school students. The voices of students, parents, and community members are missing from this report. Second, this study draws on a national, multiyear sample of 57 participants. A larger sample size, a mixed methods approach, or an in-depth qualitative case study concentrated on similar-sized districts, for example, might yield alternative findings. Third, we used a pooled qualitative data approach (see Appendix A) by blending data from two studies conducted during different years; this presents a limitation because the sampling strategy, protocol, and research questions during each research phase were related but varied over time. Thus, and especially because we conducted earlier interviews during the COVID-19 school shutdowns, answers might have varied over time. Finally, this study is exploratory in nature, meant to elucidate initial findings about social-emotional well-being practices for high school students with the purpose of guiding policy, practice, and research. Many important questions related to social-emotional well-being for high school students remain outside the scope of this study.

Findings and Discussion

In this section, we present the study findings along with our interpretations. The findings are organized by research question. This study began as an investigation into research question (RQ) 3: How can school districts support the social-emotional well-being of high school students? However, in exploring this topic, we heard valuable insights about the social-emotional well-being needs of high school students (RQ1), school practices that support social-emotional well-being for high school students (RQ2), the role of equity in providing social-emotional well-being supports for high school students (RQ4), and the challenges and barriers educators and leaders face in supporting social-emotional well-being for high school students (RQ5). Because of the complex and nested nature of school district governance, we believe it is important to include perspectives on needs and supports at the school level to strengthen school district policy and practice.

RQ1. Social-Emotional Well-Being Needs of High School Students

The first research question we asked was: What do educators perceive as the social-emotional well-being needs of high school students? According to research participants, high school students are struggling with anxiety, depression, apathy, and communication, and their social-emotional well-being needs differ from those of younger students.

Educators Report That High School Students Are Struggling with Anxiety, Depression, Apathy, and Communication Skills

Research participants widely agreed that the social-emotional well-being of high school students has not returned to normal since the COVID-19 pandemic and that many students are struggling with depression and anxiety. High school students need mental health supports, given that research participants reported feeling that suicidal ideation had increased since the COVID-19 pandemic. School staff mentioned that the pressure to perform and achieve affects students' stress levels and that anxiety is on the rise. Some research participants noted a concern about students' apathy toward school, which they related to lowered attendance rates and poor performance on schoolwork. Betty,² a school leader, lamented how apathy and disengagement has played out in her school:

[Students ask,] "Why can't we . . . just do it online? Everything's posted online anyway. . . . I don't need to be in class. . . ." I think the year overall has gone really fast and has kind of been a struggle. I think we spend a lot of our time with at-risk students, more so than before COVID. . . . You tell a senior, "Hey, if you don't pass all your classes, you're not going to graduate." And they're like, "Okay." I just don't see the drive that I used to see.

Communication skills are a major concern. Those whom we interviewed expressed views that technology—social media in particular—has hindered students' ability to effectively communicate with others. Examples included extreme anxiety at having to talk to employers at job fairs or the inability to make basic phone calls to new contacts. Research participants also discussed the effects of trauma on high school students, noting that a history of trauma such as abuse could negatively affect students' school performance. These qualitative perspectives align with national findings that show concerning mental health levels for students in grades nine through twelve.³

The Social-Emotional Well-Being Needs of High School Students Are Different from Those of Younger Students

Research participants identified several ways in which high school students' social-emotional needs are unique or different from those of elementary or middle school students. Participants discussed how high school students need ways to express their voice, have choice, and feel a sense of belonging. Ways of supporting student voice include student advocacy, offering developmentally appropriate curricular choices, and seeing students as partners or stakeholders. Examples of opportunities for incorporating and amplifying student voice include student government and student advisory groups that meet with the principal or superintendent to share their perspectives.

Social-emotional well-being, according to participants, is also individualized and best serviced by meeting the needs of individual students. Annette, a high school counselor, described how she

² Pseudonyms are used throughout this report to protect the confidentiality of participants, per Institutional Review Board standards, and to humanize the educators who participated in this study (Lahman, Thomas, and Teman, 2023).

³ The CDC Youth Risk Behavior Survey, conducted in 2021 with 13,000 students in grades nine through twelve nationwide, reported that 29 percent of those surveyed said that their mental health (which includes stress, anxiety, and depression) was "most of the time" or "always" not good in the 30 days before the survey.

counsels individual high school students to help them determine their social-emotional well-being supports and needs:

“What does it look like to take care of yourself? Do you need a break? What do you do when you are in our weekly student meeting, and you don’t agree with what somebody’s comment is? How are you going to work navigate that?” [Our supports are] different for each student.

Participants also discussed how individual student choice of clubs, sports, and activities can increase engagement with school. These activities can be purposeful and social, meeting the social-emotional well-being needs of individual high school students. For example, while describing how the schools in his district provided for social-emotional well-being needs of high school students through clubs, Fred, a district leader, said:

I want every kid in the school to be in a club or an extracurricular. They’re going to be in something besides class, and we’re going to look at it being intentional. . . . I want your kid to be in something. I want them to come to school. Attendance matters.

Research participants also shared the importance of considering high school students’ transitions—from middle school and into postsecondary—in caring for the students’ social-emotional well-being. This connects to a final and unique aspect of high school students’ social-emotional well-being: intentionally connecting high school activities and academics to a larger purpose, such as postsecondary career goals or personal life aspirations.

RQ2. School Practices That Support High School Students’ Social-Emotional Well-Being

The next research question we asked in this study was: How do schools support social-emotional well-being for high school students? We found that the schools represented in our sample support social-emotional well-being through staffing, programs, connections and relationships, leadership practices, and school-wide practices. These school supports are summarized in Table 1. We also found that the different needs of high school students call for supports that vary from those of their elementary and middle school counterparts.

Table 1. School Supports for Social-Emotional Well-Being for High School Students

Support	Description
Staffing	• Mental health specialists (e.g., social workers) • School counselors • Support staff (e.g., administrative assistants, school resource officers)
Programs	• Formal programs (e.g., Sources of Strength, positive behavioral interventions and supports [PBIS], and Restorative Justice) • Sports, extracurricular activities, and student clubs
Relationships and connections	• Peer tutoring programs • Adults that intentionally build relationships with students
Leadership	• Caring of staff and students • Informal, small moments of support appreciated • Available and supportive during a crisis
Practices	• Regular team meetings about social-emotional well-being • Advisory or homeroom periods • Safe or calm spaces for students • Professional development for teachers • Partnerships with outside counseling agencies • Curricular connections

Staffing: Mental Health Specialists, Counselors, and Support Staff Are Key

A major avenue for delivering social-emotional student supports in high school is through staff, primarily mental health specialists (social workers by training), school counselors, and support staff (e.g., custodians, administrative assistants). The increase in school-level social-emotional well-being staffing is a shift that has occurred over the past decade, which participants attributed to an increase in mental health needs and recovery from COVID-19. Mental health specialists complement the work of school counselors. Participants noted that because they are not required to work on typical counseling tasks (e.g., scheduling, college admissions), mental health specialists can be available for students who are in crisis or simply need someone to talk to. Mental health specialists also help provide for the social-emotional well-being of high school students by running mental health groups.

The responsibilities of the high school counselor have evolved; participants discussed many types of counseling roles in their high schools, including college and career guidance; helping with transitions from middle school; tracking bullying and creative problem-solving to stop bullying; connecting to kids; and, in one school, a counselor with training in adverse childhood experiences and trauma-informed care is assigned to student well-being.

Finally, participants mentioned the important role that support staff (e.g., nonteaching, certified staff) play in the social-emotional ecology of their high schools. Examples of support staff include an administrative assistant who keeps students company while they wait for their counselor; another administrative assistant who oversees the “Calm Place”; school resource officers; and operations, maintenance, and custodial staff. Research participants noted how these support staff built relationships with—and contributed to social-emotional well-being supports for—students in their

high schools. Thus, school staff are an integral part of providing social-emotional well-being supports for high school students.

Opening Doors and Changing Practice: A Counselor's Perspective

"There was a situation with a student who came to see another counselor who wasn't available, so she came into my office [per our new open-door policy]. She started crying her eyes out and said that the pressure at home is monumental . . . and I suggested that she tell [her family] how she feels. That the amount of stress and pressure that she's going to feel will be reduced significantly. She came back to see me the next day and told me that yesterday, when she had that conversation with me, her plan was to kill herself. . . . And that's probably an example of our open-door policy where it really turned out to be a game changer, a lifesaver."

—Jalal, high school counselor

Formal Programs and Supports Can Specifically Target Social-Emotional Well-Being for High Schoolers

Another school practice for social-emotional well-being is providing formal and informal supports specially targeted at high school students. These supports include mental health programs, discipline or social-emotional learning programs, extracurricular activities, and informal programmatic supports. Research participants at the district and school levels named a variety of formal programs that make up their suite of social-emotional well-being services, including Signs of Suicide and Portrait of a Graduate. The most-mentioned formal programs in the study were Sources of Strength and Character Strong. A full list of all formal high school student social-emotional well-being supports described by research participants can be found in Appendix C. Extracurricular activities such as clubs (e.g., theater, Black student clubs, and Gay Straight Alliances [GSAs]) and sports were named by many as helping high school students feel a sense of belonging. Some participants connected social-emotional supports to college and career readiness approaches as well.

Relationships and Connections Are Important

Relationships and connections are important to providing for the social-emotional well-being of high school students, according to research participants. Participants identified peer-to-peer relationships as key to social-emotional well-being, with some schools encouraging peer relationships formally through peer mentorship programs. Participants also noted that caring and supportive teacher and staff relationships with students were important to social-emotional well-being, offering examples of staff being available to students who need help and describing social-emotional well-being practices that included connecting with students through such rituals as warm greetings. Research participants also discussed the importance of preparing students for life after high school through postsecondary career and college counseling. Moreover, they identified building relationships and forging connections with students and their families as an important practice.

School Leadership Matters to Social-Emotional Well-Being

School leadership, according to research participants, is also important to the provision of social-emotional well-being supports for high school students. Nearly all school staff talked about the

importance of school leaders' support to their own ability to provide social-emotional well-being supports to students. Leadership practices that interviewees said support their social-emotional well-being—thereby enabling them to promote and support the well-being of students—ranged from small moments of caring, such as finding ways for newer teachers to take time off for a loved one's surgery, to larger crisis responses where staff felt encouraged and supported. School leaders are also important in creating a positive school culture, for example, by sending positive notes home or helping make phone calls to families. One school leader used discretionary funds to hire additional mental health staff, which a high school teacher interviewed for this study said they appreciated. Research participants also discussed principals' regular actions, practices, and routines, such as scheduling regular meetings to check in about students and holding advisory committees that include students.

Caring Principals as Well-Being Supports: A Teacher's Perspective

"He very much practices what he preaches to us: The same compassion and understanding that we're told to give our students, he gives us. He knows that we are just human beings trying our best and, really, I think he puts his staff first. He really cares about making sure his staff feels appreciated and understood. I really see that in the house he leads, and I really appreciate it."

—Marie, high school teacher

Practices and Routines Contribute to Social-Emotional Well-Being

There are a variety of routines and school-wide practices geared toward social-emotional well-being in high school: meetings, advisory periods, collaboration with outside agencies, professional development, and the connection of social-emotional well-being supports with academics and postsecondary goals. Many participants mentioned regular team meetings—with administrators, counselors, district staff, or teachers—that allowed them to discuss student needs and social-emotional supports. Many high schools included in this study allowed time to provide formal social-emotional lessons on a skill (for example, prosocial in-person communication) during a homeroom or advisory period. Participants also identified trainings and professional development for teachers and staff as well as routine collaborations with outside agencies (such as mental health support organizations) as additional practices that support high school students' social-emotional well-being.

Acknowledging high school as a transitional period is also important. Participants shared that connecting academic content to a focus on college and career readiness was essential to considering the whole child. For example, when asked how social-emotional well-being supports for high school students in her district are developmentally appropriate, Faith, a district leader, reflected on her district's journey:

In previous years, for our core social-emotional [practice], we used Zones of Regulation, [a formal curricular program]. But we found that while you can use aspects of Zones in high school, you can't do the bonus program. You just can't. Middle school is a bit of a stretch, but we found that middle school was fine if they came through elementary school with it. So, it does have to be different. And I think the workforce lens of it is very helpful. Informally, the kind of happenstance stuff that counselors have been doing is kind of around workforce and goal setting and reaching

your own personal goals. . . . [Helping students consider] the decisions they're making now: Are they supporting their goals?

High School Social-Emotional Well-Being Supports Should Vary

Research participants asserted that social-emotional well-being supports for high school students ought to vary from those provided to younger students in elementary or middle schools. District leaders expressed concern that high school students are often left out of social-emotional planning. Participants across all role types and levels suggested that whole-school Tier I or district-wide interventions (e.g., Second Step, Responsive Classroom) were geared toward, created for, and more appropriate for elementary and middle school students. To illustrate, Rachel, a high school mental health specialist, said:

I think a lot of the curriculum that we were given and asked to turnkey, and adolescents by nature think all adults are ridiculous. . . . There's something a little bit inauthentic about it that [high school] kids can sniff out.

Research participants suggested that social-emotional well-being supports for high schoolers need much more development at all levels of the school system. For example, district leaders shared that they have put more effort into standardized, Tier I (whole school) elementary programs for social-emotional well-being. Participants also shared that high schools present a unique challenge because they tend to be more content-driven and focused on academics, grades, and graduation rates than elementary or middle schools. School staff concurred with this sentiment.

RQ3. District Practices that Support Social-Emotional Well-Being for High Schoolers

The third research question we asked was: How do districts support the social-emotional well-being of high school students? We found three themes in answer to this question, which we sketch out in Table 2 and explore in more detail in this section. To summarize, the themes are school district central office management and oversight, encouragement and advocacy, and routines in service of social-emotional well-being.

Table 2. District Supports for Social-Emotional Well-Being for High School Students

Support	Description
Management	• Oversight of a director of mental health or social-emotional well-being • School staff hiring decisions (e.g., counselors, mental health specialists)
Encouragement and advocacy	• Superintendent leadership (e.g., communications, hiring, resources) • Grant writing • Crisis management
Routines and practices	• District-wide meetings and committees • Professional development for teachers and staff • School improvement plans inclusive of social-emotional well-being

District Management and Oversight of Social-Emotional Well-Being Supports and Staffing

A major finding in this study was the importance of district personnel who are charged with overseeing and leading the expanding and evolving work of social-emotional well-being. This is a new evolution in the day-to-day operations of school district central offices, and both district leaders and school personnel interviewed for our study agreed that leadership involvement at the district level is important. District leaders described the rising social-emotional well-being needs of their student body and shared how they had started to specifically hire for these director-type roles to guide that work. High school mental health specialists spoke highly of their school district central office directors because they provided professional and emotional support. For example, mental health specialists praised district-wide convenings held at the school district central office by their director of mental health. These district managers are often responsible for the hiring of school staff, including counselors and mental health specialists.

Expanding Student Supports in the School District Central Office: A District Leader's Perspective

"If it were 10–20 years ago, [there] was one person [in charge of social-emotional well-being]. And now it is a whole department with a holistic approach. We just feel like the way the climate is going, that's where we're heading: That student supports are going to be a bigger deal. And so, we're trying to build an infrastructure for that."

—Faith, school district leader

District Encouragement and Advocacy for Social-Emotional Well-Being

Generally, building a supportive, respectful, and caring culture within the school district central office was seen as important to the overall provision of social-emotional well-being supports. Superintendents showed positive support by creating district missions and frameworks that espoused

and encouraged social-emotional well-being as a key district priority. Several other district leadership practices support high school students' social-emotional well-being, including hiring and securing grants for additional mental health and counseling staff. School staff reported appreciating district leaders who support social-emotional well-being broadly through communications and actions, and specifically during times of crisis. Another district leadership practice in support of social-emotional well-being was the leveraging of community resources, such as the creation of strategic partnerships with outside mental health agencies to shore up the social-emotional well-being services offered within the schools.

Showing up for high school students during crises came up regularly throughout the study. For example, Mary, a school district leader, spoke about her supportive leadership of secondary students:

There had been a planned protest that was organized by our high school students. I wanted to make sure that we were there making our presence [known] in solidarity and supporting our students' civic action. Because that's what I really admired: their ability to find their voice.

Nina, a school counselor, praised her district's prioritization of mental health:

I think just prioritizing mental health within safety conversations—and understanding that a lot of school safety concerns are from trauma and mental health concerns—means we need mental health support for those kids as a big overarching umbrella. . . . I feel like we get it right. Our district has offered staffing for mental health intervention for every single school. Whether or not principals use it, that is up to them, but our superintendent has offered it. I feel like a valued member of our educational system as a mental health provider, which is great. Part of the district's safety plans are for kiddos who are coming back to school after a threat assessment. Mental health is always a mandated part of their safety plan. A lot of those kids are forced to meet with me to start. And then we're able to build rapport and a relationship. Then, they want to see me even after they've graduated or are off of their safety plan. So yeah, they've really streamlined responses to student suicides and things like that within our district. There's kind of a pretty significant protocol that we follow if a student or teacher completes suicide, and we also have Crisis Teams.

As Nina described, her district's overarching support for her work is complex and layered. In this illustrative quote, Nina speaks of the importance of her district getting mental health “right” and reflects on both her individual work and the key role that teams play in providing social-emotional supports for high school students.

District Practices That Support Social-Emotional Well-Being for High School Students

Research participants cited a variety of routine district practices that support social-emotional well-being for high school students. For example, the school district central office serves as a place to coordinate, convene professionals across the district, and strategize about social-emotional well-being. Professional development and training for all staff was important to changing minds and bringing along reluctant teachers on topics such as mindfulness, discipline changes, restorative justice, and the

incorporation of social-emotional strategies in the classroom. Jalal spoke enthusiastically about how district supports aid him as a high school counselor:

[Our district leaders] do a wonderful job of supporting us every step of the way. They provide us with professional development and different types of resources that help us guide our students. And then we have a very strong referral list that we send out to parents and families.

Participants also discussed how their district leaders coordinated district-wide social-emotional well-being committees. This was one district practice that helped connect schools with district visions for social-emotional well-being. The practice included regular committee meetings that bridged school staff with district leadership and focused on social-emotional well-being implementation. Finally, district leaders and school staff discussed school improvement plans and frameworks that included attention to social-emotional well-being.

RQ4. Equity-Minded Practices for Social-Emotional Well-Being in High Schools

The fourth research question we asked was: How and to what extent are social-emotional well-being practices for high school students equity-oriented or contextualized for minoritized students? We found that diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) staff and initiatives, individualized supports for minoritized students, and clubs and safe spaces were three equity-oriented practices for student social-emotional well-being at the high school level.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Staff and Practices

Participants cited equity and inclusion initiatives as one way in which schools and districts took care of minoritized students. Examples of diversity initiatives include district diversity teams, DEI newsletters, and counselors working with DEI committees. These diversity initiatives were cited by participants as tangible ways in which minoritized students are supported. Some participants noted their district's work on lowering discipline rates, which they connected to social-emotional well-being because it promotes inclusion and belonging for students of color who had been disproportionately represented in disciplinary actions. Third, participants in several districts named their district equity director, a person of color, as particularly supportive. They expressed the importance of how the district director was modeling leadership and promoting belonging for minoritized students through their presence and through visits with schools. Jalal, a high school counselor, discussed the rich ways in which his district's equity director contributes to social-emotional well-being supports:

We have a district person for equity and inclusion. This is their second year, and they do a wonderful job communicating with families, especially if it's a racial concern or if it's bullying or abuse. I think they kind of go hand-in-hand together in that they want the best possible outcome for all families and parties involved. . . . I like having somebody from up top that deals with equity and inclusion across the board. I feel like it's super helpful because we have the same mission and vision, all together.

Individualized Social-Emotional Well-Being Supports for Minoritized Students

Our study showed that, generally, social-emotional well-being practices in high schools are not school-wide or delivered via a packaged curriculum. Rather, at the secondary level, social-emotional well-being supports are individualized to meet student needs, including those of minoritized students. This was especially true when research participants were probed about issues related to equity or inclusion. Participants shared that social-emotional well-being supports for Black, Latinx, and LGBTQ+ students are delivered by mental health professionals, such as mental health specialists or counselors, allowing for an individualized focus on student identity related to race, culture, or sexual orientation.

Equity in High Schools: A Teacher's Perspective

"I think it's important for students to feel that their identities are respected and also represented in the environments they're in."

—Marie, high school teacher

George Floyd's murder in 2020 and the Black Lives Matter movement were directly cited by research participants as responsible for an increase in support activities to help with Black student belonging. These support activities include Black Lives Matter banners hanging in community spaces, Black student associations, Black History Month celebrations, and the distribution of Black school community newsletters, among others. Annette, a school counselor, said the following about how things have evolved in her district:

At a weekly school meeting, one of the things proposed [by students] was to hang up a huge Black Lives Matter sign in our central hallway. That was a super cool conversation within the school community and among students. [They discussed] why and how could that help maybe people understand who we want to be and how to make other people feel more comfortable. And then also, knowing that there are some people who feel like it's a political issue, and maybe wouldn't be a fan of the Black Lives Matter sign. But anyhow, we have it hanging. And it's been there ever since.

Several participants also discussed the national anti-transgender messages and legislation and how it was affecting the social-emotional well-being of students and staff. For example, in one district, a counselor shared that she is concerned about queer students in general and transgender students in particular. A mental health specialist in a different school in the same district expressed alarm at her colleagues' apathetic response to anti-transgender state legislation.

Equity-Oriented Clubs and Inclusive Safe Spaces

Finally, equity-oriented clubs and inclusive safe spaces are a primary way in which school districts provide for the social-emotional well-being of their minoritized high school students. For example, one district with a higher population of Latinx students discussed a fun Mariachi club, a Latino

Leadership Club, and an intervention specialist who specifically works with Latinx high school students.

Many participants discussed GSA clubs at their high schools as supportive of the social-emotional well-being of LGBTQ+ students. Lisa, a high school teacher, shared an example of how one school counselor supported students:

[Our school counselor] was working primarily with our LGBTQ population, and she was the one who started a GSA, which was great. I think it was the first time our school had that, and our kids felt really safe with her. And they would go in for lunch gatherings, and she would do after school gatherings. She would even do special workshops during the school day where she would pull kids and they would combine with our [mental health prevention program] Sources of Strength. And that's been really neat, combining some of these different programs that we have. The kids have taken that really seriously.

RQ5. Challenges and Barriers with Social-Emotional Well-Being for High School Students

Our fifth and final research questions asks: What challenges do educators perceive in providing social-emotional well-being supports for high school students? In what follows, we sketch out four challenges or barriers uncovered by our interviews: the precarity of school mental health staff; high school leadership disengagement; school district central office churn, disorganization, and lack of support; and an approach to social-emotional well-being that is disconnected from equity-oriented practices. These are challenges that are within the realm of school district policy and practice. Outside challenges—such as disengaged parents and the politics of social-emotional well-being writ large—were mentioned by participants but are outside the scope of this report.

Precarity of High School Mental Health Staff

The first barrier to student social-emotional well-being supports in high school is the precarity of mental health staff. The provision of high school social-emotional support is largely personnel dependent, relying on mental health specialists, counselors, and support staff. A heavy reliance on particular types of staff is of concern because these supports are susceptible to disruptions through resource restrictions and key staff departures. Our research participants noted that these positions are precarious, due, in part, to their funding via COVID-19 emergency funds—e.g., the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES) and the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER)—or other local, county, or state grants. Research participants of various role types (school and district alike) were unclear on how their social-emotional well-being personnel would continue to be funded in the future. Jalal, a high school counselor, described this precarity:

We used to have [a school social-emotional specialist], and this was extremely important. It was a two-year government-funded program. She worked a lot with the social-emotional aspect of the school body. That's something that she would collect data on. But she's been gone for a couple of years now. So, we never really picked up the data where she left off or anything along those lines.

In addition to the precarity of funding for social-emotional well-being positions, some research participants discussed how mental health specialists received a different level of pay or held a different employment status. For example, in some districts, these specialists are not full-time school district employees but rather loaned from a county agency with different pay scales than counseling staff hired directly by the school district. In other areas, districts relied heavily on outside providers for counseling and mental health services. Regardless of employment status, counselors and mental health specialists described their work as sometimes challenging or demoralizing, which could contribute to the churn evident in these key positions. As Gail, a mental health specialist, described:

I would say that one of the biggest [challenges] is just kind of feeling disconnected. And then getting looped in last minute to all of these conversations, and [school leaders] are like, “Oh, well, let’s go ask the mental health specialists.” And I’m thinking that if I could have been a part of that conversation the whole time, we probably could have already had this resolved.

High School Leadership Disengagement with Social-Emotional Well-Being Initiatives

District leaders reported that, in some instances, high schools had refused to participate in social-emotional well-being supports. This was attributed to principal autonomy and a general disengagement with social-emotional well-being initiatives. For example, a district leader remarked that, when their district tried to implement a social-emotional well-being program, “one principal’s vision went in another direction.” Chad, a district leader, further elaborated on this barrier and the role of principal autonomy and control:

We don’t have any major district [social-emotional well-being] program. It’s very driven by the buildings. . . . I would say here it is kind of the support you’re getting through providing social workers, providing the space.

Participants suggested that some high school staff and leaders are resistant to social-emotional well-being practices because, as institutions, high schools are overly focused on delivering academic content and bolstering graduation rates. And although some school staff shared that their principals facilitated the implementation of social-emotional well-being supports, others said the opposite—that their school leaders were unsupportive. They perceived these unsupportive school leaders as barriers to providing social-emotional well-being supports for their high school students.

School Piecemeal Approaches to Social-Emotional Well-Being for High School Students

Research participants identified a lack of coherence with social-emotional well-being implementation in high schools—described here as a *piecemeal approach*—as another barrier. Research participants also widely agreed that high school social-emotional well-being lags behind elementary school social-emotional well-being. Participants reported struggling to find appropriate and effective social-emotional well-being programs designed specifically for high school students. In some places, staff found advisory or homeroom periods to be a suitable time during the busy high school schedule to address social-emotional well-being. Yet, in other places, research participants shared that their

scant advisory schedules—which occurred perhaps twice a month—did not allow for any depth of implementation.

Another way in which schools used a piecemeal approach to high school student social-emotional well-being was through their reliance on individualized student supports, such as one-on-one counseling or mental health specialist sessions, often in reaction to a student emergency (e.g., suicidal ideation, depression). While individualized supports are a good start and a necessary way to help students cope, there is much to be desired with this case-by-case approach to high school student social-emotional well-being supports. In other words, an individualized, triage-like way of providing social-emotional well-being support leaves out intentional and proactive connections with families and preventative communication skills teaching; it also neglects a systemic approach that, for example, connects high school student social-emotional well-being with postsecondary readiness and a sense of purpose.

Very few places have a whole-school or holistic approach to high school student social-emotional well-being supports. Of those who worked at schools that claimed to have a whole-school social-emotional well-being approach at the high school level, all were employing very specific programs that target suicide prevention. Thus, another barrier to student social-emotional well-being in high schools is the lack of a coherent approach, such as a school-wide, Tier I initiative. Gail, a mental health specialist, described the challenge of an individualized approach to high school student social-emotional well-being:

I just feel that there's only two of us here, and we're at a very large high school. And I feel like that's the same for all of our mental health specialists. . . . I feel like it's either we need to do more prevention work, more group work, and less like one-on-one work, or it would shift to be more specific with treatment goals. . . . I feel like that's what half of the population needs, and half of the population just needs kind of like resources and more support, but they don't necessarily need intensive therapy. But how do we reach all of those students to ask, "Hey, what do you need? What would you benefit from?" So, I feel like that's really hard.

District Churn, Disorganization, and Lack of Support

Another major finding was how a lack of district support shaped the perceptions of school staff. Several school participants expressed a need for better leadership at the district level to support counselors, mental health specialists, and teachers in the trenches. Participants shared stories of safety concerns, ill treatment by district leaders, and the need for a district-wide phone policy to temper teenage over-use in high schools. In particular, and in several different places, school staff discussed how an uncaring superintendent or a lack of focused district effort for social-emotional well-being created barriers for their own efficacy in social-emotional well-being implementation. A school leader, Betty, expressed her frustrations with this lack of support:

There's no focused efforts, especially at the district level to say, "This is important, and we need to implement this. And staff is going to be responsible for this. And there's not an excuse not to do it. And we're offering ways for you to do it. And so do it." [Social-emotional well-being] is just kind of always put to the side.

As sketched out in the section on research question three, the importance of district support (via the hiring and placement of a director of well-being, for example) was clear in the findings of this study. However, there was a tension in the interview data as well, for it was clear that churn in the school district central office has disrupted social-emotional well-being supports for some research participants. For example, several interviewees talked about a shift in school district central office management and oversight because of retirements or grants ending. In other words, there was often not a distributed and staffed team in the school district central office dedicated to student social-emotional well-being. Rather, there was one caring leader doing a lot of heavy lifting, making social-emotional supports susceptible to disruption and upset. Disorganized school district central offices also don't have a district-wide social-emotional plan or strategy to move their work forward. Instead, as Chad, a district leader described, some districts have champions who might or might not have formal power:

Our Student Support Specialist is not on board, but our Director of Student Services is; that is a huge passion of hers. She's just always advocating for all the mental health things. We meet with the head of the [local mental health agency] services every so often just to make sure that caseloads are getting covered, because sometimes your staff are not staffed and all that kind of stuff. So, it's gonna be mainly resources at the end of the day where central office is supporting. We don't have anybody specifically for [social-emotional well-being], but we definitely have some major champions of it.

Equity Disconnected from Systemic Social-Emotional Well-Being Supports

Finally, this study sought to explore how, and to what extent, social-emotional well-being supports for high school students are equity-oriented or contextualized to the needs of student subgroups. Previously discussed challenges pointed to a lack of systemic high school social-emotional well-being supports, and our study found a similar barrier with equity-oriented supports. For example, although DEI was important to many research participants, there was generally a disconnect between DEI programs and social-emotional well-being programs. When asked about equity, participants suggested that we needed to talk to their equity director, implying (or directly telling us) that equity work and social-emotional well-being work are distinct and not intertwined. Furthermore, equity-oriented supports were primarily delivered by individual mental health specialists or through extracurricular clubs and not as part of any school-wide social-emotional well-being practices or initiatives. Data were mentioned rarely throughout the study, and although some districts do in fact review data on social-emotional outcomes, they did not connect subgroup gaps to a need for greater social-emotional supports. This is problematic because, in the most recent CDC youth survey available (2021), there were concerning mental health outcomes for female teens, LGBTQ+ youth, and youth of color. These outcomes point to a need for increased equity-oriented social-emotional well-being supports.

Recommendations

The following recommendations flow from the findings and challenges we have presented on the social-emotional well-being needs of high school students. They are meant to guide school and system policy and practice and call for sustainable funding, renewed hiring practices, an audit of district

practices, district plan designs, and equity connections. We also touch on implications for further research.

- **Sustain funding and structural supports for mental health specialists.** The importance of mental health specialists and supportive school and district leaders was a major finding in this study. Similarly, the precarity and disorganized nature of these newer roles was evident in our interview data. Thus, we urge school districts to consider long-term thinking around and funding sources for social-emotional well-being beyond short-term grants or emergency funds. More research is needed to understand how districts are grappling with the end of emergency federal and state funding, which was used to bolster social-emotional well-being staffing during the pandemic.
- **Hire and support socially-emotionally competent principals, district leaders, and support staff.** Leadership is key to strong and robust high school social-emotional well-being supports, as evidenced by this study. Support staff, similarly, are an integral part of the high school student social-emotional well-being support system. In that vein, we recommend that human resources staff consider the importance of candidate social-emotional competencies and capacities when making hiring decisions. School boards, generally responsible for hiring superintendents, ought to take seriously the key role that a supportive and encouraging superintendent can play in creating a district that envisions and systematically supports the social-emotional well-being of high school students. Current and veteran staff could also benefit from additional training to implement social-emotional well-being practices. Further research is warranted on how and to what extent school district central offices are allocating human and fiscal resources for system responses to high school apathy and depression, which is closely tied to the wicked problem of chronic absenteeism (e.g., Lenhoff and Singer, 2024).
- **Conduct a district-level social-emotional well-being audit as a step toward creating proactive, preventative, and sustainable social-emotional well-being supports.** Another finding in this study was the disorganized and piecemeal nature of social-emotional well-being supports in high schools and in school districts more broadly. There is a wide variety of practices and programs in place in the high schools that were represented in this study—counseling sessions, clubs, discipline programs, and advisory lessons, among others—but these resources were often patched together in a triage fashion. Rather than react to crises or immediate student needs, we urge districts to consider a social-emotional well-being audit as a first step toward creating social-emotional well-being coherence and sustainability. This could be a district-led process that involves all stakeholders across a system. Stakeholders should work together to catalog the various social-emotional well-being practices being used and identify gaps and needs within the system. That information could then be paired with data on the social-emotional well-being of students and staff. We encourage school districts to then use the audit results to drive future social-emotional well-being practices, programs, and initiatives. Researchers might partner with school districts to engage in a developmental audit process.
- **Design district-wide social-emotional well-being plans with high school students in mind by implementing research-based holistic supports to help students with key challenges (e.g., depression, anxiety, apathy, and communication skills).** A key recommendation is to

review how and to what extent district social-emotional well-being programs consider the needs of high school students. Research-based supports for high school students include attending to adolescents' needs for autonomy and purpose (Immordino-Yang and Knecht, 2020) and using proven strategies to help adolescents with anxiety and depression. Researchers have conducted robust and thoughtful evaluations on social-emotional well-being programs and equitable practices for younger students (e.g., Cipriano et al., 2023; Ramirez et al., 2021), but much more research is needed on high school social-emotional well-being supports. Researchers should consider adding to the research base by conducting analyses of social-emotional well-being programs in grades nine through twelve, analyzing district and school improvement plans for high school social-emotional topics, or creating a strategic set of research and practice briefs that synthesize best practices for combating the key challenges presented in this report. District leaders might consider collaborating with high school students to design social-emotional well-being plans.

- **Weave equity efforts into social-emotional wellbeing practices, and bolster supports for students of color, female teens, and LGBTQ+ students.** The disconnection between equity and social-emotional well-being was documented by this study. The CDC has documented the rising mental health needs of students, particularly for LGBTQ+ youth, female teens, and youth of color (2021). These data, along with our findings, suggest that there is a compelling reason to weave equity efforts intentionally and systematically into high school student social-emotional well-being practices. This level of support ought to begin in the school district central office, given that our research pointed to the importance of the school district central office as a lever for high school student social-emotional well-being. Researchers could collaborate with school districts to document, evaluate, and improve equity-oriented social-emotional well-being practices.

Interview Protocol

1. Please briefly state your name, position, and number of years working in this position.
2. How is it going? How are you feeling?
3. How are the high school students in your [district/school] doing, socially or emotionally? How do you know? Is data collected?
4. Please describe how your [district/school] supports the social-emotional well-being of students.
5. Who is in charge of social-emotional well-being here?
6. Who are the caring leaders, teachers, or staff you work with at the high school level?
7. In many places, schools and districts have added mental health and counseling staff since the COVID crisis. Can you speak to that in your school/district?
8. Does your school or district have any formal SEL curricula, frameworks, standards, or programs? Are they successful? How do you know?
9. What partnerships does your [school/district] have to help take care of the social-emotional well-being needs of high school students?
10. I'd like to hear about how the central office supports social-emotional well-being for high school staff and students.
11. What about elementary or middle school social-emotional supports? Are those different in any way from those for high school students? Why/why not?
12. I'm interested in school district leadership. Does your superintendent support social-emotional well-being? School board?
13. I'm also interested in school leadership. Can you provide some examples of how high school principals or other high school leaders take care of the social-emotional well-being needs of students?
14. Some research suggests that student voice is important to high school social-emotional learning. Is that the case here?
15. I'm curious about the connections with family or community members. Can you tell me about that?
16. My previous research found that educators consider extracurriculars, such as sports or clubs, to be important in supporting the social-emotional well-being of high school students. Is that the case here?
17. Previous research shows that connections and relationships are important to caring for high school students. What are your thoughts on that?
18. Some educators worry that there is an over-emphasis on academic content and graduation rates in high schools and not enough focus on social-emotional well-being supports. Do you agree?

19. Do adolescents have particular needs? What does “developmentally appropriate” social-emotional well-being support look like in high school?
20. I’m curious if you have any examples of college and career readiness initiatives, or hands-on learning, that support student social-emotional learning?
21. I’m curious about diversity, equity, and inclusion here in this [school/district]. Can you tell me about any DEI plans or initiatives, and how, if at all, they connect with social-emotional well-being here?
22. When you think about caring for high school students, what comes to mind? How would you define “care in high schools?”
23. Do you have any final thoughts about social-emotional well-being in high schools in your [district/school] that you didn’t already share?
24. If you are comfortable, please state your age, race, and gender for demographic purposes.

Study Methods

Research Phase I: High School Thematic Analysis of Previously Collected Data

In 2020–2021, we conducted a study of school district leaders to examine how school districts think about, provide, and plan supports for care and social-emotional well-being. From that study, we had approximately 850 pages of transcribed interview data collected from 47 district leaders. Participants for this first phase of research were recruited through convenience and snowball sampling methods. To analyze these data for high school–specific themes, we employed elaborative coding techniques (Auerbach and Silverstein, 2003). From the 41 participants who spoke about high schools and thus remained in the data analysis, we then coded 164 excerpts—a sentence or paragraph from an interview—of data related to high school students’ social-emotional well-being and generated new emic codes and a new set of high school–specific coded data. We then combined, categorized, and reorganized the codes to surface several themes related to high-school social-emotional well-being, such as the use of counseling staff and district and school coordination in service of social-emotional well-being. We used these themes, prior research, and literature on high-school social-emotional well-being to draft a conceptual framework that guided the creation of a new, semi-structured interview protocol used for the next phase of study.

Research Phase II: Additional Interviews on High School Student Social-Emotional Well-Being

Second, we designed a process to conduct additional interviews. We decided to conduct supplemental interviews with those who work in public school districts and are in positions of leadership and decisionmaking related to social-emotional initiatives. We interviewed 16 district leaders, high school leaders, and educators from a variety of school districts around the country.

To recruit participants, we first used a snowball and convenience sampling method, returning to research participants from our original study to ask for additional and repeat research participants. We also invited randomly chosen educators from public school districts in states and regions that were underrepresented in the broader study sample. We did not restrict the sample to any one type of school district (e.g., urban, suburban, medium, small) and instead sought out interested and willing participants who are enthusiastic or innovative leaders with expertise in high-school social-emotional learning. This approach was used because the goal of this project is intellectual and conceptual in nature (Creswell and Poth, 2017; Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, 2018). One previous participant who participated in Phase I of the study consented to be interviewed again, although they now work in

a higher-level position in a different school district than they did previously. The current sample includes participants from all the U.S. Census Regions: the Northeast, Southeast, Southwest, Midwest, and West. See Tables B.1 through B.5 for detailed demographic information about the research participants.

Additional interviews for research phase II were collected during the academic year 2023–2024. We conducted all interviews using a virtual meeting platform. All interviews were transcribed using artificial intelligence technology and then cleaned and de-identified by the lead researcher. Interviews lasted approximately one hour each and used a semistructured interview protocol. We also conducted document analysis, reviewing the missions of and social-emotional programming plans for each participant’s district (if available). Data analysis was ongoing and iterative throughout the project (Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, 2018). We conducted multiple rounds of first and second cycle coding (Saldaña, 2015) and then used second-cycle coding strategies to further refine themes using a constant comparative and elaborative coding method (Auerbach and Silverstein, 2003; Charmaz, 2014).

Table B.1. Roles of Research Participants

Role	Number
Superintendents and assistant superintendents	40
Directors and assistant directors	11
Principals	1
SEL and whole child leaders	4
Academic coaches	1
High school mental health specialists	4
High school counselors	3
High school teachers	3
Total	57

Table B.2. Gender of Research Participants

Gender	Number
Male	27
Female	30

Table B.3. District Locations of Research Participants, by U.S. Geographic Region

Region	Number
Midwest	16
Northeast	1
Southeast	10
Southwest	1
West	29

Table B.4. Participant District, by Urbanicity

District Type	Number
City	16
Suburb	24
Town	10
Rural	7

Table B.5. List of Research Participants, by Name, Title, Gender, and Race or Ethnicity, Presented by School District Name (Urbanicity, Region)

Name	Title	Gender	Race or Ethnicity
Alberton City School District (suburb, west)			
Mary	Assistant superintendent	F	White
Anaconda School District (suburb, midwest)			
Corinne	Assistant superintendent	F	White
Baker School District (suburb, midwest)			
Cheryl	Director of SEL	F	White
Belle Jardin School District (rural, west)			
Xavier	Superintendent	M	White
Browning School District (town, midwest)			
Raymond	Superintendent	M	White
Butte County School District (suburb, southeast)			
Kevin	Academic coach	M	White
Cambria School District (town, west)			
Nikki	Assistant superintendent	F	White
Michael	Superintendent	M	White
Carter School District (town, west)			
Henry	Superintendent	M	White
Cascade School District (suburb, west)			
Betty	Principal	F	White
Lisa	Teacher	F	White
Marie	Teacher	F	White
Nina	Teacher	F	White
Centennial School District (town, west)			
Zach	Superintendent	M	White

Name	Title	Gender	Race or Ethnicity
Chester School District (suburb, southeast)			
Noah	Superintendent	M	White
Darby School District (rural, midwest)			
Fred	Superintendent	M	White
Dillon City School District (city, midwest)			
Jalal	Counselor	M	White
Dodson School District (suburb, southeast)			
Sarah	Director	F	White
Chad	Assistant superintendent	M	White
Drummond School District (town, midwest)			
James	Superintendent	M	White
Eureka City School District (city, southwest)			
Nicole	Director of SEL	F	Black
Foothills School District (city, west)			
Oliver	Superintendent	M	White
Paige	Assistant superintendent	F	White
Quinn	Director	F	White
Geraldine School District (rural, southeast)			
Faith	Assistant superintendent	F	White
Great Falls City School District (city, northeast)			
Rachel	Mental health specialist	F	White
Honey Creek School District (suburb, west)			
Aaron	Superintendent	M	White
Brandon	Director	M	White
Cathy	Director	F	White
LeFevre School District (town, west)			

Name	Title	Gender	Race or Ethnicity
Ron	Superintendent	M	White
Samantha	Assistant superintendent	F	White
Tabitha	Director	F	White
Libby City School District (city, west)			
Robert	Assistant superintendent	M	White
Lone Crow School District (rural, west)			
Lucy	Director	F	White
Kyle	Superintendent	M	White
McGregor School District (rural, west)			
Ulysses	Superintendent	M	White
Middleton City School District (city, west)			
Wesley	Superintendent	M	White
Yvette	Assistant superintendent	F	White
Miles City School District (city, southeast)			
Randy	Superintendent	M	White
Pleasant Prairie School District (city, west)			
Isaac	Superintendent	M	White
June	Assistant superintendent	F	White
Plentywood City School District (city, southeast)			
Dennis	Director	M	White
Poplar City School District (suburb, midwest)			
Lori	Director of SEL	F	White
Red Lodge School District (suburb, midwest)			
Annette	Counselor	F	White
Diana	Mental health specialist	F	Black
Evelyn	Mental health specialist	F	White

Name	Title	Gender	Race or Ethnicity
Gail	Mental health specialist	F	White
Penny	Counselor	F	Black
Winnie	Assistant superintendent	F	White
Ronan School District (suburb, southeast)			
Christopher	Director	M	White
Saco School District (town, southeast)			
Ken	Superintendent	M	White
Sun River School District (city, west)			
David S.	Superintendent	M	White
Frances	Director	F	White
Troy City School District (city, midwest)			
Darren	Whole child specialist	M	White
Twin Bridges School District (suburb, southeast)			
Theresa	Director	F	Black
White Sulphur Springs School District (suburb, midwest)			
Raymond	Assistant superintendent	M	White
Winifred School District (rural, southeast)			
Deborah	Director	F	White

NOTE: District names and research participants' names and titles are pseudonyms and de-identified. They are included here to humanize the people and places who participated in this study without revealing identifying details. Participants gave self-identified demographic information, including gender and race or ethnicity.

Formal High School Social-Emotional Well-Being Programs

Table C.1 lists the formal programs that were mentioned by research participants. The table lists the programs, their descriptions, and a descriptive quote or example of how these programs were used.

Table C.1. Programs Mentioned by Research Participants

Program	Description	Example or Quote
Character Strong	Whole-school intervention program: Character Strong is “[a]n evidence-based, multi-tiered solution to support whole child success” ^a	Teachers and district staff play music and greet kids.
Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Program (GEAR UP)	College and career readiness-focused program	“We have higher academic scores than some similar districts around us, but we have a higher freshman failure rate in our high school. There is research that links freshmen failure rate to potential graduation. We’re trying to change that here. GEAR UP is part of that, but also the principal is part of that.” —Paige, assistant superintendent
Holistic Learning Project ^b	Well-being program based in Ventura County, California, and rooted in academic strategies connected to student well-being	“They have focus groups and surveys, and they capture data related to learners. It really helps inform, at least for my role, the vision for next year using focus group data learner needs. So, it’s been it’s been a really good project. . . . There’s overlap with student perceptions of their wellness within their learning experience.” —Corinne, district leader
Leader in Me Training	Professional development program for leaders, staff, and students	“We’re doing a book study on trust and inspire by Covey because we are a Leader in Me district. I figure if we’re doing that with the kids, we need to do that as adults. How do we build trust amongst our staff? I want all of our [district] team to be in buildings on the front lines every week.” —Raymond, district leader
Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports (MTSS)	A school-wide intervention framework	“The division leadership team [was expanded] when we added on an assistant principal who really is good. He does our MTSS data, which looks at the behavior data of the schools and things like that. He just has a really good knack with that. Then we’ve added our EL [English learner] and preschool coordinator who is centrally based. She’s at the high school as well, because I think we’ve decided that maybe bringing in someone from the high school might have some influence at the high school.” —Christopher, district leader
PBIS	A school-wide discipline framework	One district took the already existing PBIS framework and added SEL to it to support social-emotional well-being.
Portrait of a Graduate	A district-level process that engages school stakeholders to outline qualities desired of high school graduates	“We also just completed a Portrait of a Graduate for our district. Our goal is that it is not a sheet of paper we put on the website, but that it is truly what we’re trying to build into all of our social-emotional learning. I would say our

Program	Description	Example or Quote
		goal is to develop competencies at every grade level to say, ‘This is how the portrait plays out kindergarten. This is how it plays out at first grade.’” —Chad, district leader
Restorative Justice	An approach to discipline that seeks to restore relationships rather than punish students	“I guess my impression was that at this time there was a paradigm shift, or there was this idea that you can get through the changing of school culture and a trauma-focused lens, that you can somehow affect a school environment. And then, in turn, help students to become better learners and create an environment where kids feel safe.” —Rachel, mental health specialist
Signs of Suicide	A national program, “Signs of Suicide is an affordable, evidence-based suicide prevention program that has demonstrated a 64 percent reduction in self-reported suicide attempts” ^c	Counselors responsible for implementing this program district-wide, including at high school.
Sound Discipline	A school-wide discipline program that focuses on connectivity, now called Building Equitable Learning Opportunities and Nurturing Growth (BELONG), which is a “comprehensive approach to school transformation that focuses on building capacity and sustainability within a district. . . . [Its] approach helps schools create equitable learning environments where all students thrive” ^d	Sound Discipline was well implemented at the elementary level in one study district but took a lot longer (three years) to implement in the high school.
Sources of Strength	Program description: “Youth mental health promotion and suicide prevention program designed to harness the power of peer social networks to create healthy norms and culture, ultimately preventing suicide, violence, bullying, and substance misuse” ^e	“The district uses Sources of Strength; it’s a national thing. They have this wheel with social-emotional resources. So, you have medical access and spirituality and generosity, healthy activities, mentors, positive friends, family support, you know, all of the things.” —Betty, school leader

SOURCE: The programs identified in this table were mentioned by research participants who spoke about formal social-emotional well-being programs used in high schools.

NOTE: Out of 57 total participants, 20 discussed formal programs.

^a Character Strong, undated.

^b Pseudonym used for a small, local project that could potentially identify the participating school district or leader.

^c Mindwise Innovations, undated.

^d BELONG Partners, undated.

^e Sources of Strength, undated.

Abbreviations

BELONG	Building Equitable Learning Opportunities and Nurturing Growth
CDC	Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
COVID-19	coronavirus disease 2019
DEI	diversity, equity, and inclusion
GEAR UP	Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Program
GSA	Gay Straight Alliance
K–12	kindergarten through grade 12
LGBTQ+	lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and more
MTSS	multi-tiered systems of support
PBIS	positive behavioral interventions and supports
RQ	research question
SEL	social and emotional learning

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