

St. Edward's University  
Graduate and Professional Studies

INCREASING UNDERSTANDING OF COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOL-BASED MENTAL  
HEALTH PROGRAM SUPPORTS FOR ADOLESCENT YOUTH POST-COVID-19: A  
THEMATIC ANALYSIS

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Leadership in Higher Education  
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Fall, 2022

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## **DEDICATION**

This research is dedicated to all educators who are working hard each day to help students with their mental and physical health. The COVID-19 pandemic has taken a toll on us all; it is my hope that, on some level, the time and energy that has gone into this dissertation can help those who have dedicated their lives to helping others. Also, to my own kids: thank you for being a source of inspiration. Be kind, work hard.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge my dissertation committee for their hard work, dedication, and support throughout this process.

Dr. Peterson, thank you for your unwavering support and encouragement. I am not sure I could have done this without having a chair who was equal parts compassionate, easy to talk to, and respectfully able to hold me accountable. Thank you.

Dr. Scott, thank you for being willing to join the team and give us your time and tremendous insight. Your kindness has been so appreciated. Dr. Sechrest, thank you for stepping up and adding another project to your already very full plate. In our first course of this program, you shared with us the most important job of leaders is to develop leaders. I have taken that to heart personally and professionally, and I have seen that modeled by you these past four years of the program. Thank you.

## **ABSTRACT**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the mental health needs of adolescents changed dramatically. The emotional, psychological, and overall stress of the pandemic took a significant toll on students' mental health and well-being. At a higher rate than pre-pandemic, students reported feeling depressed, stressed, or anxious. Given how critical attending to the mental health needs of students is to their academic and personal success, addressing mental health and social-emotional learning is a crucial piece in the development of students during and post-pandemic.

Findings from this dissertation showed continued research is needed to expand literature to more decisively address mental health and social-emotional needs of adolescent students post-COVID-19. Additionally, through the literature review process and interview analysis, there were four major themes identified for stakeholders to consider to best support adolescent students. First, cultivate positive relationships between students and their teachers and peers. Second, have established processes and tools to support students with extra social-emotional needs. Third, foster a school-wide culture where it is encouraged to take appropriate risks and mistakes are treated as learning opportunities. Fourth, find ways for all students to be involved and take pride in their school.

From emergent themes, two main recommendations are presented for stakeholders to consider: first, establishing SEL curriculum as an elective course, local credit, or supplemental tool that is predicated on supporting students' 'courage to discover'. Second, rethink traditional school spirit to be more inclusive of all extra-curricular activities and clubs to ensure every student is involved, acknowledged, and valued for something school-related.

This work will benefit school leaders by broadening and deepening all school stakeholders' understanding of student mental health needs through their experiences during the pandemic. Also, all school stakeholders may gain a better understanding of how social-emotional learning and mental health is best implemented in and out of the classroom to aid student development. This work may support administrators, staff, and teachers in responding on the front lines to the tier one mental health needs of adolescent students.

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this qualitative, narrative-based study is to identify lessons learned by K-12 mental health counselors during the COVID-19 pandemic, and to leverage those into best practices that can be used to support middle school (6<sup>th</sup>- 8<sup>th</sup> grade) students. As the pandemic closes in on the three-year mark, research on school-based mental health, particularly focusing on the transformative age range of the middle school student, is of significant importance to counselors, school communities, and all stakeholders in order to best help students with mental health and/or social-emotional needs.

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in March of 2020, mental health needs for students across the United States have exploded. Reports have begun to document the pandemic's influence on students, specifically raising alarms about increased mental health difficulties (Sheasley, 2021). The intensity and duration of the pandemic has exacerbated the mental health needs of everyone, particularly pre-teen and teenage students. In their educational setting, all K-12 students have had to endure being isolated at home with virtual learning, being exposed to an unprecedented amount of media coverage regarding death and suffering, experienced a revolving door of school closings and re-openings, and had to deal with a global pandemic in that liminal space between child and young adult.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the social-emotional needs of students has changed dramatically. The emotional, psychological, and financial stress of the pandemic has taken a toll on students' mental health and well-being (Sheasley, 2021; Singh et al., 2020). Attending to the social-emotional needs of students is crucial to their academic success and development. In essence, social emotional learning (SEL) involves evidence-based programs, practices, and policies through which children and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes

necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions (Weissberg, Durlak, Domitrovich, & Gullotta, 2015).

Over the last few years, school-districts are attending more to social emotional health as part of the day-to-day operations of school and are devoting a chunk of what would be learning time to well-being checks, screenings and discussions about the effects of stress (Mulhern, 2020). These programs also can include more robust social and emotional learning, which teaches skills to help children manage their emotions, control behaviors and cope with life's pressures and in-house counseling and therapy. The term "unprecedented" is an appropriate way to describe the combination of school closures and state and local budget cuts that school systems encountered from COVID-19. A significant aid and investment into mental health resources is required to recover from the trauma and learning loss that children and young adults will experience as a result of the pandemic (Mulhern, 2020).

In K-12 education, most districts, in some capacity, employ school counselors, social workers, mental health counselors, and crisis counselors. In Texas, public school ISD's typically have school guidance counselors licensed and trained in trauma-informed practices, but they spend the bulk of their time on academics, juggling students' schedules and keeping them on track for graduation. Students with severe mental health needs are often referred to therapists off campus. Few schools have campus-based licensed medical professionals who are equipped to provide long-term mental health care. The pre-COVID literature on school counseling provides evidence that school counseling practices promote students' social emotional development (Lambie et al., 2019; Masia Warner et al., 2016; Webb et al., 2019), academic achievement

(Carey & Dimmit, 2012; Carrell & Carrell, 2006; Shi & Brown, 2020), and postsecondary outcomes (Hurwitz & Howell, 2014; McMahon et al., 2017; Mulhern, 2020).

While each job focuses on students' mental health and emotional well-being, these roles are slightly different and focus on different types of student needs as well as different levels of critical need. Because of the sheer volume of students' mental health needs during the COVID-19 pandemic, all of these positions have been tasked with more students than ever before, with more needs than ever before. Whether the COVID-19 pandemic was the trigger of the mental health issues, or if it has brought to the surface issues that were always there, the influx of mental health needs for kids has overwhelmed and spread thin counselors across the board. In the absence of such professionals, along with a typical counselor to student ratio of 500-1, it often falls on teachers to identify students who are struggling. But, teachers themselves wrestle with mental health issues, as they juggle greater workloads, teaching both in-person and virtual students, and risking exposure to the virus. Even before the challenges brought about by the pandemic, teacher stress has long been a major concern, with teachers consistently experiencing some of the highest levels of occupational stress among most occupations (Johnson et al., 2005; Markow et al., 2013).

It has been a well-established norm that social-emotional learning is critical for academic success (casel.org). When students have supportive relationships and opportunities to develop and practice social, emotional, and cognitive skills across many different contexts, academic learning accelerates. Hundreds of studies offer consistent evidence that SEL bolsters academic performance (casel.org). The COVID-19 school closures have underlined the importance of effective distance learning strategies when there are no in-person school

alternatives. Since the spring of 2020, temporary school closures in over 180 countries have kept 1.6 billion students out of school (Azevedo, 2020; World Bank, 2020).

School counselors in middle school typically have a student workload ratio of around 1-500 students. Because that ratio is so enormous, most districts employ social workers and licensed therapists to take on the higher priority cases. In most cases, the higher tier/priority level counselors will have a caseload of around 20 students. As the COVID-19 pandemic has progressed, more and more students need tier 1 and tier 2 services and this quite simply overloads the ability of all counselors in schools to help students effectively. In middle schools today, staff are encountering student anxiety, psychological trauma, family conflict, and depression at higher rates. Suicidal ideation also is on the rise (Meyers, 2020).

To meet the volume of student needs, school counselors are having to prioritize mental health services more than ever before. School counselors' roles are generally defined as a certified or licensed educator who works across all grade levels and implements a comprehensive school counseling program to support students' development in three domains: academic, social emotional, and postsecondary (ASCA, 2019). Their professional responsibilities range from individual counseling, group counseling, and classroom lessons to family outreach and college and career readiness counseling (ASCA, n.d.). As leaders in a district, it is critical that school counselors be equipped with knowledge and skills to address mental health services and social-emotional learning as well as what they need to more consistently and easily speak to the expert therapists who are primarily trained in crisis counseling.

For this reason, a primary purpose of this research is to add to literature that challenges the current status quo in K-12 public education where school counselors have an unmanageable caseload and could never possibly accommodate the mental health needs of their students.

Further, as the number of students who need long-term higher tier level services increases, so to must the commitment of a district to employ more therapists who can appropriately respond to these issues with fidelity in terms of both quality and duration. In addition, another purpose of this research will be to gain insight into how school counselors can focus more of their time on mental health counseling and the implementation of social-emotional learning in classrooms to respond to the uptick in needs due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This study aims to provide the entire school community with evidence of the need and data-based suggestions for serving students at the highly developmental and transformational middle school aged years.

Mental health experiences and lessons learned will be explored through qualitative interviews in a volunteer sample of crisis counselors comprised of school counselors, social workers, and mental health therapists. Participants will be recruited to ensure a wide-range of experiences, in different school districts. The research I address aims to learn about the mental health experiences of middle school students and include the following questions: Research Question 1: How can schools ensure students have access to high-quality mental health supports as schools recover from this global pandemic? Research Question 2: How has mental health counseling during the COVID-19 pandemic changed trauma-informed practices and social-emotional learning in K-12 public education? Research Question 3: What processes should a school community implement from lessons learned by school-based mental health support staff during the COVID-19 pandemic?

This project aims to build a rich and in-depth perspective of middle school students' mental health in order to expand literature to more decisively address mental health and social-emotional needs. This aim will benefit the counseling profession by broadening and deepening all school stakeholders' understanding of student mental health needs through their experiences

during the pandemic. Also, stakeholders may gain a better understanding of how social-emotional learning and mental health is best implemented in and out of the classroom to aid student development. This work may support administrators, staff, and teachers in responding on the front lines to the mental health needs of middle school students.

## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

School districts across the United States and around the world faced an unprecedented disruption during the spring of 2020 and the 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 academic school years due to the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, students faced new challenges accessing school-based resources and support (Meyers, 2020). For adolescents and teens, whose interactions with peers are so central to their lives and development, the pandemic's shrinking of their world has been especially difficult.

### **K-12 Mental Health Support**

On the front lines of mental health support for students, school counselors needed to be ready to adjust to supporting the educational, social, emotional, and mental health needs of all students. The COVID-19 pandemic negatively affected the mental health and social, emotional, psychological, and educational well-being of young people (Golberstein et al., 2020). While it is normal for outbreaks to cause anxiety and fear in society (Güngör et al., 2020), anxiety and fear caused by the pandemic may make it difficult for individuals to combat the results of the outbreak. Identifying and responding to factors associated with anxiety can reduce individuals' anxiety levels and contribute to combating the negative effects of the pandemic (Banerjee, 2020; Brooks et al., 2020). This is where school counselors, social workers, and all crisis counselors use their expertise to help students.

When focusing on middle school students specifically, attitudes toward mental illness and mental health literacy are barriers for adolescents regarding their academics, attendance, social skills, and mental health-related issues. In the United States, one out of every five children has had a diagnosable mental health disorder (Office of Adolescent Health, 2019). Mental health

concerns continue to increase in children and adolescents. Depression and anxiety rates have significantly increased in children aged 6-17 years (CDC, 2020b). Additionally, suicide is at an all-time high in the United States and currently the second leading cause of death in adolescents ages 10-19 (CDC, 2017).

Although there is an increase in mental health issues in the child and adolescent population, the rates of mental health service access have not increased (Mojtabai et al., 2016; Mental Health America, 2018). With the growing concern of lack of mental health treatment, there has been a push to integrate mental health services in the K-12 school setting. It is estimated that 70-80% of students who receive behavioral or mental health services receive them at school (Atkins et al., 2010). With this understanding, many schools have implemented trauma-informed practices and policies (Bartlett et al., 2016). Research demonstrates that disasters and crises can worsen many preexisting problems for children (Phelps & Sperry, 2020).

### **COVID-19 Ramifications in Middle School**

The COVID-19 pandemic has several characteristics that are similar to previous public health crises, as well as community crises. Studies find that mass crisis events have a significant impact on the children living in the affected community (Comer et al., 2014; Furr, et al., 2010; Hoven et al., 2005). Students in K-12 schools have reported higher levels of distress, increased fear, anxiety, anger, sadness/depression, and behavioral problems (Auger et al., 2004; Green et al., 2015). Despite the major impact on mental health following a community crisis, schools are often still the only source of mental health support (Phelps & Sperry, 2020). For example, following the September 11th attacks, only one quarter of New York City children with severe posttraumatic stress received counseling services (Fairbrother et al., 2004). Of these children, the majority of them received services within the school setting (Fairbrother et al., 2004). Given

that most students receive mental health support within the school setting during a community crisis, and, in this case, a global crisis, the work of all student-based mental health counselors is critical.

With the importance of the transformative middle school age range and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the importance removing some of the stigmas of mental illness is significant. School educators have recognized the impact that a student's mental health has on learning and achievements, and these educators realized there is a great deal that can be done to help students with mental health issues (Barile, 2020). In the United States, schools are the most common entry point into mental health services and are recognized as an ideal setting for integrating health and mental health services (Lai et al., 2016).

As mentioned, adolescents spend more time in school than in any other type of institution. Therefore, schools play a crucial role in student development, ranging from peer relationships and social interactions to academic attainment and cognitive progress, emotional control and behavioral expectations, and physical and moral development (Fazel et al., 2014). Without proper tools and education, adolescent mental health issues often go untreated or undertreated in a school setting. Conduct disorder-related behaviors tend to persist into adolescent and adult life through drug abuse, juvenile delinquency, adult crime, antisocial behavior, poor employee relations, marital issues, unemployment, interpersonal problems, and poor physical health. Furthermore, major depressive disorder often has an onset in adolescence and is associated with substantial psychological impairment and suicide risk. Okasha (2003) stated children with pre-pubertal major depressive disorder have significantly higher rates of bipolar disorder, major depressive disorder, substance use disorders, and suicidality than a regular comparison group, as adults. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, approximately 15% to

20% of students could be expected to be identified as needing support through screening (Dowdy et al., 2015); this percentage will almost certainly be higher given the potential emotional consequences of the pandemic.

With this in view, O'Reilly et al. (2018) reported that 50% of adults with mental disorders had experienced these symptoms before age 15, making middle school a critical time period to identify, address, and properly treat mental health issues. Mental health education and support at school can be critical because these outcomes can make adolescence a critical time for mental health promotion, early identification, and intervention. The impact on mental health and social skill development includes anger management, recognizing and understanding others' point of view, social problem solving, peer negotiation, conflict management, peer resistance skills, active listening, effective communication, and increased acceptance and tolerance of diverse groups (NASP, 2002).

According to Garmy, Berg, & Clausson (2015), many adolescent students are at risk for mental health concerns, and about 60% of adolescents formally diagnosed with a mental illness will have recurrent problems. School counselors' mindset and training of how to work with students having mental health issues affects the way they provide support to students and their families. Therefore, it is important to understand how school counselors are communicating with other staff members to ensure students with diagnosable mental illness are being referred and helped in a consistent way. Part of the role of the professional school counselor is to work with the whole child, which means that school counselors collaborate, support, and provide information to staff about what life stressors are impacting the students (ASCA, 2012).

Understanding their perspective and ability to communicate with administration on one end, and social workers on the other is a big step to helping school counselors address the needs

of the whole child. Many schools try to address not only the academic needs of students but the psychosocial, mental, and physical health of students so they may develop into effective, productive citizens. Living with a mental illness can have profound effects on a student's quality of education and life. When the issue of mental health is discussed, it is viewed as a person's emotional well-being, mental well-being, physical well-being, and the quality of life that person is experiencing. Mental disorders have become more common in schools, causing restricting opportunities for students in the classroom (Tabish, 2005). NAMI (2017) estimated that the start of mental illnesses most often occurs in adolescence. About half of people with mental illness experience onset by age 14 (Association of Children's Mental Health [ACMH], 2016; NAMI, 2017). Adelman and Taylor (2006) revealed that 12%–22% of all adolescents under the age of 18 need some sort of support with a mental illness or a social/emotional problem, and this support typically begins in schools. As numbers were rising pre-pandemic, this expected increase shows that mental health and psychosocial success are growing concerns for many in education and society.

### **Mental Health Multi-Tiered System of Supports**

In schools where large numbers of students encounter mental health barriers to learning, strategies other than just improving instruction are required in order to improve achievement test scores and close achievement gaps. When students come to school unable to learn or when they are not motivationally ready to learn, test scores are not likely to increase unless schools enable students to navigate beyond the barriers that are interfering with their mental health (Adelman & Taylor, 2006). As far back as 2001, the Policy Leadership Cadre for Mental Health in Schools (Policy Leadership Cadre for Mental Health in Schools, 2001) stressed that increasing mental health in schools is about creating a comprehensive, systemic approach to strengthen students

and families, schools, and communities. The purpose of such improvements was to maximize learning and wellbeing. The Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA (2021) noted that leaders promoting mental health in schools have emphasized the importance of several considerations. Programs must be based on well-conceived models, and they must include a framework that is linked with the mission of schools. Additionally, support programs need to be restructured in a manner in which school and community resources are woven together to create integrated approaches to enhance healthy development and address problems (Policy Leadership Cadre for Mental Health in Schools, 2001).

Over the past two decades, a commonly adopted practice for schools to create school-based mental health services is via a three-tiered approach (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2004). The first tier is designed to provide mental health programs and services to target all students in an effort to decrease risk factors and increase resilience. Such programs include varied curricular and extracurricular activities to increase students' feelings of success associated with school. Schools alone cannot identify youth needing greater mental health support. Universal screening, which may also be a tier 1 approach, offers an opportunity for health professionals and schools to partner. Effective school-based mental health screening requires a sufficient number of trained health professionals to conduct screening and review results in a timely manner, predetermined follow-up timelines, including a tiered follow-up approach based on risk level, staff to immediately identify students in crisis and who need immediate intervention, and partnerships with youth-friendly health services for those needing intensive intervention (Stoiber, 2016). Community partnerships can vastly improve the ability of schools to provide mental health screening and treatment.

Tier two is targeted mental health services to assist students who have one or more mental health needs but who manage at a functional level in many academic and social activities. Interventions may include group or individual therapy and behavioral elements of Individualized Educational Plans (IEP's). The third-tier addresses needs of students identified as having severe mental health diagnoses and symptoms. Tier three interventions involve a multi-disciplinary team of professionals working collaboratively to support the young person's mental health needs (Young & Murray, 2004). Specialists include psychiatrists, psychologists, and social workers working in a trusting relationship with school personnel to suggest treatment, facilitate referrals, or to interpret clinical techniques.

This research aims learn more from stakeholders in each tier; their individual experiences during COVID-19, lessons learned from working with middle school students and families, and how those can be shared and communicated.

### **Tier 1 School Counselor**

It is important to understand and differentiate between job roles and descriptions for different school-based mental health counselors. The first line of defense for student mental health issues in school is the professional school counselor. The American School Counseling Association (ASCA) recommends that school counselors deliver services via guidance curriculum, individual student planning, responsive services and system support. All four components of the delivery system provide a platform for addressing mental health related issues in some way, but particularly, responsive services afford school counselors the opportunity to work directly with students who may be experiencing any mental or emotional disturbance. These services include individual counseling, group counseling and crisis response (ASCA, 2012). Gybsers and Henderson (2000) recommend that school counselors spend between 25-

40% of their time within the delivery system providing responsive services, with the highest percentages recommended for elementary and middle school counselors. School counselors still struggle to find a balance that allows them to use responsive services to adequately address personal/social and emotional needs, in addition to their perceived primary role of promoting academic success and career readiness. Disproportionate counselor to student ratios, school counselor self-efficacy addressing personal, social and emotional issues, and a lack of clinical supervision are all contributing factors that prevent school counselors from achieving this professional balance (DeKruyf, Auger, Trice-Black, 2013).

### **Tier 2 School Social Worker**

A second line of defense for more urgent needs is the district and school social worker. School districts employ social workers to address the needs of at risk and special needs students. The precise social work role in connection with these students varies from school to school and from school district to school district. Some school districts employ school social workers to serve multiple schools or to work with a single broad population. Other districts assign the social worker to a single school or a narrow population. Many school districts expect social workers to function as members of crisis teams (Openshaw, 2008). The school social worker spends most of his or her time helping children with emotional and behavioral disorders. Accordingly, many school districts employ social workers in the special education department, where they are limited to working with special education students. This diversity in the social worker's roles creates a wide variety of functions and responsibilities for school social workers.

While the school counselor may request support from the school or district social worker, she/he may also determine what the next step of intervention would be best served by a behavioral facilitator. While there are many names across districts and states that these

professionals are labeled, the core of their work is the same: help support students by teaching de-escalation and positive behavioral strategies and techniques. These facilitators teach youth and families how to identify underlying needs and bolster strengths to facilitate the development of an individualized plan that supports the family vision. Also, they assist in the development of natural supports and non-traditional community resources needed for youth and their families to reach their vision (Lensa, 2022).

### **Tier 3 Mental Health Therapist**

After a student has gone through tier 1 and tier 2 support, the typical next step in public education is to refer the student to a licensed mental health therapist at a tier 3 level. Multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) is a framework for schools to plan and offer supports and strategies that work together to provide all students with the appropriate type and amount of social, emotional, and behavioral supports they need to be healthy, safe, and engaged learners (Force, 2020). In many larger districts, there are a handful of these crisis counselors on staff who can report directly to a campus to support. In smaller districts, and when district staff are at their caseload capacity, mental health clinics partner with districts to aide in additional crisis counseling. District partnered mental health professionals (e.g. school psychologists, licensed mental health therapists) are trained to work in the school context and support the learning process in addition to mental and behavioral health. These staff are embedded in the school community, knowledgeable of school culture, and are available in a sustained capacity to work with all students and families (NASP, 2020).

## **Educators' Responsibilities and Training for Supporting Students' Mental Health**

There are many positions on a school campus who are directly or indirectly charged with helping support the mental health of students. Since teachers see students each day, they are often tasked with being the first point of contact for potential mental health issues. Teachers spend a significant amount of time with students and are in a unique position to identify and help support those who experience mental health concerns (Johnson, Eva, Johnson, & Walker, 2011). In addition, teachers often play an integral role in supporting comprehensive school-based mental health services. However, teachers report a lack of training on how to address student mental health in the classroom (Osagiede et al., 2018) and often struggle to effectively refer students who have emotional and behavioral health concerns (Eklund & Dowdy, 2014).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, schools appeared to have challenges identifying students who experience internalizing concerns such as anxiety and depression (McIntosh, Ty, & Miller, 2020). While students working from home clearly made diagnosing mental health issues more challenging, whether virtual or face-to-face, teachers and other certified staff are not trained explicitly in addressing these issues. Despite teachers' role in supporting students' mental health, training in this area is not explicitly addressed in pre-service teacher education programs (Council for Accreditation of Educator Preparation, 2018). Teachers typically rely on in-service professional development to enhance their knowledge of student mental health. Teacher training programs related to student mental health tend to focus on areas such as early identification and referral processes (von der Embse, Kilgus et al., 2018; von der Embse, Rutherford, Mankin, & Jenkins, 2018), or content knowledge (Kutcher et al., 2016). Training programs may also focus on a specific type of mental health concern (e.g., attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, depression). In addition, there are various formats for training such as full or half-day

workshops, courses, or online training programs. As school-based mental health services continue to expand (Weist et al., 2018), teachers will play a critical role in supporting students' mental health needs. State departments of education, school districts, or university faculty may be involved in providing teacher training in student mental health and need information on effective practices.

While teachers are the most likely campus staff member to identify a student mental health issue, there are many other campus staff members who work with and spend time with students on a daily basis.

### **Mental Health for Middle School Students**

While all students need mental health support, perhaps no age range is of more import than the middle school age range (11-14). Middle school students are characterized by rapid physical growth, curiosity about their world and an emerging self-identity. Middle school counselors enhance the learning process and promote academic, career and social/emotional development. School counseling programs are essential for students to achieve optimal personal growth, acquire positive social skills and values, set informed career goals and realize full academic potential to become productive, contributing members of the world community (O'Grady, 2017).

Adolescence is a unique and formative time. Physical, emotional and social changes, including exposure to poverty, abuse, or violence, can make students in these years extra-vulnerable to mental health problems. Protecting adolescents from adversity, promoting socio-emotional learning and psychological well-being, and ensuring access to mental health care are critical for their health and well-being during adolescence and adulthood (WHO, 2021).

Globally, it is estimated that 1 in 7 (14%) 10-19 year-olds experience mental health conditions, yet these remain largely unrecognized and untreated. Adolescents with mental health conditions are particularly vulnerable to social exclusion, discrimination, stigma (affecting readiness to seek help), educational difficulties, risk-taking behaviors, physical ill-health and human rights violations (WHO, 2021).

Adolescents are at a vulnerable stage of development, with the majority of mental disorders emerging during adolescence. Rates of psychological distress among adolescents seem to be increasing. For example, the prevalence of depression increased from 9% in 2005 to 13% in 2017 among US adolescents aged 12 to 17 years (Lancet, 2017). While at the time of this study, the COVID-19 pandemic is very much still ongoing, research is emerging to show statistics, particularly for mental health needs among adolescents, increasing at a rapid rate.

Thorisdottir and colleagues' study, which showed that the prevalence of depressive symptoms was increasing from 2016 to 2018, and then increased somewhat more from 2018 to the numbers reported during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 (Thorisdottir, 2020). While caution should be applied when interpreting an increase as a result of the pandemic alone, it, at the very least, has exacerbated many issues for adolescents who are more at risk for presenting with mental health problems. Risk and resilience factors are therefore imperative to map in studies like that by Thorisdottir and colleagues. As pointed out by both Pierce and Holmes in their position papers early in the COVID-19 pandemic, it is of utmost importance to capture vulnerable groups in pandemic-related population-based studies (Pierce et. al & Holmes et. al, 2021). Similar research conducted in Norway suggests that some groups of adolescents, such as adolescents living in separated families, are disproportionately at risk for increased symptoms of mental health problems during times of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Lancet, 2021).

## **COVID-19 Communication**

As COVID-19 research focused around student mental health continues to evolve and be published, an important aspect of support will be centered around the above groups of mental health counselors effectively communicating. This communication needs to be horizontal and vertical in nature. Counselors and school psychologists have much to offer in the assessment of students and both sets of professionals should be members of multidisciplinary assessment teams. Counselors contribute skill in developmental assessment approaches and provide a holistic view of the student (Smith, 1995). In addition to communicating with the other mental health specialists involved in student care, it is also critical for counselors to communicate with all school stakeholders. One way schools and districts can address this limitation is by creating partnerships with agencies and organizations in their surrounding community. These school-community partnerships provide a comprehensive array of supports and enrichment opportunities that can be accessed through a systematic approach to addressing out-of-school barriers that interfere with academic success and healthy development. For instance, integrated student support has emerged as a systematic approach for matching students with a tailored student support plan, often through leveraging resources in the community (Walsh, 2019).

## **Purpose of Study**

This study is intended to contribute to the body of literature regarding mental health related barriers to student learning and the obligation schools have to deploy available resources to ensure a world-class education for all students. It is well documented that mental health needs and fragmented families are barriers to student success in schools and that federal legislation dictates a focus on not only academic achievement but also on extended mental health services to children and families in need. The research questions in this study attempt to provide support for

school-based mental health personnel and services that effectively address the problem of mental health matters to identify and execute post-pandemic best practices.

Interview questions and sessions are intended to glean a comprehensive perspective of lessons learned from COVID-19 in the space of student mental health. Research Question 1: How can schools ensure students have access to high-quality mental health supports as schools recover from this global pandemic? Research Question 2: How has mental health counseling during the COVID-19 pandemic changed trauma-informed practices and social-emotional learning in K-12 public education? Research Question 3: What processes should a school community implement from lessons learned by school-based mental health support staff during the COVID-19 pandemic?

## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This chapter provides a description of the general methodology, procedures, and sample selection criteria I followed in the study as well as a description of the research design. Also, included in the description of the methodology presented in this section is an explanation of the participants in the study.

This study will be conducted in urban and suburban public-school districts across a large city in the southwestern United States. Narrative-based case studies derived from in-depth interviews with school-based mental health professionals will be conducted to discover common themes and best practices.

### **Narrative and Grounded Theory**

I chose narrative and grounded theory as the method of research for my study because I wanted to capture the subjective experiences of school-based mental health counselors through their perspectives. The participants include school counselors, social workers, mental health behavioral facilitators, licensed therapists, and other school-based certified staff members who are drawn from ethnically diverse, public school districts in a southwestern state.

Narrative inquiry and grounded theory are interrelated and several examples can be found of studies that combine the use of both (e.g., Bailey & Jackson, 2003, 2005; Cohn et al. 2009; Drew, 2007; Floersch, Longhofer, Kranke, & Townsend, 2010). This type of research method is suitable for a study about how school-based mental health counselors experience and perceive their experiences during COVID-19. A narrative approach was deemed appropriate to use in this study because it affords insights into understanding the lived experiences of the participants and produces authentic descriptions of these experiences as it is happening to the participants in the

immediate environment (Ganeson & Ehrich, 2009; Omizo et al., 2006). Using grounded theory allows for the research questions to evolve and change over the course of the study (Creswell, 2007), so starting with broad questions prevented the focus of the study from becoming too specific too quickly, rather than letting the data guide the research. My intended use of this research approach is to obtain the participants' experiences by combining their textural and structural descriptions into an integrated essence (Omizo et al., 2006) of the COVID-19 experience for mental health counselors.

Using narrative theory, researchers describe lives, tell stories about them and write narratives of experience. Thus, in telling a story the narrator takes responsibility for making the relevance of the telling clear so that meaning is created between storyteller and listener. The role of the researcher is to be an effective listener and to see the interviewee as a storyteller rather than as a respondent (Savin-Baden et al., 2007). Therefore, in interviews the agenda is open to development and change depending on the story being told. Authors such as Bauer (1996) take the position that the object of narrative analysis is the narrative itself, as opposed to the events being narrated or the experiences of the narrator.

### **Sample Selection**

Participants were selected using purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is used in qualitative research participants' experiences with the phenomenon. Creswell (2013) states that a purposive sample is one in which the participants and the sites are selected intentionally to understand the central phenomenon under study as it is experienced by those specific participants at those research sites. Maxwell (2005) implied that the technique of purposive sampling involves deliberately choosing participants from the population that can provide the researcher with the most useful information. Welman and Kruger (1999) considered purposive sampling to

be the most important of the non-probability sampling techniques to select primary participants. Participants are essentially chosen because they have experience with the researched phenomenon (Kruger, 1988).

Before participant recruitment was initiated, I submitted the research protocol to the St. Edward's Institutional Review Board (IRB). After IRB approval was acquired, individual counselors that met the eligibility criteria as determined by my professional judgment were contacted via email and invited to participate in the study. In the initial email to prospective participants, I included a letter of introduction outlining the purpose of the study and the time requirements, sample questions, a letter of informed consent, and my contact information. I, then, followed up with the respondents of the initial email via phone contact to further explain the study and answer any questions that they might have had. The respondents that agreed to participate signed the consent form, returned the signed copy to me, and scheduled a Zoom interview with me.

My goal in sample selection was to include participants in the sample from a variety of levels of experience, and mental health supporting positions. Creswell (2013) recommended that qualitative research requires only a small number of participants. The general rule for sample size in a phenomenological study is typically limited to ten participants (Creswell, 2013; Hays & Singh, 2012); thus, I thought to stay within an 8-10 participant range.

The respondents who accepted an invitation were invited to participate in an initial interview but were under no pressure to accept. I included the purpose of the study, sample questions, and an informed consent form in the initial email so that the potential participants could make an informed decision about their participation in the research study. The initial email was followed up with a phone call to further explain the study, answer any questions that

they might have had, and to set a date and time for the initial interview. If a potential respondent chose to participate, the individual was informed that he or she could withdraw from the study at any time. Recommendations from selected participants and professional colleagues supplemented my professional judgment in selecting participants that would best meet the research criteria. The selected participants desirably represented a demographically diverse range of education and work experiences, current school counseling positions, as well as male and female perspectives. I gathered the participants' demographic information prior to their individual interview sessions and then used open-ended questions to guide the semi-structured interviews.

## **Interviews**

The interviews were semi-structured so as not to lead the participants, digitally recorded to be transcribed verbatim to ensure that the data is "rich," and examined thoroughly for emergent concepts. The next step involved recording, clustering, and synthesizing the categories to examine emerging themes in the data (Kornfeld, 1988; Moustakas, 1994). Initially, I analyzed the data to find and record significant statements and to delete duplicate statements in the process of horizontalization (Iwamoto et al., 2007). For this study, statements containing elements that are crucial to the experience of counselors' responsibilities and COVID-19 experiences were to be extracted, then grouped into related clusters of themes or "meaning units" (Iwamoto et al., 2007, p. 342) to create a description of the textures and structures of the experience for each participant (Boon & Alderson, 2009; Omizo et al., 2006).

The goal of this study was to evaluate the participants' experiences using textual and structural descriptions of COVID-19 experiences (Omizo et al., 2006) until saturation was reached. Strauss and Corbin (1998) suggested that saturation occurs when "no new or relevant

data seem to emerge regarding a category, the category is well developed in terms of its properties and dimensions, and the relationships among categories are well established and validated” (p. 212). In other words, theoretical saturation is the point in which there is no new understanding gained, no new theme derived, and no new concern appeared from the data category (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). I sought to suspend all judgments and focused on how the participants experienced and perceived the pandemic under study.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection was planned according to the suggestions proposed by Chan et al. (2013) of conducting a semi-structured interview and allowing the participants to guide the interview process with their concerns, rather than only the prepared interview questions. I also planned to ask participants “focusing but not leading questions” (p. 5) pertaining to their experiences and to listen intently, keeping in mind that the way I ask the questions affects the quality of the information collected (Chan et al., 2013). I notated information in my notes for reference during the data analysis process (Macdonald, Sauer, Howie, & Albiston, 2005).

In addition, I utilized a self-reflective journal to record my thoughts, feelings, and perceptions during the study. A reflective journal is used to document ideas, observations, and stereotypes. Using a reflective journal permitted me to review my position when concerns arose during the research process that could have potentially influenced the study (Chan et al., 2013; Hamill & Sinclair, 2010). After each interview, I wrote in the self-reflective journal to help in self-reflection and in the qualitative process, any assumptions and judgments (Macdonald et al., 2005).

Various methods of data collection that were used in this study including written responses to the demographic questionnaires, the self-reflective journal, and participant observation categorized in my field notes. The variety of techniques used in data-collection increased the trustworthiness of the study by providing multiple frames of references and multiple sources from which the data was obtained (Denzin, 1978).

Data was gathered in individual Zoom interviews conducted by me. The interviews were 45- minutes to 1-hour in length. The interview protocol included open-ended prompts and questions in order to encourage participants to describe what was meaningful and salient in their roles as school counselors. If the participants indicated that they wanted to spend more time on the interview, the interview was extended. The interviews were terminated when the participants indicated that they had no more to contribute or the prearranged length of time had transpired. Before each interview began, I reviewed the purpose of the study and obtained informed consent.

I documented all extraneous reactions by participants in my field notes such as their voice tones, facial expressions, body language, and noteworthy mannerisms. All identifiable data regarding a respondent was removed from the interview report and pseudonyms were substituted for participant names to protect the person's identity. I listened to each digitally recorded interview as soon as I possibly could after the actual participant interview ended. I listened repeatedly to the taped interview to gain a much fuller perspective of each participant's experience through the participant's own words (Holloway, 1997).

At the end of the transcription process, participants were asked to review transcripts of their interviews and to provide feedback or additional comments related to the initial discussion in order to address credibility of results using member checking. I conducted member checks with research participants by giving each participant his or her transcribed interview and the

research abstract for review and feedback. This member checking process ensured that the participant's experiences were accurately reflected. Participants wrote their comments on the actual transcript, which was incorporated into the final report. Any changes that were recommended by the participants were made in the interview report prior to solidification of data analysis.

## CHAPTER 4: DATA ANALYSIS & RESULTS

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to student mental health being examined in a new way across the country. This study aimed to explore adolescents' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically the psychological and social impacts on this age group and how this knowledge could be used by all school stakeholders to better support students in this transformative age range. Responses to open-ended interview questions were summarized following the qualitative content analysis by NVIVO software (2022). The answers were given via Zoom meeting and then coded with regard to content and frequency.

While there were several key findings identified during the research, four major themes emerged with regard to answering the initial research questions:

Research Question 1: How can schools ensure students have access to high-quality mental health supports as schools recover from this global pandemic?

Research Question 2: How has mental health counseling during the COVID-19 pandemic changed trauma-informed practices and social-emotional learning in K-12 public education?

Research Question 3: What processes should a school community implement from lessons learned by school-based mental health support staff during the COVID-19 pandemic?

The themes are as follows: First, cultivate positive relationships between teachers and students and students and students. Second, have established processes and tools for teachers and students with extra social-emotional needs. Third, foster a school-wide culture where it is encouraged to take appropriate risks and mistakes are treated as learning opportunities. Fourth, find ways for all students to be involved and take pride in their school.

One way major themes 1,2, and 4 were further developed was by the research gleaned that students were able to adapt to school closings and virtual learning, but overwhelmingly missed in-person social contact with friends both at school and in their personal time.

**Theme:** students overwhelmingly missed in-person social contact with friends both at school and in their personal time

- *“At the end of the day, kids needed to be around each other kids face to face.”*  
(Teacher 1)
- *“It was clear students could handle the academic adjustment, but struggled mightily to interact with one another virtually.”*(Social Worker 2)
- *“We underestimated the importance of socialization as virtual learning made students feel isolated and alone.”* (School Administrator 2)

Research used to advance major themes 1,2, and 3 also suggested middle school students’ willingness to return to school varied based on their connection to their school and whether they had positive relationships with peers and teachers. Also, there was a positive consensus regarding the importance of returning to school in order to socialize with close friends face-to-face and get back to consistent routines.

**Theme:** Returning to school was needed for socialization and for consistent routines

- *“It was never more obvious how important students being involved in their school outside of their academic classes is to them wanting to be in the building each day.”*  
(School Administrator 1)
- *“Students who struggled finding something they were passionate about at school were much more likely to stay virtual longer.”* (School Counselor 1)

- *“The more we connected school to the whole child and encouraged students to be themselves and listened to how they were doing, the better they were doing academically. It was a huge moment for us to realize this as a campus.” (Teacher 2)*

The findings centered around concerning challenges of the school environment suggest the need for peer relationships and the need for bullying to be dealt with more effectively in schools to help increase young people’s connection to school as well as a sense of belonging and safety in school. Existing research during the pandemic has also demonstrated that maintaining relationships during online learning is a significant challenge and a lack of togetherness with peers has been found to be one of the most critical factors which was reflected throughout discussions with educators. This was critical research in advancing theme 3.

Routine and structure were an important implication for teenage mental health amidst ongoing uncertainty throughout the pandemic. The absence of a structured setting of school during the pandemic has been highlighted as an important coping mechanism for young people with mental health issues. This absence of routine was reflected in the research, particularly around the routine of traveling to and from school and the structure of a school day, suggesting this may have acted as a coping mechanism for some students. This, again, could also be linked with a sense of school belonging, which we know to be of importance for academic and psychological functioning in adolescence. This further developed themes 2,3, and 4.

Careful consideration is needed to ensure interventions meet the needs of a wide-range of experiences and outcomes, likely by embedding whole-school approaches to tier one services. Educators discussed the importance of involving young people in school reform beyond the pandemic, empowering the student voice to ensure responses are acceptable and appropriate for

this population. This research provides important implications for future distance learning if there is another lockdown; particularly around encouraging students to create routine and structure to their day and providing guidance around positive learning environments.

Additionally, this research shaped themes 1 and 4.

**Theme:** It is important to more directly involve students in school decision-making processes

- *“We were surprised at how much we learned when we asked students. They may be 11 or 12, but they were honest and thoughtful with their feedback on how we could help them during this time.” (School Administrator 2)*
- *“Students were telling us they needed to feel comfortable, to feel safe, to feel valued. We were worried about learning loss when we should have stayed more focused on their mental health.” (Social Worker 1)*

Mental health implications predominantly centered around findings relating to peer connectedness also highlight the importance of young people having a core group of friends who they could rely on and talk to about their feelings. This is very consistent with tier two small-group services. Educators noted the role of the pandemic in helping students to understand the importance of relationships. Future work should look to further understand the support students received on return to school and longer-term mental health outcomes for teenagers as the pandemic continues. Along those lines, the findings on young people’s apprehension around seeking help from teachers suggests that further efforts could be focused on help-seeking and open conversations about mental health in schools, which in turn may have positive implications for young people’s connectedness to school. This helped to better center themes 3 and 4.

**Theme:** Building relationships is imperative for students feeling connected to their school

- *“Positive relationships is the most important thing.” (Mental Health Therapist 1)*
- *“Building relationships is at the core of whatever we do.” (School Counselor 2)*
- *“Teachers needed to take a step back academically, and just listen and check in and strengthen those relationships.” (Teacher 1)*
- *“Students struggled to forge relationships when they returned; we needed to spend a lot of time helping them to build those peer to peer bonds.” (Teacher 2)*

Numerous educators reported students are pulling back into a shell, seem apathic or depressive, and are sad and show fear of failure and the future. Educators get the impression students are low in spirit and more afraid than before the pandemic. The challenges because of the COVID-19 pandemic are enormous and long-lasting; they influence the everyday life of all people and lead to a decrease of life quality as well as an increase in stress and mental symptoms like anxiety, for example, among all age groups. This cycle of students being low, with teachers and staff also struggling, exacerbates problems for everyone and lowers chances for students to really get the help they need within a school setting.

**Theme:** Students and teachers need social-emotional support

- *“Students have simply lost their courage to discover.” (Mental Health Therapist 1)*
- *“Students have more social-emotional needs than ever before.” (School Counselor 2)*
- *“Teachers are human, they are struggling. Now add dozens of students in their classes each day who need significant mental health support. It’s overwhelming.” (Teacher 1)*

Social-emotional support for students and staff at schools needs to be urgently increased. Moreover, a comprehensive and holistic review approach of student success needs to be implemented. Middle school students are subjected to particular challenges; they need a great deal of abilities and skills as well as self-motivation to cope with the current school requirements. These skills need to be taught and embedded within a school day because concentration, resilience, and motivation are dispositions which need to be learned in the same way as any academic content area.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the role parents and caregivers played in children's education was illuminated. Stress experienced by the parents because of COVID-19 correlated high with the behavioral changes of adolescents, based on the research. One silver lining of this, based on interviews with educators, was that the parent-teacher relationship factors was generally reported more positively, underlining the value of regular interactive communication. Cooperation between children, teachers, and their parents was vital in preparing for virtual learning and in the months afterwards. School staff had to hastily formulate and implement creative and sustainable communication strategies on a scale not previously experienced that would be accessible to parents and students alike. Most parents seemed to acknowledge the success of this approach and commended educators for their regular contact, availability, and commitment to keeping in touch with individual children. Now that such lines of communication have been established, there is an argument that it should be maintained post-COVID-19 and utilized to nurture increased parental involvement, particularly amongst those previously hard to reach. The parental confidence that can emerge from this type of communication has been described as an opportunity to nurture self-efficacy and more equitable relationships. Proactive relationships between home and school reposition parents from passive

to informed recipients of information and the findings in this study indicate that options for the delivery of skills-based training, awareness-raising, and intervention techniques is a way to sustain this in the months ahead.

Another key finding from the qualitative interviews was the importance of vertical and horizontal communication amongst the multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) where we have tier 1 Universal supports, tier 2 targeted supports, and tier 3 intensive supports. During the implementation of MTSS, creating a plan to share information with families and community members about the school's approach to MTSS in a clear and accessible format is essential. School support staff needs to earn the trust of students and families by explicitly stating why MTSS is necessary, how MTSS will impact students, and the schedule of expected communications.

**Theme:** Stronger communication between school staff and stakeholders is imperative

- *“We desperately need to partner with parents so we can work together on ways to support students who need extra support.” (Social Worker 1)*
- *“There is a huge gap with communication between teachers, counselors, social workers, and mental health therapists. They are all helping the same student, but not collaborating or sharing their experience.” (Mental Health Therapist 2)*
- *“There needs to be time in the day allotted for teachers, counselors, and social workers to talk and communicate.” (Teacher 1)*

In interviews conducted, there were multiple themes that were overarching to most or all of the sessions in terms of what can be done by stakeholders to help support the emotional well-being of students. These supports were consistently mentioned to help address social,

behavioral, and academic challenges which are all important steps for fostering a positive environment and strengthening a child's ability to learn. The four major themes were, again: First, cultivate positive relationships between teachers and students and students and students. Second, have established processes and tools for teachers and students with extra social-emotional needs. Third, foster a school-wide culture where it is encouraged to take appropriate risks and mistakes are treated as learning opportunities. Fourth, find ways for all students to be involved and take pride in their school.

**Quotes taken that further develop all of the four major themes:**

- *“When students are not involved in something at school outside of their classes, they are so much more likely to have extra mental health needs.” (Social Worker 1)*
- *“Students are feeling isolated and don't know how to get involved and socialize.” (Social Worker 1)*
- *“Kids are so inwardly focused; they need so much guidance and support on how to interact with others right now.” (School Counselor 2)*
- *“Teachers need to focus on making sure their students are okay before they get into the content. Kids right now need to know adults in the building care about them.” (Teacher 1)*
- *“This is middle school. It needs to be okay to make mistakes and we need to put students in positions where they feel safe enough to make a mistake. Kids are feeling so hesitant to do anything that will make them feel like they look foolish to others.” (Teacher 2)*
- *“We so desperately need to honor all achievements students are earning. Athletics get so much attention; celebrating students for academic and all other types of*

*achievements creates a culture where all kids take pride in their school and feel valued.” (School Administrator 1)*

- *“Teachers need help. They need support and training on how to do help kids with tier one social-emotional needs. More than that, they need help as people also dealing with the pandemic. Help the teachers first, then train them to better serve students.” (School Administrator 2)*

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

This study contributes to limited research examining the mental health impact of COVID-19 on middle school students, particularly in a public, urban, southwestern United States region. Findings from interviews with multiple tier 1, tier 2, and tier 3 mental health support staff, conducted during the spring and summer of 2022 were used to develop major themes. Primary findings indicated that all practitioners felt a concerning effect of the pandemic on middle school students' stress, anxiety, depression, and loneliness: themes gleaned stemmed from this perspective.

Findings from this study have important implications for all school stakeholders about opportunities to address stress related to the pandemic and provide the groundwork for developing targeted intervention programs for middle school students at higher risk. Following an extended period of time of social isolation and limited academic engagement/stimulation, significant attention should be paid to addressing mental health symptoms which also impact educational achievement and could worsen the achievement gap. Interventions are needed to mitigate the effect of the pandemic on adolescent mental health. Strategies may include improving resilience by developing peer support networks, leveraging digital technology for mental health support, facilitating partnerships between families and mental health providers, and ongoing government support. Schools are a critical partner in providing mental health services and resources to youth because of their proximity to students. Although school counselors, school social workers, and school psychologists are trained mental health providers in schools, teachers will likely be tasked with providing initial layers of targeted support to students post-pandemic and will need more robust and appropriate training and resources.

Experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic, school closures and returning to school were complex and varied between individual students. The COVID-19 pandemic has taken a significant toll on adolescent mental health, particularly for those with poor mental health prior to the pandemic.

Nationwide school closures limited access to mental health services for many vulnerable youths. While some mental health providers have offered telemedicine services, the capacity of schools to provide these services is low. Furthermore, some families lack the technology required to access these services, if they exist. Given the status of adolescent mental health prior to COVID-19, the potential impact of COVID-19, and below-recommended ratios of school counselors and psychologists to students, school-community partnerships can be instrumental in supporting students and staff. The Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) framework, used by many school districts to guide their mental health activities, can structure this work.

Tier 1 emphasizes mental and emotional health; these interventions are often delivered school-wide or to an entire grade. Schools can consider implementing or expanding social and emotional learning (SEL) programs. SEL programs embedded into the master schedule for teens can increase social and emotional skills, attitudes, behaviors, and academic performance. SEL programs allow a student connection to school that can also protect or buffer young people from health risk behaviors.

More students need tier 2 approaches in the 2022–2023 school year. Tier 2 approaches can be delivered by either a school counselor or community health professional. These approaches focus on issues such as problem-solving, grief and loss and typically occur in smaller groups than tier 1 approaches, such as small group counseling sessions; schools will need to

allow for students to be exempt from class time to focus on their mental health in these types of tier 2 settings.

Tier 3 strategies, such as individual counseling with a licensed mental health therapist, are for students already experiencing mental health challenges to prevent symptoms from worsening and other symptoms from developing. School social workers will be tasked with lessening the stigma of therapy to students as well as families to ensure students are receiving proper care. Additionally, districts will need to make a concerted investment, both time and financial, in securing quality mental health therapists who can provide necessary tier 3 care.

Implementing school-based prevention and intervention strategies promoting social and emotional well-being at all three MTSS levels can improve educational outcomes, save money, and promote mental and physical well-being for students and their families. Community-based health providers can support schools in this work and can work with students and their families in community-based settings. Given the increased COVID-19-related mental health stress on the nation's students, school-community mental health partnerships are now, more than ever, essential to the health and well-being of our young people.

From emergent themes, three primary recommendations are ultimately presented for stakeholders to consider: first, establishing SEL curriculum as an elective course, local credit, or supplemental tool that is predicated on supporting students' 'courage to discover'. Second, rethink traditional school spirit to be more inclusive of all extra-curricular activities, clubs, and holistic achievements to ensure every student is involved, acknowledged, and valued for something school-related. Third, invest resources to support teachers and their personal mental health, as well as better equip them with training to deal with tier one mental health student needs.

- **Establishing Social-Emotional Curriculum To Promote A Courage To Discover**

The research was clear regarding the importance of adolescent students being encouraged to take acceptable risks. We need to create a middle school culture where making mistakes is okay and considered a way to foster growth. We need to foster an understanding for all school stakeholders that research is telling us students at this age have such a fear of failure that, whether academically, extra-curricularly, or socially, they simply do not put themselves out there to try new things or try things outside of their comfort zone. Waiting until high school for students to learn about or first try to develop these dispositional skills is too late: grades go on college transcripts, close-knit social groups are more difficult to penetrate, and extra-curricular activities are often limited to those with prior experience and a certain skill level. If middle school students are afraid to come out of their shell, that is unlikely to change at the start of high school, and that isolation and lack of involvement are two major contributors to school-based mental health issues.

- **Rethinking School Spirit To Be More Inclusive Of All Students**

School culture plays a huge part in how much a student wants to come to school each day. School spirit has been largely measured by athletic success and school-day-based traditions. This research suggests student-involvement and recognition for a wider array and variety of school-based achievements is necessary to have a school culture where all students feel they belong and are valued. The recurring theme research showed time and again was lack of student involvement is the best indicator for risk of mental health needs. Adolescent students need to feel a sense of belonging and find their way to some type of school-based activity or club about which they are passionate. School administrators and staff then need to find modern and

innovative ways to leverage that involvement to more properly acknowledge accomplishments of all students.

- **Invest Resources To Support And Train Teachers**

It is increasingly clear that everyone has been significantly impacted by COVID-19. Teachers have borne a larger brunt of the struggle than most due to the fact they were tasked with trying to ensure all of their students are getting the support they needed while dealing with their own personal and family struggles. Research suggests most, if not all, social-emotional resources are being driven to help students. This presents two large gaps; proper training for teachers to implement social-emotional care with fidelity, and resources to properly care for and support teachers themselves and their mental health needs. It is clear school administrators need to invest time and resources in helping teachers get the support they need. The research suggests helping teachers starts with taking tasks off their plate that are not directly tied to student success. Further, administrators should offer grace and assume best intentions when handling issues with teachers rather than form a dictatorial and compliance mentality that is based around pointing out what a teacher did wrong or is not doing. Students and teachers alike need support, empathy, and positive coaching/mentoring to be at their best. A person who feels appreciated will always do more than expected.

## APPENDICES

## APPENDIX A

### Interview 1

Alan Thompson: that's it excellent all right well again thank you for joining me and being a part of this, I really do appreciate it and my dissertation the title is centering the mental health needs of middle school students sort of lessons learned and crisis counseling during during COVID-19 and so that's really our aim throughout this this interview to kind of get as much perspective from you, and hopefully i'll be able to you know kind of allow school stakeholders to gain a better understanding of how social emotional learning and mental health is best implemented in and out of the classroom to aid student development and then also to be able to look at some of the gaps that may exist between sort of those tier one and two and three levels. And so I have six pretty basic questions. Okay, and I think we'll just we'll jump right in.

I1: Sounds good.

Alan Thompson: All right, well, the first one is pretty easy your sort of current position title, so a little bit about your work.

I1: Okay, so I am currently [REDACTED].

Alan Thompson: And just sort of off that how long have you been working sort of in this role, and maybe some of your past roles that have allowed you to see a lot of different perspectives with with kids and education and mental health.

I1: So the current [REDACTED], I had just I started in August, so it has been my first year previous to that I was a school counselor so i've worked as a school counselor for 15 years, all of them have been in the high school setting, but I have worked as as a guidance counselor grade level, I have also worked as lead counselor. I have worked in the early college concepts you just kind of seen the stressors there and I have also previous to counseling I taught elementary. So that's where I kind of started my journey in the education field, and then you know just kind of similar to your interest here I just saw me for mental health professionals and that's what led me to get my masters in counseling and then after that it just kind of you know progressed and now i'm here and i'm really excited because one of the neat things about my position is i'm able to provide more the mental health, as well as a therapist so I have the angle from the education perspective. And then i'm able to kind of blend that with the mental health and provide some services interventions to kind of understand what they're facing you know as far as like the students and the parents as well kind of challenges. And i'm also a parent so that has definitely also given me a vast amount of experience.

Alan Thompson: Absolutely, and so it's actually probably pretty unique to where you, you have a really good appreciation and understanding for that sort of first level school counselor work and all that all that that encompasses and so. I think we'll be able to go back to that and that's that's like really super helpful for me in this work, because what I think probably happens and and, as

you, as you know, like there are a lot of school counselors who may not know when it gets kind of to your level now what's happening there and then the flip side there might be some. You know, really strong crisis, but maybe not fully aware of what the anyway, so to kind of bridge those gaps and stuff and so really you have that full perspective, which is awesome.

Alan Thompson: Okay, well, so let me, let me ask and you know take as long elaborate however you want to do it, but in a general sense, the question is how have middle school students and really all students to be fair, but how of middle school students been impacted by sort of from your perspective.

I1: Well, you know, of course, because of COVID-19 all students all levels of education to kind of a regression, there was a halt as far as you know, they were able to transition into the new campus so depending in a middle school is such a short amount of years right some schools have from six to eighth grade some have intermediate so just focus on seventh and eighth so depending on how the schools are set up so. It kind of it's like that gap right from elementary where you're there for maybe about five years and then a short amount of time in that middle schools it's a shorter period and then right before you get into high school. So kind of that gap what it allows the middle school students to be able to do is kind of make that transition from being younger students and maybe having a lot of direction, a lot of not being able to maybe make their own decisions where to go, so a lot of developmental skills are taking place during that time. And so I think one of the setbacks with COVID-19 was that they were not allowed to do that kind of that discovery, you know kind of that it's weird age there. Students have simply lost their courage to discover. They don't want to be little kids anymore, but yet they're not ready to be like high schoolers you know and so it's a very important time because of the transition and the the development of skills that they have to gain so that they're not just kind of taken over and lost in high school. But they're able to kind of learn and grow and become and have their own interest because it's also changing from what they were who they were in elementary. So typically in middle school, you know you have a lot of differences in frank group. It just changes in their interest as well, like what they want to study there's a lot of just kind of discovery that they're doing whether it's sell whether it's like they're crying group whether it's religion so there's a lot of just kind of openness going on with their development, so what it also helps is that with middle school you're able to kind of like protect them in a sense, because you're in those years, and you have them more kind of contained and it's like okay Now you can go on to high school well again with us not being able to do that for those years, some of our students really were kind of lost because they just went from there last schooling may have been at the elementary and then, when we were able to kind of come back into the schools, then they had to jump into high school so they didn't have those lessons that time to build some of their self you know, so I think that that was a really detrimental to some setbacks. And we're seeing that regression even more because again developmentally they didn't have those skills in that time to strengthen those skills so we're seeing that in high school. And so again they're expected to come into high school and be able to know how to run their schedule, how to talk to teachers, how to navigate their friend group and making choices, so that has been difficult. So some of our students were kind of stuck you know either they they kind of stayed in their younger years or They didn't have that support to be able to kind of on their own, be able to navigate high school, which again is it's an awesome opportunity for them to just kind of really focus on their interest and what they want to study. So it left our. i'll call them babies for right now but they're not babies, but it kind of left

them in that vulnerable age where because they didn't get that then we have some floundering and some that, of course, you know just naturally were able to continue and make progress. So I think that that's kind of one of the the main ones where we see a lot of regression socially emotionally mentally and so, and when that happens, then they start questioning themselves so then that regression kind of becomes a basis for their self doubt, lack of self confidence, maybe even also just them, not being able to have that courage to kind of discover and take you know wanting to explore maybe new topics new friend grew. So it also just kind of brought about a lot of for some a lot of fear, you know what else and again also just with the what I also noticed was a regression also exam with working with their families or their parents, because again in school, you know socially it's their time to kind of become who they are, and explore well when we didn't have that and they were at home they get to be able to kind of just self explore like they would have in a school setting so for some we saw you know again that they either kind of got that and maybe their younger years and kind of their relationship with their parents and others, they just kind of wanted to really push the limits and didn't understand why you know it's like okay my fifth grader just all of a sudden started working against me well, that was part of developmental and it would have taken a little bit more time and they have been school, but because we didn't have that, then it seems like it's just from one day to the next, that they have these changes.

Alan Thompson: Yes, I agree, and that is actually a really good segue I was a great answer it's a really good segue into the next question which is sort of to take what you're saying and then now saying okay well how have the mental health needs of middle school students changed over the course of the pandemics, a certain you know just in your experience what you've seen. You know, of course, before the pandemic, there were kids needed help and having mental health issues but sort of your perspective on how that's changed evolved throughout this this pandemic.

I1: I guess, one of the more obvious changes that we noticed was the fact that we were you know middle school is just kind of that all time of year for for the students and with the COVID-19 and the shutdown What happened was it some of those development skills and changes that needed to happen didn't happen so then now you're working with someone who not only developmentally they should be may be at this level and socially emotionally mature and they're not right, but they're being expected to so it's just like they have to take this giant leap and a very short amount of time and they're expected to know this so again it's really just kind of increase that very normal time of theirs as a teenager where it's like they're not able to discover who they are there, a lot of self doubt it has really just increased the self doubt it has really increased the reliance on peers and social media So then, some of them or also just not they're seeing things on social media that they have not maybe experienced or live through because of the shutdown and what happened and so then they are wanting to just kind of match some of that and it's not realistic, so a lot of them have very unrealistic expectations of themselves of society of where they should be, we also saw just a lack of their own self reliance and being able to kind of problem solve and work through some issues were against this or normal you know middle school issues, but because of COVID-19 and not having that social setting this is like really just obvious you know and a lot of them are just really Self doubting themselves, and so, then that's really just kind of causing them to limit what they're willing to do or get help one of the good things, one of the positives that I did see was that because we did have more that reliance on social media, and you know around the same time we started having all the the social unrest and

also just with the attention with the me to movement, and also with just getting help and some of the issues that were made aware, then, some of them were able to see that there is that glimpse of like oh okay there's another option, I can get help I can seek out resources you know so and so it's doing it, and they are a pop culture, media person or you know influencer and so then it's okay so some of that did increase some of your awareness so we were able to have a couple more they were now voicing requesting, you know with their parents saying I need to talk to someone so that was a positive in my.

Alan Thompson: Absolutely it's it's really interesting because both of those questions there was a you said it explicitly in that second question this this idea of the courage to discover. Right like that that is really fascinating I mean as a really and I can see that in that transformational that middle school a you know where, if you if you have that self doubt you don't have that natural curiosity to go and take some risks and to put yourself out there, a little bit and and as as we shift because it'll scholarship right yeah because if you're not going to do it when you're 12 when you're going to be able to yes do it.

Alan Thompson: yeah that's excellent so from your perspective and again and sort of a crisis counselor tier three when when someone gets to your level, you know it's it's a significant and so what what strategies, best practices have you found that if positively impacted middle school students during COVID-19 post COVID-19 if we are post COVID-19 you know I don't know but what kinds of strategies and best practices have you found that that are working and maybe they're a little bit different than pre pandemic, maybe it's the same thing that just tried and true methods, but when you are having when you're seeing positive that what, what are some strategies and best practices, yes, and you know, most of them are kind of a tried and true just because, again, I have been working.

I1: In the education field for 20 a little bit over 20 years, but most of that was as a school counselor so I have been able to see the change evolve from when students or not didn't have a cell phone and weren't allowed to be using they're so close to where we are now where it's like you know it's like your it's your other hand, it's it's just like it's an automatic for some students so i've been able to see that some of the more effective strategies i've been able to even even though times have changed i've been able to use them, and that is, you know, establishing rapport letting them know that that you are someone there to help them that you're not judging them so really just kind of stressing that is very important, because then you're able to help them feel comfortable enough to talk to you and tell you how they're thinking how they're feeling just in the years that I worked, you know again it's very normal that during this time they're just thinking that they're just so self critical and they're thinking that they're the ones, the only ones going through this And that they see that on social media their friends are happy and going in showing you know all these fun things that they're doing and then they're not Participating or maybe not doing the same activity so, then they started just kind of really comparison, so what I try to do as well, is that i've seen that has been the most helpful is just really kind of get them to see how whatever tool, they have whether now with the phone Using that to their advantage, and how sometimes it can maybe not be as helpful like it just kind of had a lot of just questioning like Okay, is it helpful for you to be looking at your friends what they're doing over the weekend i've you know you're not going to be as busy like is I go on to kind of lead to comparison, which again is very normal and natural at this age.

I1: But what has happened because of social media it's like it's so instant and you can see everyone, and anyone that it's just it's hard for them to get away from it, you know kind of really just kind of teaching them a lot of just self regulation that self awareness, knowing when they might not be in a good state of mind or might not have the energy to you know, engage in whatever they're going to do. So a lot of just kind of self questioning just kind of self checking. It has also been I tried it as much as I can use the social media outlet, so you know, whatever is kind of coming out I try to get them to see some things that might be helpful, for example, like right now with the you know now right now, but the movie encounter when it came out. Just really kind of getting using that will be and kind of asking them hey you know who do you connect more with which one are the actors and why and how are they similar and how are they different and what are some of the skills that they use and just kind of helping them be able to see that you know just have a different perspective of being able to see more intuitive rather than just it's a movie it's like no, you know let's kind of learn from it. If there's anything going on in the media that you know that we want to just kind of explore, so that the present time has really just kind of helped in and made it just more readily available for you know, like okay let's look at this like How does this apply or and being able to reference it like sometimes I like to use a lot of either movies, or maybe kind of shows that are popular for them so being able to like if I forget the name look it up online, you know just kind of show them it's also been very helpful there because of what we have with YouTube you know if it whenever I teach them a skill and I want them to practice it, I will direct them to a video like hey you know what i'm watch some videos about this so again they don't have to wait, whereas previously it's like they have to wait for. The counselor or whoever they were meeting with to be able to kind of get access to some of these skills, now they don't have to wait as as long right, because here here's the link that I can send you for the YouTube video here here's i'm going to email you this short assessment take it once a week and then, when we meet again i'll kind of evaluate the data so that has also been very helpful for us, we try as much as we can. Using data, you know just kind of assessing their mood kind of assessing like kind of what happened, so that we can use that data to kind of show them the facts because they might think that they haven't made any progress it's like no look let's let's kind of break this down look at where you were when we first started meeting. And now you're telling me that you're happy you're having more experiencing more happy days so that's progress, you know, recognizing I do a lot of which has been very effective over the years, is just kind of that fact checking. You know, not necessarily just like what's real for a year which side okay kind of doing that pro and con list which then again that I can kind of connect to when they learn those skills in school it's like hey you know how you used to work on this pro con list for one of your classes well let's apply that same skill to what you're going through right now you're making a decision about you know whether or not you want to play football. So let's go ahead and do this chrome con list so I really try to just are some use some skills that I know that they have learned by that age. Because then they'll have that as a reference, and they will be able to like oh yeah we did do this. And then just kind of again showing them how practical that you might learn something in your class like with science right whenever they're doing theory testing well that's those similar principles can be applied when you're trying to find out whether or not this boy likes you or you know there's girl or there, whether or not they're your friends. And I also try to do a lot of connecting and referring them to books which I have noticed it's more they're not and I don't know if it's they're saying they're not or maybe because you know, we have the audio but i'm having less than less saying yes i'm reading books and using those to just

kind of learn from or kind of see how others have experience so because of that then i'm kind of using more like you know popular shows movies. But that has been a little bit of I have to kind of gauge, you know and find out from them like what are some of your hobbies and so when they tell me reading, then, again I try to kind of match what we're going to use to something that they like, and if they play a sport, you know kind of connecting okay well you know just like you would learn the skills. For soccer it's kind of like, how do you get ready, how do you get ready to play soccer and so connecting what they are already using and showing them and practicing there with them that it can then be applied when they're doing this problem solving with their emotions, you know I also do, especially because we're two or three students, some of them have either had severe traumas or maybe just trauma after trauma that they are not connected with their or they don't trust their emotions and their feelings, so we do a lot of learning to be in tune with what they're experiencing so that they can start noticing what they are either feeling or thinking or when it comes up you know a lot of just awareness of triggers of why why this would get you upset you know if if you have every time you get a pet pet either get dies or gets taken away from you then, this is why, maybe now anytime you see a pet you don't want to interact with them, because you just don't even want to create that bond with that and then, explaining to them more that has been what you've had to do to just kind of self protect. And this is why and it's like oh Okay, I thought I was just being a bad person, because I used to love dogs and now I don't like no, you know just kind of that that reason there's a reason why. And so, when we're able to get to the bottom of it and understand then they're able to work through that and not not just see themselves as the problem child.

Alan Thompson: that's really that's really interesting because again like that problem child you kind of going back to the previous question where they're seeing all these things on social media and it's like i'm the only one who's but they're also posting. Right like there's that not not making that connection of well it's maybe it's a little bit like not real for me, but for everybody else it's correct yeah that's that's that's really. But it goes, it also ties back into the self doubt and being really critical and man Okay, so this is a really, this is the last question. But I think it's really in your wheelhouse because it's sort of related to these. You know tier one two tier three and kind of all of that were looking at gaps or problem areas that currently exist in really just K 12 education to properly handle the mental health needs of middle school students, you can take that any any direction.

11: And you know, and because of my experience and being able to this year have this role where i'm not in the school per se 24 seven but i'm able to kind of have like an outside perspective. I'll say it's still not easy okay it's not easy, as far as like pinpointing what it is because it's just so vast and it can just be any any multiple thing that's going on as far as like what the gap is. What I have come to the realization I was listening to a graduation speech by darn it I just her name escapes me right now she's the author of a book titled and it gets journey. Her name will come to me a little bit, but anyways so she was speaking at the rice university ceremony, and one thing that she was saying, and I was like oh that's what we are experiencing now so remember when or honored know, maybe. But before before schools were mandated or that they had to provide breakfast and lunch right it wasn't the school's responsibility before it was either like kids had to eat breakfast at home and bring their lunch or they had to buy it right, then, over the course of the years. We started noticing that hey kids do better when they eat breakfast and they come they've satisfied their basic needs, and so they learn better and that's what we're here to do to help them

learn so let's go ahead and start feeding them so then that long changed and pass right Well now, I think what we're seeing is that before with mental health, it was a outside of school problem, like you, fix it you try to get help. And then send them to us when they're ready oh and, by the way they have to keep come to school, even though they're having these problems and oh sorry you're having to travel so far to take them to get help, but you still have to bring them to school and you're still responsible, you know. So I think what we're seeing, and this was this I think has really been brought to light, because of everything with code is that we're starting to recognize that their mental health is not an isolated problem they can just be dealt with outside of school and then, when they're ready. So we're seeing that now it's like okay it's knocking down our door and it's saying the school system also has to help. And you know enough first I kind of went back and forth with that, but essentially if the schools are there to help build our citizens of society. And this is a need that we have now because it's gone so many years, I met and typically anything that has to be given to like the masses is done at the school right, you know that's why now like in high school they're they're having their high schoolers learn cpr because you know it's like okay wait. We can fix this problem instead of just isolating and teaching them when they become adults and they choose, like no we have them we have this large audience right now. And we can kind of teach them skills, so I think that this is kind of what's happening now is that now the schools which trickles down to the teachers right to educators now. We can ignore these mental health problems we have to learn to be able to work with them address them, not that we are skilled enough to help them there, but we have to be able to be skilled enough to kind of recognize, just like when we recognize that hey maybe there is a cognitive issue here, so I need to refer him or her to get testing or now it's those skills and we have to start recognizing as soon as he doesn't look her happy self lately like there might be something going on. Let me go ahead and just kind of check in and for her you know, to talk to a counselor and then they can do their checking in. But what we're also what i'm also noticing as any you know, and I don't know if it's because up to now we have gone so long with not kind of giving that assignment to someone particular just like when they blow up and they have like the fight and it's like okay go take them to see the counselor right now. I think that one of the reasons that we are seeing more tier three and so severe is because those signs have gone unrecognized and some of our students have gone and attended and not offered to help so that you know, this is just it's like kind of how I explained to my clients and my shins it's like when we have a problem and it's been growing and growing and growing and growing and then it blows up. Then we have this giant womb, you know and it's like, how do you tackle that. You can't just set up all these er see do that now, it has to kind of go again trickle down to other support and start identifying problems earlier so with all that i'm coming to that where it's like Okay, now we need to start Recognizing some of the signs, you know, we have the aces know some of these at risk and we've known them for years right, but it was just more of like oh just identify them and then that's it. But no one went and followed up with susie cool had for at risk signs, it was just completed and submitted. So now we need to start working at okay. When we do see all the signs, what are we going to put in place to be able to kind of start giving them that support that help that they need them, and not just letting it continue up through middle school and then high school and then it just blows up you know. So um that's a definitely a challenge because that's kind of what I was saying that you know just how looking I was like Oh, my goodness, how do we do that because and school counselors are over tasks, right now, they are also having just so many you know and it's hard and that's why I think that this is also in the resource that we have because i've been a school counselor I know that you know you are trying to figure out their academics trying to figure out their social

emotional and then also, at the same time trying to help with lunch duty and then also you have a parent wanting to meet with you so you're pulled in so many directions that you're not able to give the time and attention to really helping any of those right so then now we're tasked with okay well how do we try to help them because I kind of compare it to like school teachers when they have so many objectives that they have to cover in a short amount of time in the classroom, how do we do that so really just kind of continuing to problem solve and look for ways of how can we help that be possible, how do we not only just identify some of these at risk markers but now also just try to like okay now how do we what help can we offer them, how do we, you know identify the ones that need that help, how do we refer them, how do we follow up with that, because you know again because of everything that's been going on. it's going to now trickle back down to the schools have like Okay, do you knew all these signs were there, so how did you try to help you know and so accepting that that is something that we're going to be tasked to do and looking for ways of Okay, how do we try to still do your job of educating but also see that this is, this is a shift that's happening, and you know, and I started to see that shift in my profession as. As a school counselor Alan and I had for workers that were not ready for that shift they used to, they were used to being just academic counselors like hey i'm here to help you, with your schedule i'm here to give you the the resources, so you can start applying to college Aside from that, then I have, I have enough work, you know it's keeping me busy I have enough work, but now you're also there now looking at okay well that's still now your euro is changing in that shift has been hard for a lot of people that are not comfortable dealing with or don't feel that they're capable, to provide that social emotional support. So that's where you know again we're there to help, because then, if we are able to focus on on that social emotional and teach some of the ones that are recognizing like Okay, yes, I know that I was hired as a teacher, but because I spend more time with these kids than their actual parents, then I know I need to be skilled in this area, now professional professional I just need to be able to recognize and know where i'm going to refer them like what after this after I know that I have this need for this student then what's the process to get them help and that's where you know our role your role comes in, is because then it's like okay well how do we provide, how do we set that up so that I can be strategic and when I just respond right so that's the difficult part you know because it's like how do we help with that without just being like Okay, this is what you have to do because then it won't be effective right so it's like Okay, how do we identify how do we create our system, how do we support our system, how do we check that it's a good system that it's going to help us be able to meet the needs. So I know I didn't really answer but it's like kind of like yes, we have it's more of like yes, we have a problem Houston and, yes, we are working on it and there's not just one answer one way.

Alan Thompson: No, but I do think that idea idea of in the same way that we understand breakfast is helpful for students to learn, I mean taking care of one's mental health is sustenance I mean it is right in a way, I mean you know, and then I think wonderful analogy and and also just the idea of getting you know whether it's counselors who lean a little bit to the academic side, or whether it's teachers who you know, or maybe sort of used to how it was a long time ago, when you could you know again via you know, but the just that those simple shifts and being a little more proactive and trying to address things here before they get here I mean that's that's yeah that is great great stuff that is that is wonderful. That was those were great answers on this is awesome I really, really appreciate you taking the time to do it, this has been wonderful learning for me and, hopefully, good for you to kind of hear some of this stuff too. And so I know you

have a client here soon so we'll go ahead and stop and i'm sure i'll follow up with you soon, but but this was this was awesome Thank you so much for your time and all the things and you have said some things that I have written down that like I mean just really, really like good stuff so and i'm going to use the courage to discover because that that's like the that's huge, and so I can so like get that so.

## APPENDIX B

### Interview 2

AT: Well, I really appreciate you coming and working with me today and. helping me, be a part of the dissertation or my dissertation, just in case I know I put this in the email but just in case you me need refreshing or would like refreshing, the title of my study a centering the mental health needs of middle school students lessons learned and crisis counseling during coven 19 I really think you're gonna be able to give a lot of excellent information and so we'll just start asking the questions if you're. ready.

I2: Thank you.

AT: Alright, the first question is, what is your current position or title.

I2: Well yeah so thanks a lot for inviting me to participate in this and I'm happy to be here an I have been in different parts of education for over 20 years and have served in a variety of roles that impact mental health and for the most part, focused on middle school students in their transition from elementary school to middle school and then obviously middle school to high school, and so I have been able to be a part of tier one and tier two and two third tier three interventions and yeah I've seen a lot over the course of my 20 plus years.

AT: So how long have you been working I know you talked about it a little bit in the first question, but how long have you been working in education with middle school age students?

I2: So, most of my career has been with middle school and what I have been able to see over the last, particularly the last few years is just the level of transitional support that middle school kids need from when they leave elementary school as fifth graders and then come in a sixth graders and then obviously when they leave eighth grade and transition into high school and ninth grade. What I think has become evident over the last several years is that this is a very transformative time and, both in terms of academic mental health socially, and so I really feel like it is a really crucial time in the development of again of these students, both in terms of academically and socially.

AT: How have middle school students been impacted by COVID-19?

I2: Yeah I think it has really been a difficult stretch for all of us, and I know that you know most if not all adults have been really impacted by it, and so you can really take that and multiply it by however much you want when you consider you're now talking about you know 11 12 13 year olds and you know how they've had to adjust and deal with things you know happening to them and they really aren't necessarily equipped with the skills to necessarily know how to handle it. I think, from certainly from my work, I would say that middle school students during COVID and now certainly coming back from COVID I think that they've lost a lot of their ability to engage socially and you know, really just the ease of making friends and just being social and having positive interactions with others, I think has been impacted through a lot of the students being

isolated for an extended period of time. I also think that social media has played a really large part in that because students have become so dependent on trying to post things that are you know where they're trying to get things to be perfect and look perfect and then they see their friends who are posting these things and others and people they don't even know. And so I think it's COVID has exacerbated that social media outlet and dependency, as far as middle school students really having a less than reality, I guess, a view of reality that is just where everything is perfect and everyone is perfect and, and so I think that has contributed to students just being less willing to take risks and put themselves out there and there's probably more sense of fear of failure than I've seen before at the middle school level. We so desperately need to honor all achievements students are earning. Athletics get so much attention; celebrating students for academic and all other types of achievements creates a culture where all kids take pride in their school and feel valued. And then, lastly, I think you know academically we just see at the middle school love with here during COVID. You know, students, some students have really done well, but those that haven't. They haven't necessarily had the best support at home or they haven't necessarily been able to get the supports that they usually get in person at school, they haven't been able to have those and then that has caused them to maybe give up a little bit more easily maybe not try as hard as they normally would. You know, because they're not being pushed to their best and then, when they don't do well they're not necessarily being given the the same supports and obviously there's just something about being in person, as the teacher, where a teacher can help and see things nonverbal communication and things like that so teachers have had a you know it's much harder to do that virtually and so at the end of the day, everybody has been really impacted by COVID but I certainly you know would make the argument that middle school adolescent age range has been impacted as much as any age range has.

AT: So I'd like to ask a follow up question to that.

I2: Sure.

AT: So you mentioned, you know the students that have done well um what does what does that look like what does it look like to the middle for middle school students to have done well and then how does that differ from what does it look like for a middle school students and not done well you know what I mean if that makes sense I'm just saying about that.

I2: Yeah definitely, so I think when we think of traditionally when we think of middle school students, we think of kids who are trying out new things they're being exposed to different clubs different activities different social opportunities, and so you know typically you know from an educational standpoint, we would gauge positive behavior from a middle school student, as someone who is willing to engage and joining a new club or as willing to try out for a sport or you know to join theater or two just to just try new things, and so the first thing I would say is you know we think that a student is doing well, when they are putting themselves out there and are you know, in the classroom asking questions and participating and engaged and then outside of the classroom that they're you know willing to try to be involved in something they're trying to find a passion and so I think, on the other side of that when we look at students who aren't doing well we're looking at students who are very disengaged in the classroom setting there they're not participating, you know, maybe they're not turning in work they're not willing to get involved in any extracurricular activities and any clubs there they're just not really taking part in in the

middle school, you know, in the opportunities I would not gauge it as who's necessarily has the highest grades, and looking at that metric and saying Oh well, this student is getting good grades so she or he must be doing okay. I think, certainly, we would look at somebody who's doing well, as somebody who's progressing grade wise and so who someone who's getting better week to week month to month, but at the end of the day, I think COVID has exposed this idea of when students are dis they're already sort of they lack engagement academically and socially and now they're isolated and they really don't have any opportunities to be involved in so they are so disengaged and they are they're feeling so far away from whatever we would consider a normal middle school behavior that that isolation, though there, there are just a lot of red flags that that go that are I guess put up from that and it's because of covert it and because of virtual learning, it has been really hard for us to meaningfully address those.

AT: Right yeah It makes me think of you know how hard it was as an adult and we have the tools to you know call people, or do you know, do something and high school students kind of have a little bit of freedom to you about the middle school level and elementary they make the best of everything so I have this group of middle school students that stuck in between those two spaces.

I2: Absolutely.

AT: So again, a little bit you've touched on this a little bit too, but how have the mental health needs of middle school students changed over the course of the pandemic, how would you say that has changed?

I2: Well, I think one of the good things that has come from this is that, as a society or certainly as an educational Community I think we're much more aware of everybody has mental health needs and is struggling to some extent, and just because you're super involved or just because you have a lot of friends or just because you have really supportive parents or just because you have you know really high grades, you can still be struggling, you can still be dealing with a lot, and so I think that right a great there is a positive from coven because we've I think we've been better able to acknowledge that everybody could be struggling and so as teachers as educators as social workers as counselors and therapists we I think are looking for things as far as with every student and not just the ones who's you know where the red flags are really very obvious but as far as what those obvious red flags, do you look like I think COVID again has really shown where when students get you know really isolated and in virtual learning where they just maybe wouldn't, not only would they were they not willing to participate, they might not have even been willing to turn on their camera. They might not respond to direct messages where they're just completely disengaged and you know, obviously, if they're not attending that's a that's a whole other issue, but if they are attending but just really unwilling to you know to even show turn their camera on and so things really I think require some follow up on educators. You know, it really should show up on their radar. I think, as a from a therapist perspective, what we're seeing is that students are much less likely to take risks and they're very much afraid of failure. I think we're seeing students who have very little coping skills when things do not go their way, they're not really sure how to handle failure but also just handle disagreements or differences of opinion and lastly, I think one of the big things is what we see is because there is such a spike in the mental health needs of kids that teachers and administrators and staff on a campus are not

necessarily feeling fully equipped without a handle that and so you know, certainly, one thing that I hope comes from this is there's more work to be done, as far as how we can utilize resources to support those at the campus level to identify and mental health needs to be able to refer those properly, not necessarily to everybody, you know, be a therapist but that everybody is attuned to what potential problems are and to be able to properly refer those and to be able to you know treat kids with patience and grace and compassion.

AT: What strategies and best practices have you found that have positively impacted no school students were saying post COVID, but you know we know COVID is still going, but as far as being a little different now?

I2: Yeah yeah, so I do think you know, certainly in one on one therapy sessions we've been able to try to really go back and analyze situations with students and kind of get them to talk to us sort of what was your mindset what were you thinking and then you know work with them on how can we reframe that and work with them on you know, specifically when you feel like this, or when you do this here's a coping strategy, a specific thing that you can do to hopefully have that go away before you know you act out or something negative. And so it really I think the first thing I would say is as we're working with students, one on one for them to identify how they're feeling and you know work with them on some sort of coping mechanism for that, and you know, certainly if we can get there, we can start to dig a little more deeply into why they're feeling that but, honestly at the middle school level, a lot of our success is just simply giving them a tool that they can have when something comes on or when they're feeling a certain way that they know Okay, I need to do this and then this will help me and so that has been successful. Another I think big success pieces when we're able to get administrators and teacher leaders in a district or in a school who you know are really open to wanting to learn, and you know, want to listen to you know how they can what were some of the things they can do on the on the ground level to help kids when they are in crisis, and some of those strategies as far as just really thinking from a compassionate place and you know, trying to listen and I think, providing support to educators, to let them know that you know you don't necessarily need to solve the problem. Really, can you just listen and just make sure that that student feels safe and comfortable and then we can refer it and get it to the right person who, who is equipped to handle that. And then I would say strategies that that involve working with students on some social media awareness and education as far as what they are seeing and what maybe the reality is and maybe you know, hopefully, being able to involve caregiver and you know, making sure there are some boundaries and some balance there. Because, as I mentioned earlier between COVID and between social media those two things have been really big triggers and a lot of the behaviors we've seen, and so we can we can't control COVID but we can work with students and with parents on you know, trying to limit and better understand and support students and what social media is and what it's not and how it can be used in a you know, a more productive way.

AT: Thanks a lot. So finally we're going to answer the last question about I'd like to hear about what gaps or problem areas you feel currently exist in the K 12 public education system to primarily handle the mental health needs of middle school students.

I2: I definitely think there's a gap as far as the coaching that we have from the mental health side to the teachers and to staff members, I would like to think that there are ways where whether it's

school counselors or whether it's the social worker or people coming in that are really training teachers better. And you know, a part that we're not even getting into is just how teachers right now need a lot, too, and so the more resources, we can put into people coming in and trying to not just mentor teachers on how to help students but also mentor teachers on how to help themselves during this. And so there's a gap there, I also think there's a gap between the educational options that students have, as far as courses, we talked about some social media literacy kind of courses. But also just you know coursework that or opportunities, maybe it's not coursework but just opportunities, where students can you know learn a little bit more about themselves and to be able to you know have opportunities to listen to others. And you know, really have opportunities social opportunities that are guided and hopefully, that can get students in a in a more comfortable space for them to you know to be in their own shoes and to be able to communicate effectively and then I also think a gap is right now on how we currently involve parents in the process I'd like to think there are ways where we can work with the student and we can work with a parent and we can all work together and we can all learn from each other, and we can all help and give each other, you know tools and strategies and obviously there's a lot of really tough situations that caregivers and parents are dealing with. And so I do think that if we can earn as educators, that we can earn the trust of parents that we can really bridge the gap, because we can get them hopefully working to help their students after school and then certainly it's something that we can do day to day to help them, you know, while there, while they're in school.

AT: Those are the questions I have today is there anything else you want to say before we leave?

I2: No, that was great I hope that these answers were helped were helpful.

AT: They really, really, where I really appreciate it.

## APPENDIX C

### Interview 3

ALAN THOMPSON: Alright, thanks so much for giving your time today. I'm really looking forward to this interview and learning from you and what you have to say.

I3: sounds good.

ALAN THOMPSON: Alright, so let's start off with what is your current position or title.

I3: I have been in education and variety of roles for several years and most recently in mental health, focusing a little bit more on middle school kids and adolescents and that sort of transformative 11 to 13 age range and my area of focus is their mental health and then also working with not just individuals, but also with groups and with families as well.

ALAN THOMPSON: Okay, so how long have you been working in education slash specifically with middle school aged students?

I3: Well, certainly over a decade and.

I3: I do think that, as I said in the first question that you know that the middle school age is transformative and particularly in these last few years, with COVID-19 there's just been a big I guess spike in the mental health needs of everyone, but specifically for this age group, and so I think what and I'm sure that I'll share as we continue in the interview but it's a time where there are really significant mental health needs and with kids at an age where you know they're old enough to sort of know something is may be wrong, but not old enough to really know how to address it or fix it and so hopefully you know these are all things that we're working to figure out how we can best identify and then be equipped to help students who are going through tough times.

ALAN THOMPSON: Yeah so what specifically or in what ways have middle school students been impacted by COVID-19?

I3: Students have more social-emotional needs than ever before. I think it's been hard for educators, to really tell sometimes what students are doing well, and they do what aren't and so when we've been face to face teachers counselors just staff there if someone's just not looking like they're having a very good day that's a little more evident obviously face to face and seeing that then these last couple of years where students may not you know they first of all, they may not even have a camera on but even if they do you know they're sort of sitting still in one spot and you don't necessarily get to see you know some of those nonverbal or verbal cues that you normally would sort of identify that something might be wrong, so you know, certainly, I think of it has impacted our ability to maybe address some of the issues before they really you know, continue to get worse and worse because no one's really understanding or knowing that anything's wrong in the first place. I also think that just socially middle school students in general it's an awkward time and only then I think further exacerbated by social media and by

isolation and by you know, students, just not being in situations where they're feeling safe and comfortable to put themselves out there and things that you would typically see when you're 12 and 13 years old, the last couple of years students who really have been forced to grow up pretty quickly, and you know, maybe have missed out on some of that being a kid. And then I think also we just have, the last couple of years, specifically, we just have a more gap than we've had with parents just you know also being really impacted by this and not exactly knowing what to do for themselves, let alone for their children and so you know, it has become very complex to try to work with families and with students on identifying and trying to figure out ways to properly support them, you know, during that again that sort of transformative time.

ALAN THOMPSON: How would you say the mental health needs of middle school students have changed throughout the course or over the course of the pandemic.?

I3: I think that the mental health needs have changed and first of all and just that we're seeing how a greater number of kids at this age have more severe more significant needs and so just knowing that and knowing that we're going to have to address that. I also think that students have lost an ability to sort of know how to participate in small groups and large groups where they're you know, having to listen, having to be patient everything has been you know kind of again in isolation and sort of with social media and with the Internet kind of I'm going to get things when I want them at the time, I want them and then having to sort of then go back to school and you know some of those skills that they would have not really lost. God, they continue, you know, had they not been virtual, so I think we're seeing a lack of social etiquette. And then I also think that students are because of COVID-19 and because of everything that has happened, these last few years, they are maybe more afraid to look embarrassed or afraid to look stupid or like they don't know what they're talking about they don't know what they're doing and I think that all stems from again being isolated and you know just kind of feeling like they've maybe missed some things and because of that, I think there's a real fear they're putting themselves out there and being willing to kind of take some risks and again things that we would we would consider sort of normal middle school kid behavior and how that manifests itself when it does not happen, you know kids will internalize things they'll bottle things up and then oftentimes that's gonna you know come out and negative ways and ways that are certainly not appropriate or things that again, hopefully, we have to do a better job of seeing things you know, on the front end and working and figuring out ways to support things so that it doesn't escalate to where it gets out of control.

ALAN THOMPSON: What best practices have you found that have positively impacted middle school students post COVID-19?

I3: Yeah there's a post COVID first of all, I think you know really being able to find resources to position trained counselors to be able to have one-on-one conversations with students and really identify sort of here's the action or the words or whatever that you know you're doing like tell me kind of getting to the root of not necessarily the root of why it's happening, but at least sort of what it feels like and then that way we can work one-on-one as a counselor to try to help the student get some coping Defense mechanisms some coping mechanisms to know okay I don't exactly know why I'm feeling this way, but when I feel it I have you know this specific thing that I can do, and you know that might be some sort of breathing exercise or that might be, you know

some sort of counting exercise or you know it may be something is acknowledging they're feeling a certain way, and they need to walk away or they need to do sort of agreed upon action to hopefully you know where things won't continue to get worse when they feel a certain way. So I think that those kind of one-on-one conversations work well, I think, also from a school perspective when a staff is on board with really wanting to bring in experts out train all the staff on not necessarily how to solve these problems, but just on how to you know, maybe identify and then sort of properly refer and, at the very least to sort of words and ways that we can support students And you know being compassionate and showing some grace and being kind in situations where teachers who care traditionally very have just very much focused on the academic side you know, hopefully we can when we when we are finding ways to at least give them a certain training, where they can feel comfortable to address it. You know that's a big positive thing that can occur. And then really trying to recommend to middle schools and districts and principals and counselors to really try hard to get students to be involved and really making sure whether it's a club, whether it's a sport, whether it's any kind of extracurricular activity. When students are not involved in something at school outside of their classes, they are so much more likely to have extra mental health needs. Students who struggled finding something they were passionate about at school were much more likely to stay virtual longer. Certainly one of the things that we're seeing is when a student that age is not involved in anything and they just can't find their passion it's really also hard to find their purpose, and so you know, certainly we're constantly working with kids on trying to identify you know some sort of group that they can be with and develop and find some of those passions and then hopefully get a little bit more comfortable with who they are, and then once those things happen then they're a little bit more easily able to carry on, you know good conversations and be comfortable around others. The more we connected school to the whole child and encouraged students to be themselves and listened to how they were doing, the better they were doing academically. It was a huge moment for us to realize this as a campus.

ALAN THOMPSON: What gaps or problem areas currently exists in K 12 education to properly handle the mental health needs of middle school students?

I3: There's not there to kind of go off what I, my last course there's not a lot of training that staff are getting and some of that is educators traditionally or are not always welcoming of wanting to be trained in mental health and social emotional learning and so hopefully that's an area that we can we can close that gap and that everybody realizes that you know just having a baseline ability to diagnose to be able to have some general things of what to do. I think that's a big thing that needs to happen so certainly some training. Hopefully there's more resources put it into having mental health professionals on campuses and you know, therefore when some of the issues do escalate past what a teacher or maybe even a school counselor is trained, you know, to help that there's enough people on the campus that can help. I also think a big gap is just in the curriculum in general there's not you know, particularly for middle school there's a lot of the same courses that we've taught for decades and I know that there needs to be a lot more emphasis on teaching social emotional learning about some of the upside and downside of social media and how to navigate that space and having more of whether it's character-based education or whether it's social emotional learning, whatever you want to call it, but you know, certainly, having more opportunities there for students, I think, would be good. And then I also think

getting parents involved as much as we can and making sure that they know that they can reach out and that we're all in this together is important also.

ALAN THOMPSON: Great, thank you so much. This was super informative and I really appreciate your time.

## APPENDIX D

### Interview 4

Alan Thompson: Okay, we are recording Thank you very much for taking the time to be interviewed today. I'm really looking forward to it.

I4: Yeah, absolutely.

Alan Thompson: So the first question I have for you is what is your current position title.

I4: So I am a [REDACTED], but have worked quite a bit with the transition from eighth grade into ninth grade.

Alan Thompson: Excellent, how long have you been working in education and just in general with that that middle school age group?

I4: So, I just finished up my eighth year in education in total and then I would say, working with the middle school group for the last three years.

Alan Thompson: Well, so, those last few years, you talked about being with middle school students and so we'll just jump right into it here. How have middle school students been impacted by COVID-19?

I4: So I actually started working with middle school students right at the year 2019 and so you know the start of the school year before we entered into pandemic and everything shut down, and so I would say they've been impacted, I mean, obviously, you know middle school is a really important time kind of in their youth and growing up and maturing and learning those like social and emotional and just all of the skills they need to be successful, high schoolers and adults and all of those things, and so losing that interaction I think with day to day interaction in terms of you know, getting walking into school in the morning and going from class to class and being in class and, and so I think we've seen a lot of just not necessarily knowing how to do some of those like routines that have that we sort of maybe took for granted, before, and so I think that's something that you know they don't necessarily know how to interact with one another in a way that I think used to be comfortable and just normal and now there's just a lot of like I think thought that has to go into it um you know when they went online and that you know we're all doing school online. So, they knew people they have been in class with previously, but did not actually meet anyone new, so I think there was a lot of social isolation. Middle school, I think, is when you start to learn how to advocate for yourself, and so they weren't learning those skills and they weren't building relationships with their teachers. Middle school is already an awkward time and they're already dealing with a lot of different things, and so I think not having really interacted with people in a normal quote unquote normal way in a couple of years has really shown, and I think just the constant use of technology, and so you know, of course, they were expected to use technology in classes and whether they were paying attention or not they have everything at their fingertips they're on social media they're playing games at school in that way it's that constant connection that isn't really connection. Social media is great, but it can also

really get inside their heads and kind of play with their minds, then like they don't really have an outlet for how to like process and deal with all of the things that they've seen and are trying to work through online they might work through what a normal day in a school with other kids.

Alan Thompson: That was great, really well said. How have the mental health needs of middle school students changed over the course of the pandemic?

I4: I think in the social emotional realm, I think, they need a lot more support in that area, but I don't know exactly what they need. Positive relationships is the most important thing. Building relationships is at the core of whatever we do. And so you know I think in a sense, I think some of the like social emotional has almost become like a buzzword within education, and I think that, like it's I don't know like I think students need to be educated on like what it is they're experiencing and feeling in order to like know how to then appropriately handle it, you know, I think that again so many of them were online and just kind of stuck inside and around the same people for so long and that I'm getting around kind of like being back in an environment in school, and I mean it wasn't certainly a normal school year. They don't always know how to interact with others appropriately. I think they really need to be explicitly, directly taught how to process and deal with things both internally and externally, like what some of the emotions they are feeling and why they may be having these feelings and just have some of these things explained. Like, some of the impacts that this online learning and pandemic and all of the effects it can have and they can understand that maybe they're not alone in this and it's normal and it's something that everyone is going through. And you know, it's not like the adults on campus can point back to when they were this age and going through a pandemic and here is how it should be handled – we are all trying to figure it out. I think they may not know that sort of like what they're feeling and processing and dealing with is, in fact, like normal and does have like can be dealt with and can get better and can they can learn, and they can grow, so I think they just need a lot of support in that way, and that it has fallen a lot on teachers, I think, who were dealing with their own things as well. So, teachers are trying to bring SEL into the classroom to help their students, but they don't necessarily know exactly how to do that and exactly what that looks like. I think students need a lot of direct guidance and for someone to really listen to them but also to really guide them into like how to appropriately deal with some of what they're experiencing and feeling.

Alan Thompson: That's really great; that's really good, I wonder if you could just maybe elaborate a little bit on you know kind of speaking about the struggle that teachers have had and what they're going through. We've we focused a lot on how to help kids, but I guess in your experience are we really doing what we need to do to help teachers in this?

I4: Yeah, so I think that teachers, you know are kind of on the front lines of all of this, and you know at the beginning of the pandemic, they were heroes and at the end or now it's sort of like they want too much and they're selfish and greedy, but I think like no one really knows sort of the toll that has taken to like you know, teachers, want to like see good things in their students and they want to see them succeed and grow and like be happy and enjoy like this being in school and being around their friends and instead we are seeing some of the effects of the pandemic and the behavior issues and that's because students don't know how to deal with and process what they're feeling and so they're acting out and so it's making the classroom not as

maybe a welcome space as it has been. Or for teachers who have been in this profession a long time and have always been able to manage their classrooms, and then all of a sudden they are having to teach in person and online and deal with their own personal things and effects of this, and a lot is put on teachers in a normal year and then you add in all of this and it's like okay, you want teachers to teach and to you know worry about standardized tests and to be counselors and do this and do that and they do care about their students and they don't always necessary know how to fix things and of course, on the counselor side of things, when they send someone to a counselor, counselors are wildly overloaded as well, and so it just becomes it some students, I think, unfortunately, if they seem to be doing okay, then it's like okay just don't mess with this kid and kind of let them do what they need to do when in reality, those kids also need help, and we don't always have the time to do everything that needs to be done. And I think there is a lot of teachers don't feel supported by administration, but it's not like they don't want to support teachers, again, it's just there are so many things that have to be dealt with that are constantly moving parts. Teachers are human, they are struggling. Now add dozens of students in their classes each day who need significant mental health support. It's overwhelming.

Alan Thompson: Yeah, that's really good stuff.

Alan Thompson: What strategies and best practices have you found that have positively impacted middle school students post COVID-19?

I4: So I mean you know it definitely is going to be a big umbrella here, but any sort of SEL learning, which I think is something teachers want to know more about and integrate into the classroom, but without direct and proper training, teachers aren't maybe able to implement it as successfully. As counselors, we can do small group instruction, you can go into classrooms, you can do lunch meetings, but I think when teachers are able to successfully implement things like I saw a mood meter where you know students each day are kind of asked to pick like where they fall on like a mood board, and so you know what kind of what color-coordinated quadrant you may fall in that day. Red is more angry, blue is more calm, yellow is more energetic, and so on. When you are able to implement something daily, it becomes a consistent practice for students to check in with like yeah how am I feeling today and what might be contributing to that, or you think about what to change from yesterday to today and how they maybe improve this or you know if I'm not feeling in a great space like what's contributing to that and what can I, maybe improve upon or work to do better tomorrow um you know I think anything with like meditation and mindfulness I think again, are also buzzwords that have kind of grown that people don't really know how to use them, but I think there's a lot of really simple breathing strategies that with when you know students get like worked up or anxious or stressed out or angry or any of those emotions is take 10 seconds now and reset and I think one of the things that has was important for COVID-19, but I think can become even more important is just the relationships built with adults on campus with students and I think every student on campus should have a trusted adult mentor they feel like they go to you know and a lot of times again that falls on teachers because that's who they see every single day, but hopefully at least once a day being personally called out by name and asked how they're doing and checked in on, you know they feel like there's someone like hey if I'm not doing so well and I recognize that, there's someone I can go to and talk about it and, again, maybe they can't fix it, but at least once a day be pointing in the direction of like where I might be able to go um you know, so I think that definitely the

relationship piece, and again it becomes more important than ever that students have a trusted adult on campus. They spend so much time at school and I think there has always been an emphasis on, but it has become even more important, just with getting kids involved and again wanting to find what is important to them what makes them want to get up each morning and why they come to school, you know because maybe they feel awkward or out of place or they haven't found their group, and hopefully, they can kind of work to find what they're passionate about and find some people who are like minded and just have some like trusted people and in their lives, and so you know I don't know how many of this is backed up by data, but I think they're like little things that adults on campus can do to help, even when they have been given formal training. It was never more obvious how important students being involved in their school outside of their academic classes is to them wanting to be in the building each day. In a perfect world, teachers are integrating SEL into their every single day, but of course, you know there's a lot of teachers where content is so important to them and the reality is, if the kids feel seen and valued and heard and like they belong, they are likely going to engage more with the content. But, you know that's a slower process as well, so yeah.

Alan Thompson: One more question for you what gaps or problem areas currently exist in K 12 public education to properly handle the mental health needs of middle school students?

I4: And you know I think there's a lot of attention given to like mental health and social emotional and all of those things and there's a lot of like just focus on that on social media and I think there's a lot being said about it, but I don't think there's a lot being done about it necessarily. You know, I think that, as I mentioned before, teachers don't really feel equipped to handle this or that or how to positively help kids in their classroom in a way that is truly productive and not just doing things to do them that lose their shine after a while. I do also think that there's like a need for more counselors and social workers on schools and on campuses and specifically counselors that are like just specifically for wellness and mental health and don't really have many other, or very few other assignments or tasks or duties. I think sometimes teachers don't feel like they can handle a situation or issue so they refer them to the counselor, but the counselor has a checklist of 100 other things they're doing when really those things should take a back seat to kids, and they do, but when you have so many more kids that are dealing with things they haven't ever dealt with before and maybe don't feel comfortable talking to their parents or siblings or even friends and they want someone who is sort of like a neutral third party but who still cares about them. I do think we need more of these professionals on campus in order to really make an impact and not just talk about it, but really put it into action. But, again, I just think I think that there's a lot that's still being learned just in general by all school personnel. But, so I think actually acting on it, as opposed to just like kind of letting things get to a point where it's past the point of really being able to get kids on a positive path and understanding what they are feeling and dealing with and I think a lot of the knowledge is there, maybe it is just learning what to do with it and then transferring that to people who are with kids every single day and that's you know the teachers who need to be able to have a consistent practice in all their classrooms and it becomes like not awkward and weird.

I4: I think that you know it's again middle schools, already a hard time and so these kids are dealing with things that you know, none of us have ever had to deal with, I think you know

they're they show signs of like being incredibly resilient but also like do need some really specific direction, whatever that needs to look like.

Alan Thompson: Yeah, absolutely all right, well, you gave me a lot of really good stuff here, so I appreciate your time, and thank you so much for participating in this.

## APPENDIX E

### Interview 5

Alan Thompson: Alright, we are recording Thank you very much for agreeing to do this and i'm excited to hear about your experiences, and I think it's going to be really valuable in the study, so thank you very much let's go ahead and get started. What is your current position and title and just previous experience as an education.

I5: I have been in education for 14 years. My focus has been social and emotional learning and even when I was in a traditional classroom I really made sure to build a community with my students I didn't really start on anything curriculum wise until like a weekend. I also worked at a summer camp for 18 summers, and so I worked specifically, with middle school, for the first 10 and a half summers and then elementary through middle school for the next five and then for the last three I was the senior or like the older campers on camp and I was everything from a cabin counselor all the way up to girls head counselor.

Alan Thompson: Okay next question how long have you been working in education with middle school age, students and you kind of address it from a camp perspective, but I think what I'm looking at more is maybe to kind of address specifically the amount of time that you're you have experienced with middle school kids and then maybe just sort of quickly any sort of you know things that you can kind of say about from like when you first started with working with them until now just sort of just changes that you've seen over the course of time that you've been working with them.

I5: Oh yeah in a traditional classroom I taught freshman English, so I didn't teach middle school, but in the non traditional classroom I worked with our folks program, and so I worked with middle school for seven years, so for the last I would say the first couple of years it was interesting to see the growth from the students at the beginning of like seventh grade year to the end of second grade I didn't necessarily work with the same exact students, because they were one day programs, maybe two days of program but the growth in just a collective of like seventh grade their maturity level from the beginning of the year to the end of the year is always impressive because the reflections went from being really basic after the activity to being really more in depth and really having a lot more growth, I would say that goes for every grade level but we really worked a lot with mainly seventh and eighth grade students.

Alan Thompson: Yeah, and I also think just having you know, working with freshmen you're also really in a lot of ways, still connected to that transitional piece, so I think it's very relevant to the work that I am doing for sure. So all right now, a little bit more sort of a specific question how middle school students been impacted by COVID-19.

I5: Yeah I think middle school such a formative year like formative years in like people's lives, and so I think it's an interesting thing like you know all of us went from you know potentially be on social media for anywhere from like 30 minutes to like an hour a day, but when the pandemic happened, not only were students staring at their computer every day because they were in class, but they were then, just like on their devices 24 seven you know, and so I think they're the

amount of intake of just everything that they were just like being exposed to, I think, is just really been a you know exemplified or you know blown up, and so I think it's been interesting because that, I think impacts, the way that they look themselves the way they look at other people, you know, I think that somewhat argue that, like middle school kids are more aware like socially and self aware than they've ever been, but I also think it's just a lot of like TikTok like has you know ADHD TikTok where they're like telling you like if you've got these symptoms are like these are the symptoms of ADHD and like now kids like running around being with, maybe of see like they self diagnose themselves because they have like two of the things right, but that's not really necessarily like what you have right and so like they're trying to like instead of maybe seeking out actual help or figuring out things that are actually going on with them they're just like walking around like self diagnosing each other, and so, then it's just an interesting like situation that they're in because I think again, all of the stuff was out there, when I was in middle school I just didn't have it at my fingertips, you know and then COVID like really really like forced everybody to be on their screens so often that they were just flooded with all that stuff and I really think that like impacts their like mental health.

Alan Thompson: No for sure. And it's a really good insightful point as far as just it being so tough to go from when you're isolated this idea of like this is, this is all you have, and so that, when you're seeing this and you're hearing it on social media and you're like well, it must be true, you know and so having the these boundaries just be I guess sort of the waters are like very muddy and like what's real and what's factual and all that stuff so that's really a good point.

Alan Thompson: Next question. How have the mental health needs of middle school students changed over the course of the pandemic.

I5: I mean, I think that is part of it right like these kids because of everything you just said, like these muddy waters, you know, like they are like it's like when I was growing up, I saw like infomercials on like medicine for like depression and it's like if you have these symptoms blah blah like you may have depression talk to a doctor, but here are all the side effects that come with you know this medication in my brain I was like I don't want any of the side effects so like I'm never going to like talk about you know, maybe having depression or whatever the disease or whatever is right, whereas like the way that middle schoolers consume information now it's like well I have these things, so I must have depression and here robberies of other people are fixing it so like I need to be doing those things right so it's like again, I think that, like if you want to look at it from like the most positive side of it, like, I think that more kids are speaking up and are advocating for themselves and are saying hey, this is what I think I have here some things that I think might help me. There may be opening lines of communication with their parents better you know because there's things out there that are like how to talk to your parents about whatever it is going on in your wife kind of thing, and so I think that there's on that positive side that there's like this really great opportunity and learning curve for kids to figure out ways to have those conversations and like asked for the needs that they like the once, but I also think, unlike the other end of that spectrum it's like creating all of these things that like maybe somebody doesn't really have but now there's like convince themselves, they have you know it's like creating a bunch of hypochondriacs like in an emotional sense.

Alan Thompson: Okay. What strategies and best practices have you found that have positively impacted middle school students post-COVID if that's a thing just you know recently?

I5: Even things I was doing prior to coming home but it's creating a community you know, I think that students are craving especially going from being an isolation and you know being at home for school and all that, I think that you know they were really craving that community and even kids who didn't want to be at school didn't really enjoy school they think that once they have the opportunity to get back to school, they were like Okay, although you know, and so I think the you know the opportunity to allow kids to interact and engage with each other, you know, I think that we've got kids that are going into ninth grade or kids are going into sixth grade who are really like first graders you know they mean because okay that might not be having math they're really second graders the methods, but the point is is that they are you know developmentally and like socially they're behind two and a half years, maybe not like to an extreme for every kid. But you know, I think, giving them opportunities to engage with each other and giving them opportunities to learn about each other and to like just have face to face conversations, again I think it's just a really important thing because they've been so consumed by TV phones social media, you know I have friends who have kids that are in third grade and have a phone you know and like are on YouTube and are you know they have all the parental things like guides and whatever they're but they're still that's how they're interacting with people they don't have a sibling and the parents aren't talking to them like the only interaction they're having is through a computer or phone so giving kids the opportunity to learn like exponentially so like learning by doing with each other, I think, is a really important thing post go ahead.

Alan Thompson: Yeah, for sure. Okay last question what gaps or problem areas currently exists in K 12 public education to properly handle the mental health needs of middle school students?

I5: I mean, I really just believe in yourself and emotional learning. As I said, I thought was something I was doing pre COVID that was something I was doing before it was a buzzword you know really helping students to learn, who they are, and what they need in order to be successful, so that they can then advocate for themselves is really important, and I also think empathy you know what I mean, I think, with learning what is important and how other people are different how that is I think that's a huge gap and a huge thing and again it kind of like almost comes back to that social media piece right where you know kids are just like watching discourse about whatever it is like people are arguing with another sky is blue you know they mean and so just learning how to be like, I think the gaps are we're learning a lot about ourselves from social media, but maybe not as much from other about other people and how to be like respectful humans.

Alan Thompson: So what do you think that that looks like as far as thinking about curriculum wise and in a middle school, I mean what might that look like, as far as a course or intervention opportunities or what do you think that might look like in a middle school where there can be more of these kinds of things that are implemented into the everyday schedule.

I5: Yeah I think like you know, ideally it's not its own separate course ideally as a teacher integrating this into their everyday curriculum and realizing that there are different learner dispositions that students you know that that like perseverance right like that's the thing that like

if a person can persevere through things like when the hard things happen in their mental health is down. Like if they can persevere through things and they can you know get past that kind of thing so like that explicitly teaches like what perseverance, is what it looks like what it sounds like to students, so that they can really grasp it versus just being like all right guys let's persevere. Okay, but what does that mean what does it look like and sound like for you particularly sixth grade kid in the front row, you know what I mean like because it's going to look different for that kid in the front seat, the kid in the middle seat to the kids in the backseat you know, and I think that acknowledging that. Like we talked a lot about like differentiated education, and you know all that kind of thing but acknowledging that that's also something that we can do for like I said, these learner dispositions that are things that students, these are life skills not soft skills.

Alan Thompson: That's a really great last line life skills and soft skills and then I think the other thing is what I'm hearing is we're at a point where you know we were teaching content we're teaching all of the same academic courses, but you know we're not really addressing a lot of the issues that you're talking about, nor are we necessarily training teachers and equipping them with you know how to work with students, and so I do see and I know exactly what you said, but as far as some of the gaps are problem areas, I think that those all of those kind of go along together so that's really insightful and you've definitely made me think a lot is there anything else that you maybe want to say or wanted to include.

I5: Yeah I think it's important to understand that social emotional learning like is what is the plate in which we serve everything else off of right and if we can help our students in that social emotional range and learn more about themselves or about the psyche and more about all of those things like that's going to impact their mental health right and so. I think mental health, social emotional learning, like all of those are like these, like buzz words, you know that have been really focused on or hit on hard because of the last couple of years, but then, also because the pandemic and I think it's acknowledging that, like none of these things have to be separate none of these things have to be another thing a teacher has to do right they should be the thing that the teachers starting out with remembering that kids are human remembering that they themselves are human and therefore approaching everything that they're trying to teach from like a human lens versus like hey I have a curriculum, I have to get through so like it doesn't matter if you don't get it we're moving on, you know and like you know the gaps are going to be bigger than they've ever been and if your mentality as a teacher is to just be like Oh well, we'll catch up, I won't sink or swim kind of thing like what are you doing, why are you in education stuff you know, and so I think we as administrator needs people who have some sort of influence, big or small. You know our job is to help support those teachers who are trying, you know, like obviously there's there are those teachers who naturally you're just going to be better supporting social emotional learning, which therefore there's and they make them better at supporting mental health, but I think that we can't forget about those teachers, but I think that our main focus is the one who really don't come natural to that, and so, how do we support them. Maybe it is that we have you know seminars or webinars or you know spaces for them, we have curriculums you know that kind of thing but it's also a mind shift, you know my teachers have to be willing it's that whole adage of like you can get a horse to water you can't force them to drink right like if a teacher is a troll or a troll you know.

Alan Thompson: It's so much good stuff. I'm so grateful for your time, and this is going to be tremendously helpful to the work that I'm doing and so thank you very much.

I5: Of course, thank you.

## APPENDIX F

### Interview 6

Alan Thompson: Thank you so much for taking time to meet with me. Okay, so let's go ahead and jump right in. So let's start with what is your current position or title?

I6: [REDACTED]

Alan Thompson: So how long have you been working in education and then specifically with middle school aged students?

I6: The answer to both questions is, I just finished my fourth year.

Alan Thompson: Great. Okay, so you got into this pretty close to the start of the pandemic.

I6: Yes.

Alan Thompson: All right, so you're going to have good experience with this. How have middle school students been impacted by COVID-19?

I6: Oh, my gosh. Okay. The biggest thing I've noticed is they have had such a hard time readjusting to any kind of routine or procedure because they were at home for so long, and they were able to do whatever they wanted, whatever they wanted. A lot of them were alone all day with no adults there to redirect them or anything like that. So they have a hard time still, even at the end of this year, they were still having a hard time with, like, well, why can't I leave class ten minutes early? Like, I'm done with my work, why can't I just leave? Or, what do you mean I have to ask to go to the bathroom, like, stuff like that. And then also, too, just noticing not every kid is a great home life. So for some of them to be stuck at home for a year was detrimental to them. And so they have a lot of pent up feelings about that, about whatever was going on at home. It could be siblings, parents, whatever adult may or may not have been present. And, like, that leads to a lot of outbursts in class that you can't always pinpoint exactly what the source of it is.

I6: But they have a lot of feelings, and they had no outlet for those feelings during that year they were at home. Right. So now they're coming out in very, like, unhealthy ways. I would say those are the two biggest things.

Alan Thompson: Yeah, absolutely. How do you think the mental health needs of middle school students change kind of throughout the course of the pandemic? Maybe think, like, pre-pandemic during the pandemic, and I know we're still kind of in it, but now that we're sort of back in sort of a normal school setting, how have they changed, do you think?

I6: I feel like kids are getting more comfortable with asking for help and recognizing that they need it, and, like, hey, I know I'm having trouble with my reactions and behavior, but also they know that that's an issue. And so I feel like there's more demand for mental health services than there was prepandemic. Right. Because all of them are in kind of the same boat. And I feel like before that, you would have kids who might reach out, like, in a time of crisis, but not just because something was feeling tough or they were stressed or something like that. And I feel like they've recognized returning to school that like, oh, wow, this is actually really hard. And they've also kind of been exposed to more, like, just current events, and they talk to each other more, and

it's like, oh, you're not coping either. Wow, neither am I. What are you doing? Well, I went and talked to my counselor. Oh, maybe I should try that. So I feel like that's what's changed.

Alan Thompson: Yeah, for sure. So you feel like they're able to sort of identify something's not feeling right?

I6: Yeah, and it's not like every kid is comfortable asking for help, because I've definitely encountered kids that are like, oh, if I go talk to a counselor, they're going to call my parents. And I don't want them to know whether it's because they're personally uncomfortable or like, some families just have a stigma against counseling and mental health services. So it's definitely not across the board. But I do sense that a lot more of them are, like, opening up to this idea that, hey, it's okay to talk to somebody when things are tough. This is middle school. It needs to be okay to make mistakes and we need to put students in positions where they feel safe enough to make a mistake. Kids are feeling so hesitant to do anything that will make them feel like they look foolish to others.

Alan Thompson: Yeah, absolutely. What strategies and best practices have you found that have positively impacted middle school students in the COVID-19 era?

I6: I don't know. Just for me personally, it helps for them to see, like, little humanizing aspects of authority figures, like teachers, coaches, counselors. If you can let them have little peaks at who you are other than your job title, I think they respond really well to that. I don't know. I connect to kids a lot through, like, the things that they're watching or reading or whatever, because I'm into a lot of the same nerdy stuff they are. Mentally, I feel like I'm still kind of on their level, but that's the way I can connect to them that they're like, oh, man, did you see the new Spiderman movie? And I'm like, yeah. It was awesome. Let's talk about it. Why'd? You like it. And then you can kind of use that to segue into some of the things that are bugging them. And even if I don't know the things that they like and enjoy, if I can start with getting them to talk about something like that and put them at ease a little bit, that seems to help. And they're like, oh, that's right. Adults do also enjoy entertainment and doing things for fun. I don't know. I feel like that has been an effective strategy. Just let them know that you're a person who also has hobbies and interests. And I feel like a lot of the time. Especially. Like. In teacher training programs and stuff. They kind of train you to put a barrier or a separation between you and the kids. Which. Like. Yes. You have to have boundaries. For sure. But at the same time. You've got to know when it's okay to like. Let yourself be vulnerable around kids and and let them see you as a person. I'm just thinking back when I was around this age, my teachers were teachers, my counselors were counselors. The principal was this mystery, untouchable figure that you tried to avoid interacting with. I feel like it helps for them to see that you're not actually this scary, shadowy authority. You're a person. It's okay. We

Alan Thompson: Do you feel like teachers you've embraced that letting yourself be seen as human and letting them know some of your personality and things you like and connecting in that way? Do you think that a lot of teachers have embraced that, or it's been sort of a slow process?

I6: I think younger and newer teachers have embraced it. I sense that it's been difficult with people who've been doing this for 10, 15, 30 years, because those tend to be the teachers that I hear about from kids. This teacher is very like I don't know anything about them. They just treat us like students. They don't really talk to us about anything besides school. And so the kids can

also tell when adults are kind of keeping you at a distance. Right. I do think it does tend to be the older teachers, which the Pedagogy or whatever was back when they entered education. And it's just things change with each new generation that enters the field. Right?

Alan Thompson: Yeah, absolutely. Final question. What gaps or problems do you feel problem areas do you feel currently exist in K through twelve public education to properly handle the mental health needs of middle school students in general and go off on this one?

I6: The obvious answer is there's just not enough people being employed by schools. Right? Like, there just are not enough people to handle the demand right. Now, when you have one social worker for 3000 kids, plus they're also having to go to other schools, or you've got ten counselors for thousands of kids, mathematically that doesn't make any sense. That is also a reason that you end up with sort of kids not feeling like these authority figures are real people. Because if you've got a counselor whose case their workload is 400 kids, how are they ever supposed to have the time to actually get to know those kids and put them at ease and bring them in to talk to them? When it's not a crisis or a discipline situation? They literally don't have the time. And then on top of that, so many counselors end up with also having to do scheduling, which is insane, and that takes away from their actual job that they should be doing. What was I watching? I was watching some movie or something the other day and there was a guidance counselor in it, in the movie, and I was like, oh, it was *Lady Bird*. That's what it was. It was from 2017. It's a recent movie, and the guidance counselor in that movie is still this old fashioned Hollywood version of a guidance counselor who just sits there and calls kids in to talk to them about what they want to do for a living. And I'm like, counselors haven't been doing that for decades. Why do people still think that's the only thing a counselor does? I feel like that's a huge part of the problem. Counselors have too many duties thrown on them. There's not enough of them. And then you're seeing increased demand because of all of these after effects of the pandemic. So how on earth are they supposed to handle all those things? There's no way. That bugs me a lot.

Alan Thompson: Yeah, absolutely. Well that's all for my questions. Is there anything else that you want to share or thoughts you have as far as mental health needs of students currently?

I6: Yes, in general, I do wish that social and emotional learning was more incorporated into everyday curriculum and not just addressed again during a crisis situation, because so much of our mental health in education is reactionary instead of preventive. And that bugs me a lot. Every once in a while, I'll come across an article or something about, oh, wow, look at what this school is doing. And I'll see some school that has these really great conflict resolution programs or things for kids who are just going, kids who are getting into fights all the time and all these ways of preventing having to send them to alternative school or other kinds of punishment. But then I'll look a little further and like, okay, let me find out about this school. And it's like a campus with like 400 kids or something small like that. Those programs and everything are great. They're not applicable across the board at every school. But I do think that some kind of social and emotional learning should be present all the time and also not just in elementary school. I feel like that's the thing, too that I see a lot is like, again, I'll see articles. It's like, here's how to incorporate social and emotional learning in your classroom. And it's like, during your morning circle time, do this. And I'm like, no, and we're closing that path. Done. Irrelevant. But there needs to be some kind of equivalent, whether it's an actual class or just making time for bringing

home rooms back and making homeroom be that time where that's addressed. It needs to be a constant thing presence.

Alan Thompson: Agreed. Well, that's that was really great. Super informative, really helpful, and yeah, I super appreciate your time.

## APPENDIX G

### Interview 7

AT: Okay, so we are recording and we've gone through all of the preliminary information and stuff, and so I just want to say thank you for being here and doing this, I think you're going to have really excellent things to say, and so I really appreciate you contributing to this project and so with that we'll get right to it, what is your position and title.

I7: Thank you for inviting me for this experience. I'm excited to participate and [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

AT: And so, how long have you been working with middle school age, students and kind of in what different capacities over the course of your career?

I7: I have been working with middle school students for 14 years and during that time I've had the opportunity to work with the students that are close to getting into middle school and in middle school as well. I have a background, with his students that are coming to the country for the first time that I don't know don't speak English or that are learning English as a second language, as well as everything related with the social emotional wellbeing That is my current role and the one that I have grown into and we're just looking for ways to give better tools around the district for working with students in their social emotional well being.

AT: That's great Thank you. Okay, next question how have middle school students been impacted by COVID-19 and you know, obviously we've all been impacted and so just kind of whether you take that academically socially or you know in any in any way how a middle school students been impacted by the pandemic?

I7: Yes, like you said, we all have been impacted to a different degree, but in I believe that the age that middle school students are in it just brings them an extra set of challenges, when it comes to what God has done to academic and to their social lives if they're in the middle of moving from being children to being high schoolers and coming adults so it's like a pivotal moment in in their growth, and I think what when they're in those years they're in the process of just developing that that identity and the impact that Colin has had is that for a certain amount of time for a year to their social lives were impacted. They were not going to school in person and everybody had a different scenario what at some point, they were away from the people that they usually hang out with so there's a couple of challenges that they have they were moving from elementary to middle school so that represented a new campus possibly and people from other couples of that area know so that's already a change and to add the fact that they were not in the same amount of communication with their peers. That definitely represent that and an impact for order social emotional well being as well as just the academic impact we are experiencing across the board, and especially with middle school students, that they are, they are some gaps, there are gaps that that that happened with the students that were alive for a certain period of time, and that was not probably the best fit for their education style and the gaps are there and teachers are leaving that every day, but I think the biggest part of all of this impact is how they have to come back from coffee because they are not the same person that they were just because they are growing, they are finding themselves and growing into be an adult but then these just heavily

change their way of leaving so is how they're coming back from it that us represents an additional challenge in the mix of just growing up and becoming adults.

AT: That's really well said and I want to sort of expand a little bit on this idea of the they are coming back as the same person I'm wondering if you can sort of elaborate on that elaborate on that specific Lee for the emergent bilingual students who have recently kind of come in into the country or into the school system. Can you talk a little bit about how those challenges are just that much harder?

I7: Absolutely, yes. The cultural changes that the students experience when coming to a new country with just a new way of life and a new language are enormous so they need that that social interaction to develop language to develop their second language, the this the social opportunity helps them to speak and listen, which are the language domains that that developed first before they go into the reading and writing so if they haven't had the opportunity of having these interactions with others and his academic language embedded in their everyday lives it's just, it becomes just a higher challenge and then, if you set us there's there certain strategies that you work with students in person. Especially when they're learning another language that that doing it virtually just does not have the same result so that's why I say they're not behind in in learning in integrating to society to culture in general to leave that everyday life around their new place of where they have arrived. So he has definitely changed the way that they are adapting to the new place that they're they're leaving because they haven't had the same opportunity that they would have if COVID would not happen so their access to their social experiences and the academic experiences changed during that that arrival or during those first months or years of driving to a new country, so the results of their integration to the quarter have definitely been changed.

AT: Excellent Thank you. Next question how have the mental health needs of middle school students changed over the course of the pandemic?

I7: They've definitely changed because I did the you know the pandemic we had a student that maybe were excited about having a break, of going to school and it's like a jump in their emotions of like going to be able to stay home for a bit and but then it really hit them and with experiences of when we talked to other students, I even have experienced listening to a poem from a middle from a middle school student that that just share that particular experience of the excitement at the beginning of like vacation time and then get into the monotony of the everyday the same thing I'm not seeing my friends and are going to school. And that particular point, like really impacted me to hear the life that they are going through as teenagers and they're meant to help change because they're there is a higher level of drop when you are in a high so they were high and excited and then it's like you just go down lower because you're coming from a temporary level of joy so I think that that that that that does that impact the way that their mental and health needs happened throughout the pandemic and then I believe that that when they are coming back from it they're being a little bit more cautious it's almost that they're not as invested in life. As they once were because now they experienced all of these things that didn't feel good at times so they're coming back in just more cautious and not just being themselves and not investing make or they haven't I think there's a set level of fear of just getting hurt again or getting into a space that didn't feel safe that didn't feel good so they are not embracing life in the

same way that they would have before COVID and that's that really impacts, the way that their needs of mental health happened, from the beginning doors, now that we're kind of coming back, but not quite and we always kind of set back a step so they are they're cautious they're not moving forward as confident and safe as they once felt.

AT: That is a really well said, and I do think that cautious miss that fear of failure and has come out a lot in these interviews and I talked to one person, a couple of weeks ago, who said in her view that middle school students have really lost their courage to discover and I thought that was so well said, and it really is kind of exactly what you're saying, where there's that fear of failure there's that just sort of lack of you know, wanting or being curious to take risks and if you're not taking them in middle school when are you going to take them right? So, that's really well said and yeah so let's go to the next question here. So you know thinking along those same lines as far as you know, you're seeing some of the potential issues that that are going to be currently existing. Now what strategies and best practices have you found that have positively impacted middle school students in this sort of post COVID-type world?

I7: I think this post COVID time the first and foremost thing that that positively impacts, the students is giving them an opportunity to build those relationships with one another. If they have the opportunity to share their feelings and to have their feelings validated and to use have the space of being able to say how they're feeling and to have others listen, I think that one of the strategies that we have being encouraging with throughout our districts, is the Community circles, so when students have that space when they're able to share and listen to others and you have that set of parameters to how you're going to respect one another and I just keep it to the people that are they're sharing. It gives that level of we built a level of trust and with that trust comes just a stronger relationship with one another, and I think that building trust with everybody around them is what's going to eventually because it's not going to be immediate but eventually take them to a point that they can feel a little more safe to jump into life because they have that that circle a straw circle of friends or just that opportunity to be who they are, and start building those relationships and a strong relationship with one another, I think that would be the stronger strategy that that could impact positively impacted positively impacting our students right now. We were surprised at how much we learned when we asked students. They may be 11 or 12, but they were honest and thoughtful with their feedback on how we could help them during this time. Students were telling us they needed to feel comfortable, to feel safe, to feel valued. We were worried about learning loss when we should have stayed more focused on their mental health.

AT: Yeah I definitely agree with that last question here. So far, this has been excellent. What gaps or problem areas currently exist in K 12 public education to properly handle the mental health needs of middle school students?

I7: I believe that the biggest challenge or gap that we have right now is the disconnect that happens between everybody involved in the life of a child of a teenager from the teacher from the front of his staff of school parents administrative staff, I think that, within our school system we have people that are very invested in mental health issues of the students, because that is their role that's what they do, but then we have these other people, which are the teachers in general, like that spend way more time in a one on one opportunity with the students that may not have

that in their forefront, because they have other things that they need to accomplish with it all the academic but then, in addition, we have the Community and the parents. I think we are all leaving this coming back from copied in different ways, and we are trying to do the best that we can and when we think about parents they're getting back, they have gone back to work and they're dealing with their own things and I think sometimes they that there can be a. were out of these we're moving on it's fine world fine, but is not always the case so just to build that conscious consciousness within our Community members and an eye on that partnership with our parents, so we can all be together at the end every adult in the life of a child should be invested in supporting the mental health needs of this age group, because we are here for them, what I do believe that there is a disconnect and that lack of let's say uniformity around all the parties or how we're invested in in supporting the mental health needs of students is definitely an area of opportunity that can only be breached by communicating and partnering and talking about it and just remove the stigma, so we can really talk about what's happening, the real things that are happening and just working together as adults in the life of children around us. To be those role models and to just look for ways to support them, we are adults, we already have some tools that we have developed in our decades of life, they don't have that set of tools they are just getting to them in the worst possible scenario of challenges, so that's our job together and just building those partnerships working together closer with one another. All the people involved in the life with children and not have those that disconnect to just really connect with one another, so we can support our students needs.

AT: Excellent that is really, really well said. That's all the questions I have, but if there is anything else, that you can kind of think of or that you would might want to say that can be helpful, any other thoughts.

I7: I just want to mention that I appreciate that you're jumping into this story, because as an educator and as a parent of children of this age I kind of see it from all the different points of view and there's a lot more there's a lot of conversation that we need to continue for our kids as our children and as our students as well, so thank you for the ladies.

AT: Well, thank you very much for all that you said, and I will say that a lot of what you said really has resonated with me and it's been pretty consistent as far as what several others have said, and just the complexities that we're working with and just like you, you just said, this idea of like let's have these conversations and let's try to get people talking about it, and that is sort of a first step, so much good stuff. Thank you very much for participating in this, and I really appreciate you. Thank you.

## APPENDIX H

### Interview 8

Alan Thompson: Thank you so much for being here to interview today. So, to start us off, tell me what is your current position or title?

I8: OK. [REDACTED]

Alan Thompson: Awesome. And how long have you been working in education slash specifically with middle school students?

I8: I have been working with this age group for seven years.

Alan Thompson: OK, awesome. Yeah. So, you've seen that transition from a middle school to high school.

I8: Umm yeah. That in between period.

Alan Thompson: So how would you say that this age group of students has been impacted by COVID-19?

I8: Umm yeah, that's a good question. I think they're in like as we kind of mentioned just now in a very particular part of their life where they're kind of in between childhood and adulthood and they're having to figure out a lot of social things. And so I think that's been like the main impact that they've had is like missed social opportunity because we've all been in quarantine and so kind of like that personality development, if that makes sense.

Alan Thompson: Yeah, no, absolutely. So kind of just going off of a little bit of what you just said, how have the mental health needs of middle school students changed kind of throughout the course of the pandemic?

I8: Yeah, so I think initially at the beginning of the pandemic, a lot of the needs of of this particular age group were the same as everybody's. We were kind of dealing with, like, the ambiguity of the pandemic and who's gonna get sick, what? How? Who's affected by that and kind of struggling with that and needing help with that. And then once kind of COVID became more familiar, we were further in the pandemic than those needs shifted more towards like the consequence of isolation and how to kind of build back community and like social interaction that they kind of need to develop themselves and their personality. And also to learn in general, like as an educator, right to bring that into the fold as well, but.

Alan Thompson:  
Yeah, it almost seems secondary now.

I8: It really does right because you can teach mathematics at any point, but there's just

personality development happens. It's like a very fragile process that has to occur.

Alan Thompson: Right. And they've had a lot of broken, a lot of them have this, like, these formative years have had these, like, broken experiences.

I8: Yeah, it teaches them to be, I would argue that like consequence of COVID is that it's taught them to be fearful in places that they might have learned to be confident.

Alan Thompson: That's really well said, really well said. Okay, what strategies and practices have you found that have positively impacted these students post COVID-19?

I8: I mean anything that gets done to interact again, I also think these questions just in general like social, emotional learning as a, as a concept or as a practice, should definitely be implemented now more than ever as a result of kind of this isolation and effective COVID. It was clear students could handle the academic adjustment, but struggled mightily to interact with one another virtually. We underestimated the importance of socialization as virtual learning made students feel isolated and alone. Students struggled to forge relationships when they returned; we needed to spend a lot of time helping to build those peer to peer bonds.

Alan Thompson:

Agreed. And then final question, what gaps or problem areas do you feel currently exist in K-12 public education to properly handle the mental health needs of the students? And even I mean like of course thinking about COVID but just like before that in general?

I8: Yeah, I mean, and I kind of, I guess I gave away my opinion on it and the previous question, but I think that it should like it's a job that's left to coaches and band directors and sort of like the extracurriculars where it needs to be put into the English classes, the social studies classes where every kid has access to it because COVID is something that's affected everyone and everyone needs this kind of like readjustment back into society and we also need to know in terms of curriculum, like what specifically that looks like. You know, as a result of COVID, what are the missed skills and how do you make up for that? Kid are so inwardly focused; they need so much guidance and support on how to interact with others right now. I don't know. So that's the next question for me.

Alan Thompson: No, that's so that actually brings up a good point about like, like putting it into the curriculum. Do you feel like some teachers are maybe more willing than other like how do we make, I guess, like how did how do we make that a reality and like just you know thing we do once and not touch it again?

I8: No, it Umm, I think it's like just a matter or it's not just, but largely it's a matter of awareness, right. There's a lot of teachers who and none of us have gone through a pandemic before. So maybe the thought like, it's not natural to think like, oh, this is going to change literally the way human beings interact and behave, change people's personalities and that needs to be adjusted for. Maybe a thought just doesn't occur to everyone and it needs to be like made aware to teachers. It could be brought in to, you know, our professional development very, very easily because I think there is what I'm not fully versed on social emotional learning, but I imagine

there's like five pillars that you could give to people quickly. So yeah, just awareness, because I think it's overall kind of a new concept for educators, really.

Alan Thompson: Yeah. I mean, I think too, like personally I think some teachers are so focused on like the content, you know if they're well, I don't want to like waste time with this and really like you're going get more out of kids if you spend some time on this, do you see that?

I8: Right. It's like what it's foundational. Would you rather build a house on sand or would you rather build a house on rock? Like if you give them right this this ability to kind of like, regulate their emotions, make decisions for themselves. Like all of these very important things that they have to learn to do with other people and their environment, if you give them those abilities, they can probably do your work. They could probably focus in your class without being distracted by these weird social things that they don't understand. So it really is like it's foundational, and I think that's the point that you have to get across to teachers.

Alan Thompson: Yeah, that's. I like that. I like the foundation analogy. It's the long game. So awesome. Well, that's what I have as far as questions. Do you have any final thoughts that you want to share?

I8: No, I mean that's it that it's absolutely foundational like that's where you should start.

Alan Thompson: Yeah, awesome. Well, thank you so much for your time. This was great, and I really appreciate it.

## APPENDIX I

### Interview 9

AT: Well, I really appreciate you coming and working with me today and. helping me, be a part of the dissertation or my dissertation, just in case I know I put this in the email but just in case you me need refreshing or would like refreshing, the title of my study a centering the mental health needs of middle school students lessons learned and crisis counseling during COVID-19 I really think you're gonna be able to give a lot of excellent information and so we'll just start asking the questions if you're. ready.

I9: Thank you.

AT: Alright, the first question is, what is your current position or title.

I9: Well yeah so thanks a lot for inviting me to participate in this and I'm happy to be here

[REDACTED], focused on middle school students in their transition from elementary school to middle school and then obviously middle school to high school, and so I have been able to be a part of tier one and tier two and two third tier three interventions and yeah I've seen a lot over the course of my 20 plus years.

AT: So how long have you been working I know you talked about it a little bit in the first question, but how long have you been working in education with middle school age students?

I9: So, most of my career has been with middle school and what I have been able to see over the last, particularly the last few years is just the level of transitional support that middle school kids need from when they leave elementary school as fifth graders and then come in a sixth graders and then obviously when they leave eighth grade and transition into high school and ninth grade. What I think has become evident over the last several years is that this is a very transformative time and, both in terms of academic mental health socially, and so I really feel like it is a really crucial time in the development of again of these students, both in terms of academically and socially.

AT: How have middle school students been impacted by COVID-19?

I9: Yeah I think it has really been a difficult stretch for all of us, and I know that you know most if not all adults have been really impacted by it, and so you can really take that and multiply it by however much you want when you consider you're now talking about you know 11 12 13 year olds and you know how they've had to adjust and deal with things you know happening to them and they really aren't necessarily equipped with the skills to necessarily know how to handle it. I think, from certainly from my work, I would say that middle school students during COVID and now certainly coming back from COVID I think that they've lost a lot of their ability to engage socially and you know, really just the ease of making friends and just being social and having positive interactions with others, I think has been impacted through a lot of the students being isolated for an extended period of time. Students are feeling isolated and don't know how to get

involved and socialize. I also think that social media has played a really large part in that because students have become so dependent on trying to post things that are you know where they're trying to get things to be perfect and look perfect and then they see their friends who are posting these things and others and people they don't even know. And so I think it's COVID has exacerbated that social media outlet and dependency, as far as middle school students really having a less than reality, I guess, a view of reality that is just where everything is perfect and everyone is perfect and, and so I think that has contributed to students just being less willing to take risks and put themselves out there and there's probably more sense of fear of failure than I've seen before at the middle school level. And then, lastly, I think you know academically we just see at the middle school love with here during COVID. You know, students, some students have really done well, but those that haven't. They haven't necessarily had the best support at home or they haven't necessarily been able to get the supports that they usually get in person at school, they haven't been able to have those and then that has caused them to maybe give up a little bit more easily maybe not try as hard as they normally would. You know, because they're not being pushed to do their best and then, when they don't do well they're not necessarily being given the the same supports and obviously there's just something about being in person, as the teacher, where a teacher can help and see things nonverbal communication and things like that so teachers have had a you know it's much harder to do that virtually and so at the end of the day, everybody has been really impacted by COVID but I certainly you know would make the argument that middle school adolescent age range has been impacted as much as any age range has.

AT: So I'd like to ask a follow up question to that.

AT: So you mentioned, you know the students that have done well um what does what does that look like what does it look like to the middle for middle school students to have done well and then how does that differ from what does it look like for a middle school students and not done well you know what I mean if that makes sense I'm just saying about that.

I9: Yeah definitely, so I think when we think of traditionally when we think of middle school students, we think of kids who are trying out new things they're being exposed to different clubs different activities different social opportunities, and so you know typically you know from an educational standpoint, we would gauge positive behavior from a middle school student, as someone who is willing to engage and joining a new club or as willing to try out for a sport or you know to join theater or two just to just try new things, and so the first thing I would say is you know we think that a student is doing well, when they are putting themselves out there and are you know, in the classroom asking questions and participating and engaged and then outside of the classroom that they're you know willing to try to be involved in something they're trying to find a passion and so I think, on the other side of that when we look at students who aren't doing well we're looking at students who are very disengaged in the classroom setting there they're not participating, you know, maybe they're not turning in work they're not willing to get involved in any extracurricular activities and any clubs there they're just not really taking part in in the middle school, you know, in the opportunities I would not gauge it as who's necessarily has the highest grades, and looking at that metric and saying Oh well, this student is getting good grades so she or he must be doing okay. I think, certainly, we would look at somebody who's doing well, as somebody who's progressing grade wise and so who someone who's getting better week

to week month to month, but at the end of the day, I think COVID has exposed this idea of when students are dis they're already sort of they lack engagement academically and socially and now they're isolated and they really don't have any opportunities to be involved in so they are so disengaged and they are they're feeling so far away from whatever we would consider a normal middle school behavior that that isolation, though there, there are just a lot of red flags that that go that are I guess put up from that and it's because of covert it and because of virtual learning, it has been really hard for us to meaningfully address those. At the end of the day, kids needed to be around other kids face to face.

AT: Right yeah It makes me think of you know how hard it was as an adult and we have the tools to you know call people, or do you know, do something and high school students kind of have a little bit of freedom to you about the middle school level and elementary they make the best of everything so I have this group of middle school students that stuck in between those two spaces.

AT: So again, a little bit you've touched on this a little bit too, but how have the mental health needs of middle school students changed over the course of the pandemic, how would you say that has changed?

I9: Well, I think one of the good things that has come from this is that, as a society or certainly as a educational Community I think we're much more aware of everybody has mental health needs and is struggling to some extent, and just because you're super involved or just because you have a lot of friends or just because you have really supportive parents or just because you have you know really high grades, you can still be struggling, you can still be dealing with a lot, and so I think that right a great there is a positive from coven because we've I think we've been better able to acknowledge that everybody could be struggling and so as teachers as educators as social workers as counselors and therapists we I think are looking for things as far as with every student and not just the ones who's you know where the red flags are really very obvious but as far as what those obvious red flags, do you look like I think COVID again has really shown where when students get you know really isolated and in virtual learning where they just maybe wouldn't, not only would they were they not willing to participate, they might not have even been willing to turn on their camera. They might not respond to direct messages where they're just completely disengaged and you know, obviously, if they're not attending that's a that's a whole other issue, but if they are attending but just really unwilling to you know to even show turn their camera on and so things really I think require some follow up on educators. You know, it really should show up on their radar. I think, as a from a therapist perspective, what we're seeing is that students are much less likely to take risks and they're very much afraid of failure. I think we're seeing students who have very little coping skills when things do not go their way, they're not really sure how to handle failure but also just handle disagreements or differences of opinion and lastly, I think one of the big things is what we see is because there is such a spike in the mental health needs of kids that teachers and administrators and staff on a campus are not necessarily feeling fully equipped without a handle that and so you know, certainly, one thing that I hope comes from this is there's more work to be done, as far as how we can utilize resources to support those at the campus level to identify and mental health needs to be able to refer those properly, not necessarily to everybody, you know, be a therapist but that everybody is

attuned to what potential problems are and to be able to properly refer those and to be able to you know treat kids with patience and grace and compassion.

AT: What strategies and best practices have you found that have positively impacted no school students were saying post COVID, but you know we know COVID is still going, but as far as being a little different now?

I9: Yeah yeah, so I do think you know, certainly in one on one therapy sessions we've been able to try to really go back and analyze situations with students and kind of get them to talk to us sort of what was your mindset what were you thinking and then you know work with them on how can we reframe that and work with them on you know, specifically when you feel like this, or when you do this here's a coping strategy, a specific thing that you can do to hopefully have that go away before you know you act out or something negative. And so it really I think the first thing I would say is as we're working with students, one on one for them to identify how they're feeling and you know work with them on some sort of coping mechanism for that, and you know, certainly if we can get there, we can start to dig a little more deeply into why they're feeling that but, honestly at the middle school level, a lot of our success is just simply giving them a tool that they can have when something comes on or when they're feeling a certain way that they know Okay, I need to do this and then this will help me and so that has been successful. Another I think big success pieces when we're able to get administrators and teacher leaders in a district or in a school who you know are really open to wanting to learn, and you know, want to listen to you know how they can what were some of the things they can do on the on the ground level to help kids when they are in crisis, and some of those strategies as far as just really thinking from a compassionate place and you know, trying to listen and I think, providing support to educators, to let them know that you know you don't necessarily need to solve the problem. Really, can you just listen and just make sure that that student feels safe and comfortable and then we can refer it and get it to the right person who, who is equipped to handle that. And then I would say strategies that that involve working with students on some social media awareness and education as far as what they are seeing and what maybe the reality is and maybe you know, hopefully, being able to involve caregiver and you know, making sure there are some boundaries and some balance there. Because, as I mentioned earlier between COVID and between social media those two things have been really big triggers and a lot of the behaviors we've seen, and so we can we can't control COVID but we can work with students and with parents on you know, trying to limit and better understand and support students and what social media is and what it's not and how it can be used in a you know, a more productive way.

AT: Thanks a lot. So finally we're going to answer the last question about I'd like to hear about what gaps or problem areas you feel currently exist in the K 12 public education system to primarily handle the mental health needs of middle school students.

I9: I definitely think there's a gap as far as the coaching that we have from the mental health side to the teachers and to staff members, I would like to think that there are ways where whether it's school counselors or whether it's the social worker or people coming in that are really training teachers better. There is a huge gap with communication between teachers, counselors, social workers, and mental health therapists. They are all helping the same student, but not collaborating or sharing their experience. There needs to be time in the day allotted for teachers,

counselors and social workers to talk and communicate. And you know, a part that we're not even getting into is just how teachers right now need a lot, too, and so the more resources, we can put into people coming in and trying to not just mentor teachers on how to help students but also mentor teachers on how to help themselves during this. And so there's a gap there, I also think there's a gap between the educational options that students have, as far as courses, we talked about some social media literacy kind of courses. But also just you know coursework that or opportunities, maybe it's not coursework but just opportunities, where students can you know learn a little bit more about themselves and to be able to you know have opportunities to listen to others. And you know, really have opportunities social opportunities that are guided and hopefully, that can get students in a in a more comfortable space for them to you know to be in their own shoes and to be able to communicate effectively and then I also think a gap is right now on how we currently involve parents in the process I'd like to think there are ways where we can work with the student and we can work with a parent and we can all work together and we can all learn from each other, and we can all help and give each other, you know tools and strategies and obviously there's a lot of really tough situations that caregivers and parents are dealing with. And so I do think that if we can earn as educators, that we can earn the trust of parents that we can really bridge the gap, because we can get them hopefully working to help their students after school and then certainly it's something that we can do day to day to help them, you know, while there, while they're in school. We desperately need to partner with parents so we can work together on ways to support students who need extra support.

AT: Those are the questions I have today is there anything else you want to say before we leave?

I9: No, that was great I hope that these answers were helped were helpful.

AT: They really, really, where I really appreciate it.

## APPENDIX J

### Interview 10

Alan Thompson: Okay, so we are recording Thank you very much for taking the time to participate in this and I'm really looking forward to hearing what you have to say, because I think it's going to be really tremendously valuable to this work, so we'll start right away with the first question and that's, what is your current position and title.

I10: [REDACTED] and I have served in this role in many roles throughout my 31 years and education in various capacities that primarily focused on middle school high school social emotional learning mental health and everything in between.

Alan Thompson: Perfect so you talked about being in education for a little while. How long have you been working specifically with that age group and how have you seen that age group evolve and how things have changed over the course of the last couple of decades?

I10: So the majority of my tenure in education has been with that so 31 years has been with that secondary age group and again within various capacities, including coaching, specialized groups mentoring and ideally what I've seen the trend I've seen is has been very interesting. Over those years I've seen more of the need to not necessarily spoon feed but modify and modify what they're learning in the curriculum, so as to be able to encompass the social emotional needs that students are having. It's been my finding that no student of mine would ever want to learn, history or had the capacity to learn history if there's social emotional needs aren't being met and that was always an easy tie in with what I taught in high coach because to me the relational part of education is profoundly important because it's not until students understand that you care about them that they will even remotely care about what you're trying to teach them or what you're trying to coach them as far as skill sets so. Over the course of my 31 years that has become more prominent as they stand side by side that the needs of students. You know, for whatever reason. Maybe you know lacking parental components at home or you know, whatever working parents or whatever we have just become more than a teacher to students and At first it was you know I serve as the counselor and I serve as a coach and a teacher and now it's you know I service is potentially a dad role model, a counselor a coach a therapist all these different things, I think, are really important with an education, if only exhibited by listening and taking an invested interest in what students are actually saying, because through that you can truly understand where they're coming from where they are mentally and cognitively to be able to grasp anything that you're trying to teach you.

Alan Thompson: That is a tremendously well said and that's really profound that's wow so. The first kind of real content question here how have middle school students been impacted by COVID-19?

I10: Don't have to go so far beyond how we as adults handle change. No one likes change. Taking cubicles out of the Office here and replacing them with an open forum that didn't necessarily work in the 80s and classrooms cost change which causes anxiety which creates a

feeling of loss of control. So it's not it's not so hard to understand into to be able to appreciate how students have dealt with, especially middle school students have dealt with this incredible amount of change that has been thrust upon it. It's scary and called anxiety. Their well being and safety was of course all costs, brought into you know into the limelight, along with what was potentially taking place at home or wasn't taking place at home, the dynamics of that family being put into a situation where they are around each other, a lot more in this transition played out in a way that caused some very bizarre behaviors. It's almost like a digression, from where they should have been, but because of the pandemic, whereas I'm looking at a seventh grader a sixth grader within programs that that I oversee I'm really dealing with a mindset and emotional capacity of an elementary kiddo. So you have to take that into consideration, because the social impact of what went down hindered them socially, which obviously is not a good thing, which then causes them to be more focused on the social components of the change that creates anxiety coupled with the lack of control that they might have within a family dynamic. Then, of course, hinders the whole educational process as a whole because they're not going to be focused on what am I learning in history if they're not feeling safe comfortable in control of what is happening around them, so I think the pandemic is has just created something that we've never seen before, and as a result of that, we as adults had to kind of change our perspective and understanding that the students social emotional needs needed to be met, as I mentioned before, before they can appreciate anything that you're trying to teach.

Alan Thompson: Absolutely. And the next question in and you touched on it a little bit so maybe just sort of expand if you can How have the mental health, the needs of middle school students changed over the course of the pandemic.

I10: They have become paramount. And that those needs, have to be met first before any type of curriculum or instruction or anything like that can be implemented. Again it's allowing them to understand and know that you really care about them. You have a safe environment for them it's a controlled environment which even a zoom call or a team's call, even though it said technologically controlled environment there's still so many abnormalities it just isn't familiar to these kiddos as they're coming into the educational system and dealing with it this way, so taking into consideration that the social emotional needs of students and the mental capacities that they might have because of this change because of this transition is weighing on them. The utmost important that that those norms and guidelines and procedures that that support what they're going through social emotionally our take precedence over what you're trying to teach and once that's established, then the educational part comes a lot easier. Teachers needed to take a step back academically, and just listen and check in and strengthen those relationships. Teachers need to focus on making sure their students are okay before they get into the content. Kids right now need to know adults in the building care about them.

Alan Thompson: Absolutely for sure. What strategies and best practices have you found that have positively impacted middle school students post COVID or whatever post COVID means at this point?

I10: Giving students, an opportunity to reconnect you know just reconnect and have a sense of normalcy. Letting kids be kids. Putting an end to place opportunities for them to practice again what they've been missing for years. Curriculum is important but, again, it all goes back to if

they're not in a good place mentally they're just not going to be able to absorb. Like that spawns we want them to be within our within our content they're just not going to be able to absorb that that information and apply it with whatever way is necessary so putting things in a place where, and this is true of teachers his well anybody that's coming back into the workforce, you can't just throw new things on them, you have to let them reconnect with peers colleagues talk about things that are normal you know so put a bunch of history teachers together and let them just talk history that's normal to them it's their language. And then bringing in ways that they can connect reconnect with their students. So bring somebody in from a social emotional component, where they can talk about ways to help students connect to not only their peers, but also to the educators again and it's just it's you know, creating blueprints where we can just get back into what was originally a normal experience and something that was just what we did. I think that's, the most important thing is just letting kids know that we're going to start over and just reconnect.

Alan Thompson: I love it and I wonder to kind of follow up on that what do you think what might it look like when you talk about kids being able to you know to reconnect and to practice that and the way I sort of take, that is, you know middle school is a time where you know it's a place where you, you need to be able to have the opportunity to make mistakes and to put yourself out there and to try to discover, you know where your passions lie. What when you, you know, when you say reconnect and to be able to practice and to be able to allow kids to be kids what, how do you see that what might that look like in a middle school?

I10: It can be as simple as having a grade level dance party in the cafeteria after school, so they can just dance and the kids and laugh and goof maybe opportunities for them to play around with social media in the cafeteria just anything that they're already connected to as a result of being cooped up for as long as they were to be able to do that in a social setting within the school. To me, where they can identify with each other that hey you know what I do that too, or I like that as well. It's just having similar hobbies or you know allow them to do similar projects together within the school just anything that gives them a platform to express themselves in a way that reconnects them to those that are around them. It could even be activities that that you do, that are that are team building that allow students to say hey yeah I've got a dog, I mean it could be as simple as that you raise your hand if you have it Oh, I did too and let them, talk, talk about it and discover the similarities that they've always had that were just unfortunately disconnected when we went into pandemic mode. So it's just as simple as letting them have time to be kids again.

Alan Thompson: So you mentioned the opportunity to discover I wonder if you could talk a little bit about how maybe how social media has contributed to or maybe taken away from that courage of middle schoolers to discover?

I10: I think it has caused a disconnect to some extent. But yet if we really step back and look, there is also opportunities through social media to connect. And I say that by you know certain kid and I can use my kids example that are middle school age, they have found friends within their schools that are followers of the same interactive and highly creative youtubers and from that relationship is created in there's conversations and it's almost like having a club based on social media and another middle school daughter of mine is really an anime and dry so she's

connected with friends, they use certain tools that they find online on social media platforms to help them create and craft these anime and now they they're involved they've taken a step further, beyond the social media into an actual art club. So if given opportunities to explore the social media and explore, you know how those around them, are also connected, it could open up avenues that we really never even looked at before or are not looked at, but considered within schools it's always well, we got their club, we got the history that we have that, but yet there's so many new dynamics going on that students in our children had to rely on. While we were on lockdown, if you will, that these things now are a huge part of their life and, even more importantly, it was a part of their coping. They were able to cope and get through this very challenging time by exploring new things that social media provided. I think, with moderation, of course, those things can be highly effective in keeping that connection and allowing students to explain and explore beyond what was originally available before all this, all this happened.

Alan Thompson: Yeah that is really, really well said. Okay, one more question for you what gaps or problem areas currently exist in K 12 public education to properly handle the mental health needs of middle school students?

I10: I think the biggest gap and problem is of fact that those that we're relying on to help close the gap are also absolutely mentally and socially worn out primarily because of all this stuff and I can speak from my realm of this little world that the piling on new things and new initiatives and someone's idea, maybe just a small little tiny thing, but by the time it rolls down the hill of public education and that for teacher standing at the bottom of the Hill and trying to catch that pedal pebble it's not boulder that absolutely just rolls over them, so I think, as I mentioned before, post-pandemic, I think, and even to this point because we're still dealing with kind of the ripple effects of all this is let teachers reconnect and speak of familiar language something that's normal to them, it gets them relaxed and energized and there's nothing more I taught history for a very long time, you get me in a classroom or a room with colleagues and we just start talking history everybody in the room, and I can say this because I've seen it gets fired up gets passionate again gets excited and it's rejuvenating so allow that to happen, and then bring in someone who's got expertise in giving coping skills or strategies to help students reconnect within the social emotional components instead of again inundating the adults that are in charge of these students with more initiatives and more things and only weigh them down to the point where they just cannot help themselves, and I think that's the biggest disservice that we're doing to our students is over inundating our leaders and our teachers with more than they can handle and that stress that the teachers are having then is put on the students and anomaly. It only makes things worse. Teachers need help. They need support and training on how to help kids with tier one social-emotional needs. More than they, they need help as people also dealing with the pandemic. Help the teachers first, then train them to better serve students.

Alan Thompson: it's excellent I really appreciate your thoughts and your perspective and taking the time to meet with me today, this was this was really, really helpful, thank you.

I10: My pleasure.

## APPENDIX K

### Comprehensive Theme/Coding List

- Be humble
- I messages
- Listen to understand
- Community Circles
- Respect Agreements
- PBIS district-wide
- Positive school culture
- Problem centered and user focused
- Consistent expectations
- School-wide expectations
- MTSS clearly communicated
- Support positive behavior
- Building relationships
- Teach behavior
- Strong systems and routines
- Extra SEL support after breaks
- New student on-boarding
- Parent connections
- Community gatherings
- Social worker platform
- Class to class same expectations in secondary
- Data analysis formative and summative
- Mood meters daily
- Administration calibration
- Administration follow up with teachers
- School wide common language
- Get feedback from students
- Acknowledge doing things right
- Do not take it personally
- Show you care
- Earning trust is a process
- Cheer successes
- Trauma, PTSD need support services
- Learning students' personality type
- Love languages
- Mental health not the same after COVID-19
- Students are more cautious after COVID-19
- Students have lost a courage to discover
- Parents and teachers avoid minimizing and assuming
- All students have been impacted by COVID-19

## **Comprehensive Theme/Coding List (Continued)**

- All behavior is communication
- Showing up is tough when disconnected and not involved
- Rethink school spirit and culture
- Get conversations going
- Social anxiety/panic attacks on the rise post-COVID-19
- Appreciate cultural differences
- Students when overwhelmed can feel frozen
- Identify kids' passion
- Servant mentality
- Gratitude
- Assume best intentions
- Can be firm and fair
- Can be demanding without demeaning
- Name behavior when see it
- Extra SEL supports early in 6<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade for transition
- Triage urgent needs first
- Classroom community
- Everyone wants to be heard
- Model it is okay to not be okay
- Avoid power struggles
- Mental health exacerbated exponentially when student feels isolated
- Fallacies of social media
- Students unable to process emotions
- PLC is a think not a thing
- SEL mandatory class and curriculum
- Community partnerships
- SEL teacher training
- Mental health teacher support
- Student focus groups
- SEL is the plate
- Prioritize relationships
- Student/teacher mediation
- Consistent professional learning in SEL
- SEL in daily curriculum
- More social workers needed
- School counselors more time to counsel
- School announcements kindness
- Student mentors
- Connecting then learning
- Culture of kindness
- Power of Vulnerability

## **Comprehensive Theme/Coding List (Continued)**

- PBIS: establish expectations, teach expectations, positive reinforcement, restorative consequences
- Behavior framework: PBIS, restorative practices, trauma-informed practices, social-emotional learning
- Soft heart, thick skin

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