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PUBLIC HEALTH STUDENT REFLECTION

How Can Public Health Professionals Help to Improve Mental Health for Students Using Distance Learning?

Colin Brame[1]; Lorraine S. Wallace[2]

[1]The Ohio State University College of Medicine, Columbus, OH

[2]Department of Biomedical Education and Anatomy, The Ohio State University College of Medicine, Columbus, OH

Corresponding Author: Colin Brame, (614) 579-4358, brame.21@buckeyemail.osu.edu

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Having worked with patients hospitalized at Nationwide Children's Hospital over the past year, I have seen the complexity and, often, difficulty involved in accessing and completing assignments and homework virtually. Even as masks have gone away, students with chronic illnesses continue to learn and complete assignments outside of the traditional classroom environment. At the same time, these students must also navigate complex software, Wi-Fi challenges, and the monotony that often comes with online education. These problems are not exclusive to the hospital and, if educational institutions neglect the new struggles that students face during school, many learners may be left behind.

The COVID-19 pandemic forced schools to find alternative methods to reach and teach students. Across the board students transitioned to online education, losing valuable socialization time with their teachers and peers. Students fell behind in their learning, but there remains an even more pressing public health issue.[1] During and after the pandemic, diagnoses of mental health disorders increased in children and adolescents.[2] There could be multiple explanations for this alarming trend, including a lack of socialization, a loss of work-life balance, or stress about an uncertain future. Nonetheless, these data point to an essential objective: the mental health of students utilizing online learning must be prioritized.

To resolve educational gaps caused specifically by the COVID-19 pandemic, schools implemented solutions including additional online classroom time. However, giving students more work and online instruction time may discourage already weary learners. Moreover, technological advancements in schools that increased the prevalence of virtual education delivery methods, although helpful, have prevented students and teachers from maintaining a healthy work-life balance. This system appears to be teaching young people that work is monotonous, always looming, and overwhelming. Instead of giving students hurdles to overcome, public health experts can help schools to engage students with creative learning solutions and expand students' capacity for resiliency and growth, thereby improving mental health.

A promising case report outlined a unique strategy for assisting a student with sickle cell disease in her educational journey.[3] Researchers facilitated collaborations between a local hospital and the student's school. To help this student succeed, they developed a strategy focusing on metacognition to improve learning strategies, such as helping this student to create and optimize a personalized studying schedule. Soon, this patient successfully advanced to the next grade. Metacognition is the process of reflecting upon an individual's own thoughts and learning strategies to develop positive thought patterns, and metacognition can improve not only academic performance but also mental health by helping individuals to develop emotional resiliency.[4] Through metacognition, individuals can develop personalized strategies for growth. By teaching metacognition strategies, educators may also help students to better manage stress. Capable and motivated students, who are simply overwhelmed by online education, may benefit from new strategies for approaching work and stress. Public health experts can help improve student mental health by showing educational institutions a method for building emotional resiliency: metacognition.

Author Contribution

Colin Brame wrote and revised manuscript. Lorraine S. Wallace edited and reviewed manuscript.

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