Why Schools Must Prioritize Student Motivation and Mental Health Post-COVID-19

Promoting Equity and Academic Success Post-COVID-19

empoweru

Student mental health challenges have been rising for the past decade, creating barriers to academic success. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the National Institute of Mental Health estimated that **one in three students struggled with anxiety, depression, trauma, or attention issues** that negatively impacted their ability to focus, stay motivated and engaged, and learn.

Then the COVID-19 pandemic hit, and the ever-changing learning models, social distancing, and lost milestones ignited an escalation in non-academic barriers that fueled an estimated learning gap of 20-30%.

With more than

1 in 4

students suffering from poorer emotional and cognitive health since the pandemic began, researchers are describing this as a **"collective trauma."**

When a student misses school, it can cost a district on average

$70

per day in direct lost revenues and re-teaching time

This situation is having a detrimental impact on students' ability to focus and learn. It is leading to decreased engagement and motivation and fueling academic loss for students across the country.

As humans, we are wired for survival, which means that our reptilian brains (hippocampus and amygdala) respond at a subconscious level to fear and stress. The growing fear and uncertainty throughout the pandemic is pushing many students and educators into an automatic fear response, yielding decreased focus and rising levels of stress hormones, like cortisol, that sends them into "flight, fight, or forget it" mode.

In a school setting, a student's response to a perceived threat triggers a protection response, which causes students to argue, avoid, shut-down, and stop engaging, disrupting their ability to learn and putting them behind academically. This is not news to any educator who has tried desperately to engage students remotely this year.

The average in learning gaps does not reveal that the divide is actually much wider for disadvantaged students, who were already behind before the pandemic. This compounds existing inequities in education. A recent study found that students of color could be six to 12 months behind, compared with four to eight months for white students.

With so much learning to make up next year, there is intense focus for educators to help students catch up, increasing pressure after a year of COVID-19. School leaders and staff are overwhelmed by their own stress and burnout while trying to re-engage and motivate students to bridge the learning gap.

The cost of disengaged and unmotivated students is enormous to school districts. When a student misses school, it costs the district on average $70 per day in direct lost revenues and re-teaching time. And when anxiety or depression levels rise to a level that requires Tier 3 school support (i.e., special education), it costs schools $5,000 to complete an evaluation for special education and an additional $17,000 per student per year to educate this student. Schools cannot afford to avoid the problem. They need a better response.

The research is clear: schools will not be successful if they do not first address the mental health and resilience needs of the students, particularly those students who had the fewest academic opportunities before the pandemic.

1 Self-Identity
Student learns about self in order to best make personal changes and improve quality of life

2 Motivation & Habits
Student creates personal change by mastering strategies for habit change and motivation

3 Inner Coach
Student improves distress tolerance by using realistic self-talk (Inner Coach over Inner Critic)

4 Emotional Regulation
Student learns and successfully implements strategies for emotional regulation

5 Community
Student is able to identify community of support and make more meaningful connections

Prioritizing a Multi-Tiered System of Support for Resiliency & Mental Health

There is an urgent need to address the well-being and mental health of students in a more holistic way. Schools that focus on building resiliency skills have better results in the short- and long-term than schools that are simply focused on raising test scores. Research shows that students who receive resiliency and mental health support have higher grades, fewer absences, fewer arrests and disciplinary issues, and graduate and attend college at higher rates. In the COVID-19 era, how districts go about addressing the mental health challenges for both students and educators has swiftly moved from a nice-to-have category to a must-have category. Their efforts will directly determine how successful they are in meeting academic milestones equitably.

Implementing a Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) to identify and address a student's mental health needs will allow schools to have a comprehensive and organized system that provides support that helps all students thrive. Yet asking school leaders and staff who are dealing with high levels of stress and burnout to build a new system of support is challenging. Research shows the school districts have so many demands on educator and student time that

programs must dove-tail with other initiatives seamlessly. EdWeek's study of principals this past year clearly stated that 66% are looking for turnkey solutions that are effective and easy to implement given the limited time and capacity of staff in an already crowded academic school day.

A recent study found that for every $1 invested in resiliency programs, there is a direct cost benefit to the school district of $11 from reductions in mental health and disciplinary issues and increases in academic achievement. The government has taken notice and responded to the critical investment needed for resiliency programs. Legislation for the CARES Act, ESSER II and now ESSER III have earmarked billions of dollars to help states and districts make up for lost time in the classroom. With new federal dollars, districts have the opportunity to thoughtfully embed turnkey, holistic solutions that will support student mental health development with an intentional focus on increasing student coping skills, persistence, and resilience.

EmpowerU is Fueling Student Transformation

For districts looking to implement an effective, comprehensive resiliency program, the latest research recommends utilizing a MTSS framework to deliver vital support to students. The research points to a tiered, individualized approach, customized to each student's level of internalized and externalized behaviors.

EmpowerU's founders have spent the past seven years identifying evidenced-based elements in mental health programs that are effective in fueling resilience for all students. By implementing a program rooted in 21st century skills and best teaching practices, schools can stimulate deep reflection and learning so that core concepts and resilience strategies are easy for students to recall, retrieve, and apply quickly as they navigate both their current challenges and future obstacles. This critical work to build student resilience is widely regarded as having the most positive impact on personal life-long success.

Over the past decade, the EmpowerU founders have reimagined the delivery of student resilience and mental health support. The EmpowerU solution increases access to vital, one-to-one support for all students while effectively building long-lasting resilience skills for students and educators.

> Through a proprietary, online platform, EmpowerU deploys highly personalized skill-building content in daily doses that is supported by one-to-one Master's level coaches who help each student make the connection between course content and their individual goals and obstacles.

By bridging the gap between curriculum-only programs and one-to-one therapy, EmpowerU has fueled student transformation by making support accessible for all students without a heavy lift on teachers or the need for schools to hire additional staff. Curriculum-only solutions often lack student engagement and do not provide the vital support required to apply learning to an individual student's obstacles and goals. And while one-to-one therapy is helpful for students at Tier 3, it can be costly, difficult to schedule, and, most importantly, can take several weekly sessions to create a diagnosis and treatment plan for students who are quickly slipping behind.

EmpowerU's Four Pillars Rooted in Evidence-Based Strategies

EmpowerU's hybrid solution is rooted in four evidence-based elements that are proven to help students move from a place of discouragement, avoidance, and disengagement to confidence, resilience, persistence, and success. These four essential pillars build student mastery of resilience skills in a way that allows them to be internalized strategies that students can easily recall, retrieve, and apply when they inevitably face stressful and difficult situations.

PILLAR ONE

Rooted in Relationship and Unconditional Positive Regard

PILLAR TWO

Daily Engagement and Skill Building

PILLAR THREE

Comprehensive and Long Enough to Cement Learning that Lasts

PILLAR FOUR

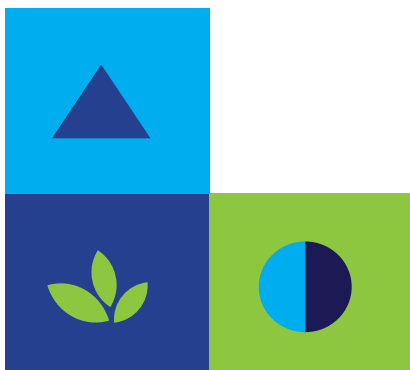### Accessible and Equitable

Rooted in Relationship and Unconditional Positive Regard

A safe, supportive relationship is critical for student engagement and, in turn, academic success. A strong and intentional relationship with an adult is a key factor in building effective programs for adolescents and young adults. We know students are good at learning concepts, but meaningful reflection and growth requires accountability and support. By embedding one-to-one support into the program, students are accountable to reflect on and apply the daily content to create meaningful change in the areas of their life that they care about most.

EmpowerU students are assigned a licensed, Master's level therapist as their personal coach to guide them throughout the course. EmpowerU coaches support students with deep reflection to internalize the concepts and apply them to their identified goals and barriers. This is only possible with the psychological safety provided by the one-to-one, safe, supportive relationship built between students and their EmpowerU coach. Coaches are trained to treat each student with unconditional positive regard, looking for the best in each student to ensure that they feel seen, heard, valued, and respected each day. This allows students to be vulnerable and dig deep into their barriers so they can move through the course successfully and achieve their goals of personal growth and empowerment. The quality of the therapeutic relationship is the single most important factor to creating positive outcomes, which is why EmpowerU puts so much focus and intention on the coach-student relationship.
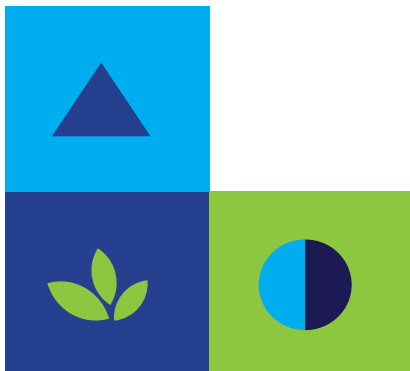
Daily Engagement and Skill Building

The powerful combination of one-to-one personalized coaching and daily lessons delivered asynchronously in bite-sized doses each day results in significant improvements in student emotional well-being, academic goals, and grades. It also positively impacts attendance. Each skill-building lesson is engaging, relevant, and delivered in daily doses for easy consumption. Developed using the Understanding by Design framework, the program includes curriculum mapping and formative and summative assessments to ensure student mastery of core social-emotional concepts. These core concepts are aligned with resiliency frameworks, ASCA standards, and National Health and Wellness standards, allowing the 8-14 week program to be credit-worthy.

EmpowerU meets students where they are, guiding them through small, achievable steps to create lasting change. The EmpowerU program is informed by the Transtheoretical Model (or Stages of Change model) to create and measure intentional behavior change. In addition, the work of Gretchen Rubin on tendencies that create lasting habit change in small, daily steps is central to the lessons. The founders also were informed by their therapeutic work, noting that dialectical behavior therapy and cognitive behavioral therapy programs typically include daily practice over a period of time and typically show positive effects, but that most schools do not have the time to commit to daily practice of certain skills over a long period. EmpowerU founders were intentional about creating the time and place for students to thoughtfully complete this daily work.
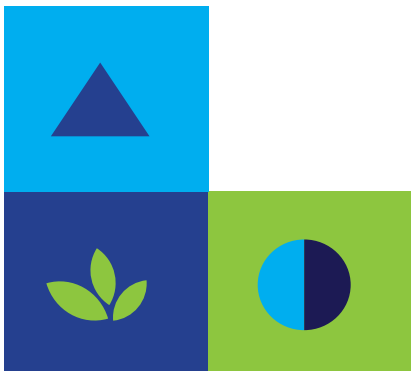
Comprehensive and Long Enough to Cement Learning that Lasts

There have been hundreds of studies on the effectiveness of the length of academic interventions, but few on the optimal dosage and length of resiliency programs to ensure the outcomes are lasting. The founders relied on many literature reviews (e.g., A Review of Tier 2 Interventions Conducted Within Multi-Tiered Models of Behavioral Prevention) and primary research that conclusively determined that at least 20 minutes a day over 8-14 weeks was indeed a standard to achieve transformation. EmpowerU was intentionally designed to be self-paced over an 8–14-week timeframe. Over the course of the six units, students build resilience that shifts their focus from problems to progress.

Students gain mastery over the key concepts and strategies to help them navigate their current barriers and to build the resilience to navigate future barriers. As a result, they become more stable, confident, grounded, and hopeful.

Neuroplasticity is taught in the course, and students learn that they have the ability to rewire their brains by building their "Inner Coach" muscle to combat their "Inner Critic." They first identify what their Inner Coach sounds like in order to create awareness, amplifying its existence. Students learn that by repeating new habits or thoughts over and over again, new neural pathways form and these new behaviors become more automatic. They are prompted throughout the program and supported by their coach to work to build these new, helpful pathways using small steps each day and the Transtheoretical Model (or Stages of Change model).
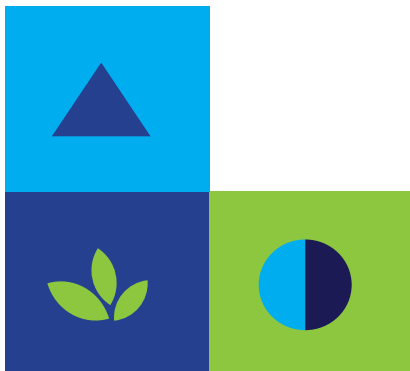
Accessible and Equitable

EmpowerU is committed to unlocking the nonacademic barriers to education. By ensuring that all students, no matter their race or ethnicity, can access quality mental health and wellness support that is relevant, culturally competent, and impactful in a cost-effective way for school districts is at the core of EmpowerU.

EmpowerU was designed to be both accessible and equitable. These are cornerstones in any effective solution and core to national best-practice frameworks. The content and coaching methodology has been reviewed to ensure that the wording, examples, videos, and coaching approach are accessible, inclusive, and equitable for all students. Furthermore, the EmpowerU founders fundamentally believe that therapy and mental health support should not be a privilege but a right for all students. We know that racial and ethnic disparities exist in access, use, and quality of care for mental health services and EmpowerU can help to play a role in reducing these mental health care disparities.

When schools utilize EmpowerU as a Tier 1 and 2 solution, more students have access to vital, daily, one- to-one support by Master's-level coaches. By having the structure of the daily lessons, coaches are able to provide support efficiently, making the course more accessible to all students. EmpowerU's 3-year data compilation shows that BIPOC populations perform above the course averages in personal growth from pre- to-post assessment.
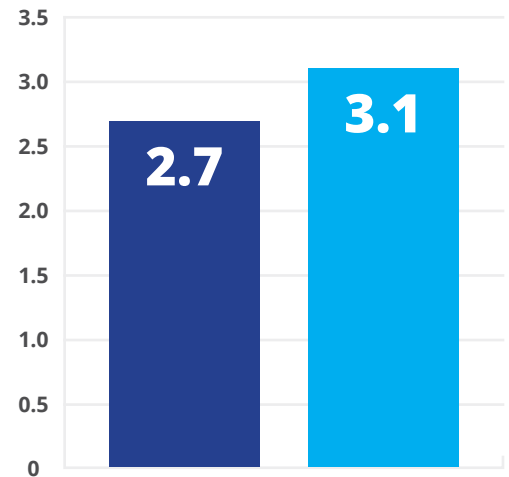
EmpowerU Data **Summary**

EmpowerU partners with schools to engage students as active participants in their wellness journey throughout the semester-long, credit-bearing course, delivered uniquely at Tier 1, 2, and 3 from elementary to high school levels. Their program is highly customized to the individual wellness and mental health goals and challenges of each student. As a result of this approach, **EmpowerU students complete the course at an 88% completion rate**. This compares to industry standards of 5-30% completion rates for online courses. EmpowerU's post-course data collection over the past three years attributes the high rate of completion and success students have in the course to the support that each student receives from a coach every day. In fact, EmpowerU students rate the importance of the individualized coaching embedded in the course as a 3.65 out of 4.0 in helping them make personal growth and change.
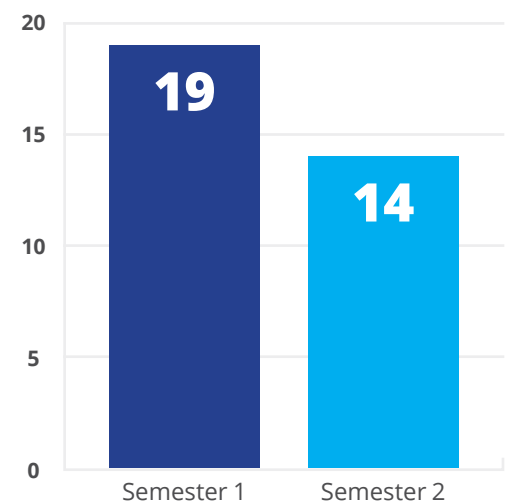
Completing the course has a **significant impact on the student's engagement and performance in the classroom** setting beyond the EmpowerU program. EmpowerU school partners report that there is a correlation of students who complete the EmpowerU program with higher grades and attendance.

In addition, over the last three years of data collection, on **average 94.5% of students make significant goal progress** (an increase of one or more stages of change according to the TTM model) in all four goal areas (Personal, Emotional, Social, and Academic), and **93% of students show improvement in their emotional and social wellbeing from pre-to-post assessment**. EmpowerU students identifying as Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) make up 39% of the overall EmpowerU participants. The BIPOC student outcomes on average are two percentage points higher than the overall averages. Finally, outcome and completion data has remained steady during COVID-19 and remote learning. This suggests that the daily lessons and one-to-one coaching are both accessible and helpful for students during this difficult time. Read more about EmpowerU's data collection methodologies and tools here.

Student GPA Increase

Student Absence Decrease

Based upon a 2018/19 correlation study between EmpowerU student outcomes on grades and attendance

EmpowerU is a Tier 1 and Tier 2 Support

EmpowerU is a powerful, turnkey mental health and resiliency program that is easily implemented by MTSS, Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), and/or school support district or site-based teams. EmpowerU has developed tiered programs, providing a personalized student experience at each level.

Most importantly, EmpowerU does not require hiring a staff member to implement and measure the effectiveness of the program, making it highly accessible for school districts. It is a low-lift for staff and leadership who are already stretched thin.

> **EmpowerU coaches are an extension of the counseling and social work staff, who are all too often assigned case loads far above industry standards and are unable to provide the necessary one-to-one support to impact change.**

The EmpowerU Dashboard keeps school partners updated on student progress in real time. School staff also receive weekly, personalized comments from the EmpowerU coach on student outcomes and insights to help support the student in meaningful ways.

At the end of the course, students complete a final project that summarizes their growth, what they want to work on going forward, and how their school and home team can support them. The EmpowerU coach also completes a comprehensive final student evaluation that shares the pre-to-post growth in the Transtheoretical Model (or Stages of Change) framework and pre-to-post mental health and social-emotional growth that can be used as a documented, data-driven pre-referral tool.

EmpowerU offers a Tier 1 solution for both educators and students. The educator course is a professional development mental health curriculum that helps support educator self-care and provides a universal language of resilience to build school-wide capacity for student support. EmpowerU Tier 1 for students can be implemented within an advisory or health period to provide access to resilience curriculum for all students within an existing educational framework.

EmpowerU fills a major gap in services at Tier 2. By providing targeted support for students struggling with anxiety, depression, and motivation, it is a data-driven, pre-referral tool to avoid higher and more costly intervention. EmpowerU's Tier 2 solution provides 20-30 minutes per week of one-to-one coaching (6-7 hours of individual coaching support over the program) and a semester credit. When the data and outcomes are used as a documented pre-referral at Tier 2, the student can successfully return to Tier 1 without having to go through the costly SPED evaluation process (about $5,000/student). This allows districts to easily measure the ROI for EmpowerU.

School Leaders Must Act Now

District and school leaders must act now to support the mental health and wellbeing needs of their students and educators. Student mental health has been a growing concern, and the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues that many students are experiencing. It is especially important that districts prioritize the students who were already behind pre-pandemic and BIPOC students who are being disproportionately affected by the pandemic and the recent cultural and political events protesting centuries of racial injustice.

At this critical time, school leaders are looking for a more holistic perspective that will reengage and motivate struggling students in support of their mental health and wellness.

EmpowerU is a powerful, turnkey resilience and mental health program that is easily implemented by MTSS, Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), and/or school support teams. By teaching students resilience skills, they will not only meet their short-term personal and academic goals, but also have the strategies and tools to overcome inevitable future obstacles. EmpowerU's evidence-based and accessible solution can support all members of the school community to increase confidence and well-being even during the most difficult times.

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