

Trauma screenings and teacher trainings: How Virginia schools are trying to boost students' mental health

Computer simulations are being used to train teachers in Loudoun County Public Schools to deal with students' mental stress. (Kognito)

By

[Hannah Natanson](#)

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One day this fall, students in Alexandria will take a break from virtual class and click into an unusual survey.

For 15 minutes, third- through 12th-graders in the Northern Virginia district of 16,000 will puzzle over 11 statements, every one describing a negative emotion “happening because of the [coronavirus](#) illness.” Students will rate how often they experienced each feeling in the past month — from zero, or “never,” to 4, “almost every day.”

“I have trouble going to sleep,” reads Prompt 11.

“I feel alone,” reads Prompt 9, “even when I am around other people.”

And Prompt 5: “I have trouble feeling happiness or love.”

The [survey](#), an adapted version of a covid-19 trauma screening developed by UCLA, is meant to gauge how Alexandria City Public Schools students are faring after a long, confusing, chaotic — for some, catastrophic — summer, said John Baker, the district's director of school psychology.

“We are definitely anticipating higher stress levels coming into this school year because of what I call the dual pandemic,” Baker said. “There's the health pandemic with covid-19. Then there's the racial injustice.”

“And not being in person is raising stress levels, too,” he added.

[How schools are preparing for the coronavirus mental health crisis](#)

It is one of several ways school officials in Virginia and across the country [are seeking to assess and boost students' mental health](#) as part of the virtual return to class. Some have set up crisis hotlines, others are offering grief training for teachers, and still others have debuted virtual "wellness rooms."

In Loudoun County Public Schools, teachers are preparing for the school year by engaging in simulated online conversations with humanoid student-characters who complain of emotional trauma. In Fairfax County Public Schools, for the first time, all staffers must incorporate some "social and emotional learning" into their classes this coming year, said Bethany Koszelak, a mental health and wellness specialist with the school system.

"That could mean you're in English class, reading a book, and you start talking about the problem-solving skills between characters," Koszelak said. "Or you're in history and you start talking about some of the social justice issues then, and how that applies to our life now."

Mary Alvord, who runs a mental health and psychotherapy practice for young people in the D.C. area, said the challenge of supporting students' mental health feels more urgent now than at any time she can remember — except maybe the direct aftermath of 9/11. She said clients of all ages, from elementary-schoolers to high school seniors, are showing up to sessions completely freaked out. They are anxious about the pandemic and the nationwide protests that have followed the May killing of George Floyd in the custody of Minneapolis police. But they are also worried about the simple mechanics of virtual learning.

"There's a lot of what we call catastrophic thinking: 'What if my Internet goes out? What if I can't do my assignments?' " Alvord said. "And there's also a lot of, 'How am I ever going to meet people if everything is online?'"

Unfortunately, the nation's shift to virtual schooling also means reaching students is more difficult than ever. Ezra Golberstein, an associate professor of health policy and management at the University of Minnesota, said that while screenings such as the Alexandria survey are a good first step, school officials must act on the data they gather.

He said they should pair struggling students with psychologists or social workers for follow-up tele-counseling sessions and ensure all children have the resources necessary to participate. Golberstein noted that youths most severely affected by the coronavirus — students in low-income households, or whose parents lost their jobs because of the pandemic — are also least likely to have stable Internet access.

"Schools are the de facto mental health system for kids, especially now," Golberstein said. "So not having in-person resources for kids is making all of this so much harder."

[*Kids used to love screen time. Then schools made Zoom mandatory all day long.*](#)

In Alexandria, all students in the system were to receive devices this week, ahead of the start of the 2020-2021 school year. And officials say they are working to ensure that all families have access to the Internet — a target they expect to hit by Tuesday, the first day of virtual school.

Schools will deliver the trauma survey to students in late September or early October, said Darrell Sampson, Alexandria's executive director of student support teams. He said he feels confident every family that wants to will be able to participate. Still, parents can also choose to bar their student from taking the survey, an option schools must offer under Virginia law. Families have 30 days to decide; all they need do to opt out [is click a link online](#).

Once the survey wraps up, a small handful of school staffers will review the data, Sampson said. Only a handful of employees directly involved with any student — their teacher, school counselor, nurse, social worker, psychologist or principal — will be allowed to examine that child's results.

The survey is not diagnostic, Sampson said: It will lead to no formal determination of a student's mental health status. But, if a school decides any particular child needs some form of intervention, Alexandria staffers will contact that student's parents to discuss next steps and whether individual or group tele-counseling is appropriate. Officials may also use the aggregate data to adjust the school system's larger academic program.

"Say the screening tool tells us students are really struggling with worrying about things at home like economic trauma from the pandemic," Sampson said. "That will tell us: Do we need to put some things in the curriculum, at a universal level, that help teach coping strategies?"

It is the first time the school system has ever administered a survey like this. If it proves successful — for example, by matching students with social workers more efficiently — Alexandria might consider continuing it in a post-pandemic world, Sampson said.

"We're not necessarily looking to have kids start to unpack traumatic experiences in school," said Baker, the school psychologist, "but there are skills we can teach them that might help them lower anxiety."

[Pandemic learning pods are here to stay — and could disrupt American education](#)

That same ambition motivated Loudoun to spend \$150,000 — funded partly through the budget, partly through donations — on a training program, developed by a company called Kognito, that simulates discussions between teachers and student-characters about the children's mental health.

"You go through a set of three virtual conversations with an elementary-school-, middle-school- and high-school-aged character," said John Lody, the school system's director of diagnostic and prevention services. "And if you do it wrong, you get feedback from a virtual coach that points out where you can be more effective."

Every teacher must complete the module by the end of the first quarter, Lody said. The program is meant to equip educators to assess students' emotional states, comfort children and direct them to school mental health resources. Educators will also offer social and emotional learning for a half-hour every morning.

Fairfax is pursuing similar initiatives. In addition to training educators to incorporate social and emotional learning into their classes, the school system is requiring that all teachers participate in online modules detailing student “danger signs” to watch for in a virtual classroom, said Koszelak, the mental health specialist.

Those include failing to show up for live-video lessons, making worrisome comments in class chats or looking exhausted — as best as teachers can tell by peering into a computer screen, anyway. If they identify problem signs, educators might contact parents to ask: Is your child crying a lot? Eating too much or too little? Saying too much or too little?

Despite the preparations, Koszelak acknowledged that she feels worried sometimes. It is all so much more complicated than how things used to work — when teachers could simply eyeball students as they walked into classrooms every morning. But she is also hopeful.

“It’s hard to say what to expect, because I have never lived through a global pandemic before,” Koszelak said. “But I do believe students are resilient. Maybe they can come through this stronger than ever.”