

# Student mental health struggles skyrocketing

BY MATT RAWLINGS  
Of the Keizertimes

One of the main concerns of Salem-Keizer Public Schools (SKPS) since the COVID-19 pandemic hit has been the mental health and well-being of their students.

Working alongside Paraorama Education — an east coast organization that focuses on improving student outcomes by helping schools and districts act on data — the district collected student well-being data from nearly 20,000 students in the Salem-Keizer area, ranging from grades 3-12 — questions were based on students well-being. The district collected two sets of responses in April/May and October/November.

“I’ve seen student mental health range

## School counselors talk year in isolation

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It has now been over a year since the COVID-19 pandemic shut down Salem-Keizer Public Schools. Elementary students began in-person hybrid learning earlier this month, while middle and high school students are set to begin next month — OSAA athletics also returned earlier this month.

But even though a return to normalcy looks to be on the horizon, the last year has taken a psychological toll on many students.

Keizertimes talked with three different counselors in the area — Todd Bobeda (McNary High School), Pat Curran (Whiteaker Middle School) and Ashley Eveleth (Forest Ridge Elementary) — to get their perspective on what this last year has been like for their students

**How have you seen the mental health of students impacted by the pandemic over the last year?**

**Bobeda:** Like every life transition, some students have adjusted well and are now able to learn in a remote environment. School is not just about academics and the social/emotional learning aspect of a typical day is just as important in the growth of an adolescent as the actual content in the classroom. We are finding that the percentage of students that were already struggling in school and with mental health, particularly those with anxiety, have

from troubling decompensation (a term used by mental health professionals to refer to episodes during which a person's mental health disorder deteriorates), and deep struggles with ongoing trauma and suicidal ideation to high levels of engagement, happiness, diminished anxiety and relief from not having to navigate crowded hallways, classrooms and complex social relationships and, of course, everything in between,” said SKPS school psychologist Chris Moore.

Based on the data that was collected,



overall measures of self-reported student well-being showed that, since last spring, students are experiencing more challenging feelings (mad, lonely, sad, worried and frustrated) and fewer positive feelings (happy, safe and hopeful). Students did, however, share that they were a little more “excited” last fall than they were last spring.

At the elementary level, the most significant drops in positive feelings were in feeling happy and loved — secondary students also experienced the most notable plummet in feelings of happiness.

According to Moore, the most concerning exacerbation of challenging feelings at the elementary level were for students who are feeling lonely and sad — one out of five

elementary students reported “frequently” or “almost always” feeling lonely and one out of seven elementary students said that they “once in a while” or “almost never” felt loved.

At the secondary level, one out every three students reported feeling “frequently” or “almost always” frustrated — one in four felt lonely or worried “frequently” or “always” and one in five reported that they were happy or hopeful “once in a while” or “almost never.”

“It’s important to note that these data points simply suggest the presence of situational, social-emotional risk factors that need to be addressed. None of these data

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increased based on the isolated environment in which they are living and learning. The experiential learning cycle involves a stimulus experience and then the reaction to that stimulus through observation, conceptualization and then application to the next experience.

Most of our Celts were able to get back up last spring when the initial shock of working from home hit and again when this academic year started in the Comprehensive Distance Learning (CDL) environment. The tough part of measuring mental health is that students that are struggling at home during CDL do not have an adult connection that is measuring and monitoring their mental state.

The teachers and McNary, specifically the advisory teachers that have each student for four years, can form relationships with each student and get them to counselors when needed. In this distance learning environment, that has been more difficult as a lot of communication and signs of

mental health issues are nonverbal. We are working very hard to reach our students in a different way than we ever have in previous years.

**Curran:** Some students have been impacted more than others, but everyone has been impacted in some way by the pandemic as well as other factors. In the beginning it was new and scary with worry about getting or giving someone the virus and people dying.

As time went by I think most student’s focus shifted away from fear of the virus to dealing with the stresses of online school and the lack of socialization. On top of that, many families lost jobs and are just trying to survive month to month. We also had forest fires, a crazy presidential election, and now an ice storm with power outages.

**Eveleth:** The range of effects this pandemic has had on student mental health is as varied as the students themselves. Some students have found great comfort in learning from home while others desperately

missed the people and structure at school. I have had multiple parents reach out to say that their child has not been “acting like themselves” lately. Extra bad moods and increased oppositional behavior have been a reality for many families during this time. Increased anxiety has been common for kids as well as adults, and it often manifests as irritability or anger in young children.

**In your estimation, what has been the hardest aspect kids have had to endure over the last year?**

**Bobeda:** Being alone. Social anxiety has increased tremendously and many of the students we are requesting to come to the limited in person instruction are showing signs of low self-esteem and insecurity.

At McNary, we strive to get every student involved in at least one club, sport, or activity every year and the students are missing that connection. McNary was a safe place for them to learn to grow socially and many of them needed it as a platform

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