

First Book, an Innovative Leader in Education Equity, Releases Groundbreaking Research Illustrating the Impact of COVID-19 on Emotional Wellness of Students in Underserved Communities

NNPA Newswire

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Nearly One Thousand Educators Participated; Report that over half (53%) of the students they serve struggle with their mental health

WASHINGTON, First Book, a nonprofit organization dedicated to ensuring education equity for children living in poverty, today announced the results of a national survey designed to identify emotional wellness challenges faced by school-age children. In addition to reinforcing earlier findings regarding the devastating mental health effects of COVID-19, this survey shed new light on the severity of this impact — especially in communities of need. It also established that emotional wellness issues have become a significant barrier to education for many students who attend schools in these communities — a majority of whom are children of color. Pediatric psychologists from Nationwide Children’s Hospital’s On Our Sleeves movement for children’s mental health partnered with First Book to offer a clinical perspective on survey questions and process.

In the new survey findings, educators report that 53 percent of the students they serve struggle with their mental health and only 20 percent of educators feel prepared to support the mental well-being of their students. Of significant concern, 98 percent of educators say mental health challenges act as a barrier to children’s education. And notably, educators are facing their own mental health challenges. Student mental wellness issues have a ripple effect on educators who feel helpless and unsupported.

“Educators across the country are speaking out about the urgency of the mental wellness issues that their students are facing, how they don’t feel prepared to address the issues, and how those issues act as a barrier to learn-

ing. Based on what we’re hearing from our Network of educators, this is truly a crisis,” said Kyle Zimmer, president and CEO, First Book. “First Book is committed to supporting low-income communities that have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic and the data revealed in this survey is guiding us in providing educators with high-quality, research-driven tools to nurture emotional wellness and develop healthy habits that prepare students to not only learn but thrive.”

On an ongoing basis First Book solicits input from its Network of more than 525,000 educators — all of whom serve children in need — to enable the organization to directly address the needs of practitioners and the children they serve. Mental wellness was spotlighted as a critical problem exacerbated by COVID-19, leading the organization to design focus groups and a survey to better understand the magnitude and scope of the issue, as well as what is needed to address this barrier to education. Nearly 1,000 educators responded to the survey providing startling data. The results provided a framework for the resource, which is now available, entitled: Taking Care: An Educator Guide to Healthy Habits for Student Emotional Wellness, a free resource created in collaboration with On Our Sleeves. The resource and study are now available through First Book.

“Collaborating with First Book to provide educators with evidence-informed activities and curriculum is one more step forward in making sure they feel more prepared to support their students,” said Ariana Hoet, Ph.D., clinical director of On Our Sleeves and pediatric psychologist at Nationwide Children’s Hospital. “Educators have been on the frontline supporting children’s mental health before and throughout the pandemic with limited resources. We know the pandemic has exacerbated worries around children’s mental health, so this need is even more crucial than ever.”

According to the First Book study, the top three life circumstances or experiences that contribute to children’s mental

health challenges are 1) unstable or difficult home life; 2) hunger/food insecurity and 3) isolation due to Covid-19. Because these three factors often intersect as children grapple with returning to normalcy post-pandemic, the resources First Book provides to educators are

essential tools for helping them become better equipped to aid students who are still dealing with the effects of Covid-related depression, trauma, loneliness, and loss.

First Book’s findings are particularly relevant given recent warnings issued by professional organizations such as the

American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, and the Children’s Hospital Association. These groups have declared a national emergency in children’s mental health and have noted that psychological strains, made worse over the past few

years by pandemic-associated isolation, anxiety, fear, and grief, have caused a crisis in several societal sectors including education. They also emphasize that children in communities of color have been disproportionately impacted due

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