

Empowering Student Leaders to Address Youth Mental Health at Dwight Morrow High School

BACKGROUND

Youth mental health was suffering before the pandemic, with 1 in 6 of U.S. youth ages 6-17 experiencing a mental health disorder each year. The COVID-19 pandemic added a layer of complexity to these already critical issues – school closures, social isolation, and financial hardship for families.

According to the 2021 State of Mental Health in America Report, **9.7% of youth in the U.S. have severe major depression**, compared to 9.2% in last year's dataset. This rate was **highest among youth who identify as more than one race, at 12.4%**.²

Melissa Conceicao, an LG Electronics Superhero Teacher at Dwight Morrow High School, began recognizing the need to address youth mental health in school. Initially, she started by practicing Inner Explorer's Mindfulness-Based Social Emotional Learning (MBSEL) programs in her classroom. Over time, students were inspired to lead mental health and well-being initiatives of their own.

With the support of Principal Ben Suro, Mrs. Conceicao and several students kickstarted what is now known as the Project Happiness Club, a student-run club on a mission to empower their school community to recognize and prioritize mental health.

"Having student leaders allows kids to see that they have peers who **feel how they feel** and understand what they are going through; they need fellow students that they can **look up to** and relate to."

-Melissa Conceicao, Educator

The mission of the club aligns with a nationwide initiative to integrate mental health and well-being resources into education following the pandemic; a portion of the most recent COVID education relief funding can be dedicated to mental health resources, including MBSEL programs such as Inner Explorer.

"In order to get to the **academic success**, we have to start with the **social and emotional well-being** and make sure that not only our students, but also our **educators**, are able to come back and that their social and emotional well-being **guides the decisions** we're making," shares Education Secretary Miguel Cardona in a recent interview.

CLUB INITIATIVES

One of the club's first initiatives was promoting the Inner Explorer 21-Day Quest, with the goal of instilling **the habit of daily mindfulness** practice as a **preventative mental health tool**. Implementing a consistent mindfulness practice ensures that students, staff, and families gain skills such as self-awareness and emotional regulation. As a result, the health and well-being of an entire school community improves by fostering **connection, compassion, and understanding** of oneself and each other through a shared practice.

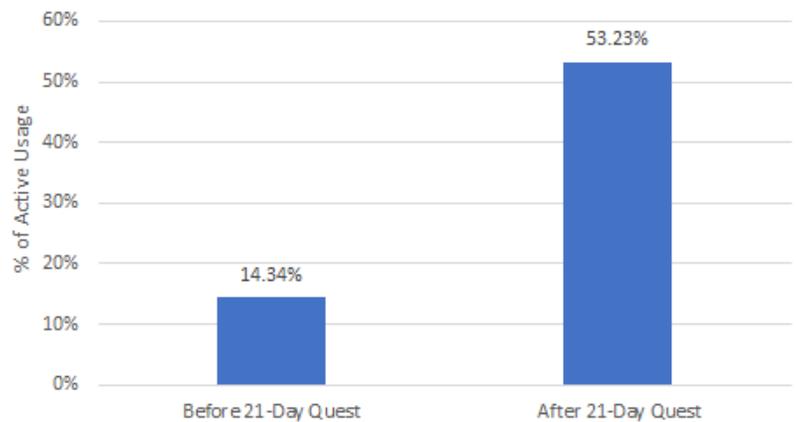
“Our team, our students, and their families are experiencing a lot of **trauma**. The best way to help is to ensure people feel **safe, acknowledged, and heard**. **Mindfulness-Based Social Emotional Learning** teaches us skills we can use to make that happen.”

-Ben Suro, School Principal

Dwight Morrow High School 21-Day Quest participants **increased their engagement with the Inner Explorer program by an average of 371% after its completion**.

This change demonstrates an improvement in practice habit on average **from once a week to three or four times a week**. When practiced **daily**, Inner Explorer has been proven to **reduce stress**, as well as improve **average G.P.A.** and **reading, math, and science grades**.

Improved Engagement after 21-Day Quest



Other club projects include writing over **300 thank you notes** to school staff, planning an end-of-the-year **reflection survey** on how the club can best support students the following school year, and hosting a **Q&A for incoming underclassmen**.

Many of the club projects are inspired by the **six sustainable happiness skills**, as defined by the LG Experience Happiness initiative: mindfulness, generosity, gratitude, human connection, purpose, and positive outlook.

“We plan to incorporate the LG Experience Happiness initiative resources, such as **printables and digital downloads**, into club initiatives for the coming school year,” Melissa says.

STARTING A YOUTH WELL-BEING CLUB AT YOUR SCHOOL

The Project Happiness Club offers four key findings to other educators and students who would like to begin a well-being club at their school.

Get Student Buy-in

Oftentimes, students may feel embarrassed or hesitant to talk about their mental health and well-being. When student leaders step up and set an example, they create a safe space for their peers to express themselves too. “The **perception of mental health** begins to change when student leaders **engage** in discussion about it and **participate** in practices that support it on a regular basis, such as mindfulness,” shares Mr. Suro.

Highlight the Importance of MBSEL to School Administration

Mindfulness-Based Social Emotional Learning (MBSEL) provides a pathway to learning key skills such as self-awareness and emotional regulation. Daily practice has been proven to reduce stress and amplify learning. Communicating the benefits of MBSEL programs, as well as youth mental health to **school administration** is an important first step in bringing a well-being club to your school.

Expand on Student Strengths

The Project Happiness Club designates specific roles for each member of the club. Each role helps **develop** an existing skill of the student in charge. For example, one student is an artist and creates an art piece to illustrate a positive message of the week; the message is then shared via the school announcements. Allowing students to **play to their strengths** within their club role gives them purpose and fuels their **passion** behind the mission.

Communicate the Long-term Impact

Mrs. Conceicao points out that students nowadays are used to instant gratification: “They have to **understand the ‘why’ behind what they are doing**, otherwise, they will feel discouraged if they do not see results right away,” she shares. Communicating the **long-term impact** of the club and initiatives from the get-go keeps students motivated in their quest to create **positive change**.

“With a little bit of confidence, you can do so much to **help your community**. Go for it, even if you feel apprehensive as you do it! You aren’t alone, there are a lot of people who will **help you** and contribute. Also, **listen to others as much as you lead** – really listen to other people’s thoughts and opinions, because a **variety of perspectives** results in a **better outcome**.”
-Student Leader, Project Happiness Club

SOURCES:

1. Whitney, D. (2019, April 1). National and State-Level Prevalence of Mental Health Disorders and Disparities of Mental Health Care Use in Children. JAMA Pediatrics.
2. Reinert, M., Nguyen, T., & Fritze, D. (n.d.). The State of Mental Health in America. Mental Health America.