AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

# ESSENTIAL SCIENCE CONVERSATION:

# APPLYING PSYCHOLOGICAL SCIENCE: BUILDING POPULATION HEALTH SUPPORTS TO IMPROVE YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH

# (OCT. 22, 2026)

## SESSION DESCRIPTION

Youth mental health is not just a school issue or a clinical issue, it is a systems issue. Rising rates of distress among young people, combined with educator strain and uneven access to support, reflect the need for a more coordinated way of working across education, health, and community settings.

This APA webinar will bring together a range of voices to explore what that coordination actually looks like in practice. Panelists will share how youth, psychologists, educators, families, and community partners can work together to create more connected and responsive supports. The focus will be on what helps systems function better, how early signals are recognized and acted on, and how well-being can be supported in ways that feel real and sustainable in daily school life.

*Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed by the presenters in this webinar do not necessarily reflect the views, policies or positions of the American Psychological Association.*

## UNOFFICIAL TRANSCRIPT

**Shandol Hoover:** Hello, everyone, and welcome. Thank you for joining us for today's program, Applying Psychological Science: Building Population Health Supports to Improve Youth Mental Health. Today's webinar is part of APA's Essential Science Conversation series, which fosters meaningful dialogue between experts and the broader community on emerging issues and innovations in psychological science. My name is Shandol Hoover, Senior Director of Science Special Projects and Implementation. Before we begin, I'd like to share a few brief announcements.

First, today's session is being recorded. Within the next two to three weeks, all registered participants will receive a link to the recording along with a transcript and additional resources related to the discussion. Please note that any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed by the presenters for today's webinar do not necessarily reflect the views, policies, or positions of the American Psychological Association.

We also encourage you to visit apa.org/science to learn more about opportunities to engage with APA. There, you can subscribe to our free *Science Spotlight* newsletter to stay informed about news, funding opportunities, and developments related to psychological scientists, as well as our *Editor's Choice* newsletter, which features curated articles from APA journals. We also invite you to explore the APA Response Center for policy updates, resources, and support. We have an exciting lineup of programs this fall. In addition to upcoming live events, you can access more than 70 free on-demand webinars through our website.

We hope you will join us next week for our Science Training Session on conducting research that informs policy and practice. Thank you to those who submitted questions during the registration.

We encourage you to continue sharing your questions throughout today's discussion using the Q&A feature in Zoom. Please note that chat will be reserved for panelists to share resources and important information. If you experience any technical difficulties during the webinar, please let us know through the Q&A as well. It is now my pleasure to introduce Dr. Nicole Barnes, APA Executive Lead Psychologist for Education, who will moderate today's conversation.

**Nicole Barnes, PhD:** Thank you, Shandol, and welcome. Hello, everyone. Thank you so much for joining us. We are glad that you are here with us today, and we are fortunate to have a wonderful group of panelists here to help you think through how you build population health supports around youth mental health. Please help me introduce our panelists for today's discussion. They are going to come on camera now for us. We have APA President Dr. Wendi Williams with us. We have Vice President of the National Education Association, Noel Candelaria. We have the Chief Medical Officer of The Jed Foundation, Dr. Laura Erickson-Schroth.

We have the Vice President of Research and Evaluation for Born This Way Foundation, Claudia-Santi F. Fernandes. We have Dr. Tammy Hughes, who is a professor in the School of Education at Duquesne University. We have Dr. Stephanie Jones, who is the Gerald S. Lesser Professor of Early Childhood Development at Harvard Graduate School of Education, and Dr. Elizabeth McCauley, who is a professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences, and also the Chief of the Psychology Division at the University of Washington and Seattle Children's Hospital.

Thank you all for joining us. We are here today because youth mental health is not just a school issue and it's not just a clinical issue. It is, my friends, a systems issue. We know that rising rates among young people, combined with this educator strain and uneven access to support, reflects the need for a more coordinated way of working across silos, silos in education, in health, and in community. In this webinar today, we are bringing together a range of voices to explore what coordination actually looks like in practice.

Our panelists today are going to share with you how youth, how psychologists, how educators, families, and community partners are working together to create more connected and responsive supports. The focus of today's discussion will be on what helps systems function better. How early signs and signals are recognized and acted on, and how well-being can be supported in ways that feel real and sustainable in daily school life.

I want to start with our amazing APA president, Dr. Wendi Williams. I'm hoping, Wendi, that you can, as the lead of this national organization for Psychological Science and Practice, you can help us set the stage for our discussion today. Why is it that youth mental health has escalated into this defining public challenge for our time? Why did APA feel it was important to bring together this particular group of leaders to have this very important conversation? Wendi?

**Wendi S. Williams, PhD:** Thank you so much, Nicole. It's an honor and a pleasure to have been invited. I want to start with a simple understanding or claim that youth mental health is not a puzzle for us about what's wrong with young people. It reflects the conditions that we've built around them and that they're trying to live and thrive within. That's certainly at the heart of what we want to do in our work with them and in our understanding of how to be most supportive.

I'd reframe the question slightly, in that young people aren't more fragile than in other times. Certainly, it's that the conditions around them have shifted so dramatically, and they're also very new and different for each of us. We're also responsive to this brave new world. I think that's actually a helpful way and a hopeful way of thinking about things because we can adjust and we

can grow and lean into the flexibility of our growth. I think three shifts, though, stand out for me. The first is that the social environment of childhood has been restructured.

When we think about our young people and the lives that they're living right now, digital life has reshaped how they connect, how they sleep, how they compare themselves, or make meaning of who they are in the world. No longer with just the kiddos on their block, but with the kiddos all over the world. They can swipe and see any number of comparisons. This is why APA issued a health advisory on social media in adolescents, in fact. Second, distress is not evenly distributed. Young people facing racism, poverty, rejection of who they are, for whatever diversity they bring to their representation and their presence, they do carry a heavier load. The data do show that.

Finally, third, our supports haven't kept pace with what they need. Most schools are nowhere near the recommended ratio, for example, of school psychologists to students, let alone mental health supports. Too many young people reach help only when they're in crises rather than having been met along the way. When you put those together, you begin to see that there's a population-level problem rather than one that's individually solved with a one-off or one appointment with the school psychologist or counselor who happens to be on campus that day or that week.

It needs a population-level response. We need supports woven into places that our young people already are. That's in schools, and for families, within communities, and in the digital spaces where they spend a lot of time. The people best placed to tell us what those supports should look like, should feel like, are them. They're super smart. They can tell us a whole lot about their experience. In fact, they'll tell you more than you want to know sometimes. If we listen, there's practical wisdom in their experience that really, I think, allows us to lean into their leadership and what they have to share with us.

**Nicole Barnes, PhD:** Thank you, Wendi. You just summarized for us in such a beautiful way, as you normally do, how this is so much about working with youth and centering their voices, not just as input, but as true partners in this work. I want to ask Claudia to tell us a little bit about how they've done that at Born This Way Foundation, because it's been a major part of their organizational structure and their commitment to this work for a long time. Claudia?

**Claudia-Santi F. Fernandes, EdD:** Absolutely. Thank you. Certainly, it's always such a pleasure to be here. It's such an honor to be alongside this panel. At Born This Way Foundation, we partner with young people every stage and every step of the way. It's so important to make sure that we're moving beyond being included, including young people, and actually making sure that they feel a sense of belonging. That they are part of the solutions that they are creating alongside us.

I always love to share, Dr. Ayana Jordan gave an incredible grand rounds at Yale a few years ago, and she shared, and this always resonated so deeply with me, she said, "Being included is getting an invitation to the party. Belonging, though, is being able to show off your dance moves when you get there."

**Nicole Barnes, PhD:** I love that.

**Claudia-Santi F. Fernandes, EdD:** I love that. It really resonates with me on so many levels, because we can invite young people to be in the room. We can give them a seat at the table. We can certainly tell them that their voice matters, and they can still feel like they're on the outside looking in. It's important for us to really think about the value of including them, how to create spaces and places. Developmental science has told us that belonging is so much more than giving an

invitation. In a recent meta-analysis of 32 studies involving over 110,000 adolescents, school belonging was significantly associated with lower depression and suicidality.

We saw this in our own research with Hope Lab from March of 2025 where we learned that LGBTQ+ youth who had access to in-person spaces that were very supportive of their identities had nearly half the rate of depression. It was 28% compared to 53% among those who had supportive spaces. It's really important that we really think about if we're going to co-create spaces and places alongside young people, it starts with us as the trusted adults playing a role in building communities where they belong.

Belonging starts with young people knowing that it's okay to show up imperfectly, that learning is a process for us too, and that sometimes you've got to share your own two-step or your shimmy or whatever it is on that dance floor to create space for them to share their own moves.

**Nicole Barnes, PhD:** Thank you, Claudia. You give us a lot to think about there, how you really do that authentically and not in a way that just is performative. I really appreciate that. I want to turn to Noel because I'm hoping, Noel, you can give us some really nitty-gritty, you're in classrooms all of the time, you're speaking with educators all of the time. There's no doubt we're-- to bring something up that Wendi said when she opened for us, that they're growing up in a digital world.

I'm wondering, from your point of view on the ground and from what you're hearing from youth, from what you're hearing from educators or those who are supporting youth, how are digital tools interacting with students in ways that might affect their well-being or their attention or their social dynamics?

**Noel Candelaria:** Thank you, Nicole, and thank you to the APA for hosting this really important conversation. The reality is that as educators that I talk to across the country, I just finished my back-to-school tour where I visited eight states and classrooms all across the country. What they're telling me is that they're seeing the youth mental health crisis play out in their classrooms every single day. We know that what's happening in the community, what's happening at home, it doesn't stay there. They walk into our classrooms with our students. More than 90% of our members that we surveyed said that student mental health is a serious issue in their classrooms.

We're starting to see more increases in absenteeism, bullying, behavior challenges that are not just student-to-student, but student-to-adult. Then also students who are simply just disconnected. Then technology, particularly social media, is adding to those challenges. That's what our members are telling us. Three out of four of our members identify social media as a serious, serious problem. As a special education teacher myself, I know how technology can be a powerful tool for learning and inclusion and ensure that students are connected. We also know it can negatively impact our students' attention. It can impact their sleep, their self-image, and relationships.

That's why for us at NEA, our position is that we need clear developmentally appropriate policies around technology with educators that are at the table to help shape those decisions. Not just being told, but that we are actually at the table being part of those conversations because we're the ones that have to implement it and know the direct impact that it has when policies are enacted that don't include educator voice. We're very clear that we must hold technology companies accountable for protecting our students, because at the end of the day, technology should support learning and human connection, not replace it.

**Nicole Barnes, PhD:** I think that's so true. I'll tell you, from a lot of the talks that I've been doing on educational technology lately, it's so important for us to define what kind of technology we are talking about, because the relationship between technology and outcomes has very much to do with the specific tool and the purpose of that tool. I appreciate that nuance that you're bringing to this conversation, because I think it's very aligned with what the science tells us as well.

Tammy, you're a school psychologist. You also train future school psychologists. I'm wondering, how do you prepare them to spot what may be these early warning signs? What could we all be looking for in terms of behavioral patterns to pick up on so that we can intervene before people reach the point of crisis?

**Tammy L. Hughes, PhD:** Thanks, Nicole, and thanks for having me. I think the most important thing is to realize that when you work in a school setting, you're working in a team setting. That really means making sure that the educators, that everybody is trained in mental health first aid, that folks are aware of the kinds of things that we're looking for, for a referral. One of the benefits of being a school psychologist is that we are involved in all tiers of support. Universal prevention, and then early detection and intervention, and then, of course, Tier 3, which would be individual support. We have a wide opportunity to think about how can information get to the right people?

I always like to begin by saying nobody is trying to make you a psychologist, but I am asking you to tell me when kids are deviating from their baseline. This is just very beginning, basic kinds of things. I'm not asking for a diagnosis. I'm not asking for symptoms. Is the child different than they used to be? We already brought up eating and sleeping. Are they different in that sort of way, or have they gone completely dark? Are they off the grid? There's what we call leakage. Are they talking about things that are happening online? Are they more distressed than their other peers about not having their phone or technology with them?

That's really sort of the first line, is making sure that we have the folks in line on board. The second thing is really making sure that when we talk about trauma-informed ideas, that we understand that kids are going to get into situations that need care, handle with care. One thing that comes up quite a bit is things like sextortion, where adults will say, "Well, what did you think was going to happen?" Something like that, instead of taking a trauma-informed approach and understanding that their embarrassment and their ability to cope is really dependent and related to how the adults around them interact.

School psychologists are working with parents, with kids, and with teachers on all of those things. That's the first thing. I'm just going to add one quick thing, which is to say, kids are using technology, and we need to embrace and understand how they're accessing how to think about their own mental health. There are absolutely programs that I'm involved with that are closed systems that deliver evidence-based prevention, early intervention sorts of work. We need to think ourselves broadly.

**Nicole Barnes, PhD:** Yes, I love that. You brought up so much of the science that undergirds so much of our practice. I want to lean into that a little bit more and ask Elizabeth if she could share with us a little bit about what the science tells us about what children need to thrive. Because you see, Elizabeth, from your position, what educators, what psychologists, both of them, what they're seeing on the ground, and you also come from a very strong background in the science. What do you think are those essential, maybe non-negotiable conditions that the research says that young people really, really need to truly thrive?

**Elizabeth McCauley, PhD:** Thank you very much for inviting me to participate. As others have said, it's an honor to be here. I think if we're looking to foundational science, we have to start with the groundbreaking work of Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth, whose work on parent-child attachments continues to influence our understanding of what young people, and really, all people, need to survive and thrive. The kind of core relationship that provides that sense of security, personal worth, and safety.

This foundational work has inspired, really, generations of developmental scientists, some of whom are on this screen today, that have advanced and looked at these key elements. What I would like to do is focus on a couple of the frameworks that are being widely applied today that develop from these earlier frameworks. Two examples are the Harvard Center on the Developing Child. They have a framework that focuses on three key factors, responsive relationships, strengthening core life skills, and reducing sources of toxic stress. Again, that relationship is right at the front.

The WHO, the World Health Organization, has a nurturing care framework, again, based on decades, really, of research. It focuses a little bit more broadly. It focuses on good health, adequate nutrition, safety and security, if we think of the wide variety of circumstances that they're thinking about, opportunities for early learning, and then, again, responsive caregiving. These are the frameworks that have been informed by strong and replicated science. There's also a strong body of research that documents the role of stress and trauma during childhood as key factors that increase the risk for depression, anxiety, and behavioral disorders.

I think we'll hear more about that. I want to close out my comments, though, by saying something that's a little bit more on a positive note, because while early childhood distress and stressors are key factors in interfering with positive development, there's also a body of research that has looked at what can mitigate these negative influences. I think it's important for us to keep our focus on what we can do to mitigate.

The American Pediatrics Association has called out some very important variables. They talk about thriving. In their definition, thriving doesn't focus on having perfect parenting skills or perfect parenting exposure but really stresses that there's a wide group of individuals in a child's life that can come in and serve those purposes, be that caring caretaker, and that it's important to focus on repair when relationships are damaged and the hope that's included in thinking about repair and reworking when there's a damaged relationship.

I also think it's important to remember that there's a robust literature on the efficacy of parent training programs, positive parent training programs, which can support and teach parents skills that foster a more positive caregiver-child connection. Even if there was a rough start in the beginning, there can be a repair by learning better parenting skills or different parenting skills.

The final thing I would say is there's also research on the impact of adverse childhood experiences that underscores that there are protective factors. Certainly, parental warmth is one of those protective factors, but also positive peer relationships, and as was mentioned earlier, a positive school climate, an inclusive school climate can really buffer, if you will, youth that are at risk for those levels of distress. I will end with that.

**Nicole Barnes, PhD:** Appreciate that, Elizabeth. Thank you so much. I love seeing the connection of core conditions across the frameworks that science has come to some pretty strong conclusions on what is actually a tipping point there. I'm wondering, Stephanie, if you can talk about, from your clinical work, you've worked a lot with youth who are facing severe stress and severe trauma. I'm

wondering if you see a connection between these foundational supports that Elizabeth was talking about and how they translate into resilience when young people encounter acute levels of adversity.

**Stephanie M. Jones, PhD:** Great question. I appreciate, as others have said, being here and having this conversation that is so important right now. I have my own problem, which is that I just want to talk about what everybody else talked about, but I guess we'll get to that later. I'm going to answer your question in a way by not really answering it.

**Nicole Barnes, PhD:** I love it.

**Stephanie M. Jones, PhD:** I'm going to apologize at the outset and say something that's connected to Elizabeth's comments that's about this idea of resilience more generally, and then I'll travel along. I just wanted to start by saying that resilience itself is a funny construct.

**Nicole Barnes, PhD:** It is.

**Stephanie M. Jones, PhD:** It is often misunderstood. I want to just level set with everybody about what is resilience, and it's connected to what everybody has said. Resilience sometimes gets understood as a trait-like concept. This kid is resilient and this kid, less so. This is what we need to do. I want to make sure that it's really clear that we all see and understand resilience is really about a dynamic between adversity and challenge on the one hand, and as we heard, protective factors and strengths and assets on the other.

All of those things on either side, you can imagine a scale, they operate at the individual level, and they operate in settings and ecologies and have a great deal to do with conditions, as we heard right at the beginning. When we're thinking about resilience, and practical resilience, and all the things that we might strive for to support kids who are facing significant trauma and adversity, who are facing everyday kinds of adversity, toxic stress, and so on, we really want to think about, on the one hand, how do we reduce those sources of stress? Really, how can we double down on building up strengths and assets?

The strengths and assets side derives from some of the things that Elizabeth was talking about, which is connected, tuned in, positive relationships with someone. It could be a single adult in a setting where that child or young person is spending time. It could be a parent. It could be multiple people. That's one thing that we can really focus our efforts on. The other is building up, Elizabeth said, these core life skills. Those skills include things like self-regulation, executive function, emotion regulation, emotion knowledge, but also the more interesting set, like belonging and meaning-making or finding meaning, agency, the kinds of things that are really developmentally salient for youth.

How are we going to create opportunities for those things in the settings where young people are? Those are some of those core life skills that are really essential. In this age of screens and AI and all of that stuff, what are the connectivity skills? How do you learn to tune into another? How do you tune into yourself to figure out where you are and what you're feeling and what you're going to do? Those are all supports and protective factors. In our work, we've done a ton of research and work in social and emotional learning as a body of supports and practices that can be embedded in schools, tons of evidence behind them, and so on.

That's a real place to think about how do you weave supports in. Often, those practices are too complex, meaning they're curricular and they don't really fit all the settings where young people are. The way I would think about practical resilience, if you're getting into the practical world, is to

say, what are the common strategies to effective complex practices that we can support all people to engage in? They may sound overly simple, but how are we going to get every adult in the system to be ready to do a check-in with the kid? "How are you?" Just that. "I'm really wondering, how are you doing?"

This is a really meaningful moment, and it can be tiny. What are the simple devices and strategies that tune in to youth and that are opportunities to get kids talking about their world? "Gosh, I'm not feeling great today." "What's happening?" Then you're in a connection where you're talking about emotions, you're building up those core life skills. I would think strategies, simple routines that are repeated across settings that adults are all ready to do. Last point I'm going to make. I know I'm well over what I'm supposed to be doing.

All of this means that we also have to think about the adults in all of these systems. How are we tuning in to the adults in these systems and supporting them in exactly these same ways? How are we connecting to them, ensuring their well-being is taken care of, that they have what they need to tune in to very young children, to medium-sized children, to young people?

**Nicole Barnes, PhD:** Absolutely, yes. We're going to talk more about the intersection within the ecosystem of education between educators and students because it is all one, and you can't look at one as though it's separate from the other. Before I leave this discussion around supportive relationships, I want to give Laura a chance to chime in here because The Jed Foundation has done so much work around supporting really, really meaningful relationships between youth and then other trusted adults. I'm hoping, Laura, you can tell us a little bit about that work and the role of relationships in helping to support youth where they are.

**Laura Erickson-Schroth, MD:** First of all, thank you so much, Nicole. It's a real pleasure to be here. I also want to thank Dr. Williams for the work that you're doing through APA around youth mental health. It really signals something very important, that it's been a priority. Also, I was going to say, appreciate Stephanie's comments, the way that you talked about resilience. It made me think about Ann Masten's *Ordinary Magic* and that you talked about finding meaning. Just so that folks know where I'm coming from and what Jed is, I'm a psychiatrist. I'm the Chief Medical Officer at The Jed Foundation. We're a national nonprofit focused on emotional health and suicide prevention for young people.

We work in the spaces and places where young people are. We're also in schools and community-based organizations around the country running technical assistance programs to help them set up their systems for looking at mental health and suicide prevention. Thinking about community and what are the important things that young people need, the more I do this work, the more I see this two-pronged approach where you have these two components. One of them is connection and the other one is what a couple of other people have signaled to, which is purpose or meaning.

I think it can't be overstated how important connection is. Starting from the very beginning of the webinar with Claudia talking about what it looks like when a young person is supported at school and feels belonging. Of course, study after study tell us that having supportive people in your life provides resilience. We know through research from decades and decades of research that having even just one caring adult makes a huge difference in a young person's life. In addition to that, the more time I spend with young people now, the more clear it is to me that they also need this stake in the world.

I think about Making Caring Common at Harvard is always following where young people are with meaning and purpose and connection. Their study a couple of years ago showed that 58% of young

adults felt like they had little purpose or meaning in life. I'm seeing the same thing in my clinical practice. I work in an LGBTQ youth center called Hetrick-Martin Institute. There's this generational existential dread. It's related to, I think, a lot of the things that Dr. Williams talked about at the beginning of the webinar. Their world has changed so completely. They're thinking about the climate and they're thinking about technology and AI. That sounds really bad.

I'm going to say the same thing that Dr. Williams said, which is that we're seeing signals that young people care so much. There was a recent Gallup poll where they looked at Gen Z and they surveyed them about what they were looking for in life. 80% said that they wanted to work to help others. They're a generation that's strongly oriented towards purpose. There's this gap in their feelings of connection and purpose and meaning. We also have a generation of young people that they want us to help them find ways to contribute and to make change in the world. We need that too. I see it as a win-win. If we can help them to do that, it helps them and the world.

**Nicole Barnes, PhD:** And us.

**Laura Erickson-Schroth, MD:** Yes. I'm including us in the world. Yes, exactly.

**Nicole Barnes, PhD:** I think about how they can give us a little hope in all of this as well. You mentioned Wendi in so much of your remarks there, and I want to give her an opportunity to chime in here, because I know that you care deeply, Wendi, about supporting those very important relationships that youth might have.

**Wendi S. Williams, PhD:** Thank you for that. I sat here, Laura, just growing in hope, being reminded that they are our leaders. They're coming. They are coming. I think when we think about the importance of those relationships and really providing some structure of operational framework around that becomes really important so that it's not something that's a one-off or that's dependent on an additional hour or free moment that a colleague has, that a teacher, educator, administrator has, but that it's built in, that it becomes reliable because the structure provides for that reliability, and that it can meet our good intentions as well.

Three things come to mind, and some of you all will hear echoes of your work in these responses too. First is that we make that connection visible. Young people need to know that it's there, and we need to also be able to demonstrate that it's there too. I'll get back to us being the adults. Some schools do this through relationship mapping. Staff go through their roster and mark which students have a trusted adult. Stephanie, I see you nodding. I'm thinking about you as I'm [laughs] talking. Students who don't have a mark, they get someone. You actively, proactively take the initiative to make sure that that barrier to connection is crossed.

It's simple. It's measurable. It's something we all can do. I really took so much, Stephanie, from your comments around the things that are just within our grasp. They truly are accessible and just, I don't say easy because I know that our days are long and things are challenging, but they're accessible. There are small things that we can do. Second, I think just building connection into the structure. I'm certainly a systems-- I'm an administrator by design, and I've been led in that space. You have to make it possible for folks to do the things you want them to do. We have to create and design that space.

Advisory periods, keeping students with same adults across the day, across the year, across multiple years, and protected time in the schedule. If we're mindful, if we're intentional about that, they begin to have those reliable spaces where they can plug in and their barrier to access that is diminished. I think that's important for us to build in structurally. Again, if it depends on an extra

hour or the teacher who likes to stay after and do additional things, that's not going to cut it, especially in these times. We think about the structural challenges that our young people are facing.

Third is caring for the caring adults. We absolutely need to take care of the adults in the building. As much as I talk about the school psychologist to student ratio, I'm wondering about the mental health access and support and care ratios between colleagues. How do we create that? What are the additional supports that we bring into the educational life of administrators, of educators, of the adults in the space we want to cultivate the conditions for young people to feel plugged in? We all are at our edge, if we're honest. We just have to acknowledge that.

I don't know about you all, but I have spent a lot of time in school buildings, particularly in New York. I can just tell you that all the adults, there's a lot of love, there's a lot of care, but there's the reality of being overextended. In the ways that leaders and educators can build in care and well-being infrastructure into that working space, I think will go a long way to ensuring that our young people have the care support network around them too that can catch them.

**Nicole Barnes, PhD:** Absolutely. I want to ping Noel right now, because I'm just dying to hear what you have to say in response to Wendi's comments. What are you seeing on the ground as ways in which we intentionally build belonging, which we intentionally build these supportive relationships and supports, rather than leaving that to chance? Because I think that's what we've typically done here, lucky if you found that mentor who invested in you and cared about you, but how do we do that in a more systemic and intentional way?

**Noel Candelaria:** Yes, thank you. That's spot on, because something that I learned early on in my career when I was working as an education support professional, as a paraeducator in a classroom, was that every interaction with a student is an opportunity to make a difference. Sometimes it's something as simple as just greeting the students by name. How do we make sure that there's a process to learn who all our students are? Sometimes it depends on the size of the school, especially administrators. It can be difficult, but it's possible. I've seen it done, asking students about their interests, noting when something isn't right.

One of the practices that we had in my classroom was, whether it was myself or my assistant, we always stood at the door greeting every student by name, welcoming them with a handshake, because that also gave me a sense of how they were walking into my classroom. Like you said, that sense of belonging can't just depend on an individual educator doing what's right. We have to build it intentionally into our schools. That means that we're creating schools and classrooms where students have an authentic voice, like we heard earlier from Laura. How do we ensure we have systems and processes where students have an opportunity to bring their voice into the space?

That's part of the decision-making, how we set up the systems and structures around them. Too many times we do it absent of student voice. We want to make sure that students' identities are respected, and that we create a system of respect where every student feels safe being who they authentically are. It also means that we're building strong anti-bullying policies that are consistent across the board, that as a school, we're bringing in trauma-informed practices, and that the staffing and professional supports that are needed by the educators are consistent across the board.

When you have 30 to 40 kids in a classroom, building those individual relationships becomes increasingly difficult. That's why belonging isn't just about making students feel welcome. It's about making sure that they know that they matter every single day, and that the systems and processes that we build in are intentional about that, so that the students not only see it, but they

feel it, which is really important, so that it's not just individuals doing what's right. We build it in systemically throughout.

That means that the training isn't just for the teachers or the support staff in the classroom. Are we training the custodians who are interacting with the students in the hallway? Are we training the bus drivers who are bringing the students to our school? Are we training the front staff who oftentimes are the ones interacting with the students when they're walking in late because they had just to deal with something traumatic in their lives before they even walked into school?

We have to look at the aspect of the entire school family community, and how are we making sure that the training is reaching every single person that will be interacting with the child throughout the day, including our cafeteria staff. I can tell you that the staff that I work with, just serving students food and how they were approaching the line when they were serving and what options they were making, would be able to give them a sense of what kind of day they were having.

The interaction that they even were able to have in that moment to make a student feel seen and valued by knowing what their favorite cookie was and being able to say, "Hey, we've got your favorite cookie today." These little things that you have to build intention on it but the tone starts at the top. We have to make sure that our administrators are making sure that we have those systems and structures in place so that educators can truly feel that they can practice this across the board.

**Nicole Barnes, PhD:** What I love about your answer there is you're really talking about building an entire system around prevention and for the entire population, not just for a subset of the population that is in crisis or has particular needs. If we're all quite honest with ourselves, that's really not the way schools are set up. It's really not the way society is set up in general. It's meant to catch and to track crises. I want to pull Tammy into this conversation because I'm wondering, what does it take to shift an entire system to think about this more from a preventative/prevention standpoint than a reactive crisis one when the system supports and reinforces that crisis response?

**Tammy L. Hughes PhD:** I'm going to start where I always am, which is with one foot in psychology and science and one foot in the reality of education. I like to bring folks, particularly in our audience, to say what we know is good science is not always implemented with fidelity in school systems. We are dealing with adults who are overstretched, as we've said, who are busy, smart, practical people who are dealing with kids that have challenges that are unknown and unseen before now. That interface, there's a giant space between what we know and measure and what plays out in the real world.

I'm just going to bring a tiny bit of that reality to us today. I swear I'm not going to do it in a negative way, but I just need us to look with our eyes open. One of the things, we've talked about excellent ideas. Let me frame a couple of things. Number one, we have universal support in schools. We have SEL, we have social-emotional learning, and positive behavior intervention and support. That's great. What we don't have at our universal level is universal relational support.

Everybody in here today has talked about relational support in a whole bunch of different ways. The way that I talk about it in schools is I talk about positive childhood experiences, which has shown to be a buffer for anxiety, depression, behavior problems. Those positive childhood experiences are themselves an independent factor that we can help adults who are not psychologists, who are not the teachers that are disposed to helping us with every kid. Those are the kinds of things that we can track and measure in school that do not take extra work and training. We do need to make it visible.

I know somebody mentioned visibility, but I want us to think about the lives of kids today. Their lives, we started on social media, is visible. Not only are they examined from every way, they know if they were tagged in a chat, they know how many streaks they have, they know at a very fundamental level who's liked, who's in, who's out, who made a mistake. Our ideas around relationships need to be managed and be transformed into today's language because visibility is important, but maybe not in the way that we think that it's important.

What we see in the school safety literature, which is where I hang out most of my time, is that kids who are disenfranchised at school, they don't see the school as a safe place where relationships are what we would call in psychology, stress buffering. They see the environment as a source of stress for them. Until we are able to listen and understand and believe that what their opinions mean matter, we are going to have a hard time.

The reason that that's hard in education is because there's a lady at the front of the room named Dr. Hughes, who's right. I have the right answer. I get to decide who stays. I get to decide all kinds of things that are maybe unfair or maybe informed by my bias or maybe impact other people because I have a lot of social referent power in my building. If I have an opinion about a kid, everybody has an opinion about a kid.

This is a very textual level of how do we go about implementing good science in the school. When I think about things like PCEs, Positive Childhood Experiences, not only does it help schools and school belonging and making sure you have somebody you trust, it also goes to communities. We need to start talking about universal supports as a relational factor. Relational needs to be in the universal support continuum. That relational factor needs to go to our communities, to our families. I was talking earlier about some of the work I do through technology. We have family care teams. It's not just what is happening with a kid, what is happening with the teacher, what is happening with the family.

In New York, by the way, Wendi, we also have clergy involved because a lot of our family systems are much larger than the way we think about them and talk about them in the literature. I think I bring to this conversation, probably why you asked me here, Nicole, is to say that system of education is what we call a dependency system. What that means is I would have done it better had you been clearer. If you had told me the right way to do it, then I would have acted the right way. We see that between kids and teachers. We see that among colleagues. We see that with teachers and administrators. I'll go through superintendents and all the way up to school boards. That idea of shifting, it's not just about training. It's about how do we help people move to have expectations that are broader than what our current systems of education are built to withstand, because the truth of the matter is we have a lot of kids that get excluded from school and don't have access to education.

How do we make these systems more flexible and that our outcomes are not only measurable, but also are accountable, have accountability to them, and also treat the people inside them as well. When I work with teachers, they're like, "I didn't get to make this decision. Nobody asked me." It's at every level, and it's at every level in different ways. For our kids, I'm just going to end on this, our kids who are steeped in social media are not getting opportunities to have a social interaction at the same rate or the same quality as you and I did going to school.

If you all knew every mistake I'd ever made, that's for life, housed in somebody's memory somewhere. It's very hard to interact with, even the best kids don't know who's the best people because they can't tell. Their interactions are coarse and rated. We really need to get into the middle of that sort of thinking around our relationships.

**Nicole Barnes, PhD:** Thanks, Tammy. You gave us a lot to think about there. I want to ask Elizabeth if she'll join in on the conversation here and give us your thoughts. You are also, Elizabeth, in schools all of the time, also working in the hospital settings. What do you see as some of these untapped opportunities for us to evolve in the way we think about prevention and then crisis support?

**Stephanie M. Jones, PhD:** I'm going to respond on a much more practical and concrete level. I respect everything that Tammy said. I was trying to focus a little bit more on particular areas where I think we can take some actions. A lot of what I am going to say is I think it has already been reflected in this conversation. The first thing I would talk about is really how do we foster, I'm going to say, the broad issue of school climate. I think almost every one of us have talked about that. I feel like positive school climate is a key factor in behavioral health outcome studies in terms of students' performance academically, their mental health, et cetera.

I think that in my reading, it's just a really important place to put some of our thinking and our resource. I think it covers a lot of the things that you mentioned, Tammy, in a more concrete way, if you will. I think the schools, and I defer to those of you that are in schools more than I come in and out, but I feel that there are schools that articulate a shared set of values and standards and expectations. Not for students in terms of just behavior, but really how people treat each other, what people prioritize. I feel like more attention to supporting this careful thinking about establishing a positive, productive, inclusive, respectful school environment is really important.

We know that it would lead to reduced risk of mental and behavioral problems. I think we've already mentioned the huge issue we have with attendance in schools. If there was a place you wanted to go because you were valued, as all of you have said, I think we would overcome. In the state of Washington, we have, ever since COVID, a huge problem with attendance in school, which I think is supported by parents losing the sense that school attendance is as important as I think it was considered before.

I think also this issue of decreasing bullying. We know that policies and procedures and approaches to bullying in school can impact that in school settings. I think that's another place that I would put in the larger category of school climate. That would involve administrators, educators, students, bus drivers, the cafeteria workers, everybody working together as has already been described.

Another place for taking some of the places where I think we have a new opportunity to enhance behavioral and mental health supports in the schools is working more with our school counselors. We're doing some trainings with school counselors. For a person who has worked more in a clinical setting, these school counselors have 300 kids or more that they're responsible for. They are interacting with a lot of kids who are presenting early on with distress and early indicators that could easily evolve into a major mental health problem or a school dropout problem or a school failure problem.

I think taking advantage of the school counselors, I don't mean taking advantage of them, but using the skills and the presence that they have and helping and supporting them is a real, maybe I would say, and I defer again to you all, a bit of an underutilized resource. When I first started to do some of the school-based work, I felt like the school counselors were, "We just rearrange schedules. We're not getting involved with some of these more complex issues."

Now I feel like they're saying, "We need to learn more. We need to learn how to recognize kids who are at risk. We need to learn some brief, I'm not going to say intervention, but preventive strategies about how to scaffold a student to get to a place where they can get more support." I feel

like that's an underutilized resource or a really important resource for us to look at. I'm just giving you my spiel here, what I believe in.

I think the other thing is that we need to encourage our schools, again, you may have more of this in your parts of the country, to go back to vocational and active learning opportunities for students. I feel like I have too many students who can't find a place in the academic curriculum that fits for them. Also, for opportunities like band, like orchestra, like drama, one of the things that happened in the Seattle public schools over the last year is we had a very unfortunate incident. I'm a mental health provider. The response was to pour in mental health providers and stop all the band and music opportunities. It just felt like, "What are you doing?"

What would be more beneficial is to have some of these opportunities to excel in a way that maybe isn't as traditional but gives them a sense of belonging. Then the last thing that I would focus on, and I really appreciate the comments people have made, is enhancing collaboration and partnership with parents. I think what I would extend it to is the comments that a number of you have made is that we need to support the parents, and we also need to support the people in the buildings. We need to support the teachers. We need to support the administrators or figure out ways to provide a more supportive environment across the board.

Again, from a mental health perspective, I think frequently the parents are left out because of HIPAA and then FERPA. There's all these rules and regs about what you can share. We are losing a problem-solving partner. Really, the parent is the person, the caretaker is going to be there for the long run. Getting them into that loop just seems like a really important piece of early prevention work. I'll get off my soapbox here. Those are my things that I would focus on.

**Nicole Barnes, PhD:** Oh, we appreciate it. I think what's undergirding your response there is this need for an ecosystem of support. I want to turn to Stephanie about that because I know that that's so central to the work that you're doing. I wonder if you could talk us through, how do you do that kind of broad implementation work where you're supporting entire ecosystems, not just particular actors within them?

**Stephanie M. Jones, PhD:** Thank you, Nicole. I'm going to do it again, which is answer your question and then not really answer it, because I think we've heard across a lot of these answers ideas that speak to that question specifically. We've heard about how do you support the multiple actors in that ecosystem to be working in the same way and connecting with kids in ways that are complementary and across settings and all of those things. I agree with all of them.

I'm going to say something different, which is that I think, and I'm going to say it quickly because I know we want to get to ultimately to the questions from the audience, which is a lot of the things that we've heard today are important things, and they're complex things to do. Like Tammy had this whole beautiful set of interlinked important things to do just even at the universal level. Social-emotional learning, PBIS, and then relational infrastructure and support.

I would say yes, but I wonder if it is incumbent upon us to do more of this kind of work together to say what's common across all of these things? How can we simplify so we get to simple, not simplistic, but simple that is then shareable across that ecosystem that different actors in these different settings can be working with the same core material? The hypothesis is that what's common across all of these approaches accounts for their common effectiveness.

It doesn't necessarily, although people would get mad at me for saying this, it doesn't necessarily run up against evidence-based practice. Because you're drawing common components, you're

adapting them so they suit different settings and different needs. Then the experience from the kid's perspective is that there's some parallelism, like they're having common experiences and interactions around the same strategies, even if they're very simple ones, across all these places.

I think that we have to think in new and different ways about our own work in order for it to cross an ecosystem, to be simpler to manage, even just in one place, and maybe then open the opportunity to young people to be co-designers with us. Let's find out what the common strategies are, relationship building, feelings check-in, whatever, doesn't matter, and then say, "Hey, kid, how would you design this and do this yourself?" I think this stuff is the kind of stuff that young people really care about. They're so interested, and it's about them, their feelings, where they are. Bring them in to design the work. They know. This is me being a little soapboxy too, and I'll stop there.

**Nicole Barnes, PhD:** Thanks, Stephanie. I want to give Laura an opportunity to respond to that because I think, Laura, Jed Foundation, you do so much of that. What have you found that's working? What's your response to Stephanie?

**Laura Erickson-Schroth, MD:** I love that you said simple. It's not simplistic, but it makes me think about the way that JED approaches all of our technical assistance programs, and it's across very different settings, like K-12 school districts, high schools, colleges, and universities, community-based youth-serving organizations, sometimes cities. We work with individual cities around youth mental health strategies, but we have a comprehensive approach that has seven domains that we know, based in research, are domains that if you focus on these, you can improve youth mental health and decrease youth suicides in whatever setting that you're in from a systems level.

I think that simple approach, it's not simple because it's so complicated to make sure that these are rolled out in all of the different settings, but it helps people to think about, okay, I'm looking comprehensively at this problem, and I know what are the components. I know that I can, like she said, go to young people and say, "What do you think about this domain, about building community connection? What does that look like in your setting?" It gives everyone a roadmap and an easy something to follow along. That's what I was thinking about when she was talking.

**Nicole Barnes, PhD:** I love that. I saw, Claudia, I saw you applauding as Stephanie was talking, and I want to bring you in and ask, how are you working with youth? You do bring them in really authentic ways to co-design. What does that look like? How does that work?

**Claudia-Santi F. Fernandes, EdD:** First, I just want to say that I want to comment on so many of these rich responses. As a former educator, I spent 10 years inside schools. I was a bilingual school counselor, transitioned to academia. I was at Yale for 10 years conducting youth-engaged research. Now I'm at Born This Way Foundation, where it's the beautiful, exactly what you're saying. It's this beautiful space and place where we take the research, we take the science, we conduct it as well, and we learn from all of the incredible researchers out there, and we build the bridge to translate it into action.

It's so important to really think about that because, for example, we just recently submitted a paper to a peer-reviewed journal. It's focusing on our peer support. We conducted this research with Yale, and we just conducted a clinical trial of our Be There certificate. Our Be There certificate is a 90-minute free mental health training to teach young people how to safely support one another.

In this, we have some of the preliminary findings, but we wanted to bring it back to the community, to really learn from the community and say, "What do we do with what we've learned from these

findings?" That they don't just stay inside a peer-reviewed paper, but they come to life. We looked over some of the preliminary findings to really think about, and we hosted an event last week on Wednesday, and JED was there and several others. It was over 150 people, 60% being young people. We had young people and decision-makers present from other organizations to look over some of our findings, to discuss peer support, and tell us how we need to move with our next steps. That's part of our process.

We did this with our Hope Lab research. We're doing this with our research with Yale, and that is our process. We co-design the research together, from the survey questions to interpreting the data. We take the data, we bring it back to the young people. We try to better understand the intersectionality within some of that data as well. Then we bring it back to young people and groups, again, in a community setting to think about what those next steps are, to think about what we need to do, what action steps we will take. We're going to be analyzing some of this data that we gathered from this convening.

We're really excited then because that's how, at Born This Way Foundation, we determine what we do, what we fund, and we also determine what next steps and actions we take alongside young people.

**Nicole Barnes, PhD:** Fantastic. I just love that. That gets me so excited. I don't know about the rest of you all. Well, we're going to leave some time for Q&A from the audience, but before we do so, I want to end our panel discussion with Wendi where we started. Wendi, I'm wondering if you can talk to us a little bit about hope and of what gives you hope about the future of young people and their well-being. What's your guiding light, North Star, out there that says, "Yes, we should continue doing this work together because there's a lot that we can accomplish?"

**Wendi S. Williams, PhD:** Oh, my gosh. I love this question. Thank you so much for letting me be the one to end this off. I actually just feel so incredibly hopeful because of them. I don't mean it in the platitude way. They truly are the leaders of tomorrow. I know that we are deeply concerned because of the world that they sit in and that we're all trying to face and make sense of together. We also are trying to do that too as the adults. What we must always remember is that the adults that raised us worried about us the same way, and here we are.

**Nicole Barnes, PhD:** Yes, they do.

**Wendi S. Williams, PhD:** They will rise to the occasion because they must, just like we had to. The work we do is to continue, I think, to support them in being as whole as possible, but also reflecting, critical where they need to be and take the lessons and the assets that they grow in and of themselves as they respond to the challenges that are in front of them. They are capable. They are strong. They are smart. They are beautiful. We know that. That's why we love this work. We have to have faith in them and their leadership. That's where I draw my hope from.

I am an auntie of four girls and a little boy being raised in Japan. When I tell you, they are just so bold. We just have to allow them to lead. I have been so just happy to hear all the different ways that we talk about sharing the space with them, being led by them as they are children now because the world that we're trying to build is theirs to take forward. We have to always remember that. That's where I draw my hope from. Thank you.

**Nicole Barnes, PhD:** You're going to give me some hope in there too. I appreciate that. Thank you all for this very rich discussion. I'm going to take some questions for the audience. I'll just say these out to the panel. If anybody feels so inclined to come off of mic and answer it, that would be

fantastic. I'm going to start with this one because I hear it in schools a lot. I remember hearing it when I was a teacher myself.

We'll start with the communities have limited time, even less money, and strained workforce capacity. They cannot do everything, and they cannot do another thing. If you have to help them prioritize, what is a high-leverage thing that they could do in their communities tomorrow to support youth that is not also adding additional strain to them?

**Tammy L. Hughes PhD:** I'll go quick. It's the relationships that we've all talked about. Building relationships.

**Stephanie M. Jones, PhD:** I'll jump in and say again, I think that's reflected in focusing on school climate, developing that positive school climate.

**Claudia-Santi F. Fernandes, EdD:** I'll jump in to say we need to create more intergenerational organizations. We are making decisions about young people and their future. Unfortunately, we're doing that while that's not reflected. They're struggling in the workforce. I think that's an important, creating intergenerational spaces and prioritizing hiring young people. I would say hire a young person, hire several, bring young people into your organization and in the rooms where decisions are being made.

**Stephanie M. Jones, PhD:** I'll just say a very practical way to build connections is to do the relationship mapping that we heard about at the very beginning. It's very simple, and it just shows you, it makes visible who's connected and who's not. Then you can really focus your efforts.

**Noel Candelaria:** Yes, I think it's just being that trusted adult, which is really important. That's something that we can all do. Like I said early on, it's just something as simple as learning the student's name and letting them know you see them because then you also can notice when they go quiet. It's just a way to be able to make sure that you let them know that you're someone who cares. Oftentimes, that's what students want to be able to see. That's what others want to see is, who actually cares. I think to me, that's also really important.

**Laura Erickson-Schroth, MD:** I'll add one more thing. It's a reframe of what someone said earlier in this conversation. I think it was really helpful. I would say any systemic change that's going to be stuck and is going to be a routine that you know is going to be helpful for young people. Whether that's like, you're going to set up, I think someone said, advisory meetings or a homeroom where they're with the same adult over a number of years or whatever it is. If you have an idea for one thing that you know could potentially help, set it into motion and at least do that one thing.

**Nicole Barnes, PhD:** All right. Our next one, which is very provocative. I like it. We've talked a lot about stuff that we can do more of. What should we stop doing?

**Tammy L. Hughes PhD:** We should stop punishing kids when they learn and remember that we are all learners. When kids misbehave, and they might, take that as an opportunity for instruction and support and care, and diminish punishment. Adults respond to punishment. Kids respond to positive reinforcement.

**Wendi S. Williams, PhD:** I would just add to stop-- I'm sorry, Laura.

**Laura Erickson-Schroth, MD:** Sorry.

**Wendi S. Williams, PhD:** No, you go first.

**Laura Erickson-Schroth, MD:** I was going to say adults also respond to positive reinforcement. We all need that too.

**Wendi S. Williams, PhD:** Thank you.

**Nicole Barnes, PhD:** Indeed.

**Wendi S. Williams, PhD:** I would like positive reinforcement. I will tag on to that. I think we also need to stop expecting their childhood, their youth to look like ours. I think part of our angst about this is that it looks so different from what we went through, and it will. We need to, I think, be in the reality of what they're actually experiencing.

**Stephanie M. Jones, PhD:** I'll add one. I think we have to stop creating systems based on our needs and reimagine systems based on what we understand and then what we ask about for kids.

**Claudia-Santi F. Fernandes, EdD:** I would add something that was shared previously about the trusted adult. We really need to think about parents and guardians and their burnout, and how the mental health crisis should not fall on their shoulders, and the importance and value of the trusted adult and the village and community around us to make sure that we're supporting. I would say just that, stop solely focusing on the parents and really think about how we can share this work together.

**Noel Candelaria:** Then I'll add that I think we need to just stop overloading a school day. There's just so much that we try to pack in. It begins with looking at curriculum needs and everything. We just need to stop overpacking what we try to cram into a day because that in itself, oftentimes, it's just overwhelming, not just for the adults, but especially for the students. It's something that we constantly add more things, but we never sit down and really have a conversation about what needs to go away.

**Tammy L. Hughes PhD:** I'm just going to add, we have our old ideas of what 4th-graders should be, and post-COVID, we need to stop thinking about what 4th-graders should be or whatever.

**Laura Erickson-Schroth, MD:** While we're on the stop train, I would add that we have to think about young people's sleep, and we have to stop getting them up at 6:00 in the morning when that really doesn't work for their health.

**Nicole Barnes, PhD:** Stop getting up at five o'clock in the morning as well. It's not doing much for my health either. Well, anybody have any last words to say out to our amazing audience before we close out?

**Noel Candelaria:** I'll just start real quick. Just to pick up where Wendi left off, I really want to talk about what does give me hope. Being in schools all across the country and interacting with our youth, including our aspiring educators, kids that are in high school wanting to be teachers, kids that are in college wanting to be teachers, they're the ones that really give me hope because they're speaking up. There, I see them demanding mental health supports that they deserve. They're not being quiet about it.

They remind us all that what every student deserves to feel safe, feel valued, and free, and to truly be able to be their full authentic selves. They give me hope because they're not just tomorrow's leaders. A lot of them are leading today already. That really gives me hope.

**Nicole Barnes, PhD:** It really does. Thank you, everyone, for joining us for this Essential Science Conversation. We hope to see you again soon. Have a great night. Thank you to all of our panelists. Bye, everyone.