

Today's Students May Be Emotionally Unprepared

By MARC BRACKETT JUNE 22, 2016

Regardless of all the honors classes and A.P. courses they took in high school, or the science, technology and engineering classes they cram into their college curriculum, students today will not be fully prepared to compete in an increasingly global business environment.

The problem — and the solution — is not intellectual. It's emotional.

American teenagers are in psychological trouble. For the first time, college students today are facing more stress than their parents, according to a recent report by the American Psychological Association.

The evidence is all around us. American teenagers attempt suicide more often than youths in most other countries, and they are among the world leaders in violence, binge drinking, marijuana use, obesity and unhappiness, according to a Temple University professor, Laurence Steinberg.

A survey of more than 123,000 students at 153 colleges by the American College Health Association in 2013 found that more than half experienced overwhelming anxiety and about a third felt deep depression during the academic year.

How can they learn and thrive if they do not have the skills to handle their emotions or feel safe and supported enough to talk about them?

This is, or should be, worrisome to educators and policy makers, not only

because of the suffering that results but also because a large and growing body of research demonstrates that the way people manage their emotions — that is, their emotional intelligence — matters for personal growth and to the success of the broader society and economy.

Emotions drive learning, decision-making, creativity, relationships and health. Mastering the skills of emotional intelligence paves the way for greater well-being, better relationships and overall effectiveness — for college students, for students from kindergarten through high school and for the adults who surround them, including educators and parents. The Nobel laureate James J. Heckman has written that teaching “noncognitive” skills, including recognizing and regulating emotions, would be a cost-effective way to increase work force productivity and quality.

Teaching emotional intelligence — or what’s more broadly referred to as social and emotional learning — to children and adults has proven effective—and sorely needed.

Given that, it’s frustrating that policies to mandate and finance evidence-based approaches to social and emotional learning are slow to come. A few states, including Illinois and Alaska, have acted on their own. Leaders in Washington and across the nation need to listen to youth and work to change education to equip America’s youth to be competitive for the global century well under way. Our future — and our children’s future — depend on it.

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