The Critical Need for Mental Health Education to be Mandated in New Mexico's Public Schools

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The Critical Need for Mental Health Education to be Mandated in New Mexico’s Public Schools

Based on a review of research and best practices in mental health awareness and skills, this inquiry project argues for state legislative policies that would require mental health awareness and skills in the K-12 curriculum. Mental health affects individual accomplishments in every stage of people’s lives beginning in early childhood and throughout the life cycle. Prevention and treatment of mental illness plays a key role in the ability of an individual to cope with loss and develop resiliency and perseverance in challenging times and to make better decisions that improve the individual’s life and the lives of those around them. Recent research shows that mental health awareness and skills, which encompass social, psychological and emotional well-being, can be taught, measured, and mastered, starting at an early age. This inquiry project examines the question of how legislatively mandated mental health education in public schools can positively affect children’s well-being and their future success. As a case in point, New York is the first state in the U.S. to require mental health to be part of health education. Virginia passed legislation requiring schools to teach mental health lessons to 9th- and 10th-grade students. New Hampshire, 4th in education and 2nd in child well-being, included mental health education in the first state-wide school safety plan. New Mexico could follow their lead and decisively turn around current conditions for child well-being and educational attainment. Implications of such proactive policies have been highlighted in research, including substantial decreases in childhood trauma, alcohol and drug addiction, violence and crime, with measurable increases in rates for student proficiency, high school and college graduation, teacher retention, employment, and eventually, a long-term, positive effect on our state’s economy.