Two years into the pandemic, K-12 students need socioemotional support, experts say

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Students in K–12 schools, while struggling with their academics, are suffering most in the areas of socioemotional development, according to George Mason University education experts.

Courtney K. Baker and Kristien Zenkov, K–12 education professors in Mason's College of Education and Human Development, emphasized in recent interviews that schools need to address students' long-term trauma so they can then focus on learning.

What are the most pressing issues facing K–12 students returning to school this year?

Zenkov: It is absolutely reasonable to say that every student returning to school has experienced some sort of long-term trauma from life in the past two years, and they need support to help them process what happened. We all failed and are still failing students by pretending that things are normal when they aren't. Kids know that we have not been honest with them, and the sooner we acknowledge that, the sooner we can all start healing.

Baker: As students return to school this year, we need to adjust our expectations and meet them where they are. While many are focusing on "learning loss" and student "deficits" in mathematics and literacy, it is important to remember that not only has every student, no matter their age, had two years of unprecedented educational disruptions but also that the impacts of the pandemic are still being felt by adults and our economy. To think that last year or this year is "normal" is a detriment to their educational experiences. We still need to address students' social and emotional needs first, because students need to feel safe and valued to learn.

There's been a lot of talk over the pandemic about "learning loss," the idea that students aren't meeting the usual academic metrics. What are your thoughts on the idea of learning loss?

Baker: So much emphasis is being placed on this idea of "learning loss," which is determined by how students do on standardized assessments at the state or district levels. Our reliance on standardized assessments to determine learning and the value we place on them has always been problematic and is more problematic now, as students have had different than normal experiences over the past two years. There is also not a lot of evidence that these high-stakes assessments predict student success. These assessments can be culturally biased and do not necessarily reflect what students can do. We need to rely on other forms of assessment, such as formative assessments, to measure student learning and success, rather than pushing our teachers to teach even more to standardized assessments.

Zenkov: There's a very real disparity between students in wealthier communities, where parents could hire tutors or work remotely and guide them, and students who were not able to get that support. The idea of learning loss, while something of a
media construction, lays bare the educational disparity we have in our schools. Any consideration of "learning loss" should begin with an analysis of that disparity.

**We are hearing about teachers leaving the profession. Why is that?**

Zenkov: Teachers were already exhausted before the pandemic and became even more exhausted by having to find so many new ways to teach during the pandemic. Add to that the newly emboldened public attacking teachers on social media and in-person, suggesting to teachers that their expertise in content and pedagogy isn't respected. Of course, teacher morale is down. In addition, teachers often don't feel supported by their administrators, so they are leaving the profession.

Baker: Instead of us learning from the pandemic that we need to alter the status quo of education and rely less on high-stakes standardized assessments, I worry there will be a greater reliance on these forms of measures. A reliance on standardized assessments puts unnecessary pressure on teachers to limit authentic, rich learning experiences so that they can teach to tests via memorization and excessive repetition. The devaluing of teachers' professional decision-making, combined with the public attitude about teachers, may understandably make educators more inclined to leave the profession.

Baker is an assistant professor in education and academic program coordinator Mason's Mathematics Education Leadership. Baker's research focuses on online learning, development of mathematics specialists and STEM integration.

Zenkov is a professor of education, academic program coordinator, and director of the Elementary, Literacy, and Secondary Education Division of Mason's Secondary Education Program. Zenkov's research focuses on literacy, urban teacher education and social justice.

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