



# Education Sector: Executive Summary

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The Systems Of Cross-sector Integration and Action across the Lifespan (SOCIAL) Framework aims to facilitate and accelerate progress toward a society that values social connectedness across the lifespan and in all societal domains. Drawing upon the socio-ecological model and the Health in All Policy (HiAP) framework, the SOCIAL framework provides a guide for how every sector of society and every level of influence (from the individual to societal) can contribute to social connection and reduce social isolation and loneliness.



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## **Making the Case: Why Should the Education Sector Address Social Disconnection?**

- Education sector provides tremendous opportunities for social interaction given the number of hours spent in educational settings by some of our most vulnerable members of society (i.e., children).
- The experiences of younger students in educational settings often influence the development of their social skills and thus the quality of their social connections throughout their lives.
- There are also opportunities for education and learning throughout every stage of life. For students of all ages, educational settings provide the opportunity to form connections and learn skills that will enable them to be more connected in society.
- Many students and educators report loneliness in the school system (1). Educators are often needed to provide support for students, it is critical to support them as well.

## **Significance: Impact of Social Connection and Disconnection on Students**

**K-12:** Research suggests that social isolation and loneliness have a significant impact on students in grades K-12. The stress caused by undesired social isolation has been linked to increased risk for anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem among children (2–4). Social isolation can also interfere with academic performance, including academic engagement and achievement (5,6). These effects are particularly strong during adolescence, when peer acceptance is critical to well-being (7). Extended social isolation has adverse effects on long-term mental health, and the negative psychological effects of isolation can develop months or years later (8)

## **Significance: Impact of Social Connection and Disconnection on Students (cont.)**

**K-12 (cont.):** Loneliness has also been linked to a host of negative outcomes including higher levels of stress, fear, boredom, anxiety, depression, and related mental health problems (9). Loneliness can also contribute to lower levels of academic engagement and achievement among children and adolescents, (10,11) as well as lower levels of academic self-belief and greater school dissatisfaction (12).

- In contrast, positive peer relations have been linked to lower rates of loneliness (13), stress, and mental health problems (14), as well as higher levels of prosocial behavior (15), emotional well-being, and positive beliefs about the self (16). Positive peer relations can also promote academic achievement (17,18), reduce the likelihood of grade retention (19), and buffer or reduce the effects of loneliness on academic outcomes (16,20,21)

**College:** College students transitioning into new environments may view their peers as more socially connected than they are, which increases their own feelings of isolation (22). In addition to some students experiencing social isolation and loneliness, college students are reported as experiencing fairly high levels of mental health conditions (23). An analysis of literature between 2009-2019 found that 22% of students experienced depression and a 2012 survey of 400 university and college counseling centers nationally found that 41.6% of students have anxiety disorders (24). Uncertainty over the quality of one's social and academic bonds leads individuals to question their social ties and their fit in an educational setting; in contrast, feelings of belonging typically support student retention (25).

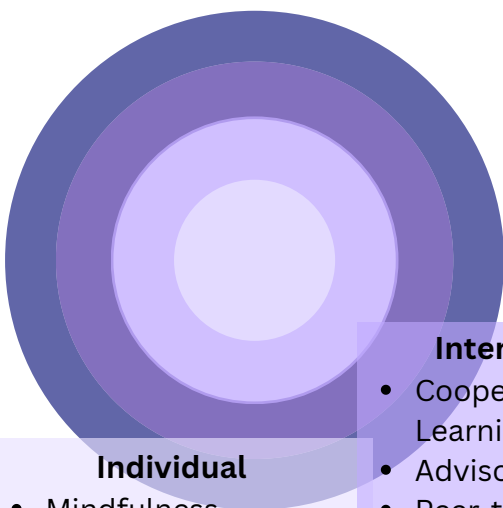
**Graduate:** Research has also uncovered high rates (1 in 5) of social isolation and loneliness among graduate and professional healthcare students, linked with other significant academic and mental health outcomes (26).

## Significance: Impact of Social Connection and Disconnection on Students (cont.)

**Graduate:** Doctoral students who report feeling socially isolated have higher attrition rates than students who do not report social isolation, with lack of social connection being cited as a prime reason for attrition (27). This is similar among medical students, with social isolation being considered a signal for early dropout in medical school programs (28).

**COVID-19:** While most K-12 schools and postsecondary programs have returned to in-person learning environments, it is clear that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on students' experiences of social isolation and loneliness will linger, and lessons learned from providing education and socialization in remote environments are important to consider for current and future solutions to address SILC.

## Approaches across levels of the socio-ecological model



### Individual

- Mindfulness Techniques
- CBT Therapy
- Social-Emotional Learning
- Digital Technology Training

### Interpersonal

- Cooperative or Peer Learning
- Advisory Programs
- Peer-to-Peer Mentoring
- Trauma-Informed Instruction
- Volunteering

### Community

- Virtual Courses for Nontraditional Students
- Evidence-Based Programs
- Providing Spaces to Gather
- Foster Belonging & Normalize SIL

### Society

- Promote Awareness
- Media Narratives
- Educational TV Programming Advocacy

# Consider Cross Cutting Themes

## Lifespan

- a. Are my strategies appropriate and inclusive of different stages of life?
- b. Are my strategies sensitive or tailored to potential developmental characteristics that may influence the acceptability, accessibility or effectiveness of solutions?
- c. How can I expand my current strategies to include other age groups, or intergenerational approaches?

## Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Access (IDEA)

- a. Are my strategies or approaches inclusive?
- b. Are there groups that may be over or under-represented in my current strategy?
- c. Who do I want to reach that my current efforts may be missing?
- d. Do some groups benefit more from my strategy than others?

## Modality

- a. How might the acceptability, accessibility, scalability, and effectiveness of my strategy or approach differ across modalities?
- b. What are the opportunities for and barriers to fostering social connection through learning environments depending on their modalities?

## Evidence Gaps Persist Including:

- a. Understanding of the relationship between the quality of online learning for K-12 students and experiences of loneliness, isolation, and disconnection during and post the COVID-19 pandemic.
- b. Exploring whether curricular SEL approaches that attempt to teach students specific social-emotional skills can modify behaviors that contribute to positive change in the quality of peer relations and, in turn, reduce social isolation and loneliness.
- c. Evidence-based systems and learning environments on university campuses that advance belonging and connection.
- d. Measuring the prevalence of loneliness and social isolation among participants in alternative education platforms and programs.
- e. Better understanding the experiences of educators and the development of evidence-based, systematic approaches in primary, secondary, and post-secondary environments that recognize and address educators' SILC



## Conclusion

Strategies focused on promoting and strengthening social connection and reducing SIL through educational environments hold tremendous promise for improving health and well-being for both students and educators. Individuals, researchers, educators, policymakers and many other stakeholders have developed evidence-based strategies that target SILC and are ready for dissemination, providing a pathway forward. While this evidence demonstrates significant promise, gaps within the research literature and the limited scope of some evidence based programs also suggest untapped opportunities to accelerate progress.

## We Need YOUR Input!

How are you addressing student & educators' social isolation and loneliness?

We would love to learn if you are using these strategies or conducting research in these areas. Please share more about how this report relates to your work by completing [this brief form](#).

Help us make our collective voice heard by sharing, reposting, and spreading the word about our work with your networks! You can also sign up to receive the Foundation's [weekly research reports](#)!



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