REAP IMPACT REPORT

Mental Health Among Students in China's Rural Schools

A little more than 10 years ago, REAP tried to engage education officials and teachers in addressing student mental health issues in rural elementary schools and junior highs. There was little interest. In these conversations, school officials repeatedly told us that they could not sanction mental health instruction for students because it took time away from core academic subjects such as math, language studies, and English.

In the mid-2020s, the situation is very different. The prevalence of student mental health problems has become a national crisis. China's Ministry of Health has called on all schools, from the cities to the countryside, to address these issues. Our conversations with school officials about mental health are also very different. When we ask principals what they are doing to improve student mental health, they commonly express two things: a deep sense of urgency about the importance of addressing these challenges and a clear acknowledgment that they lack the necessary expertise and programmatic materials to respond effectively.
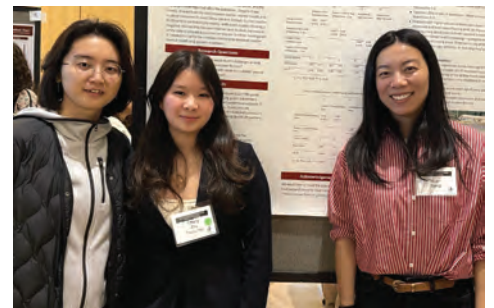
The work of REAP over the past decade (despite the initial reluctance of school officials) has shown there is a mental health crisis in China's rural schools. In a paper we published in a top public health journal, we found that between 25% and over 50% of rural students — even in elementary school — are at risk for depression, anxiety, stress, ADHD, and more. This is much higher than the world average, almost certainly due to the pressures of education, the separation of families by the *hukou* system, and the omnipresence of social media.

Where can teachers or parents turn to for help? The rising problems of mental health are nearly always compounded by limited access to mental health resources and a severe shortage of mental health resources for youth in China. There are fewer than 600 youth psychiatrists in China for 420 million youth — with almost zero in rural areas.

The Social Emotional Learning Project

To address this gap, REAP introduced a structured Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) curriculum into elementary schools and evaluated its impact. The intervention, delivered in collaboration with one of China's top psychiatry programs at the National Academy of Sciences, aimed to improve youth mental health outcomes and equip students with the tools to navigate their emotional and social worlds at a young age.

Besides observing mental health impacts, REAP also examined whether allocating time and resources to SEL instruction would have any adverse effects on student academic performance, as so many school officials feared in the 2010s.

Learn more about REAP

The SEL Curriculum

Designed by psychologists at the Chinese Academy of Sciences specifically for the Chinese school system, the SEL curriculum spans one full year of intervention and incorporates four major themes:

- **Self-awareness.** Gaining self-knowledge, building self-confidence, and regulating emotions.
- **Social relations.** Cultivating and managing relationships with others, including parents, teachers, and peers.
- **Self-management.** Building beneficial study habits such as time management, improving skills such as concentration and creativity, dealing with academic setbacks, and setting future goals.
- **Self-development.** Addressing life challenges such as puberty, bullying, and addiction, while fostering responsibility, moral development, and a sense of life purpose.

Project Implementation (2022–2023)

From 2022 to 2023, REAP conducted a randomized controlled trial across more than 50 elementary schools in rural China. We trained more than 200 local teachers to deliver the SEL curriculum, monitored implementation of 36 weekly SEL sessions over a full academic year, and surveyed over 2,000 students and teachers before and after the program.

Key findings include:

- The SEL program significantly improved student social-emotional skills, attitudes, and overall well-being (i.e., flourishing).
- The program led to significant reductions in symptoms of depression and in internet use, without negatively impacting academic performance—even though instructional time was redirected from academic content to SEL.
- Female students experienced greater psychological benefits from the SEL program compared to male students, including increased SE skills, reduced anxiety and depression symptoms, and improved resilience.
- The teachers who implemented the curriculum shared with us that the skills they taught the students also benefited them in relieving their own issues. "I wish there were a curriculum for teachers!" —This inspired us to conduct new research on providing effective mental health support for teachers!

These findings suggest that implementing a structured SEL curriculum is a highly effective, low-cost strategy for improving mental health and human capital outcomes among schoolchildren in rural areas of low- and middle-income countries.

Giving Back

REAP placed a strong emphasis on community engagement throughout the project. We organized a series of online and offline events to create a sustainable network of mental health advisors, drawing from institutions such as Stanford School of Medicine and top Chinese universities. These advisors collaborated closely with local and national education officials to improve mental health support systems in schools.

After the study period, based on the positive evidence from the research and the support of local government agencies, the SEL training has been extended beyond the study sample to cover all 200 schools in the prefecture. Working alongside NGOs and local authorities, REAP continues to expand the program to parents, educators, and other regions, including Xinjiang and Yunnan. The team also established a national mental health alliance among like-minded organizations. Additionally, local university students were trained as field enumerators for the study, helping to strengthen research capacity and fostering the next generation of mental health researchers.