

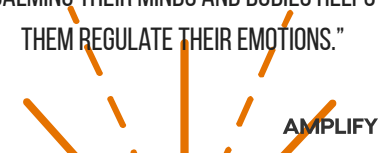
## UVA Team Helps K-5 Students Flourish

## Putting Research into Service

Equipped with lessons from the Louisville study and a 3Cavaliers grant issued to Jennings along with David Germano, a Professor in Arts & Sciences and Executive Director of the Contemplative Sciences Center, and James Nataro, Professor and Chair of Pediatrics at the Medical School, for a collaborative study to determine CSP's effects on children's health, UVA introduced the CSP curriculum to Charlottesville City Schools in 2019. Beginning with a pilot program in grades K-4 at Johnson Elementary School, the Charlottesville CSP expanded to K-1 classrooms at Greenbrier Elementary this fall, bringing the total number of Charlottesville students benefiting from the curriculum to nearly 400 for the 2021-22 school year.

Allison Pillow, who teaches the CSP curriculum at Johnson Elementary as its School Counselor, says she's seen remarkable effects on students from CSP's integration of social and emotional learning with lessons on "calming and focusing" and mindfulness:

**"THEY'RE UNDERSTANDING WHAT IT MEANS TO HAVE COMPASSION FOR THEMSELVES AND OTHERS AND HOW CALMING THEIR MINDS AND BODIES HELPS THEM REGULATE THEIR EMOTIONS."**



# BUILDING COMPASSIONATE SCHOOLS IN CHARLOTTESVILLE

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It's never been more critical to holistically support children's cognitive, emotional, and physical needs as part of their education. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic brought unprecedented disruption to students' learning, the rate of mental and physical languishing among children across the country was rising rapidly. This is especially true in vulnerable populations regularly experiencing poverty, trauma, and community violence.

High levels of mental and physical stress can interfere with a child's academic development, health, and well-being, and the ripple effects can be devastating for families, communities, and society. A critical resource for countering these alarming trends is early intervention at the public-school level—providing children the tools to build resilience and the personal, social, and emotional skills to reach their highest potential. UVA's Compassionate Schools Project is designed to do just that.

### A Groundbreaking Approach to Education

Developed by teachers and education experts at the School of Education and Human Development in collaboration with UVA's Contemplative Sciences Center, the Compassionate Schools Project (CSP) incorporates integrated lessons in **mindfulness, social-emotional learning, movement, and healthy eating** into public school education.

School of Education Professor Tish Jennings, a leader of CSP, says, "The idea of the curriculum is to give our children the skills to manage their own health and well-being throughout their lives and to understand what self-care means for them, how they can monitor their needs, and how doing so can empower them to contribute to their communities."

The CSP team is proving the program's merits in a massive, randomized controlled research trial over five years in the city of Louisville, KY. The research involved 20,000 children in K-5 classrooms throughout 45 elementary schools in Louisville public schools—the most comprehensive study of its kind. Led by principal investigator Patrick Tolan, a professor in the Education School and in the Department of Psychiatry and Neurobehavioral Sciences in the School of Medicine, UVA researchers are preparing to publish the study later this year.

Preliminary findings indicate the program led to calmer and less disruptive classrooms; more satisfied and motivated teachers; and, on a school-wide level, fewer discipline problems, better academic performance, and fewer absences. As a result of these and other school and community benefits, Louisville schools have formally adopted the program.

**P**ILLOW says the students especially love the mindful breathing exercises. In a recent program evaluation, one student said: "When I am scared and worried, I like to stop and take deep breaths and when I am done with my breaths I feel much better and then I take some time to tell my body how I am feeling. That helps so much."

Teachers at Johnson are noticing changes too. One explained, "We begin each day with 10 Morning Breaths, and the students come up with new breaths each day to follow along together! I have also seen students practice compassion when others get injured by being extra quiet and sweet to them, and even standing up and giving the hurt or upset person tickets from their own ticket boxes (that they had earned for doing the right thing) to cheer them up."

A key part of CSP's power is its whole-school approach. In Charlottesville the CSP curriculum is directly delivered once or twice a week for 30–60 minutes through the school counselor and **specials** (i.e., PE, Art, Music, Library); however, the lessons and language are emphasized throughout the school day. For example, most classroom teachers at Johnson and Greenbrier have adopted CSP's use of **compassion boards**—where students can post acts of kindness toward themselves or others in little cut-out hearts—and **pause places**—designated corners where students can take a moment to calm down or reflect.

In addition, all teachers can benefit from the professional development and training offered as part of implementing the CSP curriculum. In Charlottesville that training is provided by Polina Mischenko, a postdoctoral research associate at the Contemplative Sciences Center and director of the Charlottesville CSP. Included in the training is **Cultivating Awareness and Resilience in Education (CARE)**, a professional development program co-created by Jennings. The CARE program is designed to help teachers and school administrators manage stress and develop the kinds of skills that support embodying many of the CSP curriculum's learning objectives, including compassion, self-care, and self-awareness.

Expanding CSP's positive effects is the ultimate goal of all involved. Katherine Sublett, the School Counselor at Greenbrier who's leading implementation in grades K-1 this year, says, "We want every student impacted in some way and to scale up as quickly as we can so all grades can receive the curriculum directly." Pillow also has broad aspirations for the program. "A longer-term goal of mine is to have the benefits of this curriculum and practice spread out to our families and our larger Charlottesville community," she says.

Leveraging the University's research and scholarship for direct and tangible benefits to the community is exactly what President Ryan called for in his 2030 strategic plan, **A Great and Good University**. "President Ryan has been very clear and consistent in imploring all of us across Grounds to think about engaged scholarship and service," says Germano, "and about how we need to be focused not only on what we can do at the University, but also on how we can be supportive and engaged with the communities in which it is embedded."



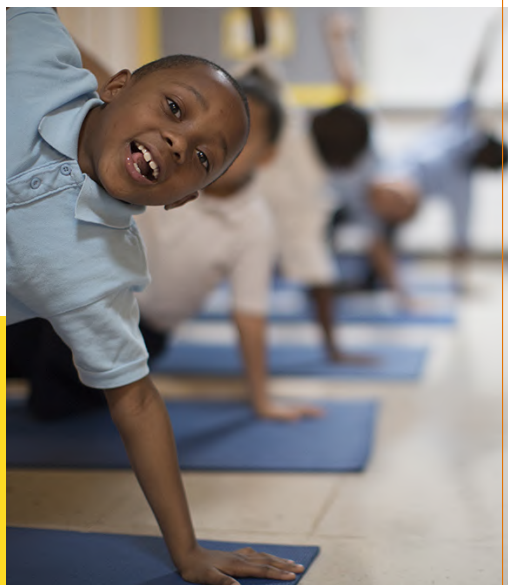
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## Widespread Benefits to Public Health and Well-Being

**T**HE Charlottesville CSP is poised to transform elementary education across the commonwealth and the nation and to improve public health for generations to come. The study will utilize Fortify Children's Health—a pediatric Clinically Integrated Network (CIN) launched by UVA's Children's Hospital in partnership with the Children's Hospital of the King's Daughters. This CIN is the first of its kind to track children's health data through a network of healthcare providers, including children's schools.

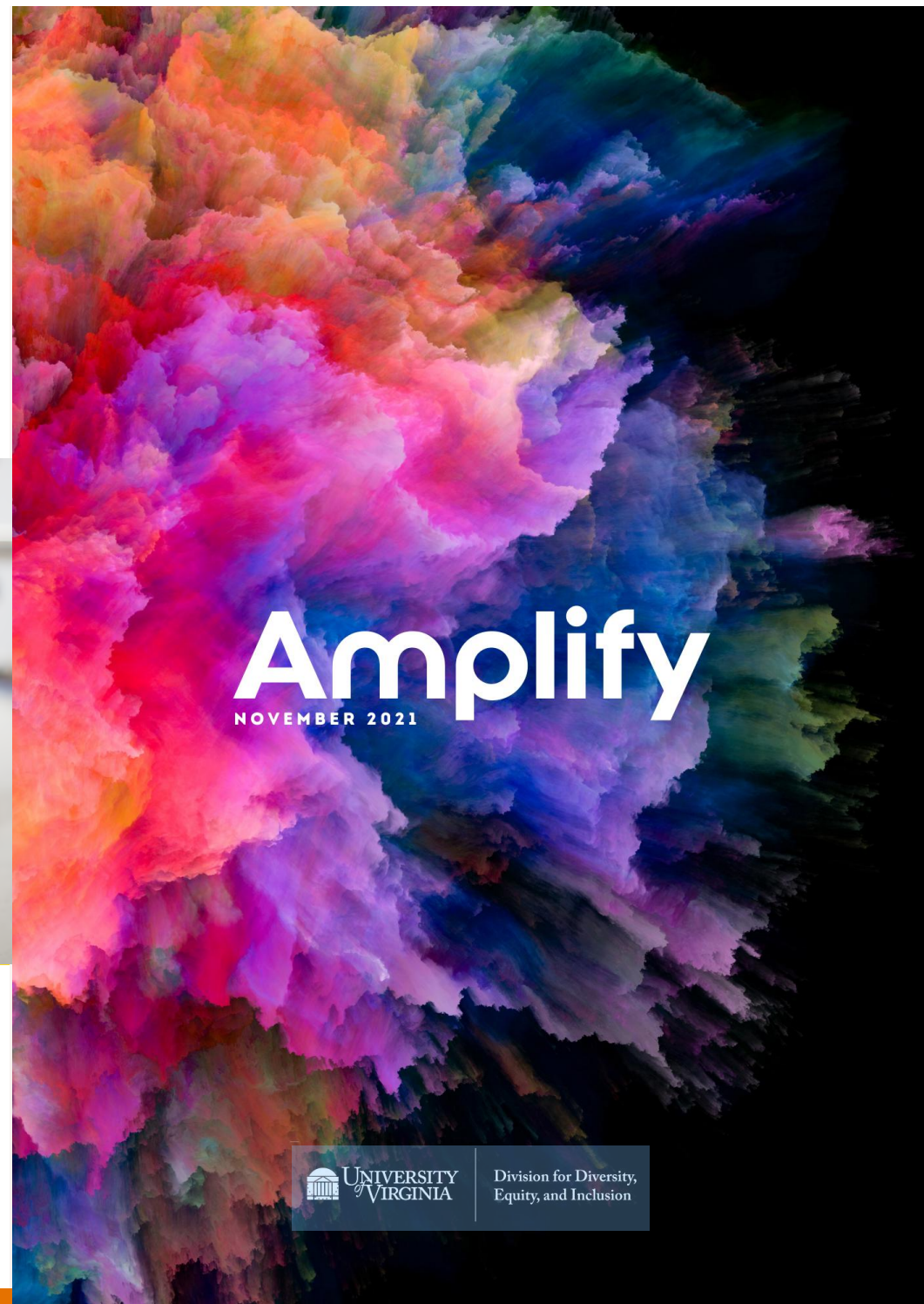
By linking school data to health data, the UVA team can investigate the extent to which the program improves children's mental and physical health, thus decreasing healthcare expenditures. If they can demonstrate that interventions delivered at the school level have positive impacts on common health concerns such as anxiety and ADHD, the program may be adopted at a very low cost by every school across the Commonwealth.

Nataro explains the study's importance: "We need ways to make our society, and particularly our youth, more resilient to the stresses of everyday life and to be able to help heal when they develop these disorders. This is not to say that medication and psychotherapy and psychology don't have their place," he says.



"I THINK THIS REALLY IS A VERY IMPORTANT WAY TO HELP US RAISE HEALTHIER CHILDREN AND DEVELOP A HEALTHIER SOCIETY."

Germano adds that in addition to benefiting the lives of children, this program brings tangible economic benefits for the future. "In today's world, we run across many people who tell us that while they would like to support kids with programs like this, there just is not the money for it. But this research is geared specifically toward the economy of education, and allows us to say, 'Look, we can say no to this sort of thing and save \$50,000, but when we look at the health care data, we are going to spend ten times that on the other end.'"



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