

Briefing

# Reach Out, Rebound, Reorientate

Strategies to Protect  
Mental Health in The  
School Ecosystem  
During COVID-19

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## STRATEGIES TO PROTECT MENTAL HEALTH IN THE SCHOOL ECOSYSTEM DURING COVID-19



### About the Varkey Foundation

The Varkey Foundation is a not-for-profit organisation established to improve the standards of education for underprivileged children throughout the world. Our mission is to ensure that every child has a good teacher.

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## Introduction

Over the past year, education systems around the world have faced unprecedented disruption as governments respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. At the height of the pandemic last year, over 190 countries temporarily shuttered their schools and other learning institutions, measures which cut off over 1.6 billion learners from the classroom. Figures released by the UN's lead education agency, UNESCO, show that many countries are now reopening their schools.<sup>1</sup> Significant work is also being undertaken by global development agencies to assess the extent of learning loss caused by the pandemic and the measures taken to contain it.<sup>2</sup> However, the full impact of COVID-19 on the mental health of teachers, other school workers and students has yet to be fully assessed by the international community, amid mounting reports of severe mental health problems in students and teachers.<sup>3</sup>

In November 2020, the Varkey Foundation established a task force to discuss the mental health crisis in school systems around the world, composed of 15 teachers from 11 countries.<sup>4</sup> The task force held a series of online discussions and consulted with several subject specialists to formulate a range of recommendations for policymakers and teachers to safeguard mental well-being in schools. The experts consulted by the task force were Dr Huma Masood, an education specialist from UNESCO; Dr Saliha Afridi, a leading clinical psychologist from the UAE; and Ms Katrina Spartalis, a school counsellor working for the GEMS Education network of schools in the UAE. The group was chaired by Dr Saima Rana, Chief Education Ambassador at the Varkey Foundation.

In this document, the task force sets out its principal findings and makes a series of recommendations to policymakers and school administrations to help address COVID-19's impact on the mental health of school ecosystems all over the world. The task force's key recommendation is for leaders across school ecosystems to promote mental health literacy. If implemented, schools would be better equipped to recognize the early warning signs of severe mental health disorders in students and staff and to access avenues for treatment, either through school counsellors or other mental health experts such as medical professionals.

<sup>1</sup> See eg "[UNESCO figures show two thirds of an academic year lost on average worldwide due to Covid-19 school closures](#)", UNESCO, 2021

<sup>2</sup> See eg *Simulating the potential impacts of the COVID-19 school closures on schooling and learning outcomes: A set of global estimates*, World Bank (2020)

<sup>3</sup> *Mental health and psychosocial considerations during the COVID-19 outbreak*, WHO Worldwide (Ref: WHO/2019-nCoV/Mental Health/2020.1), 2020; *COVID-19 and the classroom: Working in education during the Coronavirus pandemic*, Education Support, 2020; *Mental health effects of school closures during COVID-19*, *The Lancet* (Ref: Volume 4, Issue 6, p421), 2020; *Canadian teachers' attitudes toward change, efficacy, and burnout during the COVID-19 pandemic*, *International Journal of Educational Research Open* (Ref: Volume 1, 2020, 100016), 2020

<sup>4</sup> The teachers were [Global Teacher Prize Ambassadors](#), a network of 300 teachers from more than 60 countries around the world composed of finalists for the Varkey Foundation's annual US\$1 million Global Teacher Prize.

## Key issues

The mental health challenges arising by the pandemic for teachers and school staff are unprecedented in most countries. In its discussions, the Varkey Foundation's task force discussed the very high levels of stress faced by teachers worldwide because their teaching has been so disrupted during the pandemic. Members of the taskforce, representing 11 countries around the world, overwhelmingly described feeling disconnected from their school systems. Most task force members reported that their colleagues felt that the key relationships between teachers, school staff and students had been significantly disrupted by repeated school closures, as well as by the threat of contracting the virus.

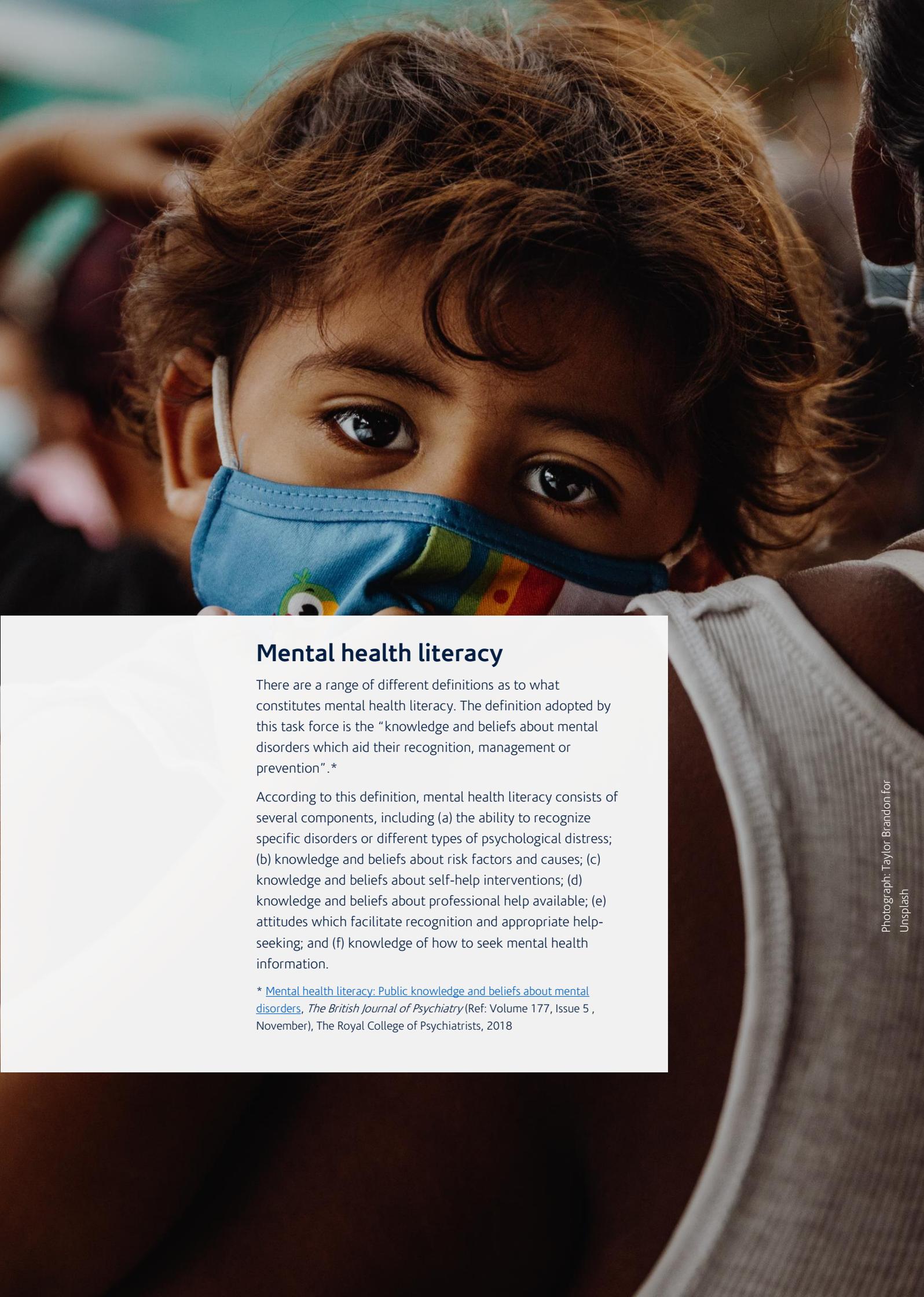
In countries where schools have reopened, adapting to school life in the 'new normal' has also been a stressful experience for both teachers and their students. With social distancing and safety protocols strictly imposed in schools in many countries, there are limited avenues left for students and teachers to socialize with their peers. In the absence of the traditional support system that was built around casual interactions in cafeterias or sports room in schools, many teachers and students are experiencing loneliness. Numerous other factors like confinement in homes during lockdowns, the constant fear of contracting the virus, financial instability, and a lack of physical activities have been identified as the source of mental distress among teachers and students.

The task force further argues that besides these conspicuous factors that have led to a spike in mental health issues in the pandemic, there are certain other problems that governments have overlooked. Out of these, the most significant one is that the teachers are not given adequate representation in the decision-making process by the policymakers or administrations. The lack of empowerment is a major cause of frustration in the teaching community.

Secondly, the task force argued that teachers are not getting enough recognition for the extra work they are doing during the pandemic. Most members of the taskforce felt that the teaching profession has not been shown enough respect from policymakers or compassion from the community at large, despite their considerable efforts to keep their students learning during the pandemic.

For instance, a task force member from the United Kingdom noted that teachers in the country had to work significantly longer hours than usual while schools were partially closed, teaching lessons both online and in the classroom, for the children of so-called "frontline" workers. A task force member from Australia reported that teachers were going to the extent of sacrificing their family life to fulfill their duties towards the profession. Since Australian teachers were required to teach on-site in schools, many had been living away from their homes as they feared contracting the virus and spreading it to their families. This practice affected the mental health of the teachers themselves and their wider families.

The task force's discussions raised another significant problem contributing to mental health issues in students: the lack of choice and voice given to students by the education systems in the matters of 'what' and 'how' they want to learn. In the fast-evolving learning environment, most students have not been given adequate opportunities to choose the topics they want to study or decide on whether they want on-site or off-site learning. This feeling of lack of autonomy is likely to have frustrated many students, especially teenagers who are also grappling with a range of uncertainties regarding their future.



## Mental health literacy

There are a range of different definitions as to what constitutes mental health literacy. The definition adopted by this task force is the “knowledge and beliefs about mental disorders which aid their recognition, management or prevention”.\*

According to this definition, mental health literacy consists of several components, including (a) the ability to recognize specific disorders or different types of psychological distress; (b) knowledge and beliefs about risk factors and causes; (c) knowledge and beliefs about self-help interventions; (d) knowledge and beliefs about professional help available; (e) attitudes which facilitate recognition and appropriate help-seeking; and (f) knowledge of how to seek mental health information.

\* [Mental health literacy: Public knowledge and beliefs about mental disorders](#), *The British Journal of Psychiatry* (Ref: Volume 177, Issue 5, November), The Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2018

## The road ahead

The new school ecosystem that is developing in response to the COVID-19 pandemic will continue to evolve as the trajectory of the pandemic changes. Both school systems and communities more broadly will have to craft new plans to adapt to the emerging social situation. Considering the immense impact that the continuing disruption life will have on individuals and their mental health, it is necessary to build resilience in ourselves and those around us.

Mental health resilience can be built through more awareness and education about mental health care. The task force advocates improving mental health literacy in students, teachers and members of the public through school curriculums, training programmes for teachers and social media campaigns.

**To mitigate the impact of the pandemic on mental health of teachers, other school staff and students across school systems, the task force recommends that efforts should be directed towards three goals:**

1. Building mental health literacy among teachers, school workers and students;
2. Empowering teachers and students by giving them a bigger role in decision-making processes; and
3. Providing adequate access to mental health care facilities to all the members of the school ecosystem.

## Recommendations for policymakers

**Train:** Teachers should have basic training in how to identify signs of mental health issues among students. After parents, teachers are often the primary care-givers for children. They meet their students daily and can easily spot behavioral and emotional changes in them. Improving mental health literacy among the teachers will allow them to recognize early signs of psychological distress in their students and offer help to those in need.

**Empower:** Teachers' voices should be represented in all the decision-making processes that affect them or their work. With greater control and authority over their work-life, teachers will feel more confident and satisfied.

**Support:** During the pandemic, teachers around the world have been working tirelessly to ensure that there is minimum disruption to learning processes. To support teachers, governments should provide them the infrastructure they require for remote teaching and adequate training in information and communications technology.

**Protect:** The government should ensure the safety and health of the teachers. In places where schools have reopened, teachers should be provided with good sanitary and safety tools to protect them against COVID-19. Teachers should also have adequate access to physical and mental health facilities. In countries where insurance companies do not cover the costs of mental health services, governments should provide teachers with affordable or free mental health care.

**Recognize:** It is important to acknowledge the hard work teachers are doing in this challenging situation. Teachers deserve wider recognition from the general public for the sacrifices they making to keep the education system going during the pandemic. One way would be for governments to create public campaigns to raise awareness of the incredible efforts that teachers are making during this difficult time.

**Reorient:** It is imperative that we make the present generation of students resilient to the current pandemic or any similar crisis in the future. Therefore, during the pandemic greater emphasis should be placed in the school curriculum on life skills such as communication, critical thinking and independent learning. Non-academic subjects like theatre, sports and arts should be given more emphasis in schools as they will help students to express themselves and their feelings.

**Reset:** Given the unprecedented circumstances in which learning is taking place today, learning and teaching targets should be redefined. Learning goals should be aligned with the learning/teaching resources available to teachers and students in any location, until the pandemic is over. This will reduce the pressure on teachers and students alike.

## Recommendations for teachers and schools

**Reach Out:** Use all possible channels like e-mails, letters and phone calls to maintain regular communication with students. If they are absent from classes for a number of days and unreachable, liaise with parents and school leaders, and if needed take help from local social workers to find them. In Indonesia, with support from the government, teachers visit the students in remote areas to check on their well-being.

**Inform:** Notify parents and psychological counsellors in school if any student exhibits sign of mental illness. Inform students about the mental health care facilities available within the school or local community centers. Educate parents about mental disorders and how to recognize signs of common problems like technology addiction.

**Involve:** Let students take decisions regarding topics they want to learn in the class. Where possible and practical, involve them in the planning of some lessons and build learning routines for themselves.

**Innovate:** Adopt effective pedagogies for imparting distance education, that make the learning process exciting and engaging for students missing the school environment. For example, task force member Melinda Wilson from the USA encouraged her students to produce dances and some mini-musicals based upon a topic of their choice, like depression or immigration. Not only did the students get an opportunity to collaborate and learn about an issue of their choice, their academic work improved. Similarly, Dayang Suriani, an English language teacher from Indonesia, uses several online applications like Comic Page Creator and Canva to develop story writing skills in her students. Creating comic strips helps her students to express themselves and release stress.

## Recommendations for students

There are a range of measures that students can take to look after their mental health and learn effectively during the pandemic. However, students also need the help and support of their parents and teachers in preventing mental health problems. The task force recommends:

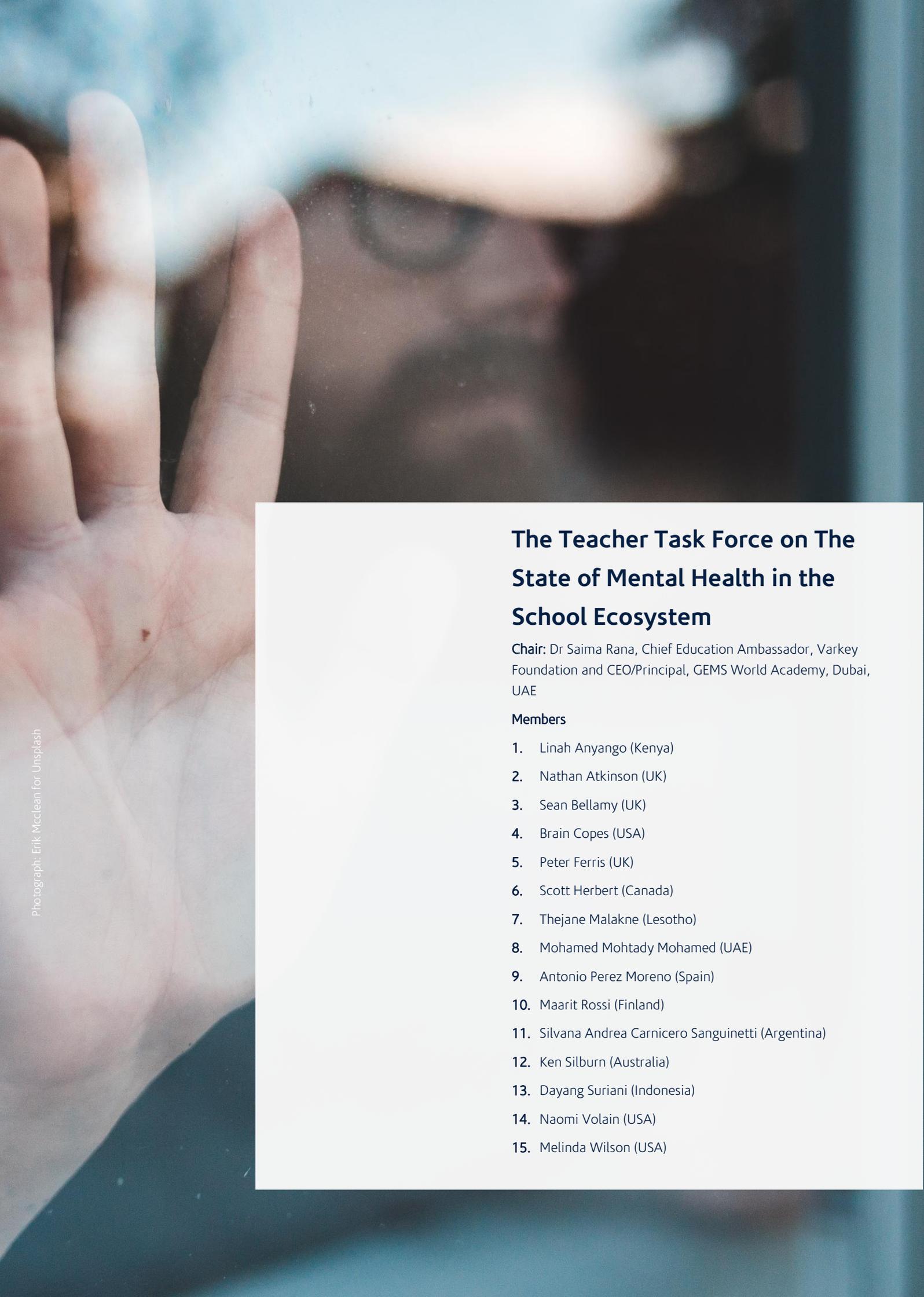
**Communicate:** Students should stay in touch with their friends and families and talk to them regularly. If they feel lonely or depressed they should not hide their feelings and reach out for help from people around them, including their teachers.

**Build Routine:** Creating a routine for daily activities can reduce stress as it helps students to manage their time efficiently and organize their activities. In their daily routines, students should allocate adequate time for sleeping.

**Stay Active:** Physical activity plays an important role in promoting good mental health. Where possible, students should engage in regular physical activities such as sport, exercise or dance.

## Special attention for students with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

The task force also discussed the significant impact of the pandemic on the mental health of children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). Mohamed Mohtady Mohamed, a task force member from the UAE who works with children with SEND, raised concern over the lack of tailor-made distance-learning programmes for such children. The task force urges policymakers to develop such programmes, and provide adequate training to parents and children to use them.



Photograph: Erik Mcclean for Unsplash

## The Teacher Task Force on The State of Mental Health in the School Ecosystem

**Chair:** Dr Saima Rana, Chief Education Ambassador, Varkey Foundation and CEO/Principal, GEMS World Academy, Dubai, UAE

### Members

1. Linah Anyango (Kenya)
2. Nathan Atkinson (UK)
3. Sean Bellamy (UK)
4. Brain Copes (USA)
5. Peter Ferris (UK)
6. Scott Herbert (Canada)
7. Thejane Malakne (Lesotho)
8. Mohamed Mohtady Mohamed (UAE)
9. Antonio Perez Moreno (Spain)
10. Maarit Rossi (Finland)
11. Silvana Andrea Carnicero Sanguinetti (Argentina)
12. Ken Silburn (Australia)
13. Dayang Suriani (Indonesia)
14. Naomi Volain (USA)
15. Melinda Wilson (USA)



Oakwood Estate, Chertsey Road  
Windlesham, Surrey, GU20 6HY, UK  
[www.varkeyfoundation.org](http://www.varkeyfoundation.org)