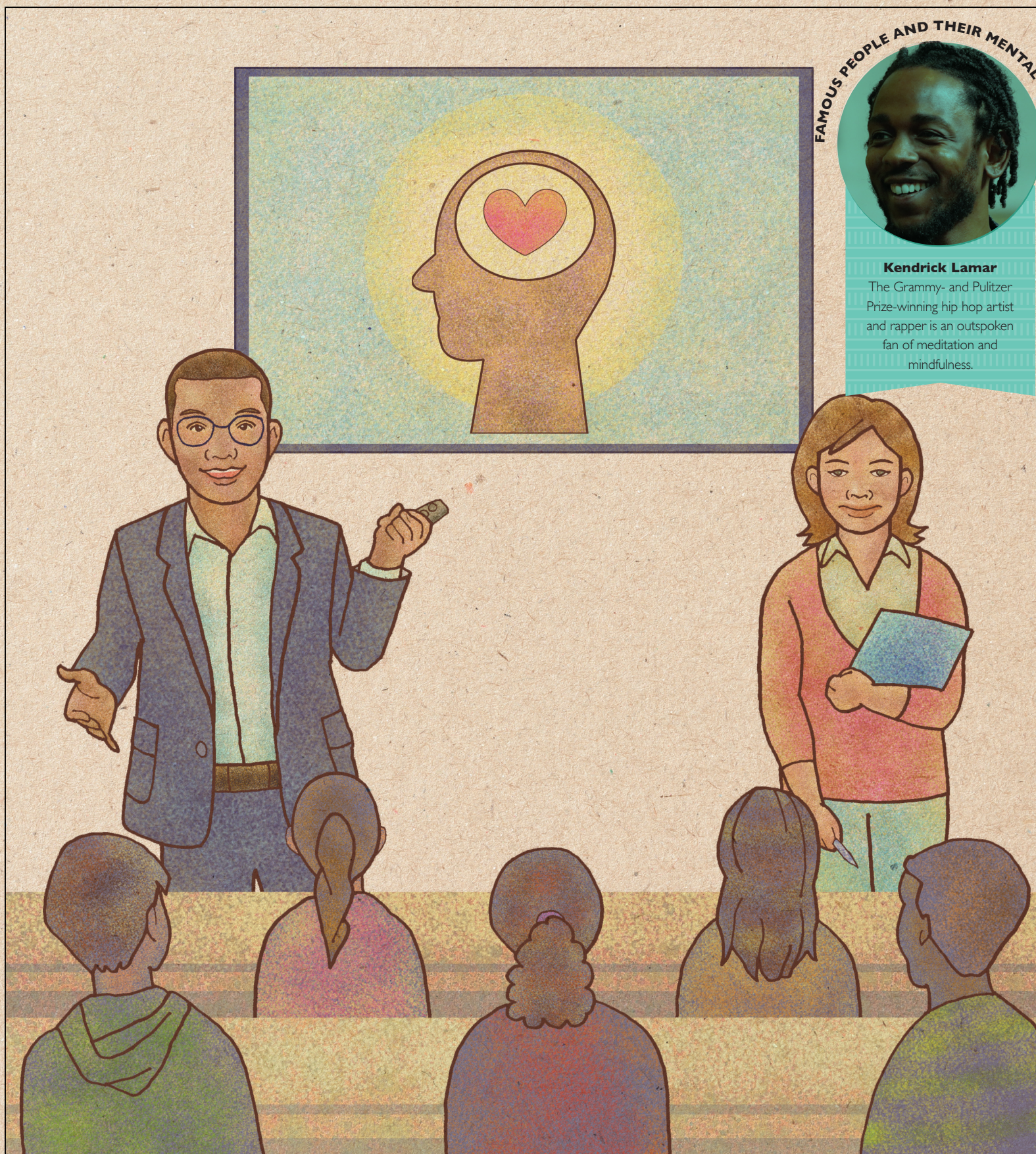


FAMOUS PEOPLE AND THEIR MENTAL HEALTH



**Kendrick Lamar**

The Grammy- and Pulitzer Prize-winning hip hop artist and rapper is an outspoken fan of meditation and mindfulness.





# Improving Mental Health At School

Educators and student support personnel are helping kids access evidence-based mental health techniques. Can this program grow? *By Claire Charlton*

**B**y the time children reach school age, they spend more time in the classrooms and hallways of their schools than they do at home. Because of this, teachers, coaches and administrators are uniquely positioned to sense when a child is struggling. Yet they aren't necessarily equipped to help a child who is experiencing a mental health challenge.

Several years ago, schools reached out to the University of Michigan Medical School with a plea for help with the number of students who were struggling.

This initial outreach led to the 2013 development of Transforming Research Into Action to Improve the Lives of Students (TRAILS). TRAILS is designed to equip K-12 schools with evidence-based mental health practices — with a goal of meeting students' mental health needs to improve their social and academic outcomes.

Research shows that about 50% of students suffer from some form of mental health disorder, including depression, anxiety or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), yet only about 20% have access to any type of behavioral health services, says Meredith Ollila, Communications Specialist with TRAILS.

"By having some behavioral health resources available in the schools, more students can be reached," Ollila says. "We know that we can improve youth access by training school professionals in evidence-based practices like cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) and mindfulness.

## How TRAILS helps

TRAILS provides a suite of programs for school professionals to develop and sustain support systems. The foundational tier addresses social-emotional learning through tools that can be delivered by teachers. "These are designed to fit right

into their curriculum and address resiliency and self-regulation skills, relationship-building, and recognizing and naming feelings," Ollila says.

A second TRAILS tier involves a targeted intervention for those experiencing mental health difficulties. TRAILS provides training to school counselors and social workers in CBT and mindfulness techniques. "Ten students in a 10-week group learn techniques to navigate social pressures to reduce more serious mental health concerns, including anxiety and depression," Ollila explains.

A third tier provides training and resources to increase the accurate and timely identification and referral of students at risk of suicide.

When the pandemic closed in, TRAILS created "Coping With COVID-19," which is based on the TRAILS depression and anxiety skills group manuals with pandemic-specific content, delivered virtually statewide to more than 1,300 school staff.

In November, TRAILS held training specifically for the Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD), with 320 attendees. "COVID brought so much uncertainty and loss of control, and we recognized that it was meaningful to give students tools, ways of thinking and activities to manage amidst so much uncertainty," says Jennifer Vichich, TRAILS Program Lead with the DPSCD Partnership Team.

## Strong partnership with DPSCD

In its first year, TRAILS was rolled out to three schools in Ann Arbor. By 2016, the program expanded across the state with CBT and mindfulness training for mental health providers, a clinical trial including 116 Michigan high schools and 1,300 students. In 2019, a community partnership brought TRAILS to DPSCD.

The U-M Youth Policy Lab, through the Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy and the Survey Research Center at the Institute for Social Research, has gathered data from DPSCD staff, families and students which will inform how TRAILS moves forward within the DPSCD community.

The effort is funded in part by philanthropy partners, including the Ethel and James Flinn Foundation, the Michigan Health Endowment Fund, Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan Foundation and the Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan. District-wide implementation at DPSCD means resources and support are available to more school staff and their students. The program is designed to build the capacity of district experts, so it's self-sustaining and dovetails into the mental health support outlined in the DPSCD Blueprint 2020.

"We can give educators the tools and training so they can serve their kids, and they are so ready to do what they can," Vichich says. "We are working together to help make their jobs easier, more efficient and more evidence-based. We are so impressed with the leadership of the district."

## The role of philanthropy

By funding sustainable programs that can be scaled, philanthropic dollars can increase access to evidence-based techniques.

"We still very much need the clinical piece and access in the primary care setting, but there are other programs that are not reliant on insurance that can be impactful and effective. TRAILS is an example of that program," says Andrea Cole, executive director and CEO of the Ethel and James Flinn Foundation. "I'm very excited about the progress we have had in the Detroit Public Schools and we are in conversations with the State of Michigan to scale that program to all school districts in the state."

## INCREASING ACCESS

May is Mental Health Awareness Month and we acknowledge and celebrate by sharing some important information about efforts to broaden access to evidence-based practices such as cognitive behavioral therapy and mindfulness to children and teens who wouldn't otherwise get the support they need. In this installment of *Opening Minds, Ending Stigma*, we're proud to recognize the important, sustainable work in the Detroit Public Schools Community District — and other schools in Michigan — that will build social-emotional intelligence, resilience and coping skills among our kids.



**Andrea Cole**  
Executive Director and  
Chief Executive Officer,  
Flinn Foundation

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