



Resilience • Persistence • Success

## Media Release

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### **As Youth Mental Health Needs Surge, North Dakota Grants Provide Access to EmpowerU**

*The Department of Public Instruction (DPI) and North Dakota Center for Distance Education Approve \$100,000 in Matching Grants for Students to Access a Proven Social-Emotional Learning Platform*

(August 17, 2021—FARGO, North Dakota) The pandemic is expected to have long-lasting effects on youth mental health, particularly if they're not addressed. North Dakota Center for Distance Education (NDCDE) is excited to proactively partner with the youth mental health pioneer EmpowerU to bring a proven, data-driven social-emotional learning (SEL) curriculum to students in an effective and meaningful way. Now more than ever, students need support and skills to engage, learn and focus coming off last year's pandemic school year.

School guidance counselors, principals and district leaders are invited to learn more during EmpowerU's [free weekly webinar series](#) in August.

- Thursday, August 19 at 4:00 p.m. CDT
- Tuesday, August 24 at 7:30 a.m. CDT
- Tuesday, August 31 at 12:00 p.m. CDT

“North Dakota’s Center for Distance Education (NDCDE) is excited to partner with EmpowerU to provide vital social and emotional support for North Dakota’s learners. EmpowerU has a program that includes quality curriculum and live support through regular interaction with mental health professionals,” said NDCDE Superintendent Matthew Lonn, Ed.D. “Every student in North Dakota regardless of where they live should have access to this level of mental health support, and we believe this program is an exciting step in making that a reality.”

EmpowerU equips students with the skills to build persistence, resilience and success by pairing interactive daily lessons with 1:1 support from online instructors. These instructors, who have master’s degrees and a high degree of training in EmpowerU’s programs, serve as life coaches to personalize and apply the course content based on each student’s goals and barriers.

“We know there is a significant need to help students process and learn to overcome the feelings of isolation, hopelessness and anxiety they experienced during the pandemic. The problem is too big for most schools to provide the daily skills and support that students need on their own,” said [Katie Dorn, MA, LSC, MFT](#), EmpowerU’s founder and licensed school counselor and family therapist. “Now there is funding for schools to proactively prepare for the surge they expect. EmpowerU is an online partner that can support schools as they need to scale. Our online elective course is a first step for many students learning resilience, while earning needed high school credit.”

Over 93% of students who complete the EmpowerU program report increased confidence and wellbeing, making meaningful progress towards their goals.

### **Youth Mental Health Data**

In March 2021, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that in the first six months of the pandemic in 2020, the proportion of children ages 12- to 17-years-old visiting the emergency room for mental health-related issues increased by 31%. And according to Mental Health America<sup>1</sup>, the population most impacted by the Covid-19 mental health crisis were young people from age 11 to 17. These youth showed indications of anxiety and depression more often and more severely than other age groups. Feelings of isolation and loneliness crept up as the leading factor contributing to a person’s mental state. North Dakota ranks 25th among states for youth mental health, with 13.75% of youth

reporting at least one major depressive episode in the past year for 2021, as Mental Health America<sup>2</sup> documents.

### **How EmpowerU Works with North Dakota Center for Distance Education (NDCDE)**

With state support, North Dakota schools now have help. Schools will identify students who may benefit from a SEL course (a Tier 2 support). District personnel will enroll identified students in the credit-bearing course through [NDCDE.nd.gov](https://ndcde.nd.gov). The district pays the \$390 course fee through NDCDE and submits for reimbursement for half the total enrollment cost (\$195) through [DPI WebGrants portal](#). Reimbursement is available through June 30, 2022. Educators who have questions are encouraged to contact [jocelyn.kolle@k12.nd.us](mailto:jocelyn.kolle@k12.nd.us) or [matthew.lonn@k12.nd.us](mailto:matthew.lonn@k12.nd.us).

Once enrolled, students complete daily online SEL lessons that are supported with highly personalized coaching by licensed, trained therapists. Students can easily access all coursework by phone, computer or tablet. SEL equips students with essential skills such as problem-solving, goal setting, social interaction and emotional regulation to improve a student's academic learning, study habits and test scores.

Four evidence-based elements help students move from a place of discouragement, avoidance and disengagement to confidence, resilience, persistence and success. These form the foundation of EmpowerU's work to help schools [prioritize student motivation and mental health](#) during the coming school year.

- 1:1 personalized support
- Daily engaging content
- Comprehensive and robust
- Accessible and equitable

EmpowerU's approach helps schools scale their mental health services according to student needs and counseling capacity. School counselors receive a weekly report with progress on enrolled students, as well as measurements of student growth pre- to post-participation using the Prochaska/DiClemente Transtheoretical Model of Change. With insight into each student's goals and progress, the school's mental health team can make student appointments more focused and intentional.

The semester-long online course has rolling admissions and can be completed in 30 minutes each school day. EmpowerU's approach is aligned with the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional

Learning (CASEL) and National Health and Wellness standards, so students who complete all six units of the course can receive a semester credit.

As one school principal observed, “EmpowerU is more than just talking about problems. It gives students tools to engage in the process of self-improvement and equips them to overcome obstacles — now and in their future.”

Independent evaluation of EmpowerU showed that:

- More than 93% of students who complete EmpowerU make a dramatic shift from discouragement and anxiety to improved wellbeing, motivation and hope.
- More than 88% of students complete the program, compared to completion rates of 5-30% in other programs.
- More than 98.5% of students would recommend EmpowerU to a friend or classmate.

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### **About Empower U**

[EmpowerU](#)'s highly personalized, online SEL program helps young people replace anxiety and depression with resilience and confidence, fueling student transformation without a heavy lift on staff or need for additional hires. The program provides each student with interactive lessons and personalized coaching, pairing technology with brain research in a unique way that supports students and empowers their growth. Multi-year data makes it clear: nobody understands Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) and approaches SEL the way EmpowerU does.

### **About North Dakota Center for Distance Education**

[North Dakota Center for Distance Education \(NDCDE\)](#) is both a nonprofit governmental agency and a school. It has served as the center for distance learning in the state of North Dakota since 1935. NDCDE's purpose is to provide learning opportunities for K-12 learners in North Dakota regardless of where they live. In 1935, the Center for Distance Education fulfilled this purpose through correspondence courses. Today, nearly 85 years later, the Center for Distance Education provides online, digital learning opportunities along with additional comprehensive educational services to North Dakota K-12 learners, parents and school districts. NDCDE's mission is to ensure that all North Dakota students regardless of location have access to educational opportunities that meet or exceed their expectations for quality curriculum, ongoing contact time with highly qualified teachers, monitoring course delivery efficiency and effectiveness, and student learning.

[North Dakota Center for Distance Education](#) is also a fully accredited K-12 school with the educational nonprofit Cognia and meets all requirements for curriculum and instruction set forth by the North

Dakota Department of Public Instruction (NDDPI). In addition, NDCDE is an approved online course provider by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) for prospective student-athletes seeking college eligibility.

Reference links:

1. <https://mhanational.org/2021-policy-institute-addressing-youth-mental-health-needs-schools>
2. <https://mhanational.org/issues/2021/mental-health-america-youth-data>
3. <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/data-what-we-know-about-student-mental-health-and-the-pandemic/2021/03>