Rethinking Student Mental Health in the Moroccan School

Toward a Systemic Approach

International Roundtable Morocco & United States

Organized by ImpactForge· Boston — Rabat · 2026

I. Opening Remarks

Faycal El Iraqi

Founder & CEO, ImpactForge· Boston, U SA

Faycal El Iraqi is the founder and CEO of ImpactForge Consulting, a transatlantic firm based in Burlington, Massachusetts, specializing in nonprofit capacity-building, impact measurement, and civil society development across Morocco and the United States.

Faycal El Iraqi, founder of ImpactForge Consulting, opened the roundtable by welcoming participants from Morocco and the United States and setting the tone for a conversation centered on honesty, reflection, and practical change.

Rather than repeating familiar discussions around school violence, anxiety, or dropout rates, he encouraged participants to ask a deeper question: why do these problems continue to persist despite years of reforms and conversation? He emphasized that students suffering cannot be understood in

isolation from the educational environment itself. Schools are not only places where symptoms appear, they are also systems that can either support or intensify emotional and social struggles.

He also highlighted the importance of the Morocco-Boston dialogue. The purpose was not to copy American models or import ready-made solutions, but to create a shared space for learning. Both contexts face growing questions around student well-being, educational equity, and the challenge of building schools that support the whole child rather than academic performance alone.

> “We are not only asking 'What does the student suffer from?' we are asking a deeper question: 'What within the educational or social system may be contributing to or deepening that suffering?'” – Faycal El Iraqi

II. Intervention Rkia Salnave

Rkia Salnave

Psychology Specialist Northeastern University Student, works in a middle school · United States

Rkia Salnave combines academic psychology training with direct field experience in a U.S. middle school. She is engaged in Moroccan civil society work focused on mental health awareness and reducing the stigma that prevents young people from seeking support.

Rkia Salnave spoke from lived experience inside schools, offering a perspective grounded in everyday interactions with students. She explained that many young people grow up in educational environments where emotions are rarely discussed openly. Academic discipline and performance dominate the culture of the school, while emotional struggles remain invisible.

According to her observations, students often reach adolescence without learning how to express anxiety, sadness, or stress in healthy ways. As a result, when psychological support becomes available later, many students feel uncomfortable asking for help because emotional vulnerability has never been normalized

From Silence to Conversation: The Role of Awareness Workshops

She stressed that awareness workshops could play an important role if they are designed carefully. Instead of formal lectures, schools need interactive and participatory spaces where students, teachers, and families can speak honestly about emotional well-being.

Creating a culture where conversations about mental health feel natural is just as important as providing professional support services.

> “Combating mental health stigma must begin early in schools. Talking about emotions should be as natural as talking about physical health or academic achievement.” -Rkia Salnave

III. Intervention Abdelaziz Snihji

Abdelaziz Snihji

Professor of Sociology of Guidance and Professional Integration — Morocco

Researcher in school life and student psychological and social well-being, focused on quality of school life, inclusive educational approaches, and the development of more equitable practices in Moroccan schools.

Abdelaziz Saniji grounded the discussion in data and institutional realities. He reminded participants that mental health challenges among students are not isolated cases but part of a broader social issue affecting schools worldwide and in Morocco specifically.

He pointed to high levels of school violence, emotional distress, and disengagement among students. At the same time, Moroccan public schools still lack a structured system for deploying trained school psychologists. Existing staff members often work in awareness or guidance roles without the specialized preparation needed for sustained psychological support.

Despite these challenges, he shared cautious optimism regarding the “Pioneer Institutions” initiative introduced by the Ministry of Education. Schools participating in the program have begun integrating extracurricular activities, creativity, teamwork, and student engagement into daily school life. Erly results suggest that when students feel more connected to school, dropout rates decrease significantly.

- WHO: 1 in 7 adolescents worldwide suffer from a mental health disorder
- UNICEF confirms the same trend across all income groups
- Morocco's Economic, Social and Environmental Council (2023): 48.9% of Moroccans report psychological disorders
- 64% of Moroccan students have been exposed to school violence
- 30% of students say they dislike school and feel it does not meet their needs

IV. Intervention Abdelkarim Belhaj

Abdelkarim Belhaj

Professor of Psychology & Director of the Higher Institute of Psychology — Morocco

Director of the Higher Institute of Psychology, Senior academic and practitioner in psychology, contributing to mental health education and institutional development in Morocco.

Abdelkarim Belhaj emphasized that the Moroccan educational system was historically built around discipline, instruction, and examination rather than student well-being. While that model shaped generations of schooling, it no longer responds adequately to the emotional and social realities students face today.

He argued that mental health should not be reduced to the absence of illness. A healthy environment is one where students feel safe, supported, respected, and capable of learning. Psychological support, therefore, should not be treated as an exceptional service for a small number of students, but as a core dimension of educational quality.

280,000 Students Lost Each Year

One of the strongest moments of his intervention was his reference to the hundreds of thousands of students who leave school every year in Morocco. He explained that dropout is not simply an individual failure but a sign that broader support systems are not functioning effectively.

Dr Belhaj also raised concerns about accountability within education reform. Programs are often launched without clear mechanism to measure their real impact on student well-being. He called for a

long-term preventive approach focused on inclusion, anticipation and emotional support rather than waiting for crises to emerge.

> “The goal is to shift from a logic of crisis-response to a logic of prevention and anticipation, building a school environment that offers greater support and inclusion for students vulnerable to psychological and social precarity.” -Dr. Belhaj

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V. Intervention — Dr. Ivonne Borrero

Dr. Ivonne Borrero

Head of School Psychologists — Boston Public Schools, United States

Specialist in school mental health, prevention, and multicultural and multilingual intervention. Leads a team of over 30 multilingual school psychologists across Boston Public Schools.

Ivonne Borrero arrived at the roundtable carrying twenty years of practical experience inside one of the most linguistically and culturally complex school systems in the United States. Boston Public Schools serve students from more than 139 countries, with significant populations speaking Haitian Creole, Arabic, Somali, Chinese dialects, French, and Russian. This is not, she was careful to say, a problem to be managed, it is the reality of the institution, and everything about how the school system operates needs to be designed with that reality in mind.

She noted that the pandemic created a new layer of difficulty: large numbers of students became anxious, withdrawn, or simply unable to return to the rhythms of school life. The emotional residue of those years is still present in classrooms, and the response has required more than academic support.

The Safe and Supportive Schools Initiative

The centerpiece of her presentation was Boston's 'Safe and Supportive Schools' initiative, now more than two decades old. Its fundamental premise is that a school cannot effectively educate students whose basic emotional and social needs are unmet, and that meeting those needs is not the school's job

alone. The initiative works by building dense partnerships between schools and the wider ecosystem around them: universities, libraries, social service agencies, community organizations, and after-school programs. Concretely, programs include crisis intervention services, peer mentoring, free summer learning, college preparation support, and community-based after-school care.

One of the most valuable elements she described was the Family Liaison program, school-employed staff members, often members of the communities they serve, who connect families with school resources in their native languages. During the pandemic, this network allowed the district to produce multilingual digital resources on everything from managing homework routines to recognizing anxiety, reaching families through local TV stations, including a Haitian Creole channel.

In a second intervention, Dr. Borrero raised a more technical but equally important point: the tools used to assess student mental health are often culturally misaligned with the populations they are meant to serve. Her recommendation was pragmatic, reach out to major educational publishers like Pearson and initiate the development of localized, normed assessment tools for the Moroccan context. She pointed to Boston's experience creating Spanish and Portuguese adaptations as a model, noting that publishers are often willing to partner on these projects and may offer financial support for the groundwork.

> “Prevention is the real key to any effective school policy. Investing in early intervention and preventive support is more effective and sustainable than waiting until problems become severe.” -Dr. Borrero

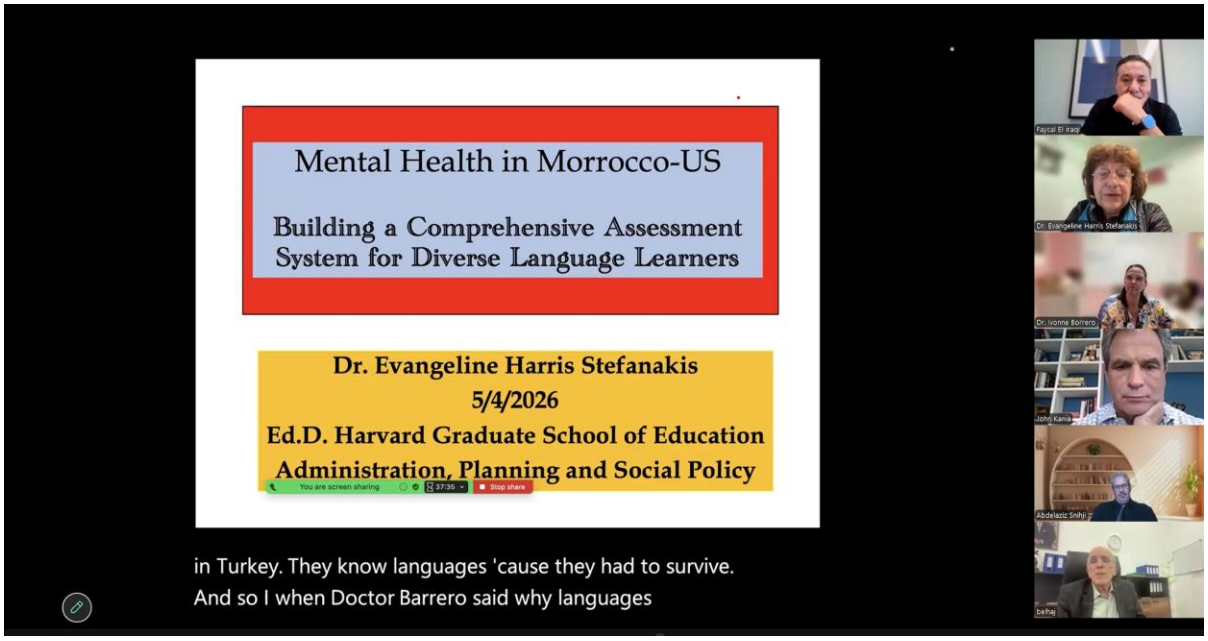
VI. Intervention Dr. Evangeline Harris Stefanakis

Dr. Evangeline Harris Stefanakis

Ed.D., Harvard Graduate School of Education, Administration, Planning and Social Policy · United States

Specialist in bilingual student assessment and equitable, culturally responsive educational evaluation. Currently works with recently arrived immigrant students in Revere, Massachusetts, including young people from Morocco and Algeria.

Dr. Harris Stefanakis presented under the title shown in her opening slide:



Dr. Harris Stefanakis began by talking about herself, her Greek family, her childhood in Turkey, her moves between cultures and languages and educational systems. It was not digression. It was a way of grounding everything that followed in lived experience rather than abstract principle. Learning, she insisted, does not happen only through words on a page or answers in an exam. It happens through seeing, hearing, touching, doing, and when assessment systems ignore that, they measure something much narrower than what they claim to measure.

She then walked through a history that makes for uncomfortable listening: the story of how intelligence testing was used, for decades, to sort students along racial, social, and linguistic lines. Bilingual children, children from immigrant families, children whose way of thinking and expressing themselves didn't fit the mold, these students were systematically misclassified and placed in programs for students with intellectual disabilities. This was not accidental; it was built into the design of the tools. And versions of that problem, she argued, persist today.

Assessment vs. Evaluation: A Crucial Distinction

The conceptual heart of her intervention was a distinction that sounds simple but has far-reaching implications: the difference between evaluation and assessment. Evaluation is about sorting, ranking students against a norm, producing scores, determining who goes where. Assessment, by contrast, is about understanding, sitting alongside a student, observing how they work, asking questions, documenting progress over time. Real assessment is labor-intensive and requires professional judgment. But it is the only approach that gives a genuinely fair picture of what a student knows and can do.

Her practical recommendations: use portfolios drawing on student work in multiple languages; involve teachers, families, and students themselves in the evaluation process; design rubrics that are developmentally appropriate and culturally aware. She described initiatives in Massachusetts where researchers collected and analyzed work from Arabic-speaking, Russian, Haitian, and Chinese-background students specifically to develop fairer assessment frameworks. She also noted, directly and without fanfare, that she currently works with recently arrived students from Morocco and Algeria at Revere High School.

In a follow-up contribution, Dr. Harris Stefanakis raised two further points. First, developmental screening needs to happen earlier, before school entry and again around third grade, which research consistently identifies as a critical juncture for reading development and social-emotional growth. Second, she returned to the language problem: the term 'mental health' carries a heavy stigma in many cultural contexts, and when it is associated with madness or weakness, it becomes an obstacle rather than a bridge. She called for a deliberate shift toward language that foregrounds strengths and possibilities, social-emotional skills, resilience, well-being, rather than deficits and disorders.

> “Assessment without cultural sensitivity is not neutral, it produces systemic injustice. A fair school is one that recognizes that students learn and express themselves in different ways.” -Dr. Harris

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VII. Intervention John Kania

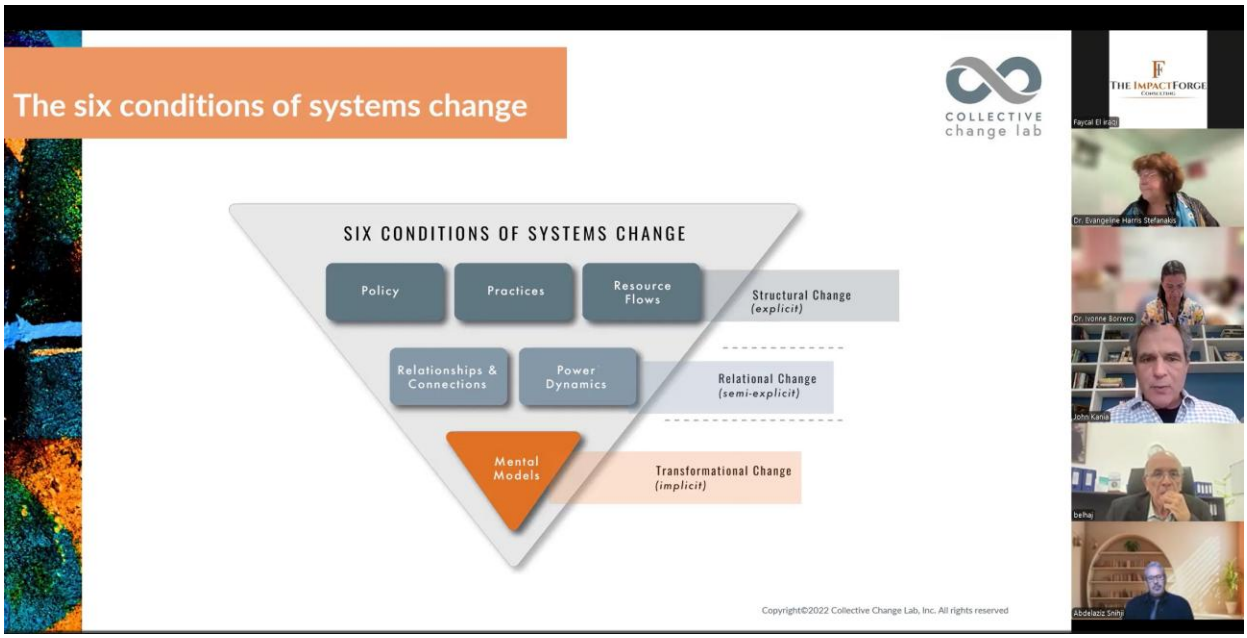
John Kania

Expert in Systems Change & Co-developer of the Collective Impact Framework — United States

Specialist in collective impact, systems change, and multi-stakeholder partnership building for complex social and educational challenges. A leading practical and academic reference in the field of systemic reform.

John Kania brought to the roundtable a framework that is deceptively simple to describe and genuinely difficult to implement: the idea that complex social problems cannot be solved by any single actor, no matter how well-resourced or well-intentioned, and that effective change requires a level of structured collaboration that most organizations, and most reform efforts, never quite achieve.

He began by naming something that the other interventions had circled around without quite addressing directly: the confusion about what 'systemic change' means. The word 'systemic' is everywhere in education reform discourse, but it is rarely unpacked. He presented the Six Conditions framework, illustrated in the diagram he shared during the session:



As the diagram makes clear, systems operate at three distinct levels, and most reform efforts only touch the top one:

- Structural (Explicit): Policy, Practices, Resource Flows, the visible machinery of the system
- Relational (Semi-explicit): Relationships & Connections, Power Dynamics, how actors relate and who holds influence
- Transformational (Implicit): Mental Models, the values and cultural assumptions that shape how people fundamentally understand the problem

He argued that the uncomfortable truth is that about 90% of reform effort targets the structural level, new laws, programs, and funding. These changes matter, but they rarely last on their own because relational and transformational dynamics stay the same. Durable change requires working on all three levels at once, especially the mental models that shape how educators, families, administrators, and policymakers understand students, mental health, and their own roles.

The Five Conditions for Collective Impact

He then presented the Collective Impact methodology as a practical framework for managing this kind of multi-level, multi-actor change. The model rests on five conditions:

- Common Agenda: All relevant actors must share a definition of the problem and a common theory of change
- Shared Measurement: Agreement on how success is measured across all stakeholders so that progress becomes visible to everyone
- Mutually Reinforcing Activities: Different actors doing different things, but in ways that complement rather than contradict each other
- Continuous Communication: Not occasional coordination, but regular, structured dialogue that builds trust and allows course corrections
- Backbone Organization: A dedicated entity whose sole job is to coordinate, facilitate, and sustain the collaborative effort, its absence is the most common reason these efforts fail

Community Ownership: The Non-Negotiable Condition

In a second intervention, Kania addressed a risk he had seen play out repeatedly in reform contexts: the tendency to design change from the outside and impose it from the top. Government support is necessary, he acknowledged, but it is not sufficient. What makes reforms take root is whether the communities they are meant to serve feel genuine ownership of them. He called for a 'Place-Based Approach', interventions designed from within specific communities, in response to their specific needs and cultural contexts, with the people those communities trust in central roles.

> “Real change happens when the local community feels the school is a collective project that belongs to them. Collective Impact requires a shared agenda, a Backbone Organization, and a genuine willingness to share accountability.” Dr. Kania

VIII. Writing Intervention Prof. Omayma Achour

Prof. Omayma Achour

Habilitated Associate Professor, Faculty of Legal, Economic and Social Sciences (FSJES Agdal), Mohammed V University, Rabat Morocco

> Researcher in public policy, social law, and education governance. Her work examines the structural conditions required to make student well-being a durable national policy priority, with a focus on intersectoral coordination, equity, and legal frameworks.

Prof. Achour offered a contribution that was deliberately policy-oriented, she was less interested in describing problems than in identifying the institutional levers available to solve them. Her starting point was a straightforward but important claim: Morocco already has the legal architecture it needs to make student mental health a national priority. What it largely lacks are the political will and operational coordination to use that architecture.

She pointed specifically to Framework Law No. 51-17 on education, which places equity, quality, inclusion, and school success at the center of the reform agenda. Student mental health, she argued, should be read directly into that mandate — not as an add-on, but as a precondition for educational quality. You cannot achieve inclusion or reduce dropout without addressing the psychological and social conditions that drive disengagement. Similarly, Framework Law No. 09-21 on social protection, which is expanding health insurance and family support mechanisms, creates an opportunity to link school-based mental health services with the broader health and welfare system rather than treating them as an education-only issue.

Her policy recommendations were concrete. Schools or clusters of schools should establish mental health units staffed by psychologists, social workers, and counselors, connected to local health services through formal referral pathways. Teacher training must be upgraded, not to turn teachers into therapists, but to equip them to recognize early warning signs and activate support systems. Modules on emotional regulation, conflict resolution, and well-being should be embedded in school life programs.

She also insisted on the equity dimension that too often gets lost in these conversations. The students most at risk, girls facing social pressure or gender-based violence, students in rural or underserved areas, children from low-income households, are precisely the students least likely to be reached by services designed for the average case. Any serious reform needs to direct its most concentrated efforts toward those groups, and must be evaluated, in part, on whether it is reducing or reproducing inequality. A national observatory on student well-being, producing disaggregated data by gender, territory, and socioeconomic status, would provide the evidence base that effective policymaking requires.

> “Student mental health is not merely an individual issue, it is a structural challenge that requires systemic solutions grounded in equity, prevention, and coordinated governance.” Professor Achour

IX. Closing Remarks Faycal El Iraqi

Faycal El Iraqi brought the roundtable to a close with remarks that were, by design, more forward-looking than retrospective. He expressed genuine gratitude to each of the speakers, not as a formality, but in recognition that what had just taken place was relatively rare: a sustained, honest conversation across disciplinary and geographic boundaries, held together by a shared concern for something that matters.

He reflected on what the day had produced. The range of expertise in the room. Moroccan educators and psychologists, Boston practitioners, researchers, civil society voices, had made it possible to move between the granular and the systemic, between personal testimony and data, between what works elsewhere and what might work here. He noted that the conversation had been marked by a consistent refusal to treat student mental health as an individual pathology, and by a consistent insistence that the school system itself is part of both the problem and the solution.

He announced three next concrete steps that participants had agreed on during the session:

- **A** collective diagnostic and policy paper, built participatively and drawing on the contributions of everyone present, laying out both the current situation and a recommended path forward for school mental health in Morocco.
- **An** open national forum to be organized in the coming fall or early in the next academic year, bringing together a wider range of stakeholders, researchers, school administrators, families, civil society organizations, and government representatives.
- **An** ongoing coordination network, informal but intentional, among the people in this room and others who share these concerns, designed to keep the momentum alive and ensure that this roundtable is a beginning, not an ending.

> “The session closed in an atmosphere of mutual appreciation and gratitude, with an invitation to take a group photo commemorating the spirit of collaboration and dialogue that defined this roundtable.” Faycal El Iraqi

X. Preliminary Recommendations

The following recommendations emerge from the roundtable's collective discussions. They are preliminary, intended as a foundation for the participatory policy paper to be developed in the coming months.

1. Develop a National School Mental Health Strategy

Formulate an integrated national strategy with measurable objectives covering teacher training, staffing, preventive intervention, and assessment, grounded in Framework Law No. 51-17 on education and connected to Framework Law No. 09-21 on social protection. Embed a culture of accountability that ties policies to their actual impact on students, not just administrative compliance.

2. Deploy School Psychologists in Public Schools

Move from limited, fragmented initiatives to a systematic, institutionalized deployment of trained school psychologists across public schools, with national professional standards, dedicated university training pathways, and targeted coverage for rural and underserved areas.

3. Shift to a Preventive and Developmental Approach

Redirect institutional focus from crisis-response to proactive prevention, through social-emotional learning programs embedded in the curriculum, developmental screening at key educational transitions, and sustained support for school belonging and emotional safety.

4. Localize Psychological and Educational Assessment Tools

Launch a national initiative to develop culturally and linguistically adapted assessment tools for the Moroccan context, working with educational publishers and involving linguists, psychologists, anthropologists, and field practitioners in norming and validation.

5. Integrate Emotional Education from the Earliest Stages

Make conversations about emotions, stress management, and help-seeking a regular, normalized part of school life from early childhood, through both formal curricula and extracurricular programming. Schools cannot address what they never name.

6. Meaningfully Engage Families and Local Communities

Build systematic mechanisms for genuine family and community participation in school mental health, drawing on the Boston Family Liaisons model and adapting it to Morocco's linguistic and cultural diversity. Communities that feel ownership of school initiatives sustain them; those that don't, don't.

7. Build Multi-Sector Partnerships Using the Collective Impact Methodology

Apply the Collective Impact framework, with a designated Backbone Organization, a common agenda, and shared measurement, to bring education, health, social protection, civil society, and local authorities into coordinated action around student well-being.

8. Establish a National Observatory on Student Well-Being

Create a dedicated data system tracking well-being indicators, school climate, emotional resilience, dropout patterns, disaggregated by gender, territory, and socioeconomic status. Evidence-based policymaking requires evidence.

9. Organize a National Open Forum in the Coming Fall

Translate the momentum of this roundtable into a broader, more inclusive national conversation, producing concrete commitments alongside a participatory policy paper on student mental health reform in Morocco.