



COVID-19 Considerations for Supporting Student and Staff Wellness When Reopening Schools

May 15, 2020

While the usual transitional concerns will be present when schools reopen, it is anticipated that this fall’s return to school will be particularly challenging. Teachers and administrators should operate on the assumption that everyone, (students, families and staff) will have experienced some degree of anxiety and stress, uncertainty, illness, grief and loss.

Some will have been ill themselves, some will be grieving for a relative or friend who died, if not by illness, possibly from an accident or even suicide or violence. Some will have experienced hunger, abuse, neglect, evictions, domestic violence and/or community violence. For some students, the experience of social distancing and being home during COVID-19 will have been traumatic.

Schools will likely see an increased number of learning, behavioral and emotional problems, from more students. For those who already have emotional and behavioral challenges, these may be exacerbated.

Existing disparities also will be more pronounced. Stressors from the transition back are likely to intensify and may impact learning and teaching.

This guidance document addresses planning considerations for the social and emotional well-being of students and staff during the transition when schools reopen.

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Maximizing Ways to Ensure Your School is Friendly, Welcoming, Helpful, Non-judgmental and Caring

Each initial and subsequent encounter between school staff and students and families presents an opportunity for welcoming our school community (staff, students, families and other stakeholders) and providing support. The following includes considerations for school districts when working toward this:

- **Promote psychological safety.** All the basic tenets of creating psychological safety, a positive culture and trauma-responsive schools will be even more important. Maintaining a trauma-informed approach is critical. Troublesome behaviors are attempts to cope with a feeling of being overwhelmed and should not be punished, but rather understood and addressed in context with compassion and understanding. Utilize the trauma lens (see Appendix A) to understand the range of reactions. When we see student misbehavior, we need to ask what happened (or what is happening) to them vs. what is wrong with them, and then ask what is *strong* with them.
- **Acknowledge what happened and who is not here.** Students or staff members may be struggling because of someone who is missing from their lives. They may not be here because of a transition to middle or high school, graduating, moving to a different school, or unfortunately, because they have passed away. Acknowledge any loss of life that may affect students or your school community. Also acknowledge opportunities, activities or celebrations that may have been lost because of the pandemic.
- **Rapidly identify students who are not successfully transitioning back to school.** To address school readjustment concerns, transition planning should focus on preparing school staff to implement early warning and response procedures that:
 - **Quickly identify any student, family or staff having problems.** They may be more withdrawn, more anxious or depressed, or exhibit some other indicator that the time at home was difficult for them and they would benefit from community mental health services and supports.
 - **Provide personalized supports** to aid those with adjustment problems or exhibiting change that is interfering with their ability to function well in school.
 - **Refer** students in need of additional services.



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Initiate targeted social and mental health supports for those who experience major adjustment problems. This is a time to consider increasing mental health and social/emotional support staff inside schools.

Monitoring for Targeted Supports

Look & Observe

- Basic necessities and practical needs (food, clothing, shelter, medical care, school supplies)
- Psychosocial needs (connection, positive feedback, counseling)
- Academic needs for students and professional supports for staff

Ask & Listen

- Students at all levels
- Families through outreach and offering services
- Staff at all levels, in formal and informal ways

Link

- School-based resources (counselor, family resource and youth service centers, health center)
- Community-based resources (behavioral health provider, grief counselors, health clinic, social services)

Supporting Transitions During the First Weeks

Schools may have to manage a variety of behaviors that jeopardize a positive school climate and may create re-traumatization for students and staff. Unstructured times at school can be challenging and potentially dangerous, especially for vulnerable students. Plan to prevent problems and encourage teaching proactive behavior during daily transitions focused on before school, moving from class to class, breaks, lunch and after school. The emphasis should be on:

- Providing positive supervision and safety and social supports (PBIS principles are key here)
- Providing attractive, well-designed and structured recreational, enrichment and academic support activities and mindful moments
- Responding to problems that arise in real time and framing them as teachable moments.
- Considering referrals to school mental health professionals (school counselors, social workers, psychologists or mental health counselors). If needed, these individuals may



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need to make referrals to community-based behavioral health agencies to assess the mental health needs of our students.

Questions to Consider	Completed
How will everyone – staff, students and families – be welcomed, oriented and positively connected to the school?	
What outreach will be made to those students and families who were expected but did not return?	
How will staff minimize problems during daily transition times (e.g., before school, during breaks, lunch, after school)?	
How will we provide supports for (and not punish/re-traumatize) those not adjusting well?	
How can we incorporate social and emotional learning activities in every classroom, at the beginning, middle or end of every lesson?	
What structures, activities and programming will we have in place to facilitate a culture where everyone feels safe, valued and cared for?	
What resources/ partners are available to assist students who may need additional services?	

Reopening Schools with a Sense of Exciting Renewal: Generating Hope and Resilience

Creating an optimistic mood and sense of excitement for staff requires welcoming and supportive activities that highlight how much everyone is valued and the critical role they play, along with an exciting agenda for renewal; plans for making renewal a reality; new opportunities for engagement of everyone; and some key players (e.g. classified staff) taking on leadership roles.

Consider a kick-off renewal planning group/committee to:

- Publicize what makes the coming year so special (e.g., a colorful handout, a feature on the website, a news release, email announcements, a brief video, etc.)
- Plan several kick-off events, (if these events comply with safety and health guidelines from the Department for Behavioral Health and the Center for Disease and Prevention Control), such as:
 - Keynote presentations by leadership that focus on renewal and hope, followed immediately by small discussion groups focused on ways each stakeholder can play a role in making renewal a reality. Ask what personnel and other stakeholders will need in order to take on a meaningful role.



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- Welcoming events for teachers and staff, families, students and community members (including volunteers), with buddy and mentor systems set up to support newcomers until they are functioning effectively. (Note: Welcoming events are not informational sessions. They are meant to be celebratory and relationship-building. A cap to the series of welcoming events could be a communal picnic open to all stakeholders.)
- First day and first week welcoming and transition supports for all students.
- Substantive orientations and support for newcomers (e.g., teachers, staff, families, students, volunteers).
- Identifying and correcting any problems that arise early in the re-entry process.
- Celebrating work and publicizing outcomes.

Questions to Consider	Completed
How can our leadership team embrace and communicate to staff that we can get through this and that we have an opportunity to create a new perception of our school?	
How can our leadership team show all staff their voice matters and we need their engagement in helping us create kickoff events that will get our students/families excited about the new school year?	
How can we celebrate the return of our staff and students?	
What new traditions can we start that give our staff and students opportunities to be recognized?	

Addressing Grief, Loss and Traumatic Stress for Staff and Students

Preparing Staff to Respond to those Experiencing Grief and Loss

Grieving and traumatic grief disrupt normal functioning. Everyone will need to feel they are in a safe place to express and work through their loss and traumatic stress.

Make sure school staff recognize grief and loss can apply to experiences, milestones, changes as well as the literal loss of people or things – and those losses will feel big to students and should be taken seriously and not dismissed as “less than” other, more impactful losses in the adult world.

Staff should understand the Basic Stages of Grieving (these can occur in any order):

- **Shock:** Usually the first reaction, often experienced as numbness or physical pain and withdrawal.
- **Denial:** Acting as if no loss has occurred to avoid the painful feelings and thoughts.



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- **Depression:** Feeling pain, despair and emptiness is not always accompanied by a visible or expected emotional release such as crying.
- **Guilt:** Self-blame for not having expressed more caring or a belief that the loss was his/her fault.
- **Anxiety:** – Panic reactions as reality sets in.
- **Aggression:** A misdirection of anger and frustration and a lack of control. Trusted teachers may have negative moods and behaviors directed toward them and see that as rejection, when it is a confirmation of the safe space they have created.
- **Reintegration:** Loss is accepted (although there may be periods of relapse).

Helping Others Dealing with Loss

To help others deal with loss:

- **First acknowledge what has happened.** “It’s really hard to lose someone we are close to or know. In our school community, we lost (insert applicable name).” Then normalize the range of emotions that may be experienced. Encourage talking about what happened and how they feel. (“Tell me what you’re feeling.” “I’m so sorry.”) Ensure this conversation is happening in a safe space where there is truly time to communicate, share, empathize and grieve as a group. Remember that adults do not need to hide their own process, challenges or grief. Adults being open and vulnerable likely will encourage students to share. Adults must do this in a regulated manner (i.e. controlled vulnerability).
- **Allow others to express their reactions and then validate the emotions that emerge at each grief stage.** Offer time for them to share feelings and facilitate the process with warmth and understanding. Validate the feelings expressed – even if they seem harsh. There may be expressions of anger, fear, guilt or other emotions that do not seem reasonable to you but feel very real to your student. Some may even indicate relief that what happened to someone else did not happen to them. Others may find it hard to express anything. All students need to be reminded that there is no right or wrong way to feel: It is OK to cry, it is OK to feel numb.
- **Be sure students and staff are prepared for what to say and how to act.** It is critical that they not shy away from someone who is grieving (“Glad you’re here, sorry about your brother.” “When you feel like it, I’m here to listen.”).

Helping Students Who are Grieving and Reluctant to Return to School

There are several ways to help students who are grieving and reluctant to return to school:



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- **Outreach:** A home visit can help assess needs and how to address them. A step-by-step plan can be made with the individual's family.
- **Special support and accommodations at school:** Steps should be in place to inform teachers and other staff about plans and specific ways to help a student or colleague readjust. Supports include connecting the person to special friends and counselors who will be especially supportive, identifying constructive coping strategies to use in school settings, and ensuring the student feels a sense of control in the process.
- **Counseling:** This can help the person through the stages of grief and support strategies to return to school.

Preparing for Understanding and Responding to Traumatic Stress Responses in Students and Staff

Several key COVID-19 stressors include anxiety about exposure and illness; limited connections to others; a limited support system; lack of cognitive stimulation; monotony; limited access to normal coping strategies; stressed family members; limited resources; financial stress; losses and grief; and uncertainty. Here are some of the ways stressors that are experienced may be expressed by students and staff:

Signs of Stress in Students

- Clingy, whiny, tearful, frightened, anxious
- Agitated, hyperactive, over-reactive
- Irritable, impatient, aggressive, angry
- Withdrawn, disengaged, lethargic, depressed, sad, hopeless, suicidal
- Poor concentration, limited comprehension, poor memory
- Vague physical complaints
- Sleep disturbance, appetite disturbance
- Seeking attention, "in your face"

Signs of Stress in Staff

- Anxious, fearful
- Depressed, sad, withdrawn, less engaged, absent
- Irritable, impatient, frustrated, angry, explosive, over-reactive
- Agitated, poor concentration, poor memory
- Vague physical complaints, headaches, GI problems, sleep disturbance, appetite disturbance
- Overwhelmed, confused, difficulty with problem-solving or making decisions
- Loss of creativity, lack of motivation



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Staff and students alike are at risk of an exacerbated stress response if they also have experienced recent loss or history of significant loss; past or current exposure to trauma; pre-existing behavioral health concerns or history of such; limited support systems in family, community or workplace; a feeling of isolation; difficulty with attachment and relationships; or poor or limited coping skills and supports.

Creating a Space Where People Feel Safe, Respected and Cared For

Creating a space where people feel safe, respected and cared for is essential to addressing traumatic stress at the beginning of and throughout the year. The following may help:

- **Consider a whole-school or whole-class brief lesson** on how traumatic stress impacts our brains to help normalize and reduce shame, as well as lessen the likelihood that schools will engage in punitive re-traumatizing reactions.
- **Encourage self-compassion** and provide time, spaces and places for embedding self-care activities for both students and staff. Group spaces, breathing together, journaling time, etc., can be integrated into classroom activities and staff meetings and routines.

Questions to Consider	Completed
What do we have in place to support students and staff who appear to be deeply sad, withdrawn or in distress?	
What community resources do we have to support staff and students?	
Are our counselors situated to handle many individual counseling sessions with students in need?	
What do we have in place to support Tier 3 students (students who we think may be at risk of harming themselves or someone else)?	
Have we made time for our counselors to address the mental health of their students through Tier 1 instruction (whole group guidance) and Tier 2 direct student services (individual or small group counseling)?	
Have we been clear on the protocol for teachers to let counselors know when a student is in distress and how they should go about doing this?	
What other support staff do we have in place to help students who need extra support?	
What buddy/peer support systems can be set up to support connection among students (especially in the case of closing again)?	



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Re-engaging Students Disconnected in Instructional Activity

There are several ways to re-engage students who become disconnected in the class. Here are some suggestions:

- **Understand their mindset.** [Watch this brief video about the Learning Brain vs. the Survival Brain.](#) It explains that when children are in survival mode (Survival Brain), the Learning Brain is stifled. Adults can help students shift into the Learning Brain by creating a physically and psychologically safe environment.
- **Providing student choice and voice is important.** Personalization and differentiation are going to be key in all classrooms. Students are going to come back with varying experiences and responses to the pandemic. For some, engaging in typical teaching and learning activities may be comforting. For others who may be in “survival brain,” they may not have the capacity to interact in this way.
- **Do not make tasks high stakes.** This increases the likelihood of compounding existing stressors.
- **Plan for student engagement** by ensuring our instructional approach honors student needs, circumstances and interests while being relevant and valuable to their lives. Students must perceive the tasks given to them as attainable and worthy of their participation.

Incorporating Brain/Body Breaks into Daily Lessons

Provide brain and body breaks to support both academic and social/emotional learning.

- **Squeeze muscles:** Starting at your toes, pick one muscle and squeeze it tight. Count to five. Release, and notice how your body changes. Repeat exercise moving up your body.
- **Belly breathing:** Put one hand on your stomach and one hand on your chest. Slowly breathe in from your stomach (expand like a balloon) and slowly breathe out (deflate).
- **Mindful meal/snack:** Pay attention to the smell, taste and look of your food. No multitasking.
- **A restful moment:** Sit in a relaxed, comfortable position. Pick something to focus on, like your breath. When your mind wanders, bring your attention back to your breath.
- **Blowing bubbles:** Notice their shapes, textures and colors.
- **Coloring:** Color something. Focus on the colors and designs.



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- **Listening to music:** Focus on the whole song or listen specifically to the voice or an instrument.

(See “Building Resilience” Chart in Appendix B)

Questions to Consider	Completed
What am I doing to create a physically and psychologically safe classroom to support students in both “learning brain” and “survival brain”?	
Are we engaging our students in a manner that honors their voices and choices?	
How do we create tasks that do not convey high stakes or pressure?	
Are our lessons relevant and engaging to the lives of students?	
Am I taking care of myself so I can engage with students in a calm, warm and caring manner?	
How are we going to communicate to students the various help/supports they can reach out to if schools are closed again? (See “Crisis Hotline Information” in Appendix C)	

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Appendix A: Wearing a Trauma Lens

Wearing a Trauma Lens: Shifting our Perspective to Support Students who are Trauma Exposed



"Remember everyone in the classroom has a story that leads to misbehavior or defiance. Nine times out of 10, the story behind the misbehavior won't make you angry, it will break your heart." – K. Ritchie

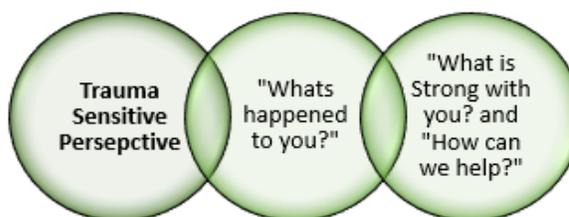
When students act out in school sometimes adults respond using a non-trauma informed lens that labels the student as sick or bad. Actions that result from this perspective (e.g., punishment, exclusion) can often re-traumatize students.



10 Building Blocks of Enduring Relationships

- 1 Awareness of students' life
- 2 Empathy
- 3 High expectations
- 4 Humility
- 5 Unconditional care and forgiveness
- 6 Consistency and predictability
- 7 Intentionality
- 8 Responsiveness to student needs
- 9 Patience and restraint
- 10 Respect and celebration of individuality

- Trauma exposure may result in a profound shift in world view: a child may lose trust in the world as a safe place and no longer trust that people will protect them
- This shift can last long after the trauma has passed and impact relationships and situations that are unconnected to the initial trauma
- The Trauma Lens allows us to understand and recognize the role past and present trauma exposure may have in the current behavior and functioning of a student
- The Trauma Lens appreciates that trauma can cause a pervasive shift in the way youth perceive and relate to every aspect of the world



Instead of responding using the sick/bad perspective, we must consider the function of the behavior and find out how they may have been injured or impacted and, most importantly, how we can help them.

Source: trauma responsive Educator project brief



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Appendix B: Building Resilience

Connection	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Frequent, sustained outreach• Mentors/buddies• Check-in, check-out
Safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Normalize stress response• Look, ask and listen• Model appropriate emotional expression
Nutrition & Exercise	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Healthy snacks• Recess• Movement breaks
Competence	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Frequent, targeted affirmation• Small chunks• Repetition, patience
Empowerment	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Choice• Voice• Flexibility
Self-Regulation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Social/emotional learning and emotional literacy• Mindful focusing• Regular breaks



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Appendix C: Crisis Hotline Information

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: (800) 273-TALK (8255)
Crisis Text Line: 471-471
SAMHSA (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration) Disaster Distress Helpline: Call (800) 985-5990 or text TalkWithUs to 66746 (24/7, 365-days-a-year, toll-free hotline dedicated to providing immediate crisis counseling for people who are experiencing emotional distress related to any natural or human-caused disaster. This multilingual and confidential crisis support service is available to all residents in the United States and its territories).
The Trevor Project: (866) 488-7386 (a national 24-hour, toll-free confidential suicide hotline for LGBTQ youth)
Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance: Online support groups
Al-Anon and Alateen: Online support groups

This guidance is an adaptation from [Volume 25 of the UCLA School Mental Health Project](#).

(JV, DS, MS, MM, MR)