

POLICY BRIEF

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STRATEGY NETWORK

TREPeducator.org/covid-19-ed-conference

The Imperative of Non-Clinical, Therapeutic Classroom Support, After a Crisis: Concerted School-Wide Efforts for Crisis Repair

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The COVID-19 pandemic will eventually subside, with other crisis moments to follow suit, in the future. Our children will return to school, with bright, beautiful faces, atop heavy hearts and wearied souls. Most will be joyful, expressing a desire to want to get back to the consistency, predictability, and safety that school typically offers. Simultaneously, there will be sadness, anger, disappointment, confusion, anxiety, and grief. The care, assurance, hope, and planting of the seeds of resilience will be prerequisite to the learning that meets schools' usual expectations. Educators will not be able to pretend "all is well", for the sake of getting back to the "business" of teaching. Our children will need us to be authentic, relational, caring, and at our very best.

COVID-19 – A Traumatic Event

It must be acknowledged that, long before this crisis, African American and Latino children were already fighting an uphill battle against institutionalized racism and inequality. We know that they were disproportionately affected by poverty and all of its correlative disadvantages – limited educational opportunity and attainment, job skills, employment access and social capital, food insecurity and lack of access to quality health care, increased physical and mental health problems, and direct exposure to violence and crime.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Black and Brown individuals and communities experience disproportionate rates of severe illness and death. There is a greater likelihood of exposure to

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the virus, due to being a critical, service, or agricultural worker, being uninsured/underinsured, not having paid sick leave, living in multigenerational, more densely populated areas, and residential structures that make social distancing implausible, developmental and behavioral disorders that either compromise health or ability to fully understand or communicate early signs of illness. Ultimately, Black and Brown students will be more likely to personally know someone who has been severely impacted or to have died, as a result of the pandemic. All these factors have critically elevated toxic stress levels in the home and, additionally, created a “storm” for those living under conditions of emotional, physical, or sexual abuse. It will be imperative that schools respond accordingly.

After the “Storm”

When the crisis has been mitigated enough for a return to school and work, schools must:

1. Fully acknowledge the higher risk of threat and consequences that our children and their families have faced during the course of the crisis or traumatic event.
2. Support students in processing all they have experienced.
3. Guide them toward resilience.

Without this, students will take matters into their own hands, through acting-out, risky, or self-injurious behaviors, students **will** find ways protect themselves and cope. The emotional dysregulation guiding these behaviors and a punitive disciplinary response, often have an ongoing, cyclical relationship; which leads to a host of negative outcomes that persist across the life span. Schools can be the first (and in some cases, only) line of defense against such results.

Therapeutic school-wide and classroom supports

Students will first look to their classroom teacher as a model for how to handle all they are experiencing. Teachers may be inclined to refer more obviously dysregulated students to the social worker, counselor, or social emotional specialist. The truth is that **all** students will need and deserve additional help through this difficult time. The entire school will need to be set up, by **administrators and a Behavioral Health Team**, with an ongoing, school-wide focus on rebuilding student trust, building resilience, and promoting a familial culture that is understanding and supportive. The **clinician(s)** should be offering weekly classroom or clustered sessions on processing experiences, grief, loss, anxiety, sadness, stress, fear, etc., with a focus on coping strategies and building resilience, after which they provide anchor charts, signs, posters, and other visual references, that ensure continuity across the school. **Classroom**

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teachers can use the clinicians as their model and extend lessons taught, as they provide daily well-being instruction and reinforcement from the classroom teachers. Overall, the administrators, clinicians, and teachers are being asked to sculpt a landscape of supports, resources, and tools that will enable students to achieve the expected academic outcomes.

Thankfully, many teachers are already incorporating effective methods of support for students impacted by trauma, by infusing fun and laughter into the teaching-learning process, engaging students in focused deep breathing, and much more. The following reference tools, provide an effective place for teachers and schools to start or continue forward.¹

Sample Ways to Embed Coping Support into Classroom & School Culture			
Mindfulness is a school-wide expectation and even collective activity 2 to 3 times per day (ex: beginning of the day, after lunch, and just before dismissal).			
Calming centers with common student procedures are set up in EVERY classroom, collective space, and office.			
READING BLOCK includes a shared positive quote for the day that the students have found to be meaningful for them. Each day, the student responsible for the quote can add it to the Hope- or Inspiration-themed bulletin board, area, or calming center, in an organized way.	WRITING BLOCK includes free journaling or shared journal writing between student and teacher.	MATH BLOCK includes rhythmic breathing and movement.	SOCIAL STUDIES PERIOD includes a collective decision-making conversation or guided problem-solving talk. For example, a “What Would You Do” type of question with real-life scenarios, related to topic of lesson or relevant student life experience.
SCIENCE PERIOD includes body awareness activity, such as a body scan, with guided attention to body processes and sensations or soothing sensory input activities	GYM class begins and/or ends with yoga or rhythmic exercise. Remind students that all gym activities are healthy ways to relieve stress or release angry and sad feelings.	MUSIC class begins or ends with mindfulness using music and nature sounds.	ART time begins or ends with guided imagery techniques or visualization, related to scenery discussed in class. When creating art, highlight how the process itself can be an excellent stress reliever.
BUILDING TRANSITIONS are mindful transitions for all students, at all times (as transitions can be extremely difficult for students impacted by trauma). (Refer to TREP project for more information on this.)			

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LUNCH PERIODS are thoughtfully planned and organized as to reduce excessive and triggering movement and noise and ends with mindfulness before students line up calmly.

RECESS expectations are clear and safe with designated areas for different types of play and relaxation. There are specified areas for sitting and talking with friends or relaxing, board games, ball play, personal play equipment, such as hula hoops and jump ropes, etc. Following an identified schoolwide procedure for lining up safely and calmly, recess ends with a school chant and a series of collective deep breaths.

DISCIPLINARY PROCEDURES AND POLICIES are positive, instructional, and restorative.

Easy-to-Teach Coping Strategies

Using sensory input to soothe: soft music, nature sounds, pleasant smells, nature scenes, soothing objects

Relaxing the MIND through mindfulness, meditation, body awareness, visualization, grounding

Relaxing the BODY through breathing, yoga positions, progressive muscle relaxation, self-massage

Personal Inspiration: allow students to bring in or draw pictures of meaningful people in their lives, living or not, who care about them and whose encouraging words could help them through difficult moments. These pictures, perhaps even accompanied by a quote, get taped into the front of a folder, notebook, or planner that is often with the student to look at, whenever they need some additional care, comfort, or encouragement.

Musical Inspiration: have a listening center or include as an option in the calming center a pair of headphones on any music listening device with a mix of calm, soothing music and a few songs the students have contributed or voted on, that they find to be incredibly inspiring during tough times. Students can listen, when they take mental breaks, as needed. Encourage them to make their own encouraging playlists at home.

Shared Journaling: Invite students to do a free write, encouraging them to write out their thoughts and feelings, whenever needed. Once each week, collect their journals and reply in writing to at least one entry.

Create: encourage students to draw, color, or write out their feelings when they notice their emotions or distracting thoughts are preventing them from paying attention in class.

Silent signals: develop a system of using silent signals that allows students to let the teacher know when they need a break, academic help, or emotional support. Be sure there is a prominently displayed anchor chart.

Anchor charts: every coping strategy taught by teacher or school clinician should be placed on an anchor chart which becomes a menu of options for students to choose from when they notice signs of agitation or distress.

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¹ Additional citations for further reading:

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