

POLICY BRIEF

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TREPeducator.org/covid-19-ed-conference

COVID-19 Recommended School Responses to Support Teacher Well-Being

by Stacy Overstreet & the New Orleans Trauma-Informed Schools Learning Collaborative

From a needs assessment performed by the New Orleans Trauma-Informed Schools Learning Collaborative (NO-TIS LC),¹ over 50% of teachers expressed concern that neither they nor their schools will be adequately prepared to address the stress and trauma students and teachers likely experienced during the pandemic. Over 50% also expressed concern that their schools will not be able to sufficiently balance the well-being of their students with the demands to make up for lost instructional time.

As we resume schooling in the midst of the pandemic, our recommendations for charter network and school leaders are primarily focused on the needs of teachers and are organized around the key principles of trauma-informed care and drawn heavily from recent guidance from the National Child Traumatic Stress Network.²

Cultural Humility and Equity

Administration should create school supports for teachers that consider their individual context, culture, and challenges. This includes checking in with teachers to learn what has been most stressful and most helpful to them during the pandemic, designing supports to meet the individual needs of teachers, and, in particular, identifying ways to support Black teachers who are bearing the brunt of the health impacts of COVID-19 while also facing greater family responsibilities. Schools must recognize power imbalances and work to change them by holding institutions accountable to standards of educational equity.

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It is essential to ensure access to technology and educational resources to all students and teachers.

Teachers should be provided with a clear plan for how the school will provide access to technology and learning materials to all students, including those receiving special education services and arts education. Teachers should be able to share how experiences of inequities are impacting students and their families, and have the chance to act as advocates for students' needs.

Safety, Trustworthiness, and Transparency

To ensure the safety of educators and students, schools and districts need to develop a school reopening plan based on the latest public health guidelines provided by the Centers for Disease Control for hygiene, social distancing, and protective equipment. Teachers need protective equipment, sanitizing supplies, and monitoring tools to maximize physical safety. To prioritize the wellbeing of teachers, schools should consider flexible work and leave policies that allow vulnerable teachers and staff to work from home and to care for a family member who may have been exposed to COVID-19.

It also helps to create routines and enact a clear instructional plan, including acknowledging stress that has resulted from routines that have already changed. Schools should maintain clear, concise, accurate, and timely communication to increase predictability, a sense of control, and feelings of safety.

Collaboration and Mutuality

Schools should engage and collaborate with teachers in planning for the future. This could be by establishing a teacher advisory group to identify instructional successes and challenges to inform planning and to provide periodic feedback on plan implementation. This would send and reinforce the message that teachers, support staff, and administrators “are in this together.”³

Support collaboration with families, such as asking families about the best times for and methods of communication. It is also important to maintain up-to-date contact information for families, provide administrative support to teachers when contact cannot be made, and create clear guidelines for family contact. Another possibility would be to create a community advisory group that can help support individual teachers in making and sustaining contact with families and identify community resources available to support family well-being. Teachers should be

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given opportunities for professional development to foster partnerships with families to enhance learning and well-being, and training sessions could be offered for families to increase their familiarity with instructional technology when school opens.

Support from Peers and Administrators

Create rituals and routines that provide opportunities for teachers to connect with one another and with school administrators to develop and sustain positive, supportive relationships. Embrace a stance of cultural humility and talk with teachers about the best ways to build a sense of safety, community, connection and hope. Gauge the success of efforts to create supportive relationships and a positive work environment through the regular assessment of school climate.

Provide supports for teacher well-being and mental health. Review mental health benefits included in employee health insurance packages with teachers so they know how to activate benefits, and provide a list of resources for mental health and well-being. Schools can improve access to mental health services through access to telehealth services, an on-site adult mental health service provider, flex time in teacher schedules, and increasing financial feasibility through benefits packages. Teachers should also be informed about secondary traumatic stress and strategies for prevention, and schools should encourage teachers to take time throughout the school day to manage their stress, utilize professional development time to offer strategies for coping with stress, and sponsor wellness activities such as yoga or meditation.

Empowerment, Voice, and Choice

Provide training, resources, and time to empower teachers to help their students manage stress and trauma. This would include providing specific guidance for teachers on how to talk with students using developmentally appropriate language about Covid-19 and physical safety guidelines, including changes in routines and social rituals due to safety concerns, and training on the impact of trauma on student learning and behavior. Schools should incorporate integrative, comprehensive practices into the school day to support students in the classroom, such as trauma-informed approaches or social emotional learning (SEL) programs, along with accountability system to ensure the uptake of these practices.

Provide training and resources to support distance learning and academic remediation. Although teachers experienced many successes in the transition to distance learning, their comments indicated that there is still a lot for them to learn. They indicated a need for further

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training in the best practices in distance learning. They also indicated a need for additional staff support and tools to assess and address gaps in learning as a result of the pandemic.

Conclusions

As network and school leaders feel the push to develop operating plans and budgets that will be effective in closing the learning gap that has occurred during the pandemic, we hope they will feel an equal push to develop plans and set aside funds to support the well-being of teachers and students. If we are to assuage a devastating mental health fallout like the one we experienced following Hurricane Katrina, we must attend to the social, emotional, and behavioral well-being of students and staff.⁴

The New Orleans Trauma-Informed Schools Learning Collaborative is developing a webinar and planning tool for network and school leaders to help schools plan for high-quality social emotional supports for school reentry and beyond. We are also working in partnership with local experts to develop a suite of online professional development resources to support many of the recommendations included in this report. Those resources will be available to all schools.

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¹ The complete report can be obtained by emailing Stacy Overstreet at soverst@tulane.edu.

² National Child Traumatic Stress Network (2020). *Trauma-informed school strategies during Covid-19*. NCTSN. <https://www.nctsn.org/resources/trauma-informed-school-strategies-during-covid-19>; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2014). *SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach*. HHS Publication No. (SMA) 14-4884. Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

³ National Child Traumatic Stress Network (2020). *Trauma-informed school strategies during Covid-19*. NCTSN. <https://www.nctsn.org/resources/trauma-informed-school-strategies-during-covid-19>

⁴ Osofsky, H., Osofsky, J., Kronenberg, M., Brennan, A., Cross Hansel, T. (2009). Posttraumatic stress symptoms in children after Hurricane Katrina: Predicting the need for mental health services. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 79, 212 – 220.