



Evidence-Based Guidance for How Schools Can Respond to A National Mental Health Crisis in the Wake of COVID-19

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PREFACE

The conference brought together researchers, policymakers, and practitioners to provide evidence-based guidance for the role that schools can play as the primary social institution responsible for influencing the well-being of children and youth during this national crisis.

Based on research from previous disasters we can be hopeful that most children will exhibit resilience in the face of this traumatic event. However, serious mental health challenges may be exhibited by as many as 1 in 3 children in families that have been affected by the virus or by the economic destabilization.

Before COVID-19 schools were already American children's primary source of mental health care; only 16% of American children receive mental health care and over 70% of those children receive that care in a school setting.

Educators are in a well-placed position to identify students in distress and provide psychological and emotional support. Research done in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina showed that better outcomes were found for students who expressed their distress to their teachers and were met with a supportive response. To aid educators in preparing for the challenge ahead we have developed a set of summer [professional learning courses](#).

The Evidence-Based Case for Removing Police from Schools

As the conference neared it became clear that it would be important to address the role of schools and educators in supporting youth to transform institutions that maintain structural racism.

In keeping with the conference goals of supporting educators to make evidence-based decisions, I provide a brief summary of what is known about the effects of police officers in schools.

The documented [ineffectiveness of police in schools](#) for improving safety is compounded by the fact that they are [especially damaging](#) in school districts that predominantly serve Black and brown students.

The presence of police officers in schools [increases the likelihood of students being shuttled into the justice system](#) for virtually every offense that occurs in schools, including minor offenses like fighting and theft for which children and youth should be counseled not arrested. This directly contributes to racial inequality because police officers are more likely to be in urban, mostly minority schools.

[Here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#) are more evidence of the ineffectiveness and harm created by police in schools. ***The safety of our schools is paramount and police in schools is one of the least effective ways of achieving that.***

During this period of massive budget shortfalls, school districts should not be paying millions of dollars for a practice that has shown to at best have [no effect on safety](#) and at worst [harm children's life outcomes](#). Two studies that came out in 2019, one on [New York](#) schools and one on [Texas](#) schools, show how increased police presence in schools negatively affects students' educational outcomes.

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Schools should replace police and security staff with social workers, youth workers, and counselors with the dedicated role of using evidence-based strategies for [increasing school safety](#).

A tumultuous academic year has ended but the educational challenge is just beginning. Together we can rise to meet the many challenges ahead.

Sincerely,



Micere Keels

Founding Director of the TREP Project
Associate Professor, University of Chicago

Session videos and individual briefs can be accessed on the conference webpage

TREPeducator.org/covid-19-ed-conference

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INTRODUCTION TO THE BRIEFS

This conference on how schools can plan for the growing child mental health crisis was an effort to respond to one of the many consequences of an unprecedented global crisis. As schools around the country began to close, jobs were lost, and death tolls began to rise, it became clear that every aspect of our society was going to be affected by COVID-19.

The pressures placed on all schools, and especially those serving students from vulnerable families and communities illuminated the infinite ways that educators and schools provide for youth. Districts were challenged to find new ways to serve students who did not have internet access, whose parents could not home-school them, and who no longer had guaranteed breakfast and lunch. Schools were also suddenly tasked with finding ways to help students cope with the loss of family members and friends.

Although all students' school routines have been disrupted, educational destabilization and learning loss are most pronounced among children in low-income communities and schools. Because of historical ties between race and economic marginalization, many of these children also face the burden of racial trauma that is heightened during this time of civil unrest in the fight against systemic racism and police brutality. Racial trauma compounds COVID-19 mental health challenges and increases the need for educators to strengthen their use of social and emotional, social justice, and culturally responsive practices.

This collection of policy and practice briefs brings together the expertise of a diverse group of education professionals from across the U.S., for the shared purpose of providing guidance for educators, administrators, and policymakers as we continue forward.

The briefs are focused on actionable recommendations and strategies for creating an emotionally supportive school environment for all, but especially for students coping with trauma. In the following pages, panelists provide strategies for teachers as they plan for how they will help students manage the mental and emotional impacts of COVID-19; illustrate how we can reframe our perception of undesired behavior from a disciplinary issue to a social emotional learning opportunity; give guidance on how educators can build students' emotional intelligence; and detail the benefits of various classroom strategies such as differentiation.

Many panelists also addressed the current political moment by highlighting the social justice implications of how racial and economic inequality and structural violence impact not only the experiences of students, but also the expectations of teachers and distribution of resources available to schools.

A cascade of traumatic events is happening, and we can intervene before lasting traumatization sets in. All educators have a role to play by supporting children and youth as they navigate many complex thoughts and feelings that they may not yet have the emotional vocabulary to express. We hope that the guidance provided in this collection of briefs are useful for district leaders, school administrators, and individual educators as they begin to strategize and contemplate a trauma responsive future for schools, whether in-person or online.

Sincerely,
Alle, Hilary, & Joanna
Policy Brief Editorial Team

OPENING SESSION

The Importance of Centering
Psychological and Emotional Trauma in
Planning for the Coming Academic Year



Understanding and Responding to Mental Health Needs of Very Young Students: Holding a COVID-19 Perspective

by Jordana Ash, Hemera Foundation

Both children and educators may have overwhelming and upsetting feelings during this worldwide pandemic. Grounding policy and practice responses in developmental neuroscience can ensure that educators, schools, and families have the tools to help children be resilient and establish schools as an essential partner in healing.

Substantial advancements in neuroscience have clearly identified the impact of early experiences and environments on the developing brain. The earliest relationships with caregivers can promote healthy brain development, affect how young children build social and emotional skills, and set the stage for language and literacy development starting at birth and beyond. It is in society's interest to strengthen the foundations of healthy brain architecture in all young children to maximize the return on future investments in education, health, and workforce development.¹

These considerations have never been more important than in the time of COVID 19. Children's development has not paused, and these young children, their families, and teachers need support as never before. The stress of this extraordinarily stressful time gets worse for those dealing with poverty, racism, or violence. Because of these systemic inequities, both immediate and long-term impacts will not be evenly distributed.² Data gathered during the pandemic indicates that parents experiencing job loss, job insecurity, high community mortality, and lack of access to resources are reporting more mental health issues.³ These are the family circumstances affecting many school children.

School becomes a touchstone for millions of children as a place of safety and stability when home is not always so. Educators and educational settings have always played a significant role in supporting children's emotional well-being in addition to their academic growth. Therefore, it is important to ground any school district or building policy in best practice information. Fortunately, like the strides made in understanding core brain development and functioning, great progress has been made in understanding the nature of toxic stress, adversity, and trauma on the developing brain and body. Understanding how this pandemic relates to trauma and affects children's growth, development and relationships will set the stage for effective, responsive educational systems of care.

The [National Child Traumatic Stress Network \(NCTSN\)](#) provides current, topical data-driven information about trauma and its effects of people of all ages. Traumatic reactions can include a variety of responses: intense and ongoing emotional upset, depressive symptoms or anxiety, behavioral changes, self-regulation difficulties, social and attachment problems, regression or loss of previously acquired skills, academic difficulties, nightmares, difficulty sleeping and eating, and physical symptoms, such as aches and pains. Educators can expect to see some of these behaviors in some or most of their students depending on the experiences these children had prior to the abrupt changes wrought by COVID-19.

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However, it is critical to remember that even when children experience a traumatic event, they do not always develop traumatic stress. Many factors contribute to symptoms, including whether the child has experienced trauma in the past. Protective factors at the child, family, and community levels can reduce the adverse impact of trauma. Close, caring relationships with important adults in children's lives have been shown to reduce the likelihood that traumatic events result in child traumatic stress.⁴ School leaders can plan now to create opportunities for protecting children from the effects of these experiences by:

- Designating an adult with whom each child can form or deepen a relationship in the school setting can serve as a buffer to traumatic stress.
- Restoring a sense of safety through consistent, predictable routines throughout the school day reassures children and adults alike.
- Building emotional literacy and allowing the expression of feelings helps children gain emotional regulation.

Mental Health Consultation as a Resource for Collaboration

Mental health consultation focuses on building the capacity of the adults in children's lives so children are supported in all settings where they learn and grow, including preschool, childcare and home visiting programs. Mental health consultants are highly trained licensed or license-eligible professionals such as clinical social workers or psychologists with specialized knowledge in childhood development, the effects of stress and trauma on families and caregivers, and the impacts of adult mental illness on developing. Mental health consultants partner with schools to promote social and emotional well-being of all children and help teachers and administrators identify children who are struggling with mental health issues, trauma, or other family concerns and are in need of extra intervention. This approach has been shown to reduce suspensions and expulsions in the early years, reduce behavior concerns and improve children's social and emotional skills, in addition to reducing childcare provider stress, burnout and turnover.⁵ While funding and scope of this approach may differ from state to state, the [Center of Excellence for Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation](#) can provide resources and network linkages for schools.

Mental Health Toolkits and Activities

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the pace at which schools are taking steps to recognize and respond to the mental health needs of young students. The [Colorado School Mental Health Toolkit](#) is an example of a blueprint for school mental health services that can guide community members, schools, local leaders, and districts through 10 best practices, including strategies for implementing, funding, and sustaining mental health services in schools. The [toolkits](#) bring critical attention to the role played by schools during and in the aftermath of disasters and make the case for schools to implement practices such as screenings, suicide prevention, and wellness plans. Teachers can incorporate educational activities that are developmentally appropriate for young students, foster positive, supportive relationships, and focus on young students' emotional and physical well-being. These [activities](#) are applicable in digital or in class formats, making them especially suited for planning during this time of so many unknowns.

Jordana Ash is the director of strategic partnerships at the Hemera Foundation where she oversees early childhood and adolescent mental health programs. She recently served as Colorado's first state director of early childhood mental health in the Colorado Office of Early Childhood, leading policy, practice and research efforts across state agencies and community organizations.

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NOTES

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Learning from Hurricanes to Plan for the Aftermath of COVID-19

Previously published in 2019 as a fact sheet from UNC-Chapel Hill and Gibson Consulting Group

by Cassandra R. Davis, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill

“Our kids came to us even after the storm because it was their sense of normalcy. They were taken care of here.” – teacher

After a disaster hits, schools must manage recovery efforts that consider the needs of their students, staff, facilities, and communities. Disaster recovery requires assessing damage and being creative to address difficult situations when resources are limited.

A research team from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Gibson Consulting Group conducted interviews and surveys in school districts recovering from Hurricane Matthew and Hurricane Harvey. Through this data collection, researchers identified common challenges facing schools during disaster recovery, as well as promising practices to mitigate these challenges.

Issues and Promising Practices

Hurricanes Matthew and Harvey created immediate and long-term disruptions to life. Students and staff experienced personal loss ranging from minor damage to total loss of home. The impacts on school facilities ranged from minor flooding to total loss of building and supplies. Some schools, undamaged by the storm, experienced displacement challenges as they took in students and teachers from other campuses.

Interview participants recommended that school and district personnel should adhere to the following:

- **Return to a familiar routine quickly.** Participants described that routines provide a sense of normalcy during a period of displacement and disruption for both students and staff.
- **Accepting aid requires vulnerability.** Participants recommended that educators should be open about personal experiences when requesting and receiving aid. Through this process of openness, individuals will be more transparent, honest, and comfortable when talking about specific school and district needs.

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In Their Words	Lessons Learned
<p>“[Teachers] are having to miss more work than they normally would have, which affects the instructional time and affects their days off and affects their ability to deliver instruction.”</p> <p>- District personnel</p>	<p>Instructional time was lost due to school closures, a presence of social-emotional and physical needs, students and staff absences, and other disruptions. Participants expressed a need for administrators to acknowledge the personal recovery efforts that must take place outside school.</p> <p>Overall recommendations encouraged administrators to focus on the following after school reopen:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Provide teachers with recommendations on how to compress the required curriculum or prioritize content. - Reconsider what is required from students and staff (e.g., relax dress code, reduce homework, and overlook absences).
<p>“The mental piece, the stress of it, trying to come to school, losing everything that you possibly may have had.... It takes them out of their comfort zone.”</p> <p>- Principal</p>	<p>Mental health and social-emotional needs took a new prominence after the storm. Interview findings highlighted weather-related anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress, self-harm, exhaustion, and survivor’s guilt.</p> <p>Participants recommended that administrators:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ensure that appropriate counseling services are available for both students and staff. - Be responsive to evolving issues that may persist in the days, months, and years of recovery. Participants indicated that there is a need for short- and long-term support services following a storm.
<p>“[Staff] were dealing with things on their own personal end and our administration was understanding of that. You can’t care for others if you’re not on point with your game.”</p> <p>- District Personnel</p>	<p>Findings revealed that participants depended on the support provided to them by colleagues and administrators as they dealt with personal recovery as well as increased work demands.</p> <p>To promote a supportive school culture, participants recommended:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Promote and encourage staff collaboration. - Be flexible with time off. Staff need the ability to leave for meetings about home repair, etc. while continuing to do their job. - Ensure staff continues to be paid during the disaster. Continual payment is vital for participants’ morale and personal recovery.
<p>“There are resources out there. Don’t be scared to ask for what you need for your kids.”</p> <p>- Teacher</p>	<p>During a disaster, communication is essential, but there are more opportunities for communication to break down. Interviewed participants expressed an interest in receiving communication immediately after the storm from local, state, and federal agencies regarding information on school calendars, testing, access to resources, and insurance.</p> <p>Additionally, participants recommended that all educators overall should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Use a variety of tools to communicate with people (e.g., some outlets are checked by parents more regularly than others). - Ensure that messaging is consistent across organizations and personnel to reduce confusion. - Know what needs exist at your school(s). Participants reported that communicating needs to districts, state agencies, and community groups is critical.

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Implications for Policy and Practice

Being hit by a hurricane creates many challenges. Schools must balance repairing facilities and estimating damages to equipment while supporting students and staff through a traumatic event. During the recovery process, schools should aim to provide a routine that enables students and staff to have a sense of normalcy. Policymakers at the state and district levels can support educators' return to normalcy by ensuring that schools are aware of resources available to aid recovery efforts. Additionally:

1. Policymakers could **waive requirements** for testing or announce decisions about testing requirements by the time schools reopen.
2. Policymakers could **increase the availability of mental health resources** to schools in the immediate aftermath of the storm and in the months of recovery.
3. Districts can **adopt a flexible leave policy** to support staff who are managing personal recovery efforts and taking on increased demands at work.
4. Policymakers at all levels should **be in continual communication** during the recovery process so they are able to address evolving issues and present a consistent message to the public.

Cassandra R. Davis is a research assistant professor in the Department of Public Policy at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Her current areas of interest include environmental disruptions to schooling, education policy, qualitative research methods, and social and historical context in education.

Psychological and Emotional Well-Being in the Context of Outbreaks and Stress: Practices for Educators in Urban Contexts

by Tanetha Grosland, University of South Florida, Tampa

The current pandemic presents serious issues for educators and students alike. It certainly will be a traumatic experience for students, with children and teenagers likely to lose focus or experience serious emotional states of fear, overwhelm, and stress.¹ Educators similarly will have gone through the trauma of the pandemic, while also attempting to manage and address the needs of their students, meaning the emotional wellbeing of students and educators are at risk.

This is particularly true in urban areas, which are being heavily impacted as they manage the effects of massive unemployment rates that disproportionately impact how families in urban areas meet their basic needs (e.g., shelter, food, and safety) due to racialization and disproportionate health care.² Considering these overlapping health issues and emotional concerns, educator well-being needs to be examined and addressed.³

Maslow's hierarchy of needs reminds us that humans must meet their basic and psychological needs before they can adequately, or at all, engage in creative pursuits—including the process of educating.⁴ This leaves educators with questions like: *What can we do to address these critical issues and the overlapping workplace demands? How do we keep personnel and staff emotionally healthy so they can show up to work, be in the best mindset possible, and fully carry out their professional responsibilities?*

In order for teachers to feel able to adequately address the mental health challenges resulting from the pandemic, and foster a healthy, productive learning space, strategies need to be in place to manage stress and prioritize mental health in the classroom for both students and teachers.

Address Workplace Emotions in the Workspace

When educators return to the classroom, they will not only be handling their own stress from the pandemic, but will need to witness and respond to the psychological impacts children will be experiencing. If teachers do not have the support and resources they need to manage this stress, it will almost certainly have an adverse effect on their students. Children typically respond to situations based on how the adults around them respond, yet many adults do not understand how their workplace emotions affect their practices.⁵ Therefore, they dismiss these emotions as a non-workplace concern or ignore their emotions overall.

If educators do not plan how they will address emotions now, many educators will likely leave the profession altogether.⁶ Such planning requires leadership implementing institutionalized policies (school-based and/or beyond) that make it safe for educators to experience emotions in the workplace. Any one in a school can implement a policy – as they are all stakeholders. Of course, involving leadership (teachers, administrators), educators, community members, and students make for a robust team to develop and implement policy. A

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policy of this type might be a school-based policy concerning the health wellness for educators. Educators can publicly negotiate contractual pay for their workplace-added stress in the context of conflict and trauma.⁷ Other ideas include, developing a policy to have a wellbeing coach for educators, in which they have a specific time of day that is built in, to design individual strategies to address their own wellbeing concerns. This would involve the steps like: designating a grant writing team, writing a grant, hiring substitutes to cover coaching time, and developing a schedule. It is critical for educators working within communities hit hard by racialized housing segregation, like Baltimore, Detroit, and Chicago, receive the support needed to feel any emotions without stuffing or shaming so they can then model resilience and emotional curiosity to students and families.⁸ If educators cannot feel safe enough to experience their own emotions at schools and universities, how are they to facilitate this for the communities they serve?

Use Emotional Literacy

Talking with children about their emotional experiences is key to coping during this time of extreme stress and is helpful for students of any age and in any type of program.⁹ In particular, using a framework of action research or inquiry during educator healing circles regarding critical incidents is a promising approach. A framework of inquiry is a process that systematizes professional critical thinking.¹⁰ Inquiry takes up emotions as a way of informing practice, rather than just discussing emotions to simply talk about them. This lessens judgment about emotional incidents, since these incidents are instead used to change the way we approach educating.

Inquiry becomes a powerful tool to professional learning when teaching any student, at any age, and in any context (online, in person, or elsewhere) thus helping build their own emotional leadership. Outlining action research in the classroom, for example, includes:

1. Develop a wondering about emotional health in your everyday workplace experiences
2. Collect data in your workplace related to your question (statistical, talk, student work, or your own journal observations)
3. Analyze/organize the data by looking for themes, reoccurrences, and/or critical incidents
4. Write down what you found from your data organizing
5. Develop a strategy based on your theme to improve ways to connect emotionally
6. Share your action research with other professionals and community members
7. Implement the strategy

Strengthening emotional fortitude in the workplace also enables educators to better help their students develop the ability to effectively respond to change.¹¹

Accept Emotions to Change Emotions

Accepting emotions without attempting to change them is an important first step in protecting and promoting the wellbeing of educators. When followed by a framework of inquiry, educators can use students' stories to inform practice and go deeper. Enduring a global pandemic is a novel time to plan to practice leadership skills in the context of stress that actually move humanity forward and not stifle communities in fear.

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Tanetha Grosland is an Assistant Professor in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at the University of South Florida, Tampa. She is interested in what it means to understand, not just policy itself, but rather, what urban educators' experiences with policy and what they consider to be important social policy in their everyday lives.

NOTES

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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.

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.

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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 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

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a lot for them to learn. They indicated a need for further 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.

Stacy Overstreet is a Professor in the Department of Psychology at Tulane University. Her research focuses on the implementation and evaluation of multitiered trauma-informed school-based mental health services. She is a founding member of the New Orleans Trauma-Informed Schools Learning Collaborative.

NOTES

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SESSION 1

Frameworks for Thinking About the
Prioritization of Social and Emotional
Learning and Mental Health for
Academic Gains



Social Emotional Planning Considerations for Returning to School

by David Adams, Urban Assembly

As schools prepare for the eventual return to in-person instruction, there are certain considerations that will best support the social emotional responses of our students and teachers when coping with the challenges of recent months. Research and practice have demonstrated that the following strategies will help support students in this transition back into school.

Create a safe and predictable learning environment for returning students

Learning is inherently a social and emotional process. During quarantine, students have faced different amounts of stressors and have had access to different levels of support at home and in the larger school community. Creating a safe and predictable learning environment increases a student's capacity for learning by reducing the emotional load of an unpredictable or chaotic school climate. This can be achieved by focusing on **social awareness** – staff and students' ability to demonstrate an awareness of the role and values of others in the greater community.

This social awareness could take many forms. One example would be rituals that welcome students back to school and provide an opportunity to reconnect with their previous year's teacher and classmates to facilitate the transition into the new year. Students would also benefit from consistent schedules for the first month that rebuild predictability and reduce their emotional load. Lastly, students should actively participate in the development of the norms that guide interactions in their school in order to practice developing community by creating a shared understanding about how they want to be treated and how they will treat others.

Model self-awareness by narrating the emotional component of learning and relationships

Students internalize ideas by watching peer and adult models. When adults narrate the emotional component of their reactions, it validates that students can responsibly express their needs and emotions in the classroom. Teachers should prioritize **self-awareness** in the classroom by providing opportunities for students to recognize who they are, what they need, and how they feel relative to the world around them. Additionally, teachers can help students label their emotional responses by teaching and modeling the use of emotion words that help students make sense of their feelings and identity.

Staff and students' ability demonstrate an awareness of other people's roles, their emotions and perspectives or **social awareness**, is another critical component of re-entry. Teachers should pay attention to student emotional responses during work, play, and problem-solving activities and act as a "emotion detective", seeking to understand the root causes of student thinking and behavior. They should also create opportunities to listen to student perspectives and build relationships by providing spaces for students to make personal connections to themselves and the instructional content.

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Be intentional about building relationships within your class between students and between you and your students

Emotions drive attention, and attention drives learning. Students pay attention to people they care about and who care about them. Build time in your classroom to actively develop the relationships between students in your class, but don't let them have all the fun – join in on the **relationship building** as well! Students will reflect what adults and peers model.

One way to support this would be to open the year with meaningful group activities that allow students to engage in shared problem solving to build connections. An example is an icebreaker with teacher participation that focuses on purposeful interactions that allow students to communicate about themselves while problem solving. Additionally, students should take the driver's seat in the development of the norms that guide interactions in their classroom and school.

Emphasize cooperative learning activities that support social emotional skill development

Teachers should align their instructional formats and approaches to the principles of cooperative learning. The five principles of cooperative learning approaches are:

1. Positive Interdependence
2. Social Skills
3. Individual Accountability
4. Group Evaluation
5. Face-to-Face Interaction.

This can be achieved by focusing on using positive communication and social skills to interact effectively with others and teaching skills like **active listening** and turn taking to facilitate their social interactions and group problem solving. Students will also get the chance to develop **social awareness**, demonstrating consideration for others and a desire to positively contribute to their community, by developing tasks that include positive interdependence to help students value working together as a group.

Explicitly teach social emotional learning skills

More than ever, teachers and students need to be consciously skilled in self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision making. This occurs when teachers explicitly teach, model, and integrate social emotional learning skills throughout the day.

Many students have faced difficult circumstances while being away from school during COVID-19. Adopting these recommendations will help ensure that your school or classroom will contribute to your students' resilience and offers a supportive learning environment where all students can thrive.

David Adams is the Director of Social-Emotional Learning at The Urban Assembly. He previously served as the Social-Emotional Learning Coordinator for District 75 where he shaped the District's approach to social-emotional learning for students with severe cognitive and behavioral challenges. He has worked internationally

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in schools in England, standing up and evaluating programs of positive behavioral supports and Social-Emotional Learning as a research intern at Yale University's Health, Emotion and Behavior Lab, and published multiple academic papers around the relationship of social-emotional competence, and student academic and behavioral outcomes. He is married with two children, serves on the Board of Directors of CASEL and is a Civil Affairs Officer in the Army Reserve. David holds an M.Ed. in Educational Psychology from Fordham University.

Addressing Traumatic Stress and Academic Regression with Social Emotional Learning

by Cathleen Beachboard

As schools start making COVID-19 contingency plans for next school year, a second lurking crisis is about to show up in school systems and classrooms everywhere – traumatic stress. Before this pandemic even started, almost half the nation’s children had experienced at least one or more types of serious childhood trauma. This pandemic, unfortunately, is adding to that trauma with its far-reaching ripple effects from families losing jobs and income, people going hungry, children seeing family members sick and dying, and a looming fear to leave home due to threat of illness. Even the parents or guardians who students normally turn to for stability may be overwhelmed trying to keep their own mental health stable.

Addressing the mental health of students is going to be critical in the future of classroom practices. Especially with the research on childhood trauma showing that prolonged traumatic stresses has the potential to leave students with impaired ability to learn, heightened anxiety, and lifelong health problems.¹ The good news is that by using trauma informed practices with social emotional learning (SEL), teachers have the ability to relieve the weighted impact of traumatic stress.²

SEL Increases Long-Term Achievement and Positive Classroom Behaviors

Social emotional learning is no longer an option with rising amounts of traumatic stress due to this pandemic. It is a necessity and is also critical to addressing academic skill regression and learning loss in students. The more positive mental supports schools provide students the less they will be affected by traumatic stress. Research has shown that students who participated in SEL programs showed remarkable gains over students who did not.³ Those same students also showed improved classroom behavior, an increased ability to manage stress and depression, and better attitudes about themselves, others, and school. In addition, this study discovered that SEL has the ability to give at-risk students the tools they need to overcome obstacles and plug into their education for long-term achievement.

There is also evidence to suggest that including SEL in school curricula can help promote resilience and therefore increase academic achievement. However, fearing academic regression and finite time schools may consider eliminating SEL to focus on core subjects. The logic behind this decision, that more time for content delivery will better the gains for students academically, is mistaken.

Quick SEL Practices for the Classroom: Mental Health Check-Ins and Self-Care Plans

SEL can work in tandem with teaching academic content and enhance the teaching of the content presented. For example, Mental-Health Check-Ins can be conducted at the start of class in a few minutes and can significantly enhance the amount of learning a student does in class. According to one study, “simply talking about our problems and sharing our negative emotions with someone we trust can be profoundly healing—reducing stress, strengthening our immune system, increasing academic attention and reducing physical and emotional distress.”⁴

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Communication helps with coping and healing. Teachers can create spaces—even remotely—where every student can check in. Communication allows teachers to gain insight on student safety concerns, feedback, and levels of traumatic stress. This small practice can be done in a few minutes of time in which a teacher asks students to rate their feelings and asks if they need individual assistance before they start learning. This allows the teacher to provide SEL practices and coping mechanisms as they are needed by students. It also allows the teacher to get an overall gauge of the class mood and helps the teacher use the data to plan SEL lessons for the whole class based off trends in Mental Health Check Ins.

Teachers can also use the practice of creating self-care plans to help students learn and refine SEL skills. A self-care plan is an intervention that can give students a sense of control and prevents them from being completely consumed by emotional reactions due to traumatic stress. As students create their own, they also develop ownership and autonomy. When an educator knows a student's individual plan, they gain insight into the strategies, activities, and tools students have to deal with traumatic stress.

Self-care plans start by asking students to identify support structures and activities that help them feel better such as music, exercise, coloring, art, or meditation. Students also identify one or two people with whom they have a good relationship and to whom they feel they can turn for help and support. After completing the support section, students list stressors that might act as hurdles to their mental well-being. This section serves as a guide for moments when they might use their self-care plan. This small practice will help students in times of overwhelming stress and provide them with the confidence that they have internal capacities to face traumatic stress. This simple practice takes minimal time and yields massive benefits to the teacher and student.

SEL is not one more thing for schools to do, it is an integral part to a child's academic, social, and emotional development. It yields gains in academics, provides mental safety for students, and can coincide with content, therefore not adding anything to a teacher's "plate". If schools want to truly help at-risk students, get greater gains in academic achievement, and deal with the traumatic stress from this pandemic utilizing SEL is necessary and critical as a whole school practice. The future of the COVID-19 pandemic is uncertain, but the mental health of our students should not be.

Cathleen Beachboard is a teacher, writer, speaker, mother to 7 children, and mental health advocate. She is the author of *10 Keys to Student Empowerment*, a motivational speaker focused on student mental health, and a blogger for *MiddleWeb*, *Edutopia*, and *Eduweek*.

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COVID Considerations Regarding the Social and Emotional Health of Students

by Matthew Portell, Fall-Hamilton Elementary

COVID-19 was an unexpected interruption in lives of people globally, and schools are no exception. The educational approach moving forward must be traversed with delicacy and purpose, using what we know about the impact of trauma on the neurodevelopment and stress response systems with children and adults while also imbedding the core principal of supporting the social and emotional health both teachers and students.

What is Trauma?

According to the [American Psychological Association](#), trauma is defined as “an emotional response to a terrible event.” It can lead to shock and denial, or in the longer term, emotional disturbances and physical symptoms like headaches. Both children and adults who experience an inability to protect themselves may also feel overwhelmed by the intensity of physical and emotional responses.

Physical and Safety Considerations

It is imperative to preview the global response within education as the conversation moves from concluding the 2019-2020 school year to launching the 2020-2021 school year. However, the [considerations for a safe environment](#) – social distancing, health screenings, and small class sizes, for example – are going to be difficult to accomplish considering the current financial strain and cuts to districts/schools, and the needs and resources of students. However, my greatest concern lies in the social and emotional health of our students while trying to ensure their physical health. Many schools have worked overtime to ensure students social emotional health is a priority by creating environments that promote relationship and connection. We must consider the impact of distance, masks, and other requirements will play on our students social and emotional state now and into the future.

Trauma Informed Foundations and Support the Social and Emotional Health in Schools

It is important to consider practices that will support the social and emotional health. The principles of a trauma-informed approach can assist in creating a stable foundation for schools to utilize when addressing the varying social and emotional needs within a district/school post-pandemic. For reference, the principles of two models, [Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative](#) (TLPI) and [Heart of Teaching and Learning](#), provide some guidelines, including addressing students’ needs in a holistic way and providing guided opportunities for helpful participation.

Both models promote not only promote the power of relationships, connection, consistency, and shared responsibility, but they focus on the building skills and regulation through the context of school. These ideas were needed prior to COVID and will certainly be more relative after.

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Considerations

Although these models are very well respected and used, we must also consider the day to day practicalities in schools. [Dr. Eric Rossen](#) and the [Trauma Informed Educators Network](#) have created a list of considerations for the social and emotional well-being of adults and children in schools post COVID-19.

For example, they recommend an emphasis on mental health and access to services, such as ensuring access to school mental health professionals (e.g., social workers, psychologists, counselors, therapists) that are based in the school and are easily accessible to staff, students, and families. To address the unexpected transition, schools should expect a prolonged honeymoon period as students re-enter school and re-establish relationships when compared to returning from summer. This honeymoon period will likely be followed by an apparent increase in gaps/disparities caused by inequities in the months of school closure. Opportunities could be given for students to rejoin their previous teachers for a short time or introduce them to their new teachers early to ease the transition.

Schools should anticipate significant academic, social, and emotional regression, but should still honoring the experiences of students while they were home. It should be expected to experience student defiance or resistance - many students may feel disempowered, victimized, abandoned, or resentful. Others will have lost trust and faith in the school's ability to care for and protect them. Adults working with these students should remember "it affects me, but it's not about me" and establish mechanisms to empower students and provide unconditional positive regard to build trust.

To address these challenges, schools should establish an intentional focus on social emotional learning skill-building, which likely regressed with a lack of social interactions, and avoid assuming that lack of demonstration of social skills represents willful disobedience or purposeful insubordination. Teachers should provide students with opportunities to voice concerns, challenges, and needs. Incorporate restorative practices when appropriate

Schools must also recognize staff needs upon return, as they have potentially experienced their own loss or stress (financial, personal, social, physical/medical), including perhaps seeing negative comments about the school's response, or feedback from families. Schools should establish a mechanism to address secondary traumatic stress, such as Tap In, Tap Out, Buddy Classrooms, Boundary Setting, and Self-Care in the Background.

Closing

As educators traverse these historic times, it is imperative to recognize that individuals process stress and trauma differently. We must use this time to think differently about the systems and structures utilized to support all involved in our education system. By utilizing the components of either trauma-informed schools model previously mentioned in conjunction with the recommendation, we can begin to allow those affected by previous and current stress and trauma to begin or continue to build healing and resilience.

Mathew Portell has dedicated over a decade to education in his role as a teacher, instructional coach, teacher mentor, school administrator, international speaker, and trainer. He currently serves as executive principal of Fall-Hamilton Elementary, an innovative trauma-informed school in Nashville, Tennessee.

SESSION 2

Utilization of Discipline and Behavioral Data to Identity Students in Need of Additional Supports



Positive Discipline in the Era of COVID-19 to Increase Student Engagement

by Jessika Bottiani, University of Virginia

School closures related to COVID-19 have taken an emotional and cognitive toll on students, parents, and teachers alike, with no clear end in sight to the demands and challenges ahead. Now more than ever, conventional school discipline approaches like disciplinary referrals or school suspensions are unlikely to work – and may even cause harm. Punitive tactics like these have never been an effective response to difficult student behavior and are prone to excessive use, particularly with Black students. Prior to COVID-19, Black students nationally were three times as likely to be suspended out-of-school as all other racial and ethnic student groups.¹ Racially disproportionate impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic prompt reasonable concern that disparities could grow when students return to the classroom.

Now more than ever, we must turn our attention to upstream prevention. Below are recommendations based on the evidence-base supporting a multi-tiered approach to promoting student engagement and preventing unnecessary use of punitive discipline. Each of these recommendations has implications for reducing educational inequities and applications of the recommendations in virtual and in-person classrooms are given.

“Fix Injustices, Not Kids” Principle²

Let us begin with a core principle of focusing our energy on fixing injustices, not kids. A lot of the time, we default to thinking about discipline and behavioral data as a reflection of a problem *within* students. This is a trap that can quickly lead to deficit thinking – the idea that students, particularly Black, Indigenous, and students of color from low-income backgrounds, struggle because of internal problems in themselves, their homes, their families, and their neighborhoods. This type of thinking places the burden of behavioral challenges squarely within students and their families, and *denies* the impact and role that surrounding, intergenerational and present-day structural inequalities and interpersonal biases have on kids. Ibram X. Kendi, the author of the book *How to Be an Antiracist*, has said that denial is the heartbeat of racism. Striving to be antiracist means letting one’s defensive guards down and not denying what is there. It also frees one to focus more on student, family, and community strengths and assets that can be tapped as funds of knowledge and resources for learning in schools. This shift in focus to fixing injustices, not kids, is a first step that can lead to meaningful change in the way that punitive school discipline strategies are used.

Create Connection – Relationships Matter

It is critical to invest in relationship building and connection student-to-teacher and student-to-student, particularly in physically-distanced learning circumstances.³ Furthermore, culturally responsive teaching is predicated on having authentic relationships with students. To create connection in remote learning context, educators can leverage technology in creative ways, including:

- Distance learning online “check-in” assessments (“Today I am...[check all that apply]: Happy, excited, sad, anxious, hungry, silly, tired, lonely, bored, overwhelmed”).

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- Daily morning meetings to orient students to the day, answer questions, provide an opportunity to connect with their classmates, and share their concerns and needs.
- Peer-to-peer chat times to encourage and initiate peer interaction.
- Scheduling 1:1 video calls with students and/or parents to check-in and recognize their efforts

These strategies also apply for in-person class opportunities to build and sustain high-quality relationships and connections.

Use Empathic, Data-Driven, and Effective Responses to Disruptions and Off-Task Behavior

When disruptions to learning and off-task student behaviors do occur, function-based thinking, based on evidence-based intervention, can help to understand underlying drivers and root causes of the behavior.⁴ In addition, teachers can use daily check-ins or track patterns in student behavior problems to observe the what, where, when, who, and why applying data-based decision-making strategies.⁵ Correcting the behavior with quick, empathic, and private communication and praising around the behavior are other effective strategies that avoid shaming the student. Group contingencies (e.g., games like the Good Behavior Game) have extensive evidence to support their positive effects and can be used in online or in-person settings.⁶

Make Schools “Softer”, Not “Harder”

School hardening approaches (e.g., increased surveillance, policing, and punishment) have been linked to students feeling less safe, less like they belong, and less fairly treated at school.⁷ Increasingly, school districts are instead investing in social emotional learning (SEL) programs as part of their school improvement plans, as evidence supports the effectiveness of well-implemented SEL on student academic and developmental outcomes. Such investments are a step in the right direction. Softening schools does *not* mean being soft on misbehavior and offenses; it means proactively providing universal and targeted supports for students’ and school staff’s “soft” social-emotional and interpersonal skills, as well as preventively intervening with mental health supports. SEL curricula can be adapted for remote learning with support of district and school leadership.

Develop School Staff and Student Equity Literacy as Part of SEL Initiatives

SEL initiatives have potential to foster trusting, respectful, and emotional safe learning environments for all students. However, there is a danger that SEL initiatives could be delivered superficially, as just another way to police student behavior, which could have disproportionate, negative impacts for Black and Brown students.⁸ SEL programming should address the harmful effects of racism and other systems of oppression experienced by students in and out of school and can be delivered in ways that empower youth agency to create healing spaces. Equity literacy curricula can help teachers and students alike gain fluency in equity concepts and practices and create an avenue for honest dialogue and relationship building. Such curricula must avoid teaching students to “cope” with forces of oppression like racism, sexism, homophobia, and xenophobia. Instead, lessons can teach skills for recognizing when bias and inequities are occurring, strategies for self-care, and approaches for speaking up when it is safe to do so. Incorporating equity literacy into SEL initiatives must be done with care and with coaching and professional growth opportunities provided to teachers.

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Support the Wellbeing and Growth of School Staff

School staff and administrators themselves have experienced COVID-19 as a traumatic event. They have faced the enormous stress of rapid conversion to virtual teaching in the context of their own and students' personal losses due to the pandemic.⁹ It is essential to encourage educators to take time needed for self-care. Teacher stress can lead to emotional exhaustion and a deteriorating classroom climate, which in turn can have long term effects on student academic outcomes.¹⁰ Lowering stress is also associated with reduced enactment of implicit biases.¹¹ Administrators should support school staff with specific suggestions to engage in self-care practices such as mindfulness, healthy eating, exercise, and connecting with loved ones. But administrators can go further too by encouraging school staff to start with self-care, and move from there to self-work. Eighty-three percent of teachers in the U.S. are White, and the majority are White women. Someone quoted Maya Angelou the other day to me saying "Do the best you can until you know better. When you know better, do better." For our schools to equitably support all students, including Black, indigenous and students of color, in the wake of COVID-19, we have to create actively anti-racist learning spaces, and that will take embracing Maya Angelou's call for us all to do the work that is needed to know better and do better for our students.

Jessika Bottiani is an Assistant Professor at the School of Education and Human Development at the University of Virginia. She is a principal investigator and co-investigator on a collaborative team of prevention scientists engaging in multiple federally-sponsored and foundation-funded research initiatives. Her work focuses on developing and testing preventive interventions designed to increase teacher skills in equity literacy and social-emotional learning instruction and promote their use of positive discipline techniques in the classroom.

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Reframing Behavior Problems as an Unmet Need

by Morgan Derby, The Trauma Informed Teacher

What will the beginning of the 2020-21 school year look like? With the COVID-19 pandemic ongoing, there is so much uncertainty relating to education, and no one can claim to have every answer.

Although returning to school is likely to restore some sense of safety and structure for students, the problems they experienced during their time at home will not go away when students return to traditional classrooms. Many children may have experienced stress, fear, loss, and trauma during their time away from school. Such trauma can impact the brain, causing children to think and behave differently.¹ Often, but not always, their behavior can appear to be willful, acting-out behavior.² However, as we return to school it is important that we consider it highly likely that those behaviors are the result of trauma from or exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.³

Schools Lack Capacity to Meet Growing Mental Health Needs of School-aged Children

Reframing Behavior

In a traditional classroom setting, teachers and administrators use discipline strategies such as sticker charts, color-coded behavior models, detentions, or the removal of privileges to try to modify behavior. However, these strategies are not consistently successful and can further exacerbate feelings of trauma and stress in students who have experienced trauma.⁴ Students may start to internalize a message that they are inherently bad which can be quite damaging in the long run.

By recognizing and reacting to students' behaviors through a trauma-informed lens, educators can create a paradigm shift within their classroom culture that can eliminate the need for most, if not all, traditional punitive discipline. Behavior problems (outside the context of developmentally appropriate behaviors or behaviors related to a disability) are an indicator of an unmet need, revealing that something in a child's world is not as it should be. The goal is to meet the need driving the negative behavior and thereby eliminate the reason for the behavior and the behavior itself.

How to Identify and Meet the Unmet Needs of Students

Develop strong relationships with students. Strong, healthy, positive teacher-student relationships are the foundation of a trauma-informed classroom. When teachers get to know their students well and simultaneously let students get to know them, they are able to understand their students on a deeper level.⁵ A healthy, positive teacher-student relationship builds trust which encourages connection and responsiveness, thus serving as a foundation for understanding and modifying behavior.

Identify patterns of behavior. Predictable behavior can be prevented using tools, such as a functional behavior assessment (FBA), a team meeting, or other identification and tracking methods. Identifying the problem behavior and its patterns can yield significant information about the need driving the behavior. Noise, changes in routine, stress, transitions, hunger/thirst, changes in temperature, peer conflict, or feeling threatened are all potential situations (among many, many more) that could trigger concerning behaviors.⁶

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Look at the product of the behavior. Consider what the child seeks to gain or anticipates as the result of the behavior. The negative behavior, although not desirable, is helping to provide the child with something that they need. If a child regularly hits a peer, do they know they will get sent home from school early each time or they will get to spend one-on-one time with a favorite staff member? What are the child's emotions before and after the behavior? Exploring the answers to those questions can help to better identify why a child is behaving in an inappropriate way. Many children will have endured horrible events during their time spent away from school that may be disclosed, but some may not, and especially in those cases a child's behavior can indicate trauma to a discerning adult.

Meet the need. When a student is using their behavior to ask for feelings of safety, acceptance, connection etc., identify strategies to allow the need to be met within the school day. If a child is using their behavior to ask for attention rather than immediately responding with negative attention, the adult needs to give the student positive attention and affirmation as often as possible. By meeting the need of the child, the need driving the negative behavior as well as the behavior itself will be eliminated. It is not always a simple task, but utilizing trauma-informed corrective strategies can often eliminate the need for traditional, punitive forms of discipline.

Shifting the Mindset

Reframing behavior through the lens of trauma does not necessarily require special tools or curriculums, but it does require a mindset shift. When students return to classes in a physical school building, teachers and administrators will need to shift their thinking on student behavior to reflect the trauma of the COVID-19 pandemic. It will be a natural reaction to want to spend extra time trying to catch up on any gaps in academics due to the pandemic, but spending more time developing strong, health teacher-student relationships will likely reveal larger gains in academics, social-emotional skills, and positive behavior in the long run. Students who have experienced trauma crave a positive, fulfilling connection with a healthy adult. Feeding that connection with copious positive interaction will likely help students fill an emotional need left by the trauma of the COVID-19 pandemic, while also creating a positive classroom environment that optimizes learning.

Morgan Derby is a high school special education teacher and the creator of the blog, The Trauma Informed Teacher.

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Prepare Schools to Mitigate Trauma

by Antonio Garcia, University of Kentucky

COVID-19 has altered every facet of our lives. In the effort to social distance, students are grappling with loss – loss of face-to-face interaction with teachers, peers, community, and extra-curricular activities in exchange for online or remote learning. As the school environment is often the only safe refuge students have from abuse and neglect, students have lost their protection as well. Besides guaranteeing two meals a day, teachers and school personnel offer a safe set of eyes and ears on children. Nearly 20% of the 4.1 million alleged instances of maltreatment are reported by education personnel.¹ Therefore, the pandemic, and the resulting lockdown and loss of in-person instruction, will likely create traumatic experiences for young children that teachers will need to be able to recognize and address.

Even before the World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 outbreak a pandemic on March 12, 2020,² teachers were challenged on a daily basis to meet the educational needs of their students, especially for the 1/5 children and youth who are diagnosed with a social, emotional, or behavioral disorder.³ These symptoms are likely due to exposure to adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). ACEs include psychological, physical, and sexual abuse; violence against mother; and living with household members who were substance abusers, mentally ill or suicidal, or ever imprisoned. We know from prior studies that exposure to ACEs has significant effects on educational outcomes, including:

- Increased risk for learning and behavior problems
- Decrease engagement in school
- Increase enrollment in retention and special education services

While schools are the most frequent and efficacious setting for trauma-specific interventions,⁴ best practices for screening students for ACEs, and referring them to evidence-based practices (EBPs) in school settings, have not been identified.⁵ When school resumes, whether in-person or via remote format, teachers will be the first line of defense for children and youth grappling with the aftermath of the pandemic.

What is needed?

Teachers and school administrators need to be trained in recognizing indicators of trauma and abuse, and in how to make appropriate referrals when they observe “red flags”.

Research can guide these best practices, for example from Project AWARE, a partnership between the University of Kentucky Child Center on Trauma and Children (CTAC) and the Department of Education, was funded in 2014 by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) to increase awareness of and responsiveness to mental health issues among students in Kentucky. Despite training school personnel in Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (PBIS) and creating school-based trauma teams that included mental health professionals teachers, behavioral coaches and other school staff, less than 5% of teachers referred students in need to onsite, school-based clinicians who are trained to deliver EBPs. The project ruled that low reporting was due to a lack of understanding of externalizing and internalizing trauma symptoms and the best practices for referring students.

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Learning from Project AWARE, the importance of common mission and understanding of trauma-responsive practices and the purposes for referral becomes clear. It is vital that teachers consistently follow the same procedures to screen for services, notify school-based mental health staff, and reinforce concepts of trauma-informed care in their classrooms. Team members need to communicate regularly and work towards building common understanding of evidence-based practices in order to produce the most effective and protective environment for students.

What is next?

What we need now is to offer training, support, and guidance to our teachers. They need training in recognizing or screening for trauma. Given that their plate is full as is, it is an impossible task to ask them to address trauma. However, teachers can play a pivotal role by “spotting” trauma and knowing how to refer students to clinicians who can provide effective programs. Currently, I am researching how to increase leader, teacher, and staff awareness of evidence based practices and improve efforts toward initiating and sustaining exchanges of knowledge and information between educators.⁶ To achieve this goal, I plan to examine whether a newly developed online training curricula, inclusive of lectures, role plays, and group dialogue, increases knowledge exchanges about EBPs between school leaders and between leaders and teachers. The study will also determine if these conversations increase knowledge, awareness, and the chances that school personnel make referrals to EBPs as needed.

We now know that mere dissemination of information from leaders to staff about new innovations is not adequate. “For school leaders to support the changes...they must recognize and embrace the value of the innovation.”⁷ That is, to increase teacher or staff awareness of EBPs, leaders must:

- Instill motivation for teachers to screen students for need
- Encourage teachers to refer students to EBPs when needed
- Establish buy-in and support of school leaders.

While trainings, such as AWARE, for teachers on related context (trauma awareness, screening, and referral procedures), may be offered, inadequate time is devoted to unpacking how to rely on new knowledge in the classroom on a day-to-day basis. In other words, while information is disseminated, teachers are not trained or given the opportunity to observe how such knowledge should be used in the classroom. The online training platform expands upon AWARE activities by providing concrete, real-life examples of how leaders can initiate and engage in cultural exchanges with other leaders, their teachers and their staff about detecting or screening for “red flags”.

From a pragmatic standpoint, online training offers flexibility as teachers can complete training in the comfort of their own homes during this global pandemic. After we overcome the unprecedented challenges related to COVID-19, teachers will then be armed with knowledge and resources to respond to the trauma that many students will bring with them to the classroom. Without swift action, students will be placed at heightened risk for learning and behavior problems, and decreased engagement in school.⁸

Antonio Garcia is an Associate Professor at the University of Kentucky College of Social Work and was previously employed as a child protective services worker. Relying upon mixed methods research, he has identified strategies to mitigate barriers to implementing evidence-based treatments (EBTs) for youth who

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have experienced trauma. His findings compelled him to mobilizes inter-professional partnerships to promote equitable access to and engagement in EBTs for children and families of color across multiple child-serving systems.

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SESSION 3

COVID-19 Related Traumatic Stress Screening, and Managing Traumatic Stress Response Behaviors in the Classroom



Responding to COVID-19: Planning for Trauma-Informed Assessment in Schools

by Sandra Chafouleas, University of Connecticut

In recent years, knowledge about adverse childhood experiences and childhood trauma has come into the mainstream, highlighting that early identification of traumatic event exposure and subsequent support can lessen the negative physical and psychological effects and improve wellbeing.¹ Researchers have recently called for use of school-based screening to identify childhood trauma, but understanding the *what* and the *why* is critical to decisions about use of trauma assessment in schools.² A key consideration is the purpose for doing such an assessment since tools target different features related to trauma (e.g. exposure, symptoms).³ In trauma response, school personnel recognize that multiple issues must be considered in determining the best way to evaluate as “a one-size fits all intervention approach may not be appropriate due to the influence of a combination of internal and external factors.”⁴

Given the diverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, such considerations are particularly relevant. Although the literature on long-term psychological effects following pandemics is limited, it does suggest the potential for increased rates of conditions such as depression, anxiety, panic attacks, and suicidality.⁵ As a result, schools should evaluate options to strengthen, rather than overhaul, their current surveillance efforts and assessments in order to appropriately identify and support students’ needs.

As schools prepare to re-open, they must be prepared to assist in recovery efforts at multiple points for intervention – the system, the individual student, the adults. Assessment is important, but preparations to ensure an emotionally and physically safe environment are equally if not more important in mitigating the numbers of children and staff who experience intense and longer-term trauma stress reactions. Core principles in developing an emotionally and physical safe school space build upon common service delivery frameworks that seek to respond to diverse student needs, such as multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS). In a trauma-informed MTSS framework, schools work to:

- 1) Implement strategies for all students that foster a safe and engaging environment and build positive and adaptive responses
- 2) Incorporate small-group and individual strategies for targeted (at risk) students that address psychoeducation about trauma and its impact, reinforce social support systems, and strengthen skills in areas of self-regulation, attachment, and competency
- 3) Provide intensive and individualized supports for select (identified) students that can include trauma-specific interventions to remediate high-intensity maladaptive reactions.⁶

If schools first engage in a familiar intervention service delivery framework, then they are better positioned to understand if and how current assessment practices should be strengthened in order to identify and support students and staff who are not responding to existing efforts.

It is important to remember that not all student difficulties are a result of trauma. Interpretation of assessment data should consider potential effects of trauma, but evaluation of trauma exposure and potential trauma symptoms is not necessary for every student. Engaging in trauma-specific evaluation should be

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considered for select situations, such as for those students who are not responding to core trauma-informed supports.

Additionally, effective school responses not only accurately identify students in need of services but should also connect students to the appropriate services available in the school and in the community.³

Questions Schools Should Ask Now in Trauma-Informed Assessment

To guide trauma-informed assessment planning efforts in schools, the following questions are offered:

- 1. What assessment data do we need to inform our response?** Before concluding that universal assessment of trauma is necessary for every student (and possibly staff member) as schools re-open, schools should step back to define why those data are needed, asking how results from the assessments shape the response and what recommended practices would be different based on whether these assessment data were available.
- 2. What assessment practices are already in use, and how can these be used in trauma-informed response?** Once the purpose for data collection has been identified as related to trauma-informed response, schools can work to identify existing assessment practices to determine if there are gaps. Creating or re-evaluating an inventory of current indicators related to student well-being across domains of functioning (academic, social, emotional, behavioral, physical) offers a first step to identify potential assessment gaps in relation to the problem to be solved. This inventory includes defining not only what the indicator is (i.e. what it measures), but also how often data are collected, by who, and how data are reviewed.
- 3. What are our options in trauma-specific assessment?** Trauma-specific assessment can target different features related to trauma – generally organized as assessment of exposure to adverse events, trauma symptoms, or both. Assessment of trauma exposure typically involves a relatively brief checklist or questionnaire whereas assessment of trauma symptoms can range substantially, from brief or comprehensive rating scales to interviews.² One caution about the use of ACEs (tallying the number of personal and family traumas experienced prior to 18 years of age) as broad application in schools has not been recommended³, with the original authors of the Adverse Childhood Experiences study recently warning about misapplication of ACE scores to determine risk or service provision.⁷
- 4. What needs to happen to prepare all staff for their roles in trauma-informed identification and response?** Once assessment needs have been identified and options selected, schools should turn their attention to ensuring a coordinated system for effective implementation. This step should include defining roles, responsibilities, and professional learning needs of all staff. A school-wide surveillance system that is trauma-informed does not rely solely on student services personnel to identify those in need of additional supports. Every person plays a role in understanding developmentally appropriate and expected reactions to a traumatic experience like COVID-19. In addition, it is particularly important to build staff awareness of their own reactions as well as values and beliefs about emotions and behavior, and how it may influence their work to identify and support students.

In summary, when choosing among assessment options, it is important to note that the evidence for including trauma assessment in schools is limited, with multiple cautions regarding the need to ensure that qualified

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school personnel are involved in any evaluation as well as avoiding assumptions about student trauma or soliciting excessive details about the trauma.² Not everyone needs to have deep experience and training in trauma, but all school staff need trauma-informed knowledge and skills that increase their capacity to identify concerns as well as an understanding of with whom and how to share those concerns within the existing frameworks for coordinating service delivery. Every staff member plays a critical role in support strategies that deliver an emotionally and physically safe environment for all.

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Creating a Positive Classroom Climate to Support Students' Experiences of Stress & Trauma

by Marisha Humphries, University of Illinois at Chicago

Trauma is an emotional response to a terrible event.¹ Living and schooling during a pandemic is traumatic. More than 2/3 of children under the age of 16 have been exposed to some form of traumatic stress, and this was prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.² Although all students have been exposed to this potentially traumatic pandemic, this does not mean the pandemic has been traumatic to all students. Trauma is very individualized – an event may be traumatic to one student, but the same event may only be stressful to another student.

Students that experience the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic as traumatic will have different behavioral and emotional outcomes. These outcomes include being more disengaged, anxious, defiant, aggressive, emotionally sensitive, inattentive, emotionally explosive, clingy, and even may engage in hoarding behaviors. It is important to remember that a student's behavior is telling us something when they may not have the words or know how to express what they are experiencing. It is our job to figure out what they are trying to communicate through their behaviors, so we are better able to support our students.

Teacher Self-Reflection

Educators must not fall into the trap of using typical “at-risk” indicators, like race or ethnicity, or socioeconomic status, to potentially identify students considered traumatized. Instead, look for behavioral indicators from students like withdrawal or intense emotional reactions. Also take the time to learn about any family difficulties that emerged for our students during the pandemic. Educators must then engage in some self-reflection: *Why do I think this student has experienced trauma? What do I need to do to support my students? What do I need to do to create a positive learning environment for all my students?*

Engaging in self-reflection and understanding the developmental implications of students experiencing a pandemic will reduce the likelihood that educators perceive students emotional and behavioral reactions as traumatic or warranting punitive disciplinary reactions. Punitive discipline for behavioral or emotional outbursts are not what students need. Students need educators who are steady, empathic, calm, and supportive, and this is critical for racial and ethnic minority students, especially Black and Brown students who already disproportionately experience punitive disciplinary reactions.

A Bumpy Return to School: It is Normal

Educators must acknowledge that students time away from school has been difficult, and a number of behavioral and emotional outbursts will occur as part of the normal transition back to the school community. This is not trauma. All school personnel need to provide a positive school community that supports students social and emotional development, and educators need to provide their students with the vocabulary and opportunities to express themselves.

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Your students will have questions – lots of questions! However, ask your students what they know or have heard before you respond with an answer. This will help you gauge the depth of their questions and how best to respond developmentally. Be honest but reassuring in your response. Be open to sharing your own feelings and create a space for students to share theirs. Normalizing the diverse set of feelings that students and educators may be feeling is important in building students’ social and emotional competence (SEC) skills. Children with age appropriate SEC skills have better academic engagement and outcome, more positive social relationships, and better mental health.³

Recommendations

To facilitate your students’ positive social emotional development in classrooms, the following culturally- and contextually-relevant strategies are proposed:

- **Acknowledge – Label – Validate – Plan:**
 - **Acknowledge** your students’ emotions: Do not minimize or dismiss their emotions.
 - **Label** your students emotions: Name the emotion you think the student may be experiencing and ask the student if you are correct. Provide them with a rich vocabulary of emotion words beyond happy, sad, afraid, and angry. This teaches and models for them ways to express how one feels.
 - **Validate** your students’ emotions: Let your students know that what they are feeling is normal and valid. Never tell your student not to feel an emotion or that they do not have a reason for feeling a certain emotion.
 - **Plan:** Help your student make a plan for how to cope with what they are feeling. Make sure you are allowing the child to have voice in the coping strategies that may work best for them.
- Engage in daily emotional check-ins with your students to give you an idea of how they are doing each day and help identify students that need a more in-depth check-in.
- Conduct classroom discussions where students are supported and encouraged to share their feelings and thoughts.
- Initiate conversations about stress and trauma by creating a supportive environment where students can share their feelings verbally, writing, drawing, or performing. Do not wait until your students bring up these issues.
- SEC strategies and academics need to be intertwined and integrated (e.g., utilizing literacy as a means to promote and teach students’ social emotional competence skills). Use school content to making connections to students’ real life experiences.

Marisha L. Humphries is an Associate Professor in the Department of Educational Psychology and a licensed clinical psychologist. Her work examines children's emotional and social competence, and the ways in which schools can support this development by considering contextual and cultural factors.

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A Post COVID-19 Classroom: Getting Behind the Behaviors

by Tynisha Jointer

COVID-19 fills and consumes us with conversations about trauma. Educators want to know how to support students who have experienced trauma; principals want to know what they can do to create a trauma-responsive school. All this focus on trauma creates a deep sense of hope and optimism. The greatest hope as we prepare for a post COVID-19 return is that we get two things right when schools reopen this fall: **first, remembering that behavior is learned, and second, remember that your students will learn more from the behaviors that your model than the words that you say.**

Post-COVID Multi-Tier Systems of Supports (MTSS)

Multi-Tier Systems of Supports (MTSS) practices often include school-wide behavioral management systems, classroom expectations, and /or some form of positive behavioral intervention and supports (PBIS) to reinforce behavior expectations. MTSS models depict 80% response rates for students in Tier I universal practices. Tier II practices are reserved for the less than 15% of students who would benefit from intense skill development via an evidence-based Tier II intervention. In Chicago Public Schools a menu of interventions to support a range of behavioral skill development are offered. We train our clinicians (e.g., counselor, social workers, and psychologist) to implement these small group interventions throughout the school day. Tier III is reserved for the less than 5% of students who would benefit from specialized, individualized supports. This typically looks like one on one counseling services by a school-based clinician or an outside mental health provider.

A post-COVID-19 school may find its MTSS triangle flipped upside down. In Chicago, students returning to school in the fall would have had six months without in-person instruction. Within those six months, students have learned behaviors to cope with their environment. Therefore, it is imperative that educators teach and reteach desired behaviors. Schools will need to create classrooms that meet the diverse needs students that meet them where they are and however they show up to class. This may mean sharing power in our classroom. Students may feel powerless and see the classroom as a place to command power. In lieu of a power struggle, empower students by refraining from confronting students who need to feel in control and by avoiding labelling them as deviant and defiant.

In the Classroom

Classroom designs should consider typical symptoms of trauma: hyperarousal, avoidance, re-experiencing, and negative cognition. Hyperarousal is the body's alert system as a result of thinking about trauma even if real danger is not present. In post-COVID-19 classroom, hyperarousal can be triggered by close proximity. Engage students about their feelings and attitudes about close proximity to limit negative responses from students should people invade the student's safe space. Avoidance to most adults is the student being defiant; however, avoidance is less about the adult and more what the task or ask represents. One way to mitigate

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avoidance behaviors is to give students choices that allow the students to feel in control. Choices can create a bridge to understand what or why the students are avoiding.

Re-experiencing may include the fear that in-person instruction will be disrupted again. Students may want and need more attention. They may fear or have anxiety about forming bonds, and those who experienced loss during the pandemic may re-experience that feeling of loss. Whatever and however students are re-experiencing their trauma(s), it is important to increase their protective factors. This may include but is not limited to positive peer to peer relationships, positive adult relationships, calm corner or peace room - a space for students to self-soothe but still have access to instruction.

Some students may return with negative cognition/thinking. The world as young people know it has been disrupted as we have socially and physically distanced for months on end. Young people who may already feel hopeless may have increased negative cognition as a result of the uncertainties of COVID-19. Educators must meet students where they are, acknowledge and validate the feelings while maintaining a commitment of hope. As young people are empowered to take control of their lives, students will feel a deeper sense of belonging.

Conclusion

The collective trauma of this pandemic also has effects on educators and administrators. It is important for all school personnel to remind each other that they must take care of themselves. Reach out to your human resource or benefits department to determine if behavioral health employee assistance is available or start an educator infinity group to develop a sense of connectedness amongst peers. Develop and commit to a self-care plan for yourself and your families. What have you learned in your home that you can share with your students and families?

Lastly, remember that students are watching and learning from the behavior modeled. In a post-COVID-19 return, appropriately share personal COVID-19 experiences with students. Let them know of shared feeling and experiences, allowing students to see the human that is the educator. School staff can be the change they want to see in the world with efforts focused on deeply inspiring students as they inspire us. As schools prepare to open their doors (or virtual classrooms), let us prepare ourselves and students for a whole new world.¹

Tynisha Jointer a Chicago native and product of Chicago Public Schools. She is passionate about educating all children, staff and school leaders in developing a holistic approach to support student achievement. She brings an array of experience and expertise having supported students on the ground as a school social worker (in both the Charter and Public School), experience working as a social worker in a behavioral health hospital as well as network and district level positions to make positive decisions to support students and staffs across Chicago Public Schools.

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What Matters Is What Works: Pragmatism in Trauma Work During COVID-19

by Shipra Parikh & Jaqueline Herrera, Enlace Chicago

Two Public Health Crises

As devastating as COVID-19 has been, educators have always known that it only comes second to ongoing, chronic public health crisis caused by poverty and racism in the US. Inequality in a variety of areas has always posed a significant challenge to children's educations. Schools, which have served the important community function of nurturing many of the needs that prevent kids from getting their education, are no longer available in the same ways, which only serves to exacerbate children's needs during quarantine. The Little Village community represents one example, among so many Chicago communities, that has been particularly hard hit. Little Village, located in the South Lawndale area, is one of the 15 economically under-resourced South and West side communities most in need of internet access. In fact, 1 in 5 Chicago students, or 31% of those under age 18 in Little Village, have no internet at home.¹ Lawndale is a young community, with 29% of the population being under 18 years of age. Of its population, 29% are not US citizens, 39% are foreign born, and an estimated 25% are undocumented.² The median income is \$32,896, which is nearly half that of the citywide average of \$52,497.³ Taken together, these statistics reveal significant needs related to language, citizenship, access to resources, and income. Though specific to this community, these needs also represent a microcosm of the needs of communities across the city, and is used here, as a model through which to understand how teachers can use a trauma lens effectively. Enlace Chicago, a longtime community agency, utilizes a trauma lens in helping community members engage all of these needs and more, and in doing so, provides an example from which teachers can move forward.

Historical Trauma Responses That Educators Should Know

When looking at the history of documented trauma responses in the US, starting from the 18th and 19th centuries, patterns of societal responses have evolved in tandem with the needs of society at the time. Herman⁴ has documented three primary patterns of response:

- **Denial** – Ignoring survivors of trauma, emphasizing silence, not talking about it
- **Repression** – Avoiding real exploration of trauma, social tensions about power
- **Anxiety** – Internalized ideals of strength, overemphasizing self-reliance and resilience

In modern society, these patterns are still evident in the pattern of policies and punishments around traumatic events that communities face. In order to avoid repeating these patterns at micro levels (one on one interactions, day to day classroom engagement, interpersonal relationships), educators must practice an awareness of these patterns at macro levels (institutional, organizational, and policy). Examples include:

- **Denial** - Marginalization of youth's identities, invisibilizing populations of highest need, underfunding schools in low-income neighborhoods
- **Repression** – Racial profiling, ICE raids, over-policing of communities, Adulthood (the oppression of children by adults, solely based on their age)

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- **Anxiety** – Constant surveillance leads to a state of fear and anxiety, police brutality and neighborhood looting retrigger trauma in communities, creating a survival, fight or flight state of mind

Together, these macro level trauma experiences have resulted in youth showing up in classrooms in highly dysregulated ways, creating a crisis for teachers, whose responsibilities shift to everything but “teaching” in the traditional sense. Teachers may find themselves responsible for calming student misbehavior and emotional outbursts, managing the traumatic stress that results from societal experiences of denial, repression, and anxiety that kids experience firsthand. This can result in teachers, in turn, becoming dysregulated, vicariously traumatized, and engaging in any of these three trauma patterns in direct response to their students:

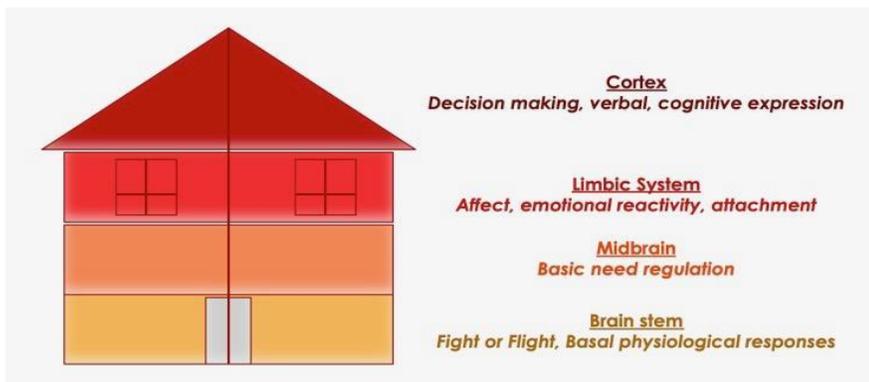
- **Denial** - Utilizing strategies that are less developmentally informed, and more about classroom management and behavior modification
- **Repression** - Engaging in increasingly harsh punishments and withholding empathy
- **Anxiety** - Fearing or becoming triggered by their students

What these patterns highlight is that trauma responses are in fact, shared, by students, their teachers, and the larger community, and need addressing more effectively.

Repairing, Not Repeating Trauma

According to education counselor Christin Langley Obaugh, “We repeat what we don’t repair.” While trauma informed trainings for schools abound,⁵ through organizations like the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, and notable neuroscientific research by scholars like Bruce Perry,⁶ educators often find this information helpful, and overwhelming. In order to be effective, however, educators focus on applying brain science to create a trauma lens grounded in pragmatism, because “what matters... is what works” (p. 260).⁷ Pragmatic application of a trauma informed lens, then becomes our goal.

In order to help, educators can utilize the image below,⁸ representing the two hemispheres of the brain (right and left), which maps each “floor” of the house to an area of the brain critical to trauma responses in the body. Each part of the brain is labeled with responses to trauma that will work best.



Based on this brain map, the sequence of a trauma response is as follows:

- Trauma begins in the basement (Brainstem) or the first floor (Midbrain), and most classroom misbehavior falls into these two areas

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- We cannot engage trauma at a lower level, by responding to a higher level (i.e., don't try to talk down a tantrum, rather meet the child in a sensory place of need with a hug, high five, flick off the lights, play music, offer a snack, engage in movement)
- As the child begins to regulate more, we can engage them further upstairs in the house
- We end at the top floor, ideally talking and processing with kids, once they are regulated

Based on this map, the following suggestions are made for educators, based on the strategies employed in the Little Village community, by Enlace Chicago.

- **Brainstem Goals:** Reduce stress and fear; Improve body regulation and safety
 - Prioritize relationships, one on one direct contact, through trusted teacher relationships
 - School as a primary avenue of outreach for youth
 - Integration of youth participants' families to the school environment
- **Midbrain Goals:** Reduce the scope of families' basic needs
 - Connect with schools to coordinate food pantry resources, emergency funds, connections with families to coordinate a range of specific needs
 - Advocating for free health testing with community health centers, and for internet access with Chicago public schools
 - Build direct relationships with community stakeholders, from the state commissioner, Senator, city aldermen, and school board
- **Limbic System Goals:** Improve relationships and attachment patterns
 - Staff build relationships and institutional memory in the community
 - Involve school and parents together
 - Establish regular communication with school staff and administrators
- **Cortex Goals:** Improve participants' decision making and life trajectories
 - Practice anti-Adultism through school outreach and school-based trainings, to empower Little Village youth to make positive life choices and improve their future potential

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***Jaqueline Herrera** has served as the Director of Violence Prevention at Enlace Chicago since 2018 and oversees a violence prevention staff of twenty people, providing supervision and clinical consultation on a daily basis. She has centralized and implemented Enlace's violence prevention model by integrating street outreach, youth engagement, and mental health. She has overseen the development of Enlace's new Street-Based counseling program, as well as Enlace's participation in community and citywide initiatives, such as the Little Village Reconnection Hub and the Community Partnering 4 Peace collaborative.*

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SESSION 4

Education Rights Issues Associated with COVID-19 Related Fall Grade Retention, Remedial Class Assignment, and Standardized Testing



Supporting Students' Academic Success During the COVID-19 Crisis

by Elaine Allensworth, University of Chicago

Disruptions in schooling accompanying the COVID-19 crisis have led to considerable concerns around declining academic performance and decreased equity in educational outcomes, and for good reason. Supporting students' academic growth is critically important for their later educational success and life outcomes. At the same time, focusing narrowly on recovering academic content missed this spring could do little to improve long-term outcomes. As students continue to experience the trauma and economic impact of COVID-19, educators need to ensure that students are in a safe, stable school environment that is responsive to the social-emotional needs of every child when they go back to the classroom. There are risks in pursuing strategies that cause more disruption in the learning environment for students and educators. The bigger impacts on students' long-term educational outcomes will be determined by what happens this coming year—both in the downturn in the economy and the ways that schools structure learning going forward.

Putting Learning Loss in Perspective Helps in Evaluating Strategies

There are reasons to be concerned that students have fallen behind in academic skills with the move to remote learning, and that inequities by race and income will increase in the future as a result of the crisis. Online learning is [less effective](#) than in-person learning for most [students](#), especially for students with the lowest academic skill levels relative to [peers](#). Families with the least economic resources are less likely to have reliable access to technology to engage in online learning, and more crowded living conditions that make learning at home difficult. Black and Latino families have faced additional stress with greater risks of exposure to the virus and lower recovery rates.

At the same time, these effects do not have to be dire for students' long-term outcomes. Even if the largest predictions in [learning losses occur](#), most students will remain within the typical grade range and be able to engage with typical class content next year. Students who have a smaller gain in learning in one year tend to have a larger gain in the [following year](#), and they tend to catch up in skill development to [where they would have been](#) after a disruption, as long as they enter a [supportive environment](#) subsequently. Most students will still be at a normal skill level for their grade, even if their content knowledge is behind what it would have been without the spring disruptions.

Teaching extra content without changing the degree to which students are getting extra support can lead [students' grades to decline](#). Studies of accelerated math classes in both [North Carolina](#) and [California](#) have demonstrated negative effects, particularly for low achieving students. Nevertheless, policy makers and educators should not assume that students and families are undergoing so much stress that they cannot handle typical academic expectations. The majority of families are highly concerned about students' education even when undergoing significant challenges. With so much uncertainty, there is a risk of lowering expectations for students out of a concern for alleviating their stress, and further exacerbating inequitable educational outcomes.

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The Economic Downturn and Continued Health Concerns Amplify Challenges in Teaching and Learning

Differences in access to technology is a very tangible, visible sign of economic inequality. But even in normal times, there is unequal access to education due to financial costs that are often invisible to families with ample resources. Under the COVID-19 crisis, the country's economic status will exacerbate [economic inequality](#), further limiting the resources and support low-income families can offer their children. There are also still considerable concerns about health risks from the virus. Students could struggle in their courses for many reasons this coming year, thus strategies that support students' success in school broadly—so that they are engaged and getting good grades regardless of why they might struggle—will be more effective for students' long-term educational outcomes than strategies that narrowly focus on catching up academic skills. Students' engagement and success in their courses matters much more for long term success than their content knowledge in a particular [subject](#), or their [scores on standardized tests](#).

Effective Strategies to Support Students' Academic Development and Promote Equity in Outcomes

Extended learning time opportunities (e.g., weeklong summer [academies](#) and [double-period math classes](#)) and one-on-one or small group support can boost academic achievement, although they do not necessarily improve course performance. High-intensity [tutoring](#) and [mentoring](#) programs that aim to support students' success in their classes, and are coordinated with their coursework and teachers, have been found to benefit test scores, attendance and grades. Ongoing [monitoring](#) will be critical to identifying struggles that are likely to emerge throughout the upcoming year. [Systems](#) that track attendance, assignment completion, and grades strengthen schools' ability to individualize services and match specific interventions to the needs of different students. Time for teachers and other school staff to monitor early warning indicator data, develop shared approaches and strategies, and provide assistance when students fall behind (rather than waiting for students to ask for help), provide support for all students.

Remedial courses, a common strategy for differentiating instruction for students with different incoming skill levels, has [both benefits and adverse consequences](#) for students with low skill levels. In order for remedial courses to be successful, training and support for teachers is required. [A particular form of double-dose classes](#) provide an alternative; all students take a regular class together while students with weaker skills have a second class with the same teacher that provides extra help and instruction to support their performance in the main class.

The Upcoming School Year Could Bring More Disruption, and a Stable Learning Environment Is What Students Need Most

While the crisis is causing acute immediate stress, there will be long-term stress from the financial fallout of the crisis and the loss of loved ones. Supporting all students ultimately means making preparation so that students have a safe, stable school environment that is responsive to the social-emotional needs of every child to set the stage for students to be able to re-engage in learning. Research on the stress of [school closures](#) and on the academic impact of [Hurricane Katrina](#) finds that while students initially experience some learning loss, the persistence of these losses depends on the receiving environment. Losses fade after a year or two when students return to stable schools.

The more logistically complicated the plans are for the fall, the more chance that students and educators could have a chaotic school year where the jobs of teaching and learning become secondary to meeting new

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demands introduced by complicated new structures. When students go back to school, it will important that predictable routines and supportive relationships with their teacher and other adults and students in the school are present. There must be systems in place that provide support if students start to struggle – systems that can provide academic and social-emotional support, and resources needed to fully engage in school for both students and teachers.

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Centering Equity, Social Justice, and Holistic Educative Dispositions in a Post COVID-19 Schoolhouse

by T. Jameson Brewer, University of North Georgia

The COVID-19 pandemic that ravaged normalcy across the globe brought with it lingering health issues for some survivors,¹ devastated domestic and global markets and economies, caused unprecedented unemployment in the United States,² and shuttered the nation's schools. Many K-12 school districts sent students home under what were then temporary measures to social distance, yet physical schools remained closed for months and learning remained online for the rest of the academic year. While the shift to online prompted questions surrounding testing, equitable access,³ and the academic trajectories of students for the return to traditional schooling, moving public education to an online, at-home, setting brought a magnifying glass onto the socioeconomic disparities throughout the United States and how they have long been manifested and exacerbated in our nation's schools.⁴

Misguided Historical Reforms: Individualization, Marketization, and Standardization

One of the most notable debates related to inequality in schools is the overarching and historical battle of equality of opportunity versus equality of outcomes.⁵ Education reforms over the past few decades have focused primarily on outcomes, centering privatization, standardization, and punitive accountability measures to accomplish these goals. This reflects a desire to reimagine schools as a private individualized commodity in the service of making students “college and career ready” so that they can, individually, escape inequity rather than an intentional focus on the glaring disparities of educational opportunities. To this end, much focus has been placed on working towards equalizing and increasing educational outputs under the assumption that the primary ingredients of an American “rags-to-riches” story—grit, determination, and increased test scores—enable students to escape generational poverty and, simultaneously, their own communities.

This approach of ‘commodifying’ education has fostered questionable policies and practices that dehumanize the educative process and all involved.⁶ Education in this myopic view is a passive exchange of information that reinforces societal beliefs in meritocracy and “pulling yourself up by your own bootstraps” which have long led to the reproduction and reinforcement of a generational economic, racial, and societal divide.⁷ This logic assumes students who fail to improve test scores lack “grit,” despite grit being a covert method for perpetuating racial stereotypes.⁸ Similarly, teachers failing to increase student standardized test scores each year despite representing a new cadre of students have their professional commitment questioned and their financial livelihoods challenged to the point where teachers are leaving the profession at an alarming rate.⁹

These approaches dismiss decades of academic literature showing the profound impact that factors like student poverty can have on informing academic outcomes and instead position these realities as excuses, overlooking and dismissing systemic societal inequalities. We have known for more than half a century that one of the strongest predictors of academic outcomes is a family's socioeconomic status and the resources

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wealth, or lack of it, can bring in the case of relative poverty.¹⁰ Yet, in the accountability landscape, with its historical roots in a post-Sputnik era and accelerated following the release of *A Nation at Risk*,¹¹ the primary, broad focus of schools has been to equalize student outcomes as measured on tests while ignoring, overlooking, and dismissing the inequitable societal and educational realities that many students face. This has led to many attempts to treat symptoms rather than underlying issues that have led, in many ways, to solutions in search of problems. Rather than understanding variance as a result of inequity, differences in student outcomes are attributed to a ‘failed’ public school system and ‘bad’ teachers.¹² The solution, then, is more standardization for accountability and privatization of the public system. The push towards privatization, marketization, and standardization of public schools has been accelerated through disaster capitalism as the prescribed solution to the crisis is individualization and marketization. Understood this way, the care of public school students ceases to be understood as a public obligation and, rather, as a private good and miscarriages of social justice are understood as the result of poor choices or poor work habits by individuals rather than reflective of larger systemic inequity.

An Opportunity for the Common Good and Systemic Change

Arguably, the COVID-19 pandemic has offered us the opportunity to reevaluate the level of importance we place on trivial endeavors and instead focus on our shared humanity and commitment to one another. Schools have long focused on reforming themselves to become the very best at testing, standardization, commodification, and quantification for comparison while minimizing the humanity of students and ignoring glaring social justice inequalities that are exposed, and reinforced, by our approach to schooling. In this way, schools have long sought to become the very best at what has decidedly become the very worst in how we approach education.

When we return to our schoolhouses we ought not return with the same mindsets and practices that have for decades reinforced and reproduced structural racial and class injustices and inequalities. We have before us an unparalleled opportunity to manifest the changes in our schools that decenter the importance of testing and rigid accountability for teachers and students and actually center the needs of students. Our students require the opportunity for their needs to be met both outside and inside of schools, and striving to increase some arbitrary test score number is hardly the route towards achieving either of those aims.

As universities begin to move away from standardized testing for its documented disadvantages to non-White and non-affluent students,¹³ K-12 schools across the country have the opportunity now to follow in the footsteps of teachers at Garfield High School that, en masse, refused to administer a state mandated standardized test.¹⁴ Accountability is important but it can be organic rather than contractual and removing testing is a fundamental component.¹⁵ Any benefits of high-stakes standardized testing simply do not outweigh the negative consequences of instructional time loss, debilitating school cultures, and teaching-to-the-test pedagogy.

Our historical efforts to ameliorate systemic poverty and racial inequalities through individualism and by raising test scores can, and should, be completely abandoned for the pursuit of ensuring that students have equitable educative opportunities. Social justice cannot be bound up within the schoolhouse walls; it requires a comprehensive approach to broad domestic policies that elevate the importance of our shared humanity and obligation to one another. In this post-COVID world, we must center equity and social justice if we are to ever fully realize the power and potential of the democratic cornerstone that is the public schoolhouse.

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Using CARES Act Funding to Protect Students' Educational Rights During the COVID-19 Crisis

by Amy Meek, Chicago Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights

States are slated to receive more than \$16 billion in education-related funding appropriated under the federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act. It is important to remember in the disbursement of these funds that marginalized students are intended to be primary beneficiaries of CARES Act funds, and states are responsible for overseeing their use. They have the authority to instruct local education agencies (LEAs) in how these funds should be used, and decisions about the allocation of CARES Act funds should center the needs of marginalized students at this crucial period.

Students from the following groups already faced barriers and educational inequities before the COVID-19 crisis began: low-income children, children of color, children with disabilities, English-language learner children, children in immigrant families, children in foster care, migrant children, homeless children, LGBTQ children, children in the juvenile justice system, and children whose identities span two or more of these categories. These are students who rely on additional support through our schools. With schools closed in most states for the remainder of the 2019-20 academic year, these children are likely to fall further behind their peers without a plan to prevent or redress equity gaps.

The disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on communities of color compounds existing risk factors, exposing already crippling equity gaps. States should recommend providing instruction and support to students to the maximum extent possible, thinking creatively about ways to meet student needs. It is also crucial that states allocate adequate funding and resources for students' return to the classroom – particularly to address the gaps that are likely to widen for marginalized students while schools are closed. This means that maintaining – not cutting – State education dollars and using the federal dollars to "supplement not supplant" State dollars, so that federal dollars are actually having the maximum impact on reducing inequities for marginalized children. Other strategies are outlined below:

Create Structures for Public Accountability and Transparency

Convene a Task Force that includes students, parents, educators, and community stakeholders with equity as a central value. The Task Force should ensure a statewide response and school district accountability to accomplish a twofold role: (1) ensure equity in short-term efforts, including meal distribution, remote learning, devices and internet access; and (2) ensure equity when students transition back to in-person instruction, including how to assess and determine the need for compensatory services for students who have fallen behind, and how to address issues like trauma, mental health, and social-emotional needs at school.

Meaningfully engage with marginalized students and parents in planning and monitoring the use of these funds. States can explore multiple strategies to engage and center the voices of marginalized students and parents, including leveraging current communication structures to gather information (e.g., phone hotlines to take questions and feedback), bringing together community-based organizations and advocacy groups in

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soliciting input and feedback, and holding multiple online community engagement sessions that focus on centering different groups on a rotating basis.

Require transparency and accountability at the district level by requiring LEAs to submit plans that put equity for marginalized students at the center of planned uses of these new funds. This also includes requiring that private and charter schools' uses of CARES Act funds be equally transparent and accountable to those of public schools. States should also provide maximum transparency on planned uses of the new federal funds by publicly posting in languages accessible to all state residents on their website: the **State application** to the federal government, the **State's plan** for the funds, and a **State report** on how funds were used.

Focus Spending on Equity for Marginalized Students

Address short-term equity gaps now. Districts need resources to provide the tools to access education remotely, thereby improving equitable access to services. Some districts already provided students with individual devices; other districts do not have the funding to provide computers and internet access to all of their students in need. In addition to this digital divide, short-term equity gaps include the need to provide additional supports for students with disabilities, ensure language access, and provide students additional supports if their parents or caregivers are not able to meet their children's educational needs while balancing other significant family concerns. Schools should also provide additional support for continued identification of students experiencing homelessness, provide increased training and support for educators on remote learning, and address mental health needs.

Address longer-term needs for school investments to narrow equity gaps. Plan for and allocate funding for longer-term investments in schools, particularly addressing equity gaps, once students return to in-person instruction. This will require that the state maintain – not cut – state funding for districts, using federal dollars to supplement rather than supplant state funding. Schools should invest in equity and accountability in compensatory education, supporting and incentivizing districts to provide compensatory education to vulnerable students. It is also essential to invest in mental health, physical health, and trauma-informed support for all students, particularly the most vulnerable.

Provide guidance and leadership to districts, both in the short and long term, by providing guidance on effective strategies for reducing education inequities for marginalized students during the COVID-19 school closure, over the summer and once schools re-open. Schools should also gather and share informational resources on effective strategies for reducing education inequities for marginalized students during these times. This includes supporting districts in methods of innovation to meet student needs, including, but not limited to best practices in engaging students virtually and creating a forum for schools and districts to share lessons and strategies they have found effective. It is equally important to provide training, guidance and support for district and school leadership and for educators on effective strategies for assessing academic and social-emotional needs and reducing education inequities for marginalized students in the COVID-19 school closure, over the summer and once schools re-open.

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Educational Rights Issues Associated with COVID-19 Related Standardized Testing in the Fall, Remedial Class Assignment, and Grade Retention

by Fred Jones, Southern Education Foundation

Amid the coronavirus global pandemic, public schools and the [51 million](#) students who attend them are experiencing a series of local epidemics. Many students are trying to [secure meals](#) and access stable and reliable [digital learning](#), while some students must contend with instances of [child maltreatment](#) due to increasing hours in the home due to COVID-19. The coronavirus pandemic has disrupted nearly every aspect of the United States' school system from a health, governance, and instructional standpoint. However, with an intentional focus on equity, there is a pathway for the United States to reimagine how to deliver education in a way that better prioritizes students who need the most resources.

Standardized Testing in the Fall

The Coronavirus, Relief, Economic, and Security (CARES) Act allowed states to submit [waivers](#) exempting them from administering state summative assessments during the spring of 2020. All 50 states requested waivers and received approval from the U.S. Department of Education (ED) not to test students for the 2019 – 2020 school year. However, just because states did not conduct final assessments, it does not mean students stopped learning. Segments of the population were able to seamlessly transition to remote learning with little complications. Other students, however, have not even been accounted for since March, when stay at home orders were first issued.

It is clear that comprehensive diagnostic tests, which are formative assessments that highlight a student's understanding of academic content knowledge at a specific moment in-time, should be performed on every student once school begins, whether school districts can fully, partially, or virtually reopen. These assessments, however, should not be used to retain students or for any other punitive measures, such as accountability within Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), but to evaluate content knowledge and inform instructional practice.

How Expanded Learning Time can Improve Academic Achievement

The United States academic calendar has always been tied to the agrarian economy, but the start and end date of most school calendars hold no intrinsic academic value. Extending the school year beyond the typical 180 school days has shown to improve assessment results and decrease achievement gaps between Black and White Students.¹ At least 40 percent of the countries² who outpace the United States on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), an international education rankings tool, have longer school years, including some countries with 200+ days of instruction. Additionally, Florida experienced significant improvements in its lowest-performing schools by adding just an extra hour to the school day for reading instruction.³ School districts should be rethinking how to elongate the school day and calendar year to provide

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Extra Learning Time (ELT) for students who are the farthest behind. Implementing ELT would allow districts to take advantage of summers, holiday breaks, and even some weekends to help address learning loss sparked by the Coronavirus.

States and districts should also consider the [following](#) recommendations from the Alliance for Excellent Education on the implementation of ELT. Specifically, policymakers should:

- **Expand high-quality remote instruction** through the summer and fall of 2020 to extend instructional time for all students or as a targeted strategy to help struggling students.
- **Develop reopening plans to provide students with in-person instruction as soon as it is safe to do so**—prioritizing students who lack technology and connectivity and/or are at-risk of falling most behind.
- **Provide professional development for educators as in-person instruction resumes** to help them support students and adjust to changes in school calendars, structures, and policies in the district’s reopening plan
- **Extend in-person instructional time during the 2020–21 school year**, including into the summer of 2021.

Remedial Class Assignment and Grade Retention

Students should not be punished, however, if their school district and/or home life was ill-prepared or un conducive for distance learning during a global pandemic. Research shows overall adverse outcomes holding students back, especially when there can be a plan to catch students up early in their education career. Black and low-income students will disproportionately suffer if it becomes a widely accepted policy to universally hold students back due to the Coronavirus’s impact on student achievement. The following are examples of state and local policy decisions to promote students to the next grade despite the likely learning losses as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

- **Maryland:** The [Baltimore](#) CEO of Public City Schools preemptively decided not to consider holding students back in any form.
- **Mississippi:** The Mississippi State Board of Education made [policy changes](#) so that “current 3rd graders will be promoted to 4th grade for the 2020-21 school year if the student meets all other district requirements for promotion.”
- **Arizona:** A [recently enacted](#) bill in Arizona waived third graders from requirements to “[demonstrate sufficient reading skills as established by the state board](#)” order to be promoted from the third grade for the 2019-20 school year.

Additionally, district leaders have expressed the high costs associated with holding students back. Instead of retaining students, local districts could use the financial resources to build capacity, such as hiring additional instructional coaches, to make up for any loss in learning. Lastly, grading policies should encompass flexibility, growth, and content mastery. While students and teachers adjust to blended and distance learning protocols, schools should adopt pass/fail grading models and also be open to creating virtual office hours.

Conclusion

Because COVID-19 has impacted every single student in this country, it is time that we use this opportunity to individualize education to a point where each student has a written graduation plan, outlining all of the

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academic and wraparound supports and infrastructure to graduate both college and career-ready. It is time for schools to adopt Individual Graduation Plans for all students.

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** The opinions and ideas in this brief are the authors' own and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Southern Education Foundation.*

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¹ Chiefs for Change and John Hopkins School of Education Institute for Education Policy. (2020). The return: How should education leaders prepare for reentry and beyond. https://chiefsforchange.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/CFC-TheReturn_5-13-20.pdf

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SESSION 5

Practices for Educating Students Coping with a High Cognitive Stress Load



Preparing Our Brains and Bodies to Regulate and Learn Through Adversity and Trauma

by Lori Desautels, Butler University

Providing Accommodations Through an ACEs Lens

Many of our students who need emotional support and resources do not have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) or 504 or a team of educators and staff available and who consistently meet their social and emotional health needs each day. These students often come to school in a survival brain state and are plagued by the adversities that have accumulated throughout the days, weeks, months, or years. These templates are created collaboratively to support all students who come to school with significant Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). These supports address the critical needs of attachment and regulation as, more often than not, students move to different classrooms and environments without consistency of routine opportunities to implement to calm and regulate while building relationships with other adults or students throughout the school day.

Providing accommodations through an ACEs Lens is not adding more work to what we are already doing, but rather intentionally and transparently handling a child or adolescent with care and the understanding that pain based behaviors show up in disrespectful, defiant, or shut down ways. These accommodations can occur naturally through our procedures, routines, transitions through morning bell work and meetings.

We know that many of our dysregulated students do not have these accommodations with accompanying accountability, or if they do, they are not consistently available and monitored. As a district, school, department, classroom, or grade level, we need to create these accommodations, so they are consistently dispersed, discussed and implemented each day. Because our students spend over 13,000 hours in school during their K-12 span, educators have the opportunity and the obligation to address the social and emotional skills and competencies through creating the modifications and adjustments needed for emotional, social and cognitive well-being.

Learn more about my approach to [providing accommodations through an ACE's lens](#).

Preparing Educators Through Pre-Service and In-Service Learning on Applied Educational Neuroscience

Educators should be taught a framework of [Applied Educational Neuroscience](#) as a necessary part of professional training. This framework addresses brain development through an educator's lens and explores attachment research, co-regulation, educator brain state, and teaching students and staff about their own neuroanatomy. These four constructs support a relational and brain aligned discipline lens which addresses the behaviors, communication, relationships, sensations, feelings and thoughts of all students and staff. These four constructs provide a new lens for discipline that is preventative, brain-aligned and becomes part of educators' procedures, routines, bell work, morning meetings and rituals throughout the day. This work begins with staff and adult brain regulation. These four constructs include creating touch points which are

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connections for teachers, ways to regulate through touch, music, rhythm, movement and breath along with learning about how our brains learn react and respond to negative situations.

This framework embraces and supports researched and evidence-based strategies and resources within the tiers of Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) and RTI that provides a sustainable structure and space for the social and emotional well-being of all students within the Tier One level. Tier Two and Tier Three supports the strategies, and resources required for increased intensity and frequency depending upon the social and emotional needs of the student. Dr. Bruce Perry reports that many of the achievement gaps we are seeing are a result of adversity gaps that can be lessened through repetitive patterned relevant experiences. We need to teach the behaviors we want to see unfold.

Applied Educational Neuroscience meets each student in brain development, leading to enhanced emotional and social well-being, and improved academic performance. Many of our students with or without IEP's, a 504, Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP) or Functional Behavioral Analysis (FBA) walk into our schools with significant levels of anxiety and stress set points that are chronically activated and we are seeing these numbers rise. This brain aligned relational discipline addresses brain development through sensory / motor integration, attachment, regulation and cognition.

Brain Aligned Discipline begins with the brain state of the educator. Discipline strategies are preventative and built into our instructional practices, routines, procedures, and transitions. They are taught to the students as procedures and sanctions. Students learn about their neuroanatomy as we begin to view discipline through the lens of science. Brain Aligned Discipline is the platform for the creation of "Resiliency Teams" which is the foundation of this new discipline lens calling for adults to co-regulate students first and foremost within the discipline process. Co-regulation is the first step in these discipline procedures. A dysregulated adult cannot regulate a child!

Ultimately, we must TEACH students about their neuroanatomy and turn the ideas of learning and self-discipline into a science that students can understand and apply. In this time, it is imperative we meet students in brain development so that we begin to build social and emotional skills from the bottom up leading to executive function performances, activating sustained attention, emotional regulation, inhibition of responses, problem solving, decision-making working memory and creative and innovative cognition. By helping children learn how to choose a different response to a stressor, we help them to actually rewire their brains to produce behavioral responses that avoid trouble. Learn more about [teaching students about neuroplasticity](#).

Lori Desautels is an Assistant Professor at Butler University where she teaches both undergraduate and graduate programs in the College of Education. Lori has created a nine-hour graduate certification at Butler University in Applied Educational Neuroscience/Brain and Trauma. Lori teaches in the classroom two days a week as part of a university course release and Lori is implementing these strategies and practices in classrooms with students and educators. Her website is www.revelationsineducation.com where you can find additional supports and resources for trauma responsive work in the schools.

Teaching and Learning in the Context of Stress and the COVID-19 Pandemic

by Lindsey Richland, University of California, Irvine

The COVID-19 pandemic raises unique challenges and heightens existing burdens on children's Executive Functions (EFs) and ability to succeed on learning from school tasks. Executive Functions are brain functions that include attentional control, inhibitory control, and working memory.¹ These are required for many educationally central abilities such as holding information in mind (e.g. rehearsing the spelling of a word), cognitively using information held in mind (e.g. mental calculation of multi-digit arithmetic), holding attention on tasks, inhibiting distraction or impulses, switching from one task to the next, and engaging in higher order thinking².

Importantly, humans only have a limited amount of EFs that are shared between these tasks, meaning if a student is heavily engaged in using one set of resources during a learning opportunity, the student will have less ability to use their other capacities. For example, when focused on remembering instructions, thinking about an ill relative, or monitoring their teacher's feelings toward them, a student may not have the available EFs to make inferences from a text, or to try to understand why a math procedure works. *A crucial task in supporting students' learning during and after the COVID-19 pandemic will be making sure students spend their limited cognitive resources on the key thinking needed for learning rather than on non-essential aspects of classroom activities. Solve this by eliminating competing demands that create barriers to learning and higher order thinking, not reducing the challenge and quality of instruction.*

Cognitive Challenges for Learning During and After the Pandemic

EF Demands of Distance Learning. Distance learning places dramatic demands on youth's EFs: it can be difficult to keep attention focused on a lesson when other digital and real-world distractors are highly salient and may be the highest for children in crowded or stressed homes. Additionally students must organize their time, plan for assignments, remember due dates, navigate technology, and get the help they need to complete schoolwork. While handling these and related barriers, for high quality learning and 21st century skills training, students must at the same time think critically, make inferences, see patterns, write arguments, and make connections to prior knowledge³. Upon returning to the classroom, teachers will be challenged to meet the differentiated instructional needs of students due to content missed during distance learning, as well as supporting students handling emotional or economic repercussions. Reducing the overall EF demands of tasks will help all students learn but particularly those with already taxed EFs.

Stress Responses engage EFs. The same EF resources that are involved in attention, engagement, and higher order thinking can also be taxed by stress.⁴ Systematic inequalities in economic stability, early experiences of high stress, genetics, trauma, and low social support are some examples of why some children will face heightened levels of stress and must exert more resources into resilience. Achievement gaps can grow when students have fewer resources to invest in their learning and if variations in coping effort are not recognized and EFs supported.⁵

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Creating a visual record of class instruction can also help, such as if you use two diagrams in a science lesson, leaving them both visible through the whole class, or if you go through two example math problems, leaving them both visible rather than erasing the first when complete. This allows a student to always catch up if his/her/their mind wanders, or to do their own thinking if they are moving at a different pace from the teacher. Provide instructions and content in visual and written form without distractions. Written records of instructions and key lesson content allows learners to return to check and reload their working memory as needed.⁶

Increasing EF availability by supporting emotion regulation. Students are also spending EFs when they have worried thoughts or when they are monitoring and explicitly thinking about social relationships. Caring, positive teacher-student relationships can help students benefit from instruction that encourages higher order thinking, and some studies suggest may be particularly impactful for Black and African American children.⁷ While more difficult in circumstances such as distance learning, building social trust as well as creating opportunities for students to serve as a social network of supportive peers may be beneficial in supporting learners' resilience.

Some work shows benefits for directly discussing how it feels to be worried or stressed and letting students know these feelings can help them learn and be turned into motivation.⁸ This can be more helpful than trying to ignore or distract oneself from thinking about negative emotions or worries.⁹ Educators might draw on popular growth mindset techniques for teaching their students that their brain is like a muscle – the more it struggles, the stronger it gets¹⁰ – to help students recognize that coping can be hard work but that brains and their functions grow and change. For older children, writing down worries that might be circling in their mind before a test can be helpful¹¹, but for younger children this can heighten these worries at least in the short term so they will need help in learning how to manage emotions. Other tools such as mindfulness and spending time in nature can be effective at resetting one's available EFs for learning.¹²

Stress and EFs in Teachers. Finally – teachers also have limited EFs, which when overtaxed, makes them less flexible to adapt to students' needs.¹³ Teachers simultaneously manage the minds and hearts of many students, some of whom may be experiencing severe stressors, as well as demands including curriculum management, monitoring administration requirements and performance reviews, and their own covid-19 related stressors. Access to and training on organizational tools and technology, support to build positive social networks with peers and administration, counseling, and restorative techniques such as mindfulness practices and breaks for time in nature can help educators to restore available EFs.¹⁴

Lindsey Engle Richland is an Associate Professor in the School of Education at the University of California, Irvine and director of the UCI Science of Learning Lab. She is a cognitive and developmental psychologist whose published research focuses on children's higher order thinking, mathematics learning, and learning under stress.

NOTES

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Lightening the Burden for Students Coping With Stress and Trauma

by Stacy Williams, TREP Project

Chronic stress and trauma can result in substantial difficulties with self-organization and persistence. These complex tasks are managed by one’s executive functioning capacities, which are dependent on the brain structures that are most affected by trauma: working memory (being able to keep and use information over a short period of time), inhibitory control (filtering thoughts and impulses), and cognitive flexibility (adjusting to changing demands, priorities, or perspectives). This brief focuses on three areas of functioning commonly affected by students coping with a high cognitive stress load: memory and retention, focus and attending, and planning and organizing.

Memory and Retention

The part of the brain responsible for memory and retention is directly affected by exposure to toxic stress and trauma, thus making it difficult to learn new knowledge, store it and retrieve in order to build coherent understanding of concepts. The most effective strategies to support students’ memory and retention is to move the learning from short term memory to long term storage by applying new knowledge to student’s own or other’s life experiences. Educators can use purposeful questioning as a way to elicit responses from students that connect to their lives.

Planning for Instruction

Plan thoughtful questions that bring the life experiences of the students in your classroom into your instruction – questions that open the door to student participation by focusing the learner’s attention on applying their current understanding to the instruction. Each success responding to classroom questions demonstrates to the students that they know how to think and have something to contribute, not only recalling facts. Here are some example questions that lie in shared experience so all learners can be led back to available evidence to find adequate answers even if they do not answer acceptably at first.

Description	Reflection	Analogy
What did you see? What happened? What is the difference between...?	What was interesting? What was surprising?	What else does it remind you of? What else does it look like?

Additional examples in endnotes¹

Focus and Attending

Students coping with stress and trauma may be consumed by thoughts of basic survival or intrusive thoughts. Focusing on academic content can be extremely challenging and may even feel like a betrayal. In this state of

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mind, the energy required to focus is much greater, and it can be difficult to attend to details and track an argument. Fatigue can set in much sooner than normal.

Strategies for Application

Strategies to support students with focusing and attending include establishing clear topics with key points ahead of time. Break up lectures into shorter chunks that can be delivered in under 20 minutes. Provide partially completed outlines with a visual anchor to follow along and return to when students' minds wander. Pay special attention to signs of fatigue from students to offer breaks or redirect their focus as needed. Using breaks strategically requires being attuned to the state of one's students and the signs and symptoms of losing focus or waning attention. The following chart gives signs and symptoms with corresponding types of breaks.

Signs and Symptoms	Type of Break
Fatigue = yawning, drooping eyelids, slouching	<u>Brain Break</u> – Our brains are wired for novelty, so brain breaks refresh our thinking and helps us discover another solution to a problem or see a situation through a different lens. During these few minutes the brain break actually helps to incubate and process new information.
Agitation = fidgeting, wiggling in seat, tapping, rocking	<u>Physical</u> –Physical activity breaks are especially supportive for students coping with trauma. The practice requires support with co-regulation by the teacher, limited movements, or length of time (e.g., an activity designed for 5 minutes could be reduced to 1 minute).
Losing Focus = looking around or outside, staring off, asking off-topic questions	<u>Focused Attention</u> – A focused-attention practice is a brain exercise for quieting the mind and learning to pay attention to our thoughts, feelings, and choices.

Sustained Attention

Students struggling under the weight of a high cognitive load have difficulty sustaining prolonged attention. Strategies to support students with sustained attention include shorter intervals between topics, frequent review of smaller segments of information, and checking for understanding often. Increasing student interaction with lecture content is an effective method of extending attention that otherwise might become tedious or cause students to fatigue. Actively engaging with verbally-delivered information taps into the positive energy boost that comes from social interaction, stimulates the brain by the variance in sensory input, and provides an immediate reward for attending. The following are examples of ways to support sustained attention when delivering information.

Methods of Extending Attention

Lecture/Rhetorical Questioning: Talk in 7 to 10-minute segments, pause, ask pre-planned rhetorical questions; learners record their answers in their notes.

Surveys with Exemplifier: Pause, ask directly for a show of hands for agreement/disagreement, whether it connects to their own experience or someone they know, ask one or two students to explain more.

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Turn and Talk: Ask each student to turn to the person next to them and share examples of the point just made or complete a given phrase or sentence.²

Planning and Organization

The prefrontal cortex is the area of the brain primarily responsible for planning and organizing information and tasks – especially concepts of time. Students carrying a high cognitive load often struggle to keep up with multiple assignments, varied tasks, tracking due dates and managing projects. Expecting students to be able to generate the organizing strategies on their own can be too much for them to be successful.

Freeing Students to Focus on Learning

Strategies that lift the burden of organizing the work can support students to apply their energy to the task of learning. Some opportunities to support such students are providing graphic organizers or thinking maps, making explicit connections, and setting up electronic binders with preset folders. Microsoft Word offers a template for an electronic binder that could be set up for students to support them in keeping assignments organized and easy to retrieve. Google Docs also provides a way to use folders to create an electronic binder that can easily be shared between students and teachers. Strategies to support concepts of time include providing visual schedules, project planning calendars, and using timers.³

Stacy Williams is a School Coach with the TREP Project drawing on more than twenty years of experience in public education to guide schools in developing trauma responsive educational practices.

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¹ Additional examples: Common Purpose: What is the purpose of.....? What is the usual function of.....?

Procedures: How does one normally do.....? How was this done? What is the normal (non- creative) next step?

Possibilities: What else could? How could we.....? If we didn't have, or couldn't use,,what could.....?

Prediction: What will happen next? What will you see? What will be the effect?

Justification: How can you tell? What evidence led you to..?

Theorizing: Why is it that way? What is the reason for it?

Skinner, E. A., & Pitzer, J. R. (2012). Developmental dynamics of student engagement, coping, and everyday resilience. In Handbook of Research on Student Engagement (pp. 21-44). Springer US.

² Additional examples: Pause: Present complex material or directions and then stop so learners have time to think or carry out directions. Ask for visible signal such as raised hands to confirm comprehension before moving on.

Guided Lecture: Students listen to 15-20 minutes of lecture without taking notes. At the end, they spend five minutes recording all they can recall. The next step involves learners in small discussion groups reconstructing the lecture conceptually with supporting data, preparing complete lecture notes, using the instructor to resolve questions that arise.; Griffin, R.M., Keels, M., Staff, J. (November, 2017). Maintaining Student Engagement in the K-12 Classroom. Practice Brief #3. TREP Project.

Addressing the Effects of and Interventions for the Impact of Stress on Learning

by Judy Willis

Educators are positioned to be the footholds students need to make school remote and classroom-based safe havens where they can rebuild emotional comfort as well as build knowledge. Teachers with this understanding become more powerful, critical motivators to reduce the negative impacts of high stress. They can adjust their teaching practices and build learning climates which enable all students to boost their emotional resilience and reach higher levels of cognition.

The Impact of High Stress on the Brain

The study of the brain lends critical information to the understanding of the way students process trauma and react in stressful environments - information that will be critical as educators start to adapt to teaching in the wake of COVID-19. Research has shown that when the brain is burdened by sustained high stress or perceived threat, it follows its programming into survival mode. The amygdala, the brain structure that basically serves as an emotionally reactive switching station, has shown to become overloaded by cellular activity in response to threat, fear, and high stress. Behavioral control then becomes dedicated to survival, and responses become more reactive and involuntary.¹

Highly stressed students, reacting to discomfort, academic frustration, or emotional struggles, slip into this involuntary survival state with reactive behavior and impaired memory construction. These responses, even though involuntary, can be misinterpreted by teachers, and the students themselves, as intentional misbehaviors.^{2,3}

It may manifest as frequent trips to the bathroom or the drinking fountain, restlessness or provocation, and daydreaming or loss of attention and focus.

Opportunities for Educators

When teachers understand the neuroscience of stress impacting the brain, they recognize that the brain's responses in high stress states are not necessarily voluntary student choices and therefore are not representative of students' behavioral or academic potentials. Instead of attributing these responses to willfulness, laziness, or low intelligence, educators can provide more supportive interventions to reduce the impact of stressors on their students' learning and emotional self-regulation.

Similarly, teaching students about their brains' powers of neuroplasticity, the brain's ability to reorganize learned connections, can help them to understand that they have the neural capacity to build the brains, behaviors, skills, and academic outcomes they seek. Studies show that students taught about their neuroplastic potentials show outcomes of increased emotional self-management, more successful learning, and greater academic success. Of note, the positive responses were especially evident in students designated as being from low-income minority groups.⁴

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Neuroscience-informed teachers can guide students and parents through the process of understanding these responses and appropriately addressing them. The inherent malleability of the brain means that educators have the opportunity to equip students with the tools they need to build the brains, behaviors, skills, and academic outcomes they seek.

Emotions are inseparable from students' responses to learning, engagement with school, and ultimate achievement. When students build strategies for self-management, they open themselves up to more successful, motivated learning and positive school experiences.⁵ Tools for building students' emotional self-management start with their developing emotional self-awareness and build up to self-management strategies such as mindfulness, guided relaxation, and visualization for students to use to mitigate emotional discomfort.⁶

When students learn about their brains' survival reactions to stress, they have the keys to change their beliefs, responses, and success as well as open themselves up to more successful, motivated learning and positive school experiences.⁷ As teachers use their understanding and related strategies, they, themselves, increasingly recognize their positive impact on their students' behaviors, efforts, mindsets, and achievements. This awareness heightens their own confidence and commitment to continue to use their skills beyond the current trauma, and to promote greater self-efficacy in all learners as time goes on.⁸

Teachers as Guardians of Classroom Climate

Research correlations support what experienced educators have known all along about the important role that emotional comfort plays in students' resilience to high stress and access to academic achievement. Optimal conditions develop when teachers promote an emotional climate that allows students to feel safe, positively supported for engagement, and free from perceived threat to their physical and emotional selves and their property.⁹

Judy Willis combined her 15 years as a board-certified practicing neurologist with ten subsequent years as a classroom teacher to become a leading authority in the neuroscience of learning. She is an author, presenter, and media consultant and on the adjunct faculty of the Williams College.

NOTES

¹ Motzkin, J., Philippi, C. L., Wolf, R. C., Baskaya, M. K., & Koenigs, M. (2015). Ventromedial prefrontal cortex is critical for the regulation of amygdala activity in humans. *Biological Psychiatry*, 77(3), 276–284. doi: 10.1016/j.biopsych.2014.02.014; Ressler, K. (2010). Activity, Fear, and Anxiety: Modulation by Stress. *Biol Psychiatry*. 2010 Jun 15; 67(12): 1117–1119; Willis, J.W. (2014) Neuroscience reveals that boredom hurts. *Phi Delta Kappan*. 95 (8). P 28-32. <https://kappanonline.org/neuroscience-reveals-that-boredom-hurts-willis/>; *Variable stress responses*. Stressful events do not necessarily lead to a stress response or to the same stress response in all individuals. One's background experiences, resilience, and level of preexisting stress and stress-management strategies at the time can influence how their brains interpret and cope with high stress (Vogel & Schwabe, 2016).

² Lupien, S. J., McEwen, B. S., Gunnar, M. R., & Heim, C. (2009). Effects of stress throughout the lifespan on the brain, behaviour and cognition. *Nature Reviews Neuroscience*, 10(6), 434–445. doi: 10.1038/nrn2639; Quesada, A. A., Wiemers, U. S., Schoofs, D. & Wolf, O. T. (2012, January). Psychosocial stress exposure impairs memory retrieval in children. *Psychoneuro- endocrinology*, 37(1), 125–

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136; Valizadeh, L., Farnam, A., & Rahkar Farshi, M. (2012). Investigation of stress symptoms among primary school children. *Journal of Caring Sciences, 1*(1), 25–30.

³ *Additional section of background neuroscience knowledge: the brain's dopamine-reward response system.*

Teachers and students can also reduce stress and promote positivity and perseverance by tapping into the intrinsic motivation power of the dopamine-reward response. (See articles: Arsenault JT, Nelissen K, Jarraya B, & Vanduffel W. (2013). Dopaminergic reward signals selectively decrease fMRI activity in primate visual cortex. *Neuron, 77*(6):1174-1186; Nakahara, H. (2014). Multiplexing signals in reinforcement learning with internal models and dopamine. *Current Opinion in Neurobiology, 25*, 123-129.) Dopamine is the neurotransmitter most closely associated the experience of intrinsic motivation, especially from achieving challenges (See articles: Anderson, B. A., Kuwabara, H., Wong, D. F., Gean, E. G., Rahmim, A., Brašić, J. R., George, N., Frolov, B., Courtney, S. M., & Yantis, S. (2016). The Role of Dopamine in Value-Based Attentional Orienting. *Current Biology: CB, 26*(4), 550–555; Berke J. D. (2018). What does dopamine mean? *Nature Neuroscience, 21*(6), 787–793; Boot, N., Baas, M., van Gaal, S., Cools, R., & De Dreu, C. (2017). Creative cognition and dopaminergic modulation of fronto-striatal networks: Integrative review and research agenda. *Neuroscience and Biobehavioral Reviews, 78*, 13–23; Cerasoli, C. P., Nicklin, J. M., & Ford, M. T. (2014). Intrinsic motivation and extrinsic incentives jointly predict performance: a 40-year meta-analysis. *Psychological Bulletin, 140*(4), 980–1008; Robinson, L. J., Stevens, L. H., Threapleton, C. J. D., Vainiute, J., McAllister-Williams, R. H., & Gallagher, P. (2012). Effects of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation on attention and memory. *Acta Psychologica, 141*(2), 243-249.)

When dopamine levels increase in response to its release mechanisms, the associated satisfaction and pleasure are usually accompanied by enhanced perseverance, motivation, and memory (See article: Bergey, C. M., Phillips-Conroy, J. E., Disotell, T. R., & Jolly, C. J. (2016). Dopamine pathway is highly diverged in primate species that differ markedly in social behavior. *PNAS: Proceedings of the National Academy of the United States of America, 113*(22), 6178-6181.)

Teachers can incorporate dopamine boosters, such as choice, music, optimism, movement, positive interactions with peers, being read to, acting kindly, expressing gratitude, humor, and especially experiencing the achievement of challenges. These dopamine boosts are especially valuable when students are stressed, but also can serve to enhance learning in general (See articles: Anderson, B. A., Kuwabara, H., Wong, D. F., Gean, E. G., Rahmim, A., Brašić, J. R., George, N., Frolov, B., Courtney, S. M., & Yantis, S. (2016). The Role of Dopamine in Value-Based Attentional Orienting. *Current Biology: CB, 26*(4), 550–555; Berke J. D. (2018). What does dopamine mean? *Nature Neuroscience, 21*(6), 787–793; Boot, N., Baas, M., van Gaal, S., Cools, R., & De Dreu, C. (2017). Creative cognition and dopaminergic modulation of fronto-striatal networks: Integrative review and research agenda. *Neuroscience and Biobehavioral Reviews, 78*, 13–23; Cerasoli, C. P., Nicklin, J. M., & Ford, M. T. (2014). Intrinsic motivation and extrinsic incentives jointly predict performance: a 40-year meta-analysis. *Psychological Bulletin, 140*(4), 980–1008; Robinson, L. J., Stevens, L. H., Threapleton, C. J. D., Vainiute, J., McAllister-Williams, R. H., & Gallagher, P. (2012). Effects of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation on attention and memory. *Acta Psychologica, 141*(2), 243-249.)

With the powerful dopamine response to achieving challenges, providing students individualized opportunities to progress toward their defined goals at their mastery levels, implements a valuable intervention for all learners. With opportunities to progress at their individual achievable challenge levels, the *barriers are lowered, but not the bar*. Especially when stressed, frustrated, or encumbered by expectations of failure, students need more frequent feedback of their ongoing progress on route to the goals to engender dopamine response. This individualizing takes much time and work. But experiencing the exhilarating impact on even just one student at a time, will boost teachers' own dopamine response and motivate their efforts to persevere.

⁴ Good, C., Aronson, J. M., & Inzlicht, M. (2003). Improving adolescents' standardized test performance: An intervention to reduce the effects of stereotype threat. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology, 24*(6), 645–662.

⁵ Mega, C., Ronconi, L., & De Beni, R. (2014). What makes a good student? How emotions, self-regulated learning, and motivation contribute to academic achievement. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 106*(1), 121–131

⁶ Kohn, N., Eickhoff, S. B., Scheller, M., Laird, A. R., Fox, P. T., & Habel, U. (2014). Neural network of cognitive emotion regulation—an ALE meta-analysis and MACM analysis. *Neuroimage, 87*, 345–355; Razza, R. A., Bergen-Cico, D., & Raymond, K. (2015). Enhancing preschoolers' self-regulation via mindful yoga. *Journal of Child and Family Studies, 24*(2), 372–385.

⁷ Mega, C., Ronconi, L., & De Beni, R. (2014). What makes a good student? How emotions, self-regulated learning, and motivation contribute to academic achievement. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 106*(1), 121–131.

⁸ Hermans, E. J., Henckens, M. J., Joëls, M., & Fernández, G. (2014). Dynamic adaptation of large-scale brain networks in response to acute stressors. *Trends in Neurosciences, 37*(6), 304–314; Schwabe, L., Tegenthoff, M., Höffken, O., & Wolf, O. T. (2012). Simultaneous glucocorticoid and noradrenergic activity disrupts the neural basis of goal-directed action in the human brain. *Journal*

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of *Neuroscience*, 32(30), 10146–10155; Willis, J.W. (2014) Neuroscience reveals that boredom hurts. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 95(8). 28-32. <https://kappanonline.org/neuroscience-reveals-that-boredom-hurts-willis/>

⁹ Reyes, C. R., Brackett, M. A., Rivers, S. E., White, M., & Salovey, P. (2012). Classroom emotional climate, student engagement, and academic achievement. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 104(3), 700–712.

SESSION 6

Coaching Educators in their Efforts to
Support Students with Grief and Loss
Processing, and Managing Anxiety and
Worry in the Classroom



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

by Jamilah Bowden, TREP Project

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 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.

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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 teachers** can the 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

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

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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.			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.)			
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	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	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.

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need some additional care, comfort, or encouragement.	their own encouraging playlists at home.	
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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NOTES

¹ For further reading:

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Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). (2020, April 22). *COVID-19 in Racial and Ethnic Minority Groups*. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/racial-ethnic-minorities.html>

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Using Responsive and Culturally Sensitive Mental Health Practices to COVID-19 in the Classroom Setting

by Sonya Dinizulu, University of Chicago

Potential Mental Health Effects of COVID-19 Affecting Students

We are treading in uncharted territories. Uncertainty provokes anxiety, fear of the unknown, and stress and social distancing and isolation for weeks has most likely taken a toll on mental health. The mental effects of COVID-19 itself are not yet known in the U.S. nor are we able to assess the effects of the fear generated by potential contamination. In similar disastrous situations, children who were isolated or quarantined during pandemic diseases were more likely to develop acute stress disorder, adjustment disorder, and grief and about 30 percent met the clinical criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder.¹ Furthermore, separation from parents or parental loss during childhood also has long-term adverse effects on mental health, including a higher risk of developing mood disorders and psychosis.² Unfortunately, there is no existing data that gives us a clear picture of how students will be affected long-term by COVID-19.

COVID-19 and Communities of Color

For communities of color (of all socio-economic status), COVID-19 has made the social and structural inequities that exist among students and their families—particularly in the African American, Latinx, and American Indian communities—even more apparent. Students in these communities are more likely to have, and therefore have to worry about, an adult in their lives that is an essential worker and at greater risk for contracting the virus. They may also know that their loved one has a greater risk of serious complications or death due to the fact that Black and Latinx people are at greater risk for comorbidities. Unfortunately, some youth have seen deaths within their family network.

While loss is a powerful stressor, we must also consider how the lived experiences of racism, heightened sense of fear and anxiety growing when trust and safety is significantly compromised by authorities, and coping with microaggressions and discrimination, further exacerbates the isolation and alienation that COVID-19 has imposed upon us. Getting help to cope with these stressors is difficult to access and find. Countless studies show that the utilization of, access to and provision of quality mental health care services is lower in communities of color.³ The pandemic's impact on racial and structural inequality cannot be ignored. Given these disparities, the educational system must ensure that the staff and teachers prevent further isolation, and re-traumatization of these students in the midst of a pandemic.

Helping Students Cope with Grief

Whether or not students experience death in their own families, it is inevitable that students will learn of deaths in the community, especially in African American and Latinx communities. It is also important to

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consider that in these particular communities, grief may not always be related to death itself. Students may be grieving loss of quality of life related, such as being homeless, familial employment, food and safety insecurities, and increased exposure to violence. These stressors affect the entire family system, and it is important for educators and staff to learn what kind of loss students are experiencing and be responsive.

Teachers can collaborate with family members to discuss ways to reassure the affected student impacted by grief and/or loss. When satisfying reassurances are not possible, instead focus on the steps that are being taken by the school and the student's family. Keep routines and rituals intact, provide teacher-student, and peer-to-peer social supports, and opportunities to grieve in a safe space at school when needed. Positive experiences, fun, and enjoyment are very important in supporting a student's adjustment to a death in the family or loss, and should be encouraged, letting them know that life will continue and that it is OK to have fun and to laugh and it is OK to feel sad and angry. Shared activities with families, friends, and teachers and staff siblings or even solitary engagement in other pleasant or enjoyable activity can be helpful.

Evidence-Based Practices and Strategies to Cope with COVID-19 in the Classroom

Not everyone who is affected by COVID-19 will respond or cope in the same way. However, evidence based interventions such as Psychological First Aid for Schools, that can be universally implemented in school-based settings to mitigate negative effects and promote resilience. Therefore, a trauma-informed mental health approach is also essential to help school communities feel safe and supported during times of danger and adversity.

Psychological First Aid for Schools (PFA-S) is an evidence-informed intervention model to assist students, families, school personnel, and school partners in the immediate aftermath of an emergency or during sheltering in place.⁴ PFA-S provides eight core trauma-informed actions that schools educators and staff can use to model on how to respond to COVID-19. A tool kit is available for free [here](#).

Practical Coping Strategies

Educators can also look to the following to help establish feelings of emotional and physical safety for students.

- A. **Routines and Rituals:** By providing a sense of safety, predictability, and consistency routines and rituals allow for students to have a sense of control in a chaotic world. One of the most important daily rituals in a classroom setting is greeting each student at the door with a welcoming, personalized hello. Teachers and staff are encouraged test many versions of rituals and routines to help mitigate stress and trauma related to COVID-19 and implement their strategies with consistency
- B. **Stress Management:** Child stress stems from a number of factors and can be best addressed by learning what the problem is, what may be causing it, and then taking steps to help a child feel more relaxed. Teachers and staff may not be able to learn the causes of stress for individual students, but implementing daily and consistent stress management habits can help improve student behaviors. Student may find mindfulness strategies such as grounding techniques, slow and controlled breathing, stretching, listening to music or nature sounds in the classroom rewarding.

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- C. **Psychoeducation:** Psychoeducation is an evidence-based therapeutic intervention that provides information and support to better understand and cope with mental health concerns. For schools, psychoeducation about COVID-19 is advised to include:
1. **Welcome students' questions and don't avoid** questions you can't answer. Given how much uncertainty there is, try to be comfortable saying "I don't know." Tolerating uncertainty is key to reducing anxiety and depression and instrumental in building resilience;
 2. **Set the tone.** Look at these conversations as an opportunity not just to convey the facts but set the emotional tone;
 3. **Be developmentally appropriate.** Don't volunteer too much information, as this may be overwhelming;
 4. **Focus on what you're doing to stay safe.** An important way to reassure students is to emphasize the safety precautions we all can take to stay safe. Promote living by facts and not by fear.
 5. **Keep students updated.** Tell students that you will continue to keep them updated as you learn more;
 6. **Normalize** exposure to COVID-19: "You're not alone/not the only one," "COVID-19 can be scary." Clear communication, accurate information, and planning are ways to reduce anxiety, especially during the transition process back to school.
- D. **Validate Emotions and Empathize:** It is important for students to expand their emotional vocabulary, while learning to **identify**, **express**, and **regulate** their feelings related to COVID-19, and additional stressors. Feeling charts can help students label emotions and check-in about how they are feeling and remind them to use stress management strategies to regulate the intensity of their emotions. Reminding students that it is okay to not be okay and keeping them in the present moment can help them build stamina to tolerate intense emotions. Telling students "to not worry," or "don't feel that way" is invalidating their lived experience and reduces opportunities to discuss how they truly feel. You should let them explain how they're feeling and express why, and validate those feeling by saying things like, 'I have similar worries. Let us brainstorm ideas on how we can make things better.' All emotions are healthy to experience.
- E. **Problem Solving:** Utilized in many therapies, problem solving skills have been linked to favorable mental health outcomes and may make students less vulnerable to emotional and behavioral problems. These activities promote independent thinking and build confidence. The Problem-Solving Box is a popular classroom activity. Invite students to anonymously write down and submit any problem or issue they might be having at school or at home, ones that they cannot seem to figure out on their own. Once or twice a week, have a student draw one of the items from the box and read it aloud. Then have the class as a group figure out the ideal way the student can address and hopefully solve the issue.⁵

Selected Resources:

- [A Kid's Guide to Coronavirus](#)
- [Concerns for the Mental Health for Children during the Coronavirus Pandemic](#)
- [Psychological First Aid for Schools](#)
- [Trauma Informed School Strategies During COVID-19](#)

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NOTES

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Facing Trauma in Our Students and Ourselves in the Time of COVID-19

by Jennifer Meade, University of Chicago

Setting the Context

In this time of COVID-19, the distance we are often able to put between our own and our students' experiences of trauma has disappeared. We are *co-processing* and *co-experiencing* grief, loss, anxiety and worry about the present and the future along *with* our students and their families. Each of us is experiencing this health crisis in unique ways. Our histories of traumatic experiences may emerge as painful reminders of our vulnerabilities and fears. Our students and their families are experiencing these same worries and fears alongside us. Their experiences of individual trauma may be compounded by structural inequalities, issues of safety and access to resources and care that our professional privileges may shield us from to some degree. Despite these stressors, as professionals we are expected to be leaders and critical sources of support in such times of crisis. To do so requires nurturing ourselves and putting our own mask on first now more than ever before.

Therefore, we must be aware of the possibility for secondary trauma, also known as “vicarious traumatization,” “compassion fatigue,” or “trauma exposure response” and how this type of traumatization can affect our ability to handle the stresses and emotions of our students. In her book *Trauma Stewardship*, social worker and activist Laura van Dernoot Lipsky introduces the concept of trauma stewardship as “the entire conversation about how we come to do this work, how we are affected by it, and how we make sense of and learn from our experiences (van Dernoot Lipsky & Burk, 2009a).”¹

In the best of times, we are a holding environment for our students, absorbing their joys and their sufferings whether we intend to or not. In this time of COVID-19, we are on the frontlines of our students' anxieties, while simultaneously experiencing our own. The notion of stewardship becomes even more essential in these unprecedented times. To support our students in processing their grief and loss and aid them in managing their stress and anxiety, we must also allow ourselves the space to process *our* grief and loss and manage *our* own stress and anxiety. To riff on the biblical proverb, *Educator, heal thyself*.

Understanding How Trauma Manifests in Our Students and in Ourselves

There is an inseparable brain and body connection in how we respond to trauma that stems from our autonomic nervous system (ANS). The ANS has two distinct components, the sympathetic nervous system and the parasympathetic nervous system. It is our sympathetic nervous system that triggers a *fight or flight* response to a perceived threat. This response is probably quite familiar to most educators and school-based mental health providers who have dealt with a student in a state of intense agitation. The parasympathetic nervous system, sometimes called the *rest and digest* system, is responsible for slowing our heart rate and lowering our blood pressure after our sympathetic nervous system is activated, returning us to a place of balance or *homeostasis*. There are two primary ways in which we experience our parasympathetic nervous system, from a place of safety and connectedness (the ideal place from which to learn), or from a primordial

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place of quiet, shutdown and collapse. In this time of COVID-19, many of us find ourselves in this state of shutdown and collapse more frequently, sleeping more, lacking energy, and unable to motivate ourselves to tackle the grand projects we thought we might when the pandemic began. This is a protective state, similar to how an animal lies still in the hopes that it will not be noticed and therefore, eaten. People who experience trauma often go to this protective place in the hopes that if they can become invisible, they will not be noticed and therefore, harmed.

These nervous system responses show up in a myriad of ways in our classrooms and mental health settings, as well as in ourselves. When our nervous system is in an optimal, *well-regulated* place, we feel loved, safe, open to the world and ready to take in new information and new experiences. We are able to communicate and connect with others. As educators, this is where we want our students—and ourselves—to be. When our nervous system is in a suboptimal, *dysregulated* place, it shows up in behaviors first before thoughts. It is important to remember that all behavior is functional and adaptive, even if that behavior is frustrating.

Moving from Dysregulation to Co-Regulation

We often assume that children walk into school feeling safe, and that educators, school-based mental health providers, and other school staff do the same. Unfortunately, that was not the truth before the pandemic hit and will be far from the truth as we reopen schools. Our own feelings of worry and anxiety are a functional response to perceptions of danger from a virus we know less about than we would like. For many of us, our go-to response to these feelings of distress would be social connection, but this coping tool has been taken from us when we need it most, adding to our sense of dysregulation.²

With so many things outside our locus of control, one of the most powerful tools we have at our disposal is our understanding of our nervous system and our ability to regulate it. Author and licensed clinical social worker Deb Dana has spoken about sharing our regulation with others as “a gift we can give.”³ Regulating our nervous systems starts with the understanding that committing to our own wellness is a way to honor ourselves and serve others. It gives us permission to engage in self-care and community care, responding to our own needs while engaging with our passions.

The good news is *we can* regulate our own nervous systems and we can help our students regulate theirs. We can stimulate a parasympathetic response with tools that do not take a lot of time but can reap tremendous benefits for us and our students such as:

- grounding ourselves in the sensory world, through touch, sight, sound, smell, and taste.
- diaphragmatic breathing (also known as abdominal breathing)
- mindfulness (combining breath with a mindful focus on the present moment)
- guided imagery and visualization
- progressive muscle relaxation

As educators and school-based mental health professionals, we can teach our students about their nervous systems and normalize rather than demonize their responses. Students can be taught a shared language to identify their nervous system states and peers can be coached to support one another in moving from one state to another. As we move forward into this new, uncharted territory together, investing the time to make regulating our nervous systems a daily practice is something we can control that is likely to benefit our students and ourselves, building shared resilience in a time of uncertainty.⁴

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National Child Traumatic Stress Network COVID-19 Resources:

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School Social Work Association of America COVID-19 Resources: <https://www.sswaa.org/covid-19-resources>

Creating a Welcoming School and Classroom Environment During COVID-19

by Erin Nation

Even before the pandemic of COVID-19, anxiety was the most prevalent psychiatric condition among children today, affecting as many as 20% of children.¹ Anxiety does not go away without treatment, but in fact worsens over time and has adverse effects on cardiac, immune, and respiratory functioning.² Anxiety disorders are also the primary psychiatric condition in adults, and the majority of adults with an anxiety disorder report that their symptoms started in childhood.

It can be expected that living through a traumatic experience such as the COVID-19 pandemic will increase or induce anxiety in children. However, anxiety disorders are also the most treatable psychiatric condition, and there are concrete steps educators can take to address students experiencing mental health challenges.³

Educators should know and be able to recognize the signs of childhood stress in order to identify students in need of support and assistance. Physical symptoms include headaches, upset stomachs, and stuttering, while emotional symptoms include crying, new or recurring fears, and an unwillingness to participate in family or school activities.⁴ Anxiety can present in a variety of ways and no two children are exactly alike in this respect. However, noticing common signs of anxiety, such as worries or concerns about family, school, friends, or activities, fears of embarrassment or making mistakes and low self-esteem or lack of self-confidence, can prepare teachers to better support their students.⁵

Teachers and administrators can prepare for the return of all students by creating a welcoming classroom and school environment that may include:

Opportunities for daily check-in/check-outs with classroom teacher or other school personnel: Students check-in in daily with their teacher or a staff member, such as a counselor or Assistant Principal to ensure the student is prepared and ready to learn. Check-in adults should consider walking and talking with students, rather than always meeting in an office setting. The student then checks out with the same staff member at the end of the school day to summarize the day and prepare or get “pumped up” for the next day.

Morning classroom meetings that set the stage for the day and build the foundation for a classroom community: Morning meetings are also an opportunity to provide a schedule for the day’s activities, like adults, children like to know what is expected of them and what to prepare for each day. Morning meetings could also include opportunities to get moving, as exercise is helpful in managing anxiety.

A cool down spot with a coping skills toolbox: Cool down spots can be located within the classroom, but also in spaces around the school building, such as in the library or cafeteria. The toolkit should include age-appropriate materials that help to deescalate intense emotion such as pages for coloring, journaling prompts, fidgets, and feelings charts.

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Lessons on coping skills, including opportunities to practice deep breathing: Teaching coping skills (strategies for handling difficult emotions) before emotions escalate is most beneficial. These skills can range from breathing techniques to slowly counting to 10 to using a stress ball. Students can find empowerment in selecting the coping skills that work best for them.

Books on managing emotions: There are many benefits in literature about managing emotions for children to be able to identify and relate to feelings and the book characters.

A change in speech: Instead of phrases such as “*calm down*” or “*relax*,” using phrases that help identify emotions such as “*It seems you are really feeling like this is too scary right now,*” is more beneficial to students with anxiety.

The validation of feelings: Like changing what we say, it’s important how we say things to children. It’s important to acknowledge and validate their big emotions. Consider phrases like: “*I know you are feeling scared. That’s not a good feeling. I want to help you.*”

The practice of mindfulness and daily gratitude: Teachers can set aside time each day to give students the opportunity to practice mindfulness through focusing their attention and calming as well as time for daily gratitude to focus on things and people they are thankful for.

Assist with positive self-talk: Teachers can model positive self-talk to their students such as “*This virus is very serious, but we don’t need to be scared, we need to be responsible by doing things like washing our hands.*”

An open space for questions: Let students know that this is a safe place, and while we may not have all of the answers, it’s okay to ask questions.

Encourage hope: While difficult situations can have negative results, they can also have positive outcomes. Model an optimistic attitude and look forward to the future.

Teachers and administrators should also practice self-care. As NATAL-Israel’s Trauma and Resiliency Center notes, no one is immune to emotions triggered by hardship. Acknowledge and attend to your own reactions and feelings. Share with children the strategies you use to cope with your distress. Seek assistance if you are experiencing feelings that are overwhelming or difficult to manage.⁶

Erin Nation is a practicing elementary school counselor in Oklahoma. She also has experience at the state level as the Director of Early Childhood and has taught Kindergarten.

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CLOSING SESSION

Planning to Mitigate an Unequal Return to School



A Broad View of Differentiation as Students Likely Return to Remote Learning in Fall 2020

by Todd Finley, East Carolina University

“We should not be trying to ‘implement’ school learning at home. Rather, we should be taking advantage of our new circumstances, and draw on the strengths that come with learning at home.” - Jal Mehta

This fall, it will be incumbent upon teachers to meet students’ differing needs—that is, differentiate: “an approach to instruction that aims to make teaching and learning work for the full range of students,” explains differentiation expert Carol Ann Tomlinson. Without a vaccine available to curb COVID-19, fall learning will inevitably include some degree of remote instruction challenging differentiation through learning due to strains in communication and lack of technology access. In addition, educators will be faced with increased child trauma will make differentiation both more necessary and more difficult by increasing the range of student need to be accounted for.

Because of the expected pandemic-related learning challenges this fall, all teachers should receive broad training in differentiation in the areas of *online best practices, culturally responsive pedagogy, and trauma-informed approaches*.¹

Three Recommended Subsets of Differentiation

Online teaching - These differentiation strategies are founded on the view that simply delivering content is insufficient to meet the needs of all learners. We must instead focus on delivering *learning*.

Best practices for remote instruction include:

- Offering clear expectations
- Building teacher-student relationships
- Teaching students how to learn cooperatively at a distance
- Providing digestible assignment activities
- Encouraging learning routines and protecting designated, quiet workspaces—as extensively researched and published by universities, psychologists, industries, and researchers of K-12 online instruction.²

Remote culturally responsive teaching – Both differentiation and culturally responsive teaching (CRT) share the primary goal of meeting the individual needs of students. CRT uses the “cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them.”³ Culturally responsive instruction from a distance encourages students to connect new things that they are learning to existing schema or background knowledge that relates directly to their culture, and interests.⁴ This pedagogy is about giving students the agency and tools to helping students become independent learners.

The main features of culturally responsive teaching include:

- Communicating high expectations and actively engaging students in learning

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- Using scaffolding to facilitate learning
- Understanding that the student’s guardians have important assets worth investigating
- Ensuring that the curriculum is grounded in the students’ daily lived lives

Some remote Culturally Responsive Teaching strategies:

- Using interest inventories to assess students’ affinities
- Connecting with parents
- Employing thinking routines
- Teaching vocabulary acquisition practices
- Demonstrating visual thinking routines (VTRs) and sketch noting

Remote Trauma Informed Practice – “When people are facing stress and difficult life circumstances, it can particularly affect three areas: a sense of safety, feelings of connectedness and feelings of hope.”⁵ When Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs is imperiled, academics suffer. Differentiation practices during a COVID-19 fall will necessitate acknowledging and addressing trauma (including the active rejection of the notion that communities that struggle with economic insecurity somehow deserve that status). As teachers use trauma informed practice (TIP) as a lens through which to ascertain how crises impact students and their families, they can also employ mitigation strategies at a distance to enhance *safety, connectedness, and hope*.⁶

Connectedness strategies include social-emotional learning, peer group work, virtual recesses, and “relational rituals” such as starting class with the sharing of positive and troubled feelings.⁷ Classroomscreen.com is a powerful tool for charting feelings and encourages predictable routines which enhance children’s feelings of *safety*. Additionally, web-based mindfulness practice will significantly reduce students’ stress and anxiety⁸ as well as the secondary traumatic stress on teachers.⁹ Also, schools can disseminate information to guardians about bedtime routines as a cost-effective and research-supported means to support the well-being of children, “particularly for socioeconomically disadvantaged and other at-risk young children.”¹⁰ Finally, children’s sense of *hope* can be increased when they see adult caregivers demonstrating that they have the sensitivity to recognize trauma and the power to help in the midst of uncertainty.

In due course, COVID-19 related uncertainty can be an occasion to foster effective online differentiation tactics, informed by culturally responsive pedagogy and trauma informed instruction. Used together, these approaches have the potential to vault us out of pre-pandemic inequities, as long as our aspirations are not limited to replicating pre-pandemic practices.

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Growing Mental Health Needs Among Children Require Immediate Federal and State Responses

by Carolyn J. Heinrich, Peabody College, Vanderbilt University

Mental health among parents and children has deteriorated since the start of the pandemic, with more than a 40% increase in children exhibiting externalizing behaviors.¹ This follows an overall rise in numbers of [children presenting at emergency departments with mental health crises](#), particularly for deliberate self-harm and substance abuse. In addition to prior research linking increases in adult and youth suicidality to economic downturns, poor children and children of color are more likely to suffer emotional disturbances as a result of enduring social disadvantages.² The collateral damage from the shutdown of economic activity will further rattle families that have already been shaken by traumas, such as the opioid and other drug crises.

Schools Lack Capacity to Meet Growing Mental Health Needs of School-aged Children

The closing of schools this spring in the wake of the coronavirus will only exacerbate the steady rise in student mental health needs, as some children spend more time in high-risk home environments without access to school-based supports. For many children in rural and other underserved communities, school-based health centers are their primary or only sources of access to basic health care, mental health care, and other supportive services. Research evidence indicates that youth whose health care needs go unmet or are inadequately addressed are more likely to experience disciplinary problems, to be chronically absent from school, and to leave school without completing, which in turn increases the likelihood that they will struggle in their transition to adulthood and in the labor market.³

In more than 60 interviews we've conducted with health providers in schools and communities across Tennessee in a [Robert Wood Johnson Foundation-funded study](#), we've heard that more serious mental health needs are being seen among younger and younger children, and that "the need is just continuing to grow." While some school- and community-based health and education professionals are attempting to stem the swelling hardships, **the cavernous gaps in the most economically distressed areas cannot be addressed without additional funding and programming support.** Our research team has been mapping gaps in the distribution of personnel and other resources in Tennessee that are critical to well-functioning health and education systems for children. These gaps are especially distressing in the most economically disadvantaged counties of the state. In the absence of adequate support, school districts often rely on a patchwork of other small grants that they compete for and partnerships with local nonprofits to cobble together a fragile, porous safety net.

Increased Federal Resources Are Essential to Expanding School-Based Mental Health Services

The Tennessee governor's [February proposal](#) to create a mental health trust fund that would have expanded school-based behavioral health programming in all counties was rescinded due to the impact of the coronavirus on state budgets. States will not be able to meet children's increasing mental health needs without a major infusion of federal support. **A potential source of federal support that should be immediately expanded is the AWARE grant program**, which is administered by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) and awarded to State Educational Agencies with the intent

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to build or expand their capacity to increase awareness of mental health issues among school-aged youth, provide training for school personnel in detecting and responding to youth mental health issues, and connect youth and their families to needed services. The grants are presently time-limited, however, and the current level of funding is a trickle in a sea of rising need.

One school district that had the grant for the (maximum) five years described how it enabled them to contract with a mental health agency that provided therapists who came into the schools weekly to meet with the students. After the grant ended, they tried to work with the therapists on a sliding fee scale, but they had such a large volume of students whose families could not pay that they reverted to a situation where children with serious mental health issues were no longer getting *any* services. Similar reports of AWARE grant recipients draw attention to the shortness of time and funding currently allotted by AWARE grants. As the director of coordinated school health in a district with the AWARE grant described the very deep level of mental health needs among their student population: “we are just scraping the surface” with the grant resources.

States Need to Remove Barriers to Effective Use of Telehealth Services by Schools

What more could policymakers do to help children avoid the very worst consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and return to learning unimpeded by serious, unmet physical and mental health needs? In addition to an immediate expansion of SAMHSA’s AWARE grants in all states, **breaking down the barriers to effective telehealth services for socially and geographically isolated communities could help to reduce vast gaps in access to adequate care.** While telehealth has attracted considerable attention as an underutilized option for meeting children’s physical and mental health services needs, our investigation of the viability of this option in areas where the needs are most glaring has illuminated some of the practical challenges in implementing it. For example, a school-based health professional described how they at first struggled to get a pediatrician on board. Once they overcame that obstacle, they had to solicit equipment donations, repurpose computers, secure software upgrades, and make a plan for “beta testing” it. Another interviewee lamented the “hodge-podge” of insurance programs that constrained their ability to offer telehealth and other mental health services, with complications associated with varying eligibility and concerns about whether a given service would be covered (or billed as in- vs. out-of-network). In the absence of a sufficient payer mix to fiscally sustain the provision of telehealth services, some telehealth programs folded not long after their hard-won launch. As a coordinated school health director pointed out, “this is where universal coverage would be very helpful.”

Although we are unlikely to realize universal, nationwide health insurance anytime soon, in the meantime, **states should focus on removing all barriers to full insurance coverage of children and of telehealth services that are provided through either school-based health centers and other public and private health care providers.**

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Ensuring That the Coming Academic Year Does Not Cement or Add to the Unequal Learning That Has Occurred During Remote Learning?

by David Johnson, University of Chicago

Each year, millions of children and families across the United States experience significant hardship and loss in their lives outside of school. These hardships are frequently material, such as housing instability and homelessness, or psychological stresses, including the loss of a loved one or abuse. And while all students are at some risk for these experiences, poverty and its attendant constellation of multiple overlapping hardships and stresses – often talked about in terms of exposure to structural violence – mean that some children are much more likely to experience one or more of these stressors, often chronically. This truth is only exacerbated by the COVID pandemic. The current pandemic forces us to confront the ways in which exposure to structural violence, historically greatest in communities of color, fundamentally circumscribes the lives – and so, too, the deaths – of children, families, and communities in our cities and across the country.

One of the most enduring challenges of addressing the impact of exposure to structural violence on children's performance in school – and one that, by extension, is likely to be magnified in the remote learning context created by the COVID-19 crisis – is the relative ease with which children's coping behavior is systematically misinterpreted by educators and administrators. Within classrooms and schools, but perhaps even more so in the virtual environment, subtly racialized narratives supply adults with easy and readily available scripts for (mis)interpreting and (mis)labeling the internalizing (depressive, socially withdrawn) and externalizing (aggressive, disruptive) behaviors that previous research suggests accompany children's experiences of unresolved stress and trauma. Internalizing behavior, which in the remote context may be all but invisible to educators, because of the likelihood that depressed or withdrawn children simply do not log on to Zoom calls or Google Classroom, is easily attributed to disinterest or disengagement. Externalizing behavior, which in the remote context may appear as disruptions of virtual spaces but also may be exhibited as aggressive acting out elsewhere in children's homes and communities as well, is easily attributed to a lack of impulse control or the absence of anger management strategies.

Because the behavior of children of color is frequently viewed through the prism of racial stereotypes that emphasize and interpret precisely these behaviors in terms of character deficiency, one of the most important ways in which educators, administrators, and district officials can address the challenge of ensuring that the coming school year does not cement the varying degrees to which children have engaged in the virtual environment is by designing systems and structures at the school level to support educators in actively dismantling these narratives and addressing the needs of the most vulnerable children in the district.

A forward-looking agenda for both policy and practice requires action at multiple levels to disrupt the existing ways in which structural violence persistently disadvantages children of color in classrooms and schools across the district, as well as the development and fostering of creative, novel ways to assess and address children's well-being. High-quality teacher-student relationships are key to any successful plan as such relationships can

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serve as a protective factor, mitigating the harmful effects of exposure to structural violence and chronic stress. Such relationships, which support students and help them make meaning can prevent or reduce lasting toxic and traumatizing effects of stress. With particular regard to ensuring that children’s capacity to access, engage, and succeed in the virtual environment during the COVID-19 crisis does not harden or worse, deepen existing inequity in the school system, previous research suggests such actions might include:

- **Exploring and developing creative, holistic ways to assess children’s well-being, particularly in the virtual environment**, as it increasingly appears that the 2020-21 school-year is likely to include the ongoing use of remote learning options as necessary components of an evolving social distancing strategy. In order to be responsive to children and families’ needs, educators require novel approaches for learning about, recognizing and validating, and engaging with the lived experiences of their students. Understanding and empathy are at a premium in the midst of the current crisis; however, educators and administrators must be equipped to engage authentically and respectfully across difference (e.g. race, class, background) with students, families, and communities in order to create a climate of trust and support.
- **Creating systems, structures, and resources to support educators in ongoing reflective practice surrounding not only the effectiveness of their instructional practice, but also the health – the extent, depth, and quality – of their relationships with children and families.** Providing educators with time, space, and support to explore their own racial identity and its intersection with the identities of the children, families, and communities they serve forms a key backdrop to the effort to understand, empathize with, and ultimately respond actively to the needs of children and families. Developing and identifying practices, protocols, and tools that support educators in acting deliberately to foster and sustain strong, supportive relationships with the students, families, and communities they serve is key. Monitoring the health of these crucial relationships provides a check not only on children’s well-being, but on the capacity of the adults surrounding them to respond in a timely and constructive manner.
- **Strengthening the infrastructure and resources within schools in order to support educators and administrators’ efforts to collaborate with one another in providing seamless, integrated support to children and families.** It is critically important to invest time, energy, and resources in creating systems for sharing information and insight, and ultimately responsibility for responding to children and families’ material and psychological needs. School counselors, social workers, and clinicians are a critical part of this infrastructure.

Ultimately, while these are all important components of a thoughtful response to the COVID-19 crisis, designed to ensure that the ways in which children’s varying capacity to engage in remote learning over the third and fourth quarters of this school year is not cemented in the form of further isolation and disadvantage over the 2020-21 school-year, they are recognizably insufficient. The exposure to structural violence that children of color disproportionately experience is not a given; it is a product of the ongoing operation of systems of oppression, exploitation, and neglect that systematically exclude Black and brown children from opportunity. In this larger sense, the COVID-19 crisis is like a radiologist’s contrast dye, injected into the body politic – we can see with terrific clarity how broken and dysfunctional American society is. Marshalling the collective will to address the structural factors and create and reproduce poverty, inequity, and exclusion in

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American society is an order of magnitude more complex – but no less necessary – than addressing the intricate, overlapping impacts of the novel coronavirus on our communities, cities, and society as a whole.¹

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NOTES

¹ For additional information, including full references and citations, please see Allensworth, et al., (2018). Supporting social, emotional, & academic development: Research implications for educators. Chicago, IL: UChicago Consortium on School Research.

Planning to Mitigate Academic and Behavioral Inequities in the Coming Academic Year

by Micere Keels, TREP Project

Although there is much that is still unknown about how COVID-19 spreads and what it does to the body, we know that it has magnified racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic cleavages in American society—**those being harmed the most are those least able to bear it**. As noted in a Chicago Teachers Union report: “[Working class Black and Latinx] neighborhoods have suffered from decades of civic disinvestment and institutional racism, with higher levels of low-income workers—thousands of whom are considered ‘essential’ and relying on public transportation to get them to their low-wage jobs as janitors, grocery store clerks and more.”¹

It is too late to prevent the racially disproportionate physical health effects of this pandemic. ***It is however, not too late for schools to act to mitigate the racially disproportionate effects on children.***

First, Reestablish the Learning Community

The academic learning loss is not solely academic. There will be behavioral learning loss, and it will be unequal. Some children are in homes that were able to create a school-like structured learning environment; other children will have had months of unstructured time, and will require considerable behavioral supports to relearn classroom routines.

Research following previous disasters has made clear that the mental health effects are always deeper and longer lasting than initially expected.² Disaster related loss of supportive and nurturing parenting or escalation of neglectful and abusive parenting means that schools will be called upon to play an even larger role in attending to the well-being of children and youth.³

For many well-intentioned reasons, many educators will want a quick return to standard classroom procedures and protocols. However, the expectation to push emotional distress aside and quickly resume the intense self-regulation required to sit still for long periods in a classroom in order to focus on academic content and testing does not facilitate recovery. The best outcomes for children are observed when schools focus first on social and emotional rather than academic learning. Staff and students need time to reestablish the school community and relearn the self and social skills necessary to be in a collective learning **community**.

Schools must proactively, not reactively, provide support for students and educators who may be coping with traumatic stressors instead of waiting until they exhibit overt signs of distress. This can be done by combining proactive screening for trauma with mental health services delivered at school.

Second, Ensure that All Teachers Plan for Differentiated Instruction

Some sources estimate that children will be returning to school in fall 2020 with only 70% of the learning gains in reading relative to a typical school year, and returning with less than 50% of the learning gains in math.⁴

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However, there is no “average learning loss” some children will gain, others will neither lose nor gain, and some, mostly children in low-income families, will lose a substantial amount of academic knowledge.

A report published by the Pew Research Center shows that 41% of lower-income parents are very concerned about their children falling behind in school because of Covid-19-related school closures.⁵ In contrast, only 21% of middle-income parents and 17% of higher-income parents are very concerned. An analysis of real-time data for 1.6 million students across 1,364 districts engaged in remote instruction estimates that the achievement gap between low- and high-income students could increase by as much as 18% for students from low-income schools by the end of this academic year.⁶

Learning loss will also be closely linked with the level of academic proficiency that students were at when schools closed. For example, an analysis of real-time data for 1.6 million students across 1,364 districts engaged in remote instruction show clear evidence that there are widening learning gaps based on students' level of reading proficiency when schools closed.⁷ Specifically, students who were struggling readers when schools closed have been much less engaged with online learning than those who were advanced readers when schools closed.

The glaring and growing educational inequality of remote learning won't be fully realized until in-person learning resumes. It is imperative that educators prepare for differentiated instruction at a higher level than ever before.⁸ All students reentering schools must be assessed for any individualized needs for academic, social, and emotional learning plans. This process will require considerable planning regarding the recruitment and distribution of paraprofessionals to support teachers in the provision of personalized in-class supports.

Third, Rethink the Distribution of Access to the Strongest Teachers

There are many calls for schools to institute robust testing at the start of the coming academic year, to provide teachers with accurate, valid, and reliable assessment data to guide curriculum and instruction. However, in our current educational system mass grade retention of low-income children would widen not narrow COVID-19 related educational inequalities. One Washington Post op-ed in favor of the idea of mass grade retention openly sweeps aside the fact that it is the “low-income and already low-performing students” who will be the ones not promoted to the next grade and “thousands of Title I schools nationwide, serving upward of 10 million [low-income] students, are full of kids [for whom] ... all of this time away from school is going to be particularly devastating.”⁹

Testing immediately upon return would only serve the needs of vulnerable students if it is associated with access to greater not fewer educational resources. In our current educational system, students who fall behind and are placed in remedial classes often receive lower rather than higher quality educational resources and consequently continue to fall further behind. If we are serious about using testing as a step in the process of mitigating the growing inequality, it must be coupled with policies for placing students who fell the furthest behind with the strongest teachers. Decades of research tell us that high-quality teachers are the educational resource that has the largest effect on children's school success.¹⁰

Low-income communities and communities of color have been repeatedly harmed by punitive education reforms that removes resources from schools with poor performance. As we prepare for the coming academic

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year, this is the opportunity to do things differently by carefully considering how we can support the communities with the educational systems that have been hit hardest by COVID-19.

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NOTES

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