

## POLICY BRIEF

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SCHOLARS  
STRATEGY NETWORK

[TREPeducator.org/covid-19-ed-conference](https://TREPeducator.org/covid-19-ed-conference)

## 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,

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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 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

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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.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For further reading:

Becky Bailey,(2014) Conscious Discipline: Building Resilient Classrooms ( pg30-31).

Deanna Crone, Roberty Horner, Leanna Hawken, (2004) Responding to Problem Behaviors in Schools: The Behavior Education Program (p. 6-7).

Ruby Payne, (2013) A Framework for Understanding Poverty: A Cognitive Approach 5th Revised Edition.