



**Back-to-School
Fall 2020**

Supporting Student Mental Health and Wellness

In the coming school year, educators may face a variety of challenges meeting the academic and emotional needs of their students. Regardless of whether classroom lessons are taught in-person, remotely or in a blended format, it will require teachers to get out of their comfort zone, accept change readily and be more flexible than ever before. The School Mental Health Resource and Training Center offers the following 10 considerations for educators to help support the mental health and wellness of students K-12 in any type of learning environment.

1. **Leading with SEL for both students and adults is key.** More than ever before, social-emotional learning will be essential as students and school personnel navigate the unprecedented challenges of alternative learning contexts. By putting SEL at the forefront, educators can help students thrive academically through building essential self-management skills, resilience, and social connections. Adult SEL, offered through professional development, mentoring programs or informal peer support, will help keep school staff resilient and connected to the school community.
2. **Survey students and family members.** Either before school begins or in the first week, a teacher should reach out to students and parents/guardians to learn more about their concerns for the school year, information about their backgrounds and interests, and their personal and academic goals. The survey results can inform a teacher about the socio-emotional and academic needs of their students and provide opportunities to work collaboratively with parents. Ideally, the survey is developed at the district level so all teachers are gathering the same information and aggregated data is used to inform district initiatives.
3. **Provide time and space for students to talk and heal.** When students return to school many will be dealing with loss and stress surrounding the events of the past half year. They may need to discuss their feelings with a caring adult. Teachers should incorporate activities into the daily routine, or as part of the curriculum, for students to express their feelings and concerns out loud, in writing or through other means like music and art.
4. **Allow yourself to be open and vulnerable.** Educators should show their human side and feel free to express their feelings and experiences of the past several months with their students in an age-appropriate way. Sharing experiences with colleagues can also be therapeutic and offer a sense of community for the staff.

5. **Delay academics in favor of building community.** Getting to know your students and providing opportunities for students to build connections with each other will be instrumental in having a successful school year. Teachers should consider meeting in-person or virtually with students and their parents either before or in the beginning of the school year. Consider using restorative circles and class meetings on a regular basis to build community and create a safe space for students to discuss their concerns.
6. **Allow students to collaborate on a regular basis.** Physical distancing does not have to mean students cannot socialize. Educators need to get creative about setting up their in-person or virtual classroom in ways that allow students to connect and have fun, and work together on projects.
7. **Focus on self-care and coping strategies.** Students, staff and families would all benefit from an emphasis on self-care and coping strategies that children can bring home and share with their families. This would include discussions about the benefits of self-care and exploring mindfulness activities and movement breaks in the classroom on a regular basis. Since there will be less movement between classes, exercise (stretches, cardio work, dance, yoga, etc.) will be essential to relieve stress and release energy for both the brain and body.
8. **Know your audience.** Educators should make sure their lessons and classroom setting are culturally responsive, trauma-informed and strive for equity. Educators need to include lessons that speak to the backgrounds of their students, the economic and social barriers they face, and hardships they may encounter on a regular basis. Teachers should embrace curricula that represent students in the classroom because inclusivity helps students feel connected to the school community.
9. **Communicate regularly with students and families.** Daily or weekly emails or newsletters to the entire class or periodic phone calls home will keep the lines of communication open and allow families to know what is going on in class. Non-academic check-ins are also helpful to assess the socio-emotional needs of students. In-person or virtual conferences with parents should be more than telling parents/guardians about their child's academic standing; they should be opportunities to learn more about the family and their child.
10. **Design lessons to discuss current events and mental health.** Educators need to talk openly with students, in an age-appropriate way, about the COVID-19 pandemic, race relations and other issues in the news. For example, a health lesson on the importance of wearing a mask and physical distancing would be helpful at the beginning of the year. Students in elementary schools could brainstorm ways they can show their feelings to friends without hugging each other or giving a friend a high-five. An example of this in a secondary class would be a discussion in Health or ELA about the mental health impact of the pandemic or a Social Studies lesson comparing the pandemic to the Spanish Influenza of 1918-19.

Tips for the Virtual Classroom

The 2020-2021 school year is likely to include a variety of instructional models that will include meetings with students remotely, either exclusively or as part of a blended model. The following tips are intended to help educators connect better with their students to provide a more enriching experience and meet their socio-emotional needs in a virtual setting.

- **Be tech savvy.** Learn about the technology you plan to use beforehand and practice extensively before you begin meeting with students. It is recommended that everyone in the district use the same tools and platforms for consistency.
- **Assess the tech access and knowledge of your students.** Find out if students will have access to a device that is compatible with what you will be using and if they have Wi-Fi connections at home. Make sure your students and their families are also comfortable with the platform you are using and have access to tutorials.
- **Record a welcome message before school.** Teachers may want to record a message to welcome students to their class in advance and send it home.
- **Create a class website or blog.** Many virtual platforms like Google Classroom allow you to create a site to keep assignments and other information. This can be a great way to communicate with students.
- **Develop a virtual routine.** Remote learning can be intimidating for both students and educators. Having a routine for the virtual classroom is essential to relieve stress. If students know what order you will follow it will help if they join late or get distracted.
- **Hold regular virtual circles.** Circles can be used to build community, discuss student concerns or reinforce academic learning.
- **Set up one-on-one meetings.** Educators can use their platform to meet with students and/or caregivers to discuss academic progress or any personal concerns.
- **Record a daily or weekly morning video.** A creative teacher may want to begin or end the week with a video that provides shout-outs for Birthdays, awards, or profiles students with a one-on-one interview. Students can also take the lead in recording a video for the class.
- **Host a classroom chat or discussion board.** This can be a place for students to discuss concerns or share ideas and ask questions about academic content.
- **Design lectures that capture the audience's attention.** If you plan to use slides, don't leave the same slide up for too long while you talk. Instead, break up the points on multiple slides and add colorful graphics to engage the students. Break up your lecture with video clips or short readings. Stand up if possible to put yourself in presentation mode and vary tone and volume.

- **Set up the camera so you connect with each student.** Put your camera at eye level and look directly at the camera so students feel like you are making 'eye contact' with them. Make sure the audience can see your whole face and your expressions during the presentation. Make sure the lighting is right. Experiment with different lighting; facing natural light is often ideal.
- **Minimize distractions.** Use an uncluttered background that is professional. If working from home, find a location where you won't be disturbed by family or pets. Make sure you silence notifications on your computer and cell phone.
- **Be interactive.** Resist the temptation to talk too much without engaging your students. Use the raised hand and chat features, polls, props and games to keep students energized and present.
- **Brainstorm ways to do group work.** Many platforms allow students to have breakout sessions to work in small groups. If all students have access to phones or other devices outside the classroom, cooperative learning can happen after the school day. Collaboration is important to learn problem-solving and relationship building skills.
- **Build in brain breaks.** Mindfulness activities and movement breaks can be incorporated into any lesson in any content area. Teachers will need to be cognizant of keeping student attention by breaking up their class period with some brain breaks.
- **Take a virtual tour.** Many museums, zoos and countries offer digital tours for free. You may also want to record your own virtual tour of your neighborhood, home or backyard or doing something for self-care like cooking or gardening.
- **Invite a guest speaker.** Educators should think outside the box and arrange for guest speakers on a range of issues relating to the curriculum or just for fun. This can be a good way to connect with community members. Virtual learning provides more opportunities than ever before.
- **Archive the lesson.** If possible, record each lesson and post them on your teacher page or send it to students so they can listen if they are absent or want to review what you covered.
- **Host office hours.** A dedicated time for students to call and ask questions, a caregiver to contact a teacher or a colleague to reach out is a great use of virtual time.
- **Establish virtual boundaries.** It is crucial that you set limits about when you will be available. You need time for yourself for self-care and relaxation. You need to support your own mental health and cannot work 24/7. Synchronous learning can help.