

SECTION 7

Educating During Crisis: The COVID-19 Pandemic and Beyond— Recommendations for All Phases

Beginning the 2020-2021 school year in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic turned the excitement of back-to-school preparations into overwhelming anxiety for all involved. Teachers, administrators, students, and families had concerns about plans for the upcoming school year—whether they are virtual, hybrid, or physically in person. During times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, natural disasters, or experiences of community trauma, these concerns continue and may change throughout the school year. This section of the toolkit provides resources to help schools take steps forward during a crisis. The guidance and tools in this section are relevant at any point of the school year and duration of a crisis, and administrations should return to them as their areas move through phases of re-opening and community healing to continue positive conversations with all parties and increase positive connections with students and their families.

Using the trauma-informed, resilience-oriented lens, a school or district can ensure all communications, staff trainings, parent interactions, and learning activities are designed to create a safe and trustworthy environment for all involved.

All individuals involved in schools will need to be flexible and prepared to respond to changing conditions. A high level of flexibility is only possible when individuals have trust in each other developed through transparent communication and that everyone's concerns have been heard and considered. Use the tools in this section to help build trust with everyone in the school community during times of crisis.



ACTION STEPS

- » Use a trauma-informed, resilience-oriented lens to plan and decide appropriate policies and procedures
- » Undertake activities to put safety first
- » Create support infrastructure for teachers and staff
- » Implement classroom strategies to promote safety and connection

IMPLEMENTATION TOOLS

- » [Initial Activities for Staff and Students](#)
- » [COVID-19 Surveys and Return to School Alignment Planning Tool](#)
- » [Student Activity: Creating a Safe Virtual Learning Space](#)
- » [Educating During Crisis: The COVID-19 Pandemic and Beyond Professional Development Training Slide Deck](#)

Use a Trauma-Informed, Resilience-Oriented Lens to Plan and Decide

In response to a crisis, school administrators may need to create and revise plans about schooling and staffing throughout the school year. As areas look to move through phases of re-opening and/or adjusting schedules in response to the effects of the crisis, schools will respond to match the community's needs. It is important to remember the principles of trauma-informed, resilience-oriented schools and infuse them into planning and decision-making processes.

It is recommended to begin by referring to the most current expert guidance to understand recommendations for schools affected by the crisis. For example, guidance has been ever-changing as researchers learn more about COVID-19, its prevention, treatment, and spread. This toolkit includes the Return to School Alignment Planning Tool to support efforts to organize the recommendations. You may revisit this tool to align this information with the concerns highlighted in surveys, described further below. This tool uses COVID-19 as an example, and starts with the following recommended resources:

- » [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\), Toolkit for K-12 Schools](#)
- » Your local and state public health departments
- » Your state departments of education

In alignment with the Principles of Trauma-Informed, Resilience-Oriented Schools, it is important to seek to understand the concerns, needs, and priorities of your three primary audiences: students, parents and families, and staff. When schooling is interrupted due to a crisis, districts will endeavor to return as many staff and students to the school building as possible, but both in-person and virtual settings cause stress for students, faculty, and staff. In a trauma-informed, resilience-oriented community, all parties are given a voice in decisions that affect them.

The five surveys in this toolkit help districts collect data regarding concerns about both in-person and virtual instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic. These surveys were the collaborative effort of educators working in the field of trauma-informed, resilience-oriented practices and Social Emotional Learning.¹ The surveys target different audiences: staff; parents, guardians, and families; high school students; middle school students; and elementary



KEY TERMS

Principles of Trauma-Informed, Resilience-Oriented Schools

Safety

Trustworthiness

Student Voice and Empowerment

Collaboration

Peer Support

Inclusion and Engagement

school students. Feedback from staff, parents and families, and all students helps a district or school understand stress related to the implementation of any scenario and prepare to meet everyone's needs. When you disseminate the surveys, spend time explaining what the survey is for, how the results will be used, and confidentiality protections. Additionally, follow your district's protocols around informed consent and collecting information from minors.

Districts and schools can create their own surveys, search online for surveys, or work with vendors that will assist them in creating surveys specific to their organizational needs.



Inclusion and Engagement Action Steps

- » Each of the surveys provided begins with demographic questions. Use these questions to understand how each demographic group in the school or school boundary area is represented relative to their percentages within the community.
- » Translate the survey into the languages spoken in your school community.
- » Consider sending the survey electronically and on paper. If you use a digital survey, be sure it can be read by screen-readers used for visual impairment and that there is a mobile-compatible version. If you use paper surveys, provide a return envelope with paid postage to mail their response back.
- » Create a survey dissemination plan that ensures every student and family learns of the survey and has adequate time to complete it. In some cases, this will mean districts may need to send a second round of surveys along with text, phone, and TV messages to ensure that all members of the school community receive and complete the form.

Factors to consider in creating a survey are to include student, staff, family, and community voice by gathering information from each group about their safety and learning concerns, academic and social needs in both virtual and in-person learning settings, and necessary health procedures. If a team is utilizing a vendor to develop a survey, look for ones that provide free surveys, will take input on design, and allow for easy access to results.

Once surveys are returned, the process of aligning needs and concerns with safety recommendations begins. This is when you can revisit the Return to School Alignment Planning Tool to add the information gathered from the surveys. Now you have one document with all inputs for decision-making. If there are discrepancies, consider hosting virtual town hall meetings, focus group sessions, or key informant interviews to better understand what will be best for your community. No matter what plan your district creates, it must be clearly communicated back to all school community members. Share how the plan was created and how future decisions will be made with the community and refer to the Inclusion and Engagement Action Steps above to inform your communication planning.

As much as possible social and emotional best practices should be at the center of the decision-making and planning process. An environment for mutual decision-making, considering everyone’s voice, can be created by following these steps:

1. Take time to cultivate and deepen relationships, build partnerships, and plan for social and emotional learning.
2. Design opportunities where adults can connect, heal, and build their capacity to support students.
3. Create safe, supportive, and equitable learning environments that promote all students’ social and emotional development.
4. Use data as an opportunity to share power, deepen relationships, and continuously improve support for students, families, and staff.²

Case Example – Fulton County Schools COVID-19 Decision Matrix

To guide decision-making, the Fulton County School District created a [decision matrix](#). This tool is an example of communication tool successfully modeling transparent sharing of information behind decisions for quarantines, closings, and opening due to COVID-19. Parents and community agencies can plan how to support the fluid changes that will happen during the school year. As the COVID-19 pandemic ebbs throughout their community, they will close schools, zones, and even the entire district. This tool does not have the details for contact tracing, quarantine, or cleaning, but it helps the community to understand when the schools might close, causing them to shift their own schedules to address childcare and work concerns in their families.

Undertake Activities to Put Safety First

When planning for the school year during a crisis, the toughest conversation may be “What do we do first?” With all the concerns, priorities, and guidelines swirling around, it can feel overwhelming. In that moment, it is important to come back to the first of the Principles of Trauma-Informed, Resilience-Oriented Schools—safety. When actions are rooted in prioritizing safety for all, it ensures the regular school activities can occur.

There are several dimensions of safety: physical, psychological, social, moral, and academic. These dimensions are defined in the Introduction section of this toolkit. The following recommendations will support schools and districts to prioritize all types of safety as they respond to a crisis in their community.

Begin by assessing safety in your environment. One tool to consider is the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction’s [Trauma-Sensitive Environment Implementation Tool on Safety](#). This tool can be used to assess both in-person and virtual settings, and focuses on student needs specifically. It provides concrete strategies to implement immediately to promote safety in both settings. Teachers can select the most applicable strategies and incorporate them into lesson plans, as relevant.

One of the most important strategies to put safety first is establishing routines and maintaining clear communication.³ While it can be difficult to create predictable environments in a time of crisis, schools and districts can strive to be counted on for consistent and clear communication. Build trust between administration, teachers, staff, students, and families that, while you may not always have the answers, you will regularly and clearly update them, explaining changes in accessible language.⁴

Create Support Infrastructure for Teachers and Staff

Teachers and staff will experience high levels of stress as they work to effectively teach and provide services during a crisis, whether in-person, virtual, or in a hybrid model. School and district leaders must be proactive to support a culture of safety and collegiality among staff. Asking teachers and staff to practice self-care without infrastructure to support them is not a sustainable approach. It is important to [promote compassion resilience](#) among all school and district staff during a difficult time. During professional development time, try this activity—bring staff together to create shared staff agreements, or a joint commitment to creating a positive culture.



1. In small groups, discuss helpful behaviors for the work environment.
2. Come together as a full group to share what the groups discussed and identify common themes.
3. Draft an agreement specifying the agreed upon helpful behaviors.
4. Post the agreement in common areas. During times of conflict, refer back to this agreement to guide conversations and actions.

Strategies for developing strong collaborative healthy teams within schools are available in multiple resources developed over the last several years. Teams can search for resources that focus on compassion resilience for staff, social-emotional learning (SEL) skills for school staff, and collaboration to find these resources. One such source is the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction’s [Trauma-Sensitive Module on Compassion Resilience](#). This resource provides an example of a cultural contract developed using the four steps listed above.

Next, it can be helpful to provide staff with skills to manage difficult conversations. Given the heightened levels of stress and anxiety, changing public health and other official recommendations, and pressures from multiple fronts, to say staff should anticipate difficult conversations coming up might be an understatement. They will be unavoidable, but how staff manage them as they come up will make all the difference. The [Self-Care Module of the Trauma-Sensitive Schools Online Professional Development](#) includes a 6-step process for responding in a compassionate resilient manner. The steps are as follows:

- 1. Notice:** Be present in the moment and able to recognize signs of distress.
- 2. Self-check:** Be aware of your initial thoughts and feelings.
- 3. Seek understanding:** Suspend appraisals. Listen for feelings and strengths.
- 4. Cultivate empathy:** Develop genuine concern based on your connection to what the person is feeling.
- 5. Discern best action:** Co-plan with the person to figure out what would be helpful to them.
- 6. Take action:** Be aware that intention alone is not compassionate action.

During professional development time, staff can discuss these workplace [scenarios from the Compassion Resilience Toolkit](#) in small groups. This will give them an opportunity to practice navigating difficult conversations before they arise. In the event a staff member appears to need additional and even professional support, [this guide](#) offered by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction suggests a helpful approach. This document can support staff to respond with empathy when one of their colleagues is really struggling and help connect them with resources.



Inclusion and Engagement Action Steps

- » Staff members' responses to stress and preferred resilience-building activities can be rooted in their culture, religion, and community. Remember that each of us has our own sources for and strategies to build resilience.
- » Allow staff to define what self-care means to them and create space for them to engage in the practices that are most healing for them, even if they are different from yours.
- » When leading mindfulness or grounding activities, be mindful to use activities that do not actively exclude anyone. Consider giving everyone an opportunity to share and lead an activity that is special to them.

Implement Classroom Strategies to Promote Safety and Connection

The classroom, online or in-person, is one of the most important places to promote safety and connection. Students of all ages have experienced and may continue to experience varying levels of separation from friends and trusted adults. Uncertain times and changes at home will increase stress for them as well. While teachers and staff may be more familiar with strategies to promote safety and connection in the classroom, such as social-emotional learning (SEL), using these practices in virtual settings are new. But, it is more important than ever to [integrate SEL and trauma-informed approaches](#).

- » Make the paradigm shift to prioritize relationships and well-being over assignments and compliance.⁵
- » Seek to make students feel valued regardless of the grade they achieve.
- » In virtual environments, it may be harder to engage students. One strategy is the Two-by-Ten approach – spending two minutes a day for ten consecutive days getting to know a student who is difficult to connect with.⁶
- » Make a personal connection with each student sometime during a session or day, either through specific feedback on skills or to note an achievement, targeted social and emotional instruction, or to hear their input into the class discussion.⁷

[Learning for Justice](#) (formerly Teaching Tolerance) lists several ideas to promote connection and help students to cope with stress during the pandemic. But connections with students will look different depending on the age of your students.

- » Teachers and staff should engage in connection building activities with elementary school-age students daily. Try five-minute virtual chats one-on-one or with small groups.⁸
- » For middle and high school-age students, try using chat features or email exchanges through school email accounts consistently, such as every Wednesday, to talk about something other than academic work.

Other activities to try include:

- » Virtual backgrounds show-and-tell: the day before, ask students to choose an image that shows their favorite food, activity, character in a book, somewhere they would like to travel, or something that gives them comfort when they are stressed. Take time to allow students to share what they chose and why to get to know each other better and build connection.
- » Create a [Bitmoji classroom](#). You can also use [Google Slides](#) or [Microsoft PowerPoint](#) to create this engagement tool as well.
- » Movement breaks: for students who can, take time to move their bodies throughout the day. It can be very difficult to sit at the computer or tablet for a full day of classwork. Movement and exercise have been shown to improve focus and cognitive function.⁹ Implement strategies daily to get kids moving.

Some students may require additional supports beyond these Tier I/universal approaches. These Tier II and Tier III supports will look different virtually than in-person, but they are just as important. To support teachers and school psychologists to identify a student's needs, use the [COVID-19 School Adjustment Risk Matrix \(C-SARM\)](#) developed by the National Association of School Psychologists.

KEY TERM

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)

“the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.”¹⁰

REFERENCES

To return to your place in the toolkit, click the number of the endnote that you followed to this page.

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