

Preparing NOW to Address Students' Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Needs Before They Transition Back to School (Part II)

Saturday, May 30, 2020

Let's Use Caring and Common Sense as Our Post-Pandemic Guides (Including a Bonus Podcast)

Dear Colleagues,

Introduction

Last time, in Part I of this Blog Series, I discussed concerns that some in the (popular) press are priming our schools for a post-pandemic rush of child and adolescent post-traumatic stress syndrome.

[CLICK HERE (<http://www.projectachieve.info/news/post/169/why-is-education-week-sensationalizing-student-trauma-during-this-pandemic-part-i>) for Part I of this Blog Series]

This sensationalism is being projected without objective data or past comparable experience. As such, it creates a negative, perhaps self-fulfilling, search-for-the-deficits mindset, and it may result in a defensive, pathology-driven climate as our students walk back into their schools for the first time in five, six, or more months.

As a school psychologist wanting to objectify the school re-entry process, I recommend—based, in part, on the Part I discussion, that—in August, September, or whenever our students return—educators need to:

- Plan from a strength-based perspective that recognizes and utilizes students' social, emotional, and behavioral strengths. . . leaning in and building on these assets;
- Recognize the importance of creating immediate and sustained safe and supportive climates—from staff to students, students to students, and school to

home;

- Allow students to discuss and debrief the pandemic's past and present effects on their lives, to socially and emotionally re-connect with their peers and staff, and to (re-)establish the supportive interpersonal and academic routines and protocols that will help them successfully navigate the re-entry process and beyond;
- Realize that we will still be living in the shadow and context of the pandemic, that students (and staff) will need ongoing understanding and support, and that everyone has their own "timeline" relative to emotional response, recovery, and "normalization;"
- Prepare to formally or informally screen students for social, emotional, and/or behavioral distress. . . but ensure that such screenings involve multiple, objective, data-based assessments (including student interviews and observations) reflecting multiple school settings taken from multiple validating sources;
- Have a continuum of in-school and community-based social, emotional, and behavioral services, supports, strategies, and interventions prepared for students who demonstrate significant or persistent challenges (before and) during the post-pandemic transition back to school; and
- Understand that this "new normal" post-pandemic school and schooling world includes a "new normal" relative to the social, emotional, and behavioral status and needs of students (and staff)—and that these new norms will vary by students' age, gender, culture, race, socio-economic backgrounds, home and family supports, and presence of medical conditions and other disabilities.

Critically, districts and schools need to begin (or continue their) planning right now to address these recommendations.

But in doing so, they also need to recognize that there are no (social, emotional, behavioral, or SEL) programs to purchase or download to accomplish these tasks.

Success here will require planning and implementing effective practices that are individualized to the students, staff, and families in everyone's respective district or school.

Success will not be accomplished by purchasing or downloading a generic program that has not been field-tested or proven for these conditions, and that may miss, be insensitive to, or exacerbate your needs.

Recall the point made in Part I of this Blog series. There are more than 40 different SEL frameworks—most that have never been extensively field-tested, and most that have not objectively demonstrated their ability to produce meaningful, observable student-centered success. . . much less sustained student social, emotional, or behavioral success.

Indeed, in the last Blog, we quoted a Harvard Graduate School of Education group doing research in this area. They note on their website:

Throughout its history, the field of social and emotional learning (SEL) has been defined or characterized in a variety of ways. In some respects, the term SEL serves as an umbrella for many subfields with which many educators, researchers, and policy-makers are familiar (e.g., bullying prevention, civic and character education and development, conflict resolution, social skills training, life skills, “soft” or “non-cognitive” skills, 21st century skills). However, discussion of this broad non-academic domain lacks clarity about what we mean and is beset by dilemmas about how best to measure and promote skills in this area. Underlying this challenge, and in some ways compounding it, is the fact that the field more generally is structured around a large number of organizational systems or frameworks that often use different or even conflicting terminology to talk about a similar set of skills.

Identifying Student Groups for Your Post-Pandemic Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Plan

Districts and schools need to immediately begin (or continue) the planning for how to address students' social, emotional, and behavioral post-pandemic transition and Fall re-entry back into school.

This should involve administrators, related service personnel (i.e., counselors, school psychologists, social workers, and relevant community-based professionals), general and special education teacher representatives, and important others.

Using a multi-tiered approach, the initial discussion should focus on preparing the services, supports, strategies, and interventions for students who had social, emotional, behavioral, or mental health needs prior to the January/February, 2020 “start” of the pandemic.

Added to this preparation should be students known to develop similar needs during or due to the mid-March closing of school and/or to the concurrent sequestration or related COVID-19 events at home. These events might involve issues related to hunger and food insecurity, parental unemployment, nuclear or extended family members or friends becoming ill or hospitalized due to COVID-19, isolation from peers or the death of relative, or anxiety around school and academic standing.

Finally, the planning should involve how to prepare, train, motivate, guide, and support all school staff in the activities and interactions that will, in turn, support students' successful social, emotional, and behavioral transitions back to school, as well as their stability and progress beyond the first days and weeks.

In this latter area, both the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) have provided great resources and guidance that districts and schools should integrate into their plans. Many of these resources are specific to the current pandemic, while others adapt long-standing work in how to assist students involved in medical and other large-scale crises or disasters.

The CDC and NASP recommendations—as well as others—have been integrated into the updated sections below.

Important Activities to Include in Your Post-Pandemic Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Plan

Beyond identifying—as recommended above—the different groups of students that will need services, supports, strategies, and interventions, some additional activities need to be included in the planning and preparation process.

Relative to the first days and weeks when staff and students physically return to school, some of the most important activities to plan for **now** include:

- Identifying, assessing, and validating which students have significant social, emotional, behavioral, and/or mental health needs; as well as the history, root causes, and intensities of these needs.

This process includes both the students who were pre-identified (as in the section above), as well as other returning students and students who are new to the district. This process ensures that appropriate, objective decisions are made regarding who needs what intensity of services and supports.

As students return to school, this process initially requires some level of on-site triaging. Staff should be trained ahead of time as to the developmentally- and situationally-expected social, emotional, and behavioral reactions of their students to the pandemic, and how to talk with them in empathetic, constructive, and comforting ways (see below).

Staff also should be trained on the “early warning signals” that suggest the need to involve the school’s related service professionals—that is, the school counselor, psychologist, or social worker.

Finally, during the first week (at least) when they re-enter the schools, students should be told that related service professionals are available if they immediately need the time or support to address their individual social, emotional, or mental health needs.

- Coordinating the professionals, schedules, logistics, and space needed to provide large and small group, and individual crisis intervention and therapeutic services—as well as the consultation needed by teachers, administrators, and other support staff.

This coordination will need to factor in which students are returning to school, as well as how, when, and where.

More specifically, as social distancing limits how many students can ride a bus or be in a classroom together, some districts may use staggered or alternative day schedules, others will have certain grade-levels on campus and others involved in virtual or distance learning, and still others will need to accommodate to parents not yet comfortable with sending their children or adolescents to school.

Given these different attendance and re-entry combinations and possibilities, information related to available social, emotional, and behavioral supports and personnel must be prepared and provided to students (and parents) before they return to school. The more that students are prepared for the who, what, where, when, and how of the re-entry process, the easier the social and emotional transition will be.

Critically, schools will also need to plan and attend to the social-emotional needs of the off-campus students who are “attending school” virtually. With schools “open” but not “open to them,” some of these students may need supports because they feel devalued, rejected, isolated, or angry.

- Helping adult staff understand, monitor, and manage their own social, emotional, and behavioral status, changes, needs, and responses.

This will need to occur as part of the reopening-of-school process, as well as on an ongoing and situational basis.

Often, the adults who are expected to provide support to affected students are experiencing their own difficulties. Some may need to process their own emotions related to the pandemic, their self-isolation, or the school re-entry challenges that they anticipate (real or imagined).

Others, after a few days or weeks of school, may become emotionally overwhelmed with the depth and/or breadth of the magnitude of the “new normal” or their responsibilities.

All staff will need training and support in how to manage their own reactions and stress. Moreover, all schools will need to plan for how they will address the mental health needs of their “first responding” teachers, administrators, and other support staff.

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- Training staff who will train students on the classroom and school routines that relate both to prosocial interactions, as well as COVID-19 realities.

By August or September, students will have been out of school for approximately five or six months. They may be re-entering with different peers in their classrooms and different teachers as their guides.

Teacher will need to be prepared to teach—consistently across their grade levels—the classroom routines that will establish (a) positive and proactive peer and adult interactions, as well as (b) the medically-safe mask-wearing, hand-washing, and social distancing routines that will keep everyone comfortable and healthy.

These same considerations will be needed in the common school areas—especially those where large numbers of multi-aged students may congregate or interact—with minimal levels of supervision.

Finally, teachers and students should discuss and be prepared for what will occur in case a second wave of illnesses occur, and if their school needs to be temporarily closed, for example, because of a required deep cleaning or medical testing of students and staff.

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- Implementing a user-friendly data management system—created in advance—to monitor and track the social, emotional, and behavioral status, progress, and outcomes of individual and groups of students—especially those students receiving strategic or intensive services, supports, strategies, or interventions.

If we are truly going to make data-based decisions, schools need a data-management system and process that can track and analyze different sized groups of students who are receiving universal, strategic, or intensive services and supports. This data management system should provide “early warning” information, as well as formative and summative evaluation results.

Relative to the second and third months of the re-entry process, some of the most important activities to plan for **now** include:

- Ensuring access to ongoing psychological care and social, emotional, and behavioral supports for those most affected by conditions related to the pandemic, and those with issues that pre-dated the pandemic.
- Monitoring students and staff for new or continuing social, emotional, or behavioral reactions—especially to ensure that individuals with delayed responses and those impacted by the longevity of the stressors related to this event have the support they need.
- Identifying and addressing new or continuing family or community-based stressors (e.g., unemployment and health insurance, a slowly recovering local economy, funding cuts to the district or its schools, ongoing medical issues for those recovering from the virus, grief over a lost parent or sibling or relative or friend).
- Maintaining connections to community-based health, mental health, and other service providers so that ongoing crisis-related needs are met for those at that level of need.
- Addressing the needs of students who are now emotionally ready and able to process the pandemic and its effects.

In order to accomplish some of these activities, the district needs to (a) have memoranda of understanding (MOUs) with agencies that have support personnel to help provide continuous social, emotional, behavioral, or mental health services; (b) systematically review the data from the data management tracking system discussed above; (c) continue to provide both individual and group services and interventions so that students can process and share their experiences in appropriate and supportive formats and settings; and (d) maintain effective communications with individual and groups of parents and other community leaders.

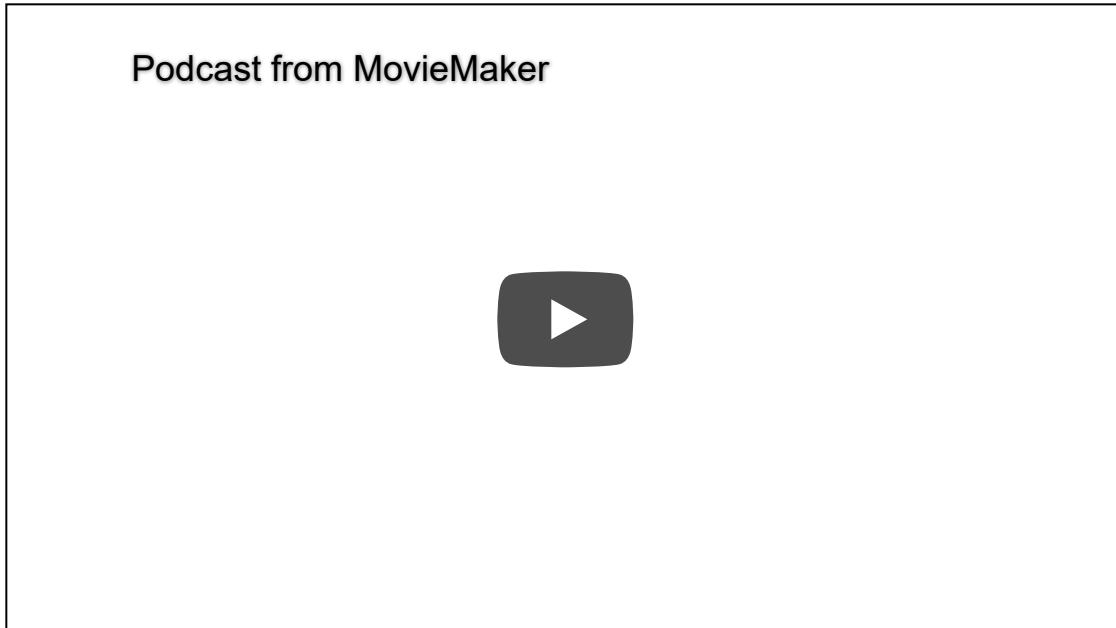
Available Planning Resources

As noted earlier, both the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) have provided a number of great resources that districts and schools can use to guide their post-pandemic or school re-entry plans.

Below are a number of relevant resources and handouts from NASP.

But before outlining these, immediately below is a link to an upcoming podcast that I recently taped with Dr. Christopher Balow, the Chief Academic Officer at SchoolMint. The title of the podcast:

Re-Opening Schools During the Pandemic: Students’ Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Needs



Now, here are the NASP resources [CLICK on Each Title for the Specific Resource]:

- Responding to COVID-19: Brief Action Steps for School Crisis Response Teams (<https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/school-climate-safety-and-crisis/health-crisis-resources/responding-to-covid-19brief-action-steps-for-school-crisis-response-teams>)

Schools should be prepared for local and community-wide infectious disease outbreaks—working collaboratively with their local and state health departments, and attending to guidance documents issued by the CDC. For detailed guidance on how to develop emergency operation plans capable of addressing pandemic illnesses, we have prepared this document “Preparing for a Pandemic Illness: Guidelines for School Administrators and Crisis Teams.” This document provides suggestions for the immediate school response to the threat presented by COVID-19.

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- Preparing for Infectious Disease Epidemics: Brief Tips for School Mental Health Professionals (<https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/school-climate-safety-and-crisis/health-crisis-resources/preparing-for-infectious-disease-epidemics-brief-tips-for-school-mental-health-professionals>)

Schools should be prepared for local or community-wide infectious disease outbreaks. This document provides guidance for school professionals who are asked to help students and school staff members cope with the mental health challenges generated by this stressor. Suggestions for how school administrators and multidisciplinary crisis response teams can prepare for these events is provided in the companion documents, *Responding to COVID-19* (<https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/school-climate-safety-and-crisis/health-crisis-resources/responding-to-covid-19brief-action-steps-for-school-crisis-response-teams>) and *Preparing for a Pandemic Illness* (<https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/school-climate-safety-and-crisis/health-crisis-resources/preparing-for-a-pandemic-illness-guidelines-for-school-administrators-and-school-crisis-response-teams>).

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- *Preparing for a Pandemic Illness: Guidelines for School Administrators and School Crisis Response Teams* (<https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/school-climate-safety-and-crisis/health-crisis-resources/preparing-for-a-pandemic-illness-guidelines-for-school-administrators-and-school-crisis-response-teams>)

A local and community-wide infectious disease outbreak is among the many emergencies to which schools must be prepared to respond. As part of this preparation, there are steps that schools can take to work collaboratively and effectively with local and state health departments in order to limit the spread of disease and to provide safe learning environments. The information provided here draws on pandemic influenza guidelines that can be applied to any potential infectious disease event, including the current COVID-19 pandemic.

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- *Countering Coronavirus Stigma and Racism: Tips for Teachers and Other Educators* (<https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/school-climate-safety-and-crisis/health-crisis-resources/countering-coronavirus-stigma-and-racism-tips-for-teachers-and-other-educators>)

After China was originally identified as the origin of the first COVID-19 cases, some Chinese and Asian background individuals experienced “coronavirus racism,” which included anti-Chinese and anti-Asian scapegoating and other reactions including fear, exclusion, microaggressions, and other racist behaviors. Both children and adults were the targets—experiencing verbal harassment, avoidance, and exclusion. Since then, some students whose family members were infected by the virus experienced similar peer reactions.

Bullying and harassment can be especially damaging when certain students or segments of society are vulnerable. School personnel need to be prepared to prevent and to intervene quickly and effectively in the presence of abusive behaviors toward any students. **Indeed, schools have a legal and ethical responsibility to uphold all students' civil rights, which includes preventing all forms of bullying, harassment, and racist intimidation or behavior.**

COVID-19 does not recognize race, nationality, or ethnicity. Accurate information is essential to allaying anxiety about COVID-19, how individuals recover from it, and what can be done to prevent its spread. This document assists educators to address many of the issues above.

Talking with Students About the Results of the Pandemic for Schools, and Helping Them Cope

Below is a pooling and adaptation of additional social, emotional, and behavioral recommendations from NASP and the CDC that need to be integrated into districts' and schools' re-opening plans.

It is very important to remember that students look to adults for guidance on how to react to stressful events. Teachers and other school staff need to acknowledge students' concerns without an excessive level of emotionality, teaching them positive preventive measures, talking with them about their fears, and giving them a sense of some control over the physical risks that are present.

While doing this, it is also important to positively model the social problem-solving, flexibility, and compassion that we all need to accomplish the school and schooling adjustments required in this post-pandemic world.

More specifically, school staff need to:

Take time to talk—using students' questions or concerns as a guide. Educators should answer students' questions truthfully, without offering unnecessary details or facts. Give students the information that they need to understand that school staff are committed to their safety, and how they can contribute to this process.

Younger children absorb scary information in waves. They ask questions, listen, play, and then repeat the cycle. Children always feel empowered if they can control some aspects of their life. A sense of control reduces fear and other emotions.

In addition:

Correct student misinformation. Children often imagine situations worse than reality. Therefore, offering developmentally-appropriate facts can reduce fears and other emotions. To do this, however, requires that educators stay abreast of the national and local COVID-19 and related facts themselves.

In a related way, educations need to pay attention to what students see or hear on television, radio, or online (sometimes, the sources of their misinformation). Students should be encouraged to reduce the amount of screen time focused on COVID-19, and older students need help in how to discriminate between legitimate and illegitimate sources of (COVID-19) information.

Explain, teach, practice, prompt, and positively reinforce safety steps and routines. Tell students in a developmentally-appropriate way (see below) how COVID-19 (and related diseases) spreads, and why wearing facemasks, maintaining social distancing, washing their hands, not touching their faces, keeping their hands off specific objects or surfaces, and covering their mouths when coughing or sneezing are important.

Then, teach and practice these skills, discussing how they may vary in their classrooms versus in different common areas of the school.

Be consistently positive role models. Staff need to stay calm, listen carefully, and offer students reassurance. They also need to encourage students to verbalize their thoughts and feelings. Students generally respond (positively or negative) to how adults' talk and behave—often mirroring and learning from their reactions.

Recognize the developmental differences across students at different grade levels.

Staff need to vary their discussions with different aged students as follows:

Early elementary school children. Provide brief, simple information that balances COVID-19 facts with appropriate reassurances that adults are there to help keep them healthy and to take care of them if they get sick in (or outside of) school. Reinforce, through specific and concrete examples, the actions that everyone in the classroom and school are using every day to stop germs and stay healthy. Use language that includes, "I am working hard to keep you safe."

Upper elementary and early middle school children. This age group often is more vocal in asking questions about whether they indeed are safe, and what will happen if COVID-19 cases occur in their schools. They may need assistance separating reality from rumor and fantasy. Discuss the efforts national, state, and community leaders are doing—in addition to those in the school—to prevent germs from spreading.

Upper middle and high school students. Issues can be discussed in more depth at these grade levels. Refer students to appropriate sources of COVID-19 facts. Provide honest, accurate, and factual information about the current status of COVID-19. Engage students in decision-making about school and classroom plans, scheduling, interactions, and needed responses and modifications.

Establish and maintain consistent daily routines. Keeping a regular schedule provides students with a sense of control, structure, predictability, calm, and well-being. At the same time, these routines should be flexible and “loose” enough that students don’t become too dependent on them (in case they need to be adapted on a periodic basis).

Help students recognize when they are getting emotional, and how to calm down. Deep breathing, thought stopping and positive self-statements, positive imagery, and momentarily interrupting one’s current behavioral pattern are valuable tools for calming the nervous system. Staff—with the support of their related service colleagues—can teach students how to demonstrate and use these emotional, attributional, and behavioral “shifts,” so that students can successfully re-focus away from emotional triggers.

Over time, be aware of how often you talk about COVID-19. After the first few days of re-starting school, excessive or prolonged discussions about COVID-19 may increase some students’ fears—or their emotional fatigue. Try to strike a balance between letting students express their concerns (e.g., setting aside a specific time for this each day), as you get them back into an academic routine.

Prevent and respond to COVID-19 teasing, bullying, harassment, or discrimination. Educators must interrupt or address acts of teasing, bullying, harassment, bias, or discrimination by speaking up against and addressing every

such remark. When doing this, educators should explain—in developmentally-appropriate ways—why the behavior or statements were offensive, and how they may be interpreted by others. Inconsistent responses send the message that COVID-19 stigma and racism are acceptable in some circumstances.

In addition, educators must:

Model compassion and acceptance of differences. As noted earlier, students take their emotional cues from the significant adults in their lives. Educators need to avoid making negative statements about any racial, ethnic, or religious group.

Counter microaggressions with micro-affirmations. Micro-affirmations are subtle acknowledgements that help students (and others) feel valued and included. These include acknowledging when a microaggression occurs, and supporting students when they share that they have been targeted because of their (COVID-related) cultural or racial backgrounds, or because of a personal or home-related COVID-19 illness or event.

Stop any type of harassment or bullying immediately. Educators need to make it clear that such behavior in any form (in person, online, through social media) is unacceptable, and that school personnel are required to immediately and directly respond. As developmentally appropriate, students should understand both school policy, why such actions are inappropriate, and how they impact others. Students should learn and practice appropriate ways to express their COVID-19 anger, confusion, or insecurities, as well as ways to prevent and respond to related conflicts.

Summary

In Part I of this Blog Series, we discussed concerns that some in the (popular) press are priming our schools for a post-pandemic rush of child and adolescent post-traumatic stress syndrome, but that such projections were not based on objective data or past comparable experiences.

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Based, in part, on the Part I discussion, we emphasized in this Part II that—in August, September, or whenever our students return—educators need to:

- Plan from a strength-based perspective that recognizes and utilizes students' social, emotional, and behavioral strengths. . . leaning in and building on these assets;
- Recognize the importance of creating immediate and sustained safe and supportive climates—from staff to students, students to students, and school to home;
- Allow students to discuss and debrief the pandemic's past and present effects on their lives, to socially and emotionally re-connect with their peers and staff, and to (re-)establish the supportive interpersonal and academic routines and protocols that will help them successfully navigate the re-entry process and beyond;
- Realize that we will still be living in the shadow and context of the pandemic, that students (and staff) will need ongoing understanding and support, and that everyone has their own "timeline" relative to emotional response, recovery, and "normalization;"
- Prepare to formally or informally screen students for social, emotional, and/or behavioral distress. . . but ensure that such screenings involve multiple, objective, data-based assessments (including student interviews and observations) reflecting multiple school settings taken from multiple validating sources;
- Have a continuum of in-school and community-based social, emotional, and behavioral services, supports, strategies, and interventions prepared for students who demonstrate significant or persistent challenges (before and) during the post-pandemic transition back to school; and
- Understand that this "new normal" post-pandemic school and schooling world includes a "new normal" relative to the social, emotional, and behavioral status and needs of students (and staff)—and that these new norms will vary by students' age, gender, culture, race, socio-economic backgrounds, home and family supports, and presence of medical conditions and other disabilities.

We then provided detailed blueprints or check-lists in what district and school personnel need to (continue to) do now to plan and prepare staff for the most effective ways to address students' social, emotional, and behavioral post-pandemic transition and Fall re-entry back into school.

These blueprints included (a) how to identify different groups of students with social, emotional, behavioral, or mental health needs; (b) important activities that need to be included in the post-pandemic social, emotional, and behavioral plan; and (c) how to approach and talk with students during the initial re-entry process and thereafter.

Critically, the recommended plans should involve how to prepare, train, motivate, guide, and support all school staff in the activities and interactions that will, in turn, support students' successful social, emotional, and behavioral transitions back to school. . . as well as their stability and progress beyond the first days and weeks.

I hope that these two Blog messages are helpful to you. As an underlying theme, I want to emphasize that, while we need to prepare for this social, emotional, and behavioral transition on behalf of our students, we need to take an objective, developmentally-sensitive, and data-based perspective in how we plan and eventually respond to the real behaviors and needs that our students exhibit.

Related to this is an emphasis that districts and schools need to prepare and implement effective, locally-sensitive, and student-focused practices. . . not global, canned, untested, or heavily marketed and frameworks or programs. And, once again, that the planning needs to occur now. . . so that the resources, preparation, and training can occur before our students come back.

As always, I appreciate the time that you invest in reading these Blogs, and your dedication to your students, your colleagues, and effective school and schooling practices—especially in the face of the challenges and competing priorities that we all are experiencing.

Please feel free to send me your thoughts and questions.

And please know that I am always available to you through Zoom calls. . . if and when you need me. Contact me at any time.

Best,

Howie

Resources and References

<https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/school-climate-safety-and-crisis/school-violence-resources/recovery-from-large-scale-crises-guidelines-for-crisis-teams-and-administrators> (<https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/school-climate-safety-and-crisis/school-violence-resources/recovery-from-large-scale-crises-guidelines-for-crisis-teams-and-administrators>)

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childcare/talking-with-children.html](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/talking-with-children.html?CDC_AA_refVal=https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/talking-with-children.html) ([https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-
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