COVID-19: School Re-entry…
Promoting Social and Emotional Wellness

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“The greatest use of life is to spend it for something that will outlast it.” William James
Stay C.A.L.M!

- **C** is for *calmness* and to *control* what you can… your reaction to the pandemic and your ability to follow medical advice for school re-entry.
- **A** is for being *available*. Administrators should seek input from staff, students, and parents about re-entry concerns.
- **L** is for *listening* to the input from a school re-entry task force composed of staff, parents, and older students.
- **M** is for all staff and parents *modeling* coping with anxiety and fear related to re-entry.
Key Issues

- COVID-19 and the resulting school closure for the spring of 2020 is unprecedented.
- There is much uncertainty about the future regarding when schools will reopen and if they will be able to stay open.
  - What reactions might we expect from school staff, parents and students on school-re-entry?
  - What will help everyone feel safer?
  - What lessons from school crises can be of help?
  - Remember, everyone has a story to tell about being quarantined!

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Key Issues

- Many decisions about the country re-opening and school re-opening has been left to local authorities
- National polls have found 50% of parents are considering continuing home schooling, 20% of teachers are considering not returning, and 40% of teachers and parent oppose school reopening until a vaccine is developed
- Many school staff are over the age of 65 and considered more at risk health wise
- The risk of contracting the virus will not be zero on school reopening

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Key Issues

The typical reactions children have to trauma are
• regression, academically and behaviorally,
• nightmares/sleeping problems and
• worry about the future.

Some children and families may have had a very difficult time while quarantined and child abuse likely increased but may not have been reported.
• Some children lost loved ones to the virus.
• Many families experienced financial hardship.

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Key Issues

• Many students lost out on key academic concepts normally taught in the spring due to either lack of internet access or being unable to learn as well as when they were in the classroom.

• Many students were disappointed at not being able to participate in spring activities that they were looking forward to in sports, fine arts, school dances, and celebrations for milestones in academic achievement.

• Normal transition activities from one school level to another did not take place in the traditional fashion.
Lessons as a crisis responder

- Primarily I listen, but one question that I always ask is, “Who or what has helped you when you had to deal with difficult things before and who or what can help you now?”
- I emphasized many times to Parkland MSD parents that children who live in a stable home and are shown unconditional love can overcome almost anything.
- It is important to seek out the people in our lives that are positive and to be that person for others!
Lessons from a few of my previous school crisis responses

• Hurricane Katrina and relocation of 115 students to Bleyl Middle School.
• Cy-Fair ISD safety task force.
• Cy-Fair high school student safety task force.
• Help the adults first—school staff and parents.
• Comments from school staff after school shootings included feelings of little support, and ordered back to school before they were prepared and ready.
• Realize that everyone's safety and security has been threatened.

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Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs

- Physiological Needs
- Safety Needs
- Belonging Needs
- Esteem Needs
- Self-actualization
- Transcendence

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Two types of anxiety are expected

• First, **fear of catching the virus** upon school re-entry.

• Second, **fear of being academically significantly behind** and having missed key benchmark subject skills normally taught in the spring. This is expected to be more of a concern at the secondary level than at the elementary level.
Suggested action steps for school administrators

- Follow all safety guidelines outlined by the CDC and state health authorities as they plan re-entry (likely includes testing recommendations, everyone wearing masks, increased cleaning, limiting class size and student movement around the school).
- Keep lines of communication open with staff, parents, and students. Provide updates.
- Determine if any staff or students lost loved ones to COVID-19.
- Form a re-entry task force with staff that includes teachers, nurses, counselors, parents and older students. Conduct a survey to allow everyone to provide input.
- Compliment school staff on all the extra efforts they made during the spring and emphasize employee assistance support.
- Provide processing session for staff during in-service training.

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Action steps for school administrators

• Send a letter to all parents describing re-entry procedures and include the recommendations from the re-entry task force. Encourage all parents to model calmness and optimism for their children.

• Provide an opportunity for parents to ask additional questions via phone or email.

• Host an open house at school before school starts either in person or via Zoom. Design a format for parents to ask questions and allow parents and students to tour the school (this might need to be done in stages to follow social distancing guidelines).

• For high schools, consider having the first grading period (6 week, 9 weeks) of 2020 grades be pass or fail so they are not included in a GPA.

• Share with teachers the COVID-19 Re-entry lesson plan.

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Processing session for staff

• First in-service day processing session in a small group format with these questions (administrators are encouraged to model sharing their thoughts/worries).
• What was the quarantine like for you and your family (20 minutes)?
• What are your fears about school re-entry (20 minutes)?
• What would help you feel safer about being back at school (20-30 minutes)?
Action steps for teachers to reduce student anxiety about catching the virus

- Model calmness and optimism.
- Reach out via phone to all students and families prior to the re-opening of school.
- Express excitement about students returning to school.
- Emphasize all the safety procedures the school has put in place.
Action steps for teachers to assist in relieving student anxiety

- Recognize every student has a story to tell and some students may have lost loved ones to the virus. Some students may have had a very difficult time emotionally while quarantined. Others may have had a difficult time with school assignments.
- Be alert for students who suffered abuse or may now be living in poverty or are homeless.
- Refer students you are concerned about to school counselors.
- Implement the COVID-19 Re-entry teachable moment.

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Tips for using the “Teachable Moment” lesson plan

• This method is the quickest, easiest, and most effective way of allowing students to have their voices heard as they share their experiences and their continuing concerns.

• Addressing students’ emotional needs first is necessary to foster better academic success. (Refer to Maslow’s Hierarchy)

• A debriefing process, such as this “Teachable Moment” lesson, must be utilized immediately upon re-entry to school. Teachers and administrators must learn about their students’ worries and challenges before academic success and compliance with routines can be expected.

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Tips for using the “Teachable Moment” lesson plan

• Administrators should be aware that some teachers may not be comfortable helping students process emotions and often need a scripted lesson to aid them in the process. This lesson provides step-by-step instructions that include teacher directed questions and instructional strategies that all classroom teachers are familiar with.

• NOTE: Some teachers may feel more comfortable implementing the “Teachable Moment” with another caring adult in the classroom.
Action steps for teachers to address student anxiety about academic losses

• Communicate with students and parents the strategies for re-teaching key concepts from the spring when face-to-face classroom instruction was not available.

• For courses that required a pre-requisite course, communicate with receiving teachers about foundational knowledge that students missed last spring and have a plan for teaching the lost instruction.

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What can I do as an adult to help students cope with school re-entry?

• Take a deep breath and recognize things will be okay and say, “I can manage school reopening and I will model optimism and hope for my own child or my students. I will get take care of myself and seek out the people in my life who are positive and I will be positive for others.”

• “I know my reaction will be the most important factor in how my own child or my students respond to the reopening of school.”

• “When I have to choose, as a teacher or a parent, how much academic pressure to put on my child or my students, I will remember what they have gone through because of the virus.”

• “I want my family and/or my class to feel more connected than before the pandemic.”

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Additional signs of student stress

- Anxiety, worry and fear
- Feeling on the “edge”
- Changes in appetite, energy and activity levels
- Sleeping problems
- Concentration problems
- Increased irritability
- Increased use of drugs and alcohol
- Verbalizing thoughts of hopelessness and thoughts of suicide.
Managing stress

• Take care of your body: take deep breaths, stretch, meditate, exercise, get plenty of sleep and avoid alcohol and drugs.
• Stay in the moment and do not worry about things that have not happened yet.
• Remember we can choose how we respond!
• Connect with others such as close friends, co-workers and extended family.
• Avoid too much exposure to the news.
• Seek out the positive people in your life.
Talking with students about the virus

- Most importantly listen and validate their feelings. Find out what they know about the virus and don’t dismiss their fears.
- Let them express their emotions through talking, writing, music or artwork.
- Acknowledge you are concerned and the virus is contagious and we do not know how widely it will spread but the majority of people who contract the virus have only minor symptoms and recover.
- Emphasize that the school is following all the recommendations from health officials and the smartest scientists in the world are working on a treatment and cure for the virus.
- Talk with your students about the heroic actions of medical personnel and suggest writing letters of thanks to them.
Talking with students about the virus

- Be honest and truthful and admit when you do not know something and state you will try to find the answer together.
- Acknowledge that what is happening is unprecedented.
- Ask your students what would help them feel safer right now?
- We do know that most people with the virus recover and only have symptoms like a cold or the flu.
- Recognize the developmental levels of your students. Remember the typical reactions children have to a traumatic event are behavioral and academic regression, nightmares, sleeping problems, and worries about the future.
- Keep their brains and bodies busy!

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Developmentally, what reactions are students likely to have?

- **Preschoolers**: toileting problems, sleeping problems, bed wetting, decreased appetite, increased temper tantrums, more clingy or whiny, and fearful of being alone. Older preschoolers may understand the effects of the outbreak and will look to adults to see how upset to be.

- **Elementary School Age**: increased need for adult attention, increased aggression and irritability, somatic complaints, sleeping problems, and concentration problems with school work.

- **Middle school and high school**: increased somatic complaints, agitation or apathy, concentration problems with school work, increased substance abuse, and withdrawal from others.

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What is resiliency?

- It is the ability to bounce back from adversity.
- It is a learned behavior.
- It takes time and effort and involves a number of steps.
- It involves dealing with strong emotions and taking actions to deal with living.
- It involves self care.
Keys to resilience

- Caring and loving family and friends.
- Capacity to make realistic plans and carry them out.
- Positive view of self.
- Skills in communication and problem solving.
- Capacity to manage strong feelings and emotions.
- Maintaining a positive view of the future.

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Helping struggling students

- Teachers will be able to identify those struggling academically and in need of tutoring
- Teachers will be able to identify those struggling with anxiety and loss and refer them for counseling support
- School administrators should anticipate increased counseling and tutoring needs for many students and search for additional school and community resources. Parent mentors and retired teachers, counselors, and community services will be helpful to meet the increased student needs.
Suicide prevention

- Will COVID-19 cause suicide rates to go up?
- Who might be most at risk for suicide?
- Isn't suicide already a big problem in the U.S.?
- What age groups might be most at risk?
- What warning signs should we look for?
- What should I do if I think a student is suicidal?
Final Thoughts

• Our behavior is very important as the spread of the virus can be stopped if we and our students follow social distance and other health recommendations such as wearing masks.

• Reentry planning must involve parents, school staff and students every step of the way.

• School mental health professionals input is essential in the reentry planning.

• Remember as an adult you have had a life time of experiences to learn what helps you in difficult times and remind yourself every day and with every challenge that you and your students will get through this!

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Questions