

POLICY BRIEF

June 5th, 2020



TREPeducator.org/covid-19-ed-conference

COVID Considerations Regarding the Social and Emotional Health of Students

by Matthew Portell, Fall-Hamilton Elementary

COVID-19 was an unexpected interruption in lives of people globally, and schools are no exception. The educational approach moving forward must be traversed with delicacy and purpose, using what we know about the impact of trauma on the neurodevelopment and stress response systems with children and adults while also imbedding the core principal of supporting the social and emotional health both teachers and students.

What is Trauma?

According to the [American Psychological Association](#), trauma is defined as “an emotional response to a terrible event.” It can lead to shock and denial, or in the longer term, emotional disturbances and physical symptoms like headaches. Both children and adults who experience an inability to protect themselves may also feel overwhelmed by the intensity of physical and emotional responses.

Physical and Safety Considerations

It is imperative to preview the global response within education as the conversation moves from concluding the 2019-2020 school year to launching the 2020-2021 school year. However, the [considerations for a safe environment](#) – social distancing, health screenings, and small class sizes, for example – are going to be difficult to accomplish considering the current financial strain and cuts to districts/schools, and the needs and resources of students. However, my greatest concern lies in the social and emotional health of our students while trying to ensure their physical health. Many schools have worked overtime to ensure students social emotional health is a priority by creating environments that promote relationship and connection. We

Evidence-Based Guidance for How Schools Can Respond to A National Mental Health Crisis in the Wake of COVID-19

must consider the impact of distance, masks, and other requirements will play on our students social and emotional state now and into the future.

Trauma Informed Foundations and Support the Social and Emotional Health in Schools

It is important to consider practices that will support the social and emotional health. The principles of a trauma-informed approach can assist in creating a stable foundation for schools to utilize when addressing the varying social and emotional needs within a district/school post-pandemic. For reference, the principles of two models, [Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative](#) (TLPI) and [Heart of Teaching and Learning](#), provide some guidelines, including addressing students' needs in a holistic way and providing guided opportunities for helpful participation.

Both models promote not only promote the power of relationships, connection, consistency, and shared responsibility, but they focus on the building skills and regulation through the context of school. These ideas were needed prior to COVID and will certainly be more relative after.

Considerations

Although these models are very well respected and used, we must also consider the day to day practicalities in schools. [Dr. Eric Rossen](#) and the [Trauma Informed Educators Network](#) have created a list of considerations for the social and emotional well-being of adults and children in schools post COVID-19.

For example, they recommend an emphasis on mental health and access to services, such as ensuring access to school mental health professionals (e.g., social workers, psychologists, counselors, therapists) that are based in the school and are easily accessible to staff, students, and families. To address the unexpected transition, schools should expect a prolonged honeymoon period as students re-enter school and re-establish relationships when compared to returning from summer. This honeymoon period will likely be followed by an apparent increase in gaps/disparities caused by inequities in the months of school closure. Opportunities could be given for students to rejoin their previous teachers for a short time, or introduce them to their new teachers early to ease the transition.

Schools should anticipate significant academic, social, and emotional regression, but should still honoring the experiences of students while they were home. It should be expected to experience student defiance or resistance - many students may feel disempowered, victimized,

Evidence-Based Guidance for How Schools Can Respond to A National Mental Health Crisis in the Wake of COVID-19

abandoned, or resentful. Others will have lost trust and faith in the school's ability to care for and protect them. Adults working with these students should remember "it affects me, but it's not about me" and establish mechanisms to empower students and provide unconditional positive regard to build trust.

To address these challenges, schools should establish an intentional focus on social emotional learning skill-building, which likely regressed with a lack of social interactions, and avoid assuming that lack of demonstration of social skills represents willful disobedience or purposeful insubordination. Teachers should provide students with opportunities to voice concerns, challenges, and needs. Incorporate restorative practices when appropriate

Schools must also recognize staff needs upon return, as they have potentially experienced their own loss or stress (financial, personal, social, physical/medical), including perhaps seeing negative comments about the school's response, or feedback from families. Schools should establish a mechanism to address secondary traumatic stress, such as Tap In, Tap Out, Buddy Classrooms, Boundary Setting, and Self-Care in the Background.

Closing

As educators traverse these historic times, it is imperative to recognize that individuals process stress and trauma differently. We must use this time to think differently about the systems and structures utilized to support all involved in our education system. By utilizing the components of either trauma-informed schools model previously mentioned in conjunction with the recommendation, we can begin to allow those affected by previous and current stress and trauma to begin or continue to build healing and resilience.

Mathew Portell has dedicated over a decade to education in his role as a teacher, instructional coach, teacher mentor, school administrator, international speaker, and trainer. He currently serves as executive principal of Fall-Hamilton Elementary, an innovative trauma-informed school in Nashville, Tennessee.