

POLICY BRIEF

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Social Emotional Planning Considerations for Returning to School

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As schools prepare for the eventual return to in-person instruction, there are certain considerations that will best support the social emotional responses of our students and teachers when coping with the challenges of recent months. Research and practice have demonstrated that the following strategies will help support students in this transition back into school.

Create a safe and predictable learning environment for returning students

Learning is inherently a social and emotional process. During quarantine, students have faced different amounts of stressors and have had access to different levels of support at home and in the larger school community. Creating a safe and predictable learning environment increases a student's capacity for learning by reducing the emotional load of an unpredictable or chaotic school climate. This can be achieved by focusing on **social awareness** – staff and students' ability to demonstrate an awareness of the role and values of others in the greater community.

This social awareness could take many forms. One example would be rituals that welcome students back to school and provide an opportunity to reconnect with their previous year's teacher and classmates to facilitate the transition into the new year. Students would also benefit from consistent schedules for the first month that rebuild predictability and reduce their emotional load. Lastly, students should actively participate in the development of the norms that guide interactions in their school in order to practice developing community by creating a shared understanding about how they want to be treated and how they will treat others.

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

Model self-awareness by narrating the emotional component of learning and relationships

Students internalize ideas by watching peer and adult models. When adults narrate the emotional component of their reactions, it validates that students can responsibly express their needs and emotions in the classroom. Teachers should prioritize **self-awareness** in the classroom by providing opportunities for students to recognize who they are, what they need, and how they feel relative to the world around them. Additionally, teachers can help students label their emotional responses by teaching and modeling the use of emotion words that help students make sense of their feelings and identity.

Staff and students' ability demonstrate an awareness of other people's roles, their emotions and perspectives or **social awareness**, is another critical component of re-entry. Teachers should pay attention to student emotional responses during work, play, and problem-solving activities and act as a "emotion detective", seeking to understand the root causes of student thinking and behavior. They should also create opportunities to listen to student perspectives and build relationships by providing spaces for students to make personal connections to themselves and the instructional content.

Be intentional about building relationships within your class between students and between you and your students

Emotions drive attention, and attention drives learning. Students pay attention to people they care about and who care about them. Build time in your classroom to actively develop the relationships between students in your class, but don't let them have all the fun – join in on the **relationship building** as well! Students will reflect what adults and peers model.

One way to support this would be to open the year with meaningful group activities that allow students to engage in shared problem solving to build connections. An example is an icebreaker with teacher participation that focuses on purposeful interactions that allow students to communicate about themselves while problem solving. Additionally, students should take the drivers seat in the development of the norms that guide interactions in their classroom and school.

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Emphasize cooperative learning activities that support social emotional skill development

Teachers should align their instructional formats and approaches to the principles of cooperative learning. The five principles of cooperative learning approaches are:

1. Positive Interdependence
2. Social Skills
3. Individual Accountability
4. Group Evaluation
5. Face-to-Face Interaction.

This can be achieved by focusing on using positive communication and social skills to interact effectively with others and teaching skills like **active listening** and turn taking to facilitate their social interactions and group problem solving. Students will also get the chance to develop **social awareness**, demonstrating consideration for others and a desire to positively contribute to their community, by developing tasks that include positive interdependence to help students value working together as a group.

Explicitly teach social emotional learning skills

More than ever, teachers and students need to be consciously skilled in self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision making. This occurs when teachers explicitly teach, model, and integrate social emotional learning skills throughout the day.

Many students have faced difficult circumstances while being away from school during COVID-19. Adopting these recommendations will help ensure that your school or classroom will contribute to your students' resilience and offers a supportive learning environment where all students can thrive.

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