



COVID-19 Considerations for Reopening Schools
Supporting Student and Staff Wellness



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Introduction

While the usual transitional concerns will be present when schools reopen, it is anticipated that this fall's return to school will be particularly challenging. Not only will there have to be social distancing and precautionary health considerations, but also care should be taken to consider the social emotional and mental health of both students and school staff. Teachers and administrators should operate on the assumption that everyone, (students, families and staff) will have experienced some degree of anxiety and stress, uncertainty, illness, grief, and loss.

Some will have been ill themselves, some will be grieving for a relative or friend who died, if not by illness, possibly from an accident or even suicide or violence. Some will have experienced hunger, abuse, neglect, evictions, domestic violence and/or community violence.

For some students, the experience of social distancing and being home during COVID-19 will have been traumatic. Schools will likely see an increased number of learning, behavioral and emotional problems from more students. For those who already have emotional and behavioral challenges, these could be exacerbated.

Existing disparities also will be more pronounced. Stressors from the transition back are likely to intensify and may impact learning and teaching.

This guidance document addresses planning considerations for the social and emotional well-being of students and staff during the transition when schools reopen.

Ensuring Educational Equity

While this guidance is specifically geared to considerations for the re-opening of schools supporting student and staff wellness during COVID-19, it is essential that considerations be inclusive of an acknowledgement that all school staff, community members, and most importantly our students and families will return to school with the societal, and often times intensely personal impacts of racial violence and racial injustice. It is our collective responsibility to ensure that we support our students and staff as they navigate the impact of this violence and injustice on student and staff well-being and mental health. It is our hope that this guidance is grounded in principles of equity as reflected in the OSPI equity statement below:

Each student, family, and community possesses strengths and cultural knowledge that benefits their peers, educators, and schools. Ensuring educational equity:

- Goes beyond equality; it requires education leaders to examine the ways current policies and practices result in disparate outcomes for our students of color, students living in poverty, students receiving special education and English Learner services, students who identify as LGBTQ+, and highly mobile student populations.



- Requires education leaders to develop an understanding of historical contexts; engage students, families, and community representatives as partners in decision-making; and actively dismantle systemic barriers, replacing them with policies and practices that ensure all students have access to the instruction and support they need to succeed in our schools.

We are in an unprecedented period in our nation. We must examine and refine our practices to ensure that the needs of all students are addressed without outcome disparity. It is our hope that as you read this guidance, your frame of reference is inclusive of our current societal reality. Furthermore, let hope, authenticity, acceptance, and determination be among the guiding principles leading to such action and change in our educational system in Washington state.

Maximizing Ways to Ensure Your School is Friendly, Welcoming, Helpful, Non-judgmental and Caring

Each initial and subsequent encounter between school staff and students and families presents an opportunity for welcoming our school community (staff, students, families and other stakeholders) and providing support. The following includes considerations for school districts when working toward this:

- Promote psychological safety. All the basic tenets of creating psychological safety, a positive culture and trauma-responsive schools will be even more important. Maintaining a trauma-informed approach is critical. Disruptive or unusual behaviors may be attempts to cope with a feeling of being overwhelmed and should not be punished, but rather understood and addressed in context with compassion and understanding. Utilize the trauma lens (see Appendix A) to understand the range of reactions. These behaviors typically represent an unmet need. When we see student's misbehavior, we need to ask what happened (or what is happening) to them vs. what is wrong with them, and then ask what is strong with them.
- Acknowledge what happened and who or what is not there. Students or staff members might be struggling because of someone who is missing from their lives. They may not be there because of a transition to middle or high school, graduating, moving to a different school, or because they have passed away. Acknowledge any loss of life that could affect students or your school community. Also acknowledge opportunities, activities or celebrations that might have been lost because of the pandemic. Validate student and staff reactions to this loss. Understand that each person may react differently to this loss and trauma. It is crucial that this is validated and not minimized by comparing suffering to others.



- Rapidly identify students who are not successfully transitioning back to school. To address school readjustment concerns, transition planning should focus on preparing school staff to implement early warning and response procedures that:
 - Quickly identify any student, family or staff having problems. They may be more withdrawn, more anxious or depressed, or exhibit some other indicator that the time at home was difficult for them and they would benefit from community mental health services and supports.
 - Provide personalized supports to aid those with adjustment problems or exhibiting change that is interfering with their ability to function well in school.
 - Refer students in need of additional services.
 - Initiate targeted social and mental health supports for those who experience major adjustment problems. This is a time to consider increasing mental health and social/emotional support staff inside schools.

Monitoring for Targeted Supports

Look and Observe

- Basic necessities and practical needs (food, clothing, shelter, medical care, school supplies).
- Psychosocial needs (connection, positive feedback, counseling).
- Academic needs for students and professional supports for staff.

Ask and Listen

- Students at all levels.
- Families through outreach and offering services.
- Staff at all levels, in formal and informal ways.

Link

- School-based resources: counselor, social worker, school psychologist, school nurse, school-based health center (SBHC).
- Community-based resources: Behavioral Health Agencies, Managed Care Organizations, Accountable Communities of Health.



Supporting Transitions During the First Weeks

Schools may have to manage a variety of trauma or stress-related reactive behaviors from both staff and students. During this time, building trust and a positive school climate is very important. Ensuring that social emotional learning is integrated intentionally into lessons with student voice and debriefing built into these lessons can build needed trust to create a positive and safe space for students to center and re-engage in learning. Providing similar opportunities for staff in meetings and making time to connect will also help staff to transition. It's imperative to provide this to ensure re-traumatization for students and staff does not occur. Unstructured times at school can be challenging and potentially dangerous, especially for vulnerable students. Plan to prevent problems and encourage teaching proactive behavior during daily transitions focused on before school, moving from class to class, breaks, lunch and after school. The emphasis should be on the following:

- Providing positive supervision and safety, and social supports (PBIS principles are key here. See Appendix B).
- Providing, well-designed and structured recreational, enrichment and academic support activities, and mindful moments while meeting CDC COVID-19 guidelines.
- Responding to problems that arise in real time and framing them as teachable moments.
- Considering referrals to school mental health professionals (school counselors, social workers, psychologists or mental health counselors). If needed, these individuals may need to make referrals to community-based behavioral health agencies to assess the mental health needs of students.
- Considering referrals to school mental health professionals (school counselors, social workers, psychologists or mental health counselors). If needed, these individuals may need to make referrals to community-based behavioral health agencies to assess the mental health needs of students.

Questions to Consider	Completed
How will everyone – staff, students and families – be welcomed, oriented and positively connected to the school?	
What outreach will be made to those students and families who were expected, but did not return?	
How will staff minimize problems during daily transition times (e.g., before school, during breaks, class transitions, lunch and after school)?	
How will staff provide supports (non-disciplinary) for those not adjusting well?	
How can we incorporate social and emotional learning activities into every classroom at the beginning, middle or end of every lesson?	



What structures, activities and programming will we have in place to facilitate a culture where everyone feels safe, valued and cared for?	
What resources/partners are available to assist students who may need additional services?	
What training will be needed to prepare staff to provide social emotional learning, use trauma-informed practices, and build a positive school climate? (See Appendix C for resources)	

Reopening Schools with a Sense of Exciting Renewal: Generating Hope and Resilience

Creating an optimistic mood and sense of excitement for staff requires welcoming and supportive activities that highlight how much everyone is valued and the critical role they play, along with an exciting agenda for renewal; plans for making renewal a reality; new opportunities for engagement of everyone; and some key players (e.g. classified staff) taking on leadership roles.

Consider a kick-off renewal planning group/committee to:

- Publicize what makes the coming year so special (e.g., a colorful handout, a feature on the website, a news release, email announcements, a brief video, etc).
- Plan several kick-off events (that meet CDC COVID-19 guidelines) such as:
 - Keynote presentations by leadership that focus on renewal and hope, followed immediately by small groups discussions focused on ways each stakeholder can play a role in making renewal a reality. Ask what personnel and other stakeholders will need in order to take on a meaningful role.
 - Welcoming events for teachers and staff, families, students and community members (including volunteers), with buddy and mentor systems set up to support newcomers until they are effectively functioning. (Note: Welcoming events are not informational sessions. They are meant to be celebratory and relationship-building. A cap to the series of welcoming events could be a communal picnic open to all stakeholders).
 - First day and first week welcoming and transition supports for all students.
 - Substantive orientations and support for newcomers (e.g., teachers, staff, families, students and volunteers).
 - Identifying and correcting any problems that arise early in the re-entry process.
 - Celebrating work and publicizing outcomes.



Questions to Consider	Completed
How can our leadership team encourage staff to view this as an opportunity for our school community to come together and promote safety, wellness, and a renewed vision for the upcoming school year?	
How can our leadership team show all staff that their voice matters? How will leadership collaborate with staff to inspire student/family excitement about the new school year?	
How can we celebrate the return of staff and students?	
What new traditions can we begin that give staff and students opportunities to be recognized?	

Addressing Grief, Loss and Traumatic Stress for Staff and Students

Preparing Staff to Respond to those Experiencing Grief and Loss

Grieving and trauma may disrupt normal functioning. Everyone will need to feel they are in a safe place to express and work through their loss and traumatic stress.

Make sure school staff recognize grief and loss can apply to experiences, milestones and changes as well as the literal loss of people or things. Those losses may be significant to students and should be taken seriously and not dismissed. Every individual may experience trauma/loss differently. Validating these experiences is essential.

Staff should understand the basic stages of grieving and the associated responses (these can occur in any order):

- **Shock:** Usually the first reaction, often experienced as numbness or physical pain and withdrawal.
- **Denial:** Acting as if no loss has occurred to avoid the painful feelings and thoughts.
- **Depression:** Feeling pain, despair, and emptiness is not always accompanied by a visible or expected emotional release such as crying but may also be expressed through self-sabotage and isolation.
- **Guilt:** Self-blame or a belief that the loss was his/her fault.
- **Anxiety:** Panic reactions as reality sets in.
- **Aggression:** A misdirection of anger and frustration and a lack of control. Trusted teachers may have negative moods and behaviors directed toward them and see that as rejection, when it is a confirmation of the safe space they have created.
- **Reintegration:** Loss is accepted (although there may be periods of relapse).



Helping Others Dealing with Loss

To help others deal with loss:

- First acknowledge what has happened. Say something like, "It's really hard to lose someone we are close to or know. In our school community, we lost (insert applicable name)." Encourage talking about what happened and resulting feelings. ("Tell me what you're feeling." "I'm so sorry.") Ensure this conversation is happening in a safe space where there is truly time to communicate, share, empathize and grieve as a group. Remember that adults do not need to hide their own process, challenges, or grief. Adults being open and vulnerable likely will encourage students to share.
- Allow others to express their reactions and then validate the emotions that emerge at each grief stage. Offer time for them to share feelings and facilitate the process with warmth and understanding. Validate the feelings expressed. There may be expressions of anger, fear, guilt or other emotions that may not seem reasonable to you yet feel very real to your student. Some may even indicate relief that what happened to someone else did not happen to them. Others may find it hard to express anything. All students need to be reminded that there is no right or wrong way to feel. All feelings are valued.
- Help students and staff to be prepared for what to say and how to act. It is critical that they not shy away from someone who is grieving ("Glad you're here, sorry about your brother." "When you feel like it, I'm here to listen.").

Helping Students Who are Grieving and Reluctant to Return to School

There are several ways to help students who are grieving and reluctant to return to school:

- **Outreach:** A home visit can help assess needs and how to address them. A step-by-step plan can be made with the individual's family.
- **Special support and accommodations at school:** Steps should be in place to inform teachers and other staff about plans and specific ways to help a student or colleague readjust. Supports include connecting the person to special friends and counselors who will be especially supportive, identifying constructive coping strategies to use in school settings, and ensuring the student feels a sense of control in the process.
- **Counseling:** This can help the person through the stages of grief and support strategies to return to school.

Preparing for, Understanding and Responding to Traumatic Stress Responses in Students and Staff

Several key COVID-19 stressors include anxiety about exposure and illness; limited connections to others; a limited support system; lack of cognitive stimulation; monotony; limited access to normal coping strategies; stressed family members; limited resources;



financial stress; losses and grief; and uncertainty. Here are some of the ways stressors that are experienced may be expressed by students and staff:

Signs of Stress in Students	Signs of Stress in Staff
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clingy, whiny, tearful, frightened, anxious • Agitated, hyperactive, over-reactive • Irritable, impatient, aggressive, angry • Withdrawn, disengaged, lethargic, depressed, sad, hopeless, suicidal • Poor concentration, limited comprehension, poor memory • Vague physical complaints • Sleep disturbance, appetite disturbance • Seeking attention, “in your face” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anxious, fearful • Depressed, sad, withdrawn, less engaged, absent • Irritable, impatient, frustrated, angry, explosive, over-reactive • Agitated, poor concentration, poor memory • Vague physical complaints, headaches, GI problems, sleep disturbance, appetite disturbance • Overwhelmed, confused, difficulty with problem-solving or making decisions • Loss of creativity, lack of motivation

Staff and students alike are at risk of an exacerbated stress response if they also have experienced recent loss or history of significant loss; past or current exposure to trauma; pre-existing behavioral health concerns or history of such; limited support systems in family, community or workplace; a feeling of isolation; difficulty with attachment and relationships; or poor or limited coping skills and supports.

Creating a Space Where People Feel Safe, Respected and Cared For

Creating a space where people feel safe, respected and cared for is essential to addressing traumatic stress at the beginning of and throughout the year. Providing social emotional learning for students and emotional support for staff will help build trust and relationships. The following may help:

- Consider a whole-school or whole-class brief lesson on how traumatic stress impacts our brains to help normalize and reduce shame, as well as lessen the likelihood that schools will engage in punitive, re-traumatizing reactions.
- Encourage self-compassion and provide time, spaces and places for embedding self-care activities for both students and staff. Group spaces, breathing together, journaling time, etc., can be integrated into classroom activities and staff meetings and routines.



Questions to Consider	Completed
What do we have in place to support students and staff who appear to be deeply sad, withdrawn or in distress?	
What community resources do we have to support staff and students?	
Are our counselors/social workers situated to handle many individual counseling sessions with students in need?	
What do we have in place to support Tier 3 students (students who we think may be at risk of harming themselves or someone else)?	
Have we made time for our counselors/social workers to address the mental health of students through Tier 1 instruction (whole group guidance) and Tier 2 direct student services (individual or small group counseling)?	
Have we been clear on the protocol for teachers to let counselors know when a student is in distress?	
What other support staff do we have in place to help students who need extra support?	
What buddy/peer support systems can be set up to support connection among students?	

Re-engaging Students Disconnected in Instructional Activity

There are several ways to re-engage students who become disconnected in class. Here are some suggestions:

- **Understand their mindset.** [Watch this brief video about the Learning Brain vs. the Survival Brain.](#) It explains that when children are in survival mode (Survival Brain), the Learning Brain is stifled. Adults can help students shift into the Learning Brain by creating a physically and psychologically safe environment.
- **Providing student choice and voice is important.** Personalization and differentiation are going to be key in all classrooms. Students are going to come back with varying experiences and responses to the pandemic. For some, engaging in typical teaching and learning activities may be comforting. For others who may be in "Survival Brain," they may not have the capacity to interact in this way.
- **Do not emphasize tasks as high stakes.** This increases the likelihood of compounding existing stressors.
- **Plan for student engagement** by ensuring the instructional approach honors student needs, circumstances, and interests while being relevant and valuable to their lives. Students must perceive the tasks given to them as attainable and worthy of their participation.
- **Be flexible and collaborative:** This trauma is revolving around a loss of control. To give that back, engage students and staff when possible in setting reasonable goals together.



Incorporating Brain/Body Breaks into Daily Lessons

Provide brain and body breaks to support both academic and social/emotional learning:

- **Squeeze muscles:** Starting at your toes, pick one muscle and squeeze it tight. Count to five. Release, and notice how your body changes. Repeat exercise moving up your body.
- **Belly breathing:** Put one hand on your stomach and one hand on your chest. Slowly breathe in from your stomach (expand like a balloon) and slowly breathe out (deflate).
- **Mindful meal/snack:** Pay attention to the smell, taste and look of your food. No multitasking.
- **Create Happy lists or Bliss lists** that students and staff may refer to when they need a mental break. The [6 Week Plan to Re-Opening Schools after COVID-19](#) has an explanation on this and other useful ideas.
- **A restful moment:** Sit in a relaxed, comfortable position. Pick something to focus on, like your breath. When your mind wanders, bring your attention back to your breath.
- **Blowing bubbles:** Notice their shapes, textures and colors.
- **Coloring:** Color something. Focus on the colors and designs.
- **Listening to music:** Focus on the whole song or listen specifically to the voice or an instrument.

(See "Building Resilience" chart in Appendix D)

Questions to Consider	Completed
What am I doing to create a physically and psychologically safe classroom to support students in both "Learning Brain" and "Survival Brain"?	
Are we engaging our students in a manner that honors their voices and choices?	
How do we create tasks that do not convey high stakes or pressure?	
Are our lessons relevant and engaging to the lives of students?	
Am I taking care of myself so I can engage with students in a calm, warm and caring manner?	
How are we going to communicate to students the various help/supports they? can reach out to if schools are closed again? (See "Crisis Hotline Information" in Appendix E).	



Appendix A: Wearing a Trauma Lens

Wearing a Trauma Lens: Shifting our Perspective to Support Students who are Trauma Exposed



"Remember everyone in the classroom has a story that leads to misbehavior or defiance. Nine times out of 10, the story behind the misbehavior won't make you angry, it will break your heart." – K. Ritchie

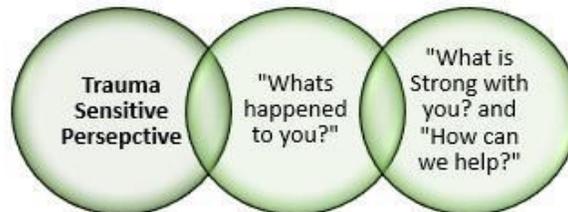
When students act out in school sometimes adults respond using a non-trauma informed lens that labels the student as sick or bad. Actions that result from this perspective (e.g., punishment, exclusion) can often re-traumatize students.



10 Building Blocks of Enduring Relationships

- 1 Awareness of students' life
- 2 Empathy
- 3 High expectations
- 4 Humility
- 5 Unconditional care and forgiveness
- 6 Consistency and predictability
- 7 Intentionality
- 8 Responsiveness to student needs
- 9 Patience and restraint
- 10 Respect and celebration of individuality

- Trauma exposure may result in a profound shift in world view: a child may lose trust in the world as a safe place and no longer trust that people will protect them
- This shift can last long after the trauma has passed and impact relationships and situations that are unconnected to the initial trauma
- The Trauma Lens allows us to understand and recognize the role past and present trauma exposure may have in the current behavior and functioning of a student
- The Trauma Lens appreciates that trauma can cause a pervasive shift in the way youth perceive and relate to every aspect of the world



Instead of responding using the sick/bad perspective, we must consider the function of the behavior and find out how they may have been injured or impacted and, most importantly, how we can help them.

Source: trauma responsive Educator project brief

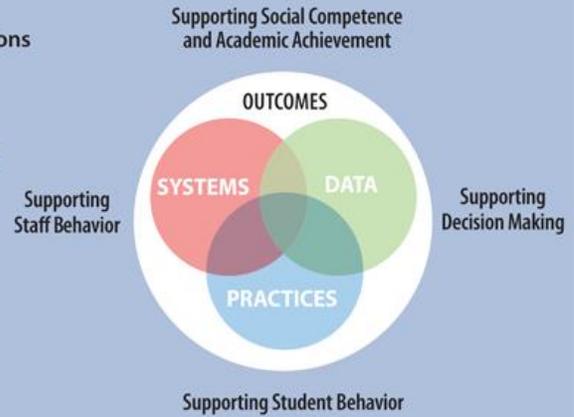


Appendix B: Principles of PBIS

Six important principles of PBIS:

1. Develop a continuum of behavior, academic interventions and supports
2. Use data to make decisions and solve problems
3. Arrange the environment to prevent the occurrence of problem behavior
4. Teach and encourage prosocial skills and behaviors
5. Implement evidence-based behavioral practices with fidelity and accountability
6. Screen universally, monitor student performance and progress continuously

Four PBIS Elements



Additional Resources on PBIS

- [Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports \(PBIS\)](#)
- Pbisworld.com
- Pbisaz.org



Appendix C: Social Emotional Learning and Trauma-informed Resources

The following SEL Online Training modules are free. You just need to create an account to access them.

[SEL Online Training Module](#)

- Segment 1. Overview and benefits of SEL
- Segment 2. Embedding SEL Schoolwide
- Segment 3. Creating Professional Culture Based on SEL
- Segment 4. Integrating SEL Into Culturally Responsive Classrooms
- **Segment 5. Trauma Informed SEL**
- Segment 6. Identifying and Selecting Evidence-Based Programs

[OSPI SEL Website](#)

[CASEL Website](#)

[Center to Improve SEL and School Safety](#)



Appendix D: Building Resilience

Connection

- Frequent, sustained outreach
- Mentors/buddies
- Check-in, check-out

Safety

- Normalize stress response
- Look, ask and listen
- Model appropriate emotional expression

Nutrition & Exercise

- Healthy snacks
- Recess
- Movement breaks

Competence

- Frequent, targeted affirmation
- Small chunks
- Repetition, patience

Empowerment

- Choice
- Voice
- Flexibility

Self-Regulation

- Social/emotional learning and emotional literacy
- Mindful focusing
- Regular breaks



Appendix E: Crisis Hotline Information

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: (800) 273-TALK (8255)
Crisis Text Line: 741741
Washington Mental Health Referral Service for Children and Teens (Seattle Children's) 24/7 referral line: 1-(833)-303-5437
Link to Washington State Mental Health Crisis lines by County: https://www.hca.wa.gov/health-care-services-and-supports/behavioral-health-recovery/mental-health-crisis-lines
SAMHSA (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration) Disaster Distress Helpline: Call (800) 985-5990 or text TalkWithUs to 66746 <i>(24/7, 365-days-a-year, toll-free hotline dedicated to providing immediate crisis counseling for people who are experiencing emotional distress related to any natural or human-caused disaster. This multilingual and confidential crisis support service is available to all residents in the United States and its Territories.)</i>
The Trevor Project: (866) 488-7386 <i>(National 24-hour, toll-free confidential suicide hotline for LGBTQ youth.)</i>
OSPI Suicide Prevention Webpage

This guidance is an adaptation from the Kentucky Department of Education document adapted from [Volume 25 of the UCLA School Mental Health Project](#).

