Addressing Social and Emotional Needs During COVID–19
Emerging Themes in School Reopening Guides

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Much attention has been paid to the academic learning loss that is projected to have occurred as a result of COVID-19 school closures. As schools plan out their fall reopening, many are asserting social and emotional learning (SEL) should be a priority. Christina Cipriano, who holds a doctorate in educational psychology and is director of research at the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, is among those pushing for more SEL. She recently stated, “It is next to impossible to expect teaching and learning to occur in a crisis without attending to our emotions.” In this brief, we summarize the ways that stakeholders suggest SEL be addressed this fall.

The Collaborative for Social, Emotional and Academic Learning (CASEL) defines SEL as “the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.” The science of learning has found that one learns within social contexts, that emotions are essential for learning and that the social brain is the leading force in cognition.

As state departments of education, various organizations, researchers and other stakeholders release recommendations for school reopening, this has either included or focused on social and emotional well-being. In this brief, we identify and discuss five emerging themes gleaned from the following documents:


• Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) brief: “Leveraging the Power of Social Emotional Learning as You Prepare to Reopen and Renew Your School Community.”


• American Institutes for Research (AIR):
  ○ “COVID-19 and Whole Child Efforts.”
  ○ “Recognizing the Role of Afterschool Programs and Systems in Reopening and Rebuilding.”

What follows are snapshots of some of the themes in the above guidance and recommendations.
Strengthen Conditions for Learning

AIR says schools with essential conditions for learning maintain environments that are physically and emotionally safe, supportive, challenging, and socially and emotionally nurturing. CCSSO created a framework to address and respond to COVID-19 impacts on the K-12 education system and included conditions for learning in its guidance. Below are the CCSSO recommendations, alongside NCSL-identified state examples:

- Ensure continuation of wraparound supports, such as school meals and access to counseling.
  
The Oklahoma State Department of Education has provided resources and guidance for distance learning school counseling. The resources include academic and SEL themes and were shared with Oklahoma school counselors to support the transition from in-person to virtual counseling.

- Share guidance on trauma-informed SEL, including a focus on school culture and climate and deployment of multi-tiered systems of support.
  
  A multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) is a framework for organizing and providing a tiered instructional continuum to support learning for all students. The Oregon Department of Education developed guidance on mental health for school counselors and other administrators, as well as on how to support teacher and student mental and emotional well-being.

- Share health and safety protocols for reopening schools, including cleaning, screening, monitoring, deploying school nurses and more.
  
  The Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction has provided a nearly 60-page fall reopening plan for schools. The plan outlines recommendations on health and safety requirements, health screenings upon drop-off, and transportation. The National Governor’s Association (NGA) has provided a state-by-state tracker of reopening guidance documents that includes actions for K-12 schools.

- Provide guidance on parent and family engagement and supports, particularly around distance learning and reopening protocols.
  
  The Indiana Department of Education created a road map for fall reentry that outlines SEL for the end of school, summer sessions and the start of the 2020-21 school year.
Identify and Address the Stress, Trauma, and Social and Emotional Needs of Students

As students may be impacted in multiple ways by COVID-19 and the closure of schools, experts and educators can look back to acknowledge the challenges and successes of virtual learning before moving forward. Since the disruption, there has been further research on the importance of social and emotional skill-building to help students manage difficulty in their lives. Research identifies student anxiety and depression as the two most urgent mental health issues. In the discussions around fall reentry, student anxiety is likely to be a significant concern. Furthermore, according to the Aspen Institute report, outreach and assessment should occur before school reopens and continue through the first 90 days. The two recommendations below come from the recent Aspen Institute report and are paired with in-practice examples that NCSL has identified:

- **Identify and address the stress and trauma that students have experienced during school closings, and that will be ongoing when school buildings reopen.**

  Children’s reactions to trauma can affect learning and behavior at school. Schools can serve as a system of support for students who have experienced trauma. Even before COVID-19, some states were working on ways to promote trauma-informed practices (TIPs) in schools. While the policy approaches vary, many states aim to increase TIPs for those in contact with youth who may be suffering the effects of trauma. Pennsylvania SB 1142, enacted in 2018, provides grants to schools aimed at increasing trauma-informed approaches, such as counseling and staff training, and identifying students at risk of trauma. Programs such as this one could bolster counselor and other school staff efforts to examine where SEL has been impactful and where more support may be needed.

- **Create emotionally and physically safe, supportive and engaging learning environments that promote all students’ social and emotional development.**

  In 2019, several states enacted legislation that addresses the issue of school climate. Connecticut HB 7215 created the Social and Emotional Learning and School Climate Advisory Collaborative. Tasked with developing a suicide risk assessment tool for students in grades three through 12, the collaborative will submit recommendations to the General Assembly by 2021 as to the tool’s implementation. Mississippi HB 1283 requires the state department of education to establish three pilot programs in six school districts. Using an evidence-based social and emotional curriculum, the program aims to provide K-5 students with the tools to manage stress and anxiety to build resiliency and deal with challenges in a healthy way.

Identify and Address the Stress, Trauma, and Social and Emotional Needs of Adults in the School

The National Commission on Social, Emotional and Academic Development (SEAD) brought together input from scientists, youth, parent groups, educators and policymakers in the report “From a Nation at Risk to a Nation at Hope,” which documents the benefits of SEL for children and provides policy, research and practice recommendations. The report revealed that teachers’ own social and emotional competencies affect their teaching abilities. A growing body of research suggests that developing teachers’ social and emotional competencies improves teacher well-being, reduces stress and burnout, and can reduce teacher...
and principal turnover. Although teacher stress and well-being are not new concerns, experts expect that COVID-19 has and will continue to produce additional stressors for educators.

The Aspen Institute stated that an adult MTSS is a useful tool of recovery for school personnel. Options can include support for trauma, targeted support or more intensive supports accessed through employee assistance programs (EAP). In a recent brief, CASEL highlighted the need for creating a space where adults can heal and cultivate their own SEL competencies and capacities during these uncertain times. Below are CASEL’s recommendations, alongside some on-the-ground examples that NCSL has identified:

- **Allow space for connection, listening and healing among all leaders and staff in the school building.**

  By partnering with Acknowledge Alliance, a nonprofit educational consultant, the Sunnyvale School District in California created a space with an open-door policy to encourage staff to receive mental health services and promote well-being through its Educator Resilience program.

- **Provide professional learning to build educators’ capacity to support students’ SEL.**

  Several states addressed this issue through legislation prior to the pandemic. One example is Colorado SB 272, enacted in 2018 and creating a grant program to assist schools in providing professional development to teachers, administrators and staff around crisis and suicide prevention. Another example is the professional educator license-renewal legislation Illinois enacted in 2019 (HB 355), requiring professional development in inclusive instructional practices and SEL.

- **Ensure access to mental health and trauma supports for adults.**

  The American Institutes for Research produced a tool for educators to use in assessing their resilience and forming a trauma-informed self-care plan. Wisconsin and Indiana are offering similar assessments and self-care resources for educators and staff.
Build Partnerships With Afterschool Programs and Other Community-Based Organizations

Since the pandemic began, the education sector has had a full plate, including shifting to distance learning and seeking hot spots and connectivity agreements in order to reach all students, and assisting with student meals. Many of the guidance materials suggest that this is not sustainable in the long term and recommend that the education sector build partnerships in order to shift some responsibilities.

Afterschool programs can be a key partner in reopening schools and addressing student and family needs.

Afterschool programs can foster opportunities for social and emotional learning, as well as re-engaging students through relationship building and enrichment activities. AIR’s brief on the role of afterschool programs in reopening and rebuilding underscores these programs’ experience as trusted partners of communities and schools. Schools could collaborate with afterschool programs and leverage their connections to local resources and services, such as mental and physical health providers. During a time when clear, timely communication with families is critical, afterschool programs can act as a bridge between schools and families. Finally, if schools collaborate with afterschool programs around split and block schedules this fall, they can help meet the needs of working families and provide students with a sense of safety and belonging.

State/Local Examples:

• The California Department of Education’s reopening plan recognized the unique role that afterschool programs play in “helping mediate high levels of stress, establishing trusting and positive relationships with youth that foster belonging while also inspiring engagement and skill development, and building bridges with families in the community.” The plan states that school districts should proactively reach out to their afterschool partners.

• The Iowa Boys and Girls Club is among the afterschool programs that have worked to provide meals and virtual programming for local families during the pandemic, including partnering with a food bank.

• The 50-State Afterschool Network can be a resource to help education organizations and state policymakers identify afterschool partners.

New Partnerships Can Assist with Identifying and Addressing Student and Staff SEL Needs

An Aspen Institute report suggests that partnerships between state education departments and child and family services agencies could help with information sharing and problem-solving and take some of the burden off an overextended education sector. The Colorado Education Initiative partnered with the state Department of Education to conduct a school needs assessment. The results have given districts the chance to evaluate community needs and determine their response while moving forward.
Empower The Youth Voice

Empowering youth to use their voice to express themselves, push for change and build strong relationships with adults furthers numerous social and emotional skills. As the National Commission on Social, Emotinal and Academic Development’s Youth Commission stated, “We know that we learn best when adults know us, make us feel safe, hold us responsible for our learning, and help us work constructively and productively together.” Youth want to be partners in their learning and COVID-19 could present an opportunity to reengage them. The Aspen Institute’s policy guide makes the following recommendation around youth voice:

- Establish a student advisory council for statewide education and COVID-related policy issues that impact youth and families.

Youth and youth-serving community-based organizations could be included in education committee hearings, P-12 task forces, advisory groups and school board hearings. Through these avenues or through student surveys, youth could be partners identifying effective distance learning techniques, providing feedback on why some were not engaged during school closures, stressors experienced, and ways schools and school partners can address student needs and successfully reengage youth in learning.

State/Local Examples:

- The Prichard Committee Student Voice Team works to integrate students as partners to improve Kentucky schools. One of the recent ways it’s doing this is by conducting a “Coping With COVID” student survey.

- The Indiana Department of Education developed a searchable database that includes SEL and wellness supports for P-12 students. The department also speaks specifically to SEL and youth voices in its Continuous Learning Guidance Plan.

- Programs that amplify the youth voice, such as Mikva Challenge Programs, have resulted in growth in five key SEL competency areas: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making.

Additional Resources

- COVID-19 Education Bill Tracking Database, NCSL
- Building Social and Emotional Skills in Afterschool Programs: A Literature Review, NCSL
- COVID-19 Recovery: Leveraging Afterschool and Summer to Help Kids Catch Up, Keep Up, NCSL
- CASEL CARES Initiative, CASEL
- Resources and Examples: Learning in the Time of COVID-19, Learning Policy Institute