

## NASP Guidance for Ensuring Student Well-Being in the Context of the Chauvin Trial

Bethesda, MD—The trial of Officer Derek Chauvin for the death of George Floyd has understandably captured our national attention and generated strong feelings for millions of people across the country. Regardless of the verdict, the issues involved have highlighted the extensive harm caused by systemic racism and police violence against people of color, particularly Black Americans, and, in so doing, has caused deep pain in many communities. While the case is legally focused on the specific actions of Officer Chauvin, the verdict will come in the context of many other instances of lethal police force against BIPOC individuals, including the recent killings of Duante Wright and Adam Toledo, as well as other recent hate crimes that have laid bare epidemic racism and White supremacy in America.

These issues affect our children and youth in many forms and can have disproportionate and long-lasting impact on students of minoritized and marginalized backgrounds. As parents, caregivers, and educators, we have a critical responsibility to ensure they feel safe and secure and to help them learn how to process events like this, express their feelings and concerns in a respectful manner, and identify positive coping strategies. Schools play a critical role in this process by creating a positive learning environment for all students, even in a virtual context. It is imperative that educators facilitate respectful discussions among students and safeguard the well-being of those who may feel vulnerable. NASP has a number of resources to help educators and other adults support children and youth in the days ahead, key points of which are summarized below. School psychologists and other school-employed mental health professionals should be involved in the planning and implementation of this work.

***Reassure students of their safety and security.*** Students should be regularly reminded that school is a safe place, and this should be reinforced through strategies and practices that ensure both physical and psychological safety. Establishing positive relationships between adults and students is foundational to safe, successful learning environments. Maintain culturally and linguistically responsive practices and ensure that students and their families feel connected and engaged. Model and teach desired behaviors. If students feel physically or psychologically unsafe, they need to know how to report incidences and trust that adults will be there to validate and respond effectively to their concerns.

***Help children engage in thoughtful and respectful dialogue.*** Allow opportunities for students to discuss current events with trusted adults in the school. Having structured community circles during designated times of the school day allows students to share how they are feeling and if/how they want to take action to address something that they feel is unjust. Establish ways for students to participate in discussions and speak with a trusted adult remotely if necessary. These conversations can be difficult and involve strong differences of opinion and painful, personal self-reflection, or even painful or triggering thoughts and comments. Adults can start by reflecting on their own experiences and how these shape their thoughts and feelings. They can help children to do the same and ask questions of each other, rather than level accusations. Help students see that words matter, as does how we use them. Teach them to avoid stigmatizing statements and to state their thoughts with opening phrases like, “I believe” or “Have you thought about” instead of “Anybody who” or “No one should.” Be mindful of the intentional or unintentional burden placed on students of minoritized

backgrounds to speak on behalf of an entire group or educate others. This student lesson plan is an example of how to have conversations with students using a social justice lens.

***Reinforce staff well-being.*** Critical to ensuring a safe, supportive school environment is supporting staff well-being and sense of confidence in responding to unfolding events and reactions. School staff are already under tremendous pressure and some may feel overwhelmed, whereas others may experience strong reactions to current events that make such classroom discussions particularly painful and challenging. Encourage and help staff to engage in their own self-reflection on how they feel about the trial and issues involved, be prepared to guide students through the coming days, and establish a mechanism for staff to request help if needed. Administrators should provide staff with clear guidelines on how to lead discussions and recognize and respond to student needs. They should also enable staff self-care measures and make clear that staff interactions and behavior must be respectful.

***Help children manage strong emotions.*** For many children, the intense discussions, media images, and messages that they have been exposed to—and in some cases are participating in—in response to racial violence can trigger a range of strong emotions. Some children may experience stress, anger, and even trauma. Children’s emotions can spill over into the classroom, whether in person or virtual. Help children understand and identify the range of emotions that they are feeling and learn to express them in appropriate and respectful ways. For children experiencing stress, we can help by spending time with them, encouraging them to talk about their feelings, maintaining a sense of normalcy in their schedules and activities, and providing coping strategies. This should include knowing the signs of more significant distress and concrete steps for seeking help, such as contacting a school mental health professional.

***Stop any type of verbal or physical harassment or bullying immediately.*** Racism, systemic inequity, and violence are major concerns for the country, and systemically minoritized and marginalized individuals may feel especially at risk in this highly charged climate. Make clear that hateful or intolerant comments—or any comments that are meant to hurt or make others feel threatened, unsafe, or unwelcome—will not be tolerated. Staff and students should also be mindful of the impact of microaggressions, which may seem less obvious to some yet can be equally hurtful and damaging. Talk to the children involved about the reasons for their behavior. Offer alternative methods of expressing their anger, confusion, or insecurity, and provide supports for those who are subject to the bullying. **Reiterate that violence is never a solution to fear or anger and will only cause more harm.**

***Discuss responsible civic engagement in person and online.*** Have conversations discussing how easy it is to share misinformation when emotions are running high. Review how to fact check information in order to understand what is accurate before sharing or reposting memes, pictures, articles, posts, and tweets. Remind students to share their thoughts in a respectful manner and to avoid engaging in online arguments with others.

***Be prepared to manage or respond to civil protests.*** Freedom of speech and the ability to protest are core values and rights in this country. They have been a key element in the nation’s response to systemic racism throughout our history. While students have a right to exercise free speech, schools have a responsibility to ensure their safety and maintain the integrity of the learning environment. School leaders should work with students who want to organize protests or walk outs, provide options for safe ways to protest, and remind students and parents of policies and any consequences for unexcused absences. School leaders should review crisis response protocols and plans for the possibility of community protests that result in violence. These leaders should listen carefully to students’ concerns and develop plans to address them.

For additional information and resources to help support children and youth, see:

NASP School Safety and Crisis Resource <https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/school-climate-safety-and-crisis> (See: Responding to Civil Unrest in Schools: Prevention to Response)

NASP Social Justice Resources <https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/diversity-and-social-justice/social-justice> (Understanding Race and Privilege: Suggestions for Facilitating Challenging Conversations)

Considerations for Principals When Students Are Planning an Organized Protest or Walkout  
<https://www.nassp.org/2018/02/23/considerations-for-principals-when-students-are-planning-an-organized-protest-or-walkout/>

###