

## Supporting Student Engagement and Well-Being in a Virtual Learning Environment: Social Justice Considerations

Most schools are adapting to the COVID-19 pandemic by providing at least some alternative or virtual learning experiences. With students often now physically situated in their home environment, educators have increasingly experienced challenges in supporting students who have unique engagement and well-being needs. Many schools are grappling with ensuring students have access to technology and keeping them feeling connected in a virtual classroom. Schools are also struggling to address unique safety issues in a virtual learning environment as well as addressing the potential for compromised emotional well-being due to prolonged isolation. Moreover, many educators have been confronted with determining how and when to adjust traditional classroom behavioral expectations and consequences.

Woven throughout these challenges is the need to balance the maintenance of the familiar and positive rhythms of school expectations (e.g., being on time, being present, participating) with the realities of students' home lives. Some families are struggling economically or lack the resources to attend to their child's virtual learning needs at home. At the same time, many teachers and other educators are stressed with public pressure to keep students active, engaged, and learning; and some students lack the resources, skills, or opportunities to adjust to the academic and social challenges being faced in a virtual classroom. Educators must consider how they will adjust while also respecting student privacy and ensuring decisions are made with equity and social justice in mind.

**Indeed, it is imperative that educators work to ensure that efforts to promote student engagement and maintain classroom expectations do not exacerbate equity issues or compromise students' well-being, safety, or privacy.** While there is no "one size fits all" approach and best practices remain a work in progress for these challenges, the goal of this document is to outline some of the most pressing issues and related potential strategies for schools to consider. Such considerations will be helpful in supporting equitable, trauma-informed, and flexible behavioral expectations for the virtual environment.

### Reducing Technology Barriers: Considerations and Strategies

The increased use of virtual learning technology requirements may uncover or magnify student or family barriers to accessing educational services. Consider the following questions and related suggested strategies on this issue.

- *Are we helping ensure all students have adequate access to the technology required to be successful with virtual expectations (e.g., devices to use, high speed internet, Wi-Fi, adequate bandwidth in the home for multiple devices)?* An example alternative includes equipping school busses with Wi-Fi that can be parked in neighborhoods with limited or no access to reliable internet so students may access the internet. (School-employed mental health staff could also be present on these busses to conduct wellness checks and to provide mental health support for students in need.)
- *Beyond access to the technology itself, do families have access to training on how to use it?* For example, do families know how to use technology to support their child with a Chromebook or other required devices?
- *Are we developing flexible home environment expectations for students (e.g., critical examination of any 'cameras always on,' clean room, student dress expectations, or similar requirements)?* For example, supporting the use of video conferencing screen backgrounds, allowing students to check in at the beginning of a class and periodically thereafter (with cameras off), ensuring dress code expectations are consistent with traditional policy, and/or allowing students to use only the chat box to help ensure engagement and attendance.
- *How are we providing varied participation options for all students in virtual classrooms, but especially for those with disabilities or unique needs?* For example, are we providing a menu of options for student participation in a virtual environment (e.g., post chat window questions/comments, raise hand electronically, small group breakouts to increase discussion, respond to electronic polls)?

- *How are we encouraging engagement for all students in a virtual environment, but especially for those with disabilities or unique needs?* As examples, educators can seek increased student input about virtual classroom expectations and what works best from their perspectives. It may be useful to provide a menu of flexible learning options that all meet classroom objectives while also increasing opportunities to revise and resubmit work.
- *Are we critically examining our student conduct or behavior policies—from a social justice perspective—in the virtual environment?* Ensure culturally responsive practices and restorative practices are being given increased consideration. Perceived student misbehavior might be driven by increased student stress or even psychological trauma. Educators may need to reconsider disciplinary responses including determining what minimal interfering behaviors can be deemed acceptable within the current context, what really necessitates adult management or shaping, and what might necessitate a referral for intervention services.

### **Positive and Safe Virtual Environments: Considerations and Strategies**

Positive, safe, and psychologically secure school environments are the foundations for learning and academic success. They are equally if not more vital in a virtual learning environment. Consider the following questions and related strategies on this issue.

- *How are we providing adequate or even increased student access to social-emotional learning (SEL) curricula in a virtual environment?* The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) has reported that student attendance increases, academic success goes up, teacher effectiveness improves, and students report feeling safer when SEL is in the school curriculum. With perceptions of connectedness being at risk for many in a virtual classroom environment, SEL may need to be prioritized even further by schools, especially during this early time of adjustment to new realities. For additional ideas, see the CASEL District Resource Center at <https://drc.casel.org/>.
- *How are we modeling and promoting emotionally intelligent skills for students?* Student personal and interpersonal skills such as empathy, patience, compassion, flexibility, and maintaining an optimistic mindset continue to be vital if not more important in a virtual classroom. Strategies include holding virtual class meetings to model and practice group decision making or conducting virtual restorative circles to build community or respond to conflict.
- *Do students and families know how they can connect with school-employed mental health professionals (e.g., school psychologists, school counselors, social workers)?* One strategy is the creation (or restructuring) of a prominent and easily accessible mental health landing page on the school district webpage. As well, schools must publicize how they will offer virtual counseling options, and they are encouraged to distribute mental health or crisis resources frequently via mail or school district social media platforms. Communications that normalize common stress reactions and experiences, while also noting an array of options for support, may comfort students and families by assisting them to understand they are not alone.
- *How can we interject frequent brain breaks and regulating activities into virtual learning?* As examples, it may be necessary to increase approaches such as mindfulness activities, repetitive and patterned movement, or relaxation exercises. To make including those easier, it may be helpful to create menus of options that take 5 minutes or less so educators can select one that is most appropriate to the situation. It is important for administrators to communicate clearly that it is not only okay but also encouraged to take these pauses.
- *In a virtual environment, how will we ensure increased student contact with trusted adults who support at-risk students?* Educators must continue to prioritize existing strategies or even create new ways for students to connect in a virtual world. For example, a virtual “lunch bunch” or “breakfast buddies” and virtual Gender and Sexuality Alliances (GSAs). Additional consideration of virtual wraparound supports for students with multiple and significant needs may also be necessary.

### **Student Support in the Home Environment: Considerations and Strategies**

During times of increased family stress, there is higher potential for decreased adult supervision, decreased adult support, and increased child maltreatment. Students with food or housing insecurities, students living in poverty, and LGBTQ+ populations may be particularly at-risk. Consider the following questions and related strategies on this issue.

- *How are we supporting students who may experience increased isolation, inadequate supervision, or increased fear at home?* These may be students who have parents or caregivers who are not present due to their work in essential industries for

which working from home is not an option. Additionally, for some students, the traditional face-to-face school environment may have been a vital (or the only) place to feel support from an adult or others, while the home environment may be an intimidating or otherwise negative environment. For those students, virtual learning at home, even under the supervision of a parent or other caregiver, may not be perceived as a psychologically safe and secure environment. Determine if the student is feeling supported by an adult or other caregiver in the home. What increased support might they need to be successful? Is the school making its GSA accessible virtually?

- *How are we supporting our students who had access to breakfast, lunch, or other food programs when they attended school in person?* Educators must consider academic challenges and student emotions or behaviors in the context of possible increased student food insecurities. Ensure students have access to free meals, as extended by the USDA through at least December, 31 2020.
- *Have we trained or retrained our staff members in mandated reporting practices, with the virtual environment in mind?* Since the beginning of the pandemic, there have been fewer reports of child abuse, despite widespread belief that abuse has not diminished and may have even increased. Additionally, given the wide range of potential virtual environments, some students may be situated in states other than that of their school, potentially necessitating the reporting of abuse in other states.

### **Virtual Crisis Response: Considerations and Strategies**

During this time of multiple crises in America, school crisis response teams are encouraged to meet regularly to plan for the active monitoring of and response to student, family, and colleague needs. Consider the following questions and related strategies on this issue.

- *Do we have a trained and functioning crisis response team (or other intervention-assistance team)?* Convene or reconvene a multidisciplinary team of educators who can address the training and crisis response intervention needs for the school. Schedule regular virtual meetings to review or update the district and school Emergency Operations Plans (EOPs), even if widespread crisis response is not currently necessary. Ensure school-employed mental health professionals are at the table for these meetings and discuss what and how interventions can be delivered virtually. For example, how will the team deliver necessary universal psychoeducational interventions or a more targeted group crisis intervention in a virtual environment?
- *Are the crisis team and all school staff members trained with basic trauma-sensitive practices?* As a sample strategy, when student behavioral or emotional challenges are present, it can be helpful to remind educators to emphasize a mindset that asks “What happened to this student?” instead of “What’s wrong with this student?”
- *Are we practicing a deliberate psychological triage process in the virtual environment that is focused on actively identifying students who have experienced one or more recent crises?* Numerous crises have occurred simultaneously in America in 2020—including but not limited to COVID-19, civil unrest in many communities, climate or other natural disasters, and family employment and financial struggles. Some students have endured several of these experiences concurrently, and those students may be more difficult to identify in a virtual learning environment. A best practice strategy for schools is to move beyond a passive “counselors will be available” approach and toward a more active checking-in process with students known to have risk factors or vulnerabilities. It may be useful to survey families electronically to help determine which, if any, crises have affected students or families. Survey results can then be used to support a more active triage and intervention process.
- *How are we promoting and providing self-care and care for the caregiver?* In addition to supporting the academic and well-being needs of students in a virtual environment, schools must actively support a culture where educators can support their own loved ones and prioritize their own well-being. In order to emphasize this need as essential, schools are encouraged to discuss their care-for-the-caregiver expectations with each other, regularly, in crisis team meetings. They may also want to consider holding virtual trainings for staff members or providing them with recorded sessions that review care-for-the-caregiver strategies.
- *Are we aware of and using recently published NASP resources for virtual suicide risk assessment and intervention?* What policies do we have for if/when educators witness or hear concerning actions or behaviors in the home environment (e.g., observe guns or other potential threats in the home, observe racist visuals/remarks). Schools must ensure staff members are aware of procedures for virtual behavioral suicide risk and virtual behavioral threat assessment and management (BTAM) practices. See the resources section for recently developed support documents.

## RELATED RESOURCES

- Behavioral Threat Assessment and Management in the Virtual Environment: <https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/covid-19-resource-center/crisis-and-mental-health-resources/behavior-threat-assessment-and-management-in-the-virtual-environment>
- CASEL Guide to School-wide SEL: <https://schoolguide.casel.org/how-it-works>
- District CASEL Resource Center: <https://drc.casel.org>
- Equity Considerations Before and After COVID-19 School Closings: <https://www.nasponline.org/x55210.xml>
- Providing Effective Social and Behavioral Supports After COVID-19 Closures: <https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/covid-19-resource-center/crisis-and-mental-health-resources/providing-effective-social%E2%80%93emotional-and-behavioral-supports-after-covid-19-closures-universal-screening-and-tier-1-interventions>
- Supporting Marginalized Students in Stressful Times: <https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/diversity-and-social-justice/social-justice/supporting-marginalized-students-in-stressful-times-tips-for-educators>
- Trauma-Sensitive Schools: <https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/mental-health/trauma-sensitive-schools>
- Virtual School Suicide Assessment - Checklist: <https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/covid-19-resource-center/crisis-and-mental-health-resources/preparing-for-virtual-school-suicide-assessment-checklist>
- Virtual Service Delivery in Response to COVID-19: <https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/school-climate-safety-and-crisis/health-crisis-resources/virtual-service-delivery-in-response-to-covid-19-disruptions>

*Contributor: Scott Woitaszewski, Christina Conolly, Lisa Coffey, Todd Savage, and Franci Crepeau-Hobson*

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