

Supporting Marginalized Students in the Context of the 2020 Election: Tips for Educators

The country is experiencing the 2020 election cycle under stress and uncertainty this year amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Strong emotions and divisiveness can make normal events like an election feel uncontrollable, even high-risk, regardless of the outcome. Students' reactions to the results of the Presidential election may range from anger to euphoria.

Any potential for change can be difficult for children and youth but especially change that occurs in the context of unrest and for individuals who have experienced systemic inequity and marginalization. Many students who are Black, Indigenous, or other persons of color; Muslim, Jewish, or of marginalized faiths; or who identify as LGBTQI2-S are reporting feeling targeted and unsafe. Given the stressors associated with the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and multiple incidences of racial violence, students and educators may find the divisiveness of the election process to be overwhelming.

Ensuring a safe, supportive learning environment, whether in-person or virtual, is a primary responsibility for schools. The following tips and related resources can help educators support all students during this time.

Understand the effect of stressors and trauma on school functioning. Extreme stress, adversity, and trauma can impede concentration, cognitive functioning, memory, and social relationships. Additionally, stress can contribute to both internalized symptoms—such as hypervigilance, anxiety, depression, grief, fear, anger, isolation—and externalized behaviors—such as startle responses, reactivity, aggression, and conduct problems. Given the often chronic and significant stress placed on students of different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, many are at increased risk for experiencing trauma and developing other mental health problems, undermining their ability to function effectively in school. Many children may not understand the political process and assume that statements they have heard on the news will happen immediately and may be fearful about impending changes. Therefore, teachers might see absences (e.g., either in person or by not participating in the virtual environment), distracted behaviors, withdrawal, irritability, and other changes in students who may feel that they, their family members, or their friends have been targeted in conversations and events around them.

Equip staff to provide trauma-sensitive responses and supports. Students from marginalized groups are at risk for experiencing trauma and the additive risk of multiple traumas. Creating trauma-sensitive schools greatly enhances supports for all traumatized students. A trauma-sensitive school views behavior as a potential outcome of life circumstances rather than willful disobedience or intentional misbehavior. Trauma-sensitive approaches emphasize helping school staff understand the impact of trauma on school functioning; seeing behavior through this lens; building trusting relationships among teachers and peers; helping students develop the ability to self-regulate behaviors, emotions, and attention; supporting student success in academic and nonacademic areas; and promoting physical and emotional health. Additional information is available at <http://traumasensitiveschools.org>.

Be sensitive to family stressors. Families are also dealing with the stress of the past year. This may cause financial or employment uncertainty and concerns about the political forecast. Groups who may have felt marginalized during the election cycle may feel an increased sense of marginalization at its close. Additionally, some families may have experienced significant stress throughout the election, which can lead to increased risk for a range of negative outcomes for their children.

Identify children and youth who are at high risk and plan interventions. Schools bear a responsibility to identify students who may be at heightened risk based on the factors outlined above. In general, interventions delivered within comprehensive service models (i.e., multitiered systems of support) and focused on educational, social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes are more effective than clinical treatment alone and can often prevent the need for intensive, direct services. However, by maintaining close contact with teachers and families, a variety of school-based teams (e.g., crisis response) can determine which students may require more intensive crisis intervention or counseling services. Schools should also create a mechanism for self-referral and parent- or guardian-initiated referral of students. Checking in with students known to be at heightened risk about their perceptions of safety and their emotional state can be useful as well.

Understand cultural views regarding mental health. It is important that mental health professionals be aware of attitudes toward mental illness and the role of mental health services when providing assistance to students. Many cultures may have different conceptualizations of mental illness, and in some cultures and faith communities, mental health difficulty may be stigmatized. Some cultures may view emotional distress as a weakness in character as opposed to a natural response to change, stressors, and adversity. Understanding these differences is an essential first step to comforting and engaging students and their families and to ultimately building the trust necessary to provide effective services and supports.

Engage and empower families. Families may have different views about education, including the assumption that education remains the duty of the school and any involvement would encroach on that responsibility. Some immigrant and refugee families may not be proficient enough in English to know how to engage, despite a desire to do so. Additionally, many families may experience practical barriers, such as not having a car, or employment that does not allow for active engagement during school hours. Some families may fear calling additional attention to themselves and their cultural backgrounds. Schools can work with cultural liaisons and families to find ways to connect with families and ensure they have opportunities to meaningfully participate in their child's education. Schools may consider reaching out to local community organizations that support marginalized groups to gather additional resources on how to support families from various cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Securing translators may be needed as well.

Access community resources. It is important to compile and maintain an accurate and evolving list of community resources available to help affected families. This should include the name, telephone number, website (if available), contact person (if appropriate), description of services, and fees if charged. For all marginalized students and families, determine if virtual support groups are available.

Stop any type of harassment or bullying immediately. Given the tone of the most recent election cycle, children may feel bullying and intimidation are acceptable. Make it clear that such behavior, in any form (in person, online, on social media), is unacceptable. Promote acceptance and actively teach conflict resolution skills to the perpetrators, bystanders, and victims. Report hate crimes to law enforcement and the Southern Poverty Law Center (<https://www.splcenter.org/report-hate>).

Focus on student strengths, and promote a sense of belonging. All students bring unique skills, strengths, and knowledge into the classroom and school community. Build on those strengths. To promote a sense of belonging in the school, consider having students who are comfortable share their knowledge about

their origins, customs, and culture. Reassure all students that they belong and are welcome community members in their schools. Activities that make students feel like they are heard may also be beneficial. For example, students can write a letter to the President-elect expressing their hopes and desires for the new administration. The school principal may wish to make an announcement to share with students (delivered either over the loudspeaker or virtually), such as:

Yesterday, (insert brief, factual statement of event) happened. So, what does that mean for us at ABC School? It means we continue as a community that is welcoming, respectful, and loving toward everyone. As a school community, it is not a time to divide, hurt, or say mean things. It is a time for us to come together, work together, and respect each and every one of us. ABC is a family, and everyone should feel physically and emotionally safe here. We will all make sure that happens. Teachers, if there are students who need extra support with this, I am here to help!

RESOURCES FOR HELPING STUDENTS REMAIN MINDFUL

- Airtime Space, <https://app.gonoodle.com/channels/game-on/airtime-space?source=search>
- Airtime (select state in which you live and take a mindful journey through your state landscape), <https://app.gonoodle.com/channels/game-on/airtime?source=search>
- Let It Go, <https://app.gonoodle.com/channels/think-about-it/let-it-go?source=search>
- Take on the Day, <https://app.gonoodle.com/channels/think-about-it/take-on-the-day?source=search>
- Teaching Tolerance, <http://www.tolerance.org/>
- Tune Into Your World (older kids), <https://app.gonoodle.com/channels/empower-tools/tune-in-to-your-world-1?source=search>

RELATED NASP RESOURCES

- NASP Guidance for Ensuring Student Well-Being in the Context of the 2020 Election, <https://www.nasponline.org/about-school-psychology/media-room/press-releases/nasp-guidance-for-ensuring-student-well-being-in-the-context-of-the-2020-election>
- Supporting Marginalized Students in the Context of the 2020 Election: Tips for Parents, www.nasponline.org/x56364.xml
- Facilitating Difficult Conversations Basic Guidelines, www.nasponline.org/x56366.xml

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