

Providing Effective Social–Emotional and Behavioral Supports After COVID-19 Closures: Universal Screening and Tier 1 Interventions

School psychologists will increasingly be called on to meet the social–emotional, behavioral, and mental health needs of students beginning this fall. Recent estimates have suggested a substantial number of students who will need critical supports, including many who were successful before the COVID-19 pandemic and who are not typically considered as at risk. Given these emerging needs, school psychologists must serve as leaders in helping schools reorient essential resources with a specific focus on universal supports. The purpose of this handout, and the accompanying webinar, is to provide considerations in meeting the social–emotional and behavioral needs of a large number of students reentering school this fall.

Considerations for Effective Social–Emotional and Behavioral Interventions

There is little doubt that there are now a higher number of children with social–emotional and behavioral concerns. Early research has suggested that more than 20% of students exhibited symptoms of anxiety and depression after just 1 month in quarantine (Xie et al., 2020). Many students who were receiving mental health or behavioral supports have not been able to access needed services over the last several months, thus potentially exacerbating problems. Many more students have experienced unprecedented levels of disruption and stressors. Under normal circumstances, we would expect approximately 20% of children to experience some social–emotional and behavioral (SEB) concern throughout their school trajectory (Costello et al., 2003)—we now expect these rates to double or triple after COVID.

Given the high number of students in need, solely providing SEB or mental health supports in a traditional one-on-one or small-group counseling model is not an option. School mental health professionals run the risk of quickly become overwhelmed and exhausting existing supports. School psychologists must consider how best to position themselves and other educators as providers of universal supports. Given the limited availability of mental health professionals to meet the individual needs of students, we must accelerate a transition to a continuum of supports with a specific focus on school-wide SEB supports. Undoubtedly, some schools and school psychologists are already engaging in systems such as multitiered systems of support (MTSS), positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS), and social–emotional learning (SEL) efforts, while others will have to change roles and functions to meet these needs.

To do so, school psychologists can use their expertise to assist schools in evaluating current universal practices and by engaging in resource mapping in order to determine how to best utilize existing resources, while also identifying new needs that might emerge. The focus must be on identifying a core set of procedures that frontline providers will use on the first day back to school. For example, teachers may need tools to reestablish classrooms that promote physical and emotional safety and strategies for working with students to develop healthy coping and problem-solving skills as they navigate challenges at home and school. Schools might also consider using school interventionists or aides who were previously assigned to work individually with at-risk students, to colead class-wide lessons and instruction.

Similarly, schools may need to implement systems that monitor the health and well-being of teachers to ensure our frontline providers are well-equipped to serve students. Professional development opportunities and other measures that assess the SEB functioning of educators can be a first consideration when schools reopen, and they should continue to be monitored throughout school reintegration. While many of these systems may take several years to reach successful implementation, school psychologists can empower educators and school leaders by providing access

to SEL resources, engaging in ongoing consultation with staff members who need additional support, and ensuring consistency in practices and messaging across the school building.

Providing Universal Supports Before Universal Screening

As schools reopen, it will be important to understand students' SEB functioning. Universal screening is used to identify early signs of SEB concerns and facilitate intervention before they become a more significant impairment down the road. Student behaviors are typically assessed through brief rating scales and teacher nomination procedures. These measures rank the frequency and intensity of a student's observed behavior relative to their peers to identify risk of current or future SEB concerns. Similar to screening for academic concerns, SEB screening can be a first step in a multitiered system of support. Once students are identified as being at risk, students are then connected with necessary services and supports.

As schools reopen this fall, there may be a push to use SEB screening to identify individual student needs. However, schools are cautioned against using this approach. It is highly likely there will be a significantly higher percentage of students demonstrating SEB risk in most schools. High prevalence rates would likely exhaust available school mental health resources and would not allow schools to provide targeted or intensive services to address these concerns. Sole reliance on one SEB screening in the fall will also not be sufficient to account for the SEB concerns students may experience throughout the first few weeks and months of school. Because of the high level of risk across the student population, even students who are not identified as demonstrating SEB risk may eventually demonstrate SEB concerns that will warrant additional support. As such, SEB screening results may demonstrate more utility a month or two after school resumes to better understand students functioning after a period of adjustment back to school.

Instead, schools are encouraged to consider how class-wide and school-wide intervention approaches can help support student SEB functioning. Many students may be struggling with sufficient coping and problem-solving skills because of stressors at home and school. School psychologists are encouraged to help teachers deliver class-wide interventions that address the SEB needs of all students. This includes approaches that ensure students feel physically and emotionally safe at school. Certainly, returning to schools where social distancing and face masks were not part of previous school routines will require an adjustment period. School psychologists can work with teachers to provide student psychoeducation about the impact that a traumatic event such as COVID-19 can have on individual student functioning. This can include approaches that strengthen student skills around emotion regulation and promote student help-seeking behaviors. School psychologists and educators are also encouraged to consider how they promote strong connections with students and strategies that work to increase their positive habits (e.g., social connections, self-care strategies) and decrease negative responses (e.g., fear, anxiety). These foundational skills will be necessary to promoting healthy student behavioral functioning and will ensure that eventual screening data can be used in its intended fashion after a reintegration period back to school has passed.

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Please cite this document as:

National Association of School Psychologists. (2020). *Providing effective social–emotional and behavioral supports after COVID-19 closures: Universal screening and Tier 1 interventions* [handout]. Author.