

Summer Planning: Wellbeing in the Back-to-School Transition

Abrupt school building closures have been difficult for students and educators alike, and the return to school buildings undoubtedly raises mixed emotions and needs for all involved. While many schools and families have been working to address social emotional learning (SEL) needs throughout the COVID-19 crisis, the emotional concerns and needs arising will continue well past the end of this closure. A strong and thoughtful approach to wellbeing for all members of a school community means planning for adult and student emotional care and learning. Attending to the needs of education staff in advance of the school year and implementing a coordinated and continuous plan for social emotional learning can set the stage for positive student and adult outcomes after the unexpected and potentially traumatic events of the past school year.

In this guide, you will find:

- **Guidance and tools** to address adult social emotional learning and wellness
- **Strategies** to address student SEL support for short-term and long-term needs
- **Additional resources** to support learning and research on SEL practices and curriculum

Audience: School and District Leaders, Educators

Addressing Wellbeing of Students and Staff

Upon return to traditional school buildings, many considerations will be needed for student and staff social emotional wellbeing, as well as communications and supports for families. A robust whole-school approach grounded in trainings, models and tools can prepare school staff members to respond to the needs of students. Purposefully creating space and time in staff gatherings and team meetings can ensure the social and emotional needs of staff are cared for and developed over time as a team. [Recent studies](#) have demonstrated a strong link between social emotional learning and the “ABCs of Learning”: attendance, behavior and course performance. Furthermore, increasing attention has been given to the social emotional skills and preparedness of school staff, suggesting that greater attention on adult social emotional learning has greater positive outcomes for students. Given the implications of this research and the anticipated social emotional needs of students and staff after a prolonged school building closure, a clear and systematic plan to address staff and student social emotional learning is a key priority for school teams. For more information on SEL competencies, check out [CASEL](#)’s website and resources.

Adult SEL

Start the Year with Dialogue

Panorama Ed defines [Adult SEL](#) as, “the process of helping educators build their expertise and skills to lead social and emotional learning initiatives. It also involves cultivating adults’ own social and emotional competencies.” Grounding wellness and social emotional support in work with staff

members will help individuals acknowledge their own feelings and needs, as well as develop team oriented supports and responses. In turn, this will help teams to cope with the stress and anxiety they are feeling and prepare them to respond to the needs of students. When considering the social emotional needs of adults, remember to create opportunities for all staff, site based and district office level teams to continuously train and build capacity around SEL. After all, increased adult learning in social emotional skill development has been linked to [improved job satisfaction and reduced teacher burnout](#), [improved personal wellbeing for educators](#), and [safe learning environments for students](#).

As staff reconvenes before the start of the school year, provide ample time for team members to express feelings, worries, losses, and fears about the last school year and returning to school. Anticipate there will be items that can be discussed and tackled as a team, such as planning for students' social emotional needs with tiered supports and creating a plan to address gaps in academic skills, while other items might not have a concrete solution. Make use of existing tools and curriculum implemented in the school and district setting for SEL collaboration, or draw upon online resources such as Panorama Ed's [Adult SEL Toolkit](#), Transforming Education's [Mindfulness Toolkit](#) or [Trauma-Informed SEL Toolkit](#). Take time to establish norms within team structures to address relationship building and social emotional needs, and ensure that adult SEL is embedded into the school and district culture with initiatives like peer mentorships or dedicated professional development, alongside modeling of reflective social emotional learning practices from leaders.

Recommendations for specific SEL planning topics include:

For grief and loss of life, make time for staff to talk to each other, perhaps offering a moment of silence or other way to acknowledge the team and individual losses. Signpost support internally and externally available to staff, such as opt-in opportunities for small group meetings for staff, or school and employer offered resources, such as counseling. Recognize that the school community will need to care for one another throughout the year as additional impacts arise from student experiences and potential new challenges due to the school closures. Develop a model and process for all staff to engage in self and community care before the start of the year to prepare for student conversations in classrooms, hallways and student check-ins. Check out the Marshall resource on [grief and loss](#) for more recommendations.

For worries and fears around future uncertainty and potential future shut-downs, make a plan. The administration, leadership team or staff may have collected input and reflected on needs for improved future response to school closures. Having a plan for school closures will help alleviate anxiety about the steps the school may need to take should a closure be deemed necessary. Offering early training to anticipate the needs of educators and students will help prepare schools to take swift action transitioning learning to alternative scenarios. Sharing that plan with stakeholders is an important step to educate and inform the community, as well as generate additional ideas, input and collective resources to enact the plan. Prepare for common questions, and encourage teams to be honest with one another when an answer or solution isn't available yet. Communicating the plan, as well as updates and revisions, can mitigate worries and fear of the community and offer clarity for

future events. Check out the Marshall resource on [summer planning and addressing “COVID Slide”](#) for additional guidance on planning.

Addressing Student SEL

A Targeted Team Approach to Differentiated Needs

For students returning to campus, schools are focusing on the multitude of experiences students have encountered during distance learning and the ways students will need the school community to respond. [Turnaround for Children](#) recommends focusing on physical, emotional, and identity safety, as well as empowering students to design and co-create norms and routines to reestablish relationships and a sense of predictability. It is important to proactively identify supports, interventions and resources to help students navigate the return to school buildings. To think about the levels of need and available responses, set-up a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) model for addressing social emotional and behavioral skill short-term and long-term needs. If a MTSS framework is already in place, build upon that structure to plan short-term and long-term supports for returning and new students. To address a gap in social emotional support systems, gather a cross-functional team to develop a plan for student support at every level. Ensure representation from general education, special education, counseling, support staff, and consider community agencies and organizations as well as student and family engagement to have diverse perspectives represented in the planning for students.

CASEL recommends promoting social emotional learning by:

- Providing consistency in daily routines for predictability and a sense of safety
- Listening to students throughout the school day, including two-way communication options
- Building and maintaining a sense of community and connection with students
- Incorporating SEL in learning by offering opportunities for students to pause and reflect on their emotions and thoughts and strengthen self-awareness

At Tier 1, implement whole school social emotional curriculum or research-based structured activities. Where possible, utilize existing school structures like homeroom classes or advisory blocks to integrate SEL into the daily and weekly instructional plan. All educators and school staff can plan activities in classrooms to establish community and encourage students to talk about their experiences, feelings and needs. It is important to establish norms and expectations for these conversations with students, recognizing that each individual’s experience will have been different. Activities like “Mindful Mondays,” morning meetings, or [restorative circles](#) are great ways to offer universal opportunities for students to engage in social emotional learning and cope with the transition to school buildings. Check out ideas for classroom, small group and 1:1 activities offered by [Greater Good in Education](#), [Social Emotional Learning Alliance](#) and [CASEL’s 3 Signature Practices Playbook](#).

At Tiers 2 and 3, pair students with interventions meeting the degree of need. Supporting students with increased social emotional needs, such as students with emotional disabilities, autism, or students who have experienced trauma, can be approached with small group and individualized

activities. School staff can use a [2x10 check-in](#), [CICO system](#) or student self-assessment tool as tier 2 interventions for students. At Tier 3, individual counseling or counseling groups can address student needs directly, while training staff in [de-escalation techniques](#) can help educators respond to student behaviors resulting from emotional needs and triggers. Organizations like the [Council for Exceptional Children](#) and [CASEL](#) have targeted resources for addressing social emotional needs of diverse learners, including [CASEL's District Resource Center](#) with examples and tools available for free upon registration.

SEL Supports for Families

Families will continue to look to schools as a community of support and network of resources to address needs outside of school. With extended school closures, students and families may not have had access to community based resources. New or existing trauma may have resulted from loss of life or food, job and housing insecurity. Having a list of available resources prepared to offer families can reduce wait time and additional barriers to access. Organizing family meetings or coffee chats can create space for families to share social emotional needs and give voice to their experiences. This is especially important for families of students with disabilities or other families who struggled to engage children in distance learning due to behavior, home constraints, or lack of equitable access to basic needs/services or technology. Scheduling workshops to train families in essential home learning tools and programs can help proactively mitigate barriers for any future virtual learning days. Organizations like the [National PTA](#), [National Association of School Psychologists \(NASP\)](#) and [The National Child Traumatic Stress Network](#) offer additional resources and guidance for working with families.

Final Word

Planning for the wellbeing of students, staff and families will take concerted effort and attention to embed social emotional learning supports into the whole-school culture. Beginning strategically with adults in school buildings and district offices will attend to immediate needs and model ongoing structures for learning. With training, development and continuous practice in place for adults, educators can take a coordinated team approach to addressing the needs of students and families.

Additional Resources

Panorama Ed's [Principal Toolkit for Spring 2020](#) webpage includes free resources for distance learning SEL surveys and strategies, as well as staff surveys, model SEL lessons and activities for staff development around SEL skills. Their [webinar resources](#) include many offerings of SEL supporting resources and training for staff professional development.

Second Step has a [COVID-19 resource page](#) with materials, toolkits and webinars available to support adult and student social emotional learning during school closures. Some materials are free,

while others require an account. Check this resource and others like it for updates on supporting transitions back to school.

CASEL is curating resources for SEL learning on their [COVID-19](#) page with regular updates to content and webinar offerings.

Positive Psychology's article, "[25 Fun Mindfulness Activities for Children and Teens](#)" offers ideas for classroom, small group, 1:1 and virtual activities to try out with students.

Teaching Tolerance's article, "[A Trauma Informed Approach to Teaching Through Coronavirus](#)" provides ideas and recommendations for supporting vulnerable students, focusing on safety and connectedness.



www.marshall.org/covid/