

K-12 Social-Emotional Support During COVID-19: Reflections and Recommendations from a Survey of North Carolina Teachers

Doha Ali, *Undergraduate Intern*

Katie D. Rosanbalm, Ph.D.

Center for Child and Family Policy
Sanford School of Public Policy
Duke University

This Brief Will Cover

- I. Emotional and Mental Health Support for Teachers.** Survey data from N.C. teachers on their concerns about returning to school in the fall. Recommended strategies for helping school administrators promote wellness among school staff upon their return.
- II. Re-envisioning the Way Students and Schools Interact.** Recommended practices for promoting relationship building among teachers, staff and students.
- III. Changes in Curricula.** Suggestions for school districts on how to integrate a social-emotional learning (SEL) model into the larger school-wide curriculum.
- IV. A Team Effort.** Recommendation for school administrators to consider establishing a pandemic response team to support implementation of trauma-informed practices across schools.

Introduction

Schools resume next week facing the unprecedented challenge of supporting learning in the midst of a pandemic. To meet this challenge successfully, school systems and administrators must acknowledge the collective trauma and stress of living through a pandemic and strive to create the kinds of safe and caring environments that promote learning, structure, trusted relationships, and physical and mental well-being. The COVID-19 pandemic has been a traumatic event for many—bringing abrupt and drastic changes in the lives of students, families, educators, and school administrators. The impact of COVID-19 has been far-reaching, including the loss of regular routines and activities, concerns about health and safety, social isolation, and increased levels of stress and anxiety. For some, the impact of the pandemic has brought new trauma, while for others it has just added another layer to existing disparities and adversity.¹ Students need support systems to help them normalize the ongoing situation and to feel safe and connected before their brains will be ready to learn.

The numerous gaps created by COVID-19 in terms of schools' functionality have yet to be resolved even as the start of the upcoming school year draws near. Given the unprecedented nature of the pandemic, there is no one solution to this problem. Students are better able to learn and receive the added benefits of social-emotional learning, connection with supportive adults, and nutrition, among other things, when they are in classrooms. However, the health risks of COVID-19 make it difficult for teachers, students, and families to stay safe in schools and classrooms, particularly while the rate of infection in the state continues to grow. Under the guidance of North Carolina Governor Roy Cooper, North Carolina schools will operate under "plan B," allowing schools to open for classes in person at reduced capacity, while still offering remote learning options for students and families who want them. School districts may also choose to operate under "plan C," which is entirely remote learning. To help teachers do their job of educating the future generation, school districts and administrators must prioritize strategies and policies to ensure the

social-emotional well-being of both the school staff and the students while also addressing practical needs and identifying feasible educational strategies.

An existing framework that schools and school districts can look to for guidance is the North Carolina Resilience and Learning Project, a collaboration between the Public School Forum of North Carolina and the Center for Child and Family Policy at Duke University. The project is a whole-school framework to promote trauma-informed learning environments that are safer and more supportive for all students. The approach is built upon two critical mechanisms of change: (1) training and support for all school staff to learn more about responses to stress and trauma, and (2) implementation of school-specific policies and practices with facilitated coaching to shift school culture and proactively promote staff and student resilience. As part of the project's end-of-year evaluation in 2020, surveys were sent to educators in nine of the districts that worked most closely with project coaches to implement the N.C. Resilience and Learning program for at least a year. The educators who participated in the survey, which was related to remote learning and education during the COVID-19 pandemic, teach in schools that are predominantly rural, low-income, and located in central to eastern North Carolina. A summary of survey findings pertaining to social-emotional well-being, and the implications for how schools can best address teachers' concerns as the school year starts, are described in the following brief. A forthcoming companion brief will highlight survey recommendations for supporting the academic side of remote learning in the coming year.

I Emotional and Mental Health Support for Teachers

Teachers repeatedly tell their students that their mindsets matter. However, teachers are not always allowed the time, tools, and space to absorb those same messages of self-care and self-reflection. Experiencing significant levels of stress in the workplace is common for school-based administrators, educators, and staff. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic created an unprecedented level of stress for teachers as they were forced to quickly learn new technology and adapt their curricula to meet the needs of distance learning, while at the same time managing often intense emotions of worry and fear for their students and their own families. In addition, teachers at schools that initiate hybrid instruction through the "plan B" model will be required to prepare both virtual and in-person lessons each day, while simultaneously managing learning needs for their own children on remote-learning days. Just as school districts are looking at new ways to support their students' learning, they must look for new ways to support their teachers so that they may continue educating North Carolina's students.

Teacher wellness is central to the N.C. Resilience and Learning project. Based on survey responses from teachers who work at participating schools, these schools have made noticeable progress in supporting their teachers. At the end of the last school year, a majority of surveyed teachers felt emotionally supported in their roles: specifically, 27% felt moderately well supported, 44% felt very well supported, and 19% felt extremely well supported.² Nevertheless, teachers have many concerns about the coming school year, including students' health, their own health, how to maintain social distancing in schools, the number of children in a classroom, and how to support student mental health and well-being.

Table 1.ⁱ Teachers' Concerns About Returning in the Fall

Concerns About Returning in the Fall	% Who Listed This in Their Top 5 Concerns
Student health	80%
Own health	69%
Maintaining social distancing at school	59%
Number of children in a classroom at one time	43%
Continuing remote learning	32%
Supporting student mental health and well-being	31%
Access to COVID-19 testing	25%
Catching up on academic content	21%
Supporting students with hygiene and safety protocols	20%
Access to personal protective gear	20%
Maintaining intensive cleaning protocols	19%
Helping students readjust to school culture and rules	18%
Building relationships with students from a distance/behind a mask	17%
Sufficient funding and resources to meet new guidelines	16%
Supporting staff mental health and wellbeing	12%
Helping students reconnect with each other	12%
Managing physical activity and recess safely	3%
Helping students readjust to school culture and rules	18%
Building relationships with students from a distance/behind a mask	17%
Sufficient funding and resources to meet new guidelines	16%
Supporting staff mental health and wellbeing	12%
Helping students reconnect with each other	12%
Managing physical activity and recess safely	3%

ⁱ This data was collected by asking respondents the following question: "What are your concerns about returning to the classroom when schools reopen? Please click and drag on the statements below to order them from: 1=your biggest concern to 17=your smallest concern. Feel free to add additional concerns in the boxes next to "other" and rank those as well."

Rosanbalm, K. (2020). Resilience and Learning COVID-related Educational Survey Data. COVID Teacher Survey. Durham, NC: Duke University.

Addressing these concerns is crucial to supporting teacher wellness and effectiveness. School administrators can begin by building on what teachers say has been helpful during the pandemic. Some of the top supportive strategies highlighted by teachers were: clear and regular communication; flexibility and reasonable expectations given increased workloads and stress; words of appreciation for the hard work; facilitation of teacher connection and team building; and resources and support for teacher mental health. Most appreciated was the schools' work on facilitating teacher connections and social-emotional health.³ If teachers' own social-emotional well-being needs are not being met, they may struggle to accommo-

date their students' social-emotional well-being needs. As they begin the new school year, it is vital that school administrators implement a structure of support around staff wellness.

Within the staff wellness support system, it is necessary to consider the multidimensional components of wellness: individual staff support and community/system-based support. Teachers and staff should feel as though their individual needs are met and the school community is one in which they feel safe, supported, and connected. To successfully create this environment, teachers need to be a part of the conversation from the start; school administrators need to ask the staff about where they need greater support and structure. To further promote wellness amongst staff, school administrators may employ several strategies:

- *Provide staff with community resources to support their physical and emotional well-being.* Schools can further their support by expanding the Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs), which connect staff with mental and behavioral health resources.⁴ Schools can develop a list of community resources that could be shared with both staff and families.
- *Train staff on self-care.* Teachers expressed appreciation to the schools that provided resources and professional development regarding self-care.⁵ To best support their students, the teachers and staff need an environment in which their social-emotional well-being needs are met. To lay this groundwork, districts and/or schools would benefit from training staff on self-care and prioritizing strategies and structures that allow staff the time and resources they need to practice self-care strategies.
- *Create a wellness plan with the teachers, staff, and administrators.* Teachers believed that school administrators could further support them by allowing them input on decisions, when possible.⁶ A team-built wellness plan can promote buy-in by allowing everyone in a school's community to take part in creating an environment of physical and emotional support and safety. By putting their needs in writing, members of the school are provided with the chance to have some agency over their emotional and physical environment.
- *Establish a set day of the week focused on promoting the physical and mental well-being of both students and staff.* Many schools have already implemented these "Feel Good Fridays" or "Wellness Wednesdays." In some schools, having a day "with no virtual instruction—where teachers can focus on lesson planning and where there is an intentional focus on wellness and team building" proved to be successful in helping teachers feel supported.⁷ On each wellness day, a set self-reflection and/or self-care goal can be created for students and staff so they may work together to meet the goal. As for the students, the classrooms' focus can shift to conquering the challenge of the day by utilizing more elements of the social-emotional learning (SEL) curriculum, and students can work on assignments in an asynchronous learning environment without direct teacher instruction.

II Re-envisioning the Way Students and Schools Interact

As schools launch the new school year, all school and district staff need to carefully consider how they will build teacher-student relationships given the circumstances of the pandemic. The basic human needs of building social bonds and feeling cared for must be met before students are immersed in academics. Teacher-student relationships are fundamental in fostering resilience and healing from adversity. During the time of COVID-19, students have lost the sense of regularity, structure, and routine that school usually provides. In addition to the sudden and significant change to their schedules, children's perception of and relationship to adult figures in their lives may have been altered by the pandemic. The virus's reach has been widespread, affecting adults and increasing stress, which, in turn, may have been projected onto children. Therefore, teachers must build a foundation of physical and emotional safety with their students before they approach their academics.

As schools consider strategies to promote strong staff-student relationships, one point emphasized by many of the teachers surveyed is the need for ongoing, universal training in trauma, stress, and adversity. Such training helps teachers examine their own experiences and responses to the pandemic. An understanding of stress and adversity, along with resilience-building strategies, can provide teachers with the skills they need to prepare for the impact the crisis has had on children and their families.⁸ If teachers remain uninformed about the potential impacts of stress, students will lack the proper support systems to prevent them from falling behind in school.

Many students will be returning to school, virtually or in person, having experienced stressful and traumatic experiences since they left in March. Two out of three teachers (68%) report their school had not developed and/or shared a formal plan for addressing student mental health concerns during the pandemic.⁹ Although many teachers expect to have students wrestling with mental health issues, almost one in three teachers reported that they were not sure what steps to take after identifying a mental health concern.¹⁰ Teachers in the survey repeatedly mentioned the need for school administrators to establish clear communication, expectations, and procedures about how to respond properly to students' stress and mental health.¹¹

In addition to training and mental health plans, school administrators, teachers, and staff need to be mindful that the beginning of this school year *should* be different from years past. To establish a strong sense of connection, teachers, staff, and students will benefit enormously from spending extra time and effort in the first few weeks focused on relationship building – laying the foundation for successful academics. To promote relationship building, schools can engage in the following practices:

- *Consider allowing students to revisit their teachers from last year.* Given the abrupt ending to in-person instruction, students and teachers did not have the opportunity to properly part ways. This time to reconnect with former teachers will allow them to be welcomed back with a familiar face. While under “plan B,” teachers and students can meet in person, this can be adapted for “plan C” by allowing students to start the year with a virtual calls from their previous teachers.

- *Consider home visits, outside with masks on, to facilitate a personal connection at the start of the year.* This can enable teachers to meet students and parents/caregivers; learn fun facts and areas of interest, along with challenges and concerns; and collect preferred contact information for staying connected across the year.
- *Create and distribute a “get to know you” survey that enables the children to share details about their lives, from hobbies to families.* Teachers will be able to have a greater understanding of their students’ personalities from day one, so the students can feel appreciated and valued.
- *Initiate a morning meeting routine to foster a classroom community.* These can include greetings, fun and engaging activities, time for sharing, and a message or goal for the day. The morning meeting sets the tone of connection, helps students settle in to the school day, and lays the foundation for engaged learning.
- *Establish an emotional temperature check at the start and end of each day.* Providing students with a system to express their emotions to the teachers and staff will allow them to establish a relationship of understanding. Teachers can utilize this system to identify students who need more support in transitioning back to school and help them adjust individualized support strategies each day.

III Changes in Curricula

Now more than ever, integrating social-emotional learning (SEL) into the larger school-wide curriculum is crucial to best provide students with the resources and skills needed for success in school. SEL refers to the thinking, emotional, behavioral, and regulatory skills that can help individuals cope with stress, interact with one another, and form relationships. These skills are necessary to well-being but are also a prerequisite to academic learning and therefore necessary as a component of school success.¹² Like academics, SEL skills need to be taught and practiced with students.

A coordinated universal SEL curriculum, implemented consistently from preschool through grade 12, could enhance the progress that many schools have already experienced from implementing SEL practices in selected grades or with targeted groups of students. Of their many concerns for the upcoming school year, both teachers and administrators shared that they were concerned about supporting students’ mental health and wellness.¹³ By prioritizing SEL skills alongside relationship building as the necessary foundations for academics, particularly at the start of the school year, teachers will find that students are better able to learn.

To best implement an SEL curriculum, teachers and administrators alike are calling for additional resources for training and mentoring, both to support universal understanding of the importance of SEL and to learn and practice skills for properly implementing the SEL curriculum.¹⁴ Once a curriculum is selected, schools can establish a role for one or two staff members to take the lead on training, monitoring, and coaching teachers to ensure the success of the initiative. These assigned SEL leads can promote accountability by creating metrics for regular and faithful implementation.

SEL fits well within the multi-tier system of supports (MTSS), an existing framework used to provide a continuum of instruction and support individualized to student needs. Indeed, many schools have already successfully built a detailed SEL structure into their systems, including screening and assessment, along with Tier I (universal), Tier II (targeted), and Tier III (intensive) interventions. Intentional expansion and prioritization of this model across districts and grades would be highly beneficial to supporting social-emotional and academic well-being, particularly during the pandemic. Suggestions include the following:

- *Utilize an SEL screener to better monitor each student's individual needs.* SEL screeners will be an important tool to help teachers assess students' social-emotional strengths, needs, and challenges. Teachers can consider existing screening tools, such as the Devereux Student Strengths Assessment (DESSA) or Panorama. These screening systems provide insights into student development and functioning, helping schools identify students who could use further support/intervention and ensuring no student is overlooked.
- *Teach students about their stress response system and their individual signs of stress.* When students understand how their brains and bodies respond to stress, they are empowered to take charge and learn active coping skills.
- *Universally teach, model, and practice skills for self-regulation and coping.* This includes deep breathing exercises, multi-sensory objects like stress balls, implementing mindful minutes, stretching or big muscle movements, and brain breaks.
- *Provide resources and space for students to express and experience their feelings at their own pace.* With SEL, teachers have the tools to help students create self-regulation plans, ways for them to calm down or feel better. Classroom calm-down spaces can be quite beneficial to provide a structured space and tools for quieting anxiety or stress. Consider ways to support students in creating these spaces at home or at their desks while learning is virtual and/or materials cannot be safely shared within the classroom. First practice skills while students are calm, then coach or guide students in using them when upset.
- *Provide school-level Tier II and Tier III interventions for students who need more support.* As with academics, some students will need more intense or frequent intervention to be successful with self-regulation and social-emotional learning. Small-group or individual interventions, provided by community partners or by specialists within the school, can give these students the support they need for success in school and beyond.

While SEL is most often implemented in elementary schools, it can be expanded to help students of all ages. SEL is critical in middle school and high school when adolescents have increased capacity for learning self-regulation skills, but are also experiencing rapidly increasing demands, risk opportunities, and hormone-driven behaviors. Adolescents moving through middle school and high school may already feel at odds with the world, and as the pandemic continues to shake up their lives, these feelings are only amplified. Students in their teen years can especially benefit from learning how to identify complex emotions, manage those emotions, control impulses, and navigate complicated social situations using curricula designed specifically for teens.

IV A Team Effort

The upcoming school year will be like no other. Increased staff training in self-care, wellness, stress, and trauma, along with the implementation of a tiered SEL curriculum across grades, will help ensure teachers and students can develop the relationships and trust that form the foundation for learning. To support this work, surveyed teachers also communicated the need for “clear and timely information and expectations for the coming year.”¹⁵ To ensure trauma-informed practices are implemented in a manner that supports teachers, school administrators may consider the establishment of a pandemic response team at each school. Each team’s focus would revolve around creating supportive environments, equipping teachers with the skills they need to support students, and developing metrics and implementation strategies for the school year. This team would provide an avenue for educator input into decision-making and would be able to make ongoing changes to the system as new obstacles arise. Additionally, this team could serve as the communications hub to ensure all staff have timely information and a clear avenue for expressing challenges and concerns.

Conclusion

With the start of school nearing, educators, students, and families are getting ready to face the challenge of education amid a pandemic. To provide space for teachers to resume teaching and students to resume learning, school systems and administrators need to create safe and caring environments that promote structure, trusted relationships, and physical and mental well-being. As schools and school districts decide what to prioritize in the coming year, social-emotional well-being strategies and policies must be placed at the forefront of their agendas. An increased focus on emotional support will allow teachers and students to better meet the demands of the upcoming school year.

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