



THE ASPEN INSTITUTE

EDUCATION & SOCIETY PROGRAM

STATE ACTIONS TO SUPPORT SOCIAL, EMOTIONAL, AND ACADEMIC DEVELOPMENT: FOSTERING CONNECTEDNESS IN THE PANDEMIC ERA

Social distancing and school closures forced by the COVID-19 pandemic present extraordinary challenges for education. While we are only just beginning to understand the impact of the last few months and what the months ahead will mean for students, families, and educators, we know that the depth of students' connectedness to school and the quality of their relationships with adults and peers in school are critical to learning and thriving in life. State leaders can take action now and through the 2020-21 school year and legislative sessions to advance policy solutions that develop, maintain, and strengthen the crucial connections and relationships that are necessary for healing and learning.

10 State Actions

- 1. Establish a student advisory council for statewide education and COVID-related policy issues that impact youth and families.**
- 2. Identify and address the stress and trauma that students have experienced during school closings, and that will be ongoing when school buildings reopen.**
- 3. Identify and address the stress and trauma that school personnel have experienced during school closings, and that will be ongoing when school buildings reopen.**
- 4. Establish a clear definition of “student engagement” and healthy conditions for learning, or refine existing definitions and provide measurement tools, resources, and guidance to LEAs and schools.**
- 5. Act to remove anxiety about academic performance and to allow for and prioritize the healing and belonging that will foster academic learning.**
- 6. Act to remove anxiety about assessment and accountability by establishing and communicating a clear plan for the 2020-2021 school year.**
- 7. Collaborate to shift some responsibilities from the education sector to other state and local agencies and service providers.**
- 8. Pilot removing barriers to innovation and enable flexibility during the 2020-21 school year to allow more responsive district and local action while maintaining focus on equity for under-served students.**
- 9. More clearly define and differentiate adult roles toward areas in need of greatest attention when students return: safety, healing and feeling connected to the school community, and maintaining and strengthening communication.**
- 10. Dedicate state education agency and other state administrative staff to focus on recovery.**

10 State Actions

1.) Establish a student advisory council for statewide education and COVID-related policy issues that impact youth and families.

- a. Create a *formal mechanism* for students and families to express to key decision makers what is most important to them to address in the coming school year and beyond, as in [Michigan](#).
- b. Commission qualitative research from students from statewide advisory council to deepen understanding of student engagement during distance learning and upon reopening to identify both bright spots and challenges/inequities. Focus a State Board meeting and other public venues – including virtual opportunities - on sharing these data and developing actions in response that consider different student groups and grade bands.
- c. Compensate student and family representatives, acknowledging that other participants are being paid for their time and contributions.
- d. Convene a task force of K-12 and postsecondary leaders along with students and community-based organizations to inform decisions on graduation and support for postsecondary transitions.
- e. Encourage districts and schools to establish their own student advisory council and provide templates and resources, especially for engaging the students furthest from opportunity. The Kentucky [Prichard Committee Student Voice Team](#) provides examples.

2.) Identify and address the stress and trauma that students have experienced during school closings, and that will be ongoing when school buildings reopen.

- a. Ensure each LEA has a Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) in place to address academic challenges *and* social-emotional supports. States can highlight promising practices and demonstrate how available funds and other resources can be used to implement these structures.

RECOVERY AND RENEWAL: PRINCIPLES FOR ADVANCING PUBLIC EDUCATION POST-CRISIS

As policymakers and education leaders plan to re-open buildings for school year 2020-21, they face important questions about how to capitalize on our strengths and finally deal with our weaknesses. Therefore, the nation's response to the pandemic must re-open schools and renew the promise of public education as an engine of opportunity. With unprecedented budget constraints ahead, these five principles create a context for productive deliberations and shared decision-making:

1. Ensure equity and engagement;
2. Use a holistic view to set a coherent strategy;
3. Follow the science of learning;
4. Take a long-term view of student success; and
5. Set an agenda for innovation and continuous improvement.

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- b. Issue guidance and share examples or templates of the significant changes that are needed to each tier of MTSS before school reopens.
 - i. Tier 1 – the learning environment and support for all students – will require a focus on whole-school programming related to healing, such as advisories, peer circles, community school models, etc. If Tier 1, universal support for nurturing relationships, sense of safety and belonging, and group healing is not made significantly more robust in most schools when they reopen, the number of students who will need intervention services will massively overwhelm capacity.
 - ii. Tier 2 – targeted interventions – will require changes to how schools manage referrals to within-school/LEA counseling and support services.
 - iii. Tier 3 will need a focus on how to manage referrals to community health and mental-health services.
- c. SEAs can issue guidance, and regional service agencies can provide technical assistance on how schools and LEAs can self-assess the design and functioning of their own MTSS, including scenario-planning around potential challenges like additional closures, or concentrated outbreaks in COVID cases or deaths, to model potential responses and identify proactively identify likely choke points and disconnects.
- d. Assess the capacity of state and community mental-health infrastructure in schools and externally, and publicly announce what will be done to improve capacities.
- e. Connect every LEA superintendent directly with their county or regional county mental-health coordinator *and* Medicaid supervisor. Issue updated, timely guidance on what services are eligible for Medicaid reimbursement and how to structure assessment and referral operations to streamline eligibility determination. States can actively facilitate and require these connections.
- f. SEAs and regional service agencies can identify and share high-quality screening tools that are free for districts/schools to identify students who need additional mental health support. Where no tools exist, partner with other state agencies, scholars, and partners to furnish assessment/screening tools. Outreach and assessment should occur *before* school reopens and continue through the first 90-days to provide as much support as much as possible to address acute needs and foster emotional /psychological safety to ensure a healthy context for academic learning.
- g. Launch free, online and interactive courses for teachers and principals this summer, next school year, and next summer offered by non-profit partners who already have significant relationships in the state and/or public institutions of higher education. Courses should address learning science and adversity science on topics including:
 - i. assessing and addressing stress and trauma among students and colleagues;
 - ii. establishing healthy learning environments infused with supportive, nurturing relationships, with separate courses for early childhood, elementary, and secondary students and settings;
 - iii. embedding healing practices into the daily routines of schools and classes;
 - iv. integrating academically rigorous content and social-emotional supports.

Leverage stimulus funds and other state investments dedicated toward higher education and community partners to incent this action. Facilitate a community of LEA leaders, principals, and teachers who want to accelerate the application of this research during the 2020-21 school year. Create incentives for teachers to engage and apply this learning through micro credentials that are treated like graduate credits in salary schedules.

3.) Identify and address the stress and trauma that school personnel have experienced during school closings, and that will be ongoing when school buildings reopen.

- a. Provide guidance and templates to districts to help clarify expectations for principals that prioritize responding to mental health needs of their staff, students and community and fostering a healthy and safe learning environment. This can include shifting or reducing job demands and shifting more decision-making to the local or school level.
- b. SEAs can partner with the research community and healthcare system to develop and provide [guidance](#) on the implementation of MTSS for school personnel. These tools should be used only by adults themselves and not required or administered by the school, district, or state. Adult MTSS can include:
 - i. Tier 1: all staff should receive support for trauma, social and emotional skills, and stress management and reduction, such as [self-assessments](#) and self-care and wellness programs, etc. [Indiana](#) and [Wisconsin](#) make online resources available. States can also leverage resources from unions, who can play an important role in building workplace relationships, community and connectedness, and in developing and sharing resources, as in [Illinois](#).
 - ii. Tier 2: Some staff may need more targeted support like group coaching, or therapy or support groups offered by school- or district-based mental health providers or through partnerships.
 - iii. Tier 3 - Few staff may need more intensive, individualized supports that could be accessed through Employee Assistance Programs (EAP), wraparound services or local mental health provider, which can include referrals to community based mental health providers, ensuring - to the extent possible - that the provider understands the context of schools and what staff are facing.

The CARES Act

The Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act, enacted in late March 2020, provides federal funding for early childhood education, K-12 and higher education programs and nonprofits providers to respond to the crisis. States may reserve up to 10% of the funding for state-level activities which includes the flexibility to directly support or incent the actions included here. The CARES Act also provides governors with \$3 billion that they may use at their discretion for either K-12 or higher education and requires only that funds must be targeted toward school districts, and institutions of higher education, most significantly impacted by the pandemic.

4.) Establish a clear definition of “student engagement” and healthy conditions for learning, or refine existing definitions and provide measurement tools, resources, and guidance to LEAs and schools.

- a. New definitions of student engagement should address:
 - i. how engagement looks different during distance/remote learning (e.g., clarifying expectations for student engagement on video, in social and emotional check-ins, in content areas, with non-instructional staff)
 - ii. how engagement looks different during the first school year after re-opening, especially the first 90-days and during/right after additional periods of closure or change.
 - iii. Developmental differences between elementary and secondary students because 7-year-olds engage differently than 17-year-olds.
- b. Engage educators to co-develop resources and provide templates to track student engagement during distance learning (logins, contacts with teachers and/or counselors, participation in-class activities, turning in assignments, etc.). Be explicit that these data will not be used for punitive purposes, but to signal the primary importance of student engagement and connectedness to school, to identify promising practices to study and share, to identify challenges and allocate resources accordingly.
- c. shorten climate surveys to assess engagement during distance learning and make these refined versions easily accessible to districts and schools. Surveys should be accessible digitally as well as in an analog format during distance learning.
- d. Survey students about their experiences during distance learning and when school reopens; being able to understand trends from before closures through to next year will be a critical resource in planning and evaluation.
- e. Include student engagement and school climate factors in every school planning/school improvement process, including access to stimulus funds and other supplemental resources for responding to school closures. At the SEA level, use student engagement data to prioritize schools and communities likely to need support in strengthening relationships and school climate when schools reopen.
- f. Provide templates and guidance to districts on how to integrate COVID-related student engagement data into early warning and MTSS systems, where existing, to track/monitor, and offer aligned supports.

5.) Act to remove anxiety about academic performance and to allow for and prioritize healing and belonging that will foster academic learning.

- a. Create or source simple and clear solutions for grading and promotion policies to respond to the crisis and in anticipation of additional school closures -- and share guidance and local examples publicly and with LEA leaders.
- b. Use the bully pulpit to communicate a clear order of operations for teachers and school leaders that prioritizes healing and social-emotional support as key conditions for learning when students return to school.
- c. In public communications, speak about resources and opportunities for deepening student engagement and accelerating student learning. Do not frame the work around “learning loss” or remediation, which orients toward deficits, is dismissive of the learning that did occur, and is demotivating for students.

- d. Provide LEAs with tools to conduct assessment and curriculum audits that identify and remove unnecessary or unhelpful tests and academic content to allow time to focus on healing and building/rebuilding strong connections to school.
- e. Curate and recommend text-based units in ELA and social studies (two per grade, per subject) that facilitate healing-centered engagement in classroom discussions. Units can draw on examples of suffering and human resilience through history, literature, and the arts. Each unit should align to state standards and include high-quality text, guides for class discussions, group projects, and culminating tasks. These units should not be required, but instead offered to LEA and school leaders as supported resources (i.e., making the best thing to do the easiest thing to do), with professional learning and networking opportunities for teachers before schools reopen and through the 2020-21 school year. Ensure selections are culturally and linguistically relevant for targeted student populations, and engage students and educators to create new units where no examples are currently found.
- f. Clearly and proactively communicate to teachers, parents, and students how state accountability report cards and dashboards will be used – or will not be used – for these impacted school years.

6.) Act to remove anxiety about assessment and accountability by establishing and communicating a clear plan for the 2020-2021 school year.

- a. Do not require or recommend large-scale administration of benchmark assessments for Fall 2020, which will come with significant administrative and psychological costs that are not offset by the benefit and could lead to over-identification for special education.
- b. Encourage the use of locally developed and/or teacher-led formative assessments and diagnostics that are aligned with curriculum and instructionally useful for teachers.
- c. Provide clear guidance to LEAs, schools, and educators on how to use assessment data (e.g., standardized benchmark/diagnostic assessments can be used to alert system leaders of possible over- and under-identification issues, but not to guide teacher decisions).
- d. Plan for Spring 2021 test administration, including planning for alternative possible scenarios.

7.) Collaborate to shift some responsibilities from the education sector to other state and local agencies and service providers.

- a. Schools cannot sustain this level of food provision and internet access for the long-term. In the longer-term, these issues need new, sustainable policy solutions (e.g., treating internet access like a utility more akin to electricity than cable TV). In the short-term, this is an ideal place for leadership from governor's offices, children's cabinets, funder collaboratives, and collective impact initiatives who can conduct a more comprehensive needs-assessment and coordinate response efforts. The Colorado Education Initiative, for example partnered with the Colorado Department of Education to [conduct a school district needs assessment](#).
- b. Establish clear partnership between state education and child and family services agencies to model collaborative data-and-information-sharing, cross-agency problem-solving, and joint public communications across agencies at the state level. Ensure LEA and school personnel have established connections to child and family service officials, and know who to contact for which issues, prior to reopening school.
- c. The Governor should lead cross-agency planning, communication, and execution, which will set the stage for local coordination. If there is a Children's Cabinet, use that forum or create an ad hoc group with similar membership.

- d. Convene youth-serving agencies and external partners to ensure all assets for summer engagement are whole and allocated for equity and optimal engagement. Where possible, create blended summer experiences that combine spaces of fun and enrichment with addressing academic needs – not one or the other.
- e. Advocate for federal funds to purchase devices and e-rate flexibility to fund access.

8.) Pilot removing barriers to innovation and enable flexibility during the 2020-21 school year to allow more responsive district and local action while maintaining focus on equity for under-served students.

- a. Allow for flexibility in meeting high school graduation requirements to enable high school upperclassmen to earn credit and/or remuneration for community service, including near-peer mentoring and tutoring for younger children. This can imbue high school experience with more meaning for adolescents, many of whom will otherwise disconnect and drop out, and can help address the huge increase in children who can benefit from 1:1 support and tutoring on basic skills.
- b. Provide guidance and flexibility for districts to serve students in mixed age-groups to allow them to progress according to their developmental stage not just their age. This will require significant attention to equity to ensure no student is pushed out of school or ignored. This flexibility should only be used when school or system leaders can verify that the student has the support, connection and direction they need and want.
- c. Waive seat-time requirements for credit acquisition to allow students to progress according to competency and development. Provide guidance to districts on how to develop personalized pathways or individualized education plans for students at all levels to find meaning in their education and tailor instruction to their social, emotional, and academic development. [Chicago Public Schools](#) requires every student to have an individual learning plan in place prior to graduation; this format and structure can be applied to all students and cover academic, developmental, and personal-growth goals.
- d. Allow school districts and schools to add more days to the school year and more minutes to the school day to diversify modes of learning and schedules. Adding more time to schooling should take into consideration family circumstances including employment, childcare, and transportation that may present barriers to accessing the expanded school day/year.
- e. Provide increased flexibility in budgeting and spending rules, such as reducing the amount of administrative reporting. Public agencies will need to maintain some processes in place to ensure accountability and transparency for the use of public funds even as they reduce administrative load.
- f. Revisit data collection and sharing rules with an eye toward fostering more data sharing across sectors, institutions and agencies to position education officials for more seamless referrals and enable the provision of social services to families. Any changes in policy or practice should continue to privilege student privacy, especially for immigrant and other vulnerable families.
- g. Establish processes to learn from all the innovation and flexibility – including as conditions for that flexibility – to capture promising practice and ensure accountability. Partner with higher education institutions and community organizations as research partners and to support knowledge management. Plan State Board and legislative hearings prior to the 2021-22 school year to examine innovations and extend flexibilities where warranted.

9.) More clearly define and differentiate adult roles toward areas in need of greatest attention when students return: safety, healing and feeling connected to the school community, and maintaining and strengthening communication.

- a. Define competencies for how all adults in the school and system should be fostering connectedness with students and families, with clear expectations for what that connection looks like while remote, for different developmental stages, and for different student groups (English learners, students with disabilities).
- b. Provide training for educators on distance learning that prioritizes relationships and connectedness as key conditions for learning.
- c. Provide a framework for differentiated teacher roles that allow districts and schools to deploy master teachers differently. This can include teaching large(er) online classes that go beyond school or district lines, for example, which can allow classroom teachers to focus more on small group and differentiated instruction.
- d. Provide templates for how districts and schools can deploy all adults (social workers, food service providers, specials teachers, etc.) to find “missing” kids and/or serve as family navigators to enable an “all-in” approach where every adult is engaging with families and students to foster connectedness and provide supports.
- e. Offer guidance on how to purpose extra-curricular activities and extended time/after-school partner programming, especially for middle and high school as these activities are critical to helping adolescents feel connected and motivated to participate in school.
- f. State education agencies can work with their state AmeriCorps commissions to prioritize AmeriCorps slots dedicated to key K-12 student engagement and connection supports, differentiated by grade level, i.e. elementary focus can be on literacy, middle and high school about connection to school, junior and seniors around finding and applying and enrolling in good post-secondary options).

10.) Dedicate state education agency and other state administrative staff to focus on recovery

- a. Create networks of districts or schools dedicated to providing social and emotional support tailored for specific student-groups (English learners, students with disabilities, etc.) to spread and share promising practice and achieve some economies of scale across district lines.
- b. Require districts to have contingency/disaster/crisis/closure response plans and create templates for them to draw from that integrate social and emotional supports and connectedness and are tailored to support students from low-income backgrounds, English learners, and students with disabilities. Plans should include intentional strategies to support student connectedness through transitions as well as in the first 30- and 90- days of those transitions.

These recommendations were developed by the Aspen Institute Education & Society Program, informed by a diverse group of education leaders that included students, families, advocates, district leaders, state chiefs, researchers, think tanks, funders, and policymakers. This resource is designed to help state education leaders identify potential actions focused on fostering social and emotional development and school connectedness and is not intended to offer one-size-fits-all recommendations. Many of these recommendations require financial investment, and some are aligned to funding provided through the federal CARES Act while others will call for reallocation of, or new funds.

Additional resources for developing state guidance on trauma and mental health screening in schools:

<https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/fall-2015/toolkit-for-i-thought-about-quitting-today>

<https://www.nasponline.org/x37269.xml>

https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/sites/default/files/TSS_Training_Package_Action_Guide_0.pdf

<http://prevention.psu.edu/uploads/files/rwjf430428.pdf>

<https://www.integration.samhsa.gov/clinical-practice/trauma-informed>

<https://www.acf.hhs.gov/trauma-toolkit/secondary-traumatic-stress>

<https://www.nctsn.org/trauma-informed-care/secondary-traumatic-stress>