



Moving Forward as a Resilient Community

Focusing on Social Emotional Health & Wellness in the School Environment

The following describes four trauma informed considerations, grounded in racial equity and social justice, to help districts, schools, educators, and families create an environment that supports resilience in students as we move forward through the COVID-19 pandemic. We acknowledge COVID-19 has disproportionately been affecting communities that have historically been marginalized, and that the distress following George Floyd's death has potentially compounded trauma especially for the Black community. Therefore, we want to name race specifically throughout this guidance .

According to the American Psychological Association, resilience is “the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or significant sources of stress.” The process of adapting may look different depending on the historical context and background of each individual.

As you explore the four pillars here, use an equity lens. Work them into your systems, being mindful of historical and social contexts for the people you serve. This crisis will affect groups of individuals differently based on multiple factors, e.g., history, access to services, racism, and systemic oppression. It is essential to think about the communities who will be affected by policy and practice decisions.

Cultural Responsiveness

What: Culturally Responsive Teaching is a process that recognizes the importance of including students' cultural backgrounds in all aspects of learning.

Why: Cultural responsiveness is rooted in respect and appreciation for the role of culture in children's learning and development. While it is essential to weave culture into all educational practices, it must also be emphasized separately. Work to recognize systemic racism and plan for a more socially just environment for all marginalized groups.

How:

- Recognize and build upon the cultural strengths of the individuals you serve, especially those who are racially, ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse.
- Ensure intended and unintended consequences of policy and practice decisions do not create harm.
- Be mindful of historical contexts for the populations you serve, especially related to public health efforts.
- Use strategies that encourage engagement and minimize mistrust.
- Integrate equity into content areas by leveraging historical examples of conflict, injustice, and discrimination to teach appreciation of diversity, social skills, and civic responsibility. Include examples of brilliance from People of Color and other marginalized groups.

Emotional Wellness

What: Emotional wellness entails feeling secure expressing personal opinions, emotions, and deeply held thoughts. Effective Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) practices support emotional wellness in learning environments by being grounded in strong relationships and teaching valuable emotional management and relationship skills.

Why: When emotional wellness is a priority in the learning environment, we are fully able to begin to heal, and ultimately to navigate the challenges and take the risks that good education requires.

How:

- Be transparent and build trust. Communicate with care and clarity.
- Provide consistent and predictable routines, rituals, and procedures to foster a sense of safety and trust.

- Honor communal values and ethnic-racial identities, which is essential for trust and well-being.
- Acknowledge what we have been through, and create space for healing.
- Model the calm behavior you want others to mirror.
- Establish group norms for difficult conversations. All should feel they can speak honestly while concurrently feeling care and connection.
- Incorporate social and emotional skill building into academic learning. Build time for practices like breathing, grounding, and movement throughout the day and in various content area learning opportunities.
- Reframe behaviors. Emotional regulation and impulse control are more difficult during times of stress. Adults should be cautious of expectations that may prioritize middle-class American culture and thereby result in acculturative stress.

Belonging

What: Relationship is one of the strongest antidotes to the negative effects of trauma. It refers to the universal deep human need to feel connected to others—to belong—in relationships characterized by warmth, support, and trust. A sense of belonging develops through good SEL practices in learning environments.

Why: Positive attachment—a sense of belonging—suppresses stress responses and aids healing; attachment provides safety, which supports emotional and behavioral regulation.

How:

- Prioritize belonging, relationships and community building.
- Use cultural competence and cultural fluency to ensure an equity lens and a strengths-focused approach to supporting belonging and relational skills.
- For staff and students, create and schedule affinity and ally spaces based on identity.
- Set up and support regular peer check-ins to keep connections strong.
- Work to make strong and purposeful student-staff relationships the norm.
- Be transparent: it builds both relationships and trust.
- Collaborate: find, build, and support multiple ways of working together.

Voice, Choice, and Empowerment

What: Voice, choice, and empowerment refer to one's sense that "I have some control over my environment, and my actions can make things better for me and for those around me." Self-determination is a basic and universal human need, essential to our sense of well-being, to our ability to persevere, and to perform at our best.

Why: Trauma and/or toxic stress happen to everyone. They batter at our sense of stability, of having any control at all. Feelings of helplessness that result from trauma can be overcome to the extent that we regain a sense of personal power. Having some authentic choice, and cultivating, nurturing, voice can help regain that sense of power.

How:

- Explain the why behind decisions. Understanding why a policy, a practice, or a new concept in science is being presented can give people a greater sense of understanding; better understanding makes it easier to buy into the policy or practice, making it easier to choose to go along with it. A sense of choice decreases the stress response.
- Help staff know what to expect to the extent possible. In uncertain times, even a little more certainty and predictability are helpful. This does not mean providing answers you don't have, but it does mean sharing information as it comes along.
- Create concrete and tangible ways to solicit student and adult voice regarding current practices and new ideas for moving forward. Demonstrate through accountability measures how those contributions will be used in future planning.
- To the extent possible, give students meaningful roles to play in the "new world" of schools. Now is an optimal time for involving all stakeholders.
- Weave opportunities to cultivate voice, make authentic choice, and empower students and educators throughout instructional practices.

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