Mental/Behavior Health and Well-Being

Considerations

Returning to the classroom following the COVID-19 quarantine requires attention that differs vastly from past considerations for teachers, school staff, and parents. Altered or eliminated required activities and tasks can lead to changes in mental and behavioral health. When determining how to provide the best support, consider contextual factors related to the environment (e.g., systems, policies, attitudes, barriers, and supports). Moreover, extended isolation, fear, and anxiety about possible exposure to COVID-19 influences student success and has significant mental health implications on adults and students alike. It is also vital to acknowledge the impact of new, inconsistent, or ineffective routines. This can affect the behavior, social participation, and well-being of everyone (e.g., students, educators, family members). In addition, witnessing recent events surrounding racial injustices further amplifies the impact of changes related to COVID-19. Below are some tips for school personnel and families to consider when supporting the mental and behavioral health and well-being of the school community.

District and School-Wide Initiatives

☐ Address behavioral management policies and procedures to limit distress, traumatization, or re-traumatization (e.g., support staff reinforcing rules for social distancing, concerned parents redirecting students, staff using appropriate strategies for children displaying aggression or challenges with emotional regulation).

☐ Incorporate training on approaches to meet the needs of students in various grade levels such as trauma-informed care, self-regulation, mindfulness, and social emotional learning.

☐ Identify safe spaces and times for students to take breaks and discuss the emotional impact of recent events.

☐ Allow opportunities for educators, administrators, and staff to address their personal concerns about returning to the school setting and for daily debriefing for peer support.

☐ Provide parent training opportunities and support programs on behavioral health, mental health, and well-being.

☐ Implement Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS).

☐ Ensure social distancing and environmental modifications support inclusion of children with disabilities.

☐ Utilize occupational therapy (OT) practitioners to assist in preventing behavioral challenges impeding learning and interaction to:

    ☐ Promote a supportive environment meeting the sensory needs of the students (i.e., addressing classroom setup, designing sensory-friendly spaces and classrooms, providing virtual sensory-based activities during virtual or hybrid instruction).

    ☐ Address behavioral challenges by training staff on self-regulation, mindfulness, social emotional learning, and sensory-based approaches for students with documented assessment results of difficulties related to processing or integrating sensory information to facilitate calming, focusing, and attending.

    ☐ Utilize social stories to explain unfamiliar concepts (e.g., social distancing) and to address the emotional needs of younger students, and those with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

    ☐ Make contact with students on a one-to-one basis and in small groups to promote resilience and self-advocacy.

    ☐ Provide education to families, educators, and students on the impact of acute-stress and traumatic experiences on brain development, learning, and behavior.

Identify Students At Risk

☐ Acknowledge students' unique exposure to acute stress and adverse and traumatic events:

- ☐ Grief and loss secondary to family member(s) being diagnosed, quarantined, or dying due to COVID-19
- ☐ Distress due to having parents on the front line (e.g., health care workers, grocery store clerks)
- ☐ Fear regarding discrimination and stigma secondary to being:
  - ☐ A Black student impacted by protests against racial injustices and the increased likelihood of contracting COVID-19
  - ☐ An Asian American and Pacific Islander student due to stigma of being linked to the origin of COVID-19
- ☐ A history of bullying or being bullied, or being a bystander to bullying
  - ☐ Students at risk for being bullied include those with physical and/or developmental disabilities, behavioral challenges, and emotional/mental health diagnoses; coming from low socioeconomic backgrounds; identifying as a member or being suspected of being a member of the LGBTQIA+ community; being socially immature; and/or requiring additional social and emotional support
- ☐ Starting at a new school (i.e., relocated, moving between grades, transitioning from junior high to high school)
- ☐ Become aware of and acknowledge the risk factors and early signs of mental illness such as internalizing behaviors (e.g., withdrawal, avoidance); externalizing behaviors (e.g., aggression); acute stress; or a history of depression, anxiety, or trauma.

Create Supportive Environments

- ☐ Promote positive mental health by creating a sense of safety and security.
  - ☐ Affirm positive and prosocial behaviors.
  - ☐ Adopt equitable school discipline procedures. Enforce procedures consistently.
  - ☐ Foster kindness.
  - ☐ Reconsider the role of school security personnel beyond discipline.
  - ☐ Follow a consistent schedule and notify students of changes and disruptions when possible.
- ☐ Facilitate social connectedness.
  - ☐ Encourage all school personnel to develop safe and caring relationships with students.
  - ☐ Promote friendships by helping students identify others with common interests.
  - ☐ Communicate with family members regularly.
  - ☐ Use peer supports in the classroom and on the playground.
- ☐ Provide opportunities for students to experience mastery and agency.
  - ☐ Create a culture that celebrates inquiry and curiosity.
  - ☐ Encourage students to set goals.
  - ☐ Allow students to make choices about activities when possible throughout the day.
  - ☐ Teach students how to utilize resources (e.g., dictionaries, class notes, websites, books, peers) to address academic challenges.
  - ☐ Encourage positive self-talk.
  - ☐ Provide opportunities for students to identify and correct their mistakes.
- ☐ Allow students to experience positive emotions each day.
  - ☐ Allow all students to experience recess adhering to social distancing guidelines.
  - ☐ Provide opportunities for students to engage with peers during lunchtime, including virtually.
  - ☐ Routinely use strategies that cultivate a sense of calm and reduce stress.
  - ☐ Offer opportunities for students to move their bodies throughout the day.

Services for Students Displaying Mental Health and/or Behavioral Conditions

- ☐ Develop processes for students, families, and educators to report concerns about individual students and threats to school safety.
- ☐ Improve access to school-based mental health services and providers (e.g., school social workers, counselors, psychologists, and occupational therapy practitioners) across school teams.

☐ Recognize the need for developing, or updating, an individual education plan (IEP) or 504 plan.

☐ Create plans in collaboration with students, parents, and teachers to educate students about their triggers and match them to the most effective and efficient coping strategies.

☐ Support students' development of self-advocacy skills.

☐ Collaborate with community agencies to develop Wellness, Recovery, Action Plans (WRAP).

Resources

☐ American Occupational Therapy Association—School Mental Health Toolkit

☐ National Association of School Psychologists—A Framework for Safe and Successful Schools