

Community-Care Strategies for Schools During the Coronavirus Crisis

Practical Tips for School Staff and Administrators

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As the COVID-19 pandemic impacts communities across the country and the world, school closures remain key to public health strategies for reducing the virus's spread. As a result, schools must find remote ways to continue providing learning and enrichment opportunities for students while also remaining committed to the social and emotional needs of the entire school community. As community members focus on sheltering in place and social distancing, they lose daily in-person connections with colleagues, students, and families. These changes, along with added stress from new routines, worries about the health of loved ones, coping with the complexities of life at home, and general uncertainty about the future, can exponentially increase the need for community care (also known as collective care). Schools are uniquely positioned to help members of their communities maintain a sense of connectedness – an important part of well-being¹ – and to identify those who may need additional support.

Accordingly, this brief offers practical guidance for educators and other school staff, and for administrators and other leaders, to help you ensure that school communities are effective, cohesive, collaborative, healthy, and sustainable while coping with the stresses of social isolation, school closures, and changes to how services are provided. The brief builds on a growing research base about school climate and culture,² on new resources currently being developed during this period,³ and on WestEd's extensive experience in education, public health, and wellness services.

1 https://data.calschls.org/resources/S3_WhatWorksBrief4_Connectedness_final.pdf

2 For example, see <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/250209.pdf>.

3 For example, see <https://www.wested.org/covid-19-resources/>.

Guiding Questions

As you and your colleagues work to meet the priority academic and service needs of students, use the following questions to ensure that community care is part of your considerations:

- Which community norms and expectations are most familiar and meaningful to your staff, students, and families, and how might you adapt them for the current situation?
- Which existing resources, policies, and procedures can be leveraged to address community care, and what else might be needed?
- What can you do to anticipate, identify, and meet the needs of staff, students, and families who may need additional support?
- What can you do to ensure that everyone in the school community has equitable access to information, resources, and opportunities for engagement?

Maintaining Community and Sense of Connectedness

Typically, schools operate in very structured ways that provide consistency and stability for staff and students. Such structuring also inherently facilitates numerous social and community interactions throughout the day. For the well-being of everyone in the school community, keeping routines, roles, and responsibilities as consistent and as close to “normal” as possible, while also being careful not to unnecessarily overwhelm or overburden anyone during this uncertain and stressful time, is important during the COVID-19 pandemic. The familiarity and predictability can help staff and students feel safe and still connected to something meaningful. In addition to putting systems in place to make connections possible, it is important for schools to actively nurture a continued sense of community. Schools are social environments in which an individual student or staff member might interact with hundreds, if not thousands, of people each school day. Working and learning from home can be overwhelming, lonely, and isolating.

To help members of the school community feel connected, even from a distance, consider all the big and small ways you interact with colleagues, students, and families on a typical school day, and recreate similar opportunities for connection remotely.

The following lists provide strategies and considerations for working to maintain community and connectedness among staff, with and among students, and with families.

Staff Community and Connections

- » Prioritize adapting regularly scheduled meetings with professional learning communities, grade-level collaboratives, student support

teams, and other essential working groups to an online environment. Keep dates and times consistent, when possible, while providing flexibility, eliminating unnecessary tasks, and lessening everyone’s overall load.

- » Add an icebreaker or grounding activity at the beginning of meetings, to help bring people together, make connections, relieve stress, and focus attention. For example, invite everyone to share one word that describes how they are feeling, share fun facts, lead a quick breathing exercise, or watch a short video and share initial reactions. Invite staff members, regardless of role, to volunteer to lead the opening activity at the next meeting.
- » Incorporate intentional community-building and self-care strategies into meetings.⁴ Create opportunities for small-group conversations, ensure that staff know where they can get additional help, and encourage self-care.
- » Be intentional about creating settings for frequent formal and informal engagement, as routines have changed drastically and many opportunities for staff interactions have ceased.
- » Prioritize communication and collaboration between and among staff and leadership groups. For example, continue one-on-one check-ins between administrators and staff, and prioritize clear and consistent bidirectional communication with team leads. Teams work best when everyone is on the same page.

⁴ For ideas, check out the related resource from WestEd: *Self-Care Strategies for Educators During the Coronavirus Crisis*, available from <https://www.wested.org/resources/self-care-strategies-for-educators-covid-19>.

- » Invite colleagues to optional and informal social gatherings that take place online and are led by administrators or staff. For example, host a virtual “happy hour” or dinner party. You can also create opportunities for personal and professional learning based on staff interests and expertise (e.g., book clubs, free online courses as a group, talent shows held remotely, TED-style presentations, virtual staff-led conferences).

Student Community and Connections

- » Structure academic and enrichment activities to be as interactive as possible. Focus on building and sustaining relationships among the group. Doing so is particularly important for adolescents, whose brains developmentally prioritize peer relationships.
- » Incorporate intentional community-building and self-care strategies into class meetings and assignments. Such strategies can strengthen social ties and may help relieve some of the stress that students are under at home.
- » Partner with students to adapt existing school or classroom expectations and norms to fit your remote learning environment. Let students take the lead in contextualizing existing rules and suggesting new ones. Take time to discuss expectations for respect and other norms or etiquette in your environment (e.g., respectful group chat behavior, video meeting tips).
- » Recognize that facilitating meaningful and engaging activities online can be especially difficult for educators who are working with younger students. Because lengthy online sessions are not developmentally appropriate for young children, who often need an adult at home to help them, keep online activities simple, social, and brief.

- » Consider ways that older students can contribute to the learning and enrichment of younger students. For example, fifth graders can read books online to a kindergarten class, high school students can write positive comments on middle school writing assignments, or middle and high school students can create “what to expect” videos, blogs, or letters for incoming sixth and ninth graders, respectively.
- » Recognize that students, especially adolescents, need positive and safe social interactions. Provide remote opportunities for existing student groups (e.g., advisories, student government groups, extracurricular clubs, athletic teams) to connect with each other around specific topics or themes.
- » Encourage student groups to consider ways they can help the larger student body feel connected (e.g., a journalism class can continue to publish the school newspaper; student government can create a survey for students to share feedback and ideas on any number of topics; academic and athletic teams can host a virtual pep rally or talent show; a service club can organize an online fundraiser for local families or develop a list of activities that students can do to stay physically active).
- » Offer remote adaptations of important milestones and events, when possible (e.g., graduation/promotion, dances, concerts, performances, yearbooks). Not sure how or what to do? Ask your students for suggestions and engage them in the planning.

Family Community and Connections

- » In addition to providing critical information on support services, logistics of school closures, classwork, and grades, offer remote opportunities for families to ask questions, share

successes and challenges, or learn about a particular academic topic/skill, so that they can better support learning at home.

- » Consider setting virtual office hours (or something similar), sending subject-specific information for families along with student work, or suggesting user-friendly videos or articles on child development, grade-level academic content, parenting tips, and other topics that are relevant to families in your community.
- » Find ways for families to have agency in their students' distance-learning experiences, provide feedback to the school, and connect with other families (e.g., virtual School Site Council or PTA meetings, parent/guardian surveys, office hours, online forums). Provide flexibility and choice related to schoolwork and other remote school activities.
- » Remember that many families are coping with compounding stressors, especially families that are caring for sick relatives, living with a large number of people, facing food insecurity, or providing essential services in the community (e.g., health care, groceries, restaurants, child care, emergency response, sanitation).
- » Ensure that all families receive information that is culturally relevant and linguistically appropriate.

Identifying and Supporting Those in Need

During these challenging times, it is more important than ever to actively identify staff, students, and families in need of extra support. Doing so is also more difficult than ever because many of the typical avenues for assessing and monitoring needs are not easy to replicate remotely. Districts and schools

Tech Tips for Online Community Building

- Use available technology and online tools to connect with students and families, assign and track assignments, share important information, and post grades.
- Whenever possible, use videoconferencing and/or social media to get some face time with students and provide opportunities for them to connect with one another in a safe and structured environment. Be sure to follow your district's or school's technology use policies.
- Become more familiar with ed tech tools, many of which are currently offering free access for educators, schools, and students. Explore and utilize virtual museum tours (there are many available), online standards-based videos, computer coding sites, historic archives, and so on. The opportunities are endless.
- Keep in mind, however, that not all students will have the computers, internet access, technology skills, or family time and support to consistently engage online. Ask students and families to let you know which tools they may need, and work with your district, community organizations, utility providers, and companies to provide those tools.
- Prioritize the human side of teaching and learning, even online. Show students and families that you care. Acknowledge the challenges they may be facing. Be flexible and understanding.

should create intentional, systemic, collaborative, and recurring opportunities to identify those who are most in need in the current environment. With systems in place, all members of the school community have roles in supporting others.

- » Be proactive in reaching out to students who need the most support in a typical school environment. It is likely that these students

will have even greater needs now. Students with disabilities, English learners, LGBTQ students, students experiencing homelessness, students taking care of younger siblings, and undocumented students may be under significant stress as they cope with existing challenges and new challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic.⁵

- » Keep an eye out for indicators that any individual student or family is struggling socially, emotionally, or academically. Track attendance of online classes, homework completion, quality of work, and family engagement, to identify needs and to target necessary supports.
- » Trust your instincts if you are worried, and follow up with students or families if you feel comfortable doing so. Alternatively, let an administrator or designated staff member know about your concerns. Make sure to follow any district or school guidelines and protocols for privacy and for reporting and tracking student and family needs.
- » Don't forget to check in with your colleagues, including part-time, classified, and support staff. Ask them what they need, and connect them with available resources (e.g., Employee Assistance Programs, community-based providers, and other mental health supports). Ensure that support resources are easy to find, and encourage their use.
- » Provide remote opportunities (e.g., by phone or video) for staff, students, and families to access professional mental health supports from licensed practitioners. Such opportunities are especially important with everyone under so much stress during the COVID-19 pandemic. Engage school counselors, school psychologists, intervention specialists, and social workers to develop policies and procedures and to provide services. Partner with community-based organizations to provide mental health supports to members of the school community.

Conclusion

With the devastation and uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic upsetting nearly every aspect of “normal” life, schools face incredible challenges. While the nation’s schools have been a visible and ongoing example of how much things have changed, they are also some of the brightest examples of resilience, adaptability, and commitment to community. Just as schools play a large role in society’s response to the pandemic, every member of a school community has a part to play in maintaining a sense of connection and ensuring that those who need the most support get it. Remember that everyone in the community is in this challenging period together.

⁵ For ideas on addressing particular students’ needs, see <https://www.wested.org/covid-19-resources/>.

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