

BRIEF

BETTER TOGETHER

A Coordinated Response for Principals and District Leaders

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Better Together: A Coordinated Response for Principals and District Leaders

The National Comprehensive Center

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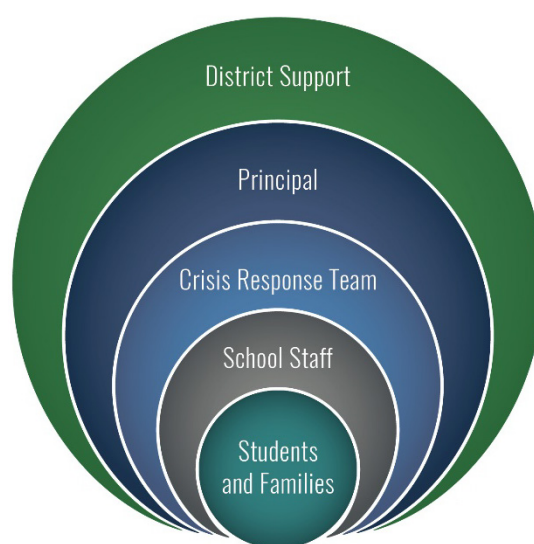
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It is no secret that successful school leadership starts with the principal. But who is taking care of school principals and ensuring their well-being? A principal's needs must be addressed before they can effectively address the needs of their school community. District leadership must prioritize the needs of principals who in turn, will empower the school-based crisis response teams to address the needs of the school community. The purpose of this brief is to provide readers with a structured approach to manage the social-emotional well-being of the adults in the school building, post COVID-19 closures. The phrase, "better together," has never been truer as school communities embark on the uncharted territory of virtual, hybrid and/or physical re-entry after an extended school closure.

District Level Support

Crisis response work is exhausting by nature. Without proper self-care and guidance from district leaders, school principals are not only subject to burnout, they also may experience personal impacts, resulting in social-emotional needs. When principals' needs are neglected at the expense of helping the school community, long-term impacts including physical illness can occur.¹ To combat these concerns, district leaders should consider instituting the following:



Scheduling regular one-on-one communications with principals

- » Individual calls to check-in with principals will help district leaders assess the social-emotional needs of each of their leaders.
- » Each call can be short in nature, but they give the principals a direct link to district-level support if needed.
- » These calls can also serve to help district leaders assess what the collective needs of the principals may be so that district leaders can provide more targeted support as needed.

Increasing principal networking

- » District leaders should provide principals the space to think through how their role has changed and how they can best support their personal needs while also taking care of the school community.
- » Through talking, brainstorming and sharing job-alike problems, principals can find renewed energy and feel replenished.

¹ National Association of School Psychologists. (2017). Care for the caregiver: Guidelines for administrators and crisis teams. [Handout]. Bethesda, MD.

Modeling and practicing self-care

- » District leaders and principals alike would benefit from practicing self-care and modeling the ideas of self-care.
- » Modeling self-care and openly talking about its importance will positively impact school leaders and may trickle down to staff and students who could also benefit.
- » For more information regarding self-care for school staff see: [Care for the Caregivers: Guidelines for Administrators and Crisis Teams](#), [ASCD: 5 Strategies for Teacher Self-Care](#) and [Self-care for those who work with traumatized youth](#)

District and School-based Crisis Response Teams

Use of a crisis response team to help strategically plan the return to school, whether virtually or face-to-face, is necessary to ensure mental and physical safety of students and staff. These teams, also called re-entry teams, assist the principal in planning and executing the return to school while also shouldering some of the burden so the principal is not coordinating the effort alone.

Determining the work of the team

- » At the district level, the crisis response team serves as a communication conduit to the principal, providing district level re-entry plans and supports to the school leader.
- » At the school-level, the crisis response team serves as a planning team to the principal to address site specific issues that are not address by the district team. The school-level crisis response team also assists the principal in implementation of the district's re-entry plan.
- » To the extent possible, both district level and school-based student support services personnel including counselors, social workers, and psychologists must be at the table. Additionally, key community stakeholders and parent representatives should be present.

Assessing staff needs

- » The school-based crisis response team must assess staff readiness and create a re-entry plan that is specific to their site.
- » It is not just children who have experienced difficult and traumatic experiences during the school closure. Many staff members may be returning to school with high anxiety concerning their own safety or that of their family members, which could affect their job performance. Being sensitive to staff needs is paramount to successful re-entry.
- » To determine the needs of the staff, it is advised that members of the crisis response team, in conjunction with the principal, reach out to each individual staff member to check on their physical and social-emotional well-being.
- » Conducting a needs assessment of each staff member includes addressing basic needs (food/housing), social-emotional needs, medical concerns, financial needs, and family functioning.
- » If Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) are available, making this information readily available and encouraging participation could be helpful. Many EAPs will send licensed counselors and/or



social workers to do whole group sessions on self-care, mindfulness, and general strategies for maintaining mental health.

Assessing resources (internal and external)

- » After determining the needs of staff and students, the crisis response team should begin to outline the resources that are available internally and determine what external partners may be needed to support the school community.
- » The principal should schedule regular meetings with the school-based crisis response team to identify progress and evaluate new concerns that may have arisen. Additionally, the crisis-response team leader (principal, social worker, etc.) should be in regular contact with the district to ensure cohesive and aligned approaches across the district.
- » Additional resources and supports can be found at the [Return to School Roadmap](#) created by Opportunity Labs (2020).

Activating a plan-ahead team

The district leaders and principal should activate a Plan-Ahead Team to engage in assessing effectiveness of actions taken thus far, identifying long-term impact, and planning for education delivery for the next 6 months, 9 months, 12 months, and beyond.

- » The Plan-Ahead Team rises above the crisis fray to gain a big picture view of what is to come and how to proactively respond.
- » The Plan-Ahead Team gathers information, reviews the effect of immediate actions, and uses the information and lessons learned to develop scenarios and identify strategies and actions needed to stabilize education services, and improve schooling for all children.
- » The team focuses on continuing the successful needed supports; addressing the increasing inequities caused by the immediate crises; and creating a safe, engaging learning environment that is flexible enough to weather future disruptions.
- » Additional resources include [After-Action Review Guide](#).

Addressing Social-emotional Learning Needs First

Not every student will have experienced trauma during school closures, but some will. In some instances, students who have never before experienced or exhibited difficulties in school may be re-entering with new concerns and struggles. “Even the most fortunate of U.S. children are going through a version of what’s called an “adverse childhood experience” right now,” (Kamenetz, 2020). It is for this reason that addressing students social-emotional learning (SEL) needs first, is imperative. Both virtual and face-to-face school this fall will require basic social-emotional structures, which include but are not limited to providing consistent and predictable routines for students, establishing a time to listen to students’ concerns, and providing a way for students to connect with peers to create a sense of community.



Establishing systems of support for SEL

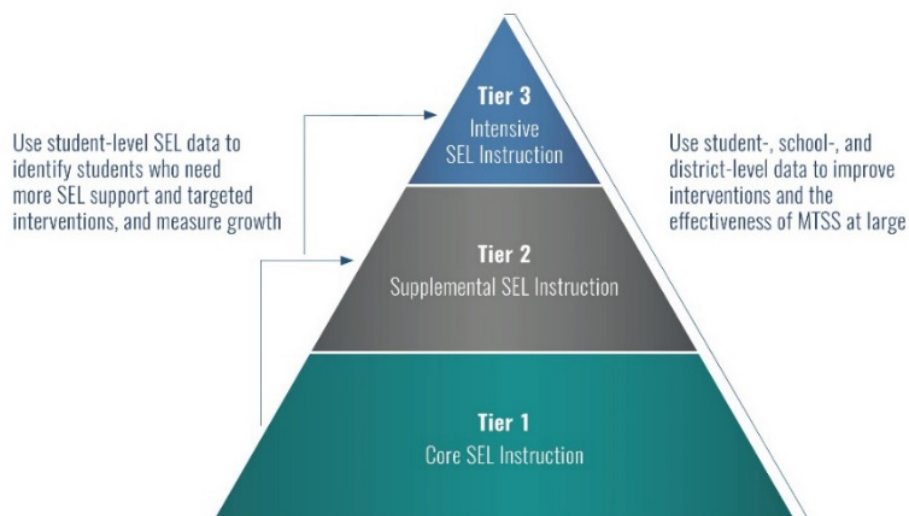
In addressing students' needs, a Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) framework is of value (see Exhibit 1).

- » Core SEL instruction (Tier 1) for all students features extensive community-building upon return to learning both virtually and face-to-face. This includes, but is not limited to, the re-establishment of familiar routines and the introduction of new routines that will be necessary.
- » In the [SEL-3 Signature Practices Playbook](#) (CASEL, 2020) it is recommended that a universal check-in system is established to provide each student a chance to connect with one another, re-establish community, and express concerns in a safe space. This time can also be used to build classroom culture, reconnect peer relationships, and address common fears and anxieties.
- » For a small group of students, small group interventions (Tier 2) may be necessary, as their social-emotional needs may not be met in a whole group setting. This could look very different, depending on the setting, but a few examples include small group sessions with a counselor or social worker, peer-led discussion circles to work through difficulties with a caring adult as a guide, or an individualized check-in/check-out process for students. These interventions should be in addition to the core social-emotional instruction provided to all students during core instruction.
- » For a handful of students, particularly those who have encountered damaging experiences, individualized intensive support will be necessary (Tier 3). This can come in the form of mentor/mentee relationships, individualized behavior plans that address the student's social-emotional needs, one-on-one counseling, and/or referrals to outside service providers.
- » Further resources surrounding students with significant social-emotional needs post COVID closures can be found at [Supporting Grieving Students During a Pandemic](#).

WHEN DO WE GET BACK TO ACADEMICS?

Teachers may be asking, "When do we get back to academics?" Although important, the social-emotional well-being of our students is of top concern upon return, even if that return is virtually. It is estimated that students may experience 2 to 3 times more learning loss than would occur in a typical summer (Guttentag, 2020). However, if educators don't meet students' social-emotional needs first, they may never get to the academic needs.

Exhibit 1. Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) framework



Addressing the Needs of Families

As a school community it is imperative that the partnership between school and home is strong. Providing families with consistent and clear communication around the school's efforts to maintain a clean and safe learning environment may help both parents and students feel better about re-entry.

Providing resources

- » Parents also may need resources on how to talk to their children about any anxiety, uneasiness, or fears that may exist about going back to school.
- » Some families who have never needed assistance before will need resources to support their child as he or she goes back into the learning community. This includes responding to families who are homeless or in transitional living situations without access to basic necessities.
- » Other resources to support school staff and families:
 - › [The Truth About ACEs](#)
 - › [How Teenagers Can Protect Their Mental Health During Coronavirus](#)
 - › [Helping Children Heal After a Traumatic Event](#)

Conclusion

Considering the difficult situation educational leaders face right now, it is imperative that school communities work together to ensure the emotional well-being of all employees from the district level down to the school level. Developing and enacting systems of support will help to ensure the well-being of the principal, their crisis response team, the school staff, and the students. The phrase, “better together,” has never been truer as school communities venture into the uncharted territory of implementing virtual, hybrid and/or physical re-entry plans, and likely some combination of all three, as we start this academic year and face unprecedented challenges due to the pandemic.

For additional resources see the Response to Disruption Resources page at:

<https://www.nationalcompcenter.org/>.



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