



**Trauma-Informed School Re-Entry Planning Guide**  
***Building student and staff resilience when schools reopen:  
Considerations and recommendations provided by the  
North Carolina Resilience & Learning Project***

The school year is over, but districts and schools are busy thinking about re-entry planning in the fall. With the ongoing circumstances of COVID-19 and the abrupt early ending to the 19-20 school year, schools are likely to need many added supports and resources in 20-21. To support your planning, the NC Resilience & Learning Project team has put together a set of trauma-informed recommendations to consider for school reopenings.

In our overview training, we discuss four large areas for schools to focus on when considering how to strengthen the resilience of students, staff, and the school community as a whole: 1) staff wellness; 2) relationships and connections; 3) structure, routine, and clear expectations; and 4) social-emotional learning. We believe these four areas remain the most important when considering current school closures and plans for re-entry to welcome staff and students back to school. We have added a final section around mental health support and crisis planning as well knowing the importance of having these plans revised and in place for the year ahead.

We have outlined here recommendations in each of these areas of resilience—general information on why each is important as well as specific examples of strategies to implement. We know that there is still a lot of unknown about what school will look like in the fall—if it will be back to normal, operating with fewer students in the building at a time, continuing with remote learning, or a mix of all of the above. But what we do know is that creating safer and more supportive learning environments for ALL kids is more important now than ever before. When schools do reopen, it will be even more critical to establish emotional and physical safety for students AND staff first and foremost by focusing on clear structures, building trusted relationships, and teaching self-regulation skills. Every child is experiencing some level of stress as we all live in the midst of a global pandemic and have been abruptly removed from the daily routines we are accustomed to. In order to get back to learning and teaching, we must first focus on helping our kids feel safe and regulated when they return or nothing else we try to teach from the front of the classroom will matter.

One of the first steps we feel to be most critical is to be sure all school staff have participated in trauma-informed schools training. The NC Resilience & Learning Project has a variety of ways to provide training both in-person and virtually, ranging in time from one hour to a full-day workshop or online series. This training gives an overview of stress and trauma, the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) research, how stress/trauma affect the brain and the stress response system, the ways we see these impacts show up in the school setting, and strategies for building resilience at the individual and school levels. Having this foundation of underlying knowledge and awareness helps put all staff on the same page in shifting perspectives on student behaviors and understanding the importance of trauma-informed supports.

## **Staff Wellness**

Take a moment to think about a time you have been overwhelmed, stressed, or just having a really bad day. How do you respond to your students and your colleagues on those days compared to other days when you are less stressed and feeling better? How does your type of response impact your students and those around you on those bad days?

We ALL have bad days, especially in the current environment in which we find ourselves. It is important therefore, to give ourselves GRACE. We will mess up. We will respond poorly to students. We will have bad days. But if we learn to recognize those signs of stress in ourselves and others, then we can respond with a plan of self-care or turn to a colleague for support so we can respond better the next time.

We've all likely heard the analogies around why focusing on staff wellness and self-care is the first step in building resilience—and we have seen time and again how true they are! If our gas tanks are on empty, we have nothing left to help to fill others' tanks. Many teachers have felt tremendous stress in the midst of school closures, switching to virtual learning, worrying about their high-risk students, and trying to tend to their own family's needs. Going into this new and unpredictable year, focusing on the well-being of our staff will be even more important. Within this area of staff wellness, it is important to focus both on making sure staff are individually taking care of themselves AND ensuring that your staff as a whole feel supported by the system and one another, with a strong sense of safety and connection.

Educators are susceptible to issues such as:

- Burnout - "The physical and emotional exhaustion that workers can experience when they have low job satisfaction and/or feel powerless and overwhelmed at work."
- Compassion fatigue - "The profound emotional and physical exhaustion that helping professionals and caregivers can develop over the course of their career as helpers."
- Vicarious Trauma (also often known as Secondary Traumatic Stress) - "The profound shift that workers experience in their world view when they work with clients who have experienced trauma." This is often a result of hearing or reading about others' traumatic stories or life events on a consistent basis or starting to actually feel another person's trauma through regular interactions with them and picking up on their trauma symptoms and reactions. Even without hearing the specific stories, teachers can experience vicarious trauma from ongoing exposure to intense trauma symptoms and reactions in their students.
- Source: The Compassion Fatigue Workbook by Francoise Mathieu

### ***Questions to consider in the planning process:***

- Does your school discuss individual staff self-care or promote the importance of staff wellness now?
- On a scale of 1-10, how would you rate your staff's level of feelings of burnout and compassion fatigue?
- What do you feel like your staff are struggling with the most as a result of COVID-19 and school closures?

- Do you feel that your staff as a whole feels emotionally safe with one another? Is there a strong sense of community and belonging among your staff?
- Do you have specific initiatives already in place that help support staff wellness or a strong sense of community and belonging among your staff (things such as duty-free lunch, administrators sharing adult mindfulness resources with staff, a buddy or mentor system for staff, or a regular yoga or walking club)? If yes, what are the specific initiatives?

***Ideas and recommendations of how to support staff wellness:*** (please note that many of these can be easily changed to better fit a virtual school environment as well)

- ASK staff what they are struggling with and what they need to support their wellness and reduce their stress!
- As much as possible, give staff an opportunity for input as safety protocols are developed. Once protocols are in place, enforce them universally and consistently so that staff at higher risk for COVID-related complications feel secure and supported.
- Consider district- or school-level supports for staff child care, particularly if schools operate on A/B days—staff may have children at home at least some of the time without a child care option.
- Provide visual reminders for staff to take care of their own physical health throughout the day – things like drinking water (which can be harder to remember to do while wearing masks), taking time to eat their own lunch, and practicing deep breathing or mindfulness along with their students as their own brain break throughout the day.
- Ensure there are protocols that are clearly communicated with staff around substitute coverage if they become sick or they need to care for someone in their family who becomes sick and are out for an extended period.
- To understand staff’s level of burnout or compassion fatigue, consider surveys such as the Professional Quality of Life Measure (ProQOL).
- Provide school-wide wellness training to staff to help them proactively develop wellness plans individually and as a community. It will be critical to start these conversations PRIOR to the start of the school year so that staff have a foundation built on the importance of self-care going into a new year of so many changes and unknowns.
- Once protocols around reopening are finalized for your district and your school, share those with staff as early as possible so they have time to access and prepare before school starts.
- Create a formal Tap-in/Tap-out program. This is a system of available staff who can quickly cover a classroom when a teacher needs a short break—be it a bathroom break, a calm-down break, or a chance to take care of other wellness needs. For this to be successful, it is important that “tap-in” staff be available quickly and that the school culture encourages and supports use of the tap-in/tap-out program as a normal part of taking care of ourselves and each other.
- Establish a lunch schedule that allows for staff to have duty-free lunch at least once a week.
- Share mindfulness resources with your staff. Things like the Calm App and other apps and sites are free right now and have great pre-recorded videos and audio clips to use for mindfulness practices for adults.

- Establish one day a week that is focused on self-care and SEL for both students AND adults (e.g., “Wellness Wednesday” or “Feel Good Friday”). Each week, you can target a specific self-care or SEL skill and give staff and students a wellness challenge. If you are in a remote learning phase, this might be a virtual challenge with an option to post fun pictures or descriptions of the activity at the end of the day. You might also consider having no academic instruction on this day, giving staff some time for planning and preparing later online material. For in-person learning, this could mean getting creative with how to weave SEL into the school day more than usual, still issuing some kind of wellness challenge for staff and families to participate in together.
- Find simple ways to just talk about self-care with staff - this could be as easy as including a self-care tip in each of your weekly staff emails, issuing a self-care group-level goal with a self-care thermometer to track progress, etc.
- Build community with staff shout-outs and praise for each other.
- Compile a list of community resources to meet staff physical and emotional needs. Consider ways to extend Employee Assistance Program benefits to staff who don’t have them, so that free mental health options are available.
- Schedule team-building time/activities and a routine time for staff to build relationships, talk about their experiences, and provide care and support to one another – consider outdoor activities or ways to do this safely while still practicing social distancing.

## **Relationships**

As more research comes out on the impact of trauma, there is slowly more and more research also on the positive impact of relationships and connection as a way to foster resilience and heal from adversity. The number one predictor of positive child outcomes is a strong positive relationship with a caregiver. It is great if this caregiver is someone at home—but it can also be a teacher, school counselor, administrator, after-school provider, or athletic coach who serves as that positive role model and source of safe adult connection that children so desperately need as a foundation.

Why are relationships so important?

- Provides a warm, secure, safe base where a child feels valued and loved.
- Ensures them that a powerful adult “has their back.”
- Models healthy and safe ways to express emotions and learn how to self-regulate with positive coping skills.
- Provides cues of safety, which tell the child’s stress response system to calm down and regulate.

Take a moment and think about your favorite teacher growing up who had the greatest impact on you. What made them so wonderful? Why did they leave such a strong impact on your life? Whatever qualities you listed are likely the same qualities we want to ensure that the adults in our school buildings will have as they connect and build relationships with each student.

We encourage schools to consider putting more time and strategies in place at the start of this upcoming school year (whether in person or virtually) that focus on building strong staff-student

relationships. Before students can access the thinking parts of their brain to be successful at learning, they must feel physically and emotionally safe with their teachers. After such an extended time away from the school building and routines, these connections will need extra effort. Below are some ideas on how to spend extra time the first few weeks of school focused on relationship building.

**Questions to consider in the planning process:**

- Have you used any of the Panorama (or similar) climate surveys with students that ask if they feel safe with/have a strong relationship with at least one adult in the school building? If so, what percentage of students answered yes or no?
- In what ways do your staff already work to build one-on-one relationships with students? In what ways do you have school-wide initiatives that focus on relationship building?
- How much time at the beginning of a normal school year do you think is needed for students to feel connected and safe to their teachers? How much more time may be needed this year given the circumstances of such an extended time away?
- What is your staff turnover rate this year? What percentage of staff will be returning and will be familiar faces to your students versus brand new?
- How do you foresee things like masks, extra hand-washing and cleaning procedures impacting the ability to form positive, safe relationships with students when schools reopen?

**Ideas and recommendations on how to create strong relationships:** (please note that many of these can be easily changed to better fit a virtual school environment as well)

- Consider setting aside time the first two weeks of school for all returning students to be able to visit with and see their teacher from the year before. Students and teachers did not get that chance to say goodbye with such abrupt school closures, and allowing for time together in this way would help with that sense of closure and moving on as well as give students a more familiar face to welcome them back.
- Set aside structured time each day for classrooms to hold Morning Meetings. This time can be reserved for fun community circle or relationship building activities for the first two weeks of school and expand to include social-emotional learning after classroom connections are solidified.
- Utilize a “get to know you” survey for kids to answer things about their family or hobbies so that teachers can get to know them as individuals. Save the surveys so you can check in with them on their personal interests and help them feel valued.
- Encourage staff to set aside more time than usual for brief one-on-one check-ins and connection building conversations with students.
- Initiate a school- or class-wide community project, ideally based on student input (e.g., school beautification project, letters/pictures for elder adults). This can empower students to do something productive and caring, restoring a sense of control and contribution to the larger community.
- Set up a formal Check-in/Check-out program with students who may need a higher level of intervention and adult support.

- Prior to school starting, identify students from the previous year who seemed to need extra support or were disengaged during remote learning. Pair these students with a mentor or create a connection plan for those individual students.
- Think about how protocols like staff wearing masks and maintaining physical distance will affect the development of positive relationships and attachment with students. Brainstorm ways to help—like having staff also wear a picture of their face smiling on their shirt each day, or staff creating and showing videos of themselves without a mask on. Consider clear masks, if feasible.
- Think about when, where and how you might incorporate play and playfulness into the school day, for both staff and students. It's very important that we don't neglect play as we focus on safety, because neuroscience shows clearly that play is the state of felt safety where we can be receptive to genuine connecting and learning. We need ways of helping adults and kids enter a play state to help with safety, relationship, regulation and resilience.

In general, plan to spend significantly more time than usual on relationship building at the start of next school year. With so much time away, a lack of real closure to the school year, and continued uncertainty and anxiety for so many, relationships have to be FIRST before any learning can begin. It will also be important for schools to ensure they spend time re-building relationships with caregivers and families, checking to see how they are doing, what needs they have, and listening to their concerns and obstacles. Many families are struggling, and school engagement may not be the most important need on their lists!

### **Structure, Routine, and Expectations**

One of the things we've likely all been craving is the former sense of structure and routine that we had prior to COVID-19. We now live in a time where the future continues to be unpredictable, we are spending much more time at home than usual, and we don't have access to all of the people and resources we are used to having regularly. We know that our kids are missing their structure and routine too— they may not admit that they miss things like math class, but they miss the routine of going to school every day, having a safe and predictable classroom to be a part of, seeing friends, and knowing what to expect day to day and hour to hour while at school. They also miss the structure of sleep, exercise, and healthy eating that school can help support. This time of uncertainty is hard for them!

No matter what school looks like in the coming year, taking steps to create structure and predictability after such an extended time of school closures and remote learning will be even more important than usual.

#### ***Questions to consider in the planning process:***

- What do you normally do at the start of a new school year to reintegrate students back into the school day routines and set clear expectations?
- How were you able to continue any structure or routine during the time of school closures and remote learning this spring?
- What former routines or expectations might you need to change for the coming year depending on circumstances?

- When you think about the ideal environment or ideal school day for your students returning, what does it look like? What might be needed that you don't already have in place from previous years?
- What were the most chaotic times during the school day for students prior to school closures?
- How could you help to make new protocols (things like wearing masks, social distancing, etc.) fun activities for kids?

***Ideas and recommendations of how to create a clear sense of structure, routine, and expectations:***

*(please note that many of these can be easily changed to better fit a virtual school environment as well)*

- As a staff, review discipline policies, expectations, and classroom rules over the summer. Consider updates and changes that might create a safer and more supportive environment for students in the current conditions. Spend time reviewing any changes with staff in advance of the school year and allow for their input. In particular, introduction of restorative discipline policies and alternatives to suspension can result in more trauma-informed behavioral management and keep students in the classroom where they can learn both academics and social-emotional coping skills.
- Consider how mask wearing will be encouraged and enforced. Brainstorm as a staff how to remind students about how to properly wear a mask without shaming, punishing, or excluding. Ideas could include incorporating into a social-emotional learning on kindness or compassion or talking about the science or history of viruses and masks.
- Increase signage around schedules and expectations - we know most classrooms already have these types of signs up, but consider ways to make them more effective or visible. In particular, focus on a list of "do's" rather than a list of "don'ts." Also communicate and brainstorm with parents around ways to maintain similar schedules and expectations at home during remote learning. Students and families may need individualized problem solving to fit their needs and circumstances.
- Encourage staff to review these expectations and schedules with students at least DAILY for the first few weeks of school as students re-acclimate to daily rhythms and rules.
- Consider how to establish more consistency with transition times or unstructured time like lunch and recess, with reminders and predictable routines.
- Consider ways to make new guidelines and routines more playful and fun to minimize stress on students. For instance, add a "lava flow" to the center of walkways where students are not allowed to step in order to promote distancing, or have students create masks of different facial expressions that they can hold up in front of their masks to share their feelings.

We know that so many students are experiencing a lack of routine or clear expectations, particularly during COVID, but we also know that kids actually thrive far more when they know what is expected of them and can predict what is happening next. With so much time away from school, we will have to spend significantly more time resetting expectations and schedules so that kids get used to being back at school and back in the rhythms of the school day—whether in person or virtually. Consistency and predictability are key.

## **Self-Regulation Skills and Social-Emotional Learning**

Most districts and schools were already implementing or beginning to implement social-emotional learning (SEL) as a part of their school-wide curriculum prior to COVID-19 through strategies like morning meeting time, implementation of Second Step or Sanford Harmony, or some kind of mindfulness or brain breaks throughout the day. Given the circumstances we are in now, SEL is even more critical in providing our students with the skills and support they need for success.

Learning to manage our thoughts, our feelings, and our behaviors is critical to lifelong well-being. Too often, we assume kids already have these skills and are simply choosing not to enact them. On the contrary, however, social-emotional learning has to be something we teach and coach as a set of skills just like any other academic content.

We highly recommend that schools do their best to keep SEL at the forefront of their re-entry planning. While it will be tempting to first focus on academics and all of the missed instruction time, if SEL does not come first, it will be much harder in the long run to get to the academic curriculum. We know that kids' stress response systems and anxiety will be even more heightened when they return, and we have to put supports and teaching in place to help kids learn how to regulate, calm their stress response systems, and access the higher thinking part of their brain.

### ***Questions to consider in the planning process:***

- What were you doing to support SEL prior to COVID and school closures? What curriculum or specific initiatives did you have in place?
- Were you able to continue SEL virtually after schools closed? If yes, how were you able to do this? What worked or didn't work?
- Do you have any kind of formal system in place to identify which students may need more support or higher levels of intervention for SEL (e.g., a social-emotional screening tool or COVID needs assessment)?
- What do you foresee as some of the greatest struggles students may have socially and emotionally when they return to school—whether it is virtually or in person—in the fall?
- Does the majority of your staff have a basic understanding of SEL and why it is important?

### ***Ideas and recommendations on how to incorporate SEL: (please note that many of these can be easily changed to better fit a virtual school environment as well)***

- Consider using a specific SEL screener to gain a better understanding of students' individual needs when it comes to these skills. The Devereux Student Strengths Assessment (DESSA) is one to consider, and has a short form called the DESSA-mini. Panorama also has several surveys that could help to identify some of these needs.
- Add SEL into your MTSS system. Using tiers for SEL interventions can be done the same way it's done for academics, with a formal system for Tier I, II, and III interventions. Some examples include:
  - Tier I: School-wide SEL curriculum used in every classroom through morning meeting time, Peace Corners in every room, a five-minute mindfulness or movement brain break

in every room following peak transition times, school-wide feelings or emotional temperature check such as Zones of Regulation

- Tier II: SEL skills groups with the counselor or social worker, mentoring program
- Tier III: Check-in/Check-out, referral to school-based mental health or other community mental health partners
- Train staff on the importance of SEL and on any specific curriculum or program you plan to implement. Continue ongoing coaching to support successful implementation.
- Teach students about their stress response system in a developmentally appropriate way so that they understand what is happening in their bodies and can begin to notice when they need to calm down or ask for help.
- Learn about and teach simple self-regulation skills to students. Things like deep belly breathing, blowing bubbles, squishing putty or a stress ball, drawing, grounding exercises, or any activity that activates one of the five senses can be used as a quick go-to calm down strategy.
- Once you have introduced and tried out several self-regulation skills, ask every student to create their own “regulation plan” that lists their favorite activities to calm down or feel better when they are upset. Help each student record this on a card to keep nearby (and consider a copy for the teacher). Spend time having kids practice these individual skills when your class is calm and regulated.
- In lieu of Peace Corners in classrooms (which might be problematic due to shared space and materials), create calm-down boxes or kits that students can keep at their desks or at home. Include materials to support them in their “regulation plans.” Many calm-down materials can be created as craft projects or purchased in bulk.
- Incorporate mindfulness and brain breaks through already existing online tools such as Mind Yeti on Vimeo, Headspace, or Smiling Mind.
- Provide space for processing experiences and feelings in a way that is comfortable for them, and at their own pace. Ideas include artwork, writing about obstacles AND strengths, and reading/discussing books about emotions, coping skills, empathy, and optimism.
- Consider a school- or district-level mental health hotline so that individuals or their friends, neighbors, and family members can report concerns and receive support and connection to resources.

Spending time on teaching skills such as identifying feelings, managing frustration and anger, empathy, positive coping skills, problem-solving, and controlling impulses will be more important than any math or reading lesson when we come back to school in the fall and we encourage schools to think through a plan that allows for more time than usual spent on this type of skill-building.

## **Mental Health Support and Crisis Planning**

Recent news and studies are already showing the increased mental health concerns for kids and adults of all ages as a result of the global crisis we are in. While every district has different systems and partners in place, our final area of recommendation is to ensure your mental health and crisis plans are revised and amplified to anticipate the increased need when school reopens.

***Questions to consider in the planning process:***

- Who are your current community partners? How strong is your relationship with them? Have you reached out to them since COVID-19 began?
- What mental health supports do you currently have in place for students and staff?
- What specific mental health needs do you anticipate for students and staff when school returns?
- Have you updated your crisis plan or created a COVID-specific hotline?

***Ideas and recommendations of how to increase mental health support:***

- Reach out to any of your already existing community partners and learn how they are providing support to the local community around COVID-19. See how you can pull them in or expand your partnership for when school returns.
- Research any community partners you do not already have and network to begin collaboration.
- Create a plan to maximize the use of any school-based mental health in your school or district. Work with providers to understand how telehealth works for them as an option to reach and serve more families - especially if there continues to be remote learning in the fall.
- Put in place a COVID-19-specific hotline - many districts have already done this but if you haven't this is a good consideration to have in place prior to school opening. You don't have to reinvent the wheel - use any community partners (like the local domestic violence agency) who already has a hotline to learn from them how to set up this process.
- Put together a resource document that can be shared with staff and families that includes local resources (for food as well as mental health supports and other important hotlines) and national resources such as hotlines for suicide prevention and domestic violence.
- Include time with both staff (in staff meetings prior to school starting) and students (during Morning Meeting or SEL-lesson time) to talk specifically about increased mental health needs many are experiencing right now and who they can reach out to for help and support – normalizing these feelings and the need for additional support in these uncertain times.
- Spend time reviewing any revisions to your overall crisis plan with staff prior to school starting. Part of this plan may include seeking guidance from Prevent Child Abuse NC around child protection protocols during remote learning.

We know that mental health support will be needed even more than usual when school reopens - both for students AND staff. As much planning and preparation as we can do in advance with local community partners and mental health providers will help to meet the needs of families and provide increased services.