



Creating Positive Learning Environments: Recommendations and Resources to Support the Social Emotional Well-being of Students, Staff, and Families

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Introduction

The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) is providing information to help districts and schools prioritize and support the social emotional well-being of students, staff, and families as they prepare for the new school year. This document includes a series of recommendations and sample resources¹ to support planning and implementation.

As noted in DESE's [Initial Fall School Reopening Guidance](#), districts and schools are preparing one plan with for three possible teaching and learning models: full-time, in-person learning with new safety requirements; remote learning; and hybrid, a combination of in-person and remote. Even during a pandemic, our job as educators is to create a safe and healthy learning environment that is joyful, engaging, and equitable for every child. In Massachusetts, we have demonstrated immense resilience and creativity in dealing with this complex situation. Whether operating in-person, remotely, or through a combination of the two, the public education system plays a pivotal role in supporting students, families, and communities. The following recommendations provide support for the efforts already underway as well as for the work ahead.

The recommendations provided in this document reflects three overarching principles:

- ***Parity and Interdependence of Physical and Emotional Safety.*** Physical and emotional safety are inextricably linked at the most fundamental level. As we implement [reopening guidance](#) related to the physical, logistical, and technical aspects of the three teaching and learning models, we need to engage in a parallel assessment of the social emotional implications of each scenario, with an emphasis on how we will communicate with and support staff, students, and families before, during, and after reopening.
- ***Equity and Racial Justice.*** Schools will reopen in the fall after experiencing school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic *and* months of heightened national discourse related to our country's long history of institutional racism. In addition, the pandemic's disproportionate impact on people of color will reverberate long after we return to school. As a result, we need to put racial equity and cultural responsiveness at the center of our work, including in our COVID-19 planning.
- ***Collective Care.*** In the year ahead, it is vital that we take care of each other by fostering a sense of common purpose, building strong relationships, and reinforcing the social emotional skills we use to support each other and respond to challenges together. The concept of collective care is inclusive of self-care practices but goes further by asking us to show proactive compassion for one another - both on interpersonal and systemic levels.

This document was developed in close consultation with a multidisciplinary team of practitioners and experts, including school and district administrators, school and community-based mental health providers, social emotional and mental health specialists, and parent and family representatives. It builds upon the [guidance on behavioral and mental health services during school closures](#) (*download*) that we released in the spring and was also informed by the [Return-to-School Working Group](#)'s discussions. Special thanks to the many district, school, community, and state stakeholders who contributed to this work.

¹ This guidance includes sample resources for districts and schools. The resources listed throughout the document do not represent an endorsement or recommendation by DESE of any social emotional, wellness, or mental health resource, product, or approach.

How to Use this Document

This document outlines a range of topics related to systems and practices that can be leveraged to support student and adult social emotional well-being this summer and fall. It is centered around a [multi-tiered system of support](#) (MTSS) framework and is designed to be sufficiently comprehensive to address different schools' priorities and needs.

The document is organized into three main sections, each containing more specific topics. Depending on your local context, as well as your specific role, you may choose to engage with all of the topics or focus on the ones that are most pertinent to your needs and/or position. We recognize that you might not have time to review this entire document before school starts. The sections in the [Table of Contents](#) are hyperlinked for ease of use, and **we have included five top recommendations below, which are also hyperlinked.**

Top Recommendations for District and School Leaders

If you are interested in prioritizing a few key areas, we suggest focusing on the following five recommendations:

From Section 1: Bolstering Tier 1 Supports for all Students, Staff, and Families

- 1a. Engaging Families as Partners: [Maintain strong two-way communication with families prior to and during the school year using culturally and linguistically responsive practices.](#)
- 1b. Supporting Staff: [Stay connected with staff and help to manage uncertainty.](#)
- 1c. Re-envisioning School Culture and the Conditions for Learning: [Allocate a structured period of culture-building time as school first opens.](#)

From Section 2: Preparing to Address Increased Tier 2 & Tier 3 Needs

- 2b. Supporting More Intensive Mental Health Needs: [Assume and plan for an increase in mental health needs and adjust methods of delivery accordingly.](#)

From Section 3: Mobilizing Around this Work

- 3c. [Articulate the Roles of Key Stakeholders Before and After School Reopens](#)

Section 1. Bolstering Tier 1 Supports for all Students, Staff, and Families

Every student, family, and staff member has experienced, and continues to experience, the impacts of COVID-19. Districts and schools are encouraged to adapt and enhance their Tier 1 (universal) supports for all students and adults to account for these unprecedented demands. The goal of these universal supports is to meet the needs of approximately 80-85 percent of students, staff, and families. Universal supports include getting students back into a regular, healthy routine, which we know is a vital step for children’s social emotional health.

1a. Engaging Families as Partners

During the spring, families and caregivers became front-line educators for their children overnight, in addition to managing an extraordinary range of stressors. As schools reopen in the fall, we can expect these stressors to continue and potentially even increase. Therefore, it will be even more critical for schools to develop effective and equitable systems for communicating with, supporting, and fostering the partnership and leadership of families and caregivers.

1. ***Maintain strong two-way communication with families prior to and during the school year using culturally and linguistically responsive practices.*** It is essential to engage in two-way communication with all families in their primary language. We know that districts and schools are already engaged with families and caregivers prior to the start of the school year to provide opportunities for them to voice their concerns, questions, needs, insights, and ideas. Since most students will have spent several months in the full-time company of their family or caregivers, schools and districts should take the opportunity to obtain as much data and information from family or caregivers as possible (e.g., through family surveys, interviews, virtual town halls, etc.).

It is vital to leverage the various ways that families access information, including email, phone, text, teacher meetings, social media, and through cultural, faith-based or civic affinity groups and community organizations. Districts and schools should ask families directly about the best ways to reach them (download [Sample Questions for Individualized Family Communication Plans](#) for example protocols). It is critical that communication strategies be both multi-modal and multi-lingual so that every family has access to the information they need and opportunities to fully engage as partners in their child’s education and leaders within the school community.

2. ***Reassess families’ strengths and support needs.*** Many districts are also using surveys, feedback sessions, one-on-one support staff outreach, and/or other methods this summer to help identify student and family needs related to technology, transportation, food security, housing, and/or health concerns. These same methods can be used to check in about social emotional health; for example, surveys can include questions about the level of stress or concern related to different aspects of their child’s education (e.g., “Where was your child most successful during remote schooling? Where could they use some additional help?”). In addition to assessing student and family needs, districts and schools should identify strengths and assets that can be leveraged to foster a positive transition this fall. Without overburdening families, find ways to check in at different time intervals to identify any evolving needs in their child’s learning experience and in the school’s or district’s family engagement efforts.

3. ***Set common expectations about what educators can do to support families during reopening.*** Who is responsible for checking in with families when children do not show up for or participate in class (in-person or virtually)? Who is responsible for communicating with families around social emotional or mental health concerns? Schools should make sure all staff are aware of their role in engaging families and equip staff with any messaging templates, talking points, professional development, or tools to help them engage with families in welcoming and culturally and linguistically responsive ways. This includes making sure that you have a plan for how bilingual/multilingual staff or parent volunteers will engage with families who are not comfortable communicating in English. Families will need clear information in family-friendly language about what is expected of their child socially, emotionally, and academically and how they can support their child at home. Finally, schools should articulate a clear system to track both family engagement outreach efforts and the data that those efforts uncover about family strengths, needs, and preferred ways to be contacted.
4. ***Leverage community resources and leaders.*** Enlisting family and community leaders in reopening and family engagement activities can significantly boost a district's or school's ability to reach all families. Formal groups (e.g., PTOs, PTAs, Special Education Parent Advisory Councils (SEPACs), English Language Learner Parent Advisory Councils (ELLPACs) and community-based organizations (e.g., afterschool programs and healthcare providers), as well as respected individuals and social media influencers can get your reopening messaging out, advise leadership on reopening and engagement efforts, and surface family concerns. Not all families are able to take on leadership roles, but all families should have a variety of opportunities to partner with their child's school to provide input, connect with other families, help students meet their learning goals, etc.
5. ***Connect families to community-based mental health and family support resources.*** Districts and schools often play an important role in connecting families with community-based resources related to mental health services and family support. When sharing these resources, staff should be sensitive to the stigma sometimes associated with mental health services. For example, schools may want to share resources with all families, rather than just those they believe or assume to be in need. It is also important to consider the language used to refer to mental health services, as some communities may be more receptive to the idea of social emotional, well-being, or parenting/caregiving supports.

Equity-Related Planning Questions:

- How have we given diverse families and caregivers a voice in our reopening planning efforts?
- Have we designed our family communication, support, and care coordination systems with the most marginalized families in mind, rather than the mythical "typical parent"?
- How have we trained all staff who interact with families on respectful communication processes and approaches across race, class, and cultural differences, including an awareness of how communication with families and caregivers can often include microaggressions that are unintentional but nevertheless damaging?

- Have we had a conversation with all staff responsible for family outreach about the particular fears and realities that Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) families may be experiencing in this moment?

Resources for Engaging Families as Reopening Partners:

- [Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family–School Partnerships](#)
- [Engaging Families Using the MTSS Model: Love in the Time of COVID](#)
- COVID-19 [mental health resources for families and children](#)
- [Prenatal through young adulthood family engagement framework](#)

1b. Supporting Staff

Students often take their lead from the adults around them, including the coping skills we use. For example, students show lower levels of social adjustment and academic performance [when teachers are stressed](#). In contrast, [supporting educators’ social emotional skills](#) can have a positive impact on student learning. In an average year, [1 in every 5 U.S. adults](#) experiences mental health challenges. This year is by no means average, particularly for staff members directly affected by COVID-19 and staff members of color.

1. ***Stay connected with staff and help to manage uncertainty.*** Districts and schools can help educators manage the current uncertainty and emotional churn by providing regular updates about planning activities and optional check-in/stakeholder input meetings - even if leadership teams do not have all the answers yet. Surveys can also be used to collect information related to reopening planning and what supports adults need (e.g., questions that are most on staff members’ minds, professional development that staff feel is essential, general concerns among staff members, etc.). Administrators can then work on universal strategies to promote collective care (space and time for staff to support each other) as well as educator [self-care](#) (in school and at home). For staff with more intensive needs, supplemental supports can be provided through onsite or external resources.
2. ***Communicate clear operational protocols and provide opportunities for practice.*** It is critical for staff to receive clear communication about how key situations will be managed and have opportunities to walk through these protocols and ask questions. In order to support staff’s ability to manage new operational protocols, districts and schools should minimize unnecessary changes and establish protocols that will remain consistent as COVID-19 restrictions ease or tighten. If a change is needed, districts and schools should communicate this clearly and provide a clear rationale for it.
3. ***Consider dedicating more time in the schedule for staff collaboration around learning-as-you-go.*** Reopening, in any model, will be complicated logistically, social-emotionally, and instructionally. Planning is essential, but unexpected situations and challenges will arise. Staff and administrators will benefit from dedicated time together to process and respond to student, staff, and family feedback about what is working, what is not, and for whom.

Equity-Related Planning Questions:

- Which staff have been engaged in planning related to reopening and social emotional support for staff? Which voices have we not heard from?
- This year may present unique challenges and risks for particular staff members in terms of social emotional needs, health, finances, childcare, support around remote learning, etc. How will we assess these needs? Do we see any inequities we need to own and address?

Resources for Supporting Educators:

- [Reunite, Renew, and Thrive: Social and Emotional Learning \(SEL\) Roadmap for Reopening School](#)
- [Educator Resilience and Trauma Informed Self-Care Self-Assessment and Planning Tool](#)
- [Three Signature SEL Practices - Creating the Conditions for Adult Learning](#)
- [SEL 3 Signature Practices Playbook](#)
- [Hosting Virtual Circles](#)
- [The Educator Context and Stress Spectrum](#)
- [Community Care Strategies for Schools During the Coronavirus Crisis](#)
- [Support for Teachers Affected by Trauma](#)
- [Leveraging Social and Emotional Learning to Support Adults in the Time of COVID-19](#)

1c. Re-envisioning School Culture and the Conditions for Learning

In every reopening model, school will look, feel, and work differently than school as students, educators, and families have previously known it. The following suggestions are designed to help everyone orient themselves to the changed environment, establish a new school culture, and create a set of routines and practices that work in a COVID-19 context.

1. ***Allocate a structured period of culture-building time as school first opens.*** Districts can signal the importance of social emotional well-being by identifying and supporting a well-defined reopening phase that educators, students, and families can use to co-create their “new normal.” Certain elements, such as public health measures and safety protocols, will be guided by federal, state, and local mandates. However, there is still a great deal schools can do to integrate safety protocols, build a social emotional foundation to reinforce those measures, and establish readiness for learning this year by:
 - Leveraging visual and other storytelling methods before school begins, which can help make the “new normal” known. For example, staff might reach out and share videos of themselves in their classrooms to help families understand what the new classroom looks like. Once school is underway, building leaders and educators might share weekly updates with stories and pictures.
 - Identifying strategies for physical activity and learner interaction that work in the new physical or virtual setting. For example, educators and students can come up with a plan for mindfulness activities, movement breaks, a classroom exercise or stretching corner, student-led energizers, and time outside. This also applies to remote learning settings. For example, schools can build 15-minute breaks between online learning sessions and prioritize hands-on and physical activities as part of remote lessons.

- Having teachers and students co-create strategies that simultaneously help reinforce safety measures and creatively address their social emotional implications. For example, schools can use hand signs to communicate emotions difficult to see behind a mask or identify new roles students can play to support each other. There is a great deal schools can do to integrate safety protocols and creatively help students, staff, and families adjust to the new requirements.
2. ***Establish a strong sense of emotional safety and responsiveness.*** In the classroom, educators can focus on cultivating a culture of emotional safety and responsiveness, where connection, compassion, and empathy are the first line of support. By acknowledging the range of experiences, narratives, and emotions people are bringing into the new school year, schools can set the tone and remove stigma. This includes building awareness about the range of experiences students may bring into the new school year, how emotions may manifest (e.g., behaviors, social emotional needs, engagement or disengagement in learning), and appropriate support strategies.
 3. ***Develop a culture and routine that help students integrate in-person and remote learning.*** Schools can promote practices that make in-person and remote learning feel like one integrated experience. Students need to feel part of a cohesive learning community and know how to travel back and forth across learning settings. Practices that link in-person and remote learning might include synchronous activities led by students (students at school and working remotely join together), weekly check-ins to manage transitions between school- and home-based learning, and regular strategies for connecting with classmates who cannot attend school in person. To help maximize both settings, educators can also work explicitly with students on the social emotional skills they will most need (e.g., self-management, self-advocacy) and establish clear learner support structures (e.g., independent learning schedules, office hours or check-in times, advisories or peer support activities).

Equity-Related Planning Question:

- School plans to establish the new school culture and conditions for learning should reflect an understanding of the impact this year is having on communities of color. What methods will we use to create a sense of emotional safety and support for students and families of color, particularly during the initial reopening period?

Resources for Re-envisioning School Culture and Conditions for Learning:

- [How to Keep the Greater Good in Mind During the Coronavirus Outbreak](#)
- [Helping Kids Face the Challenges of Reopening](#)
- [How Students Benefit from a School Reopening Plan Designed for Those at the Margins](#)
- [Imagining September: Online Design Charrettes for Fall 2020 Planning with Students and Stakeholders](#)
- [How to Reopen Schools: A 10-Point Plan Putting Equity at the Center](#)
- [How K-12 Schools Should Prepare for Reopening During the 2020-21 Academic Year: An Equity Checklist](#)
- [Reengaging Students](#)
- [What Does Good Classroom Design Look Like in the Age of Social Distancing?](#)

- [Four Core Priorities for Trauma-Informed Distance Learning](#)

1d. Strengthening Key Social Emotional Skills and Mindsets

Social emotional learning (SEL), the process through which students and adults develop the skills and mindsets needed to thrive, is more critical than ever. As schools reopen, focusing on SEL with culturally responsive programming (a universal, Tier 1 strategy) can alleviate the stress, anxiety, and isolation that many students and adults are feeling. Culturally responsive SEL leverages norms and values from the range of cultures represented in our communities and promotes strong relationships, positive self-image, and motivation for success.

1. ***Prioritize relevant and culturally responsive areas of SEL.*** There are a variety of frameworks and definitions for SEL, but for reopening, districts and schools may want to prioritize two or three areas. This can provide greater clarity on the skills and mindsets that should be reflected in reopening policies and will illuminate areas where teachers may need support.

Three key focus areas could be **relationship building, self-awareness, and self-management**. Though SEL is not a one-size-fits-all approach, these competencies are foundational to individual well-being. For instance, [self-management strategies](#) not only involve one's ability to regulate emotions, but can also improve focus and alleviate stress, anxiety, and feelings of uncertainty. However, it is vital that schools use a culturally responsive lens in these efforts, consider the greater context, and avoid placing blame on students. For example, behavior interpreted as a lack of self-management may actually be a response to a learning environment that feels unsafe.

2. ***Practice meaningful integration of academics and SEL.*** Social, emotional, and academic learning are mutually reinforcing. By weaving SEL into the fabric of the curriculum, educators can help students build on their existing abilities within the context of their core learning experience. This universal approach to SEL is flexible and can be applied to in-person, hybrid, and remote learning contexts. Schools can encourage educators to plan moments in their lessons to model social emotional skills in alignment with content objectives. For example, a challenging math lesson can provide an opportunity for adults to model a growth mindset, while a lesson in science can lend itself to adult modeling of curiosity. Both of these examples can be adapted to any teaching and learning context.

While there are a variety of programs and curricula available, the integration approach below focuses on strong pedagogical practices to accommodate all grade levels and subject areas. The five components of the [SEL Integration Approach](#) are interdependent and come together to strengthen social, emotional, and academic learning.

- **Examine:** Adults who self-reflect are better equipped to create a classroom ethos that is inclusive and welcoming to all members of the school community. By regularly examining one's identities and the way they inform one's approach to education, educators can more effectively serve students.

- **Cultivate:** A supportive learning environment is cultivated through an intentional approach to routines and rituals, accessibility, messaging, physical and virtual space, and relationships. Building connections with students, respecting them as individuals, and facilitating meaningful peer interactions fosters this strong sense of belonging.
- **Teach:** Explicitly teaching SEL competencies in a variety of settings enables students to generalize their skills to new and increasingly complex situations over time. This instruction need not be passive; students should actively engage using activities such as role playing and group work.
- **Model:** Adults implicitly model SEL for students all the time through their real-time decisions, response to challenges, and expression of compassion. In the same way, students serve as models for their peers. Strong modeling includes both demonstration and the process of “thinking aloud.”
- **Coach:** Unpredictable and ever-changing aspects of the classroom environment provide invaluable opportunities for social emotional growth. By focusing on coaching and practice rather than on discipline or punishment, students can see how skills and mindsets are malleable, evolving over time and adaptable to different contexts.

Educators who try to incorporate all five components will create a learning environment in which all students can experience, internalize, and apply the skills and mindsets that are critical to success in school and beyond.

It is important to differentiate delivery style and timing when helping students strengthen their social emotional skills, such as stress management, self-awareness, and boundary setting. Because stress management can take different forms given students’ ages and life experiences, educators can provide valuable models of how to cope with stress. Similarly, to encourage naming and processing emotions, educators can employ check-in strategies such as [roses and thorns](#) or a simple student survey on digital learning such as this [middle and high school Google Form](#). Finally, set and maintain boundaries using the [“when/then” strategy](#) and model for students how they, too, can set boundaries. While these strategies are designed for use with students, educators should also prioritize their own emotional state and practice stress reduction strategies.

3. ***Adapt SEL for each learning model.*** Whether in in-person, hybrid, or remote mode, find ways to help students feel seen, heard, and empowered at school, online, and at home. If you use an SEL curriculum, check with your provider to see if there are virtual lessons, online modules, or adaptations you can use to adjust to a hybrid or remote learning environment. When creating opportunities for students to practice SEL at school or at home, consider building in play, creativity, and other ways to reduce stress. For instance, implement “brain breaks” to encourage healthy activity and emotional regulation. Try using these [videos](#) as well as these [Breathe, Think, Do](#) and [body scan](#) activities. Encourage students and families to [play](#), and consider engaging families in the creation of a [family charter](#) or family values poster.

Support students while they adapt to transitions by establishing routines in school, whether in person or virtual. This predictability is particularly important for students who

have experienced traumatic events or may be experiencing anxiety or uncertainty due to the pandemic. For example, create continuity by relying on SEL strategies and activities that can be adapted to any learning model, such as morning meetings, [mood meters](#), [advisory/crew](#), and [individual check-ins](#). Establish and adhere to a schedule that includes these routines and social emotional touchpoints. When plans must change, particularly when transitioning between in-person learning and remote learning, explain these adjustments to students. Model flexibility, adaptability, and strong SEL skills when these changes occur.

Equity-Related Planning Questions:

- How have we solicited student and [family feedback](#) to ensure that our social emotional learning efforts are informed by and reflective of their values and priorities?
- Have we considered the unique needs of students who are experiencing homelessness and/or living in congregate care and their ability to access and establish these routines and practices?

Resources for Strengthening Key Social Emotional Skills and Mindsets:

- [SEL Integration Approach](#)
- [Reunite, Renew, and Thrive: SEL Roadmap for Reopening School](#)
- [Why We Can't Afford Whitewashed Social Emotional Learning](#)
- [Culturally Responsive Social-Emotional Competency Development](#)
- [Trauma-Informed SEL Toolkit](#)
- [Mindfulness Tool Kit](#)
- [Self-Management Toolkit](#)
- [Including Voice in Education: Addressing Equity Through Student and Family Voice in Classroom Learning](#)

1e. Cultivating Positive Behavior

At the beginning of each school year, schools should take time to train new members of the school community (staff, students, families) and remind returning members of the school's expectations for positive behavior. While many of these desired behaviors are consistent from year to year, this year necessitates new considerations and requirements in order to comply with federal, state, and local health and safety mandates. Districts will need to communicate early and often with the school community to ensure that they understand and are able to perform their respective roles in ways that align with their school's social and behavioral norms.

1. ***Clearly define what positive behavior looks like in the new school context.*** Schools create a culture and climate that is predicated on a set of social and behavioral norms, and these norms are often correlated to a set of positive behaviors that demonstrate understanding of the norms. Schools are encouraged to reexamine the norms and values they aspire to uphold and whether those correlating behaviors are clearly defined and communicated. This is most powerfully done in collaboration with students, families, and staff. For example, the school community may consider what respect for self, others, community, and property should look like in our current context. They may ask: *“This year, what will it look like for students to demonstrate respect in each of these areas?”*

How can staff and families support students to be successful in demonstrating respect in each of these areas? What may be some unique challenges given the new environment?"

2. ***Proactively and creatively update the entire school community regarding expectations for positive behavior.*** While the specific language regarding positive behavior may vary across districts and schools, what is most important is that the expectations for positive behavior are shared regularly – leading up to school, during school reopening, and throughout the school year. Schools may find that enlisting partners (e.g., families, after-school programs) in their communication efforts will help spread the information as widely as possible. In addition, schools can consider multiple modes of sharing and teaching these expectations. For example, they can provide students and families with instructional videos offered in multiple languages and shared on different platforms.
3. ***Reinforce the community aspect of positive behavior through documented social expectations and ongoing dialogue.*** Staff, students, and families have concerns about a number of pressing topics, including but not limited to: student adherence to COVID-19 health and safety mandates; stigma directed at students if they or a family member contract COVID-19; and bullying. To foster students' ability to engage in positive behaviors, schools (in consultation with students and families) may create or update a documented set of social expectations that very clearly delineates desired behaviors, incentives for demonstrating positive behaviors, and follow-up supports and/or consequences for behaviors that breach these expectations.
4. ***Prioritize teaching and modeling behavioral expectations in the classroom and other school spaces.*** Some of the new behavioral expectations may feel unnatural to both students and adults. To help students acclimate to the new expectations, it is vital that adults both teach and model them with consistency. To do this well, schools may need modified processes and supports this year, including more time up front to establish and practice the desired practices and behaviors. More comprehensive planning will also be needed to redefine expected behaviors at key points of the school day (e.g., during transitions, at lunch, arrival/dismissal, etc.) and for novel contexts (e.g., remote or hybrid learning). Effective plans may include strategies and tools for teaching, modeling, practicing, and reteaching behavioral expectations throughout the year, as well as systems for monitoring adherence to the behavioral expectations. Additionally, teachers and support staff may find it helpful to engage families in advance of or early in the school year to identify students who may struggle with some of the new behavioral expectations and to proactively brainstorm and plan for strategies that will help with the transition.
5. ***Contextualize violations of behavioral expectations and consider a restorative response.*** This year, staff, students, and families all need to learn new habits, including habits that restrict our natural instincts to socialize and seek human connection. With respect to students, a violation of a behavioral expectation should be understood and addressed in the context of: child and adolescent development, the norms and expectations of the student's race and culture, the impact of trauma on the brain, and behavior as a means of communicating an unmet need. Taking these dimensions into account, educators and families are better positioned to determine the most appropriate response to the violation,

which may include [restorative practices](#). We strongly recommend that schools minimize the use of exclusionary discipline. Over the past decade there has been a significant shift away from punitive disciplinary customs into more restorative approaches. There are numerous restorative models used across the country; many focus on practices to create and sustain community, resolve conflicts, and attune individuals to the community of people around them. These practices encourage human connection, vulnerability, caring, compassion, empathy, and positive relationships.

Equity-Related Planning Questions:

- Are the school's behavioral expectations aligned with and reflective of the norms and values of all students' backgrounds? What steps have we taken to get student and family feedback to this question?
- Are we regularly disaggregating our data (by race, gender, disability status, etc.) to determine whether specific student groups are being disciplined more frequently than others or experiencing disproportionate consequences for the same violations?
- Will the new behavioral expectations and consequences disproportionately impact specific student groups (e.g., students with disabilities, students who have experienced trauma, etc.)? What restorative measures can be taken to ensure that those students are supported in the adoption of behaviors required for health and safety reasons?

Resources for Supporting Positive Behavior:

- [Returning to School During and After Crisis: A Guide to Supporting States, Districts, Schools, Educators, and Students through a Multi-Tiered Systems of Support Framework during the 2020-2021 School Year](#)
- [COVID-19 Resources: General Restorative Practices](#)

Section 2. Preparing to Address Increased Tier 2 and Tier 3 Needs

This fall, schools are likely to see increased rates of chronic stress, anxiety, and depression due to the pandemic, social isolation, a weakened economy, and the [racial trauma](#) that many students have experienced. Consequently, districts and schools may need to enhance their systems for proactively identifying students' needs and addressing them with the appropriate Tier 2 (targeted) and Tier 3 (intensive) supports.

2a. Building Upon Your System of Tiered Supports

Many schools already have a tiered system of support in place, which they can adapt and strengthen to meet the increased needs that we anticipate this fall.

1. ***Reexamine the current landscape of supports and services and identify additional resources as needed.*** It may be helpful to quickly [map/document](#) (or revisit past documentation of) your Tier 1, Tier 2, and Tier 3 social emotional and mental health supports and services in order to identify strengths and anticipated areas of need. During this process, it is important to apply an equity lens to explore whether the resources (practitioners, organizations, etc.) have the capacity to meet student and family needs related to primary language, cultural background, sexual orientation, disability, or other consideration.
2. ***Prepare to adapt Tier 2 and Tier 3 supports and delivery systems.*** Tier 2 and Tier 3 supports may need to be adapted for physically distanced and/or remote settings, and schools may need to strengthen their systems to successfully deliver those supports. For example, do all staff understand the spectrum of supports available in the new context? Do staff involved in the provision of these supports and interventions have the training and coaching they need to implement them effectively? How will supports be adjusted in a hybrid model or if the teaching and learning environment changes during the year? Answering these questions before school begins will help ensure a more seamless experience for students, staff, and families.
3. ***Take a flexible approach to tiering needs and supports.*** An MTSS calls for flexible tiering, with students moving between and within tiers based on data from universal screeners, diagnostic assessments, and progress monitoring. However, schools may need to be particularly flexible with student supports during reopening. Some students may enter the school year with no identified supplemental needs but seriously struggle to adapt in the first few months. Conversely, other students may begin the school year with high levels of anxiety but adjust relatively quickly with the appropriate supports. Teaming at the school level becomes critical so that staff can revisit student needs and examine how those needs are evolving. Moreover, schools may need to be creative and flexible about service delivery (e.g., modality, location, timing, etc.), especially if students are transitioning between in-person and remote learning.

Equity-Related Planning Questions:

- Who in our community was most acutely impacted (in terms of health or economically) by the COVID-19 pandemic over the past few months? If we do not know, how can we find out?

- As we evaluate available resources, have we considered overall access for these supports and services as well as our families’ cultural backgrounds and linguistic needs?
- What are the barriers to accessing Tier 2 and Tier 3 support services, and who experiences those barriers? How can we remove those barriers?

Resources for Building Upon Your Tiered System:

- [MTSS Blueprint](#)
- [MTSS Resource Map Template](#)
- [DESE Safe and Supportive Schools Self-Reflection Tool](#)
- [School Mental Health Quality Guide Needs Assessment & Resource Mapping](#)
- [Addressing Race and Trauma in the Classroom](#)

2b. Supporting More Intensive Mental Health Needs

Schools should expect to observe, hear about, and plan for the provision of supports and services to address signs and symptoms of a wide range of mental health challenges that may present during in-person and remote learning.

1. ***Prepare staff to know what to look for through professional development such as [Psychological First Aid](#) training.*** Educators and families may see mental health needs manifest in the following ways:
 - Difficulty following classroom routines and expectations, including safety measures, and difficulty articulating needs (functional communication)
 - Difficulty remaining still for long periods of time
 - Increase in work refusal and/or disengagement
 - Increase in complaints about fatigue or physical aches and pains
 - Increase in difficulties related to separation from parent or caregiver or the home learning environment
 - Increased startle response (an unconscious reaction to something sudden or a perceived threat)
 - Difficulties with pro-social skills, such as delaying gratification, conflict resolution, and encouraging others
 - Increase in negative self-talk or pessimistic and hopeless thinking
 - Alcohol and other drug use
 - Thoughts of suicide and self-harm
 - Other risk-taking behaviors

Schools can help staff and families know to look for these signs and not mistake them for willful non-compliance. Students who present with these thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, especially in greater intensity, frequency, and duration, may need to be connected to more intensive mental health supports and services. As no one treatment model applies to every student, the services and supports that a student may be referred to should be based on the student’s unique needs, chronological age, developmental level, family culture and language, and accessibility considerations.

2. ***Identify and utilize research-based Tier 2 and Tier 3 supports and services.*** Some students will need more sustained, targeted, and intensive supports. Tier 2 supports

typically provide interventions that prevent problems from getting worse and support students “at-risk” of not reaching Tier 1 social and behavioral expectations. Strong Tier 2 interventions are evidence-based, matched to student needs, readily and quickly available, and include systems for progress monitoring that are communicated to students, staff, and families (see [Examples of Research-Based Processes and Interventions for More Intensive Student Support](#)).

A small number of students will need sustained, intensive supports at Tier 3. Some of these students may be served through an intensive special education program utilizing an Applied Behavior Analysis-informed approach or a more therapeutically oriented approach to address social emotional disabilities. However, it is critical to note that special education is not synonymous with Tier 3 supports. Students with and without individualized education programs (IEPs) may require Tier 3 social emotional and mental health services that are provided through the general education program. For example, [BRYT](#) provides integrated general education supports to students returning from an extended absence associated with a mental health crisis and to students who are coming to school regularly but are often dysregulated in a way that prevents their own and other students’ learning.

Tier 3 mental health interventions will need to be strongly clinically informed and grounded in strong attachments between school-based clinicians and students. Tier 3 interventions should include explicit, pragmatic goals and proactive work by clinicians with students to achieve those goals. Schools will need to integrate effective two-way communication with students’ parents/caregivers, as well as strong care coordination to ensure that adults important to the student (both inside the school and in the wider community) have the information they need to align their supports.

We strongly recommend that schools prioritize, to the greatest degree possible, maintaining and strengthening connections with students who struggled to engage in the spring or who are likely to try to avoid school in the fall. This may include regular check-ins for students and families with school staff and/or helping families to connect with community-based supports. It may also include inviting some of these students and their families to visit the school prior to opening day to talk about what will work best to help the student successfully return.

- 3. Anticipate student mental health needs and adjust methods of delivery accordingly.***

Oftentimes, school social workers, psychologists, guidance counselors, nurses, and others have overlapping or shared roles. Districts and schools may want to review how they allocate responsibilities to best leverage staff members’ skills and capacity. For example, rather than asking all student support staff to deliver individual or small group counseling and mental health services, a subset could be deployed to support Tier 1 efforts. This could include supporting and coaching teachers with classroom-based social emotional and behavioral strategies or leading whole school programming to provide basic grief management techniques and support with distress tolerance skills.

Community-based organizations that offer [Children’s Behavioral Health Initiative](#) (CBHI) services are positioned to meet the full range of students’ mental health needs, both within and outside of school. These services include: intensive care coordination, in-home therapy, in-home behavioral services, therapeutic mentoring, and family partners. Additionally, the recently launched [Network of Care portal](#) contains links to information about a host of child, youth, and family services offered by community-based organizations across the Commonwealth. Schools can also take advantage of the expansion of tele-health and tele-mental health services. See below for links to these resources.

Equity-Related Planning Questions:

- What data do we collect and analyze to identify trends in students who are referred to more intensive mental health supports and services? What additional data might be needed?
- What systems and practices do we have in place to determine the efficacy of services, including trends in efficacy by populations of students?

Resources for Supporting More Intensive Mental Health Needs:

- [Massachusetts CBHI Services](#)
- [Network of Care Massachusetts](#)
- [Supporting the SEL and Mental Health Needs of Students and Educators in the COVID-19 Era](#)

Section 3. Mobilizing Around this Work

Establishing an effective system of support involves planning and teamwork. This includes organizing staff at both the district and school levels and making sure that processes are in place to collect, analyze, and act upon data that will inform social emotional and mental health efforts.

3a. Leveraging an Effective Teaming Structure

Teaming is a cornerstone to a strong tiered system of student support and is particularly important in the return-to-school process. The work described in this document is most effective when delivered through a multidisciplinary approach that clearly establishes goals, roles, expectations, and collaboration structures. It is also important to reinforce the idea that all members of the school community share responsibility for the social emotional and mental health of students and the educators who support them.

1. ***Build diverse, multidisciplinary, and equitable teams.*** Schools may have numerous teams related to SEL, mental health, student support, school climate, and safety. This might be a good time to review teaming structures and streamline, reposition, or strengthen them. Aim for diversity – of professions and roles, cultures and backgrounds, and student populations. For example, a district-level team that is formed to oversee universal social emotional strategies might consist of
 - Members of the central office representing both student support and curriculum and instruction (e.g., assistant superintendent for student services, district-wide SEL director, chief academic officer, STEM or ELA directors),
 - Building-level administrators,
 - General education teachers from various grades and subjects,
 - A special education representative,
 - An English learner representative,
 - Student support staff (school counselor, school psychologist, school social worker/school adjustment counselor),
 - Community members,
 - Students, and
 - Families.

This structure can then be replicated at the building level, so that action plans can be customized to reflect the characteristics and needs of a particular school community.

2. ***Avoid bottlenecks and silos by empowering teams to make decisions within their scope while coordinating with other aspects of return-to-school planning.*** School reopening involves many decisions that must be made in a very concentrated period of time. Teams should be clear about who ultimately signs off on decision making in key areas. If possible, empower teams to make decisions that fall within their scope. For example, a mental health screening team might be empowered to decide which screening tools to use. At the same time, teams should understand the intersection of their work and other aspects of the school reopening plan. For example, building time for social emotional support into the return-to-school schedule requires coordination with teams that are

addressing the instructional and logistical components of the school day.

3. ***Set clear expectations for each team.*** Give each team clear guidelines about their scope, role within the larger school reopening plan, and specific deliverables. In addition, provide clear expectations for how often the team will meet, the responsibility of each member, and the time commitment expected of members.

Equity-Related Planning Questions:

- How will you ensure that multiple stakeholders are meaningful collaborators in the team process, especially staff, families, and students?
- Are your team members trained to consider indicators of racism or inequity (such as disproportionality in either risk factors or access to protective factors) when developing social emotional-related action plans for school reopening?

Resources for Leveraging an Effective Teaming Structure:

- [Define Team Roles and Responsibilities](#)
- [MTSS Logic Model](#)
- [Engage All Stakeholders in Foundational Learning](#)
- [Interconnected Systems Framework 101](#)
- [Mental Health Integration Tools](#)
- [Cultural responsiveness field guide for trainers and coaches](#)

3b. Using Data to Focus Efforts and Energy

When there are so many decisions to be made, the effective use of data is particularly vital. For some districts, using data to inform social emotional and mental health efforts will be a new endeavor. Other districts will be able to rely on existing processes and infrastructures (e.g., existing procedures to administer and respond to SEL assessments and mental health screeners). Regardless of your district's experience with SEL and mental health-related assessments to date, these recommendations may help you hone your data collection and decision-making efforts.

1. ***Collect or take stock of available data to assess students' social emotional and mental health needs.*** Collecting data on SEL and mental health needs from students, educators, and families can help you identify and address individual needs as well as common trends. The first step is to determine what data is already available within the district or school.

There are three types of data collection tools that districts can use. ***Universal mental health screeners*** are used to identify individual students' strengths and needs. ***Initial assessments*** collect data for a more comprehensive understanding of a student presenting concerns and includes self-reported psychosocial measures, observations and feedback from teachers and/or parents/guardians, and a review of associated data related to behavior, academic progress, and engagement in school activities. Finally, ***needs assessments and climate surveys*** provide information about SEL, mental health, and other related behaviors and skills among the entire population of students without the ability to identify specific students.

Districts and schools should determine what data collection tools are being used and which data tools, if any, should be added to better identify students' needs. For more information, see [Mental Health Screening Information and Examples from Methuen Public Schools](#). [RAND](#) and [CASEL offer different types of tools](#).

2. ***Make sure you are prepared to act on the data you collect.*** Prior to administering social emotional and mental health assessments, districts need to assess whether they have the systems and capacity to respond to the data collected. Simply assessing and identifying SEL and mental health needs is insufficient. In fact, screening for mental health conditions without follow-up is considered unethical practice and can harm students. To prepare, schools should ensure that they have [clear protocols and assignments](#) for: administering the screeners/assessments; analyzing the data; determining which students require support (and how urgently); and making, documenting, and following up on referrals to appropriate services or interventions. If a district determines that it is not yet prepared to administer universal social emotional and/or mental health screeners, there are other ways to monitor students' well-being, including training staff on possible behavioral manifestations of trauma and/or mental health challenges (see [Supporting More Intensive Mental Health Needs](#) above).
3. ***Use data for continuous improvement.*** Use your initial data to establish a baseline understanding of the social emotional and mental health needs in your district or school, and then find ways to collect additional data at different time intervals while avoiding over-surveying. For example, given the current emotional climate, it might be helpful to survey families and educators about their own and their child's social emotional well-being early on in the school year and then again three to four months later. This enables the district to plan support systems, assess their effectiveness, and detect any additional challenges emerging once the school year is underway. For students who have been identified as having (or being at risk of developing) mental health challenges, it is critical to closely monitor the progress and effectiveness of Tier 2 and 3 interventions.

Equity-Related Planning Questions:

- Are our data collection tools culturally and linguistically appropriate for all populations in the student body?
- Have we disaggregated the data to identify whether systemic inequities or trends exist relative to our students' social emotional and mental health?

Resources for Using Data to Focus Efforts and Energy:

- [Ready, Set, Go, Review: Screening for Behavioral Health Risk in Schools](#)
- [Massachusetts School Mental Health Consortium \(MASMHC\): Universal Mental Health Screening Implementation Guide](#)
- [School Mental Health Quality Guide: Screening](#)
- [Guidance for Measuring and Using School Climate Data](#)

3c. Articulate the Roles of Key Stakeholders Before and After School Reopens

It is critical to have clear expectations of how all members of the school community may engage in this work before and after school reopens. This should include not only administrators, teachers, and student support staff, but also students and families. The chart below outlines possible priority actions for each stakeholder group before the school year begins and during the first weeks and months of the school year. It can also be used as a template for future planning.

| District Administrators | School Administrators | Classroom Educators | Student Support Personnel | Family Partners/Leaders | Students |
|--|--|--|---|---|---|
| Before the school year begins | | | | | |
| <p>Set up/identify district-wide SEL/mental health planning teams as part of reopening efforts</p> <p>Identify existing SEL/mental health-related data, identify data gaps, and consider adding data collection tools and protocols (including staff, student, and family feedback over the summer)</p> <p>Map existing SEL and mental health resources and interventions across all 3 Tiers (and at every school)</p> <p>Provide clear messaging to the school district community about what they can expect and the critical role of SEL and mental health in the reopening plan</p> <p>Identify and coordinate with school administrators on PD needs</p> | <p>Set up school-wide SEL/mental health planning teams (coordinated with district-wide teams)</p> <p>Coordinate data collection tools and protocols with district office</p> <p>Communicate with educators and families about what they can expect this school year (including details about the physical environment, school culture, etc.), create opportunities for sharing and feedback</p> <p>In school schedules, ensure ample time for educators to collaborate with and support each other</p> | <p>Participate in district- and/or school-wide SEL and mental health planning teams and PD as appropriate</p> <p>Communicate with district and school administrators about anticipated SEL/mental health needs and strengths, both for students and adults (including your own)</p> <p>Talk to colleagues about their hopes and concerns related to the upcoming school year; if appropriate, share them with administrators</p> | <p>Participate in district- and/or school-wide SEL/mental health planning teams as appropriate</p> <p>Communicate with district and school administrators about anticipated SEL/mental health strengths and needs, both for students and staff</p> <p>Set up data collection tools and protocols to assess students' SEL/mental health needs</p> <p>Provide guidance to educators and families about SEL and mental health services/supports</p> <p>Bolster and/or develop new partnerships with community-based mental health agencies</p> | <p>Talk to your children, in age-appropriate ways, about what to expect in the upcoming school year; listen to their hopes and concerns; share them with administrators</p> <p>Talk to fellow families about their concerns, hopes, and questions; share resources and ideas for how your family is thinking about this transition</p> <p>Participate in opportunities to provide feedback and read/watch materials shared about what the new year will look like</p> | <p>Talk to your family about your hopes, excitement, and concerns for the coming year</p> <p>Reach out to your peers and find out how they are feeling about the upcoming school year</p> <p>Participate in opportunities that your school provides to share thoughts, feelings, and hopes for the new school year.</p> <p>Read/watch materials your school shares about what school will look like in the fall</p> |

| District Administrators | School Administrators | Classroom Educators | Student Support Personnel | Family Partners/Leaders | Students |
|---|--|--|--|--|--|
| During the first weeks and months of the school year | | | | | |
| <p>Emphasize to all administrators and educators the critical role that SEL and mental health play in the district’s reopening plan (e.g., fostering positive relations with students, families, and each other)</p> <p>Communicate to the community about the SEL and mental health supports available to them as they transition back into school</p> <p>Maintain active district-wide SEL and mental health teams; ask for updates on progress related to the teams’ different tasks</p> <p>Use aggregate data to guide multi-tiered SEL and mental health supports</p> <p>Take an asset-based approach when discussing SEL and mental health with your community</p> <p>Maintain clear operational protocols for school administrators and staff to promote consistency</p> | <p>Echo district leaders’ emphasis on SEL and mental health as critical ingredients of school reopening plans</p> <p>Continue to support school-wide SEL and mental health teams. Help the teams continue to re-assess needs and strengths related to SEL and mental health as the year continues and through possible changes</p> <p>Continue to provide SEL and mental health supports to school personnel. Conduct more frequent check-ins with staff, including surveys and informal wellness checks</p> <p>Celebrate the reopening process for staff and students, highlighting the successes so far, no matter how small</p> | <p>Check in with students about how they are adjusting to the “new reality” throughout the day</p> <p>Communicate, model, and reinforce positive behavior expectations</p> <p>Integrate SEL practices into academic instruction</p> <p>Pay attention to signs of mental health challenges among students and refer to mental health support staff</p> <p>Remember to care for your own social and emotional well-being, and seek support if needed</p> <p>Celebrate successes and accomplishments from the transition back to school</p> | <p>Examine data from SEL assessments and mental health screeners to identify challenges among student populations and ensure that supports are in place to address those needs</p> <p>Work with classroom teachers and other educators to inform and evolve Tier 1 efforts and to identify students who may need Tier 2 and/or 3 support</p> <p>Communicate any challenges in addressing students’ mental health to district and school administrators</p> <p>Support educators and school leaders with ways to celebrate school reopening</p> | <p>Continue to check in with your children about their hopes, excitement, and challenges with the “new reality”</p> <p>Celebrate your children’s successes with returning to school</p> <p>Continue to communicate with other families about their successes, tips, and challenges with the transition back to school</p> <p>Share any SEL and social emotional or mental health-related concerns with school administrators</p> | <p>Communicate the challenges and successes that you or your peers are having as you acclimate to the “new reality”</p> <p>Pay extra attention to peers who might be struggling, offer them support, and if needed, connect them with adults who can help</p> <p>Reach out to peers who may not have returned to the school building so you can all feel connected virtually</p> <p>Continue to reach out to adults you trust and share your thoughts or concerns about being back at school, as well as your ideas for making it better</p> <p>Try to be kind to yourself and others; there is a lot to adjust to and navigate!</p> |