

# Back to School RI: Social Emotional Learning and Mental Health Guidance SY20-21

August, 2020



**RIDE** Rhode Island  
Department  
of Education

## Vision

The central priority of implementing strong behavioral supports is to develop school wide policies, programs and practices, to create a safe and predictable environment for all students and staff.

It is recommended that this guidance be utilized in conjunction with a LEA's Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports (MTSS) to lay a strong foundation for preparing youth, families, faculty and staff to enter schools in a safe and predictable environment.

## Specific Considerations:

1. Skills related to [Social Emotional Learning](#) can be provided most effectively through direct instruction, integration into general teaching practices, such as cooperative learning or project-based learning, and integration of SEL skills into instruction and discussion in content areas, such as language arts, math, and social studies.
2. Students who feel physically, emotionally, and mentally safe tend to do better academically. An examination of SurveyWorks will provide insight of successes and gaps in climate and culture to be addressed and built upon for re-opening.
3. Students who develop ways to cope with stress, emotions, feelings, and behaviors in different situations are likely to do better academically.

## Best Practices

### *Foundations and Systems*

#### ***Before School Reopens***

- Establish or expand District/School Leadership [Teams](#) (MTSS, Wellness, SEL) and be sure to include mental health providers as well as youth and family voice. Embed programs and policies with an MTSS framework focusing on implementing a limited number of evidence-based programs that match the needs of your school community.
- Assess current data collection systems and determine whether data is being used effectively in decision making or whether there are gaps in the data you are collecting.
- Survey the types of professional development school personnel believe they will need for a successful re-entry.
- Conduct a [needs assessment](#) to help determine risk and protective factors and identify gaps in services in systems. Be sure to review a variety of data sources from a variety of systems (mental health, juvenile justice, child welfare) to ensure that you have a comprehensive view of the needs in your school and community.
- Conduct [resource mapping](#) to review and evaluate current strategies and services. Eliminate ineffective or duplicative programs or services.



### ***Once School Reopens***

- Track, collect data, and provide ongoing professional development opportunities around SEL, MH, new policies and procedures.
- Ensure accurate data collection and use of data in decision making.
- Continue to meet as a District/School team to determine ongoing concerns or new opportunities.

## ***Teacher and Family Communication and Relationships***

### ***Before School Opens***

- Invite and listen to input from all school community members. Share back how the input will be used to inform strategies and plans.
- Organize a renewed effort to gather updated contact information for all students and families. Consider how families prefer to receive information (text, email, social media).
- Identify and build on existing communication channels that were effective at reaching and responding to the community during building closures. Address any gaps and ensure communications are inclusive and culturally sensitive, in multiple languages, and accessible in a variety of forms (newsletters, email, social media, virtual meetings, etc.).
- Outline key communication messages for educators, students, families, and community partners including the norming of new policies (mask wearing, small pods, etc.).
  - Offer forums, visuals, videos, newsletters that showcase what to expect when school re-opens.
  - School behavioral health personnel should be involved in the shaping of messages to students and families.
  - Avoid fear-based messaging to encourage compliance with new procedures (mask wearing, physical distancing, etc.) as it may lead to increased anxiety instead of compliance.

### ***Once School Opens***

- Prioritize teacher and student relationships.
- Set aside the first week, or ideally month, of school to reintroduce staff and students to school life and new routines. Rebuild the school climate and culture.
  - [National Center on Safe and Supportive Learning Environments](#)
- Continue to connect with families to deepen relationships, learn about their experiences and perspective, and authentically bring them into the decision-making process as the year progresses.
- Continuously monitor and improve communication practices to ensure equitable engagement.
- Communicate about [SEL strategies](#) and a shared language that families can use at home to help teach and re-enforce SEL at home and create environment that contribute to the overall growth and wellbeing of students.



## *Administration, Faculty, and Staff SEL/MH Needs, Skills, and Capacity*

### ***Before School Opens***

- All families have faced some level of trauma since schools closed in March. This includes the school staff that have their own personal and family experiences that they need to tend to, all while working to provide quality education and support for their students and families. Before addressing the needs of students, the individual and collective trauma of each member of the school community must be acknowledged and supported.
- Put staff well-being at the center of school culture.
- Leverage community partners to support the range of needs. Communicate resources such as Employee Assistance Programs. Develop system-wide approaches to address secondary trauma and communicate to faculty and staff. Ensure access to mental health and trauma support either within the school community or through community partnerships.
- Conduct a [survey](#) and triage how staff are feeling about school reopening to address any anxiety.

### ***Once School Opens***

- Prioritize space for connection and healing among faculty and staff.
- Monitor and check in with staff regarding the ongoing stress of re-opening.
- Provide embedded coaching or PD to assist teachers with SEL for themselves and/or students.

## *Tier 1 Supports and Services*

### ***Before School Opens***

- Universal, [Tier I](#), opportunities provide daily, predictable school wide routines and practices that can have a comforting and calming effect on students and staff. These universal practices and programs can help to develop a positive school and classroom culture that leads to a successful transition back to education and schools.
- Determine if a [screening](#) process will be used upon reentry. Screenings can be universal (entire student population) or targeted (screenings for anxiety on identified youth).
  - If schools make the decision to implement universal screening, additional work will need to be done to make plans for Tier 2 and 3 interventions. Schools are cautioned to strike a balance between overextending their staff to provide individualized support to the extent that it is not done with fidelity.
- Conduct a triage of students and staff that are at a higher risk of stress of trauma.
- Develop [MOUs](#) and Partnerships with community mental health centers.



## ***Once School Opens***

- Promote emotional safety through a trauma informed lens. This can be done through the development of strong, clear expectations and routines that are predictable for youth. Getting back to a “routine” is one of the pillars of trauma recovery. These [routines](#) help students adapt to transitions by giving them a sense of safety.
- Communicate clearly and in a timely manner of changes to the schedule or routine. Students and teachers will still be in recovery mode so it will be important to take it slowly and to remain flexible. Acknowledge that students may not understand why a routine is changing. Take time to explain the changes and provide a predictable timeline of the changes. This will help to reduce stress and increase their confidence.
- A positive school and classroom culture is critical. Troublesome behaviors may be attempts to cope with stress, anxiety, and fear. These behaviors should not be punished but understood and addressed with compassion. When youth misbehave, ask what happened to cause the behavior.
- Plan classroom time to include behavioral health personnel to conduct activities to process feelings and help to facilitate Evidence Based Programs in conjunction with classroom teacher implementation of universal programs.
  - [CASEL Guide for Choosing Evidence Based Programs](#)
  - [SAMHSA Evidence Based Practices Resource Center](#)
- Anticipate student defiance or resistance as a way for them to work through the emotions they are feeling. Adults should develop ways to empower students and provide unconditional positive support to build trust. Take extra time for relationship building.

## ***Tier 2 & Tier 3 Supports and Services***

### ***Before School Opens***

- When social emotional and/or mental health needs are identified early and supports are in place, positive youth development is promoted and the severity of effects can be eliminated or reduced. [Tier 2](#) practices and systems provide targeted support for students who are in need of additional supports in conjunction with Tier 1 supports. [Tier 3](#) supports are intensive and more individualized for a particular student’s needs.
- Teachers that are concerned about the behavior of a student, or believe a student is exhibiting signs and symptoms of mental distress, should request the assistance of behavioral health personnel.
- Schools should develop a Crisis Team and Protocols for youth that are in immediate need of services and supports. This should include determining roles, assessments, resources, and training to detect signs and symptoms of a person in crisis.
  - Resources
    - [Youth Mental Health First Aid Training](#)
    - [PREPaRE Model Training](#)
    - Develop along with Community Mental Health Partner



- [KidsLink](#)
- [RI Student Assistance Services](#)
- Evaluate staffing capacity, including training requirements, qualifications, and staff time that will be needed to implement services and supports.
- Develop a process for teachers to request additional supports with progress monitoring to determine step up or step-down targets.
- Develop and confirm Community Partnerships as needed. Community Partnerships can support a full continuum of care within MTSS. Partnerships can include data sharing agreements, providing of supports and services, and implementing evidence based practices.

### ***Once School Opens***

- Implement approved evidence-based practices. Continue coaching of staff and monitoring implementation of agreed practices as deemed necessary.
  - [CASEL Guide for Choosing Evidence Based Programs](#)
  - [SAMHSA Evidence Based Practices Resource Center](#)
- Continue data collection and progress monitoring of students receiving intervention services.
- Continue communication with families about services and progress.
- Implement telehealth policies and procedures as necessary.



## Sample Activities from the field:

### West Warwick Public School, Kim Ochs, Math and SEL Specialist

- To foster a sense of connectedness, educators greet students by name and create a touch-free or virtual routine (similar to a handshake, a hug or a high five) to invite connection.
- Group students in the same breakout groups while using virtual conference rooms or setting up time for students to interact apart from academic learning. This will provide opportunities for students to build trust, synchrony, support, and connectedness through peer relationships and interactions similar to what they would experience in school.
- Facilitate an activity where students and educators have a turn sharing how they are feeling with one word. This allows students to see that all feelings are okay, they are not alone in their feelings and feelings are constantly changing.

### Johnston Public School

- [2 x 10 Strategy](#)
- Screen Castify Weekly School- Wide Video Messages. Each week ended with a school-wide SEL video for students. Messages would focus on various SEL strategies/skills taught to our students.

### Pawtucket Public School

- Connect with students and their families by phone and by Google Meet (Zoom, etc.). Parents had numerous questions and concerns and need additional resources. Communication expanding to the whole family was helpful.
- Use of a mindfulness curriculum for teens that was developed by a School Social Worker. It builds connection in the group, teaches the physiology of stress, and starts and ends with a mindfulness practice for each session.
  - Audio recordings were made for students so that they can practice in between sessions using their phones or the computer. This allowed them access to the tools when they felt stressed.
- For adult wellness and stress management, a "10 minutes of self-care" program was offered. Teachers and staff were too busy and overwhelmed to do a workshop or PD for self-care, but the 10-minute time frame felt manageable to them. A brief mindfulness practice and then a check in about how the practices were going on their own. Just as with the teens, a guided audio recording of the practices was sent out so people could use them in their own time as needed.

### Narragansett School District, Karen Festa, SEL Coordinator

- During the school year and during distance learning, students participated in brain smart start activities (An activity to unite, an activity to connect, an activity to disengage stress and an activity to commit.) This combination of activities through Conscious Discipline uses current brain research in order to promote an optimal learning state. Here is a video example: [https://youtu.be/vzYKPz\\_pTVU](https://youtu.be/vzYKPz_pTVU)
- Narragansett staff, students and families participated in "Gansett Wellness Week" during distance learning choosing from a variety of digital wellness activities including, a music room, virtual shopping competition, zumba, acts of kindness, chalk art challenge, mindful movements and more.
- Additionally, SEL weekly lesson plans and activities were published to the nssk12 website for students and families at Narragansett Elementary School.



## Tools:

[Planning and Reflection Tool](#) from School Mental Health Ontario.

[Resource Mapping Tool](#) from National Association of School Psychologists

[Reopening CASEL Organizer](#) is available to download from the CASEL website

## Resources:

### *State Resources*

- [RI Department of Education Behavioral Health Support Page](#)
- [EOHHS Telehealth Guidance](#)
- [BridgeRI](#) – Home for all things Multi-Tiered System of Supports in RI including online professional learning opportunities and supports.
- [KidsLink](#)

### *National Resources*

- [National Center for School Mental Health](#)
- [CASEL](#)

