

# **Part 1: Safeguarding Student Health While Conducting Distance Learning**

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**04/09/2020**

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## **INTRODUCTION:**

Educators are responsible for safe-guarding the health and safety of their students at school, including their mental well being. That is still true, during distance learning.

Our focus in this webinar is to have a centering conversation, to reinforce and transfer skills you already have to this new, remote context.

### **Differences: How is this context different for us and our students?**

- Physical Distance -Lack of face to face time
- Less time spent together overall
- Using packets and Youtube videos
- Relying on Seesaw and other applications (classroom Dojo)
- You can see students are engaged online
- Combination of tools to communicate with students - new environment
- Language barriers
- Many physical or personnel resources are not available in the same ways

### **Distance Learning is Different, but:**

- Many strategies you've already used in your classrooms can still be used
- Strategies need to be adapted to work in a remote learning environment
- You have the skills and knowledge for this task, trust what you know, and remember that you have colleagues that can learn with you too

## **STRATEGY: CONSISTENT COMMUNICATION**

Communication with students may happen through different media, or with a different frequency, but the key components of clear, supportive communication are just like in the classroom.

### **Do:**

#### Listen attentively

Mr. Rogers nurtured a relationship with students in a remote context, and you can too.

- Nod, smile, affirm
- Make eye contact
- Continue to use previous routines or develop new ones

#### Avoid distractions

To the best of your ability, work to focus your attention and environment on interactions with students. Work on creating a workspace that limits distractions on your end, if possible.

#### Ask questions

Get creative, give them opportunities to tell about themselves and their changed world. These are low-risk examples that might give you an appropriate window into life at home:

- "Tell me 2 things you do before you get ready for bed?"

- “What is a favorite place to do your school work at home?”

### Check for understanding

We don't need to be clinical in how we ask questions if we want to know/hear how they are doing

- “I think I heard you say...” or “you helped me understand that...”
- Using “I statements”, state nonjudgmentally what you have noticed
- Ask questions, but don't push
- Realize it may be a relief for the young person to talk about how s/he feels
- Remember it's about the young person, not you
  - His/her experiences are not the same as yours
  - His/her perspective is not the same as yours or necessarily of other youth in the family or peer group
  - His/her culture may not be the same as yours
  - S/he needs our empathy
  - S/he may use language that makes you uncomfortable

### **How is communication different remotely?**

- Morning meetings are still important, especially in lower grades
- Asynchronous conversations are more difficult, but you might get more candid responses because students can be more anonymous or less inhibited by classmates
- Kids who aren't typers yet are a challenge
- Lots of communication via the parents in this time; it's important to try to balance interaction so you're seeing enough of the children

### **Important Reminder**

Sometimes we hear what we **want** to hear. We need to hear what is **real**.

Don't shy away from what a child is really saying. Hearing it accurately is a way for you to validate their experience and show support. Being truly heard is one of the greatest gifts we can give each other, especially in a challenging time.

### **STRATEGY: REASSURANCE**

We know from experience that when students are struggling, one of our roles is to provide reassurance and support. In the ways that you prompt students, you may find signs of struggle:

- exhaustion for tasks,
- sleep disruptions and other physical symptoms,
- disillusionment with work and/or reduced performance on tasks that previously the student excelled in.

## **Do:**

### Have realistic expectations.

While we may want the end to feel in sight, we don't know that it is.

- Try to focus students on what they can control. Consider asking students to create a chart identifying things within their control, and things that are outside their control. As Tonya Wilhelm mentioned in her webinar last week, help students focus on things like “what am I going to do after lunch” rather than “what will happen if school remains online forever?”
- Encourage students to structure their work or daily routine, with healthy limits on daily work time

### Offer consistent emotional support.

This means setting up a schedule for checking in with students regularly. Put it on your calendar to ask them how they are doing on a regular basis, especially in this remote context, asking once then not following up for several days may feel more like abandonment.

Give the young person hope. The best predictor of future success is past performance.

Reminding them that they have worked through adversity before and come through it will build their hope that they can do it again. It may help to encourage the student to recall other times of struggle and share how they overcame it (frame this carefully if you are going to share in a group).

- Avoid dismissing the problem or emotion.
- You can encourage them to consider whether this worry is something they need to spend time on right now. Realizing it may not be immediate can be helpful.

### Provide practical help.

Many things that might have been possible before distance learning may not be now (engaging in team sports, going to a movie in a theater, taking a break from siblings etc.) You will need to assess the student's new reality to know what might be practical.

- Suggest connecting with friends on Facetime or Google hangouts. As a teacher, you can also facilitate ‘indoor recess’ or other assignments that encourage discussion without an agenda. These of course come with safety considerations.
- Suggest self time if life feels too chaotic in a household with everyone staying at home
- Support students in limiting their work time. This is not like in-person schooling, and they may need help building skills around creating routines and boundaries.
- Avoid falling into the trap of giving advice --this makes the discussion about you. Guide student/s through a process of figuring things out on their own. When they can't come up with strategies themselves, use language like “you may want to/consider” rather than “you should...”.

### Provide information.

This comes with the same caveats that we have operated under before. Information should be purposeful, don't overwhelm.

- Guide students to quality resources rather than vaguely point them in the direction of an unfamiliar homepage. Check the resource out for yourself, screen for inappropriate content

Acknowledge the limits of what you can do.

You can't promise not to share information with a parent or school administrator. Be honest about what you can and cannot do to help a student.

- Avoid making promises you can't keep, and don't try to fix a problem that you can't solve

### **STRATEGY: SELF-CARE**

Identify specific things students can **DO**: exercise, listening to music, getting outside etc.

Ask students what they already do that helps them feel well. You can facilitate sharing those things if that's appropriate

#### **What you already do:**

- Prompt students to share strategies they like to use
- Encourage them to get peer support, take insights from others' sharing

#### **How is this different in a remote context?**

You can still do many of these things together now, if differently. Model ideas for your students:

- Incorporate strategies in work assignments
  - Do a quick meditation before you start your lesson
  - Stand a stretch in the middle of your 'class time'
  - Use assignments like reading to offer elements for reflection, self-care or personal breaks. "Your assignment tonight is to read pages 6-9. When you're finished reading, sit quietly for two minutes (close your eyes) and think about what you read"
- Find strategies that interest the young person
- Shy away from talking to students about feeling "good", but identify positive nuances that accompany 'feeling good'; nudge them toward noticing their own positive experiences of helpful habits or interactions
- Help them think creatively about ways to get space and self time - there are many ways students can find those things without access to a full backyard
- Explore ways that the things we did in a classroom together are/could still be possible
  - Remind students that their peers are doing this work 'together' even if they aren't in a group setting

#### **You Aren't in this Alone**

Identify others/colleagues who may be helpful or necessary to call upon.

If you are becoming aware of some concerns with a particular student, consider the support and resources available to you:

- Paraprofessionals - some of them are writing letters to students, or other activities that might support connection to a student in a different way
- A staff member who has a connection to a student's special interest or particular struggle
- Special Education teacher
- Social Worker
- School Administrator

### **Important Reminder**

Keep in mind how important you are to your students. Even when you are overwhelmed and exhausted, remember that even in small ways, your energy and care for students makes a huge difference.

Remember that your initial thoughts may not tell the whole story or be accurate. Engaging other adults in your concerns will provide an additional frame of reference. Draw on the context and experience you have with the student, but sometimes things they share can be bizarre. In this, remember to share only with appropriate support staff at the school.

## Q&A:

**Q: One participant noted that they are getting a lot of communication from parents. Any suggestions for how to navigate that unexpected barrier to communicating with parents more than students?**

**A:** Talk with the parents to communicate that it will be helpful to their child for them to have direct communication with you as the educator. Be sure to reinforce with the parents how grateful you are for communication with them. Embrace the bridge, but encourage them that in a normal school day, you as the educator get many direct interactions with the student, so it will be helpful to maintain that normalcy for the student. Encouraging parents to understand this situation is new/different, but maintaining communication is one way to keep familiar and consistent elements for their child.

If they are a parent of a student with special needs, that is an important distinction. Sometimes parents are worried and being intense because they are trying to protect their child. You can validate that care and concern, and then communicate that you are trying to build that reassuring relationship with a student directly.

**Q: Could you talk a little bit about transitions? Many students struggle with transitions throughout the school day, but now they are basically non-existent. How can we support students in this change of routine?**

**A:** Having the dining room table be the office during the day and then turn into the place we eat in the evening is challenging. Students may not have the ability to be in a different room to do their schoolwork, so it's important to physically represent that there is a shift being made. If they can't move their work physically to a new space, maybe you suggest they make a pile in a clear way. As an educator, you can bring awareness to this element of daily structure and routine for students or families who may not have realized or articulated it yet.

Similarly to the reflection on Mr. Rogers, there are other routines like changing a sweater or shoes for different activities. Students were used to having time on the bus to transition from home to school, so consider building in some transition time (a walk around the house or block after breakfast before starting school). Many students in high school are signaled by bells; they can still set timers if that is helpful. It can help to engage their brain in the work of the day.

**Q: We're getting into tornado and flood seasons. Do you have any advice about how to support students when there are many scary things happening at once?**

**A:** The first thing that comes to mind is to acknowledge the fears. We don't need to be even mildly hysterical to get children ramped up, so be matter of fact and address any concerns as clearly as you can. Sometimes we try to hide those things from kids, but they are often able to pick up on something being wrong. Reminding them of routines that keep them safe related to those worries: at school we practice tornado drills, maybe at home there could be some routines that would reinforce that sense of security. Remind students that they and their families can

practice things to keep them safe. Those practical approaches are elements that they can control, which is what we want to focus on.

**Q: How are you thinking about preparing students to come back to school? What do we need to do now, and what do we need to have in place in August or September to help with the transition back into school?**

**A:** Students will be excited to come back to school because they want to see each other, and see the people they care about-- just like us. In terms of “what if we don’t come back until fall?” consider thinking about reuniting kids with the teacher they had this school year and students they might not have seen since before summer (primarily for elementary students). Creating touchpoints with teachers or peers that we had in this crazy school year might provide a bridge and some entry point to start the new year off with familiar elements, or even closure for this current time.

If we do go back to school this Spring, there may be greater anxiety about what is currently going on and the fears students might have about being together in the middle of the virus. How can we communicate the elements of being at school that are safe? If we come back this Spring, a big focus of the time we have left should be helping students process through what we’ve lived through and the changes that happened. Having a clear awareness that we will all need to take time and space to process, and this will need to be active in your classroom on your part.

We can play up our resilience as a people--just like Governor Walz does every time he comes on for his press conferences. Find important and clear examples of how people in Minnesota, your town, or your school where people have weathered past challenges and came together as communities. It’s taking an experience none of us wanted, and finding important and positive things that have come out of it. “We know how to care for each other, we can help each other.”

Practicing that kind of reflection can help students build skill in processing and growing through challenges. Students can benefit from our honesty and candidness in all of this.

**Q: This year was particularly hard because many of these challenges happened during or before spring break. In many cases, there are educators who didn’t have a chance to say goodbye to students, or provide any closure. How can we be thinking about this going forward, in case there are other waves of the virus. How can we prepare more for these kinds of situations?**

**A:** We should be taking time during this Distance Learning period to be reflecting on what has been working and what hasn’t--as a school, but also as individual teachers. Another piece of being better prepared is that we will have a concrete example of having come through it the first time. Make sure that we are communicating to students that we are still going to be here, going to be caring for each other. Hopefully there would be opportunities to converse with students to prepare for future situations, but we can’t count on that.



There's power in letters--in the mail; it's another way you can provide an incredibly meaningful communication to students.

Consider the feeling that we will have when we come out of this: an overjoyed feeling of seeing people. We can try to bring that excitement to our current interactions with students. Be expressive with how you greet students and interact with them. If your demeanor communicates that you are thrilled to see them, that can be reassuring. Don't wait until we are physically together to communicate that. Let's remember that everyday from here on out. Use that momentum and that feeling to bolster you when you return to a new normal.