



TIPS

for Educators as Schools Open During COVID-19



This document is one of several developed to provide resources for schools, parents and students as they return to school during the COVID-19 pandemic. The document targets specific tips for educators and is by no means an exhaustive list but rather a “starting point” designed to address several of the key factors that can impact how students respond to the challenges that will inevitably accompany their return. At the end of this document a link is provided to a list of resources that includes recommendations and tools from the Pennsylvania Department of Education, the CDC, the United States Department of Education, and the National Association of School Psychologist, among others.

1. Self-Care so You Can Care



“Please take note of the compartments directly overhead. Should the cabin lose pressure, oxygen masks will drop from that overhead area. Please place the mask over your own mouth and nose before assisting others.” This critical advice from your attendant on the airplane makes perfect sense. If you try to help others first and fail then everyone pays the consequences. As schools reopen during COVID-19, it is critical that educators understand that self-care may be the most important part of meeting the challenges that lie ahead. First and foremost, if you are at high risk it is important that you consult with your family physician(s) and work directly with district administration to explore the safest option for you to return to the classroom. This is not the time to “take one for the team.” Teachers often focus on their students, and leave themselves out of the equation. If you are not compromised and are heading back to the classroom, you need to take care of you in order to be the best that you can be for your students. Make sure you take time for yourself. If you don’t it may leave you exhausted and frustrated. Self-care is critical so that teachers are prepared to face the challenges ahead (both physically and mentally). Plan your day so that you can stop and get that favorite cup of coffee. Make sure you have time at the end of the day to continue your regular exercise routine. Eat healthy foods, get plenty of sleep, and remember that connections and relationships are one of the most powerful tools to combat fatigue. Make time for your family and friends. If you are struggling, don’t do it alone. Reach out to your co-workers and administration. Accept the help they offer.

2. Support your Students and Your Coworkers



As schools resume during the pandemic, students and staff will return with a variety of emotions including excitement at reconnecting with friends they may have not seen for months as well as anxiety, disappointment, anger, and sadness. In the classroom, you will need to listen, validate, and be supportive even if those emotions are extreme. Expressing empathy and understanding helps students and families know that you are listening and care about their perspective. Give students time to adjust and if they continue to struggle, consider making a referral to your Student Assistance Program and/or your school counselor/school social worker, etc. Many staff have been trained in Youth Mental Health First Aid and Trauma Informed Care. Key practices from these trainings can be useful in addressing students’ emotional needs when they return.

3. Honesty is Key



It may be very tempting to reassure students as they return to school that “everything will be all right.” When teachers respond with blanket statements to reassure students who are anxious, it can invalidate how they are feeling. No one knows for sure what lies ahead, so it is critical that you are honest with your students. Rather than reassuring them, choose to encourage them. This may include acknowledging the risks that are making them feel anxious but also reviewing what the school is doing and what they can do to minimize those risks. Praise students for being courageous and taking control of things they can control. “Thank you for wearing your mask.” “Great job on the playground today, I didn’t need to remind anyone about the 6 ft rule!”

4. Model for your Students

Students will model what they see in staff. If you want your students to be positive, you need to be positive. They will closely monitor how you respond to challenges that arise. Calm, honest, and caring teachers teach these critical coping skills to their students. Helping students learn how to be comfortable with being uncomfortable or inconvenienced can really help them develop skills for tackling challenges in the future.



5. Communicate, Communicate, Communicate

Anxiety thrives on uncertainty and these are very uncertain times. Teachers can minimize the effect of this uncertainty by keeping parents informed. If procedures change, let them know before or in tandem with when changes occur. If you have a sense from a student that parents are frustrated about something contact them before it reaches the tipping point. Often when you are able to give them some latitude, they will reciprocate.



[Click here](#) for the articles, references, and additional resources used to create this document, or visit the SEW CoP homepage for a complete list of resources and services: <https://www.csiu.org/SEWCOP>.

This resource list has been vetted and compiled by Alice Justice in conjunction with the Social Emotional Wellness Community of Practice. Alice Justice is a veteran educator who has served in a variety of roles including Biology Teacher, School Psychologist, Home and School Visitor and School Counselor. Retired from public education, she has served as a consultant to the Central Susquehanna Intermediate Unit, Pennsylvania Department of Education, and Pennsylvania College of Technology on topics including workforce development, career and technical education, school counseling plans, crisis response and management, and mental health services.

The Social Emotional Wellness Community of Practice (SEW CoP) is a regional group of experts from education, healthcare, social services, United Ways, special education, early childhood, behavior health, the Center for the Promotion of Social and Emotional Learning (CPSEL), and the McDowell Institute of Bloomsburg University. The purpose of the SEW CoP is to support area school districts with resources, supports, trainings, and recommendations related to crisis prevention and response, suicide prevention and postvention, positive behavioral interventions and supports, trauma education, etc. and to offer system-wide support of districts' initiatives related to SEW and mental and behavioral health.