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A photograph of a female teacher with long brown hair and a young female student with dark hair in a bun, both wearing blue surgical masks. They are sitting at a desk, looking down at a book or paper together. The background is a light-colored wall with some faint star patterns.

SUPPORTING THE
SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL
WELLBEING OF
STUDENTS DURING A
TIME OF STRESS

Sarahy Durango, M.A.

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There is a strong connection between students' social-emotional health and academic success.¹ Students with strong social-emotional skills have been shown to possess increased capacity to learn, improved life outcomes, and decreased risk for mental health problems.² Currently, almost 25% of children are estimated to experience a mental or behavioral health problem in a given year.^{3, 4} If left untreated, these issues are often exacerbated and can increase in severity, leading to worsened outcomes for children.⁵ Schools are increasingly becoming the central location for children to access mental health services due to barriers that interfere with families receiving support from community-based mental health providers.⁶ Thus, it is essential that schools have the capacity to meet the social-emotional and behavioral health needs of students. This is increasingly relevant in the midst of the COVID-19 crisis, which has resulted in many students experiencing uncertainty, fear, and rapid change. The effects of isolation and uncertainty -have resulted in an increase of students experiencing mental health problems. For example, over 20% of children in China have experienced anxiety/depression after one month in quarantine.⁷ With the return of students to school in the fall, whether that be in hybrid, staggered, fully face-to face, or fully online format, there is an urgency for educators to be prepared to meet the social-emotional needs of students.

TIERED SUPPORT OF SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL HEALTH

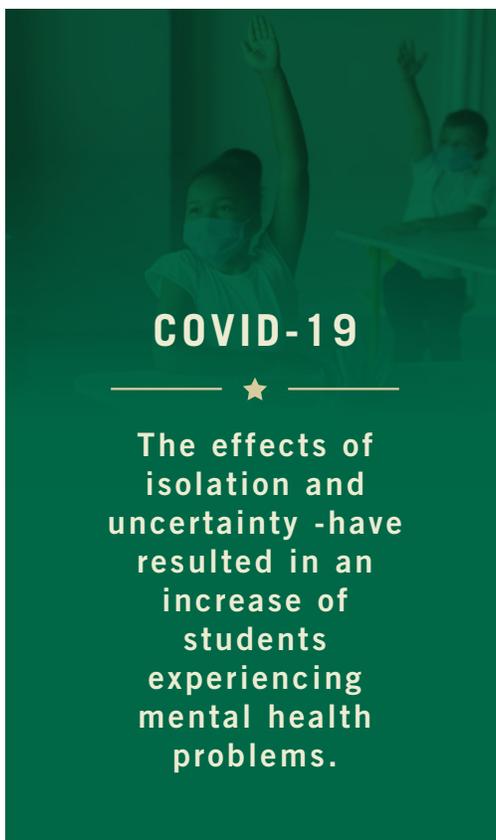
Recently, there has been an increased focus on the provision of integrated mental health supports in schools. Through a tiered and preventative approach, schools utilize three levels of support including universal⁸, targeted⁹, and individualized supports.¹⁰ As students begin to return to school, utilizing this tiered approach will be essential for promoting social-emotional well-being for students. Universal supports have the ability to service a large number of students, while utilizing resources efficiently. Universal supports include utilizing universal screening practices, social-emotional

learning curriculums, school-wide reinforcement systems, and re-teaching school-wide rules and expectations.¹¹ With the limited amount of time, finances, and support schools might encounter when returning back to school in the fall, universal supports can be of large benefit to schools to triage services. While all students will necessitate some form of social-emotional intervention when returning to school amidst a persistent public health crisis, some students may require more targeted supports. Therefore, it is imperative that schools have knowledge of and are prepared to serve students utilizing more targeted supports.

TARGETED SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL SUPPORTS

Utilizing universal interventions to support students' social-emotional well-being will be imperative in ensuring that students are able to engage with academic material in a meaningful way. Further, targeted supports will be crucial in providing students with more intensive needs with extra support in a resource-efficient manner, being that these supports are widely available, group-based, and require minimal effort for teacher implementation.¹² Commonly recommended group-based interventions, including Check-In, Check-Out (CICO), social skill instruction groups¹³, and manual-based cognitive behavioral therapy programs¹⁴, have the ability to be modified and delivered in virtual or hybrid formats, making them appropriate for use during a time when interventions must be flexible.

While standard-protocol group-based interventions are often effective for most students, there are a significant number of students who do not respond and need further support.¹⁵ Being that individualized interventions are often resource-intensive, there is a need for targeted assessment practices to inform intervention and make group-based interventions more effective, specifically during this time. This can lessen the load of students that school psychologists, school social workers, and school counselors must serve, allowing for their efforts to be directed in other areas including providing universal supports, connecting with community agencies, and engaging with families and key community stakeholders, which will



COVID-19



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A photograph of a teacher and a student working together at a desk. The student, a young Black male with curly hair, is wearing a white t-shirt and a white surgical mask. He is looking down at a piece of paper on the desk. The teacher, a woman with long brown hair, is wearing a white sleeveless top and a black face mask. She is leaning over the desk, pointing at the paper with her right hand. The background shows a window with a grid pattern, suggesting a classroom setting.

**MOVING
FORWARD**

allow for a more efficient and effective response to the return of students to school in the fall.

IMPLICATIONS MOVING FORWARD

Upon returning to school in the fall, students will need to feel physically and psychologically safe before they are able to engage with academic material. This process will be ongoing for many students and may take weeks to even months for students to feel at ease within school buildings. Having a plan to address social-emotional needs prior to re-opening will assure that students are able to continue to learn while adjusting to their “new normal”. Through a MTSS framework, district leaders and school staff can embed support for all students and tailor specific efforts for those who need it.

Below are steps that district personnel and educators alike can take to promote healthy social-emotional functioning during these uncertain times.

1. Assemble multidisciplinary teams.

Districts will benefit from having multidisciplinary teams, including administrators, school-based mental health staff (e.g. school psychologists, school social workers, school counselors), school nurses, and local public health officials, prepare for each stage of re-opening. These team members will bring expertise in multiple areas, providing schools with the best possible chance of re-opening successfully.

2. Utilize universal screening practices.

Universal screening can provide schools with information about the types of risk their student population is experiencing. This knowledge can aid schools in tailoring universal and targeted supports to address the needs of their students.

3. Focus on social-emotional well-being.

Making social-emotional well-being promotion a priority as schools begin to re-open is essential for students’ acclimating to a new way of schooling. It is difficult for students to focus on

completing assignments when they are still facing uncertainty and a disruption to newly formed routines. Thus, spending the first few weeks of school re-learning expectations and rules, acknowledging the difficulties of online learning, building new relationships, and allowing room to share their emotions and feelings will allow students to transition smoothly.

- ### 4. Establish connections with community-based supports.
- The reality of re-opening schools is that educators will have to re-think how they are providing social-emotional and mental health supports within schools. Consequently, it may be appropriate to refer students to outside counseling resources that are able to provide telehealth services. In addition, educators may need to adapt targeted social-emotional and mental health supports to be more feasible during this time, such as conducting social skills groups or counseling sessions virtually.



SUPPORT STUDENTS



**MULTIDISCIPLINARY
TEAMS**

UNIVERSAL SCREENING

**FOCUS ON
SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL
WELL-BEING**

**ESTABLISH
CONNECTIONS**

ENDNOTES

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