

Guidance for Schools on Supporting Students during Traumatic Events

The Minnesota Department of Education recognizes that trauma can have profound impacts on students and staff. During times of community-wide traumatic events, schools may need to consider adapting existing policies and procedures to adequately support students.

Guidance below provides information for schools to help create plans to respond to traumatic events in their communities. This information is intended to serve as a resource to help local school districts and charter schools make informed decisions for their communities.

Types of Traumatic Responses

Emotional Distress

Trauma, including racial trauma, makes it challenging for some youth to identify, express and manage their emotionsⁱ. Some youth may demonstrate avoidance and withdrawal, experience intrusive thoughts, low energy, anger and fatigue. Additionally, trauma can cause new occurrences of or trigger recurring symptoms of anxiety, depression, PTSD or other clinical issues.

Response Considerations

- Provide space and multiple, culturally responsive and sustaining opportunities for students to explore, process and express their emotions after traumatic events.
- Expect an increase in students presenting with acute mental health concerns, and an increase in the number of students requiring school linked mental health therapy as well as care and treatment placement.
- Ensure you have a plan in place for staff to elevate concerns about students whose emotional health poses an immediate danger to themselves or others.

Physical Distress

Common physical effects of trauma include sleep disturbances, increased blood pressure, headaches, respiratory distress, stomachaches and other gastrointestinal issues and urological issues. Additionally, after a traumatic event, for some students there is an increased likelihood of substance useⁱⁱ.

Schools should anticipate an increase in:

- Absences due to illness.
- Referrals to the health office.
- Students coming to school under the influence or use substances at school and/or in the community.

Difficulty Thinking and Learning

Thinking clearly, reasoning and problem solving can be challenging for youth who are experiencing trauma and tragedy. This makes acquiring new skills and processing new information particularly challenging. Research demonstrates that trauma can also deplete motivation and internal resources for academic engagementⁱⁱⁱ.

Response Considerations

- Hold realistic expectations for students' academic performance.
- Encourage staff to prioritize the social and emotional wellbeing of students.

Loss of Self-Esteem and Safety

Trauma and tragedy often indicates to children that the world is unsafe. Racial trauma experienced by children may send a message that individuals and systems may not be trustworthy sources. As a result, children may feel that their ability to change their circumstances is diminished. These messages can affect one's belief about the future via loss of hope, limited expectations about life and fear^{iv}. This can negatively affect students' self-esteem as individuals and learners.

Response Considerations

- Help students cultivate a positive self-concept by helping them reflect on and celebrate their strengths and the strengths of the community.
- Support students to envision a different future.

Compounding Trauma

Trauma, including civil unrest, often causes youth to experience additional adversities compounding those they experience on a day-to-day basis. This can include increased financial hardship and lack of access to essential resources like a safe place to stay, nutritious food and transportation. Some families could experience separation due to safety concerns or incarceration. These compounding challenges produced by trauma and loss can tax the coping resources of the child, family and broader community.

Response Considerations

- Work collaboratively with community partners to ensure the basic needs of students and families are met.

Adapting Policies to Support Students Experiencing Trauma

Attendance

Attendance serves as an important data point in identifying students who are disengaging from school or could be facing barriers to their education outside of school. Students not attending or engaging with school represents a larger issue that school personnel need to investigate and address.

Before adopting interventions or policies to address student attendance, districts and schools should focus on clearly communicating logistics, supports and expectations regarding any learning model, including distance, hybrid or in person, to students, families and caregivers.

Recording student attendance is a legally required and important part of the school day. It is the first step to ensuring that students are present for school and able to access their educations.

Students and families may be facing a number of barriers to attendance. Some students may not be able to get to and from school safely, others may not be physically or mentally well enough to attend school. Consider providing options for how students can attend school during particularly traumatic days.

Response Considerations

- Provide options for how students can attend school during particularly traumatic days, such as:
 - Participating via distance learning.
 - Participating in asynchronous class.
 - Posting completed coursework to a learning management system.
 - Turning in coursework on a given day—for students to count as in attendance.
- Separate engagement expectations from attendance tracking. Behaviors such as having video cameras turned on and microphones muted, sitting up in view of the camera, wearing appropriate clothing, having tidy backgrounds, and limiting interruptions might be indicators of whether or not a student is engaged at a given moment, but are not appropriate to determine attendance, particularly during this time.

Grading

Assessment and grading reflect the health of relationships between students, teachers, and families since it is part of the communication between school and families. Frequent and meaningful feedback is essential to maintaining strong relationships with students and for motivating their learning and progress.

Districts and schools should continue to consider the principle of “do no harm” to avoid damage to both students’ future education opportunities and struggles that students and families will experience during this time beyond their control. Grades should include evidence of mastery at the end of a unit or course and that evidence should be able to be collected in a variety of manners to allow students to demonstrate their understanding.

Grades should not be the only feedback that students and families receive about their learning and systems of communication should be set up to share formative assessment information. The process for grading should be transparent and evident to students and parents.

Response Considerations

- Avoid giving students 0s or Fs in assignments or courses. Instead, give a mark of no credit and work with the student to identify appropriate steps to recover credit for the assignment or in the course. Ensure students have the individualized support they need to make up assignments and course credit.
- Take a strengths-based approach when observing, offering feedback or rating a student’s social, emotional or behavioral development in the days following the traumatic event. Any feedback should help cultivate a student’s sense of resilience.
- Give students credit for reflecting on and researching current events or participating in civic engagement: A critical step to addressing race and trauma in the classroom is to help students and understand the connections between historical trauma, systemic racism and community trauma, offer students credit for this critical learning.

Discipline

Expect some youth to have trouble managing their behavior. Some youth will exhibit increased reactivity and impulsivity, aggression, defiance, withdrawal and relationship challenges^v. Behavior is communication. All students are communicating something through their behavior during every moment in every day, even if they are not aware of it^{vi}. Oftentimes behavior, particularly behavior that is viewed as unskillful or inappropriate, is a communication of a valid need.

Response Considerations

- Teach students how their needs can be met in ways that have a positive impact on the needs of the classroom community^{vii}. Remember that behavior that is disruptive to or harms the wellbeing of the community is an opportunity for individual and collective reflection and growth.
- Discipline should balance accountability with understanding of traumatic behavior. Prioritize positive and proactive approaches including community building, restorative practices and therapeutic service.^{viii} Refrain from using punitive discipline measures (e.g suspension, expulsion) when students exhibit dysregulated or unskillful behavior in response to trauma and tragedy.
 - If a student is removed from the learning environment during this time, consider giving them access to distance learning so they can stay connected to the school community during times of uncertainty.
- Avoid punitive responses to student expression and organizing efforts. Instead, proactively encourage civic engagement and healthy political discourse among students. Help students learn how to exercise their first amendment rights by teaching them to recount their own experiences, and express their world views or emotions and take action in healthy, and safe ways.
 - The First Amendment to the US Constitution prohibits school administrators from dismissing students merely for expressing political views. They can only discipline students if their speech or actions cause “material” or “substantial” disruption to school functions.

Supporting the Mental Health and Social-Emotional Needs of Students and Staff

Students and staff may be dealing with a range of emotions including trauma, sadness, anger, fear and anxiety. Social emotional learning and mental health support are critical for both students and adults in school buildings. Just as teachers and staff are encouraged to check in and support students, it is also important that teachers and staff themselves receive support from their leaders.

Students and staff experiencing more difficulties may need positive coping mechanisms, additional mental health services, or crisis support.

Below are resources that can help support student and staff mental health and social-emotional needs:

- The Minnesota Association for Children’s Mental Health offers [traumatic event resources](#).
- The Minnesota Department of Human Services offers [Mobile Crisis Mental Health Services](#).
- The National Association of School Psychologists has resources on [school climate, safety and crisis](#).
- The Minnesota Department of Human Services has created a [directory of adult mental health crisis response phone numbers](#).

- [Minnesota Prevention Resource Center](#) provides support to people and organizations on substance abuse prevention.
- National Center for School Mental Health provides several [Crisis Resources](#).
- Suicide Prevention Resource Center provides guidance on [suicide prevention best practices for schools](#).
- [Compassion Resilience Toolkit](#) offers information, activities, and resources for school leadership and staff to understand, recognize, and minimize the experience of compassion fatigue and increase compassion resilience.

ⁱ National Child Traumatic Stress Network, Justice Consortium, Schools Committee, and Culture Consortium. (2017). Addressing race and trauma in the classroom: A resource for educators.

ⁱⁱ Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (US). Trauma-Informed Care in Behavioral Health Services. Rockville (MD): Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (US); 2014. (Treatment Improvement Protocol (TIP) Series, No. 57.) Chapter 3, Understanding the Impact of Trauma. Available from: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK207191/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Cole, S. F., O'Brien, J. G., Gadd, M. G., Ristuccia, J., Wallace, D. L., & Gregory, M. (2005). Helping traumatized children learn: Supportive school environments for children traumatized by family violence.

^{iv} Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (US). Trauma-Informed Care in Behavioral Health Services. Rockville (MD): Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (US); 2014. (Treatment Improvement Protocol (TIP) Series, No. 57.) Chapter 3, Understanding the Impact of Trauma. Available from: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK207191/>

^v National Child Traumatic Stress Network, Justice Consortium, Schools Committee, and Culture Consortium. (2017). Addressing race and trauma in the classroom: A resource for educators.

^{vi} Behavior is Communication – Michigan Alliance for Families. (n.d.). Retrieved September 1, 2020, from <https://www.michiganallianceforfamilies.org/behavior-is-communication/>

^{vii} Glasser, W. (2000). We need non-coercive lead-management from the state superintendent to the teacher. *Educational Leadership*, 28-37.

^{viii} Cole, S. F., O'Brien, J. G., Gadd, M. G., Ristuccia, J., Wallace, D. L., & Gregory, M. (2005). Helping traumatized children learn: Supportive school environments for children traumatized by family violence.