Back-to-School Playbook: Caring for Students Within Our Communities

By Jeffrey Kane, Matt Lapolla, and Jack Warren

With the transition to distance learning amid the COVID-19 pandemic, care for students has never been more important. Researchers predict that a wave of mental health issues is on the horizon as a result of the pandemic. In a study conducted in June 2020, America's Promise Alliance found that "30% of young people say they have more often been feeling unhappy or depressed…More than one quarter of students (29%) say they do not feel connected at all to school adults."[1]

Close interpersonal ties and a strong community are the foundation of an excellent educational experience. With the pandemic creating great uncertainty, it is critical that schools focus on the care of learners to facilitate their educational growth and to strengthen the larger school community in remote, hybrid, and in-person learning environments.

The following research-based tips will help educators care for students during the pandemic and beyond.

Purposefully build community to drive engagement.
Embedding opportunities for social and personal interaction is a key component for driving student engagement in any format. In an online setting, it is essential.[2]

Clearly defined norms and expectations that promote learning can help build community. These should be created jointly with students and can include input from all stakeholders to ensure that classroom and schoolwide expectations are clear. Norms should direct all action towards mission-related learning goals.[3]

Schedule regular, structured advisory times to bring students together to check-in and connect with each other.[4] Since maintaining relationships with students is more challenging in a virtual setting, continue to use co-curricular activities to build that connection. Sports teams or musical groups can bring in guest speakers or hold remote practices. Be creative in making sure these experiences are available to students.

Establish a culture that prizes flexibility.
Research demonstrates that flexibility allows students additional chances to demonstrate their learning, which lessens the pressure of perfection and better supports students.[5] The transition to remote learning is uncharted territory for many educators and students. Since there's no established playbook for this situation, establish a culture of flexibility instead.[6]

Teachers know their students well; empower teachers to continue to develop those relationships and to be forgiving towards their students. Some students may have challenges learning online due to a lack of supportive structures that schools normally offer, poor internet connectivity, or stressful home lives. Flexibility with deadlines and testing allows students more opportunities to achieve the desired academic outcomes.[7]

Finally, don't get stuck doing anything a certain way if it's not working; as teachers and students grow more comfortable with distance learning, use their feedback to make adjustments to programs.[8]

Focus on student wellness.
Student wellness must be a priority for schools to help them cope with an uncertain future. Schools that address students' mental wellness in transitioning learning environments will best support their overall needs.[9]

Schools must maintain a safe way for students to connect with trusted adults and trained counselors. Building consistent advisory programs, individual meetings with school counselors/support staff, and opportunities to engage with teachers and administrators outside of the traditional classroom into the schedule will allow students to continue to foster these important relationships.[10]

Additionally, continue to build the social-emotional learning (SEL) curriculum into all remote/hybrid modules. These skills must be blended into the goals of all aspects of the community so students can observe and demonstrate their individual growth. Remember, in remote/hybrid environments, less can often lead to more.[11] Educators must err on the side of all students' wellness. Everyone is adjusting to the new types of education, and prioritizing mental wellness first will allow schools to more effectively reach long-term goals.[12]

Establish a growth mindset.
Kyle Cole, the Director of Diversity and Inclusion for the Center for Teaching and Learning at Stanford University, states, "Research has shown that when students have a growth mindset, they are more likely to challenge themselves, believe that they can achieve more, and become stronger, more resilient and creative problem solvers. Educators can have an enormous impact on the mindset of their students."[13]

Embody the growth mindset mentality you want to see in your learners. Students need to see that teachers and administrators are learning, growing, and adapting alongside them, despite the uncertainty of the times. Drive student motivation by remaining motivated yourself. This can include the practice of sharing your own struggles and vulnerabilities. Be understanding when something doesn't work and embrace failed initiatives as a chance to learn and grow as a community.[14] Assign open-ended work that allows for plenty of effective growth-related feedback.

Prioritizing students' mental health and well-being is critical now more than ever to develop healthy adolescents, strengthen connection to the school community, and support academic growth.

Additional Resources

- EdSurge has created a set of resources that illustrate how to address many different challenges facing schools: https://www.edsurge.com/research/guides/navigating-uncertain-times-how-schools-can-cope-with-coronavirus

- Faculty Focus discusses methods to best identify and support students who may be struggling: https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/online-education/identifying-and-supporting-struggling-students-in-online-courses/

- Global Online Academy, a leader in remote learning strategies, addresses key norms and rubrics for teaching and learning in an online environment: https://globalonlineacademy.org/insights/articles/five-norms-and-five-rubrics-for-high-quality-online-learning

---

[1] "The State of Young People during COVID-19," America's Promise Alliance; online at https://www.americaspromise.org/resource/state-young-people-during-covid-19

[2] Eric Hudson, "Five Norms and Five Rubrics for High-Quality Online Learning," GOA; online at https://globalonlineacademy.org/insights/articles/five-norms-and-five-rubrics-for-high-quality-online-learning.

[3] Tony Wan, "Setting 'Reasonable' Goals, Expectations and Routines for Remote Learning," EdSurge, April 27, 2020; online at https://www.edsurge.com/news/2020-04-27-setting-reasonable-goals-expectations-and-routines-for-remote-learning.

[4] Jeanie Phillips, "Creating a New Schedule for Remote Learning," Innovative Education in VT blog, Tarrant Institute for Innovative Education at the University of Vermont, March 15, 2020; online at https://tiie.w3.uvm.edu/blog/creating-a-new-schedule-for-remote-learning/.

[5] Marie Revak, "When the Tide Goes Out: Identifying and Supporting Struggling Students in Online Courses," Faculty Focus; online at https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/online-education/identifying-and-supporting-struggling-students-in-online-courses/.

[6] Emily Tate, "With Weeks of E-Learning Ahead, Be Flexible and Forget Perfection," EdSurge, March 19, 2020; online at https://www.edsurge.com/news/2020-03-19-with-weeks-of-e-learning-ahead-be-flexible-and-forget-perfection.

[7] Marie Revak, "When the Tide Goes Out: Identifying and Supporting Struggling Students in Online Courses," Faculty Focus; online at https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/online-education/identifying-and-supporting-struggling-students-in-online-courses/.

[8] Emily Tate, "With Weeks of E-Learning Ahead, Be Flexible and Forget Perfection," EdSurge, March 19, 2020; online at https://www.edsurge.com/news/2020-03-19-with-weeks-of-e-learning-ahead-be-flexible-and-forget-perfection.

[9] "Navigating Uncertain Times: How Schools Can Cope with Coronavirus," EdSurge; online at https://www.edsurge.com/research/guides/navigating-uncertain-times-how-schools-can-cope-with-coronavirus.

[10] Jeanie Phillips, "Creating a New Schedule for Remote Learning," Innovative Education in VT blog, Tarrant Institute for Innovative Education at the University of Vermont, March 15, 2020; online at https://tiie.w3.uvm.edu/blog/creating-a-new-schedule-for-remote-learning/.

[11] Emily Tate, "With Weeks of E-Learning Ahead, Be Flexible and Forget Perfection," EdSurge, March 19, 2020; online at https://www.edsurge.com/news/2020-03-19-with-weeks-of-e-learning-ahead-be-flexible-and-forget-perfection.

[12] Colin Gilbert, "How to Help Students Navigate this Social-Emotional Rollercoaster," EdSurge, April 29, 2020; online at https://www.edsurge.com/news/2020-04-29-how-to-help-students-navigate-this-social-emotional-rollercoaster.

[13] Kyle Cole, "Growth Mindset," Stanford VPTL; online at https://vptl.stanford.edu/growth-mindset.

[14] Ki Sung, "Seven Distance Learning Priorities to Consider Before Reopening Schools." KQED *Mind/Shift*; online at https://www.kqed.org/mindshift/55838/seven-distance-learning-priorities-to-consider-before-reopening-schools.