

Statewide Webinar Addresses Mental Health Needs of Students and Staff during COVID-19

As of mid-April, 27 states and three US territories have [closed their schools](#) for the remainder of the academic year to help prevent the spread of COVID-19. In addition to disrupting student learning, these closures also deprive students of the social and emotional supports schools provide—at a time when they are particularly vulnerable to suffering from high levels of stress, anxiety, and mental health problems.

“COVID presents the ‘perfect storm’ of mental health challenges,” says EDC’s Shai Fuxman, Co-Director of DESE’s Social Emotion Learning and Mental Health Academy. “Mental health needs among students are increased. Services are harder to deliver in a virtual environment. And staff are facing their own stressors.”

To address these challenges, Education Development Center offered a series of webinars to help schools in Massachusetts better support the mental health needs of students and staff during these uncertain times. Working in partnership with the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, Transforming Education, and Walker, the events offered participants a chance to hear from recognized experts and share lessons learned with one another.

Over 1,000 educators, mental health providers, school support staff, and district leaders attended the first event, with a second session offered the following week to accommodate an additional 800 participants. Some important takeaways included the following:

- **Develop a realistic but flexible plan for providing supports.** Within a framework of effective emergency operations planning, take time to assess the mental health needs, define roles and responsibilities, and prioritize courses of action across all tiers of support. But understand that this plan *will* change over time—these are unprecedented times and we are all “building the bus while we drive it.”
- **Focus on connection.** Isolation is one of the greatest threats of this pandemic. At their core, all communications and services should be designed to strengthen and/or establish critical connections with and among students, parents, and the greater community. Virtual platforms like Zoom and Google Hangout make it easy to connect online, but lower-tech channels, like phone calls and postcards, also communicate to students and families that you are thinking of them.
- When assessing need, **consider the role of trauma.** Look for students who may be experiencing neglect, abuse, domestic/intimate partner violence in the home. Pay special attention to students who have experienced violence in the past, have family health issues, or experienced a recent loss. Have trained staff (for example, school adjustment counselors) reach out to those students and/or families you are concerned about.

- Also consider **individual, family, cultural and community factors that might contribute to—or protect against mental health concerns**. For example, the LGBTQ-identifying student living in an accepting family in a loving community with strong supports is likely going to fare better from a mental health perspective than the LGBTQ-identifying student in a family that is not as accepting, isolated from supports, and feels a need to hide certain aspects of themselves at home.
- **Take care of yourself**. To meet the challenges of a new normal that one presenter described as “anything but normal”, staff need to take care of themselves—both physically and emotionally. Some strategies for how schools can support staff self-care include the following:
 - Creating and modeling routines that incorporate time for simple stress-reduction strategies (e.g., mindfulness activities, time for sharing)
 - Ensuring that training is available for any new skills or expectations that might be needed
 - Including self-care as a component of available professional learning experiences
 - Developing and communicating resources that can address all domains of self-care, such as Employee Assistance Programs

According to Fuxman, perhaps the most meaningful takeaway from the events was how engaged participants were in the proceedings. “Participants posted hundreds of comments to the chat line—posing questions, sharing challenges, and volunteering innovative solutions. Participants were eager to share their experiences, and to provide support and resources to one another. It’s underscored the importance of finding ongoing ways to bring people together.”

To this end, EDC and its partners delivered a second webinar exclusively for district leaders that focused on strategies for establishing effective mental health support systems, such coordinating virtual SEL and mental health supports using a multi-tiered approach, establishing online mental health referral systems, and using technology-based mental health strategies.

Download the presentation [***Supporting Student and Staff Mental Health***](#).

To learn more about EDC’s work supporting the mental health needs of students during this time, contact Shai Fuxman at sfuxman@EDC.org.