SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING AND BEHAVIORAL HEALTH

BEHAVIORAL HEALTH NEEDS

School administrators and teachers should anticipate that this fall’s return to school may be challenging and complex. Many students have experienced anxiety, stress, uncertainty, illness, hunger, grief and loss, violence, abuse, neglect, and/or homelessness. Teachers may see surges of learning, behavioral, and emotional issues from students. To assist students as they transition into their new learning environments for this school year, social emotional wellness, behavioral health, and culturally responsive trauma-informed care plans should be incorporated into each school’s reopening plan.

SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is the process in which students understand, recognize, and manage emotions, create and accomplish positive goals, understand and demonstrate empathy for others, develop and maintain positive and safe relationships, and foster decision-making skills.

Addressing any educational gaps students may have experienced as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic is critical. However, students may not be ready to participate in formal learning until they feel emotionally, physically, and psychologically safe.

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) has developed the SEL Roadmap for Reopening Schools which outlines various techniques schools can use to sharpen their social and emotional competencies and create supportive learning environments where all students can heal and thrive. CASEL has identified four SEL Critical Practices to assist schools with SEL reopening plans:

1. Take time to cultivate and deepen relationships, build partnerships, and plan for SEL.
2. Design opportunities where adults can connect, heal, and build their capacity to support students.
3. Create safe, supportive, and equitable learning environments that promote all students’ social and emotional development.
4. Use data as an opportunity to share power, deepen relationships, and continuously improve support for students, families, and staff.

Schools can use this roadmap to build on current efforts around community-building, school climate improvement, student well-being and mental health, trauma-responsive learning environments, restorative practices, and social and emotional competency development.
BEHAVIORAL HEALTH

BIE defines behavioral health (BH) as the emotions and behaviors relating to a student’s mental well-being and their ability to function in everyday life. Examples of BH issues include substance use, psychological distress, self-harm, suicidal ideation and suicide attempts. Schools must have a specific plan for quickly assisting students who are dealing with BH issues or struggling with transitioning back to school.

The American School Counseling Association (ASCA) and National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) developed several school reentry considerations specific to BH which can assist schools with planning for addressing the unique BH needs of their students. Specific considerations that must be included in school reopening plans are:

• Strategies and identified supports for students and families for each phase of reopening.

• Plans outlining how teachers and residential staff can set up phone/video calls with students during distance learning time periods to do regular weekly check-ins.

• A formal BH referral plan for students who need targeted support and/or counseling services (especially students who are at higher risk for significant stress or trauma from COVID-19).

• A comprehensive referral contact list for behavioral health services in your local area.

School Leaders, Teachers, and Residential Staff should also:

• Not assume that the home is a safe place for some students.

• Realize students in need may not voluntarily disclose their distress or want to talk immediately. Weekly check-ins (as outlined above) can provide a safe space for students to share concerns.

• Consider the impact of face coverings on the ability to read emotions and facial expressions, follow speech, participate in speech-related interventions, and generally participate and focus on academics.

• Acknowledge the potential loss experienced by students who cannot participate in various activities that contribute to their development and sense of self (e.g., sports, performances, traveling).

• Be prepared to handle issues related to grief and loss. Please reference the CDC’s and NASP’s resource pages for detailed information regarding grief and loss.

Bureau-operated schools should continue to follow the Suspected Child Abuse and Neglect (SCAN) protocol and Critical Incident Reporting (CIR) policy. Tribally-controlled schools are encouraged to adopt a SCAN protocol and CIR Policy.
TRAUMA – INFORMED PRACTICES

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) states that traumatic experiences can initiate strong emotions and physical reactions that can persist long after the event. Children may feel terror, helplessness, or fear, as well as physiological reactions such as heart pounding, vomiting, or loss of bowel or bladder control. Children who experience an inability to protect themselves or who lacked protection from others to avoid the consequences of the traumatic experience may also feel overwhelmed by the intensity of physical and emotional responses.

Schools should recognize the potential for higher rates of certain adverse childhood experiences (ACES) and/or stressors during the COIVD-19 pandemic that may put students at higher risk of trauma. These may include:

• Parental/guardian substance use and abuse.
• Exposure to domestic violence.
• Child neglect and/or abuse.
• Homelessness.
• Financial/food/occupational/housing insecurity.
• Mental health issues or exacerbation of underlying issues.
• Family separation.
• Grief and loss (either personal or affecting the entire school community).
• Recognize stigma that may occur as a result of COVID-19, including:
  ▪ Those who became sick or tested positive for COVID-19.
  ▪ Those who have a family member who became sick or tested positive for COVID-19.
  ▪ Those with allergies or respiratory illnesses that may result in coughing or sneezing.

Schools should use guidance from the NCTSN's Trauma-Informed School Strategies during COVID-19 to incorporate a trauma-informed approach to help children feel safe, supported, and ready to learn.