Key Social-Emotional Well-Being Information found in NYS Guidance

***Social-Emotional Well-Being***

Communities and schools are facing unprecedent­ed challenges as they respond to the compound­ed difficulties of a global pandemic, an economic recession, and civic unrest in response to structural racism. But these challenges also offer unprece­dented opportunities to re-envision and renew the capacity of our schools and communities to be welcoming, supportive, inclusive, and equitable environments.

To meet these challenges, individuals must start with the inner work of healing their own hearts and minds, finding the capacity within themselves to support healing for students, families, peers, and communities. While district and school personnel cannot solve every problem, collectively they are a powerful force in improving the well-being of themselves and those around them.

As district and school personnel adapt to environments that result in substantially reduced time spent interacting in-person, ensuring intentional and meaningful inclusion of social emotional learning (SEL) across all aspects of operating strategies is critical to supporting the well-being and success of stu­dents, staff, and families. Along with physical health and well-being, schools and districts must prioritize social emotional well-being -- not at the expense of academics, but in order to create the mental, social, and emotional space for academic learning to occur.

It is unrealistic to expect that students will return to instruction as they left it months ago. Students have experienced an extremely stressful, and for many, traumatic experience while isolated from school, friends, and community.

Some students have had positive experiences during school closures, learning, growing, and discover­ing new identities as activists, caregivers, and leaders in their communities. Schools should support and nurture new skills and mindsets.

Students known to be vulnerable, as well as those not previously on district and school radars, may return to instruction anxious, fearful, withdrawn, grieving, and/or unprepared to self-manage new or exacerbated negative behaviors. And some students have thrived in an on-line environment, as school anxiety has lessened. Should additional periods of remote learning be required, students who had an adult available to assist them previously may now be home alone as adults return to work. Older stu­dents may be tasked with the care of younger family members. Schools and districts must be prepared to meet students where they are, regardless of the circumstances in which they find themselves.

During the Regional Task Force Meetings, stakeholders discussed the variety of student, family, and school personnel needs that must be addressed during transitions back to school in the fall, whether that is in-person, remote, or a hybrid. Overall, worry was expressed that many students, families, and staff will return with fear or anxiety, and school and district staff will need to balance physical safety with social and emotional needs.

Stakeholders expressed concern over local capacity to address increased social and emotional needs with existing staff, and discussed opportunities to better position existing staff to build capacity around student and family engagement, trauma-responsive practices, social emotional learning, restorative practices, and fostering relationships, within both in-person and virtual environments. They further ex­pressed concerns about screen time for students should remote or hybrid learning be necessary, and the ability of students and families to access resources during periods of remote learning.

Stakeholders stressed the importance of clear communication with all stakeholders including students, families, staff, and community, and considered how community partnerships could be leveraged to increase capacity. They recommended that social and emotional well-being be prioritized during transi­tions back to school and for as long as necessary to appropriately support student needs; physical and emotional safety is necessary for the brain and body to be ready to learn.

Finally, stakeholders stressed the critical need to address adults’ social and emotional needs before the return to school and on an ongoing basis. Adults must have systems of support including meaningful peer relationships, opportunities to connect, and resources to support self-care. Without these supports in place, adults will not have optimal capacity to support the needs of students and families.

The following considerations are intended to assist in creating a welcoming and caring school communi­ty that ensures its members are met with compassion and the support they need to achieve and thrive. Academic learning cannot be effective until the basic human needs for physical and emotional safety are met. This is an embodied practice. Breathe, notice, feel, and be present.

Except where otherwise noted, the considerations outlined below are relevant regardless of whether instruction is in-person, remote, or hybrid.

**Reopening Plan Mandatory Requirements**

* Ensure that a district-wide and building-level comprehensive developmental school counseling program plan, developed under the direction of certified school counselor(s), is reviewed and updated to meet current needs.

* Establish an advisory council, shared decision-making, school climate team, or other collabora­tive working group comprised of families, students, members of the board of education, school building and/or district/charter leaders, community-based service providers, teachers, certified school counselors, and other pupil personnel service providers including school social workers and/or school psychologists to inform the comprehensive developmental school counseling pro­gram plan.

* Address how the school/district will provide resources and referrals to address mental health, behavioral, and emotional support services and programs.
* Address professional development opportunities for faculty and staff on how to talk with and support students during and after the ongoing COVID-19 public health emergency, as well as provide supports for developing coping and resilience skills for students, faculty, and staff.

Full New York State Education Department document link: <http://www.nysed.gov/common/nysed/files/programs/reopening-schools/nys-p12-school-reopening-guidance.pdf>