



Considerations and Reflection Questions for School Leaders

Leading a mentally healthy return to school

We recognize that each of us has had a different COVID-19 experience, and we must respond with compassion and understanding. Listen to and hear the COVID-19 experiences of school staff. Reflecting on the impact, implications and your response. People need a chance to debrief what has happened, individually and collectively, before they can turn their attention and energy to what is next.

We know that change affects each of us differently. But we won't know what people need until we ask them. As we welcome each other back to school, we will focus on reconnecting as a caring, learning community.

We have a shared responsibility and ownership for a successful return to school. This requires us to approach our work in schools with optimism, confidence and hope. Leading with optimism will help all staff to feel more confident in their role. This will enable staff to instill confidence in students, parents and families.

As a school leader, emphasize your commitment to enhance and protect mental health and well-being as the foundation for student learning. In conversations with staff related to a mentally healthy return to school, consider how you can:

- * Model optimism, confidence and hope.
- * Provide messaging that as a staff we are in this together.
- * Be clear and calm in your messaging.
- * Be consistent in what you say, in meetings with the full team and with individuals.
- * Listen carefully. Validate thoughts and feelings as staff members surface issues and concerns in staff meetings.
- * Validate the courage it takes to talk about personal and professional experiences related to COVID-19.
- * Repeat often that support is available, and that this can help on the journey ahead.
- * Offer ongoing support, and welcome individual follow-up discussion, as needed.
- * Connect individual staff members who express a concern for their mental health with employee assistance, for confidential support. Do not probe for additional information about personal matters.





Key messages

As staff return to school, it's an opportunity to reinforce the following five key messages. This will ensure alignment and show commitment to mental health and well-being. As you prepare to share these messages, reflect on the considerations beneath each one. If you need assistance or information, speak with your school superintendent or board mental health leader.

1. Mental health and well-being is our priority.

How will our staff, students and families know that we are prioritizing mental health and well-being as we return to school? As school leader, what conditions do you need to be considered for connecting and reuniting with staff?

- * Demonstrate confidence and commitment to set the tone for connectedness.
- * Prioritize a welcoming staff environment and indicate your interest in staff's experiences. Communicate these messages with clarity, consistency and support often.
- * Continue to focus on Tier 1 practices: welcome, include, understand, promote and partner. Caring relationships are the foundation of welcoming and inclusive classrooms that support student learning.
- * Demonstrate commitment to working together as a school community to enhance our focus on mental health and well-being.
- * Recognize that each of us has had a different experience over the past few months living through a pandemic. It's important that we take time over the next few days to share these experiences, to support each other and so that we are able to plan forward.
- * Find ways to demonstrate that each person's emotions are valid. As a staff community, we should look out for each other to support our mental health and well-being (e.g. an informal buddy system).
- * Communicate consistent messages regularly to reassure parents/families/students of your school plan for supporting student mental health and well-being.
- * Prioritize staff and student connections, build relationships and teach and model social-emotional learning skills to support student engagement and learning.
- * Let staff know that additional support is available (e.g. HR support, employee assistance programs and federation)
- * Acknowledge and confirm individual experiences of racism, discrimination and prejudice. Actively listen and explore ways to address and support staff concerns through ongoing dialogue, discussion and education.





2. We lead with compassion and empathy.

What strategies clearly demonstrate empathy and compassion in an inclusive environment to connect/reconnect with students and their families so they all have a sense of belonging and feel included and welcomed?

- * Emphasize the value of relationships and connections for students with caring adults. What will we do to demonstrate that we are caring adults?
- * Understand that students will have different levels of comfort depending on their previous remote learning experience. Show your support for equity and inclusion. Acknowledge the added impact of systemic prejudice, racial injustice and anti-Black racism, anti-Asian racism and anti-Indigenous racism. How do we recognize and reduce inequities, supporting students who are racialized, marginalized, or oppressed, and those who have experienced barriers to remote learning?
- * Model a calm, friendly welcome to ensure students feel they belong, are cared for and are physically and psychologically safe at school. How will you model calm?
- * Practise listening to understand and create spaces for students, staff and families to share comfortably, allowing everyone an opportunity to express themselves. What does listening and validating/acknowledging look like in your school?

3. Schools are an excellent place to promote and protect student mental health.

What did we learn during the school closure time that will help us move forward? How do we know that a student may be struggling and require additional support?

- * Consider what have we learned from our students' experiences.
 - > What went well and what didn't?
 - > How can we use this information to move forward in supporting our students?
- * Plan for students who require more support.
 - > Who are the students who require more support?
 - > What students do we need to know more about?
- * Ensure staff are clear on when to be concerned, and how to access mental health supports.
- * Are there other supports specific to a student's identity, culture or interests that may also support their well-being? This might include GSAs or other student groups, and elder, a knowledgeable supportive staff member, etc.
- * Share your school's process for accessing supports and who to call for mental health assistance (refer to the **Circle of Support Template**).





4. We have strong mental health foundations to build on.

Recognizing the work done in mental health and well-being, how do we continue to build on this to move forward during the pandemic

- * As a school community we are committed to providing the resources needed for your role in supporting student mental health within the school. Consider:
 - > What strategies do you have that you can share to support each other?
 - > As a staff, how do we prioritize our self-care, one another and our students as we return to school?
 - > How will we know the impact of the mental health practices being used in our school?
 - > What school, board or community supports may also be useful?
- * Embed culturally-relevant and responsive social-emotional learning, mental health literacy and self-care into our classroom routines. How are we prepared to do that in every classroom?
- * Recognize and reduce inequities, supporting students who are racialized, marginalized, or oppressed, and those who have experienced barriers to remote learning. What personalized or unique approaches will be required to support student mental health and engagement?

5. We need to work together.

The pandemic has provided us with an opportunity to do things differently as we move forward. As part of a team, what is our shared responsibility and our individual role in promoting and supporting students' mental health and well-being for the return to school? Recognize the need to be flexible.

- * What role do we each play (school leaders, educators, support staff, school mental health professionals, parents/families and community partners) in supporting all students as they return to school?
- * What are the things we can plan for?
- * What unknowns remain?
- * Who are the helpers in our community we can engage to ensure alignment and support?
- * How can we be sure that students get fast access to mental health support when urgent and/or significant needs arise?





Summary of reflection questions

Are we demonstrating leadership commitment to a mentally healthy return to school? Consider these six areas.

1. Have we set welcoming conditions for staff, by making space to:

- * reconnect with colleagues?
- * hear the experiences of each member of the staff, students and families?
- * reflect on the impact, implications and next steps of the information gathered from stakeholders?
- * identify strategies to support each other (e.g., promote our own self-care, care for one another and our students as we return to school)?

2. Have we articulated a clear and focused vision for return to school by:

- * reviewing and adjusting the school plan and goals that support mental health and well-being
- * acknowledging staff and students' experiences about the return to school?
- * modelling a clear commitment to mental health throughout the day?
- * understanding and using practices that promote physical and psychological safety for students and staff?

- * recognizing and reducing inequities, supporting students who are racialized, marginalized, or oppressed, and those who have experienced barriers to remote learning?

- * providing personalized or unique approaches required to ensure ongoing engagement and mental health?

3. Do we demonstrate effective communication and shared language about mental health and well-being by:

- * communicating consistent messages to reassure students, families and staff of our school plan for supporting student mental health and well-being?
- * Listening, and validating/acknowledging by using compassionate language?
- * validating the emotions and perspectives of others?

4. Are we using resources to support mental health literacy and social emotional learning by:

- * identifying what social-emotional practices we will embed in our daily practice to promote a sense of safety, belonging and well-being at school?
- * modelling for staff and students that taking care of ourselves is important?

- * encouraging students to use help-seeking strategies?

- * observing and noticing when students may require additional support?

5. Have we created respectful and trusting relationships that allow us to engage in meaningful collaboration by?

- * following a process for connecting with families?
- * modelling calm?
- * including the student voice as we develop plans and processes for returning to school?
- * supporting families to engage with appropriate board/community mental health services?

6. Do we have clear and consistent processes to support student mental health by:

- * sharing with staff our process for accessing mental health supports and services for students?
- * equipping staff with an understanding of when to be concerned about a student's mental health, and how to access mental health supports?

