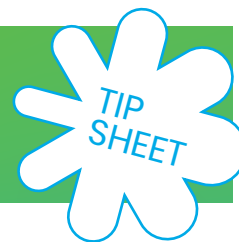


# Student Mental Health and the Return to School: Understand and Respond to Staff and Parent Concerns



We recognize that our staff and parent community have had different COVID-19 experiences. They return to school in unpredictable times, and may have many questions and concerns. School leaders must respond with compassion and understanding to support them, and help them support our students. Open communication, listening, and validating/acknowledging helps provide reassurance and reduce worry.

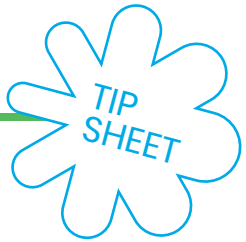
## General supportive messages:

- Welcome all staff with enthusiasm and optimism. Set a confident tone for a successful return to school.
- Engage in conversations and dedicate time to ensure a social reconnection prior to formal return to school discussions.
- Listen and be present to reaffirm trusting and supportive relationships.
- Talk to staff about how you will be there to support each of them as we all move through this experience together.
- When staff members talk about personal information and experiences during COVID-19, validate with compassion, acknowledge the courage it takes to share this information.
- Communicate what we know to help reduce feelings of worry and concern.
- Encourage all staff to practice self-care and self-compassion every day.
- Let all staff know that assistance is available through the board employee assistance program and/or their federation support program.

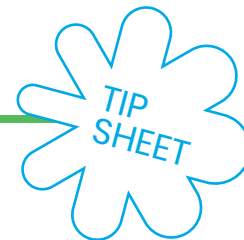
Here's how to reflect on and respond to some of the things that staff and parents might raise.

Question/concern for Staff members	School leader reflection process for Staff members	Sample response for Staff members
<b>Caring relationships are foundational, but how can we nurture caring relationships if we are feeling anxious ourselves?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Without judgement, validate how the staff member is feeling.</li><li>• Offer a validating statement to support the importance for caring relationships.</li></ul>	"I understand why you're feeling anxious, because it's hard when things are out of our control, because nothing is as we expected it to be and because there are so many unknowns.  We are going to do the best we can. By forming caring relationships, we can support each other and our students."



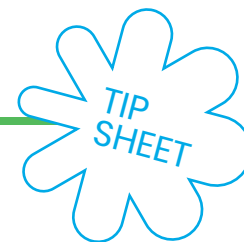


<b>Question/concern for Staff members</b>	<b>School leader reflection process for Staff members</b>	<b>Sample response for Staff members</b>
<p><b>I'm concerned about how students will be supported, and what mental health services are available.</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Validate the concern.</li><li>• Identify the process for supporting students with mental health concerns.</li><li>• Reassure staff that students will be supported and that we care.</li></ul>	<p>"I understand this is a difficult time, because we want to ensure that students have access to the support they need, because we care for them and because this is a priority for you.</p> <p>Our school mental health professionals continue to be available either in-person or virtually to provide support for students. We continue to follow our process and pathways for how staff can access support. We want to continue to extend support to students who may be experiencing needs related to their mental health and require additional support.</p> <p>Let's review the process for accessing school, board and regional community supports."</p> <p><a href="#">Kids HelpPhone is available 24/7 to help</a></p>
<p><b>I feel overwhelmed by all the needs of the students. With all this focus on mental health, how am I expected to meet their needs?</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Validate that the staff member is feeling overwhelmed.</li><li>• Reassure them that supports are available for students.</li><li>• Reassure them that supports and resources are available for them to use to meet their needs in the classroom.</li></ul>	<p>"I can understand you're feeling overwhelmed because these are unusual times, because we are all feeling the effect of the pandemic, and because we are trying to be responsive and meet the needs.</p> <p>We care about our students and our staff, and want to make sure that we have support in place for all who need it.</p> <p>Our school mental health professionals continue to be available either in-person or virtually to provide support for students. We continue to follow our process and pathways for how staff can access support. We want to continue to extend support to students who may be experiencing needs related to their mental health and require additional support.</p> <p>In addition, we have resources that focus on social-emotional learning in the classroom that will help develop skills and resiliency."</p>



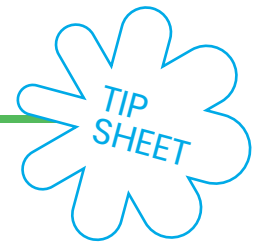
Question/concern for Staff members	School leader reflection process for Staff members	Sample response for Staff members
<p><b>I have so much to focus on already with the return to school. How will the focus on social- emotional learning and mental health help us address the academic gap?</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Validate their concerns about the workload.</li> <li>• Validate that both goals are important – addressing academic skill gaps and mental health and well-being.</li> <li>• Reassure that both will be addressed in time.</li> <li>• Encourage/offer consideration that students will be “unavailable” for learning until they are able to process their feelings, worries and concerns, and learn to build the social-emotional learning skills to support resiliency.</li> </ul>	<p>“I understand, because there is a lot for us to focus on in the return to school, because It seems counterintuitive to focus on social-emotional learning and because it feels like there is so much curriculum to cover.</p> <p>By focusing first on social-emotional learning, we will actually help address the academic gaps. Because we will help students be available for learning [or in a position to learn – whichever phrase you prefer].</p> <p>That happens by teaching them how to process their feelings, build skills to self-regulate, collaborate, problem solve, be socially aware, learn to manage stress, and develop empathy and resiliency.”</p>





Question/concern for Parents/Guardians	School leader reflection process for Parents/Guardians	Sample response for Parents/Guardians
<b>I experienced a death during the school closures.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Validate feelings and acknowledge their experience of grief and the feelings of pain associated.</li><li>• Ask what has been helpful during this difficult time and explain what support school can provide.</li><li>• If necessary, make use of your school/board process for the student/family to access mental health services and/or link to community mental health services.</li><li>• Review the <a href="#">grief and loss resource</a></li></ul>	<p>"I am so sorry to hear that your {grandmother} has died.</p> <p>This is a very difficult time to experience a loss. Because of physical distancing it can be such a lonely time to grieve.</p> <p>What has been helpful to you in getting through these difficult times? How can we support you and your child at school?"</p> <p>If you hear evidence that the student is not coping well:</p> <p>"It sounds like it might be helpful for your child to access some extra support right now. Would you be interested in talking with one of our mental health professionals to hear about what support they can offer?"</p>
<b>I have concerns about my child's mental health.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Thank the parent/family for reaching out and trusting the school community.</li><li>• Reassure the parent/family that mental health and well-being is a priority and that are supports available.</li><li>• Provide reassurance that there is a focus on providing strategies within the classroom to support their child's learning mental health and well-being.</li><li>• If there are specific concerns, ask if they are comfortable sharing them, seek to address them, and help connect with supports if requested.</li></ul>	<p>"Thank you for sharing your concern because we are also concerned about our students' mental health and well-being, and because mental health and well-being is a priority for our school.</p> <p>We do have support available for students, and they can access this at any time.</p> <p>We will do our best to support your child's well-being in the classroom. We recognize the importance of that for learning.</p> <p>If we or you have specific concerns, please let us know. We can connect you with school mental health professionals or community agencies as needed.</p> <p>We will work together to determine how we can best support your child."</p>





Question/concern for Parents/Guardians	School leader reflection process for Parents/Guardians	Sample response for Parents/Guardians
<p><b>I want/my child will want to talk about the mental health and well-being impact of prejudice, systemic racism and anti-Black racism experienced during COVID-19</b></p>	<p>The pandemic has brought to light and even magnified deep-rooted economic, social and racial inequities that have disproportionately impacted the most vulnerable and marginalized communities. Students and families experienced and witnessed firsthand how the added layers of poverty, family violence, discrimination, transphobia, anti-Black racism, anti-Asian racism, mental illness, and addictions further impacted their access to social, emotional, and academic supports. These inequities are long standing and have been further accentuated by the pandemic. It should be expected that this will be an issue raised by parents, staff and students.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Acknowledge that students may be struggling with feelings related to how COVID 19 has impacted their family and how continued acts of anti-Black racism and other forms of oppression have affected individuals they care about and themselves, including their own personal feelings of safety.</li> <li>• Acknowledge that you have a safe space for this discussion.</li> <li>• Validate that every student may have a different reaction and response to COVID19 and events of discrimination, racialization, marginalization, hate and anti-Black racism. These personal responses may be shaped by many aspects of the student’s lived experience and their identities.</li> <li>• Take action and model for students how you as an adult will interrupt or respond to harassment, bullying or racism, stereotypes or discrimination of any form immediately. Follow your board’s Safe Schools and Equity policies and procedures.</li> </ul> <p>Discussing social identity is very personal. If you need help with the conversation seek out the resources of your board equity team.</p>	<p>Everyone enters into this discussion with a different lived experience.</p> <p>Sharing opinions which put down another person or promote hate, stereotypes or discrimination of any form are not acceptable, and will not be tolerated in any discussion. You need to create a safe space for this conversation.</p> <p>When interrupting incidents you could say:</p> <p>“I don’t like what I am hearing or seeing because it sounds disrespectful, because it is non-inclusive and because such actions or statements are not tolerated in our school/classroom. Everyone is valued.</p> <p>Support is available for any student affected. Help from a mental health professional can be accessed through our school process. Help is also available through our equity team.”</p>

