

A First Day Unlike Any Other

Trauma-Informed Guidance for School Reopening

As educators across the state of Missouri prepare for the first day of the 2020-21 school year, one thing is for certain: this will be a school year unlike any other. Whether your school is starting onsite, in a hybrid model or completely virtual, the first day of school for students and staff alike will be profoundly different from years past. It is worth stating all the adjustments our school communities are making right now, including:

- Coming back after a challenging end to the last school year that was impacted by statewide building closures and stay-at-home orders;
- Making tough decisions about how to approach school for this year by balancing student and staff safety, emerging understanding of COVID-19, and the importance of student learning and connection;
- Adjusting to some or all virtual instruction and asking educators to learn and use new technological platforms and teach kids in a way never done at this scale before;
- Navigating the dual pandemics of COVID-19 and racism, and working to make our schools equitable learning environments that are working towards justice; and
- Educating students while they and their families navigate the impact of COVID-19 on their health, their families and their community.

When circumstances are as different as they are now, they require a fundamentally different approach to the year. Whatever your first day of school traditions have been in the past, we encourage you to start this year with decisions and activities designed through the lens of trauma. This document will:

- Help you think about how the principles of trauma-informed care can inform your planning,
- Provide specific examples of activities to engage in on day one, and
- Offer suggestions for navigating challenging situations posed by student behavior.

Applying the Principles of Trauma-Informed Care

1 - SAFETY

Definition: Ensure physical and emotional safety, recognizing and responding to how racial, ethnic, religious, sexual or gender identity may affect safety through the lifespan.

PRINCIPLE IN ACTION:

- Remember that your students have very different understandings of safety depending on their cognitive and developmental stages. Remember that our efforts to create safety don't always translate to people feeling safe, so take time to both explain what you're doing to keep your school community safe AND ask your staff and students to share openly about what will make them feel safe both physically and emotionally.
- Welcome questions and dialogue about the changes your school community is navigating. Minimizing or ignoring the worry, stress or trauma created by COVID-19 will not make those things go away.
- Be honest in all the information you share, including being honest about things you do not know yet or do not have answers to. When talking with younger students, always be honest, but limit the information to what they are developmentally capable of handling.
- Normalize that it is okay to feel scared but that you are taking their safety very seriously. Be prepared to offer this reassurance as often as needed.

2 - TRUSTWORTHINESS

Definition: Foster genuine relationships and practices that build trust, making tasks clear, maintaining appropriate boundaries, and creating norms for interaction that promote reconciliation and healing. Understand and respond to ways in which explicit and implicit power can affect the development of trusting relationships. This includes acknowledging and mitigating internal biases and recognizing the historic power of majority populations.

PRINCIPLE IN ACTION:

- Remember to approach this day less with the goal of getting your students or families to trust you, and more with the mindset of acting in a way that is truly worthy of trust.
- Be honest. Children as young as four years old pay attention to which adults they think are telling the truth and differentially trust those they believe to be honest.
- Consider these six key aspects of trustworthiness: vulnerability, benevolence in motivation, reliability, competence, honesty and openness.¹
- Remember that as your school designs and communicates new norms for promoting safety, make sure that your students see every adult actually upholding those expectations. Things like temperature checks or mask wearing expectations are only as good as the faith that your students have in your upholding them and being accountable to them. Make sure they see you follow through with the promises you make to help keep them safe.

3 - CHOICE

Definition: Maximize choice, addressing how privilege, power and historic relationships affect both the perceptions about and the ability to act upon choice.

PRINCIPLE IN ACTION:

- Be sure to create opportunities on day one, no matter how small, where every student can make a choice of some kind.
- Think about offering choices, even low-stakes choices, as an intervention to provide a sense of control and self-efficacy for students.
- Honor choices. If your school offered families a choice in how their child learns this year, remember to equally honor those choices. Monitor students (and staff) for conversations they might be having that judge or make assumptions about other choices made by families, and remind them that everyone is making the best decisions they can in a very difficult situation.

¹ Goddard, R., Tschannen-Moran, M., & Hoy, W. (2001). A multilevel examination of the distribution and effects of teacher trust in students and parents in urban elementary schools. *The Elementary School Journal*, 102 (1).

4 - COLLABORATION

Definition: Honor transparency and self-determination. Seek to minimize the impact of inherent power differentials while maximizing collaboration and sharing responsibility for making meaningful decisions.

PRINCIPLE IN ACTION:

- Remember and acknowledge that many staff and students are struggling with feeling as if much of their life is out of control. Use collaboration as a way to instill a sense of power and control in individuals.
- Encourage all staff members to set classroom or class community expectations collaboratively. Give students real opportunities to shape what needs to be different in their learning environment this year in order for them to feel ready to learn.
- Have students create a collaborative anchoring statement for this year. This statement can serve as something they come back to through all the changes and transition this school year will hold. Focus this statement on what you and your students really want to accomplish this year, or what school can mean for them in the face of uncertainty. An example statement is: "What we know for certain is that we are flexible and resilient. We are a community of capable and curious learners. We'll ask each other for help and give each other grace." Your statement does not need to look or sound like this, but encourage your students to create something that is positive and affirming.

5 - EMPOWERMENT

Definition: Encourage self-efficacy, identifying strengths and building skills, which leads to individual pathways for healing while recognizing and responding to the impact of historical trauma and oppression.

PRINCIPLE IN ACTION:

- Prioritize opportunities for student leadership. What decisions do students make? What projects or activities can they lead?
- Acknowledge that there will inevitably be challenges you face on day one, but remember to help your students celebrate the successes you do have.
- Encourage teachers to set realistic goals with their students for this year. Have students think about their short-term goals (what do I want to accomplish in the next 1-2 weeks?), mid-term goals (what are my goals this semester?) and a long-term goal (what do I want this year to look like?).

- Create opportunities for students and staff alike to reflect and share about their strengths. Even at times when the world feels overwhelming, reminding ourselves of the strengths and gifts around us can be grounding and encouraging as we navigate these challenges.

6 - EQUITY

Definition: A state of being in which an individual's outcomes are no longer predictable by race or other demographic factor. The process of giving individuals what they need, not just what's "equal."

PRINCIPLE IN ACTION

- Monitor and assess your data about access at the end of day one. If you are virtual, how many of your students were you able to make a connection with? What patterns can you already see from student utilization of school technology? Disaggregate this data by race, ability status and any other demographic factors important in your school community.
- Create immediate plans to remedy access challenges, whether your students are learning onsite or online.
- Make sure you understand your disaggregated student data about learning and connection to school at the end of the 2019-20 school year. Have specific plans in place to redress any disparities in engagement.
- Make space for students to discuss or share about the impacts of the trauma of racism on them and their community. Remember that many students will hear silence in the face of injustice as complacency with systems of harm.

Day One

As educators plan for how to use the time they will have with students on day one, whether online or onsite, below are some considerations for what day one should look and feel like to your students:

- 1. Balance the focus on "academics" or instruction.** Your students must feel safe, heard and connected before they can learn. Rushing to curriculum will only slow down the process of building relationships and will leave behind the many students not yet ready to learn.
- 2. Provide opportunity for simple, uncomplicated human connection.** If you are onsite, take advantage of the opportunity to be in space and relationship with

others. If you're online, try to minimize your use of or instruction about the fanciest parts of your virtual platform. Instead, focus on creating a space where students can talk, share and feel seen.

- 3. Utilize restorative circles to build community.** If you are learning virtually, circles will look and feel different, but can still provide a way to make sure all of your students have a chance to share. Based in the principles of trauma-informed care outlined above, consider using circles for both fun icebreakers and more serious conversations.
- 4. Provide opportunities for play and fun.** Many of our students did not get as much play or fun time this summer as they may be used to. Remember that even for our older students, play is still an essential part of wellbeing. There is so much for members of your school community to worry about; give them a time and reason to forget about those worries for a while and have fun.
- 5. Teach safety basics.** Take time to repeatedly teach your students about your community expectations around social distancing, sanitation or other safety standards. Remember to intermix this with opportunities for fun and connection.
- 6. Provide a way for your students to ask questions or share their concerns anonymously.** Remember that even if you have students submit inappropriate questions or comments, those remarks only have as much power as the attention you give to them. Ignore those and focus on learning what you can from your students who share genuinely.

Addressing Behavior on Day One

Many of our students are returning to a school environment for the first time in five months. Even our students who are learning virtually are likely preparing to do so in a very different way than they did in spring 2020. This kind of change, along with the stress and trauma created by COVID-19, can create challenging behaviors in our kids who might be in flight, flight or freeze mode. Consider the following for navigating behaviors:

- Take punitive discipline off the table. When we view our students through the lens of trauma, we know it is normal and natural for them to struggle through such a big change. Make it the goal of the school community not to punish our students for struggling to adjust, but rather to help them navigate their concerns and get ready to learn.

- Remember that worried kids do not always look sad. Sometimes worry looks like picking a fight, running away or ignoring instructions. Encourage educators to remind each other that even in the face of challenging behavior, our students are navigating a trauma and their dysregulated behaviors are communication to us about what they are feeling and what support they may need.
- Prioritize connection. Many of our students will be returning this year with serious connection deficits and will seek out attention to fill that need. When you see a student seeking attention or connection, focus on meeting that need rather than punishing the behavior.
- Focus on consistency. Our students will be paying attention to make sure that all the adults are on the same page. Make sure that by day one, all building staff aligns to what is important and what the expectations are for learning and connection.

As you plan for the 2020-21 school year, remember that this day is just the first of many to come. Use this day as an opportunity to build in the direction you want your school year to go and focus on creating a space of safety and support for your students. Acknowledge the stress that this experience places on educators, and prioritize self-care before, during and after this day.

If you have any questions about the contents of this document, please email info@awcommunities.org.

