



Priority for Trauma-Sensitive Remote Learning: Keeping Connections Strong

Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative

The Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative (TLPI) is a collaboration of Massachusetts Advocates for Children and Harvard Law School whose mission is to ensure that all students, including those traumatized by exposure to violence and childhood adversity, succeed in school.

As the pandemic forces students, educators and families to learn, work, and parent all day at home, collaborating and partnering with families is more important for schools than ever. Educators are now working closely with parents and caregivers in new ways, often supporting them as collaborating co-teachers. As we think about how to support students in learning at home, it is critical to consider the many financial, emotional and health stressors that may impact all involved. Just as students and their families have been impacted by the sudden and drastic changes to their daily routines, so have teachers, which means that we need to consider the ways in which we can act proactively to help buffer everyone against any harmful effects.

In trauma-sensitive, safe and supportive schools where life is structured by classrooms, corridors, cafeterias and gymnasiums, educators work face-to-face with each other and students using a trauma lens. This allows the creation of a warm, welcoming learning environment that embeds learning in a culture of safety, connection, belonging, equity, predictability, and positive relationships with adults and peers. Staff work together as a team, adapting to students' changing needs. (Please read more about the attributes of a trauma-sensitive school [here](#).) In the current public health crisis, the overarching questions become:

How do we adapt a trauma-sensitive lens in an equitable way—while teaching remotely—in a time of rapidly increasing stress? And how do we provide support to educators who are living with their own stressful situations?

We interviewed several experts and trauma-sensitive school leaders who have been working to create trauma-sensitive schools, and asked them how they are applying the trauma lens to today's time of crisis. These educators shared the questions that they use to guide their COVID-19 response and how they are addressing their most urgent priorities in trauma-sensitive and culturally-responsive ways. We share their questions and some of the actions they are taking.

Question #1

How can we connect as an urgent matter to ALL of our students/families to make sure they are safe, have needed resources, and maintain strong connections with school staff that will endure through the crisis?

Connecting with every family has been a primary goal of trauma-sensitive educators during these first few weeks of the pandemic. As one school leader stated, the first goal is to find all the families. She stated, "we are using whatever means possible *and we're not stopping until we make contact with every family in the district.*" As she points out, the crisis is highlighting the ways existing structural inequities can increase the vulnerability of those families who may already face housing instability, job loss, food insecurity, an inability to maintain social distance due to space considerations, and the impacts of health disparities, including co-morbid illnesses. This makes even more urgent the need to reach every family, as school can be both a connector to resources that can help with basic needs and meet the urgent need for students and families to continue to feel that they belong to a caring school community. Maintaining ongoing frequent and regular contact after finding the family will not only strengthen relationships with students, but help to ensure students are looking forward to return. It also enables schools to continue to play a critical role in the broader safety net.

School leaders described the many ways staff are maintaining connections with families. Some schools' staff went to students' homes when they had not heard back from families, hand delivering packets and Chromebooks to make sure students have access. Other districts organized teachers, paraprofessionals and specialists to do outreach, dividing up classroom lists among them with the goal of reaching every family in the district. Various schools have carefully selected the person most connected to each family to reach out to them. One district had already expanded its central Family

Welcome Center to approximately eight parent support specialists, and also placed staff in family engagement centers in seven schools. Both central and school-based staff at these Centers have become essential to its efforts to reach out to connect with all families. Educators are using multiple modes for communicating with families: text, email, telephone, mail, virtual meetings through on-line platforms, as well as whatever else the districts have in place for parent-teacher communication. As we spoke to trauma-sensitive educators they emphasized the importance of being flexible and sensitive to the families' needs by asking how they prefer to stay in touch, and the time of day and frequency per week that works best for them, establishing a structure for ongoing communication several times a week. In addition to regular communications with families, a trauma-sensitive middle-high school sends a daily email survey asking its students: 1) are you able to access your work? 2) are there any unmet family needs? 3) are you having any issues with your internet connection/access?

Language Access. The need for close partnership and collaboration with families during the crisis has been cause for these schools to redouble efforts to connect and communicate in the language of the home. The educators explained that schools that have already developed a structure for connecting with non-English-speaking families are benefitting from that foundational work. One district used funding to access Language Line Solutions which allows teachers to leave a message in the families' home languages. This district has also established a multi-language Hotline where district staff respond within 24 hours to a question that a parent raises or

provides a referral to resources in their home language. Another district described using district-level multi-lingual teams to assist with communication with families. These teams are assisting teachers with translating materials for families, including on-line lessons, emails, and phone messages. The teams are calling families directly, speaking in the language of the home to share information about the food program, laptop distribution, and the lessons available online, and to provide referrals to housing, unemployment and emergency services. This district's Parent Information Center also has a family specialist who is able to register families for WIC and food assistance programs.

Safety and access to resources. We heard from trauma-sensitive school leaders that, as staff are connecting with families, they

are often the first to know about issues that are threatening the student's/family's sense of safety and wellness. To help staff respond to these urgent needs, district and school leaders are ensuring that each educator has locally-based, up-to-date resource lists to share with parents in case food, housing, employment, crisis management teams, domestic violence shelters, and health or mental health support are needed. In today's crisis these systems may become overloaded and have waiting lists, and we heard from leaders that those districts that have established referral systems with community partners before this emergency are able to rely on those relationships for help facilitating referrals and accessing up-to-date information about the availability of services.

Question #2

As we plan remote learning, how do we support families to help their students learn at home?

Trauma-sensitive educators shared wonderful examples of elementary school educators inviting families to join the learning. One school leader shared with us the question that is guiding her early childhood program as they support students with and without disabilities in learning at home: *How can we support our parents/caregivers to be their children's teachers?* Their answer was to create videos for caregivers, demonstrating how service providers and specialists, such as adaptive physical education teachers, speech and language therapists, and occupational therapists, work with individual students so that families can use the same strategies and approaches at home. Videos created by other schools show teachers doing small activities that can also be done at home, and teachers or administrators reading a story to students or sharing the classroom pet. One elementary school invites families to be part of morning meetings and closing circles in their child's classroom. Bi-lingual paraprofessionals are present to

translate for parents. One elementary school developed daily student schedules and adapted them collaboratively with parents to include the child's activities at home, like time to get out of bed, brush teeth, eat breakfast, get dressed, etc.

While parents of older students may play less of a minute-to-minute hands-on role with them, the educators at the middle/high school we spoke with shared that the families' role as partners with teachers continues to be critical. The school is providing meetings three times a day for parents/students to be able to connect with staff, so they can choose the time that works best for them to address questions as they arise. At this school, feedback from parents that they and their students were feeling overwhelmed and confused about the various free online learning resources led to the school providing a streamlined list of approved online resources that were better aligned with the school's curriculum.

We heard from educators at elementary schools as well that parents were describing feeling “bombarDED” when information and messages from multiple teachers arrived at the same time, especially when there is more than one student in the family. As a result, schools are trying to coordinate how information is shared to avoid overwhelming

parents, and some schools have organized systems to share manageable doses of information in response to this feedback from parents. For example, one school has organized the timing of communications from teachers to occur at the time of day their class would have been in session.

Question # 3

How are we addressing the whole child in our virtual learning plans?

Trauma-sensitive educators discussed the opportunity during this time to use a “whole child” lens in thinking through virtual learning plans. A whole child lens recognizes that learning takes place in the context of relationships, a sense of safety, and connectedness. When children are supported in these areas and are helped to self-regulate their emotions, it can go a long way to helping children calm their emotions and be better able to learn and feel competent. Educators are finding inspiration for remote teaching from project-based learning, which can help to advance a sense of agency and be more easily adapted to students’ diverse needs. (See <https://www.wgbh.org/distance-learning-center>.)

These projects can take place according to the varying schedules in the home and can be adapted to the special needs of students and the culture of the family. Zaretta Hammond teaches that the COVID crisis gives us an opportunity to help dependent learners become independent. (See <https://crtandthebrain.com/covid19-webinar1-recording/>.)

As one district leader shared with us, “the question is: *what will help this student and this family best access learning at this time? Is it a computer, printed materials, a “packet,” or something else? And then accommodating the needs of the student.*”

Question #4

How can we maintain predictability, consistency and sense of belonging?

Given the stress and the potentially traumatic impact of the crisis, predictable and consistent routines are critically important in helping students feel calm and comfort in the face of stress. Providing a structure that enables students to know when their teacher will be available to them can be a lifesaver for many children. Knowing that there will continue to be an opportunity to interact with peers online can be exciting and energizing for students, solidifying their sense of belonging and their enthusiasm about returning to the school community when the crisis is over. Trauma-sensitive educators told us that no matter how the remote learning is

taking place across the district, (from direct instruction online as a class group, to remote learning with no face-to-face contact with a teacher or peers, etc.), having a regular time several times a week set aside for students to talk with their teachers—whether it be face to face, on a device or voice only on a phone—is critically important to buffer the traumatic impact of the current situation. Being able to access the constancy and stability that this important relationship provides to students, reinforcing their sense of connection with their teacher and their role as a member of the classroom community, is so critically important.

At the same time, trauma-sensitive educators emphasized the importance of developing their plans for virtual learning with both predictability *and flexibility* in mind. School staff recognized from the beginning that not every family is available to supervise learning

at home during school day. Some students may have to wait for help from parents until they get home from work in the evening or are watching their younger siblings during the day. Other families are wary of the internet and prefer to use written materials.

Question #5

How can educators maintain a sense of cohesion and feel effective in their work while teaching remotely?

Trauma-sensitive school leaders pointed to the importance of teamwork, collaboration, and staff cohesion for mitigating stress and helping educators feel effective and empowered. According to these leaders, helping educators feel a strong sense of staff cohesion and belonging by establishing structures in the midst of uncertainty allows educators in turn to engender this same sense of belonging among their students. District leaders emphasized maintaining the same times as before the crisis for their virtual meetings with groups of principals. Some district leaders are also adding additional times for individual discussions with principals to brainstorm solutions to each school's unique needs. At the building level, principals are also continuing to hold virtual faculty meetings at the same times they were held before the crisis, and PLCs and grade level team meetings are continuing and being held at the same time when possible. In addition, trauma-sensitive school leaders are also creating opportunities for teachers and building leaders to share ideas and talk through the challenges of remote learning. One creative principal is

holding "office hours" on Friday afternoon. While she didn't expect high participation, she was thrilled that so many teachers joined in to participate in this additional opportunity for support and connection.

The trauma-sensitive school leaders shared with us their keen awareness that providing multiple opportunities, both formal and informal, for staff to connect with each other not only helps alleviate stress but provides opportunity for the collaborative reflection that spawns innovative thinking and creative practices. We heard about staff having lunch together via online meeting platforms and having informal virtual chats, serving the same purpose as conversations that happen in the hallway and teachers' room. Ensuring that there is time for staff to continue sharing ideas/resources and problem-solving challenges with each other can enable staff to move from feeling overwhelmed to feeling empowered. The trauma-sensitive school leaders shared their perception that in some ways this is the ultimate self-care strategy for teachers, helping to prevent feelings of isolation from remote teaching.

We wish to express our deep gratitude to the trauma-sensitive school leaders who generously shared their wisdom and insight with us.

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