Introduction and Overview

The COVID-19 pandemic has suddenly changed the field of education and affected school communities, students, and staff in a variety of ways. Texas students and school staff will enter this new school year changed. It is critical that school staff feel connected, supported, and equipped amidst the unknowns that lie ahead. Staff well-being, including mental and emotional health, must be a top priority during the return to school. Strategies to support staff and student well-being must be integrated along with instructional continuity when making plans relative to both in-person and remote learning environments. School communities possess a unique opportunity to begin the school year with a clear focus on promoting wellness and resiliency which is now more important than ever.

Background: TEA's Highly Mobile and At-Risk Student Programs Division conducted a Virtual Listening Tour with nine LEAs during Spring 2020 to better understand the complex needs and challenges experienced by educators, to identify training and guidance needs, and to cultivate innovative strategies and solutions that can be shared with all schools. Division staff also studied national best practices and guidance provided by multiple organizations that promote well-being in schools.

Resources released will support local education agencies in their preparation for 2020-2021 school year and beyond. The purpose of this "Equipping Staff" guidance document is to provide school leaders with step-by-step instructions and best-practice guidance to ensure that school staff members are equipped to handle the dynamic needs of students upon return from COVID-19. This resource outlines an intentional and thoughtful process to support staff well-being through planning, assessing, building, and training for a strong and safe start to 2020-2021.

The ethos and environment of the school will have an impact on staff well-being.

It is important to build a culture of trust where school staff feel valued and know how to access support.

Staff Support and Well-Being | Equipping School Staff for Reentry

Throughout this tool you will find practical guidance, suggestions, and key action steps for the topics addressed in the chart below to promote staff wellness, resiliency, and overall well-being. The first step in preparing for the reentry of staff is to plan. Campus leaders should convene a team of mental health and well-being champions. It is vital that this team is supported by the senior leadership team in a district, school, or open-enrollment charter school. This team should be charged with developing a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) plan using reputable resources that are trauma-informed for school mental and behavioral health, starting with a focus on promoting staff wellness. Next, assessing the well-being of staff is an essential step for prescriptive planning. After initiating the assessment and evaluating the results from the adaptable assessment options sample below, it will be important to build a school culture that promotes wellness and resiliency throughout the school year. Finally, equipping staff with the most relevant professional development and training will lead to a strong and safe start for the 2020-2021 school year.
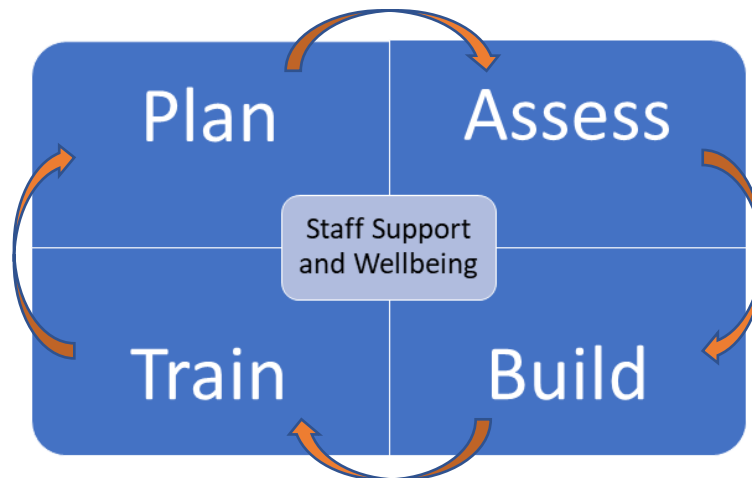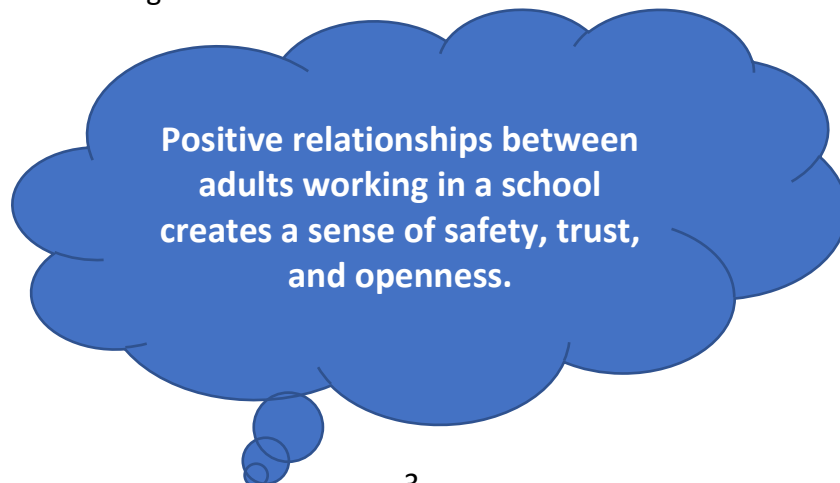

Plan | Convene a School Mental Health and Wellness MTSS team

While school staff have all shared the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic, each individual's personal experience during this pandemic has been different. Drawing on their shared experiences, teams can come together to problem-solve, brainstorm, and work cohesively to ensure that informal and formal supports are in place for all staff. Typically, MTSS teams focus on the needs of students. **However, during this time it is important that teams focus first on the well-being of school staff.**

Much like one should put on their own oxygen mask before helping others, it can be said that the staff must first take care of their own well-being before they are equipped to meet the needs of the students they serve. *Prior* to the MTSS team planning supports for students and families, consider the mental health and well-being needs of staff. Below are several suggestions and best practices for convening an MTSS team, as well as some considerations for planning. Please also use TEA Guidance on MTSS Intervention as a resource on an MTSS.

❑ Convene an MTSS Team that includes mental and behavioral health champions (remote or in-person) and leverage the strengths, experiences, and recent learnings of team members to create a staff wellness support plan.

❑ Set norms during your meeting to ensure that the MTSS team cooperates and communicates effectively to meet the common purpose outlined in the agenda. The agenda should include time to share experiences and concerns before moving to problem solving and planning.

❑ Provide an opportunity for honest and open dialogue about concerns with COVID-19 reentry with the MTSS team.

❑ Ensure that the MTSS team is supported to safely brainstorm, share ideas, and consider strong universal supports (tier 1) to promote staff well-being. The team should also plan wellness supports for colleagues who need additional help. It is expected that some school staff will need targeted supports (tier 2) to support their wellbeing, and a few staff may need access to more intensive supports (tier 3) upon return.

❑ Consider designating wellness ambassadors on campus to champion your vision for mental health and emotional wellness across campus.

❑ Develop and promote strategies to reduce stigmas of discussing stress, grief, trauma, and mental health concerns, such as providing awareness training for staff, students, and students' families; hosting resiliency workshops; and bringing in speakers (remote or in person).

❑ Create a plan for onboarding new and returning staff that includes intentional team building. Team building facilitates staff capacity to collaborate, effectively teach, and support the well-being of colleagues and a diverse learning community of students. Plan to build in these intentional touch points for teambuilding and support throughout the school year.

❑ Focus on connection before content. Research suggests that we cannot influence or teach our children well until we create a connection with them. The same is true for school staff, who must feel a connection with each other before working together to educate students and support their well-being.

Positive relationships between adults working in a school creates a sense of safety, trust, and openness.

Assess | Assessing the well-being of staff

It is important for LEAs to assess the well-being of staff prior to the beginning of the 2020-2021 school year. Staff well-being assessments are used to inform planning and decision-making for the school community. MTSS School Mental Health and Wellness Teams can use assessments to inform supports planned in the school. Timely assessment helps schools to preemptively identify staff needs and ensure that supports are in place for staff prior to the beginning of the school year.

Wellness and resiliency for everyone in the school community should remain at the forefront of all decisions. Promoting wellness is not a one and done activity; it must be intertwined daily into the school ecosystem. Systems of support includes building a schoolwide culture of care and trust. It includes promoting both formal supports and informal supports for self-care. Below are a few suggestions to ensure that processes are in place to assess and support staff well-being within an MTSS.

Best Practices and Strategies

❑ Conduct a landscape analysis on assessing mental health needs and social service needs of staff, including reviewing and adapting resources that will ultimately support students as well. (TEA developed Staff Wellness Survey located at the end of this document, other adaptable samples: Quantum Workplace, Health Related Quality of Life (HRQOL), Professional Quality of Life (PROQOL).) Reinforce with staff how data collected will aid in building a culture of wellness and resiliency. Take care to use surveys to build a culture and climate of trust.

❑ Once staff return to the work environment (remote or in-person), provide a time and space for reflection, share information on Educator Resilience & Trauma-Informed Care for self-care, and allow staff debriefing opportunities and consultation with mental health specialists.

❑ Ensure ongoing wellness touchpoints to continually assess and support all staff throughout the year.

❑ Consider hosting a remote resource fair for school staff that introduces and links staff to mental health supports and social services. The Zoom meeting application offers a useful feature of "Zoom Rooms," which allows for breakout sessions or classes to occur within the same meeting.

❑ Establish referral pathways, share the TEA Remote Counseling and Student Support Services document.

❑ Share the TEA State Mental and Behavioral Health Resource List with school staff. Encourage self-care and help-seeking for support. Also use the list to connect others. Provide updates and promote access to the district's employee assistance program (EAP) as appropriate.

- Establish systemwide approaches to address secondary traumatic stress, provide educator tips for coping with compassion fatigue, and design ways to support stress reduction (ex. STAT, buddy classrooms, tap in/tap out, an appealing calming room for staff such as a redesigned teacher's lounge, Wellness Wednesday activities/lunch bunch/speakers remote or in person, remote calming rooms alone or with peer supports, designated staff remote check in times with leaders, remote teacher self-care activities, etc.).

- Communicate plans, activities, and reentry practices to keep employees and students safe to reduce anxieties. Commit to creating a culture of open and honest feedback, transparency, and vulnerability in which staff members can safely express individual needs and concerns. Outline expectations for confidentiality. Also clearly communicate the limits of confidentiality.

- Coordinate with district human resource department to ensure needed supports are in place. (ADA accommodations, Employee Assistance Programs, (EAP) etc.). Ensure that employees are aware of human resources policies, procedures and supports that are available.

- Be patient, model empathy, and give grace to others as staff members prepare for school to reopen. Continually reassess needs. Provide opportunities for ongoing communication about the systems of support that are available across the school community to promote well-being.

Build | Building a culture of wellness and resiliency

Fostering a culture and climate that encourages wellness builds resiliency and offers an opportunity for hope and healing in the school community. Schools function best when school staff are grounded, connected, and happy. Creating opportunities for staff to connect around shared experiences is a foundational first step for building this culture. When staff members feel connected to their school ecosystem, they are more likely to feel empathy for others. This feeling of connection and empathy drives hope and healing for both staff members and the students they serve. Below are several suggestions to begin building a campus culture of wellness and resiliency.

> Supporting the social and emotional well-being and resilience of staff is critical for creating a positive school climate.

Best practices and strategies

- Model good working practices and self-care to encourage a healthy work/life balance.

- Communicate clearly with staff, particularly around any changes that might be taking place at school. If possible, consult with staff about changes and offer reassurance. Remember to also provide positive feedback on the things that are going well!

- Encourage a sense of community among staff. Establish a back-to-school social event to allow staff to reconnect remotely.

- ❑ Keep staff well-being and professional development on the agenda. Map out [staff wellness events](#) throughout the year and develop plans and alternate plans to participate in unique ways that are innovative, positive, and strengths based.

- ❑ Promote positive greetings and affirmations with staff throughout the day (e.g. email, shout outs, check in/check outs, etc.).

- ❑ Provide opportunities for community building by having morning meetings or [restorative circles](#) for staff and using tools to build [compassionate resilience](#) schoolwide.

- ❑ Create a support network between staff members to promote partnerships, mentoring, connections, and accountability partners.

- ❑ Remain open and honest with staff about any pivots that campuses may have to make during the school year.

- ❑ Include clear communication of re-entry activities and practices intended to keep staff and students safe. Create ongoing opportunities for staff to provide feedback and express concerns.

Train | Professional development and training

Professional development and training are essential components in preparation for the 2020-2021 school year. Educators must be equipped with the appropriate knowledge, strategies, skills, and tools that will equip them to teach, monitor, and support each other and their students.

Many students will likely have significant and diverse needs upon school reopening. Expect that staff members will also be experiencing anxiety, distress and trauma that will impact their emotional well-being. When school staff members feel that their leaders care about their well-being, when there is a culture of trust, and when staff is appropriately equipped and supported to address the needs of their students, they will likely experience less burnout and/or secondary traumatic stress.

> **We know that when someone has any number of Adverse Childhood Experiences, having one caring adult in their life can lead to healing and hope.**

Best practices and strategies

- ❑ Review resources on [Guidance and Support on COVID 19](#) that are continually updated to support professional development.

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❑ Survey staff to highlight specific training and professional development needs.

❑ Ensure that staff are equipped with information about [Adverse Childhood Experiences](#).

❑ View and share TEA videos on trauma informed practices for reentry after COVID-19.

❑ Review supplemental resources from professional school counselors and school psychologists in their collaborative [COVID 19 School Re-entry Considerations Toolkit](#).

❑ Prepare staff to develop a [Growth Mindset](#), which is foundational to effective teaching and learning and providing student support in changing times.

❑ Provide regular and ongoing professional development, study groups, and opportunities for staff to challenge themselves with new learning that is emerging in the education field.

❑ Consider using data from the school and the surrounding community to drive decisions for specific and tailored professional development or training.

❑ Ensure ongoing coaching and consultation for professional development and training needs.

Professional Development/Training Needs

Select and plan training that supports the wellbeing of educators as they prepare to support their students when school reopens for the 2020-2021 school year. When designing or selecting training, focus on practical, research-based strategies, tools, and tips that educators can immediately implement in both remote and in-person settings. Use data from landscape analysis mentioned above to inform additional training and support needs of staff. As an approach to professional development, encourage a culture of continuous learning, reflection, engagement, and self-improvement within the learning community.

For example, equip staff with grief and trauma-informed care resources for remote or in-person classrooms. Provide educators with research-based and practical tips on brain breaks, mindfulness exercises, deep breathing and movement exercises, stress relief and calming activities, de-escalation, classroom management, calming zones, emotional self-regulation, behavior co-regulation and relationship-building strategies. Use trauma informed care materials throughout the year that promote educator self-care and well-being. Provide opportunities to innovate and reflect as a team.

Training should also be provided by leaders to refresh staff on new or revised policies and procedures, such as those on the chart below. Staff wellness can be significantly increased when everyone on the team can work together to effectively implement policies and procedures.

To further support your reopening plan, review and consider the updated resources available on the [TEA Mental and Behavioral Health Website](#). Resources are available that can be use in both remote and on-campus environments. The At-A-Glance chart below highlights school mental health components under [TEC §38.351](#) and professional development under [TEC §21.451](#) that may serve as a helpful guide to schools for planning for the new school year.

School Mental and Behavioral Health Training, Policies & Best Practices At-A-Glance			
School Mental Health Components Include	**Required Staff Training**	**Required policies and procedures**	**Recommended Best Practices & Programs**
1. **Early Mental Health Prevention and Intervention**, **Mental Health Promotion** **Training to include recognizing signs of mental health conditions and substance abuse.**	✓	✓	✓
2. **Substance Abuse Prevention and Intervention** **Training may be combined with #1 for recognizing warning signs.**	✓	✓	✓
3. **Building skills related to managing emotions, establishing and maintaining relationships, and responsible decision making** **Training to include conflict resolution.**	✓	✓	✓
4. **Suicide Prevention / Intervention / Postvention** **Training to include components identified in TEC §38.351(e).**	✓	✓	✓
5. **Grief and Trauma Informed Care** **Training includes how grief and trauma affect student learning and behavior and how evidence-based, grief-informed, and trauma-informed strategies support the academic success of students affected by grief and trauma.** ***Training must be selected from the approved list on the* TEA Website.**	✓	✓	✓
6. **Positive Youth Development** **Training includes youth activities, youth voice and engagement.**		✓	✓

School Mental and Behavioral Health Training, Policies & Best Practices At-A-Glance			
School Mental Health Components Include	Required Staff Training	Required policies and procedures	Recommended Best Practices & Programs
7. **Positive Behavior Intervention & Support** **Training includes classroom management and de-escalation techniques (remote and in-person strategies).**		✓	✓
8. **Positive, Safe and Supportive School Climates** **Includes content on emotional wellness, diversity, equity and inclusion training.**		✓	✓
9. **Bully Prevention** **Training includes information on preventing, identifying, responding to, and reporting incidents of bullying.**	✓	✓	✓

> **In addition to required trainings to equip staff to effectively support the emotional well-being of students, consider ongoing training opportunities to help staff to look after their own emotional well-being.**

Closing

Research indicates that taking the steps provided throughout this guide can be important in the promotion and maintenance of staff mental and emotional well-being. Creating a positive school culture that promotes wellness and resiliency is more important than ever. By following the guidance in this document, school staff will be better equipped for self-care and also to meet the needs of students.

Planning, assessing, building, and training; these are four key steps to consider prior to the return of students in the 2020-2021 school year. Below is a sample staff wellness survey that can be adapted for local school and district use.

Definitions

The glossary of terms contains words and common terms used throughout this guide and in the school setting.

Term	Definition
Wellness	An active process of becoming aware of and making choices toward a healthy and fulfilling life. Wellness is more than being free from illness, it is a dynamic process of change and growth. Wellness is being balanced – physically, intellectually, spiritually, and emotionally. Strategies that focus on promoting wellness, including mental and behavioral health, contributes to a sense of emotional well-being.
Trauma	A deeply distressing event or set of experiences that can have lasting impact on a person's behavior and well-being. Each person reacts differently when they feel threatened, injured, harmed, or when they experience loss. Examples include divorce, illness, an accident, a pandemic, a natural disaster, abuse or neglect, and witnessing or experiencing violence or bereavement.
Secondary Traumatic Stress	The emotional duress that occurs when an individual hears about the firsthand trauma experiences of another.
Resiliency	The ability to overcome challenges of all kinds – trauma, tragedy, personal crises, everyday life problems – and the ability to bounce back stronger, wiser, and more personally powerful.
Compassion Fatigue	The emotional residue or strain one feels from supporting those who have experienced trauma.
Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)	Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are traumatic events that occur during a person's childhood. ACEs can have a significant impact on a person's physical, emotional, and mental health throughout their life.
Multi-tiered System of Support (MTSS) Team	A multidisciplinary team, including school staff and community partners, convened to assess needs; identify and align resources; plan and coordinate mental & behavioral health services and supports with academic supports; collect data; monitor progress; and practice continuous quality improvement. The framework typically includes 3 tiers to plan and organize the support system in a school. Tier 1 can be described as "universal" promotion prevention which provides support for all. Tier 2 can be described as "targeted," as it addresses the needs of some people for additional support (individuals and groups) and early intervention. Tier 3 can be described as a "specialized," in that it addresses a subset of people who need support beyond those provided in Tier 1 or Tier 2, such as intensive intervention and treatment.

School Staff Wellness Survey

The coronavirus pandemic, school disruptions, and other societal issues have impacted us all in different ways. This school year will be different because of these experiences. Please indicate your top five concerns for the 2020-2021 school year.

- [ ] Contracting the virus

- [ ] Exposing my family to the virus

- [ ] Managing my child care

- [ ] Managing my mental health

- [ ] Preventing students from contracting the virus

- [ ] Ensuring students use health precautions

- [ ] Engaging students in learning

- [ ] Supporting classroom discussions on societal issues

- [ ] Managing student energy/activity levels

- [ ] Teaching content online

- [ ] Ensuring student progress or achievement

- [ ] Meeting the unique needs of students

- [ ] Addressing student levels of stress

- [ ] Supporting student mental health

- [ ] Other _____

- [ ] Other _____

What types of supports do you feel that you need from your school administration to help you be successful this year?

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