

Getting Back to School after Disruptions: Resources for Making Your School Year Safer, More Predictable, and More Positive

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It goes without saying that students need to feel safe and have supportive relationships for their social, emotional, and academic learning to be optimized. Students experiencing trauma, such as from the recent weather disasters or other upsetting events, may have been exposed to unpredictable schedules, inconsistent supervision, or food insecurity and desperately need school to be their safest, most predictable, and most positive setting, especially if they have been displaced or are without utilities or basic comforts.

Multi-tiered Systems of Supports (MTSS), such as PBIS, are ideal frameworks for implementing strategies to support students coming back to school and to prevent and address further challenges. A tiered approach focuses on attending to the whole school environment to help the vast majority of students be successful and providing a continuum of support for those who need more.

With this in mind, we recommend the following six strategies for school teams to ensure a safe, predictable, and positive school year. These strategies are beneficial for all students if the school has been closed, as well as for individual students returning from extended time away from school.

Re-teach, remind, and acknowledge positive school-wide expectations [see <http://www.pbis.org/school/tier1supports>]. Yes, you may have taught your school-wide expectations at the start of the year, but students coming back to school after an unplanned absence have been in different environments, with different expectations for their behavior. Hence, a strong focus on re-teaching and modeling expected school behaviors will help to re-establish and maintain a school culture where students can expect to see prosocial behavior from their peers and the adults in the building. It is often useful for us to keep in mind that students may have been practicing different behaviors while away from school and will benefit from re-teaching and opportunities for practice rather than exclusion.

Re-teach classroom routines. Because students spend most of their time in classroom settings, it's critical that teachers establish a supportive environment and emphasize positive and proactive classroom behavior support approaches [see <http://www.pbis.org/school/pbis-in-the-classroom>] (Office of Special Education Programs, 2015). Directly teaching classroom routines in the context of positive schoolwide expectations, engaging students with effective instruction, and providing specific feedback to encourage desired behaviors will go a long way to establishing a positive classroom climate. After traumatic or unplanned events, making routines as predictable as possible will help students regain a sense of safety that they may have been missing.

Focus on the positive, and avoid punitive approaches. Some teachers, in efforts to add structure and predictability to the classroom, will use class-wide clip charts or colored behavior cards as a behavior management tool. In our experience, these public punishment systems can do more harm than good, particularly for students with disabilities or those experiencing trauma. Instead, focus on teaching, practicing, and acknowledging expected behaviors, with the understanding that some student may need more teaching, practice, and acknowledgement to use them.

Get to know your students - again. Simple strategies—like greeting students at the door by name, learning about students' interests outside of school, and using their strengths and preferences in instruction—can put students at ease and build student engagement (Allday & Pakurar, 2007). Make every attempt to recognize and value individual strengths or skills in each of your students. During the absence from school, students may have experienced extreme loss, so it's important to re-connect and understand their recent experiences.

Look for signs that students might need more help. The strategies described here can be effective in supporting the vast majority of students, even those experiencing trauma, to be successful, but others will need more support. Be aware of signs of trauma [see http://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/assets/pdfs/Child_Trauma_Toolkit_Final.pdf] and use universal screeners to identify students who may need more support—short or long term—to have a positive school experience.

Re-engage families as partners in their child's education [see <http://www.pbis.org/family/family-engagement>]. Building common messages across home and school related to safety, responsibility, and respect for all is helpful to students (Epstein, 1995; Lewis, Mitchell, Horner & Sugai, 2017). Schools become a unifying and supportive part of the community when they reach out to families and find new ways to partner meaningfully with them in the education of their son or daughter. It is crucial to review strategies for communicating with parents to ensure they are timely, supportive, and accessible (e.g., in home languages). Host informal events for families at school to increase connections, and consider inviting community leaders to attend the events as well.

Center on PBIS Resources

Office of Special Education Programs (2015). *Supporting and responding to student behavior: Evidence-based classroom strategies for educators*. Washington DC: Office of Special Education Programs. Retrieved from <https://www.osepedeashtatwork.org/evidencebasedclassroomstrategies/>

OSEP Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (October 2015). *Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) Implementation Blueprint: Part 1 – Foundations and Supporting Information*. Eugene, OR: University of Oregon. Retrieved from www.pbis.org.

Weist, M., Garbacz, S. A., Lane, K. L., & Kincaid, D. (Eds.). (2017). *Aligning and integrating family engagement in positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS)*. Eugene, OR: OSEP Center for Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports. Retrieved from <http://www.pbis.org/Common/Cms/files/pbisresources/Family%20Engagement%20in%20PBIS.pdf>

Additional Resources

Tips for Helping Students Recover from a Traumatic Event, US Department of Education
<https://www2.ed.gov/parents/academic/help/recovering/index.html>

Helping Students Cope with Traumatic Events: Tips for Educators, Council for Exceptional Children
https://www.cec.sped.org/~media/Files/Membership/TraumaticEvents_TipsforEducators.pdf

References

Allday, R. A., & Pakurar, K. (2007). Effects of teacher greetings on student on-task behavior. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis, 40*, 317-320.

Epstein, J. L. (1995). School/family/community partnerships: Caring for the children we have. *Phi Delta Kappan, 76*, 701-712.

Lewis, T.J., Mitchell, B.S., Horner, R.H., & Sugai, G. (2017). Engaging families through school-wide positive behavior support: Building partnerships across multi-tiered systems of support. In M.D. Weist, S. A. Garbacz, K. L. Lane, & D. Kincaid (Eds.) *Aligning and integrating family engagement in Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports: Concepts and strategies for families and schools in key contexts* (pp. 31-42). Eugene, OR: OSEP Center for Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports. Retrieved from <http://www.pbis.org/Common/Cms/files/pbisresources/Family%20Engagement%20in%20PBIS.pdf>

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