

COMMENTARY

Voices of Educators

Supporting Student Learning Amid the Pandemic Requires Prioritizing Social-Emotional Care



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The global pandemic and resulting economic devastation, not seen since the Great Depression, have underscored how schools are essential to the well-being of their communities. Many teachers, counselors, and other staff have risen to the occasion by working beyond the traditional boundaries of the classroom and transforming their roles in a very short amount of time. As schools abruptly transitioned to remote learning, educators had to learn new online tools, rethink student engagement, and determine how to teach trauma-exposed students effectively and on a wide scale. Teachers hold countless one-to-one tutoring sessions with students, including nights and weekends, to support learning and also to offer social-emotional care. School and district administrators have: planned and coordinated food distribution so that students have something to eat every day; held small group and one-to-one coaching sessions with teachers on how to use online platforms for their classes; communicated with families about new policies that often change on a weekly basis; called students at home to check on their well-being; listened to caretakers frustrated by the challenges of keeping their children motivated to learn; driven to teachers' homes to drop off instructional materials and resources; and coordinated with social agencies to provide basic services.

As educators, we grapple daily with the question of how we can equitably serve students while keeping them physically and emotionally safe. In the three months since schools have physically closed, we have learned some important lessons about leading schools during a time of crisis and have pinpointed some key issues that will need prioritization to adequately prepare and support educators to better serve their communities. Moving from crisis triage to action guided by core principles that center student well-being is necessary but, to do so, social-emotional care is paramount, both for children and adults.

During this time of high stress, [depression, and thoughts about hurting themselves, as well as increasing abuse](#) Now more than ever, student welfare is and needs to be at the forefront of staff meeting discussions. At the same time, we also need to pay attention to the needs of the adults in the system, who themselves are experiencing trauma. For these reasons, it is important to:

STAY CONNECTED

Above all, students and families need to know that we are here for them. Weekly teacher office hours for both students and parents/caretakers can be helpful in maintaining a sense of connection. This also enables teachers to have a visual on student well-being. Administrators can do the same, especially reaching out to the most vulnerable families (such as those who do not speak English, live in poverty, or are undocumented). [Partnerships](#) among teachers, counselors, administrators, and social agencies are needed now more than ever.

REDESIGN LEARNING TIME AND SPACE

We cannot simply transfer existing practices and burdens onto students and their families. Examining the amount of work assigned—considering that most students are learning and working on their own—is necessary. It is especially crucial for secondary teachers to collaborate so as to prevent overwhelming students with assignments.

DEVELOP FLEXIBLE LEARNING GUIDELINES

Rather than having strict mandates, creating distance learning guidelines that allow some flexibility for teachers validate and honor what they are experiencing. For example, Pomona Unified School District's distance learning guidelines, rather than being a rigid one-size-fits-all plan, offered an opportunity for teachers to have some control during such an unpredictable time. Teachers were allowed to set their instructional schedule within a set timeframe and select the means of instruction from a list of options. This approach was responsive to their diverse needs, strengths, and limitations—proficiency with instructional technology, family obligations, childcare, health, social-emotional well-being, etc.

INVEST IN PROFESSIONAL LEARNING AND TEACHER COLLABORATION

Teachers not only need time and support to learn best practices for online pedagogy and remote learning but also how to do so in a time of widespread trauma. Building in protected times—such as all day Friday—for professional collaboration and learning when teaching is one way to restructure school schedules to support this goal. The professional learning calendar must be responsive to teacher needs and requests.

California will be dealing with COVID-19 and its aftereffects for a while. As the pandemic exacerbates the profound class and racial disparities in our educational system (see [here](#) and [here](#)), it is clear that we cannot continue to rely on incremental policy adaptations or to tinker with existing practices. We do not presume to hold all the answers but we know that boldly transforming schooling practices is necessary. To do so thoughtfully, the voices and experiences of educators must be prioritized in policy decisions.

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