



# Reopening Educational Institutions During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Creating Community During Crisis

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As we entered the summer months of 2020, many education institutions are preparing protocols and re-entry plans for their students, faculty, and staff. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) issued considerations for ways that K–12 schools and institutions of higher education can protect students, faculty, staff, and administrators and slow the spread of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19).

Here is the gist of what they said:

- **Lowest Risk** - don't re-open schools and campuses, rather engage students in virtual-only learning.
- **More Risk** - Re-open schools and campuses but at a lower capacity where only small in-person classes, activities, and events are allowed if safe physical distancing practices are upheld, shared spaces are closed, and classroom materials or supplies are not shared.
- **Highest Risk** - Re-open schools and campus resuming full-sized in-person classes, activities, and events, open shared spaces, and share classroom materials or supplies.

The takeaway message from these considerations is that K–12 school and institutions of higher education SHOULD NOT re-open campus UNLESS they are willing to take on a risk of spreading COVID-19. The rest of the information provided by the CDC outlines strategies for reducing the spread of COVID-19, prioritizing the physical safety of the campus community.

The physical is only one aspect of safety. Collectively, we are dealing with far more than that. As education leaders are preparing to reopen schools and institutions, many people within the education community are grappling with grief and loss, anxiety, posttraumatic stress, and burnout (see figures to right). They may be emotionally responding to the intense COVID-19 threat to their physical health and the health of their loved ones, while also dealing with life-threatening concerns about their ability to access resources, maintain employment, care for others, and manage ongoing physical isolation. It is a scary time, where many feel powerless and unable to cope; the hallmarks of a collectively traumatic experience that continues to unfold before our eyes.

Educational leaders must consider the full scope and breadth of the problem; a complex, nuanced, and seemingly unsolvable one, to be sure. Doing so brings up far more questions than answers. How can we prioritize the safety of our community, while also offering opportunities for connection? How can we acknowledge ongoing experiences of grief and loss while moving ahead in different ways? How can we navigate stress and distress without losing control of our emotions and behaving in ways that put others at risk?

## K–12 Educators

88%	reported 1 or more trauma symptom
100%	reported 1 or more grief symptom
100%	reported 1 or more depression symptom
100%	reported 1 or more anxiety symptom

## Higher Education

94%	reported 1 or more trauma symptom
94%	reported 1 or more grief symptom
100%	reported 1 or more depression symptom
88%	reported 1 or more anxiety symptom

Date are from the COVID-19 Pandemic and Emotional Well-Being Study, a prospective panel study examining the psychological impact of COVID-19, wave 1 data collected between April 12, 2020 – May 22, 2020.  
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Leaders must grapple with hard questions regarding safety, emotions, loss, and future (S.E.L.F.). S.E.L.F. is an acronym that represents the four interactive key aspects of recovery from bad experiences. It is a cornerstone of the Sanctuary Model, a trauma-informed and trauma-responsive whole culture approach to organizational change. Utilizing S.E.L.F. as a compass can allow educational leaders to conceptualize the present dilemma facing their broader community as it is living through and attempting to cope with collective trauma.

### Safety

All members of the campus community have the right to feel not only physically safe, but also socially, emotionally, and morally safe. A socially and emotionally safe environment is one where community members feel connected to one another, invested in the community at large, and free to hold and express diverse opinions and beliefs. This allows individuals to take risks in their learning and their decision-making, approaching things from a curious and empowered perspective. Moral safety is especially poignant at this point in time. It is the idea that people can be successful and fulfilled in their roles because what they are being asked to do is in line with what they believe to be right, true, and just. Moral distress results from knowing what is right and having to do the opposite.

Leaders may ask themselves: *what does a more holistic definition of 'safety' look like for our campus community and what might help us move in that direction?*

### Emotions

As noted above, navigating traumatic experiences can result in feelings of paralyzing fear, helplessness, anger, anxiety, and many others. When there is a threat in our environment and our primitive, survival alarm is ringing, we may find ourselves incredibly fatigued, irritable, impatient, and unproductive. The antidote to this is two-fold: regulation and connection. Consider ways for community members to engage in activities that help to soothe their stress response; acknowledge that no one is doing their best work or being their best selves in the middle of this stress and distress.

Leaders may ask themselves: *what does our community need in order to manage our emotions, soothe our stress responses, and connect with one another during this stressful time?*

### Loss

Trauma tends to be inextricably intertwined with loss and grief. Consider the losses facing folks during COVID-19: loss of people, loss of resources, loss of opportunities, loss of control,

among many others. A key tenet of the Sanctuary model is the idea that all change involves loss; any attempt at moving forward means giving something up.

Leaders may ask themselves: *what types of loss is our campus community facing, and what might we need to let go of in order to move ahead?*

### Future

During times of unpredictability, future planning becomes especially complex. Things are changing rapidly, whether we want them to or not, so we must respond accordingly. It requires leaders to adapt quickly, repeatedly, and with as little stress as possible. It also allows for outside-the-box thinking, envisioning new ways forward. Top-down, hierarchical approaches to institutional leadership rarely result in this kind of nimble, creative problem-solving and planning. Powering with people at all levels of the community, honoring their expertise and their ability to contribute in meaningful ways, may be more helpful in lighting the path forward.

Leaders may ask themselves: *how can we work together to envision new ways forward?*

Though the questions posed here face the campus community at large, educational leaders are in a unique position to bring healing to the community, should they be open to looking in the mirror and honoring their own experiences during COVID-19. At a biological level, emotions are contagious. During times of stress and crisis, we are especially susceptible to the feelings, thoughts, and behaviors of those in positions of authority. Simply put, if you are stressed, overwhelmed, and short-tempered, you can and will pass this on to those around you, who will pass it onto those around them, who will pass it onto those around them, so on and so forth. Leaders own issues with feeling unsafe, struggling to manage emotions, dealing with grief and loss, and fear of the future can create through a parallel process similar concerns within all levels of the campus community. The importance of leaders presenting a calm, confident, and regulated state is paramount: your calm presence alone has the potential to calm those around you. Consider what you need, both in and outside of work, to bring yourself into this state. As we adapt every day, we are faced with an opportunity to act with compassion. These day to day moments will allow us to be a stronger collective humanity.