**The Covid-19 Pandemic: Safety Concerns Within
an Extended School Community**

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Introduction

Words cannot do justice to the traumas we are experiencing in this moment of world history. The COVID-19 Pandemic creates carnage spreading to nearly every human life on our planet. Although this pandemic's long-term impact on our children's learning and healthy development will not be clear for some time, we already see many challenges. Certainly the challenges of moving from teaching and learning in physical schools to remote learning are vast. Yet many are merely extensions of dangerous conditions long existing in our school communities. Here, we address arising concerns about old and new "school safety" issues and offer some Best Practice Reminders. We also offer a number of resources to support safety for our "extended school communities" of educators, students, families, and others.

NSCC defines the school climate domain of "Safety" by four related indicators: Rules and Norms, Physical Security, Social Emotional Security, and Social Media. Each indicator must now be considered differently, given rapidly changing conditions of physical distancing and online learning.

To state the obvious but easily forgotten fact about Safety: We are in this extremely challenging time *because* we must do our best to protect educators, students, families, and other community members from Covid-19. This extraordinarily contagious virus every day claims untold lives while sickening millions more. To ensure some degree of physical safety from the virus, we are unfortunately intensifying and creating anew other conditions that are antithetical to safety.

Four Big Ideas

One: We must center Equity in all we do. This pandemic has catalyzed our understanding of the tragic inequities in our school communities. We must center equity in all aspects of Safety, with a necessary shift to redefine school community more broadly than existing within a physical space.

Two: Rules and Norms to promote safety are still needed. Some existing rules clearly require flexibility at this time. Norms of respect and caring for all, rooted in a school community's values, must be continuously re-affirmed.

Three: Social Media and other online communication are both lifelines and dangers to safety. These venues have suddenly become the lifeline of educators and students, offering opportunities to connect in creative ways, while students' increased dependence on them exacerbates existing challenges.

Four: Dangers to students' physical and social emotional security continue, albeit differently than before. Physical safety and social emotional safety are always interconnected. Physical abuse/violence wounds deeply, often leaving emotional scars. Unhealed emotional wounds may lead to violence toward self and sometimes toward others. Different racial/ethnic and other vulnerable groups often experience these forms of insecurity and lack of safety.

Best practice Reminders

One: We must center Equity in all we do.
Briefly, by equity we mean that *every member of the school community has access to the necessary resources and learning conditions at the right time*, regardless of race, ethnicity, disability/special needs, religion, language, family background, immigrant/refugee status, tribal identity, socioeconomic status, gender, sexual orientation and/or gender identity. Many schools, districts, and individual educators have made significant progress in policies and practices ensuring this access for some of these groups. Nevertheless, this pandemic has completely laid bare the deep, historical inequities that make the conditions supporting physical and social-emotional safety fragile, if not inaccessible.

Inequities, by their very nature, reduce safety. They rob us of the protection of access to much needed resources, such as: basic needs, technology, mental health support; healthcare; and culturally responsive remote teaching/learning. The lack of access to these and other necessary resources intensifies the physical and social-emotional safety concerns inherent in the pandemic.

Those who have avoided "seeing" these inequities, can no longer claim "we didn't know" or "it isn't so bad."

The Best Practice Reminders below are rooted in self-reflection and promote resiliency in the face of future-, even life-threatening inequities.

Best Practice Reminders:

- When thinking about Safety, explicitly redefine your school community in this time of physical distancing as an extended community, like an "extended family", inclusive of all staff, students, families, and community members. Remember to include businesses, community service providers, along with community- and language-specific organizations.

- Learn about strengths and challenges of your students' families, especially more vulnerable families, while respecting family privacy. Vulnerable families may need greater support from this extended school community. Immigrant communities have been living with increased fear in recent years

and have the fear of this virus and the resulting social restrictions compounding on it. Strengthening the role of Family Engagement Coordinators and possibly adding other non-certified staff to connect with families is one effective practice.

- Remember to emphasize strengths even as you recognize the possibly devastating challenges faced by your students and their families. Ask yourself, your colleagues, your students (and family members if you can connect with them), "Name one of your greatest strengths. How can that strength help you and those around you in this challenging time?"

- Be humble about your unconscious biases, born of your particular experiences. Learn from those who have had less access to resources and/or have had very different life experiences.

- Find multiple ways to remind students and families about what they *can control*, whether it is hand washing or reaching out to help others in similar or greater need, or just getting dressed each day! Some families' living conditions may make physical distancing nearly impossible. For others, family members may be far apart without access to FaceTime or Zoom. Remind your students that connecting with family and friends, even by phone or snail mail, can be sources of support.

- If you and your school teams have been able to support students and their families at the most basic level of access to food, the Internet, and tech devices, then applaud yourselves for making a good start on addressing some serious inequities, while recognizing how much deeper the inequities go. Remember, however, that your students and their families may feel some embarrassment, even shame, at *having to accept* offered resources. There may also be anxiety over whether such support will continue. Empower caregivers to advocate for their students and families as an effective antidote for negative feelings.

Two: Rules and Norms to promote safety are still needed.
We are in uncharted territory about which rules make sense now. The disciplinary consequences of "in-school" or "out-of-school suspension" make little sense! Even as we are super busy learning to do online learning, responding to districts' new requirements for documentation, working to meet students' and their families' needs for food, tech, emotional support, etc., we must take the time to reflect on our shared norms and whether there may need to be changes or at least shifts in emphasis. For example, maintaining and building school community is an oft-stated value, but often balanced by assertion of individual rights. Today, focusing on community ("we" more than "I") is a lifesaving value.

Students are learning values through the norms we project as expectations for their behavior and attitudes. Social Emotional Learning (SEL) is a vehicle for conveying those expectations. CASEL, SEL4US, Committee for Children, and individual program

providers offer explicit guidance for how to integrate SEL into curriculum adaptable for online learning.

Best Practice Reminders:
- In-school behavior rules intended to prevent sexual or racial harassment must still be enforced. The context may be cyber-harassment, but the harm done is just as great, if not greater. Dehumanizing language can be even worse online because of the larger potential audience.

- To ensure online spaces remain safe for all students, creative alternatives in assigning effective, individual consequences are needed. If your school has developed alternative consequences, use them now. If not yet done, develop them now. For example, you can require a student who has violated an online behavioral rule to read a relevant article or book (sent by your school librarian perhaps), write a summary and a reflection, offer an apology, etc. A counselor may be brought in for further conversation.

- Restorative Practices (RP) could be especially valuable now. RP emphasizes restoring community more so than punishment. Restorative Circles can be held through Zoom or Google Hangouts. The key questions for RP within physical schools are still relevant: Who has been harmed and how might they experience further harm? What do they need? Who is responsible for mitigating and repairing these harms?

- Social emotional learning includes a focus on social relationships. Empathy is often named as an example of SEL. Curriculum content explicitly teaching empathy – whether in Language Arts, Social Studies, or even Science – may reduce disrespectful behavior.

Three: Social Media and other online communication are both lifelines and dangers to safety. As with any new world to explore, the online world contains opportunities for positive, exciting learning and significant dangers. Promoting the first and reducing the potential of the latter is now our major challenge.

With students no longer in the same physical space, face-to-face bullying is diminished. Anecdotal reports (since no research has yet been done) indicate that cyberbullying is increasing beyond its high rate in recent years. Social isolation in this period compounds the cyberbullying dynamic (target, perpetrator, bystander). Bias-based bullying and hate speech may also increase. Especially during crises, blaming one group or another increases, leading to dehumanizing language such as naming Covid-19, the "Wuhan Virus" or the "Chinese Virus."

Also, with students online so many more hours each day, the potential for interacting with sexual predators increases. With unrestricted "web-surfing," students may encounter websites promoting hate speech or pornography.

Social media may be the only way youth can connect with each other for the foreseeable future. Unless it is being misused to harm others, cutting off social

media access will intensify the social isolation that can lead to depression, suicidal ideation, and other serious mental health conditions. Balancing risks and benefits is the most basic challenge.

Best Practice Reminders
- Engaging your students vigorously is the most important practice to address online safety. Engage your students to engage each other! We know that helping others is protective for mental health. Campaigns such as #Digital4Good promote such youth engagement beyond online safety.

- Digital citizenship/media literacy curricula are widely available. While your school may already have some version, perhaps called "media literacy," examine it carefully to see if it covers the wide range of current challenges. More targeted, intensive curricula may be needed at this time, for all grade levels. Common Sense Education (K-12 options) offers a free program. Digital Citizenship Activities, such as those from the Cyberbullying Research Center, offer a less time intensive approach.

- Cyberbullying is a long-standing challenge to educators. We can barely keep up with new mutations of social media apps. However, fundamentals of bullying prevention still apply:
  - Define the behavior
  - Identify and explain the harm it causes
  - Clarify reporting mechanisms
  - Take responsibility as adults to intervene, educate, and assert consequences (when possible)
  - Empower targets and bystanders to become Upstanders
  - Set or reaffirm expectations, as discussed above, reinforcing "We are all in this together!" These expectations embody values of respect, empathy, and caring.

- Covid-19 racism is a serious concern calling for multiple responses. Please do not wait until an incident occurs in your school district before taking preventive, educational steps. Asian Americans have been experiencing this racism for months, in public as well as online. Social Studies and Language Arts teachers should immediately incorporate curricula to engage students in discussion of such racism. Several groups – notably [Facing History and Ourselves](#) and [Teaching Tolerance](#) – are providing resources to support these curricular efforts.

- With students spending so much more time online, some needing social contact and affirmation from others, especially from adults, the risk of sexual exploitation by online pedophiles worsens. According to ECPAT, an international organization working to end child prostitution and trafficking, pedophiles are [already working](#) to exploit the current situation of so many more young people at home and online. Both educators and parents should explicitly remind students about these dangers. Technology teachers can provide parents with basic instruction to change security settings, check

profiles, keep devices in common spaces, see what their children post online, etc. *For more details, [see this FBI press release](#).*

Four: Dangers to students' physical and social emotional security continue, but differently than before. Now, while living and educating within extended school communities, these climate indicators should be interpreted both more narrowly and more broadly than before. The lack of face-to-face school interactions reduces physical bullying or fighting. Yet, the likelihood of physical and sexual child abuse, intimate partner violence, and the rarely mentioned sibling abuse is greater. Child abuse reporting to state agencies is down by more than 50% since children have been away from the primary mandated reporters in their lives – their teachers. Meanwhile, calls to domestic violence hotlines meanwhile have surged. Given the *[co-occurrence rate of 30% to 60% between the two forms of abuse,](#)* it highly likely that child abuse is also on the rise.

Many of the crucial guardians of social emotional security have been mentioned above: mental health supports, resiliency activities, social connections through pre-existing and new relationships, enhancing youth and family engagement. A few more practice reminders are below.

Best Practice Reminders:

- Educators may no longer observe the signs of possible child abuse as they would have when in daily contact with their students. But still there are some potential ways to address it:
    - Counselors should maintain contact with students in families where there was evidence or at least concern about potential abuse previous to the shutdown.
    - Seek guidance from your school social worker or counselors on how to address your concerns about a student or family. Also, ask for their advice on how to word a question on daily Google check-in forms and what to do if any student responses raise concerns. These forms can include a question such as "Do you feel safe in your home?" (You may have been asked this question yourself at a recent doctor visit!) Give students options to use emojis or words in response. A single "fright" emoji may be enough of an alert for a further check-in.
    - Use preventive approaches to support families in this time of extreme stress. Providing material resources as many school districts are doing is important, but offering social emotional guidance and resources to help manage the unavoidable stress, especially in single parent or multi-generational homes, may also be life-saving.
    - Since social workers from child welfare agencies are mostly unable to make home visits, one [possible connection](#) is through school staff, such as bus drivers or counselors, safely delivering meals to at-risk homes, keeping physical distance but at least being able to see children in those homes.

- The Multi-Tiered Systems of Support ([MTSS](#)) approach remains a crucial tool to understand how the stress of this period is impacting social emotional wellness and mental health issues. Explicit in MTSS are numerous "best practices" to support all students at Tier 1, to identify those who need additional Tier 2 and Tier 3 supports. Students already identified will most likely continue to need their regular support from counselors, special education and other teachers.

  The daunting challenge, is to identify students whose vulnerabilities were not significant enough to be identified previously, but who are now in greater need of additional supports. Some signs of this might be students/families not engaging with school staff who reach out to them, not attending online sessions, and/or not completing assigned work. Direct observations may occur during (physically distanced) food drop-off at homes or food pick-ups at various sites. Any frontline staff engaging with students and families should receive brief training on what signs to look for. This could include teaching assistants, bus drivers, cafeteria aides, etc. Provide parents simple ways to report if they have any concerns about their children's social emotional wellness.

- Beyond this is the challenge of providing those additional supports when educators are already overwhelmed with supporting those previously identified at Tiers 2 and 3, while having to learn to teach online. Some best practice reminders to nurture our own resiliency and the rest of our extended school communities:
    - Practice Self-care
    - Foster Connection
    - Create Predictability
    - Model Moderation
    - Enable self-agency

About the Author

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