



Supporting The Mental Health And Well-Being Of Students Who Will Return To School Remotely

Enhancing Equitable Access to Virtual School Mental Health and Well-Being Supports and Services

As Ontario schools prepare to reopen classrooms for the 2020–2021 school year, in-person attendance for both elementary and secondary students will be voluntary. For students unable to return, opportunities for virtual or remote learning will be provided to support their:

- * **academic development**
- * **social-emotional learning**
- * **timely access to valuable school-based identity-affirming peer connections**
- * **school mental health and well-being services and supports**

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, school boards across the province have demonstrated leadership, flexibility and creativity. They have quickly responded to the world crisis by adapting conventional in-school learning models to an entirely remote experience – online platforms, over the telephone, by mail, and even through individual home delivery methods.

As well, school mental health professionals learned to adapt to this virtual reality by reaching out, checking in and providing evidence-based supports and services for students and their families.

Unfortunately, for many young Ontarians the pandemic has had a negative impact on their overall mental health¹ and well-being. This, despite efforts to mitigate the unintended consequences of [collective loss](#) due to school closures.

Students have experienced feelings of isolation, anxiety and stress due to stay-at-home procedures. Many have limited coping mechanisms, All faced reduced access to regular school routines, and daily interactions with peers and caring teachers and support staff. That has been difficult for all students, more so for students with pre-existing mental health problems.

1 https://oneyouth.unicef.ca/sites/default/files/2020-05/U-Report_COVID-19_Poll_2_Results_external.pdf





Beyond this, the COVID-19 pandemic has magnified deep-rooted economic, social and racial inequities. These have disproportionately affected the most vulnerable and marginalized communities and in particular, Black and racialized individuals.

Students and families experienced and witnessed added layers of poverty; family violence; discrimination; transphobia and homophobia; anti-Black, anti-Asian, and anti-Indigenous racism; and barriers relating to disability, including mental illness and addictions. This hindered their access to opportunities for social inclusion and to emotional and academic supports.

These inequities are longstanding, and have been further accentuated by the pandemic. They may be compounded where multiple aspects of students' intersectional identities are affected.

In Ontario, we are called to examine and dismantle the systemic barriers that will minimize the negative impacts of remote learning on marginalized students, and enhance equitable access to culturally-responsive school mental health supports and services.

The COVID-19 pandemic has magnified deep-rooted economic, social and racial inequities. These have disproportionately affected the most vulnerable and marginalized communities and in particular, Black and racialized individuals.

For all Ontario students, the return to school will be different. But for some students, the return to school may prove to be additionally complex. That includes people with pre-existing health conditions, or barriers or vulnerabilities that may have emerged during the COVID pandemic. We also need to remember that racialized students have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic.

Some families may be at greater risk and danger of infection during this current pandemic, and may not be able to send their children back to school.

Students who can't return to regular school environments will still need opportunities to engage in learning, and access mental health promotion, prevention and intervention supports – perhaps more so now than ever. This includes, for example, identity-affirming peer and staff supports, or spaces that usually provide LGBTQ2S students with opportunities to connect and express themselves in positive, non-judgemental and supportive ways.

Educators, school and system leaders will need to demonstrate flexibility, creativity and compassion for the realities these students and their families face, as they return to school in what may seem like unconventional ways.





Priorities to enhance equitable access

Here are three keys to ensuring virtual school mental health and well-being supports and services.

1. **Focus on student-centered strategies that can minimize the impacts of remote learning on students from low-income communities, students with disabilities, special education students, and English Language Learners. Expand school mental health promotion and prevention to reach students who are more vulnerable.**

Reflect:

- Why might some students not return to school in person? Examples: pre-existing health or mental health condition such as anxiety, language barrier, fear of harassment, discrimination and racism (anti-Black racism, anti-Asian racism, homophobia or transphobia).
- Which students may be more vulnerable and why? Examples: disengaged from school since March, poverty, limited access to technology, language barrier, family stress, violence, literacy.
- Is this a transition year? Examples: JK, grade 7, grade 9, grade 12, new class/school in a virtual environment, special education supports (which has additional stressors).
- Which designated school or board supports will we need to support remote learning and mental health supports for more vulnerable students? Examples: IT, translation services, school social worker, psychology, principal, resource/guidance teacher.

Consider:

- A designated board or school team to support remote learning AND mental and well-being health supports for students who are more vulnerable.
- Engage the student and, as appropriate, their parent/caregivers to learn about and better understand their current circumstances and remote learning needs and to co-develop a learning support plan.
- Identify and connect with required translation and interpreter services to facilitate ongoing communication with the student and parents/caregivers.
- Identify and connect with any required technological supports that can help students and families confidently access remote learning materials and mental health support services.
- Offer an online or telephone workshop or video to help parents with step-by-step instructions on accessing technology.
- Focus on daily positive attendance and engagement strategies.
- Explore alternative methods to support ongoing engagement in remote learning and encourage students to feel welcome and included in the classroom. Examples: engage students in remote settings to join in school small group work activities via online platforms, video conferencing or other methods. This strengthens the sense of connectedness and purpose to wider classroom learning opportunities, fostering healthy and supportive relationships.
- Pay attention to and address microaggressions and other forms of stigma, harassment and discrimination that may occur via remote learning and in-class. Understand that these experiences greatly impact student mental health and well-being. There is a duty under the Human Rights Code to respond appropriately to stop the behaviour, mitigate the harm to the student and the environment, and prevent it from recurring.
- Foster a commitment to building a mentally-healthy virtual and in-person classroom environment. See: [Creating and Sustaining Mentally Healthy Classrooms Tutorial](#) and [Mentally Health Classroom Reflection Tool](#).





2. Prioritize the continuity of remote student mental health and well-being supports and services, with a focus on equity of access and socially- and culturally-responsive supports. That should happen across the tiers of promotion, prevention and intervention, and facilitate referral pathways to local culturally-responsive care.

Reflect:

- What may be some barriers to accessing remote learning and mental health supports? Examples: limited access to technology, bandwidth, limited interest, or capacity to use online platforms, family stress.
- What are the available school mental health promotion, prevention and intervention supports? How can they be enhanced/adapted/used to support the student's remote return to school?
- What are current community supports and how they can be enhanced adapted/used to support the student's remote return to school? Examples: healthcare, mental health, cultural healing.

Consider:

- Anchor equity to positive engagement strategies to ensure they are tailored to the culture, language, identities and realities of the students and families. That's especially important for those who have been disproportionately affected by COVID-19 and systemic inequities.
- Notice when students may be struggling to engage or may require additional mental health supports. Connect with the student and offer these resources:
 - > [Student Self Care 101](#)
 - > [Student Reaching Out](#)
 - > [COVID-19 Youth Mental Health Resource Hub](#)
- Facilitate access to identity-based and culturally responsive school and community mental health supports.
- Develop/co-develop a [Student Support Plan](#).
- Learn about how to recognize and support students who may be struggling with their mental health. See [Supporting Minds Strategies at a Glance: Ideas to Support and Bolster Students with Mental Health Problems in the Classroom](#).

3. Provide frequent and consistent opportunities to communicate with students, and offer regular practical support to parents and caregivers.

Reflect:

- What resources might support parents with practical at-home strategies? Examples: how to talk about the pandemic with children and youth, how to manage their own mental health and the mental health of their children, everyday mental health activities and tools to help support their child/children's learning.
- What implicit biases or stereotypes could affect student-teacher-parent relationship? Examples: beliefs about mental health and mental illness, attitudes towards students who "choose" remote learning vs. in-person attendance.
- How can you build and develop supportive, non-judgemental relationships with student-teacher-parent that will promote sense of connectedness and engagement in the classroom community?





Consider:

- Facilitate in-person and or virtual visits to the school/classroom with the principal, homeroom teacher and school mental health professional. Offer ample time to explore immediate and longer term needs and solutions. If possible, consider combination of remote and in-person learning options.
- Develop/co-develop a [Student Support Plan](#).
- Recognize and draw upon the insights and leadership of families and community leaders when designing and implementing strategies.
- Maintain communication as appropriate with teachers, parents caregivers, mental health professionals and students to monitor progress and support needs/requirements.
- Provide students, families and caregivers with at-home guidance to support academic learning goals and [positive mental health](#).
- Connect students, families and caregivers to school-based prevention services adapted to offer remote support: [Strengthening the Circle of Support and Building System of Care](#) or [Activating a Circle of Support for Students During Remote Learning](#).
- In consultation with local public health partners and health care providers, consider engaging students and families/caregivers to gradual return to school planning (one or two days a week, etc., using extra precautions to decrease risk of infection/spread of COVID-19).
- Connect with community organizations with specific knowledge/expertise of your student population.

Tips for educators

As remote learning will continue to be necessary for some students, it's even more critical to build relationships and foster a sense of connectedness to the classroom.

Remember to:

- * Affirm diverse social and cultural identities and facilitate access to related social-emotional supports.
- * Cultivate a sense of belonging and community for students.
- * Provide virtual and in-class structures to ensure physical and emotional safety.
- * Use engaging, relevant, and culturally-responsive instruction, built on an understanding of how children and adolescents grow and develop socially, emotionally and academically.
- * Create authentic spaces for student voice and agency.
- * Offer opportunities for students to discuss and practice anti-racism, and develop collaborative solutions to address inequities, in a safe and inclusive space.
- * Provide tiered supports that meet the needs of all students.
- * Engage and connect remote learners to in-class routines as much as possible, even if it feels awkward.
- * Ask students to find a consistent place at home for distance learning, understanding that for some students that may be difficult. Encourage them to maintain a regular bedtime and morning schedule.
- * Make sure that you are consistent.





Resources

- * [Supporting Student Mental Health During a Pandemic \(COVID-19\)](#)
- * [Conversations with Students and Families During COVID-19 School Closures](#)
- * [Promoting Student Mental Health & Wellness During Remote Learning: Guidance for Educators](#)
- * [Loss, Grief and Bereavement during the COVID-19 Pandemic](#)
- * [Strengthening the Circle of Support and Building System of Care](#)
- * [COVID-19 Youth Mental Health Resource Hub](#)
- * [Supporting and Mobilizing the Work of School Professionals during COVID-19](#)
- * [Suicide Prevention Guide for Parents and Families During COVID-19 and Return to School](#)
- * [Mentally Healthy Classroom Tutorial](#)

References

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