

Back to School 2020 for Staff

This is a challenging time for everyone, adults and kids alike! Even children who are eager to return to class must adjust to the greater levels of activity, changes in routine, and the uncertainty of the future. The degree of adjustment depends on the child, but staff play a pivotal role managing the transition from home to school. Here are a few tips to keep in mind from the ESU 8 and O'Neill Public Schools' Mental Health Team.

Get Routine Up and Running

Most children have had no routine for weeks on end, a lot of screen time and late nights and late mornings. This means getting to school and staying awake all day may be an achievement for some pupils (and staff)!



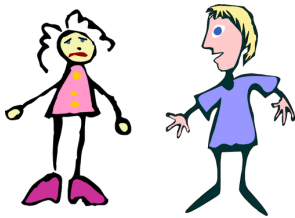
So make sure you introduce your new classroom routine right away - but that doesn't mean we expect our pupils to work in the same way as they did before school closed.

Kids feel safer - and less anxious - when they know what to expect. So spend some time introducing your new routines, explaining how work will be taught and what the shape of the day will look like. Kids need to know that every day, some things stay the same. Then they can relax and not have to think too hard about it.

To support your new routine:

- Get your **visual timetable** on the wall and use it! The kids need to know what they are doing and what will happen next
- Then once you have started your new routine, **stick to it**
- Plan to **reteach the expectations often**, offers lots of praise for knowing the routine, and provide reminders prior to transitions
- Build in time to talk about emotions--consider a **daily check in** (see below)
- Infuse **classroom mental health** practices into your day
- Work on having **calm class transitions** when children come in and out of the room
- Build up their learning stamina by using **learning breaks** (maybe more regularly than you used to). You may find that taking breaks for some mindful breathing, a **Go Noodle** physical activity, or watching a short information video, actually results in greater learning and progress
- Set up the classroom in a manner that is aware of **sensory needs**, such as dimmed lighting, reducing smells, calm music, break zone, etc.

Focus on Student Relationships



Remember that most students will arrive with social-emotional needs and will require extra time to adjust to a new routine and a busier schedule. All students will benefit from praise, encouragement, and focusing on what's working well. Every day something good is going to happen. Focus on the good and exemplify it in your words. Everyone's attitude will be uplifted.

- Give time and space for children to share their experiences and to create positive relationships. When showing empathy, ask open ended questions, validate and name feelings, and summarize their thoughts, checking back for clarity.
- Provide training with students on self calming strategies to handle strong emotions. Some ideas may include creating a worry box, infusing mindfulness activities, setting up a calming space (or **virtual space**) in the classroom, classroom fidgets, daily check-ins, as well as other well practiced self-management strategies. All students will benefit from having healthy outlets to express frustrations and stress.
- Do **daily check-ins** to ensure students have their basic needs met and to provide frequent reassurance that in this place they are safe and valued.

- End the day or set aside a time each day to identify something positive, such as a gratitude list or a positive thought.
- Be prepared to discuss Covid 19, social distancing, and the school's safety precautions. Children will be wondering if they could catch it or their parents will catch it. Know the facts, be honest, but brief. Don't go into too many details or dwell on the subject of Covid for too long. It's ok to say, "I don't know." Be relaxed in your tone of voice and don't share your fears. You are the role model and children are looking to you to gauge their safeness. Publicly practice deep breathing and the other self-calming strategies you establish in your room. Continually reassure them that the school is doing all it can to keep everyone safe.
- You may need to spend more time digging past the misbehavior to understand the need it fulfills and the source of the pain. They need you to look beyond the misbehavior and to provide them a safe, predictable place where they feel accepted. Ask your mental health support team for help with more challenging behaviors.

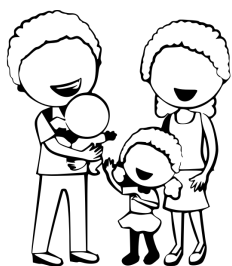
Managing Your Stress

Pass the Umbrella - As teachers, you hold the umbrella day in and day out, protecting your students from everything that could possibly harm them. You are their shield. The problem is, there comes a time when your arms get tired and your hands begin to shake. Continuing to hold the umbrella is almost impossible and can send you to the edge. It's ok to ask someone to hold the umbrella for a break, while you regain your strength.



- Set boundaries by creating and sticking to a schedule, saying "no" when feeling overburdened and asking for space or help when needed.
- Recognize and acknowledge feelings.
- Recognize what *is* and *is not* within one's control.
- Focus on the positive. Keep a [gratitude journal](#). Remember "*Laughter is the best medicine*"
- Use coping strategies such as [mindfulness](#) to help reduce stress.
- Ask for support from coworkers and administration.
- Be vulnerable. It's ok to make mistakes and not be perfect. It's ok not to be ok. It's ok to ask for help. Nobody is perfect.

Communicating with Families



To help our families return to school successfully:

- Over-communicate what they can expect before they return by sending the same message, worded in different ways, across lots of different media platforms.
- Find out about the underlying needs of your pupils - especially if you're teaching new students.
- Actively listen to parents' anxieties and offer them reassurance.
- Understand your parents' fears and resolve them through **personal dialogue** (rather than mass communication)
- Offer resources, such as online [mindfulness](#) training and [calm down](#) strategies.



Mental Health Support Team

