

Emotional & Mental Wellness

Elementary & Middle School

Setting Up for Success

Whether you've been in education for 30 years or 3 months, it's important to plan ahead and prepare for the unexpected. One way of doing this is by setting up your classroom for success. One way you can do this is by creating a positive classroom environment.

This can be done by promoting and practicing these practices:

Connectedness

A simple-check in or engaging prompt at the beginning of class can go a long way toward promoting connectedness.

- Use a color wheel to help students share how they are feeling
- Use Mood Meters to help students identify their emotions using colors and word queues.
- Use Dialogue Circles where students and teachers share using a “talking piece” to remind students that only one person talks at a time.
- Students draw or journal how they are feeling.
- Prepare a prompt at the beginning of class for students to write, color or draw about.

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Resilience

Resilience is being able to adapt well and bounce back quickly in times of stress. One way to build resilience is by using language that identifies what you're feeling. Naming the feeling gives you a place to start working through it.

- **Mindfulness:** Students sit quietly and notice how they feel. They can close their eyes and sit with the feeling until they feel like they can control it. Sometimes breathing deeply can help.
- **Deep breathing:** Students can close their eyes and count slowly to 10 while taking deep breaths. This helps them focus on something they can control, their breath, and can sometimes be enough to help them regulate again.
- **Movement:** Provide space where students can safely move their body. This could be a space to walk, do arm circles, or even jump. This movement break can help them regulate again.
- **Journaling/Drawing:** Sometimes students need a quiet place to draw, color, or journal what they're feeling before they have the words to express it to you. Giving them the time and space to do this helps them feel in control.

Discuss Concerns

Knowing your students' "normal" means you're better equipped to talk with them when you notice something has changed. When something changes, even if it's something small, it's best to check in early just in case there's more going on.

Asking your student what strategies they like helps give them some control and choice. It may also mean they are more likely to try it if it was *their* idea.

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Supporting Your Students

Building a positive classroom helps you get to know your students. Knowing your students helps you understand their behavior and spot any changes. But, what should you do when you notice behavior or changes that concern you?

Here's how you can navigate concerns:

Identify

The earlier we're able to address a student's challenges, the more we can do to support them before things escalate. Not every student who needs help asks for it. Sometimes we need to be proactive and approach the student early.

Signs of distress can manifest in several ways, depending on the student, their age and grade. Anything considered a change in student behavior - or a behavior that's extreme - could be a sign of things like anxiety, depression, or something stressful happening in their lives.

Approach

Once you've noticed any concerning changes, the next step is to decide whether to approach the student to learn more about what's causing it. When in doubt, it's usually the safer choice to talk to them.

If the warning signs turn out to be something small, then you've shown the student that you care and built more trust with them. If it's something larger, you can help support them. If you feel the conversation could take a serious turn, or if you're not comfortable, ask a school counselor or administrator to join you.

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During these steps, you can use these techniques to help the student open up:

Observable Behaviors

These are things that you may have noticed during the “Identify” step and can bring up as you “Approach” the student. Sometimes it’s hard to bring up things you’ve noticed without students arguing or feeling defensive. Defensive reactions can be minimized by sticking to the facts: mention your specific observations of their behavior without judgment or exaggeration. Here are some things to keep in mind when mentioning Observable Behaviors:

- **Be specific:** State the exact behavior you noticed and only mention what is objectively true.
- **Stay grounded:** Separate the student from the behavior. This will help you feel calm and open-minded in the situation.
- **Stay Neutral:** Use neutral language without any judgment.
- **Use “I” statements:** Focus on your perception of the behavior.

Ask Open-Ended Questions

Open-ended questions, which don’t have a one-word answer, usually help students share more. They sound like:

- **How does that make you feel?**
- **Tell me more about that feeling.**

Not all open-ended questions have to be actual questions. The goal is to have the student share more.

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Reflections

Reflections involve careful attention to what the student is saying and choosing specific parts of it to paraphrase back. Whatever you reflect, the student is likely to expand on.

Reflections are at their most powerful when they focus on what a student is saying and encourage them to talk about it. It's important to offer students the space to think through their feelings.

Talking with your Students

Sometimes a student might open up and share something that you're feeling unsure about or not equipped to handle. If this happens you can *always* refer a student to a school counselor or administrator. It's better to err on the side of caution.

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Here are some examples of things a student might talk about that warrant an immediate referral:

Warning Signs

Being a burden on others

Sounds like: “I’m so needy”

Feeling hopeless or alone

Sounds like: “Nobody understands me”

Seeking revenge

Sounds like: “She needs to pay”

Feeling anxiety or pain

Sounds like: “I have a stomachache or headache”

If this is something that happens often or seems unusual for the student.

Having no reason to live

Sounds like: “I don’t want to be here anymore”

If it isn’t clear whether a student is talking about these things, use open-ended questions and reflections to get clarity.

Supportive Responses

- “Tell me more about that feeling.”
- “What makes you think that?”
- “Sounds like you’ve been feeling kind of lonely.”

If you are ever concerned that a student may be thinking of suicide, it’s always okay to ask a student directly if they are considering suicide directly. Asking about suicide will not put the idea into a student’s head.

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Here are some ways you can ask:

Ask Directly

“I care about you and I am concerned...”

“Are you thinking of suicide?”

“Sometimes that can mean a person is thinking about suicide. Are you thinking about suicide?”

“Have you tried to hurt yourself?”

“Are you having thoughts of suicide?”

If you think a student is in a lot of distress or at risk of harming themselves or others, stay with the student and get them the in-person support they need immediately. This will look different in different schools, so check with your administration about who to go to and how to report it.

Referring a student is so much more than handing them off to someone else. Students want to feel supported and know that you’re there with them every step of the way. This can increase their motivation to go.

Elements of a Warm Handoff

- Normalize it: “The counselor has helped students with similar issues.”
- Discuss advantages: “It can feel good to talk about your feelings”
- Make the introduction: “Let’s walk down together. I’ll introduce you.”

You can give them the choice to walk with you to the counselor’s office or invite the counselor to join you. This choice gives them some control over what happens, helping them feel empowered, and helping you maintain the trust and rapport you’ve built together.

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Following Up

It's hard to know what to say after a student has told you they're having thoughts of suicide. Here are some ways you can get your student to the resources they need in the moment:

What to Say

I'm hearing you say things are getting worse and not better. I think it's time to talk with the school counselor. I can go with you.

I'm going to invite our school counselor to come in and have lunch with us now.

We're here to support you. Not just me, but other school staff, are here for you, too. We have people here who want to support you.

I'd like to walk you down to the counselor's office myself. I can reshare so you don't have to. I'm going to ask you one more question. Is there anything else you'd like to share with me?

I'm going to walk with you to see the school counselor. Would you like for me to stay while you talk, or would you rather be alone with the counselor?

Make sure you're familiar with your administration's policy on how to report these incidents.

If you have questions on how to handle a particular situation and you can't reach anyone in your school administration, here are some places you can go:

Where to go for Help

The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 988
Call, text or chat 988 24 hours a day, seven days a week

To access 988 via chat, visit 988lifeline.org/chat

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These important conversations can take their toll on educators in unexpected ways. It's common to feel worried and overwhelmed.

Don't try to do it all alone. That's what supportive staff members and administration are for. Make sure you have someone you trust to talk to. Check in with your administration to ensure there are services in place for teachers and staff. If there aren't any, ask your administration if this is something that could be established.

Remember, this is tough work, but the conversations are meaningful and could change someone's life. Some of the same tools we use with our students can be useful for ourselves, too. Things like:

Journaling

Mindfulness activities

Checking in with other staff and support members

Thank you for all that you do. And, thanks for stopping by.