

Beginning-of-Year Guidance for the 2020–2021 School Year: Responding to the Impact of School Closures

Introduction

Whether you are a teacher who has used the *Caring School Community* program for years or a teacher who is just getting started, you naturally will have questions about how to start the 2020–2021 school year. Collaborative Classroom has spent a great deal of time over the past several months with our district partners learning important lessons about how to use the *Caring School Community* program in this climate, as well as some key practices for using it virtually. This guide is designed to provide considerations for starting the new school year in ways that best meet the social and emotional needs of students.

THE CARING SCHOOL COMMUNITY PROGRAM MEETS THE FUNDAMENTAL NEEDS OF STUDENTS

As the new school year approaches, students (and their parents) will be excited to return to school. When students return (whether remotely or in person), they may be bringing with them some fear, anxiety, grief, and trauma from their experiences. Behaviors associated with these experiences and emotions may not show themselves right away. As educators, we need to be vigilant in recognizing the signs of these experiences when they do arise. We also need to be patient, tolerant, and flexible when addressing these experiences and emotions with students.

A cookie-cutter or one-size-fits-all approach will not work in addressing the complexity of challenges our classrooms will face. Students react to trauma in different ways and require flexible and supportive responses to their pain and suffering. It is therefore important to remember that the *Caring School Community* program already contains essential elements that support teachers as they work with students. These elements include:

- **Building caring relationships.** What students who have experienced trauma need most are deep and meaningful relationships in safe and supportive classrooms. The program begins with the fundamental premise that relationships are central to healthy prosocial development and essential to teaching and learning. Schools need to be intentional about building and maintaining these relationships both among students and between students and adults. In the program, students build, deepen, and when needed, repair their relationships daily. The lessons explicitly support the ongoing and often messy work of fostering within students a strong sense of community at school. This is done daily and with intention.

- **Creating calm, orderly learning environments through the use of effective classroom management practices.** When students enter school, they should be greeted by a calm, orderly, and safe environment. While school days can sometimes feel hectic or frenetic, consistent and predictable routines within a calm and caring environment can support students as they encounter any unplanned or unexpected things that come up.
- **Directly teaching social skills.** All students need support to be flexible and resilient when they encounter challenges, and all students come with skills they have learned to help them survive. The social skills that students need to thrive in school are sometimes different from the skills they need to cope outside of school. The lessons in the program help add important skills to students' repertoire that help them engage in a rigorous yet caring learning environment. These skills include reflecting on their behavior, asking for help when needed, sharing work fairly, and monitoring their attention and refocusing when necessary. The lessons also support students with learning strategies to calm themselves, resolve conflicts, and take responsibility for their learning and behavior.
- **Helping students acquire self-discipline through a caring and effective approach to discipline.** Schools cannot have a one-size-fits-all discipline system and expect it to be fair and equitable. Punitive rewards-based discipline systems work against students who need patience, flexibility, and support to help them learn to control their behavior. The program's approach to discipline helps the student acquire self-discipline to build self-control, conscience, and a sense of responsibility from within. This approach encourages teachers to treat students with respect at all times and to treat misbehavior as mistakes like those students make with academic work, rather than signs of moral or character flaws. The one-on-one interventions found in *Caring School Discipline™* help teachers work with individual students to de-escalate situations and focus on what students can do to repair any damage they may have caused or what they might do differently rather than make students feel guilty or ashamed.

We believe that rather than having a separate set of trauma-informed practices, these important practices should be part of the fabric of our daily teaching.

Considerations and Modifications for Starting the Year In Person

While you should feel confident that by teaching the *Caring School Community* program as intended you will have the tools needed to effectively help students reenter school and rebuild your learning communities, there will be modifications to consider during this special time. There will also be things you have to consider that you normally would not. This section outlines some (but by no means all) of the considerations and modifications you might need to make as you implement the program.

RULES AND NORMS

Students will have been out of school for quite a while by the time they return. Coming back to school will necessitate conversations about how they need to be with one another in the classroom space. The program provides many ideas for setting up classrooms and for managing

movement. Depending on your local and state’s health guidelines, it might be important to add some procedures, rules, and norms that center on keeping students safe to what is already in the curriculum. Considerations might include:

- Maintaining social distancing
- Handwashing
- Cleaning desks and the classroom
- Providing others with personal space
- Wearing masks

While planning for the beginning of the year, think about where to add these topics to class meetings, “Morning Circle” activities, and “During the Day” activities during the first few weeks of school. To ensure student buy-in, it will be important that they see the connection between their own safety and that of their classmates to the new rules or procedures.

SPACE

While introducing students to the classroom, consider how they will move within the class to stay appropriately distanced from one another. You might consider one-way limited travel for certain tight areas such as closets, near bookshelves, or between tables and desks.

Also examine the rug and meeting areas and think about how students might sit so that they can all see each other yet still maintain social distancing. For example, you might have students sit in designated, appropriately spaced spots on the rug.

GREETINGS

Many of the greetings in the lessons have students touch one another’s hands with secret handshakes and high-fives. This may not be appropriate given the guidelines from your local or state health agencies. You might consider having students substitute waves, elbow bumps, and blinking eyes instead of handshakes and fist bumps. Alternatively, you can ask students to come up with other creative ways to say good morning to each other without touching one another’s hands.

STUDENT MATERIALS

The program includes student materials that will be shared among students such as “Feelings” or “Emotion” cards. You might consider laminating these materials so they can be easily cleaned when shared among students.

WEARING MASKS

Depending on your local and state’s health guidelines, it may be necessary for students to wear masks to keep everyone safe. It is very difficult to read emotions while wearing masks so it will be important to talk to students about using their words as other students (and their teacher) might not recognize when their feelings are hurt or when they are disappointed.

The Reconnecting and Rebuilding Toolkit

Collaborative Classroom recognizes that students' social and emotional needs may be significantly different at the start of this school year than in previous years. To support this need, we have developed *The Reconnecting and Rebuilding Toolkit*, which is a supplement to help classrooms build relationships, support students, and revive learning communities. The *Toolkit* is designed to help you plan and facilitate Community Chats in grades K–1 or Class Meetings in grades 2–6. In addition, specific guidance (aligned with trauma-informed practices) is provided on how to support students who have experienced trauma.

The Reconnecting and Rebuilding Toolkit (accessed through the Learning Portal, cclearningportal.org) includes 10 Community Chat lessons for grades K–1 and nine Class Meeting lessons for grades 2–6. The lessons focus on building community and relationships, while giving teachers tools to have hard conversations. While the lessons in the *Toolkit* were specifically designed for reentering school and teaching remotely in the current climate, you should feel free to modify and adapt them, when appropriate, to topics that are not covered.

Considerations for Starting the School Year Remotely

One advantage that schools had in switching to remote learning last spring was the strong communities they had already built. Schools that used the *Caring School Community* program daily reported that they had a strong foundation upon which to move to remote learning. Unfortunately, starting the school year with remote learning and a new group of students poses new and more difficult challenges.

Below are some things to consider if you have to plan for starting the new school year with remote learning.

- **Build relationships.** Building strong relationships remains the centerpiece of the *Caring School Community* program whether you teach it remotely or in person. We suggest teaching the lessons and meetings in the program as regularly as your remote learning schedule allows. Schools reported success when they kept morning meetings in place when they moved to remote learning. Consider starting each day with a morning circle and ending each day with a closing circle. Some activities will need to be modified, but following the structure each day and week will help students feel connected and supported.
- **Conduct regular one-on-one telephone and/or video calls with students and families.** Since you are starting the school year remotely, you may need to make some extra connections with families and students at the start of the year. While these calls take extra time, they will prove essential as you begin working together. Connecting with students and families regularly during the beginning of the school year will be especially important for kindergarten students, who will be new to school and to remote learning.
- **Establish norms, rules, and procedures for your virtual classroom.** Just like in your physical classroom, students need to know how to enter, leave, ask questions, and interact with one another in your virtual classroom. You might consider discussing the following:
 - Norms for whole-group discussions
 - Norms for breakout room discussions and work

- How and when students should mute their microphones
- How and when students should turn their video cameras on or off
- Suggestions for wearing headphones (to reduce background noise and distractions)
- **Provide ongoing ways to support student interaction.** Building relationships takes time and effort. Students will need many ways to engage with one another across the curriculum. These opportunities are essential for students to practice and see the utility of the social skills they learn in the *Caring School Community* program.
- **Prepare students to reenter school.** Teaching the *Caring School Community* lessons as much as you can during remote learning will set up students for returning to the physical classroom when it is safe. They will enter the classroom having learned some essential procedures and discussed and established norms. Students will be ready and excited to reconnect with one another in person. *The Reconnecting and Rebuilding Toolkit* (accessed through the Learning Portal) contains lessons to support students with returning to the classroom.