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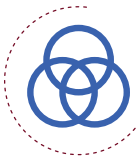
**PBIS**

Positive Behavioral  
Interventions & Supports

# PLANNING FOR STUDENT RETURN TO SCHOOL FOLLOWING A CRISIS

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# Planning for Student Return to School Following a Crisis

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## Purpose

The purpose of this planning guidance document is to provide educators with considerations for reestablishing the learning environment and supporting student's return to school following a crisis incident. We define a crisis incident as a serious event (e.g., school shooting, natural disaster) that substantially disrupts the learning environment.



## Introduction

Following any crisis incident that significantly disrupts the learning environment, intentional and careful planning for the reopening of school is critical for student and educator wellbeing. District and state or regional supports should align with and support school-based leadership planning to ensure students, staff, and families are effectively supported. Returning to routine and opportunities for connection with peers and adults provide important protective factors for students (National Institute of Mental Health, 2022). Reopening schools can be especially challenging in situations where the traumatic event took place on school grounds. For this reason, leadership teams should carefully consider student, staff, and family needs and input in making decisions about when and how to reopen schools. Although it may be challenging, returning to school as soon as feasibly possible (e.g., after building repairs, funerals or community commemorations) is a critical part of the recovery journey (Ozluk et al., 2026). Returning to school enables:

- returning to predictable routines
- increasing confidence that the school is a safe place to come back to
- increasing interactions that strengthen relationships and reduce isolation
- identifying, monitoring, and addressing signs of emotional/mental health distress

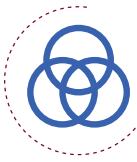
### Key Takeaways

- The return to school is a crucial part of the recovery process and may have emotional and behavioral impacts that differ from those later in the recovery process.
- Practices that emphasize relationships, routines, and proactive emotional regulation strategies will support student and staff recovery during school reopening throughout the day and the coming weeks.
- District and state or regional supports can help facilitate the restoration of the learning environment following a crisis event however school-based leadership teams should be part of all discussions and decisions related to reopening schools.

## General Considerations

District and school-based leadership teams can expect students, staff, and families to experience many emotions on their first day back at school. Students might be excited to see their friends. They might be sad about those injured or lost in the event. They might be anxious about their safety on school grounds. They might also be confused or uncertain about what the school will be like after their return, such as what will be different and what will be the same. Teams can plan an effective return to school by considering the following questions:

- Which supports will most students and staff need?



- Which supports will specific groups of students or staff need?
- Which supports will the most impacted students and staff need?

Although the specific needs of the school community will vary based on the specifics of the incident and supports in place prior to the incident, Table 1 offers some general considerations for the return to school, organized within the tiers of multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS).

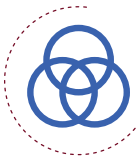
## Prior to School Reopening

Leadership teams can prepare for an effective reopening by considering the following actions before reopening schools.

- Complete relevant building repairs and/or identify temporary operating space
- Consider reopening schools within the district that were less impacted prior to the most impacted schools if there will be delays in reopening
- [Provide all school personnel](#)<sup>1</sup> a) adequate time to enter the building ahead of students and families

**Table 1. Multi-Tiered Considerations for Returning to School After a Crisis**

Tier	Considerations for Tiered Supports	Intended Recipients	Potential Data for Decision Making
Tier 1	All or most students, staff, and families will benefit from a temporary increase in supports that emphasize fostering connections, re-establishing routines, and proactive emotional regulation strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Generally, all community members</li> <li>• Those in neighboring communities or in communities with similar characteristics</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Existing data (e.g., screening, attendance, behavior, academic performance)</li> </ul>
Tier 2	Some groups of students, staff, or families will need more intensive delivery of the supports all students receive at Tier 1. Teams should consider modifications that enhance the dosage, frequency, or match to student, staff, or family needs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Those who were struggling prior the incident</li> <li>• Those that were loosely connected to those most impacted (e.g., same grade level or building, community connections).</li> <li>• Those that have experienced similar events in the past</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Existing data (e.g., screening, attendance, behavior, academic performance)</li> <li>• Impact mapping and triage data</li> </ul>
Tier 3	Some students, staff, or families will need intensive and individualized supports in addition to access to Tier 1 and 2 supports.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Those most directly impacted or closely connected to those directly impacted.</li> <li>• Siblings, teachers, teammates, or close friends of deceased or injured students or staff.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Impact mapping and triage data</li> <li>• Self-referrals</li> </ul>



to prepare spaces for return, b) the opportunity to receive information on what to expect during recovery and c) time to hear and process facts of the incident from district leadership

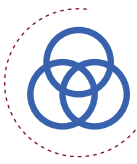
- Provide students and families an opportunity to walk through the space with support prior to reopening
- Consider the need for temporary modified schedules (e.g., early release or staggered return)
- Consider the need to adjust building access and drop off or pick up procedures
- Consider hosting listening sessions or providing other opportunities for those most impacted and all community members to share needs or concerns
- Establish or reestablish a clear communication system with staff, students, and families and consider developing transparent systems for prioritizing informing and obtaining feedback from staff and those most impacted prior to general announcements and opportunities for community feedback
- Develop and share the return to school schedule, including any temporary changes and a timeline for a full return
- Identify any needed changes to school security procedures and provide relevant training for staff
- Engage school personnel in planning back to school routines and activities and provide opportunities to build their confidence in supporting students' return by focusing on core concepts related to re-establishing relationships, re-establishing routines, and supporting proactive emotional regulation strategies
- Consider options for creatively flexing school and district crisis and mental health staffing (in addition

to external supports) to provide support for students and school personnel as needed

- Develop a process for supporting school personnel who may need additional support (e.g., roving subs or district personnel who can cover the class temporarily)
- Clearly communicate with students and families regarding what to expect upon return, including:
  - Any changes to school routines or schedules (e.g., increased security, changes in pick up/drop off)
  - Which supports are in place for both wellbeing and academics
  - [Which symptoms are typical responses for children following traumatic events<sup>2</sup>](#)
  - How students can ask for support during the day
  - How families can ask for support if they observe distress with their children

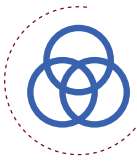
## Initial Return to School

The initial return to school is likely to feel overwhelming for many staff and students. Leadership teams can emphasize a small number of big ideas and avoid the pressure to add new initiatives or make significant changes to established routines and procedures. Table 2 provides six big ideas, describes critical features of the big idea and offers examples and non-examples of that big idea. Leadership teams should identify existing practices that align with these big ideas and support staff in focusing on and intensifying those existing practices rather than asking staff to implement new or different practices to the greatest extent possible.

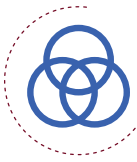


**Table 2. Big Ideas for the Return to School**

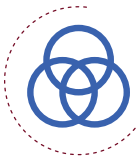
Big Idea	Critical Features	Examples	Cautions
<b>Create a visually welcoming and supportive space</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Post positive messages of support and encouragement</li> <li>Post reminders of any changes in routines</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Prior to return students, staff, and family members decorate a heart with a message of support to be displayed in the entry way and hallways.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Avoid visual displays that make assumptions about how students might be feeling.</li> <li>Avoid memorial or remembrance displays on school grounds instead maintain displays outside of or away (e.g., town center or outside school building) from the learning environment.</li> </ul>
<b>Increase supportive adult presence in the building to support feelings of safety</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identify known and respected adults who can be present in hallways and common areas</li> <li>Meet and greet students outside the building upon return</li> <li><a href="#">Increase opportunities for positive and welcoming messages</a><sup>3</sup></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Regular substitutes, community volunteers, or district staff commit to being present in the building and engaging in positive and supportive interactions with students for the first few days or weeks after return.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reduce the number of unknown adults in the building; instead prioritize the use of adults who are known to the community and students over new or outside supports.</li> <li>Avoid assuming community preferences with respect to visual displays of increased security (e.g., armed police on site); instead solicit community input.</li> </ul>
<b>Acknowledge the incident and provide accurate age-appropriate information and responses to questions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Establish the school as a reliable and accurate place to get information or ask questions about what happened</li> <li><a href="#">Provide additional supports for students who have specific questions or who want to talk further about the incident</a><sup>4</sup></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provide a script or statement to support teachers in acknowledging the incident in an age-appropriate way, such as: <i>"We have been through a tough time and are so happy to have you back in school. We each have different feelings and thoughts about it all, and we want you to know that we are here to support you. You don't have to talk about anything you don't want to but we will be here to listen for anyone who wants to talk."</i> (for older students, it may include a summary of the facts of the incident).</li> <li>Messages can be delivered by school or district leaders to the whole student body, to specific grade levels, or within classrooms.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Avoid spreading rumors or engaging in conversations that are not based in known facts.</li> <li>Avoid providing more detail than requested while answering student questions factually.</li> </ul>



Big Idea	Critical Features	Examples	Cautions
<p><b>Build routines that support increased opportunities for connection and support relationships</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Use or expand existing routines that support adult to student and student to student relationship building</a><sup>5</sup></li> <li>• Identify and leverage special relationships between students and adults in the building</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Morning meeting or advisory time is set aside for connection and support.</li> <li>• All staff increase positive student greetings and check ins.</li> <li>• Identify students who may have fewer connections and intentionally work to expand opportunities for relationship building.</li> <li>• Consider student voice and choice in developing opportunities for connection.</li> <li>• Consider the use of brief student surveys to identify trusted adults or those needing additional support.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Avoid assuming all students feel a sense of connection.</li> <li>• Avoid providing only corrections.</li> <li>• Avoid assuming all students will experience similar emotions</li> </ul>
<p><b>Enhance predictable routines and structure within the school</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Maintain and reinforce academic and social routines from prior to the incident as much as possible to support a sense of predictability</a><sup>6</sup></li> <li>• Explicitly teach practice and regularly prompt changes to routines (e.g., new hall pass procedures)</li> <li>• Expect a wide range of student behaviors following a crisis incident</li> <li>• Maintain an instructional and restorative approach to discipline</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review rules and expectations upon return just as you would following any school break (e.g., using a <a href="#">schoolwide or classroom teaching matrix</a>).<sup>7</sup></li> <li>• <a href="#">Provide a schedule of activities for class period or school day</a><sup>8</sup></li> <li>• Provide prior notice before any changes in schedule or routine.</li> <li>• Provide regular reminders and opportunities to practice any new routines or expectations.</li> <li>• Acknowledge the impact of unexpected disruptions and increase supports if they occur.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Avoid unannounced changes to schedules or routines as much as possible.</li> <li>• Avoid announcing or posting new rules or routines without opportunities to practice.</li> <li>• Avoid pressure to be overly punitive or expand exclusionary discipline practices.</li> </ul>



<b>Big Idea</b>	<b>Critical Features</b>	<b>Examples</b>	<b>Cautions</b>
<b>Increase proactive teaching and prompting of emotional awareness and regulation strategies</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Teach and prompt a small number of emotional regulation strategies (e.g., present moment focus, breathwork, movement)</li><li>• Proactively build in opportunities to practice and apply these strategies</li><li>• Teach and prompt a way for students to signal if they need additional support</li><li>• Teach students about the negative impacts of too much social media or news exposure and strategies for monitoring their use</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Schedule regular breaks and offer students the opportunity to assess their emotional regulation and practice one or more strategy as needed.</li><li>• Prior to a known stressor (e.g., change in schedule, remembrance event, challenging academic activity), pause and offer students the opportunity to self-select a pre-taught strategy or practice one or more strategy together as a class.</li><li>• Set goals with students to support reduced social media or news exposure or teach students how to install screen time limits for themselves.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Avoid assuming one strategy will work for all students or staff.</li><li>• Avoid teaching emotional regulation strategies in isolation or without opportunities to practice.</li></ul>



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