




Introduction

School districts across the country continue to grapple with impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic, including those related to school closures as well as health, social, financial, and emotional challenges in the larger community. While there are many uncertainties surrounding the re-opening of schools for the 2020-21 school year, most are anticipating significant social-emotional and academic challenges as students return. This report discusses recommended strategies and considerations for supporting students' social-emotional and academic needs following extended school closures and crisis events. This research brief draws on limited relevant research from other natural disasters and crises that resulted in school disruptions as well as broader literature on crisis recovery planning for schools. Finally, this report highlights emerging guidance and recommendations related to the COVID-19 pandemic specifically.

Recommendations

-  **Target both social-emotional and academic supports for students with pre-existing and new risk factors**, including socioeconomic disadvantage, personal or family impact from COVID-19 pandemic, and history of mental health or academic challenges.
-  **Train school staff members in trauma and crisis support strategies**, such as Psychological First Aid and trauma-informed practices.
-  **Facilitate vertical coordination and planning across grade levels** to ensure that gaps in academic content from the 2019-20 year are incorporated into the 2020-21 curriculum.

Key Findings

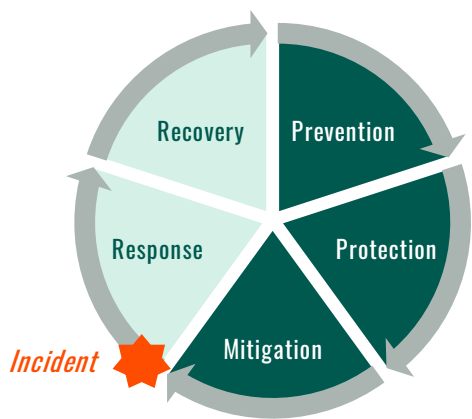
- Prior natural disasters and crisis events generally do not offer many practical strategies that are applicable to the current COVID-19 pandemic.** COVID-19 is unprecedented in modern history due to its length and breadth; there is no directly comparable event from which to draw lessons and strategies. However, past crises provide some broad insight into how school districts can best respond and address students' needs as they return to school.
- Research on prior natural disasters find that students with compounding risk factors are more likely to experience negative social-emotional and academic impacts.** Potential risk factors include low-socioeconomic status, high family or parent stress, relocation or loss of economic stability, low school engagement or attendance, and limited social support network.
- Psychological First Aid (PFA) is a strategy used during crisis recovery to identify and support students experiencing trauma.** PFA, which can be used by both mental health and non-mental health staff members, includes a sequence of core actions designed to provide increasing levels of trauma support as needed for an individual student. The process begins with initial contact and engagement and providing for basic safety, emotional, and physical needs. If needed, the PFA model then progresses to support stabilization and addressing specific needs and concerns. Finally, PFA provides targeted interventions to cope with trauma and access to mental health services.
- Schools can incorporate trauma-informed practices to provide ongoing support to students experiencing and recovering from traumatic events.** Guiding principles of trauma-informed practices include creating predictable routines, building strong and supportive relationships, empowering students' agency, supporting the development of self-regulation, and providing opportunities to explore individual and community identities.
- Districts should anticipate long-term, though likely unequal, learning loss.** Some students and courses may be more or less impacted by school closures and the shift to digital learning at the end of 2019-20. Limited initial estimates suggest that students may experience greater learning loss in math than in English. Prior natural disasters demonstrate that academic impacts are likely to disproportionately impact those already at-risk for academic challenges. Additionally, studies show that it may take several years for academic learning to recover.

Crisis Recovery Background

Emergency operations or management planning has long been recommended and undertaken by school districts to prepare for natural disasters, disease outbreaks, violence, and other incidents that may disrupt school operations. These plans typically cover a broad range of potential emergency or crisis scenarios and may include appendixes related to specific scenarios of greatest threat. Emergency management and government agencies typically organize emergency planning into several stages based on their main goals and purpose.¹

COVID-19 school re-opening plans generally fall into the recovery stage of emergency operations planning, which includes planning for “the capabilities necessary to assist districts and schools affected by an event or emergency in restoring the learning environment.”²

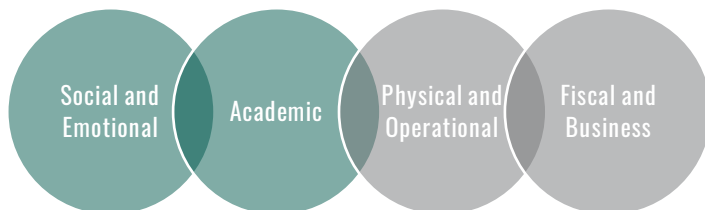
Emergency Operations Planning Phases



Source: U.S. Department of Education³

Recovery planning encompasses four main areas for school districts, including two specific to addressing the social-emotional and academic needs of returning students. The remainder of this report focuses on social-emotional and academic recovery after a crisis generally as well as specific considerations for the current COVID-19 pandemic.

Components of Crisis Recovery



Source: Multiple⁴

Social-Emotional Recovery

Past disasters and crisis events suggest that challenging family and community-level factors heighten social-emotional impacts for students. A 2015 literature review examined how familial and community factors influenced children’s reactions to disasters, such as hurricanes, tsunamis, earthquakes, and terrorist incidents.⁵ The authors found that low socioeconomic status, high parental stress levels, poor parental coping skills, intense media exposure, and secondary adversities – including “property damage,” “dislocation and relocation,” “disruption of services” (e.g., food, shelter, transportation), and “economic loss” – correlated with greater emotional distress among children.⁶

Conversely, strong social networks and supports may be protective against potential negative effects of a disaster. Social supports, provided by families, peers, schools, and other community resources, offer some protection against negative social-emotional outcomes.⁷

The recovery phase of any emergency or crisis requires additional support and attention around the mental health of students, staff, and families. Relevant student-related considerations for social-emotional and mental health recovery are listed below, followed by additional details on several specific strategies related to social-emotional recovery.⁸

- Counseling and psychological/mental health first aid (immediate, short-term, and long-term)
- In-class social and emotional support for students
- Mental health needs assessment and monitoring
- Tracking of student attendance, behavior, and engagement in school
- Coordination with local mental health providers

Psychological First Aid

The American Federation for Teachers (AFT)’s [Plan to Safely Reopen America’s Schools and Communities](#) calls for schools and districts to train all staff on “how to identify students struggling with trauma and refer them to mental health professionals for additional support.”⁹ Psychological First Aid (PFA) is one strategy that schools have used to support students and staff in the aftermath of other disasters and crises.¹⁰

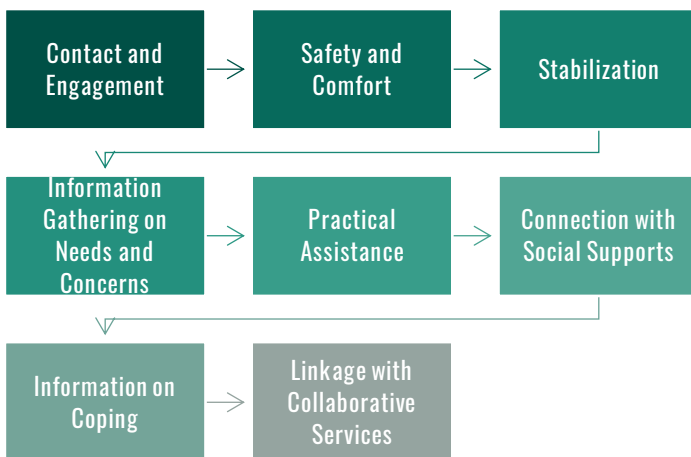
Psychological First Aid for Schools (PFA-S) is a strategy specifically designed for use during the immediate recovery phase of a crisis or emergency. PFA-S seeks to “reduce the initial distress caused by emergencies, and to foster short- and long-term adaptive functioning and coping.”¹¹ The strategy can be delivered by any staff member, including those without specific mental health training.¹²

Preparations for the delivery of the PFA-S model include the following initial planning tasks:¹³

- ✓ **Consider the School’s History and Climate** (e.g., other recent adverse events, current morale, upcoming events, recent changes, community partners, other personal trauma of staff and student).
- ✓ **Identify Distinguishing Features of the Event** (e.g., magnitude of event and trauma for staff, students, and community, level of exposure to event, rumors circulating about the event).
- ✓ **Be Aware of At-Risk Populations** (e.g., students and staff who are at special risk). Risk factors may include those with:
 - Direct exposure or injury
 - Death or serious injury of loved one
 - Close personal relationship with victim(s)
 - History of depression or suicidal thoughts
 - History of anxiety or low self-confidence
 - History of risk-taking behavior
 - Prior traumatic events (e.g., violence, abuse or neglect, economic disadvantage, medical vulnerability)
- ✓ **Be Sensitive to Racial and Cultural Diversity** (e.g., cultural, ethnic, religious, racial, and language differences).

The core actions of PFA-S begin with initial contact and stabilization followed by offering more targeted assistance, support, and coping strategies as needed. Finally, PFA-S should include connections with additional service providers.¹⁴

Psychological First Aid Core Actions



Source: National Child Traumatic Stress Network¹⁵

Additional PFA Resources

[Psychological First Aid for Schools Field Operations Guide](#)

Resource from the National Child Traumatic Stress Network and National Center for PTSD on using PFA-S in school settings.

[Psychological First Aid CDC Webinar](#)

April 2020 CDC webinar (1 hour recording and slides) on PFA and its implementation specifically in the context of disaster relief.

[American Red Cross Psychological First Aid Certification](#)

Free online course designed specifically for response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Training is not specific to youth and schools, but covers basic information on PFA and applications for current crisis.

Focus on Social-Emotional Learning

As schools re-open for the 2020-21 school year education leaders are calling for a renewed focus on social-emotional learning (SEL) as part of re-opening plans.¹⁶ To support this effort, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) offers four “critical actions” to complete in preparation for school re-opening. These actions are listed below, however additional details and strategies can be found [here](#). CASEL anticipates releasing guidance, recommendations, and tools for SEL during the COVID-19 pandemic in late June, 2020.

Critical Actions for Leveraging the Power of SEL During School Re-Opening

Action 1 Take time to build partnerships, deepen your understanding, and plan for SEL

Action 2 Design opportunities for adults to connect, heal, and cultivate their own SEL competencies and capacities.

Action 3 Create emotionally and physically safe, supportive, and engaging learning environments that promote all students’ social and emotional development.

Action 4 Use data as an opportunity to deepen relationships and continuously improve support for students, families, and staff.

Source: CASEL¹⁷

Additional SEL Resources

[Leveraging the Power of SEL](#)

CASEL’s initial COVID-19 guide for districts and schools to incorporate SEL into reopening plans.

[SEL in the Era of COVID-19](#)

Getting Smart article outlining considerations for SEL approaches during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Trauma-Informed Practices

As districts consider how to support students in the midst of a traumatic event such as COVID-19, trauma-informed practices can be used to design supportive classroom and school environments.¹⁸

Guiding Principles of Trauma-Informed Practices



Create predictable routines



Build strong & supportive relationships



Empower students' agency



Support the development of self-regulation skills



Provide opportunities to explore individual & community identities

Source: Transforming Education¹⁹

In putting trauma-informed practices into action, schools should focus on observing the “4 Rs” in all interactions within the school community.²⁰

4 R's of Trauma-Informed Schools

- R1** Realizing the widespread impact of trauma and pathways to recovery

- R2** Recognizing trauma signs and symptoms

- R3** Responding by integrating knowledge about trauma into all facets of the system

- R4** Resisting re-traumatization of trauma-impacted individuals by decreasing the occurrence of unnecessary triggers and by implementing trauma-informed policies, procedures, and practices.

Source: National Child Traumatic Stress Network²¹

Additional Trauma-Informed Practices Resources

[Framework for Trauma-Informed Schools](#)

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network's framework for trauma-informed schools.

[Strategies for Trauma-Sensitive Schools](#)

Resource from the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction for creating trauma-sensitive schools. Includes focus on academics, behavioral supports, and policies among several other areas.

Academic Recovery

Academic impacts from natural disasters disproportionately affect students that are already at-risk. In a 2018 study of the academic recovery of schools impacted by Hurricane Ike, schools were classified as having a high-stable academic recovery trajectory or a low-interrupted trajectory. The study found that high attendance was associated with the high-stable trajectory while a high percentage of economically disadvantaged students was associated with the low-interrupted trajectory. These results show that natural disasters “do not affect all people or communities equally...[and] highlight the need for policy initiatives that focus on low performing schools” during the recovery period.²²

School reforms undertaken during a disaster recovery have been shown to result in positive long-term student academic achievement. The unique circumstances around both the immediate and long-term aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans make comparisons difficult. However, studies show that reforms undertaken in the New Orleans Public Schools (NOLA PS) after the disaster did have long-term positive impacts on multiple indicators of student academic achievement, high school graduation, and college enrollment, persistence, and graduation.²³

Researchers of the post-Katrina reforms in NOLA PS, while unlikely to be replicated in other situations, identified three distinctive strategies that were especially effective:²⁴

- **More Money** – Relative to comparable districts, NOLA PS reforms after Hurricane Katrina involved greater financial investment.
- **An Ample Educator Workforce** - New Orleans as a city and the school district as an extension benefited from an influx of early career educators and school reform leaders seeking to rebuild the city.
- **Low Starting Point** - Prior to Hurricane Katrina, student academic achievement in New Orleans was lower than comparable districts, suggesting that major reforms after a disaster may result in the greatest benefit for low-performing schools and students.

In the context of crisis recovery, academic recovery broadly relates to how schools will restore the learning environment and instruction. Given the ongoing nature of COVID-19, academic recovery may include plans for an extension of the current digital learning model, a hybrid in-person/online approach, or fully in-person instruction. The following subsections describe two broad strategies to support academic recovery. Additional topics to consider for planning academic recovery include:²⁵

- Plan for resuming academic activities and routines
- Use of alternative instructional delivery
- Use of alternative school day schedules
- Use of temporary or alternative instructional spaces

Planning for Learning Loss

Districts should plan for greater than typical learning loss when students return for the 2020-21 school year, especially in math. As districts begin to shift focus towards planning for the 2020-21 school year, most are anticipating significant learning loss beyond the typical “summer slide.” Research from NWEA, the organization that administers the MAP test for Grades 3-8, predicts that based on typical learning loss between academic years that students will return for the 2020-21 school year “with roughly 70% of the learning gains in reading relative to a typical school year.” In math, learning gains are projected to be even smaller, potentially up to a year behind the typical level for some grade levels.²⁶ While similar data and projections are not currently available for high school grade levels, this suggests that incoming Grade 9 students may enter high school more behind than typical in both English and math, though math learning loss may be greater on the whole and require more targeted support at the beginning of the 2020-21 school year.

To account for anticipated learning loss, districts can facilitate a vertical curriculum review and collaboration across grade levels and courses. Teachers are the most knowledgeable of the specific competencies, topics, and skills that students may not have received or mastered during the 2019-20 school year due to school closures. These gaps should be identified and communicated across grade levels to allow for adjustments and additions to 2020-21 course curricula as students advance to the next grade level or progress to the next course in the sequence. In Ceres Unified School District (CA), teachers are currently working through a three-step process, illustrated below, to prepare to address learning loss. These “vertical conversations” are taking place at each grade level, with a special focus on transition years, such as Grade 9.²⁷

Vertical Conversations for 2020-21 Curriculum Planning

Step 1	Current grade level/course teachers documents unmet learning goals for class.
Step 2	Vertical conversations between current and subsequent grade level/course teachers to identify a core set of learning areas and skills that should be revisited in 2020-21.
Step 3	Teachers plan for how to incorporate identified gaps into the 2020-21 curriculum.

Source: Ceres Unified School District²⁸

Prior school closures suggest that districts should develop a long-term strategy to address lost learning. A 2019 study of the 2009 Australian bushfire found that a disaster may erode learning across multiple academic years. The study analyzed students’ test scores from Grade 1 (the year of the bushfire), Grade 3, and Grade 5. When comparing results for Grades 3 and 5, the authors determined that students attending the most affected schools recorded significantly

less improvement in reading and math.²⁹ Similarly, research on learning loss after Hurricane Katrina found that it took two years for students to recover in terms of academic achievement.³⁰ This suggests that students will need long-term strategies for recovering learning lost during COVID-19 school closures. From the perspective of a high school district, multiple cohorts of entering students may continue to show the impact of learning loss in the future.

Individual learning plans can be used to access and plan for addressing different levels of learning during school closure. Some districts are planning to or in the process of creating individual learning plans as part of their COVID-19 academic recovery strategy. This strategy accounts for the potentially wide range of learning that individual students achieved at the end of the 2019-20 school year and allows schools to develop targeted supports for both academic and social-emotional needs.³¹

Opportunities for Additional Learning Time

Academic recovery strategies often rely on the use of additional instructional time to address learning loss. This additional time may come in the form of additional school days to the academic year, additional time in the school day, or extended summer school.³² For example, Maryland’s draft school re-opening plan, [Maryland Together](#), offers several specific strategies for supporting academic learning during re-opening:³³

- **Summer or extended-year programs** for credit recovery or new course credit.
- **Enrichment classes** before or after school hours or during the summer that extend the curriculum and introduce new content.
- **Assistance programs** designed for students with special needs or students identified as being at-risk for academic failure.
- **Dual enrollment programs** for high school students.
- **Modified school day or year calendars** (e.g., early school year start date, late school year end date, before or after school extended time).

Additional learning time is most effective when student attendance is strong. Research from Advance Illinois on opportunities for increased learning time following school closures found that there is little research on the impact of additional time, especially at the scale necessary to make up for school closures due to COVID-19. However, research on extended learning outside of the context of disaster recovery highlights the importance of attendance in the efficacy of extended learning. As such, schools should consider the feasibility of ensuring high levels of participation in any extended learning opportunities offered to students.³⁴

Given the uncertainty around the format for instruction in both the summer and in the 2020-21 school year, if additional learning time is offered, districts should develop

strategies and plans that ensure high levels of participation from students. Best practices for summer school programming offer several suggestions, listed below, for supporting strong attendance.

Strategies for Supporting Summer School Attendance



Set enrollment deadlines to ensure that students participate in the entire session rather than entering mid-way.



Establish a clear attendance policy and track attendance. Ensure that students and families have a clear understanding of the attendance policy and reason for policy.



Provide incentives for students who attend. While field trips are common incentives to encourage attendance, there are other prizes or activities that can be distributed virtually.



Do not disguise academics in order to boost attendance. Camp-like programs have not been shown to have higher attendance than academic-focused programs.

Source: RAND and The Wallace Foundation³⁵

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Endnotes

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