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# Promoting Mental Health and Academic Success: Leveraging Lessons From the COVID-19 Pandemic for Educators

As countries around the world, including the United States, continue to navigate a return to work, family, education, and leisure after the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, we provide a resource for educators and families to promote mental health and academic success for students worldwide. Based on current psychological and educational research, this resource provides information about how students can benefit from five identified areas: **classroom instruction, community outreach and connection, mental health and well-being, the promotion of science-based information, and technology.**

The American Psychological Association's (APA's) Coalition for Psychology in Schools and Education (CPSE) is invested in the social, emotional, and cognitive development of P-12 students. The information and resources provided in this document are intended to serve as a foundation for educators, which will be supplemented with additional resources as we learn more about how the short and the long-term effects of COVID-19 affect our families. We aim to assist educators, parents, and others involved in student's lives with information to inform their decision-making processes to foster students' well-being and academic success.

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## LESSONS FROM COVID-19: Classroom Instruction

In the United States, there is a long history of students having different learning opportunities and support for their development, resulting in large disparities in students' educational environments and learning. The pandemic exacerbated some of these pre-existing problems, with educators currently teaching many students who had widely disparate virtual learning experiences. Some excelled without much support, others excelled with support, while others had little support and became disengaged. Educators also had varying levels of knowledge about virtual instruction resulting in classrooms with greater differences in academic skills. For many, the pandemic and the virtual learning environment also led to more social-emotional challenges as students' normal social interactions were limited and many faced stress, fear, and anxiety. Therefore, educators must find ways to help all students grow, while also being sensitive to their own and their students' social-emotional needs and possible lingering traumas.

### Lesson Learned 1:

#### **Starting Where Students Are with Assessment**

Students at all levels of knowledge and maturity need instruction that's challenging but achievable to provide them with optimal learning experiences. Educators must assess students' prior knowledge and connect new material to it. By connecting new information to what students already know and do, the new knowledge will have more connections, which will make it more memorable in the long-term and easier to apply in different contexts in the future. Although most educators have experience

assessing prior knowledge, educators are going to need to do this more than they have in the past. Similarly, despite educators being accustomed to building on students' prior year's skills, the pandemic has led to more gaps and variability in students' knowledge, making educators' assessment literacy even more crucial.

### RESOURCES

- <https://www.apa.org/ed/schools/teaching-learning/top-twenty/principles/assessment>
- <https://www.apa.org/education-career/k12/classroom-data>

### Lesson Learned 2:

#### **Sensitive and Responsive Teaching**

Educators need ways to deliver instruction that is *sensitive and responsive* to students' needs and current skill set. All students benefit when instruction is tailored to their needs and interests. For example, educators may need to be aware that students may not have mastered material in the same way as they did pre-pandemic. Therefore, some students might need more review or more practice before moving on to new content. Educators may need to provide more differentiated instruction to accommodate variability in student knowledge. They may want to use pedagogical techniques, such as the jigsaw approach, where students of all abilities are placed in small groups to perform group tasks. While differentiated instruction has been advocated in the past, it is now more important than ever.

## RESOURCES

- <https://www.apa.org/ed/schools/teaching-learning/top-twenty/principles/thinking-learning>
- <https://www.apa.org/education-career/k12/brain-function>
- <https://www.schreyerinstitute.psu.edu/pdf/alex/jigsaw.pdf>

### Lesson Learned 3:

#### **Promoting Engagement Through Student Choice, Interest, and Creativity**

Knowing what students bring to the learning environment can have positive benefits, as their personal interests can be used to further individualize instruction. For example, after assigning a project topic, the educator could give students the opportunity to decide how they want to research the topic and present their findings. This would be particularly effective in the classrooms of today as students have access to, and are adept at, using new technologies, the latest modes of communication, and emerging social media platforms. Instruction that engages students' interest or provides opportunities for students to exercise choice has been shown to increase their intrinsic motivation and creativity.

## RESOURCES

- <https://www.apa.org/education-career/k12/creativity-module>
- <https://www.apa.org/ed/schools/teaching-learning/top-twenty/principles/motivation>
- <https://www.apa.org/education-career/k12/learners>

### Lesson Learned 4:

#### **Social-Emotional Scaffolding**

Some students and educators may have experienced traumatic events during the pandemic that they are bringing into the classroom. Addressing their social-emotional needs is important to promoting better long-term learning. Trauma-informed educational practices are important for students who have experienced some sort of trauma, whether pandemic-related or otherwise. These practices are helpful for any students, as they create a supportive and nurturing learning environment.

## RESOURCES

- <https://www.apa.org/ed/schools/teaching-learning/top-twenty/principles/social-emotional-learning>
- <https://www.apa.org/education-career/k12/relationships>





## LESSONS FROM COVID-19: Community Outreach and Connection

While the COVID-19 pandemic gave families a new perspective on teaching, it also served to highlight curricular content that some viewed as objectionable. As the balance of instructional responsibility moved more toward families, some began to believe they should have more influence over the curriculum. This also gave rise to the notion that the community has an important role in leveraging education reform. As the pandemic started to wind down, community advice-giving intensified and, in many ways, became dramatically hostile.

### **Lesson Learned 1: Family Appreciation of Teaching**

During the peak COVID-19 period, many families came to appreciate teaching as a legitimate professional skill set that was not easily replicated by the public. Only weeks into teaching their own children, families quickly gained insight into the differences between teaching topical content (knowledge) and the strategies (skills) needed for children to learn and retain information for future use. Realizing that their own children may require different approaches—including strategies that were different from their own school experiences—families were able to see the challenges educators face daily with a room full of diverse learners. This newfound appreciation for teaching and educators was initially believed to be the silver lining to the pandemic.

### **RESOURCES**

- <https://harst.org/research-matters/pedagogical-content-knowledge>
- <https://www.nea.org/advocating-for-change/new-from-nea/culture-wars-impact-public-schools>

### **Lesson Learned 2: Communities and Schools Can Work Through Differences**

To date, a uniform equilibrium has not yet been found between curricular priorities, teacher legitimacy, and family input. Many educators were surprised to find that schools became a battleground after the strenuous efforts shown by educators during the pandemic. Educators were unprepared to answer parent assertions that curriculum content served as a Trojan horse for teaching objectionable material. Referencing state educational standards did not lessen critiques. Coupled with the history that documents the uneven path toward a free and appropriate education for girls, children of color, immigrants, and those with disabilities, it is clear there continues to be a need to listen carefully to communities with concerns. Even when there is a perception of bad faith and hostility, we must come together, listen to each other, and take each other's concerns seriously. Education is a public good, and educational attainment is associated with positive health outcomes. To realize our shared goal of successfully educating the next generation, it is important to anticipate that conversations may become heated. We must prepare community and school teams to engage in constructive and respectful conversations across differences.

### **RESOURCES**

- <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED606970.pdf>
- <https://www.difficultdialogues.org>
- <https://www.casb.org/leading-difficult-conversation-in-your-community>
- <https://hbr.org/2015/01/how-to-handle-difficult-conversations-at-work>

# LESSONS FROM COVID-19: Mental Health and Well-Being

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, students' mental health and well-being have become top priorities for schools. While prior to the COVID-19 pandemic there were some systems in place to support students' mental health and well-being, now even more, schools are investing in infrastructures and systems of support to prevent and respond to students' mental health needs. Although these systems of support guide not only students but also their families due to the pandemic, more staff, educator training, and resources have been used to address disparities in student learning and how the pandemic has played a role in increased sense of uncertainty, depression, and anxiety. Educators continue to pay close attention to the needs of their students in the classroom, the continued impact on how the pandemic has affected overall learning, and how this impact has carried over in the students' capacity to prevent and manage mental health and well-being concerns. As a result of this pivot the focus for educators has been prevention.

## **Lesson Learned 1: Addressing Students' Increased Mental Health Challenges**

Students' mental health challenges, which were already increasing pre COVID-19, showed a dramatic increase as the pandemic lingered. Families were acutely aware of their child's needs but at times, didn't know the role schools played in supporting their mental health challenges. Challenges in new learning formats and platforms such as online learning, changes in classroom schedules, not seeing their peers, their typical classroom routine, and connectedness with daily school activities were disrupted. In addition, during the pandemic, it was unclear for students and families how long these new learning formats would continue as schools navigated providing academic opportunities in a time of uncertainty. Diverse learners and those students who already had a difficult time with formalized education were most impacted with these challenges.

### **RESOURCES**

- <https://www.apa.org/ed/schools/primer>
- <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2022/01/special-childrens-mental-health>
- <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/mental-health/index.htm>

## **Lesson Learned 2: Managing Educators Burnout and Uncertainty**

As the pandemic continued, educators and school systems were faced with meeting the needs of students and their families in academic environments in real-time, daily, and at time, without notice. This state of affairs left educators and school staff with increased burnout, anxiety, and uncertainty in how to support their own mental health and well-being while meeting the mental



health and academic needs of their students. Self-care, space for support within schools, and acknowledgement of this new reality in school systems created discussions and strategies for the care of all school personnel to not only prevent further mental health challenges but to also implement on-going systems of support.

### **RESOURCES**

- <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/educators-mental-health-has-suffered-in-the-pandemic-heres-how-districts-can-help/2021/05>
- <https://www.npr.org/2021/04/19/988211478/we-need-to-be-nurtured-too-many-teachers-say-theyre-reaching-a-breaking-point>
- <https://www.rutgers.edu/news/how-teachers-can-manage-burnout-during-pandemic>

## **Lesson Learned 3: Changes in Access and Delivery of Mental Health Services**

Meeting the challenges of the pandemic in and out of the classroom, schools provided additional support for managing and preventing mental health and well-being challenges while also designing more mental health programming. These programs were accessible and delivered within school systems, focused on building connectedness, sense of community, and prevention. As a result, students, families, and school staff acknowledged the importance of access and delivery of mental health and well-being programs and services within school systems as valuable, necessary, and vital for everyone's role for students' academic potential.

### **RESOURCES**

- [https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/sites/default/files/13-Imp-SchMnHlthSprtBtPrt-508\\_0.pdf](https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/sites/default/files/13-Imp-SchMnHlthSprtBtPrt-508_0.pdf)
- [https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/un\\_policy\\_brief-covid\\_and\\_mental\\_health\\_final.pdf](https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/un_policy_brief-covid_and_mental_health_final.pdf)
- <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2022/08/behaviour-covid19-school-children-psychology-wellbeing/>
- [https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/protective/school\\_connect-edness.htm](https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/protective/school_connect-edness.htm)





## LESSONS FROM COVID-19: Promotion of Science-Based Information

Students now have access to more information than ever before, and this trend shows no signs of slowing down. Before, during, and certainly after the peak of COVID-19, students were inundated with information from technology, social media, print publications, television, and other sources. While many students were able to distinguish between accurate (trustworthy) information and misinformation (i.e., fake news), this challenge continues to be difficult.

Information in and of itself is not harmful, but inaccurate, deceptive, hyperbolic, and self-serving information that is not grounded in psychological science may be detrimental to students of all ages because they may believe, for example, that vaping is not very harmful when indeed it is very harmful. To promote the use of science-based information and to assist students in discriminating between what is true and what is not true, we briefly discuss two topics and provide resources for educators and students as they navigate the oceans of information available at their fingertips.

### **Lesson Learned 1: Educators, Parents, and Students Can Become Educated Consumers of Science-Based Information**

In psychological science, replication of research findings is critical to learning the truth about phenomena. For example, many years ago a method of teaching reading called whole language was the “talk of the educational town.” After years of research and limited reproducibility we learned that the whole language approach to reading was not all that it was thought to be. The reproducibility or replication crisis is an ongoing methodological crisis in which the results of many scientific studies are difficult or impossible to reproduce. This may call into question studies that state critical results but cannot or are not replicated. Most answers to research questions found in a single study require verification via other studies of the same topic with similar and varied methodology.

### **RESOURCES**

- <https://www.apa.org/ed/precollege/psychology-teacher-network/introductory-psychology/replication-crisis>
- <https://today.ucsd.edu/story/a-new-replication-crisis-research-that-is-less-likely-be-true-is-cited-more>

### **Lesson Learned 2: Educators and Parents Can Promote Science in the Classroom and at Home**

Educators and parents can encourage students from very early in their education to become enamored with science. There are myriad resources available online and in person for students to understand, value, and want to learn more about the world via science. A trustworthy source is the APA whose mission is to advance the creation, communication, and application of psychological knowledge to benefit society and improve people’s lives. One of the ways APA acts on its mission is via the use of science to answer questions important to society. The science of psychology benefits society and enhances our lives. Psychologists examine the relationships between brain function and behavior, and the environment and behavior, applying what they learn to illuminate our understanding and improve the world around us.

### **RESOURCES**

- <https://www.nsta.org/journal-college-science-teaching/journal-college-science-teaching-julyaugust-2010/promoting-science>
- <https://www.nsta.org/nstas-official-positions/parent-involvement-science-learning>
- <https://www.edc.org/take5forsci>
- <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2022/04/news-high-school-psychology>
- <https://youtu.be/AUs6af5lu8g>
- <https://www.pta.org/home/programs/stem>

# LESSONS FROM COVID-19:

## Technology

The COVID pandemic forced schools across the world to move from in person to remote instruction resulting in extreme variability in the speed and quality of implementation. Some schools were able to make the switch quickly because they already used online tools like Google Classroom and had devices for each student. But other schools had a more challenging time. They had to find devices for each student and make sure everyone had access to the internet. Some students, like those with disabilities or who were learning English, experienced a harder time succeeding in an online environment. We learned much about using technology in schools during the pandemic. Here are six important lessons we learned and some resources to help you learn more. These lessons will be useful in the future when schools need to use online classes again because of a snow day or a natural disaster.

### **Lesson Learned 1:** **Infrastructure, Support, and Instruction Can Be Used to Lessen Disparities**

During the pandemic, we learned that access to technology (e.g., wifi, educational software and tools) varied greatly within and across communities, largely due to socioeconomic differences and challenges. Going forward, if we are to leverage technology to advance student learning and socioemotional development, we must ensure that students and their families have access to appropriate technology and education about the effective use of technological tools.

Here are some tips and resources to support using technology to lessen disparities in access and understanding:

- Ensure that all technology, curriculum, and digital learning platforms are compliant with Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (see <https://bit.ly/3UnWqRA>) and interoperable with a student's preferred assistive technology.
- Include technology education for students and parents/caregivers. Assistive technology training and support can be included in a student's IEP and training on new school-wide technology can be offered to the school community.
- Guarantee that all students have access to home internet (or community-based internet). A working device should be part of the 'back to school readiness' plan for all students.

### **RESOURCES**

- <https://www.section508.gov/buy/>
- <https://www.section508.gov/sell/vpat/>
- <https://www.ets.org/news/stories/nine-ways-parents-and-educators-can-evaluate-edtech-for-accessibility.html>

### **Lesson Learned 2:** **Assessments Can Be Administered Remotely**

Early studies on admissions testing, licensure testing, and psychoeducational testing have shown that remote assessment can be reliable and valid. Given the growing concerns about



testing time taking away from instructional time, two lessons learned from the pandemic are:

- Consider 'at home' K12 testing to reduce the impact on instructional time.
- Administer more frequent (but shorter) tests as online homework (summer work) rather than a one-time event that stops all instruction.

### **RESOURCES**

- <https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/covid-19-resource-center/special-education-resources/telehealth-virtual-service-delivery-updated-recommendations>
- <https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/covid-19-resource-center/crisis-and-mental-health-resources/conducting-virtual-suicide-assessment-checklist>

### **Lesson Learned 3:** **Technology Can Be Leveraged to Enhance Engagement Across Home and School and Facilitate Efficient Communication and Collaboration**

As parents and educators adjusted to remote learning, parent engagement increased due to closer monitoring of their children's in-home learning activities as well as parental use of teleconferencing to communicate more consistently and effectively with school personnel. Parents became more familiar with technology tools along with their children's learning objectives, activities, and assignments. To leverage these gains going forward schools can:

- Share technology tools with parents to encourage regular, ongoing communication.
- Provide parents with teleconference options (e.g., in lieu of or in addition to in-school meetings).

### **RESOURCES**

To learn more about how technology can be leveraged to enhance engagement across home and school and facilitate efficient communication and collaboration, please visit:

- <https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/covid-19-resource-center/special-education-resources/supporting-student-engagement-and-well-being-in-a-virtual-learning-environment-social-justice-considerations>
- <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-10-05/return-to-office-black-workers-are-happier-more-valued-working-from-home>

#### Lesson Learned 4:

#### **Educators Need to Set Expectations, Boundaries, and Structures for Private/Public Life**

An implication of remote learning is that educators and students are more likely to experience a blurring of the boundaries that historically separated home and school contexts. The consequence of this blurring is that educators and students have access to information about each other that would normally remain out of reach.

Prior research on blurring boundaries has documented the spillover of negative emotions and attitudes from work to home. But not all individuals experience negative consequences from blurring boundaries.

To manage boundaries between home and work, consider:

- Set expectations. Reflect on the ways in which home and work lives blur, and the expectations for each.
- Define boundaries for each context. Consider naming these boundaries and which ones are more permeable than others.
- Determine the structures needed to uphold these boundaries. For example, are strict no interruptions rules needed during certain times?

#### RESOURCES

To learn more about how to establish and set strong boundaries, please visit:

- <https://www.weareeducators.com/educators-creating-boundaries/>
- <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1747938X21000348>
- <https://blog.planbook.com/digital-boundaries/>

#### Lesson Learned 5:

#### **Technology Can Be Used to Provide Students with Access to More Advanced Curriculum and Coursework Beyond Physical Boundaries**

Technology-based distance learning programs have expanded significantly in response to the demand for remote learning pedagogies for teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. A benefit of increased distance learning programs is that they can provide students with access to academic content and coursework that might not otherwise be accessible through their schools. Students in geographically isolated contexts, underserved or underdeveloped areas, or gifted or disabled populations do not need to rely on specially equipped classrooms to access specialized coursework. Simply having a device that has internet connection and multimedia capabilities is sufficient.

Consider:

- Not bound by physical boundaries means students can take more challenging or interesting courses. Examples may include virtual field trips, access to videos or podcasts, or enrolling in Advanced Placement, foreign language, or vocational electives. Such activities promote engagement and foster a sense of autonomy.
- Educators play an important role in identifying the appropriate distance learning programs and facilitating their use. Doing this alone can feel a bit overwhelming. Instead take advantage of resources that are already available and have been vetted such as a state's Department of Education's repositories.
- Form professional learning communities with others to distribute the workload and share resources.

#### RESOURCES

To learn more about how technology can be used to provide students with access to more advanced curriculum, please visit:

- <https://www.amnh.org/learn-teach/resources-for-learning>
- <https://www.hvcc.edu/programs/community-education/schedules/kids-on-campus-virtual.html>
- <https://www.dreamyard.com/international-poetry-exchange>

#### Lesson Learned 6:

#### **Create Opportunities for Educators, Students, Parents, Psychologists to Hone/Solidify the Technological Skills That Are a Lifelong Core Competency**

The abrupt and extended move to remote learning necessitated leveraging technological tools to conduct required educational activities including classroom instruction, student skill assessment, disability evaluations, parent-teacher conferences, conjoint consultation, and academic and mental health intervention delivery. For example, pre-pandemic development and implementation of tele-consultation by school psychologists was significantly accelerated. In order to continue the expansion of technology tools to enhance educational activities:

- Educators, administrators, and related services personnel (e.g., school counselors, school psychologists) need pre-service and in-service training and support in technology use and implementation. These technology skills will comprise an important career competency that must be fostered by regular and ongoing skill development and support.
- Parents and caregivers need access to and support in the use of technology resources to monitor student educational activity and progress and to communicate efficiently and consistently with educators and other school personnel.

#### RESOURCES

To learn more about how to create opportunities for educators, students, parents, psychologists to hone/solidify the technological skills that are a lifelong core competency, please visit:

- <https://www.pattan.net/Assistive-Technology/COVID-19/Supports-for-Educators-1>
- <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/10474412.2016.1235978>