

**Return to School, Return to Normal:  
Evaluating and Countering the Effects of COVID-19**

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Sumter County Schools

# Distance Learning Begins

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- Perceived sense of calm
- Fewer Baker Acts reported
- School personnel focused on establishing communication with students and families

# Distance Mental Health Supports

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- Face to face therapy was not an option so how could we provide services in ways that were practical, allowable, and effective
- We reviewed plans and processes with our community and contract mental health care providers, reviewed guidance from DOE and state school counseling associations
- In response, therapy was provided by school counselors, community and contract providers via video conferencing. Some providers continued to have in-office therapy
- Parents sometimes did not want adults – school or contract therapists- talking with their child. After multiple attempts, students were allowed to talk.
- Some parents took advantage of a call or video chat with a professional trained in mental health to talk, vent, even cry when they were called by school counselors and therapists

# Monitoring Student Health

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- Baker Act numbers began to rise as school was out longer
- School check ins with students and their families occurred through phone calls, email, and video conferencing
- Teachers became first line of defense for students who were not on the mental wellness “radar” but showed signs of stress or had reduced or no communication
- Contract and community therapists shared valuable information with schools regarding concerns for their therapy students

# Documentation of Communication

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- Weekly communications logs were kept for all students who received services or who posed a mental health or home stability concern.
- Logs were submitted weekly to the student services office by all school counselors, community and contract therapists, psychologists, and social workers.
- Follow ups was sometimes needed. MRT, SROs, contracted counseling and administration were all called upon, as appropriate.
- School Counselors became the “go to” when all other attempts to make contact with a family or student were exhausted

# Professional Connections

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- We had something we rarely have enough of: Time!
- School Counselors from all levels joined the FSCA weekly informational zoom meetings. Valuable resources and ideas were shared
- Student Services Coordinator held weekly Team meetings with school counselor groups: elementary and MS/HS
- Conversations were mostly problem solving and sharing of best practices, discussing new ideas

# Long Term Effects of COVID Pandemic

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- Despite all efforts, some students became more “absent” as time out of school increased
- Economic concerns, missing friends, fear of the unknown, lack of routine, fear of the virus itself – all results of the pandemic
- The school counselors were asked: based on what you know about the current societal conditions and what you are hearing from your students and families, do the effects of COVID qualify as trauma?
- A resounding Yes! From there came the idea of developing teacher training for trauma sensitive classrooms to be in place for reopening of schools

# A Trauma Sensitive Approach to School Return

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# Teacher Training Program

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- All teachers will receive training through a live webinar during preplanning
- Training will include overview of crises, typical responses, signs of distress, school wide and classroom strategies, MTSS support services, trauma-sensitive classroom activities, and self-care
- Opportunity to ask questions will be provided at the conclusion of the training
- Classroom activities will be implemented daily during the first week of students' return to campus
- Trauma-sensitive strategies will be implemented throughout the school year and beyond

# Characteristics of a Crisis Event

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- Often occurs unexpectedly and suddenly
- May be perceived as extremely negative
- Can lead to feelings of helplessness, powerlessness, and hopelessness
- Crisis event variables – predictability, duration, intensity, consequences
- Risk factors – exposure, threat perceptions, vulnerability

# General Issues Related to COVID-19

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Be aware that students may have experienced or are continuing to experience one or more of the following...

- Illness of self or family
- Death of a loved one
- Abuse/Neglect
- Economic hardship
- Isolation
- Stigma or racism

# Academic Concerns Related to COVID-19

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- Academic regression (more than typical summer loss)
- Reduced coverage of end of the year material
- Children who were not able to or unwilling to participate in distance learning
- Lack of end of the year data to make informed instructional decisions

# Mental Health Responses Related to COVID-19

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- Anxiety related to fear of catching the virus upon return
- Regression of emotional/behavioral skills
- Worry or fear related to changes in the school environment
- Disappointment regarding missed end of the year activities and milestone celebrations
- Worry about the future
- Increased need for adult attention

# Signs of Distress

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- Increased irritability or anger
- Feeling on the “edge”
- Concentration difficulties
- Changes in appetite, energy, and activity levels
- Increase use of drugs or alcohol
- Excessive anxiety, worry, and/or fear
- Nightmares/sleeping problems

# Signs of Distress Continued

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- Somatic complaints
- Grief related to loss of loved one
- Depressed mood and/or mood swings
- Withdrawal
- Feelings of helplessness and/or hopelessness
- Suicidal ideation
- Development of a new mental health illness or intensification of previously identified illness

# Suicide Warning Signs

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Suicide rates tend to increase during times of crisis. Most individuals who die by suicide will exhibit one or more of the following warning signs:

- Statements about death, dying, and suicide either verbal or written
- Statements about hopelessness, despair, or feeling trapped
- Giving away prized possessions
- Drastic change in behavior or mood
- Seeking access to pills, weapons, or other means
- Acting recklessly or engaging in risky activities
- Increased alcohol or drug use
- Sleeping excessively or being unable to sleep
- Withdrawing from family, friends, and/or activities



# MTSS Supports

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- Sumter County Schools utilizes a multi-tiered system of supports framework
- At-risk students will be identified through universal screening, teacher/staff referrals, parent referrals, and student referrals
- Students who may be at-risk for mental health concerns will be referred to the Mental Health-Problem Solving Team to screen, assess, develop interventions, and monitor progress
- School counselors will be readily available for students who display a need for immediate support. Based on the assessment of the student, the school counselor will determine if additional immediate support is warranted.

# MTSS Supports: Tier 1

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- PBIS
- SEL programs
- First week of school daily activities
- Trauma-sensitive school wide and classroom strategies
- Universal screening and progress monitoring

# MTSS Supports: Tier 2

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- Group counseling
- Psychoeducation
- Check in/Check out
- Peer support strategies

# MTSS Supports: Tier 3

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- Psychotherapy provided by school psychologists and contracted agencies
- Wrap around services and crisis planning
- Positive behavior support plans
- Mental health assessment
- Safety contracts

# Stay C.A.L.M!

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- **C** is for **calmness** and to **control** what you can
- **A** is for being **available**
- **L** is for **listening**
- **M** is for all staff **modeling** coping with anxiety and fear related to reentry

# Trauma-Sensitive Strategies

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School wide and classroom strategies will be focused on:

- Creating a safe and supportive school environment
- Managing anxiety and stress
- Promoting resiliency
- Reaffirming emotional and physical health and safety
- Reestablishing connection and belonging
- Self-regulation
- Cultural responsive practices
- Creating supports for classroom teachers

# Examples of Trauma-Sensitive Strategies

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- Create safety by providing a quiet corner or safe place to allow the child to decompress
- Deep breathing techniques
- Build a connected and genuine relationship with the student
- Greet students by name as they enter the school and classroom
- Establish predictable routines through the use of picture or written schedules
- Use positive language
- Build in brain breaks
- Connect children to what they love
- Active listening
- Mental health check ins

# Trauma-Sensitive Activities

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- Teachers will be required to do one activity per day during the first week of school
- Training will be provided on the specific activities
- Activity length will range from 15-30 minutes
- Activities will be developmentally appropriate
- Examples of activities will include: share-out session, picture or letter to helper, breathing and relaxation exercises, identifying support systems, self-regulation activities



# Self-Care

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- Get adequate sleep
- Ensure proper nutrition
- Exercise regularly
- Regular use of stress management techniques
- Limit news exposure
- Identify support system and a trusted person to debrief with
- Seek professional help if necessary

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QUESTIONS???