



## Supporting a Mentally Healthy Return to School

There are many uncertainties when it comes to the return to school during the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, our collective approach to supporting student mental health during this time of transition must be both flexible and responsive. This Early Reflection Tool is designed to help mental health leadership teams as they begin to develop and implement a plan for a mentally healthy return to school for their district. More specific tools and templates will be provided as details about the return to school framework are announced.

Even without specific details at this time, it is clear that school will not look as it did prior to the period of remote learning. There will be a need for physical distancing, reduced numbers in classrooms, changes to recess/lunch routines etc. And it is possible that there may be a need for future transitions through learning-at-home as the pandemic evolves. All of this is likely to be unsettling for students, parents/families, and staff alike. And, depending on one's experiences during the pandemic, this transition may be either more or less impactful on mental health.

In planning for a mentally healthy return to school, we need to consider that circumstances have varied for students during the period of remote learning. For some, this time may have been marked by the loss of a loved one, family job changes or income reduction, family conflict or violence, existing or emerging mental health problems, and/or a range of additional stressors. Also, for any number of reasons, some students and families were not able to take advantage of remote learning and will need to re-engage with school after a long period away from learning. In contrast, there will also be students who benefited from time at home, and will arrive at school feeling well and eager to be back at school with friends and teachers. And, we must remember that some students will be unable to return to school with their classmates because they or a member of their family has a compromised immune system and cannot risk attending school before a vaccine is found. So, students will be approaching the transition time from a range of vantage points and experiences (and so will staff).

**System and school leaders, educators, support staff, school mental health professionals and parents/families** all have a key role in preparing and supporting students in their return to school. This resource provides guiding principles, questions for consideration, and an early planning template to help identify actions each might take to contribute to a mentally healthy return to school. The template aims to help you articulate:

- ✓ two or three key goals,
- ✓ your suggested actions for those goals across the tiers, and
- ✓ actions that system and school leaders, educators, support staff, school mental health professionals and parents/families might engage in, to provide for a mentally healthy return to school.

## Guiding Principles

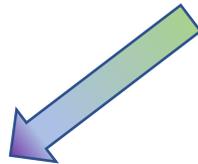
Though it can be challenging to prepare for the complexities involved in the return to school, it is important to remember that we have strong foundations to lean on in the area of school mental health.

### 1. Focus on Foundations

The key pillars for school mental health have served us well over the years. Take time to reflect:

Organizational Conditions	Learning and Training	Mental Health Programming	Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility	System Collaboration	Student Engagement	Parent / Family Engagement
Do we have the structures, roles, processes, and alignment needed for a mentally healthy return to school?	What training and support is needed to ensure that all staff are equipped to support student mental health, in keeping with their role?	What do we have in place to help students to feel welcome, safe, and included, and to address mental health needs as they arise?	How can we ensure that our MH programming reduces inequities and meets the needs of students with more or unique needs?	What systems and pathways do we need to effectively and efficiently triage and support students if there is a surge in mental health needs?	What needs have students flagged, and how can we uplift their voices and facilitate their leadership during the return to school?	How can we provide needed information to assist parents so they can prepare and support their child's mental health?

### 2. Think in Tiers

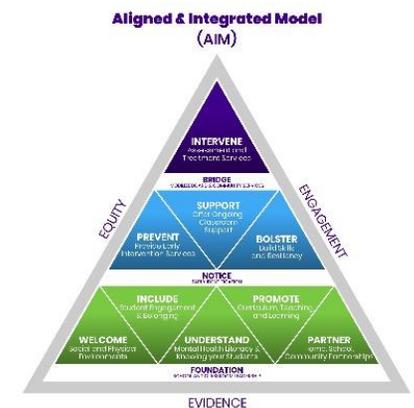


Use a tiered approach to achieve a mentally healthy return to school:

**For ALL - Offer universal supports (Tier 1)** - all students will need a chance to debrief, build relationships, feel a sense of belonging, calm anxiety, re-engage with learning, and honour missed rituals/milestones when they return to school

**For SOME - Provide additional support for those more impacted by COVID-19 (Tier 2)**- some students will need an extra chance to “catch up” in their learning, to gradually return to school, to access dedicated mental health support

**For FEW - Anticipate significant needs for those most vulnerable / affected by the COVID-19 crisis (Tier 3)** – have services and clear pathways available for those requiring more intensive learning or mental health support during the transition back to school



### 3. Leverage Pandemic Learning

What did we learn during the pandemic? What were the silver linings? What can we raise up as we move through this next phase?

### 4. Support a System Approach



Schools are an important part of the system wrapping around a child or youth, but they are not the only caring support available to enhance mental health during the return to school. Consider how your board can form or enhance relationships with community partners to advance seamless triage and care. Think about how home-school relationships and communication can be strengthened to advance student well-being. Optimize the use of internal resources, like school mental health professionals, and consider how non-regulated staff can help in supporting students.

### 5. Practice and Promote Self-Care

It has been a challenging school year. Start to finish. While it is important to do some planning for the return to school before this year draws to a close, it is equally important to plan for a time of rest! Coming back to the new school year refreshed will help you to tackle whatever is to come next with the enthusiasm and positive spirit that your colleagues, staff, and students most need. When you engage in self-care, you are modeling that for others.

### Additional Broad Questions for Consideration

These questions are provided as additional prompts for thinking through what students may require, and what practices, resources and supports are readily available and/or could be developed. By considering these aspects ahead of time, leadership teams may be in a stronger position to draw on strengths and address needs when details of the broader return to school plan are announced.

***What are the identified/anticipated student mental health needs?*** Think about the needs of students in your district broadly (e.g., Do you think most will be anxious? Excited? Overwhelmed? In crisis? Will they struggle with the new requirements for physical distancing? Will they be ready to learn?)

***What are the available resources (human and material)?*** Explore what resources are currently available that will be of support. The school system is rich with expertise and there are many excellent resources at your disposal.

***What are any additional/required resources?*** There may be gaps in expertise and resources, or there may need to be changes in how support and expertise is offered or adaptations to resources. Identify these to prepare needed professional learning or resources.

***What are the various staff roles in supporting the goals?*** Identify who in the system might contribute to ensuring a mentally healthy return to school. System and school leaders, educators, support staff and parents have a primary role. However, there are others who may also be considered.

***What would be the indicators of success/need for re-evaluation?*** It is important to evaluate whether the actions taken have been successfully completed. By identifying indicators of success, the system will acquire important information about what contributed to an effective return to school.

## Planning Template A – Before Students Return to School

This planning template is designed to help you to anticipate some of the mental health needs students may experience as the return to school approaches, and to begin to consider resources and supports that could ease the transition. Some cells in the template may be blank or incomplete – that is okay!

Goals for the Preparation Period Before Students Return to School - What is to be achieved?						
Tier 1 - all	1) 2) 3)					
Tier 2 - some	1) 2) 3)					
Tier 3 - few	1) 2) 3)					
	Needs/areas to address	What can System and School Leaders do? How do we support?	What can educators do and support staff do? How do we support?	What can SMH professionals do? How do we support?	What can parents do? How do we support?	What resources could be helpful?
Tier 1 - all						
Tier 2 - some						
Tier 3 - few						
<p><b>Resources – Expertise and materials</b> (Consider SMHO Resources – Leadership Portal)  <a href="https://smhosmso.sharepoint.com/sites/BoardMHLeadership/SitePages/Home.aspx">https://smhosmso.sharepoint.com/sites/BoardMHLeadership/SitePages/Home.aspx</a></p>						

## Planning Template B – After Students Return to School

This planning template is designed to help you to anticipate some of the mental health needs students may experience once they return to school, and to begin to consider resources and supports that could enhance their well-being. Some cells in the template may be blank or incomplete – that is okay!

Goals for the Period After Students Return to School - What is to be achieved?						
Tier 1 - all	1) 2) 3)					
Tier 2 - some	1) 2) 3)					
Tier 3 - few	1) 2) 3)					
	Needs/areas to address	What can System and School Leaders do? How do we support?	What can educators do and support staff do? How do we support?	What can SMH professionals do? How do we support?	What can parents do? How do we support?	What resources could be helpful?
Tier 1 - all						
Tier 2 - some						
Tier 3 - few						
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