## Promising Practices In Education

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused major disruption to all levels of education that could impact student outcomes for months and possibly years ahead. The SCORE series of COVID-19 Impact Memos analyzes challenges, examines emerging innovations and research-supported practices, and highlights student-centered approaches for educators to consider.

# COVID-19 Impact Memo 8: Nonacademic Supports

## Summer 2020

### Introduction

The extended spring school closures due to COVID-19 have important equity implications related to learning loss, technology access, school funding, and many other components of a student's education. As the COVID-19 crisis continues into the upcoming academic year, the opportunity gaps faced by historically underserved student groups — low-income students, students of color, English learners, students with disabilities, students experiencing homelessness, and those facing adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) — are magnified. In addition to academic enrichment, school also provides students a place to build social-emotional competency and positive relationships with peers and teachers, which are foundational for healthy development and academic success.[1]

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**Tennessee Student Well-Being**

Prioritizing the nonacademic needs of students is critically important given the following data:

- Tennessee ranks 36th in the nation for overall child well-being.
- Tennessee ranks 45th in the nation for overall youth mental health.
- One in five Tennessee students has a diagnosable mental health disorder.
- One in five Tennesseans lives in a food desert.
- One in five Tennessee children live in poverty with higher rates for Black and Hispanic students.
- More than 13,000 Tennessee students do not have stable housing.

Source: Kids Count (2019); Mental Health America (2019); "Facts About Children's Mental Health." *Tennessee AWARE Initiative*. Tennessee Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations (2019); Tennessee Department of Education State Report Card (2019).

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### COVID-19 Pandemic Impact On Emotional Well-Being

COVID-19 has disrupted life for Tennessee's students and families, with the pandemic's effects spanning academic student learning and emotional well-being. The social distancing required in response to COVID-19 presents students with many traumatic experiences that impact their academic motivation and engagement:

- Feelings of isolation and anxiety

- ◆ Financial stress resulting from parent job loss due to COVID-19
- ◆ Limited access to nutritional meals
- ◆ Limited access to medical and health services, including access to COVID-19 testing
- ◆ Unsafe or abusive home environments

Research shows that students of color, low-income students, English learners, and students with disabilities are more likely to experience chronic toxic stress or trauma compared to their peers.[2] The experience of trauma at a young age places students at higher risk for being retained at grade-level, dropping out, and not pursuing postsecondary education. This severe impact on student achievement highlights the need for responsive nonacademic supports in the days and months ahead when students return to school.

## Nonacademic Supports At A Distance

Moving into the next school year, district and school leaders should ensure nonacademic supports are a key priority following the Tennessee Department of Education research-based model, Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child. This framework **aims to ensure that every student in Tennessee is healthy, safe, engaged, supported, and challenged**. District and school leaders should prioritize two key components:

- ◆ **Trauma-Informed Pedagogy**: To improve academic motivation and engagement, implement instructional practices that actively acknowledge and respond to chronic trauma as well as the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on students' emotional well-being.
- ◆ **Professional Development**: To improve student outcomes such as attendance and academic achievement, ensure teachers are prepared to provide nonacademic supports to students in a distance or blended learning environment.

## Best Practices

While nonacademic supports may look different depending on each school's context, several existing school models continue to focus on student well-being and follow best practices during distance learning.

**Valor Collegiate Academies** is a charter management organization in Tennessee that has been praised as a national leader in providing high-quality nonacademic supports as core to their education model.[3] The organization centers the student development core on a five-point model known as Compass. This pedagogical framework guides curriculum and incentivizes the intentional teaching of nonacademic skills, with two key components.

- • **Badge Program:** Students move through Compass with badge work (similar to a youth scouting program) to master different strategies in areas such as leadership and service.
- • **Circle Cohort**: Compass follows an advisory cohort model, called Circle, that allows students and faculty to deeply engage in individual and community relationship work.
  - o Circle is still being conducted weekly in Valor's distance learning model, in addition to students having weekly individual check-ins with their mentors.

**El Paso Independent School District (EPISD)** in Texas serves a student population in which a majority are students of color and low-income students. The district has incorporated nonacademic supports into its instruction model over the last five years.[4] When schools closed due to COVID-19, EPISD prioritized engaging with every family in the district and offered support through:

- • **Capacity Building:** Restructured staff to create a dedicated taskforce to make contact with students and complete a family needs assessment.

- **Strategic Partnerships:** Partnered with United Way and local mental health organizations to offer support and social services to families as needed.
- **Consistency:** Continued to offer daily advisory periods and extracurricular activities to ensure that students still have access to community- and relationship-building opportunities.

## Looking Forward: Opportunities For Consideration

As leaders continue to navigate the nonacademic needs of their students and school communities amid the COVID-19 crisis, several approaches can be helpful.

1. **Prioritize consistent communication** with students and families to check on well-being, assess individual nonacademic needs, and share necessary resources and information.
   - Many school systems have arranged these communications at a distance through daily check-in calls with students and weekly virtual office hours with parents and families.[5]
2. **Utilize cohort models for connection** between students and teachers to allow for community- and relationship-building and give time for personalized support.
   - Build in time for students to safely share about their current needs in a small, trusted environment to combat feelings of isolation and withdrawal and build lasting structures of support — whether in-person or at a distance.
3. **Partner with community organizations** to create social support systems that are embedded into the local community and potentially supplement services to cover families' essential needs.
   - Education research after Hurricane Katrina found that students who had support and resources from their local community organizations — such as food banks, churches, and youth centers — experienced less social-emotional fallout and had higher ratings of academic recovery and persistence.[6]
4. **Deliver a comprehensive needs assessment** by surveying students, families, and teachers on the supports they need most urgently going into the 2020-21 academic year.
   - Focus on maximizing capacity of social support staff, such as school counselors, to be responsive to survey results and regularly engage with students to address their needs.

## Conclusion

Due to school closures, Tennessee students missed most of the spring 2020 term. In addition to being a time for continuing academic learning, the end of the school year often brings field days, yearbook signings, and promotion ceremonies. Without these touchstone moments for enrichment and relationship building, students may feel socially isolated and anxious when they come back to school in the fall.

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues, schools and districts have the opportunity to engage with their communities to assess students' nonacademic needs. Prioritizing student-centered responsive practices going into the upcoming school year can combat the extensive stress and trauma that students experience amid these unprecedented times. Regardless of what school looks like in the fall of 2020, school leaders must have a plan to incorporate nonacademic supports in a meaningful way.

## Endnotes

[1] K-12 Social and Personal Competencies Resource Guide. Tennessee Department of Education (November 2017).

[2] Bellis, Mark A., et al. "Adverse childhood experiences and sources of childhood resilience: A retrospective study of their combined relationships with child health and educational attendance." BMC Public Health (2018).

[3] Dickson, Todd. Compass Overview: Valor's Social Emotional Approach. Valor Collegiate Academies (2020).

[4] Cabrera, Juan. Distance Learning Across the Education Sector: Social & Emotional Supports from Private, Charter, & Public Schools. CASEL (May 2020).

[5] Wilson, Steve. "Brave New World at Success Academy." Center for Reinventing Public Education (March 2020).

[6] Greenberg, Miriam. "Coping After Disaster." Harvard Graduate School of Education (August 2017).