

Providing School-Based Behavioral and Mental Health Supports and Services during COVID-19 School Closures: *Guidance for School Counselors and Psychologists, and other Specialized Instructional Support Personnel (SISP)*

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Introduction

The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (Department) developed this document to guide and support the planning and delivery of school-based behavioral and mental health supports and services during this period of time when schools must be closed to prevent the spread of COVID-19. This guidance is primarily intended for Specialized Instructional Support Personnel (SISPs) who provide direct behavioral and mental health supports and services in schools, and for those charged with developing related systems and policies (e.g., central district administrators and special education directors). The [Specialized Instructional Support Personnel \(SISP\)](#) license fields include school counselor, school psychologist, school social worker/school adjustment counselor, and school nurse. Please note that the guidance provided below represents a set of *recommendations and resources*; it does not constitute a requirement for any district or school. Though this document is geared towards SISPs, it is important to acknowledge the role that every member of a school system has in ensuring the safety and wellbeing of students—particularly at this time of crisis. In fact, through this document we emphasize the importance of SISPs working collaboratively with their colleagues in other roles to create systems of support for students.

While the focus of this document is on the wellbeing of students, it is important to recognize the importance of adult wellbeing too. The current crisis is adding a significant layer of stress for families and educators alike. It is important for any district's plan for supporting students' behavioral and mental health to also consider strategies for supporting adults' behavioral and mental health as well. SISPs can play a role in planning and implementing such strategies, including providing professional development to colleagues on mindfulness meditation. Notwithstanding the support SISPs can provide their colleagues, it is important that districts provide other channels for educators to seek direct behavioral and mental health support if needed, such as through Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs).

The guidance provided in this document is organized according to two key roles SISPs can play during school closures, corresponding to a multi-tiered system of support ([MTSS](#)) approach. One key role is to support the integration of universal behavioral and mental health supports into general education remote learning offerings (tier 1). Another essential role is to help identify and address needs for students who additionally require moderate- or high-intensity behavioral and mental health supports (tiers 2 and 3). This multi-tiered approach can help further efforts to create trauma-sensitive, culturally

responsive, [safe and supportive learning environments](#) that help all students to feel connected, cared about, engaged in learning, and productively challenged to grow in developmentally appropriate ways.

Please note that there are many important aspects of supporting students' social emotional, behavioral, and mental health that are beyond the scope of this guidance document. The Department will continue to work with educators and community partners to provide guidance and supports in these other areas in different ways, over time.

We are grateful to all the SISPs, educators, and community partners for all you have done and are continuing to do to support the holistic needs of students, staff, and families across the Commonwealth. This document was developed in collaboration with Walker, Inc. the Education Development Center, and Transforming Education. Special thanks as well to the many district, school, and state stakeholders who helped inform this guidance, in numerous ways. Please reach out to the Department's Office of Student and Family Support via achievement@doe.mass.edu with any questions or feedback about this guidance. For broader COVID-19-related information, please continue to visit the Department's [main COVID-19](#) resource page. Additional behavioral and mental health related guidance can also be found on the [MA Tools for Schools COVID-19 Resources](#) page. See the bottom section of this document for more details on this site, along with other sources of information.

Guidance for Establishing and/or Adapting a Collaborative, Multi-Tiered Approach

The COVID-19 pandemic and its related consequences—in particular, the closing of brick and mortar schools and moving education to a remote context—is having a detrimental effect on the social and emotional wellbeing of many of our students. A substantial number of students are impacted by health concerns (e.g., family members who are COVID-19 positive; fears related to the virus); economic concerns (e.g., family members losing and/or having a hard time finding jobs, food insecurity); separation from supportive adults in their lives due to physical distancing (e.g., teachers, family members); and change or lack of routine, which can affect sleep, concentration, and emotional wellbeing. Given the long-term nature of this crisis, it may lead to a large number of students experiencing a state of hypervigilance over a prolonged period of time. In addition, students are at heightened risk for exposure to traumatic experiences, including abuse, neglect, and violence while adhering to stay-at-home advisories and other actions taken to contain the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, many students have previously experienced trauma and/or social inequities such as poverty and housing instability, environmental factors such as proximity to pollution, and disparate access to health care. These experiences can make the impact of the pandemic even more intense. Added to these challenges are the limitations that schools and other partner entities have with identifying and supporting students who are struggling.

Though school closures related to the pandemic have resulted in many detrimental impacts on students, families, and educators, it is also important to recognize areas of strength that have further developed through the current situation, including improved communication and collaboration with caregivers, improved use of technology tools, and improved practices to tailor education to the environment where students are living.

To help address the challenges and further develop the strengths, SISPs can play an important role in adapting and/or helping to establish integrated systems for providing multi-tiered supports. Multi-tiered approaches help to ensure that the social and emotional needs of all students are supported through general education offerings, while at the same time provide a context for identifying and providing additional supports to those who are experiencing significant levels of behavioral and mental health challenges. These approaches can also help mitigate the long-term impacts of trauma. SISPs can work collaboratively with their colleagues to form teams dedicated to coordinating behavioral and mental health supports to address a range of needs. Teams may include school- and community-based providers, administrators, teachers, and families.

Guidance for Providing Universal Behavioral and Mental Health Supports (Tier 1)

During these uncertain times, all students can benefit from efforts to strengthen their social and emotional wellbeing. The responsibility of providing tier 1 supports for students is shared by all educators; and SISPs can help to provide these supports in numerous ways, including the following examples.

- **Facilitate Connectedness and Positive Relationships.** The term “social isolation” has been pervasive in the mainstream media since the early days of this crisis. The World Health Organization and [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#) have underscored the need for people to maintain a safe, *physical* distance from one another, while at the same time staying *socially* connected in order to better manage stress and cope. School personnel can play a pivotal role in helping students, families, and colleagues find and maintain healthy connections during this time. These connections can help to reduce feelings of anxiety, loneliness, and isolation; support healthy coping; protect against behavioral and mental health issues; and help buffer against the long-term impact of traumatic experiences associated with the COVID crisis.

Schools are encouraged to routinely implement strategies that intentionally foster connections between students and their peers, their families, and staff, paying particular attention to students who might be more isolated. Educators and SISPs can connect with students and families through virtual means approved by the district, such as Google Classroom or other platforms, as well as through more traditional forms of communication such as phone, text, email, sending letters, and also where appropriate and with required physical distancing, dropping off educational materials, etc. To help ensure that all students are able to connect with trusted adults from the school community, schools can use connectedness surveys or other strategies such as [relationship mapping tools](#).

It is also important to keep in mind ways to be flexible and responsive to student and family needs, and to offer students and families and colleagues choices regarding the best ways to be in communication. Moreover, establishing regular communication between SISPs and other educators and administrators to share effective strategies, challenges, and individual concerns, contributes to a system that can help support both the effectiveness and wellbeing of all school staff.

- **Establishing and Maintaining Routine and Consistency.** To the degree possible, building or continuing predictable and consistent routines in communication (e.g., the same way of

communicating at the same time each day or week, routine ways to start and end classes or check-ins) can help facilitate a sense of connection and reassurance, especially during unpredictable times. As with all aspects of education, it is important to consider how practices and policies can make school both more accessible and more difficult for students, including those who have experienced and who are experiencing significant trauma. Furthermore, SISPs can coach students and families on how to maintain routines and consistency, including engaging in school-offered services and supports, as well as exercise and leisure activities.

- **Build Students' Social and Emotional Competencies.** Now more than ever, students can benefit from support for using and strengthening coping skills, such as emotion regulation and information- and help-seeking, to navigate the multiple stressors inherent in living through a pandemic. SISPs can offer teachers ideas and supports for incorporating lessons on and/or opportunities to reinforce social and emotional competencies and other skills across content areas. As defined by the [Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning](#) (CASEL), social emotional competency areas include *self-awareness and self-management, social awareness and relationship skills, and responsible decision making.*

During this time, it can be helpful to focus on lessons that are simple and easy to apply during an everyday context, such as on a Zoom call or with family members during “work” times, and to reinforce current social and emotional competencies in addition to teaching new skills. SISPs can work with teachers to use their classes’ remote learning spaces as opportunities to conduct brief wellness check-ins, following up with students individually if needed. Plans can be created for when and how SISPs are available to support other educators as they work to best engage with students and families.

Among other available resources, the Massachusetts School Counselors Association (MASCA) is posting [Weekly Lesson Plans](#) relevant to the current crisis to support all students during this time. In addition, for schools looking for additional SEL programming as part of broader planning efforts, SISPs and teachers can work together with others to consider options through SEL program guides such as those offered by [CASEL](#) and the [Wallace Foundation](#), and some of these programs are now offering free [remote learning materials](#).

- **Focus on Equity and Inclusion.** In the current virtual learning environment, it is especially critical for districts to design, build on, and/or implement systems, policies, and practices that promote equity and inclusion in order to ensure that students can fully engage in virtual learning and behavioral and mental health supports and services. Given that SISPs have codes of ethics that include a commitment to social justice, SISPs are well-positioned to review and advocate for practices that exemplify equity and inclusion.

As noted in a recent article, “[Creating Equitable School Climates](#)”, published by the [National Association of State Boards of Education](#), there are a number of ways that schools can demonstrate a focus on equity and inclusion, including striving to provide the following: effectively supported and high expectations for all related to teaching, learning, and achievement; emotionally and physically safe and healthy learning environments for all; caring, courageous, and self-reflective relationships

among and between peers and adults; and multiple, culturally responsive pathways to participation that meaningfully enhance academic, social, emotional, civic, and moral development. SISPs may be key contributors to creating equitable school climates by serving as members of a team that assesses and addresses the extent to which schools meet the aforementioned goals.

As a part of this work, SISPs may be able to help select and participate in the completion of equity and inclusion assessments that can help generate a shared understanding of how well schools are meeting their equity and inclusion goals. It is essential that this process include attention to racial equity and more. For example, SISPs may recommend that schools more intentionally and explicitly address a number of efforts to maintain equity and inclusion in virtual learning environments, such as those outlined by the [Division of Diversity and Innovation](#) at San Diego University. These can include strategies for identifying and responding to racial, ethnic, and other microaggressions in classroom discussions and discussion boards; the integration of culturally-relevant materials; navigating the variation in students' capacity to manage remote learning based on setting, culture, housing stability, English learner status, and more; and an awareness and understanding of how COVID-19 is differently impacting communities across the state, such as the disproportionate rates of illness, hospitalization, and death by race and ethnicity described in reports from the [Centers for Disease Control \(CDC\)](#) and the [APM Research Lab](#).

- **Facilitate Trauma-Sensitive School Culture.** The school community and families can work together to address the extensive impact that trauma can have on learning, behavior at school, and relationships. Trauma can be brought about or exacerbated by many experiences, including disconnection from school, relationships and separation, food insecurity, grief over lost relatives or friends, exposure to violence, and more. SISPs can help students stay on track for learning and growth by playing a central role in helping all educators understand deeply the impact that trauma can have on learning and the very important role educators can play in buffering the impacts. SISPs can help support educators to proactively use strategies that help create safe and supportive learning environments, and to respond effectively when students have difficulty focusing on learning, behaving, and relating to adults and peers during remote learning as well as when schools operate in person. Further information and guidance on trauma-sensitive school-wide and remote learning practices can be found on the [Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative \(TLPI\)](#) and [National Center on Safe and Supportive Learning Environments](#) websites.
- **Engage Caregivers.** In the current situation, caregivers' roles in supporting their children's learning and wellbeing have become more critical than ever before. SISPs should consider how to best engage caregivers in their efforts to support students' behavioral and mental health. Examples of ways to engage caregivers include providing tips and resources for caregivers on supporting students' social and emotional needs via districts' communication channels, scheduling calls directly with parents, and offering other opportunities to coach parents on strategies to support students' wellbeing.
- **Identify Students in Need.** SISPs can also support classroom teachers in identifying students who may need additional behavioral and mental health supports and services—both students who have been previously identified as struggling with behavioral and mental health as well as new referrals.

Specifically, SISPs can help teachers become aware of the signs of anxiety, depression, substance misuse, suicide risk, homicide risk, abuse, neglect, and violence in the home. It is important to have a plan and be prepared to respond to these where there are concerns. In most cases, districts have an existing crisis plan that should be followed. (For resources and guidance on conducting virtual threat assessments see [National Association of School Psychologists COVID-19 resource page.](#))

Behaviors that may warrant additional attention might include students who appear to lack focus, may appear disruptive, or who are consistently disengaged in remote learning activities, as these behaviors may be indicators of emotional distress. In addition, any changes in a student's behavior may potentially be a warning sign. Pay particular attention to students who may be acting most differently from they were in school, or whose behavior changes substantially over time, as any significant changes in behavior may be the sign of some sort of distress. Information about concerns may also be communicated with teachers or SISPs directly from students, or from students' classmates or families. These students might benefit from a check-in call from a SISP. Also, when SISPs join a classroom teacher during an online "class" as another set of eyes and ears, and informally connect with a student or students on their caseload, they can follow-up with the teacher and student as appropriate, to help with further efforts to identify needs and helpful strategies, to arrange for additional supports if necessary, and to respond to any signs of crises, emergency, or safety concerns appropriately.

SISPs should also consider how universal mental health screeners can be used to identify and support students who may require behavioral and mental health services. Some mental health screeners can be used through phone conversation with students while schools are closed, and should also be considered for use when schools re-open. Some mental health screeners can be found on the School Health Assessment and Performance Evaluation System's (SHAPE) [Screening and Assessment Library](#).

Guidance for Providing Direct Behavioral and Mental Health Services to Students (Tiers 2 & 3)

Given these uncertain times with many health and economic challenges, the need for tier 2 and 3 services and supports is likely to grow. At the same time, circumstances require SISPs to also change how services and supports are provided. This includes adapting the services students received before the school closures, as well as identifying students newly in need of services. An important aspect of this work is also the importance of engaging caregivers. SISPs and caregivers can learn from each other about effective strategies; and when welcome, SISPs can coach caregivers in supporting students' behavioral and mental health needs. The greatest change at this point is the need to provide services and supports remotely. Many licensing bodies, trade associations, advocacy groups, and others have compiled best practices to help guide you through the process of doing so. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) also published "[The School Counselor and Virtual School Counseling](#)" in 2017, long before the COVID-19 pandemic, which outlines key strategies for implementing virtual counseling. Some considerations for implementing these strategies are provided below.

- **Maintain Ethics and Confidentiality.** Whether providing check-ins/informal supports or formal services, SISPs must consider how to maintain the same ethical and confidentiality standards in this new remote environment as during in-person interactions. Standards must also reflect local policies and consider any current guidance provided by the Department that is specific to the [COVID-19-related school closures](#). In delivering virtual supports and clinical services, SISPs need to consider and address the following: how to ensure service quality in a remote setting, how to ensure equitable access for all students, how to best protect privacy and maintain confidentiality, and how to ensure safety. It is essential to provide students and their caregivers with clear and updated information about the limitations and challenges of remote services and supports. When necessary, informed consent must be obtained before the provision of services. If unsure of your district's policies around remote learning, ask a supervisor.

When working with students remotely, privacy and confidentiality protections continue to apply, in line with the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act ([FERPA](#)) and the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act ([HIPAA](#)) requirements, and their updates related to service provision in the COVID-19 pandemic era. Both laws relate to privacy and consent to share information, and [differences](#) include that FERPA is a federal law that protects the privacy of student education records, and HIPAA is a national standard that protects sensitive patient health information. However, with both students and SISPs now mainly connecting from where they are living, maintaining privacy and confidentiality becomes more challenging. Computers may be in shared spaces, sessions may be more likely to be interrupted by family members or others, and distractions may be greater. When appropriate, explore with the students' caregivers ways to minimize privacy or confidentiality breaches. Strategize about times and spaces that are conducive to privacy, and about options such as wearing headphones. Also, make sure to confer with parents/guardians and students, where appropriate, about the range of possible options for support in terms of place, time, frequency, type, and more.

- **Adhere to Established Telehealth Regulations.** Not all connections with students constitute formal "telehealth." The strategies provided above for maintaining privacy and confidentiality should be applied across all remote services and supports. However, there are additional guidelines that SISPs should follow when providing telehealth services, such as those noted below.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office for Civil Rights [FAQ on telehealth and HIPAA](#) defines telehealth *"as the use of electronic information and telecommunications technologies to support and promote long-distance clinical health care, patient and professional health-related education, and public health and health administration."* The [National Center for School Mental Health's "Telehealth 101"](#) video provides clear guidance for implementing safe and secure telehealth practices, including establishing a therapeutic space, selecting a telehealth platform, tips for the therapist, tips for students and caregivers, student privacy and confidentiality, and student safety.

SISPs providing telehealth are expected to follow the policies and expectations of their school districts as well as the most recent guidance and professional standards/ethics issued by licensing

bodies, professional associations, and insurance companies. Links to relevant licensing bodies and associations are provided below.

- **Massachusetts**
 - [Massachusetts Mental Health Counselors Association](#)
 - [Massachusetts School Counselors Association](#)
- **National**
 - [American Counseling Association](#)
 - [American Psychological Association](#)
 - [American School Counselor Association](#)
 - [Board of Registration of Social Workers](#)
 - [National Association of School Psychologists](#)
 - [National Association of Social Workers](#)
- **Prepare for Challenges and Limitations.** Providing behavioral and mental health supports and services virtually can be an integral part of a student’s remote learning experience. However, this type of virtual service delivery may have many of the same challenges as other remote learning experiences, and some additional ones as well. For example, challenges may include the following:
 - Limited access to technology, including limited access to technology devices, limited knowledge of how to use technology, and/or spotty internet connections
 - Need for parents/caregivers to coordinate technology use, particularly for young children, children with disabilities, and/or multiple children
 - Reluctance of student or family to engage in virtual activities
 - Witnessing concerning student or family interactions or behaviors
 - Limited ability to respond to in-the-moment crises
 - Increased potential for privacy breaches
 - Distracting technology features (e.g., virtual backgrounds, filters)
 - Distractions in the home environment
 - Concerns about safety in the home environment
- **Prepare for Emergencies.** Follow existing plans that your school or district has in place for emergency and nonemergency situations when you are not available, and where appropriate work with your school and district to make sure procedures and plans are updated to the school closure context where they are not already.
 - For emergency situations, make sure your school or district crisis team, as well as students and families, are aware of and able to implement the crisis protocol that is currently in place.
 - Where appropriate, plan for how to assess, manage, and develop safety plans for suicide risk, homicide risk, domestic violence, neglect, and child abuse through virtual tools and telehealth. Be prepared to develop a code word or signal with students at risk for the student to communicate safety concerns. Some resources and information are available from the [Suicide Prevention Resource Center](#), the [Zero Suicide Institute](#), the [National](#)

[Association of School Psychologists](#), and the [Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children](#), as well as the cross-district [Mental Health and Well Being](#) described in the additional resources section below.

- Make sure emergency contact information is available and accessible in multiple locations, such as the following noted below.
 - School/district website, in a location that is easy to find (e.g., directly on the home page and/or via an obvious link on the home page)
 - Periodically, through the school/district email/messaging service
 - School/district social media sites
 - Outgoing/out-of-Office email message
 - Outgoing voice mail message
 - Google classroom or other online learning portals
 - Mailings to homes
 - Flyers in school meals
 - Other venues/spaces
- Districts are urged to also consult with partner agencies around their operations throughout this period. Typical places where crisis referrals would be directed may have new circumstances as well, and school teams must be aware of this as they adjust their own crisis protocol.
- The Massachusetts Department of Mental Health has compiled a list of [mental health crisis support numbers](#) to which local contacts can be added, as appropriate. Where local contacts are added, it is essential to ensure that any place (phone or text number, email, etc.) designated by the school or district to receive any emergency information is monitored on an ongoing basis.

Additional Selected Resources

Many websites provide a wealth of information on school-based behavioral and mental health supports and services during COVID-19 school closures. A few are included below, most of which are serving as clearinghouses.

Massachusetts-Based Resources

- The [MA Tools for Schools COVID-19 Resources](#) page contains links to local and national resources for implementing multi-tiered systems of supports during this time. The Department has and will continue to host webinars on this topic, and will continue to post slides and resources from those sessions to this page.
- The Massachusetts Department of Mental Health's page presents tips and resources for [Maintaining Emotional Health & Well-Being During the COVID-19 Outbreak](#), including [tips and activities for children](#) and links for [mental health crisis support](#).
- School counseling and social emotional learning leaders from a number of Massachusetts school districts collaborated to create a [Mental Health and Well Being](#) site that includes many updates,

resources, and a calendar of events to promote good mental health hygiene during school closure, eventual return, and recovery from COVID-19.

- The [Network of Care, Massachusetts](#) page contains links to information about resources across the Commonwealth for children and adults with mental health and substance use needs; and the [MA Behavioral Health Access \(MABHA\)](#) page shows Children’s Behavioral Health Initiative (CBHI) providers of Youth and Family Services, and more.
- Free copies can be ordered of [MassHealth Services for Children and Youth](#) brochures and companion guides, which provide family-friendly descriptions of behavioral-health services available to certain children and youth, aged 21 and younger, who are enrolled in MassHealth. These also include regional contact information for Mobile Crisis Intervention, In-Home Therapy and Intensive Care Coordination providers.
- The [Massachusetts School Counselors Association](#) and [Massachusetts School Psychologists Association](#) continue to provide and adapt resources and supports, including these two recent webinars that provided important guidance for adapting the provision of school mental health supports and services to this new virtual setting: [MASCA’s The Nuts and Bolts of Virtual School Counseling](#) (April 7, 2020), and [MSPA’s Going Virtual School Psychology During Remote Learning](#) (April 21, 2020).
- Northeastern Massachusetts Law Enforcement Council’s [School District COVID-19 Student or Faculty Loss Resources](#) provides resources for navigating critical incidents including on planning and addressing critical incidents remotely.

National Resources

- [School Counseling in an Online World \(ASCA\)](#)
- [Student Welfare in a Virtual World \(ASCA\)](#)
- [Virtual School Counseling Brings Unique Rewards and Challenges \(Counseling Today, ACA\)](#)
- [Navigating Uncertain Times: How Schools Can Cope with Coronavirus \(EdSurge\)](#)
- [Virtual Therapy Tips for Parents \(The OT Toolbox\)](#)
- [National Association of School Psychologists](#)

Resources for Families

- [Supporting Kids During the Coronavirus Crisis: Tips for Nurturing and Protecting Children at Home \(Child Mind Institute\)](#)
- [Parenting in a Pandemic: Tips to Keep the Calm at Home \(Healthy Children, American Academy of Pediatrics\)](#)
- [Coronavirus Tips and Resources for Parents, Children, Educators and Others \(Prevent Child Abuse America\)](#)
- [COVID-19 Resources for parents, families, and youth \(National Federation of Families for Children’s Mental Health\)](#)
- [DESE Commissioner May 8, 2020 Letter to Families - with information about remote learning and other health and wellbeing resources](#)
- [Parent/Caregiver Guide to Helping Families Cope With the Coronavirus Disease 2019 \(COVID-19\) \(The National Child Traumatic Stress Network\)](#)