

Student Health & Well-Being During and After COVID-19

How can school leaders be aware of all the key areas of student health and well-being and put in place policies and tools to support students during and after the COVID-19 crisis?

The role of independent school leaders in supporting communities during crises

“As schools experience more challenges and tragedies that deeply impact student health and well-being and the growing importance of creating scaffolds and support for students, **independent school leaders must understand their prominent role in the lives of school families as well as in the communities around them.**”

Debra P. Wilson, Miguel G. Marshall, Charles Shaw, Susan R. Perry, and Lydia F. Maier, “Crisis Through the Lens of Student Health,” *Independent School Magazine* (Summer 2020)

Anxiety and Depression

Anxiety and depression, already high among independent school students, is exacerbated for all individuals during the COVID-19 crisis. Providing support is complicated by distance.

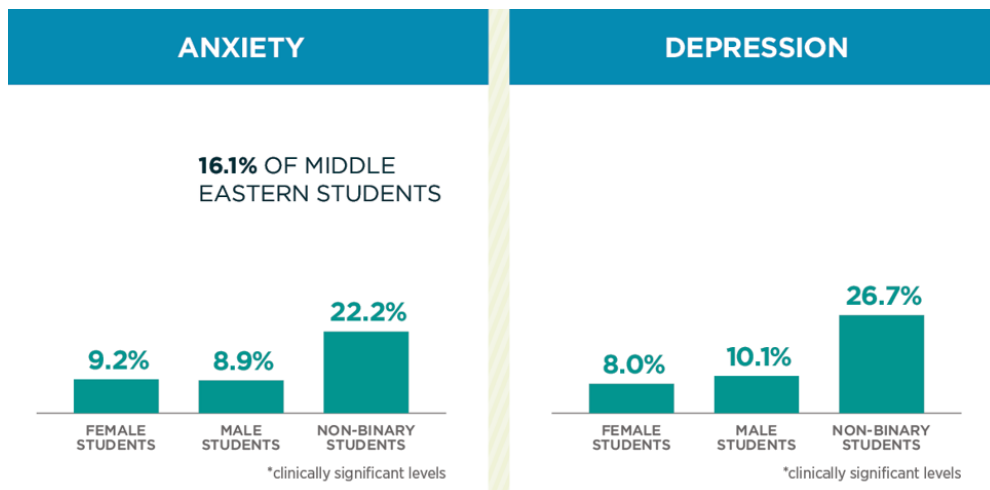
Levels of anxiety and depression among independent school students are already high.

9.6%

Percent of independent school students who have **depression**, compared to 7.3% of students nationally

9.4%

Percent of independent school students who have **anxiety**, compared to 6.7% of students nationally



Rates are even higher among nonbinary students.

NAIS and Suniya S. Luthar, “NAIS High-Achieving Schools Pilot Study”

Anxiety on the rise during COVID-19

45%

Percent of adults who believe that worry and stress related to coronavirus have had a negative impact on their mental health

Ashley Kirzinger, Audrey Kearney, Liz Hamel, and Mollyann Brodie, “KFF Health Tracking Poll - Early April 2020: The Impact of Coronavirus on Life in America,” Kaiser Family Foundation (April 2, 2020)

Parental anxiety influences student anxiety

“Experts [describe] a vicious cycle in which parents react to a child’s perceived anxiety, which results in a cycle of the parent and child feeding each other’s anxieties....

“[A 2015 Pew Research] study found that parents worry about their parenting skills, with 46 percent saying that their children’s successes or failures were tied to their parenting skills as opposed to the child’s own strengths and weaknesses.”

Donna Orem, “On My Mind: Ensuring Student Health and Well-Being,” *Independent School Magazine* (Summer 2019)

Teenagers are worried about the impact of COVID-19 on life and school.

61%

Percent of teens who worry that someone in their family will be exposed

63%

Percent of teens who worry about the effect on their family's ability to earn money

Teens worried about being able to keep up with schoolwork while in-person school is canceled

Total	Male	Female	White	Black	Other	Hispanic/Latino
56%	50%	61%	49%	66%	40%	70%

Girls and black and Latinx students are more worried than others.

Common Sense Media, "How Teens Are Coping and Connecting in the Time of the Coronavirus"

Talking to kids about COVID-19

- **“Don’t be afraid to discuss the coronavirus ...** Not talking about something can actually make kids worry *more* ...
- **“Be developmentally appropriate [and] take your cues from your child ...** Don’t volunteer too much information, as this may be overwhelming ...
- **“Deal with your own anxiety ...**
- **“Be reassuring ...**
- **“Focus on what you’re doing to stay safe ...** Kids feel empowered when they know what to do to keep themselves safe.
- **“Stick to routine ...**
- **“Keep talking ...”**

Rachel Ehmke, “Talking to Kids About the Coronavirus,” Child Mind Institute

Helping teens take care of their mental health during COVID-19

- “**Normalize** the fact that they [teenagers] are feeling anxious ...
- “**Help them look outward** ... Then give them further things to do that may be of help ...
- “**Help young people find distractions** ... It’s very helpful to divide the problem into two categories: things I can do something about, and then things I can do nothing about ... Researchers have found that finding positive distractions can help us deal with that second category ...

“There’s probably a lot to be said for talking about coronavirus and anxiety as a way to seek relief, and there is also a lot to be said about *not* talking about it as a way to seek relief. Helping kids find that right balance will make a big difference.”

Interview with Lisa Damour, “How to Protect Your Family’s Mental Health in the Face of Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19),” UNICEF (April 7, 2020)

The role of empathy in combatting feelings of isolation

“Research suggests the best way to combat feelings of isolation is to grow and strengthen concern for others ... It’s a time to ... focus children on those people who are especially vulnerable to this virus, including senior citizens and economically disadvantaged populations ...

“Parents can help their children expand circles of concern through:

- **Modeling empathy**

Listen carefully to children when they speak. Act as a guide to help children empathize with family members or neighbors who may be vulnerable.

- **Taking action**

Talk with your child. Think about ways you might be able to help.”

Emily Boudreau, “Cultivating Empathy in the Coronavirus Crisis,” Harvard Graduate School of Education (March 18, 2020)

The value that educators bring in a crisis

“What you are doing is of value.

- Just because we don't know everything doesn't mean we know nothing of value.
- You know strategies that have helped in the past to decrease distress—try them now.
- Celebrate positive contributions you make.
- Set reasonable expectations.
- The curriculum has changed—teaching children how to cope [leads to] helping them learn life skills that will make them more resilient.”

“While we can acknowledge the limitations of our current knowledge and resources, we shouldn't minimize the value of our guidance and the assistance we can provide.”

David Schonfeld, “Talking to and Supporting Students and Ourselves During the Pandemic,” National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement (April 1, 2020)

[Recorded presentation](#)

Ensuring continuity of counseling services in a remote environment

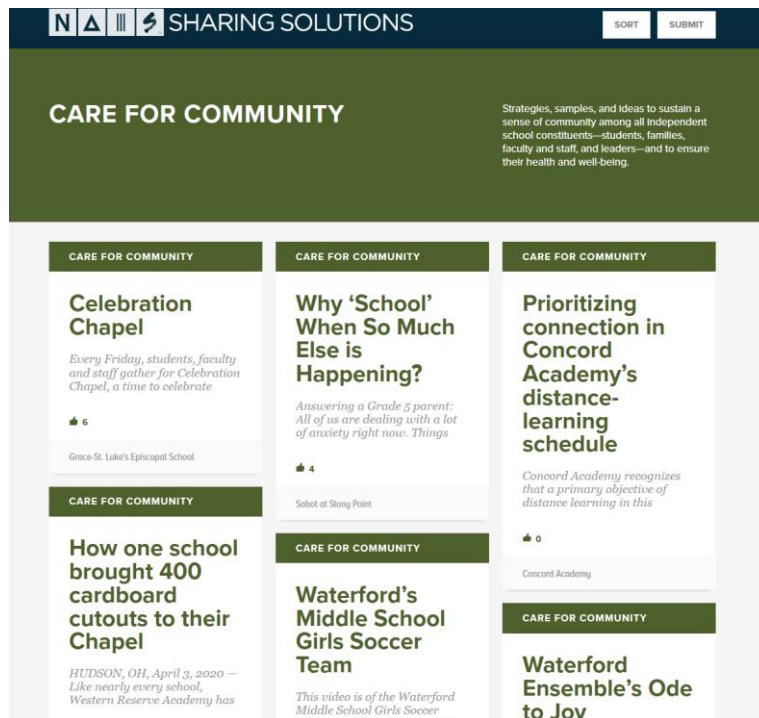
“General counseling services **provided as part of a broader collaborative approach** to student support can likely be provided remotely without running afoul of federal or state telehealth requirements or state licensure restrictions ...

“In the event that a school cannot provide counseling services remotely, whether for practical or legal reasons ... **schools could offer to work with families to identify local mental-health providers and collaborate with those providers** to help ensure continuity of care, and/or provide additional written or online resources to help students cope with their surrounding environment.”

NAIS, “COVID-19 Guidance for Schools: Counseling Special Focus”

Sharing ideas among the independent school community

[Sharing Solutions](#) is a new site for schools to share ideas and samples.



["Solution" submitted by Turning Point School \(CA\)](#)

“Our emphasis on well-being serves us well typically, but certainly is amplified in this challenging time of COVID-19. As a result, we have repurposed our usual school newsletter to focus on well-being; helping nurture our families’ intellectual, social, physical, ethical, and emotional health during time away from campus.”

Three Key Resources for Schools

1. Child Mind Institute: [Coping During COVID-19](#)
2. National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI): [Resource/info guide](#) (includes a helpline)
3. Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL): [Resources for parents, caregivers, policymakers](#)

Find a full collection of resources at www.nais.org/covid-19.

Authentic Connection's new [Student and Faculty Resilience Surveys](#) assess the impact of COVID-19 on mental health to help schools support both of these key groups. The first administration of each survey is offered free of charge for NAIS schools.

Three Key Questions for School Leaders

1. Are we aware of the prevalence of anxiety and depression in our school community overall, and do we know our most vulnerable student groups?
2. How can we continue to support students—including providing a continuity of counseling services—when our campus is closed?
3. How will we prepare for the needs of students returning in the next academic year and help them build resilience?

Loss and Grief

Schools play an important role in supporting students through loss of all kinds during COVID-19.

Understanding our collective grief in the context of COVID-19

“We’re feeling a number of different griefs. We feel the world has changed, and it has ... **The loss of normalcy; the fear of economic toll; the loss of connection.** This is hitting us and we’re grieving. Collectively ... We’re also feeling **anticipatory grief** ... that feeling we get about what the future holds when we’re uncertain ... This breaks our sense of safety.”

Scott Berinato, Interview with David Kessler, “That Discomfort You’re Feeling Is Grief,” *Harvard Business Review* (March 23, 2020)

“To weather these uncertain times, it’s important to acknowledge and grieve lost routines, social connections, family structures and our sense of security—and then create new ways to move forward.”

Stephanie O’Neill, “Coronavirus Has Upended Our World. It’s OK to Grieve,” NPR (March 26, 2020)

Supporting grieving students during COVID-19

- **Not just grief, but health concerns:** “It becomes important to help children deal with their fears and concerns about the pandemic, in addition to any grief they may be experiencing.”
- **Distance increases isolation and complicates support:** “Social distancing measures, including lengthy school closures, increases the social isolation generally experienced by grieving children and makes it difficult for schools to provide support using traditional means.”
- **Secondary loss:** “During a pandemic that requires social distancing and school closures, the magnitude and importance of the secondary losses [not just the loss of a person but also the loss of all that person did for the student] may be accentuated.”

Coalition to Support Grieving Students, “Supporting Grieving Students During a Pandemic,” (April 5, 2020)

Supporting grieving students during COVID-19 (cont.)

- **Overwhelmed families:** “The role of school professionals becomes even more important.”
- **Clusters of deaths:** “Children may experience more than one personal loss; deaths of students and staff may impact the entire school community.”
- **Ambiguous loss:** “Some children’s grief may not be related to a loss due to death ... Transitions, such as from high school to college or from middle school to high school, may be particularly challenging during a pandemic.”
- **Academic difficulties:** “Grieving students often experience at least temporary academic difficulties—so do children during a crisis.”

Coalition to Support Grieving Students, “Supporting Grieving Students During a Pandemic,” (April 5, 2020)

School protocols for a death in a school community

“When a death occurs, the school’s Crisis Response Team should be immediately activated to address the following matters:

1. “Verify the information from either the family members or local authorities.
2. “[A school leader] should work with the family to determine what information should be disclosed to the school community and in what manner.
3. “Notify the teachers and staff first to discuss what is known about the death ...
4. “Consider preparing a statement for teachers to use with students ...
5. “Draft a statement about the death to be distributed to parents ...
6. “Make [counseling and student support available]. In addition ... develop a local counseling resource outside of the school community.”

Southwestern Association of Episcopal Schools, Document Library, “A Death in the Community” (March 30, 2020)

The interruption in support for key transitions is a loss for students.

“For those [students] poised to be the first in their families to attend college in the fall, the sense of loss is especially sharp ... Many don’t have a network of loved ones who have experience with higher education, or the means to pay someone who does; schools filled that void.”

Dahlia Bazzaz, “High School Seniors Cope With the Loss and Confusion Over Next Steps During Coronavirus,” *The Seattle Times* (March 31, 2020)

“The wave of school shutdowns ... has disrupted college tours and canceled standardized tests ... And with high schools closed, students can’t get in-person guidance from counselors, leaving many to make big decisions about their futures on their own.”

Charlotte West, “How the Coronavirus Has Upended College Admissions,” *The Hechinger Report* (March 24, 2020)

The very real loss students feel about missed milestones

“A year in a teenager’s life is like seven years in an adult’s life. So, we have to have really high empathy for how big these losses feel. This is their one high school graduation for their whole life, this was their one sophomore spring on campus for their whole life. These are large-scale losses. Even if they’re not catastrophic, they’re really upsetting and rightly so to teenagers.

“So I would ask parents to expect and normalize that teenagers are very sad and very frustrated about the losses they are mourning.”

Interview with Lisa Damour, “How to Protect Your Family’s Mental Health in the Face of Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19)” UNICEF (April 7, 2020)

Clear and compassionate communication about year-end events

“Regardless of your ultimate plans for year-end events, you must communicate with your board, faculty and staff, parents, and students early and often. As each day passes, anxiety levels will increase among your key constituents if they are not clear about the school’s decision-making process and plans.

“Let your community know that school leadership is developing several plans and is committed to providing the best culminating events and experiences possible considering the ever-changing landscape of the pandemic ... Above all, be empathetic in your tone, your word choices, and in your decision-making.”

Independent School Management, “Graduation and Other Year-End Events: How to Plan During the COVID-19 Pandemic” (March 29, 2020)

Preparing for a long recovery from emotional and educational impact

“It took two full school years ... for [students returning after Hurricane Katrina] to fully recover their lost learning. There’s suggestive evidence ... that the negative impact was worse for low income and African American students ...

“What hurt these kids’ learning wasn’t just the interruption in class time. The economic impact and emotional trauma were probably just as important ... All of these factors—social dislocation, economic uncertainty—apply in spades to the coronavirus situation.”

Anya Kamenetz, “9 Out of 10 Children Are Out of School Worldwide. What Now?”
NPR (April 2, 2020)

Three Key Resources for Schools

1. Coalition to Support Grieving Students, [Supporting Grieving Students During a Pandemic](#) (associated with [National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement](#))
2. National Alliance for Grieving Children: [COVID-19 Resources \(English & Spanish\)](#)
3. Grief: Releasing Pain, Remembering Love, Finding Meaning: [Comprehensive website](#)

For a more comprehensive list of resources, see www.nais.org/covid-19.

Three Key Questions for School Leaders

1. Do we—leaders, faculty, and administrators—have a shared understanding about the types of loss and grief our students may be experiencing now and may experience after they return to campus?
2. Do we have in place a protocol for supporting—and communicating with—families if a death occurs in our school community?
3. Can we attempt to mitigate some of the unambiguous loss students are feeling by building community and maintaining traditions in new/modified ways?

Online Safety

Online safety concerns grow with the increased screen time and muddled adult-student boundaries that come with remote learning. How do we provide resources and set policies that protect students?

Social media struggles are already significant in independent schools.

7.2 hours

Average number of hours spent on social media, as reported by students in the NAIS pilot study

68.3%

Percent of students who had negative emotions caused by comparing their social media to peers (vs 49% of high-achieving students nationally)

36%

Percent of students in the “red zone” of “risky” social media presentation (e.g., posting revealing photos)

NAIS and Suniya S. Luthar, “NAIS High-Achieving Schools Pilot Study”

Teens, like everyone, are online more during COVID-19.

“Texting and social media are providing social outlets for teens. **Sixty-five percent** of teens report talking to friends or family via texting or social media more often than they usually do. More than a third (37%) have reached out to a friend or family member they haven’t talked to in a while.”

Common Sense Media, “How Teens Are Coping and Connecting in the Time of the Coronavirus”

AAP's loosened guidelines on screen time emphasize sleep and balance.

- “You should still set limits on screen time, but you should prioritize your mental health—and that of your children—which might mean allowing a little more screen time for school work or for connecting with friends, for example.
- “A few general rules still apply, however: ... You should make sure that school-aged kids are still getting at least eight hours of uninterrupted sleep time, if you can.... Schedule in plenty of non-screen time, or find ways to make it less isolating: Keep the phones away during dinner, monitor overall social media usage, and look for constructive ways to use screen time, such as educational programming or using video chats to connect with friends and relatives.”

Youki Terada, “Pediatricians on Balancing Screen Time, Sleep, and Family During Coronavirus,” Edutopia (April 2, 2020)

Remote learning can blur teacher-student boundaries (in role, time, and place).

“In this time of high stress and anxiety, it is especially important for teachers to maintain role awareness so that they stay in their professional role.

- “Teachers are educators; they are neither counselors nor parents to their students. If a student is in distress, the teacher should notify the student’s parents, the school’s counselor, and appropriate administrators ...
- “One-on-one communications should be as transparent and unambiguous as possible and should be scheduled and time-limited, with both parents and administrators being aware of the schedule.”

David Wolowitz, “Maintaining Role and Boundary Awareness When Teaching Remotely in a Time of Crisis: Being Alert to the Challenges of One-on-One Electronic Communications,” McLane Middleton (March 18, 2020)

Protecting children (online and in person) during a crisis

“We need to be prepared to continue protecting kids to the best of our ability under any circumstances ...

- **“Talk to your kids:** A quick lesson in proper handwashing can turn into a chat about body safety, or any topic that [will] help build a sense of trust, safety, and reliance in children ...
- **“[Minimize opportunity]:** By being aware of three main principles: prevent isolation, keep situations interruptible, and set expectations, you can dramatically reduce the risk of sexual abuse. Above all, be clear with both [babysitters] and your kids about the family rules so that everyone understands the expectations and knows how to speak up if they aren’t met.”

Darkness to Light, “Taking Protective Steps During the Coronavirus Pandemic”
(March 16, 2020)

Three Key Resources for Schools

1. Organization for Social Media Safety: [Resources for parents, students, organizations](#)
2. Savvy Cyber Kids: [Resources for keeping kids safe online](#)
3. Darkness to Light: [Protective measures during Covid-19](#)

For a more comprehensive list of resources, see www.nais.org/covid-19.

Three Key Questions for School Leaders

1. How can we use this crisis to recommit to helping students have healthy digital lives?
2. Do our policies and procedures address all areas of online safety? How do they need to be modified and expanded for our current (and possibly future) remote environments?
3. What will we do to reestablish communication boundaries that may have been loosened by necessity during school closures?

Racism, Discrimination, and Equity

It's critical that independent schools take into account racial, ethnic, cultural, socioeconomic, and other dimensions of difference that are impacted by decisions schools make in response to risks posed by the coronavirus.

Equity issues illuminated by COVID-19

“These issues impact the health and well-being of our students and all the adults who help schools run.”

- “Virtual classes require computers and high-speed internet, and courses offered during the day may pose a challenge for older students who must care for their younger siblings or other family members while parents and guardians work.
- Racism, xenophobia, and hate crimes against Asians have risen dramatically [in the U.S. and abroad].”
- Recent data show that African Americans are succumbing to COVID-19 at alarmingly disproportionate rates.

NAIS, “Coronavirus (COVID-19) Resources: Student Health and Well-Being and the Intersection of Race, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion” (April 7, 2020)

Disproportionate impact on communities of color

- “Communities of color are at increased risk for experiencing serious illness if they become infected with coronavirus due to higher rates of certain underlying health conditions compared to whites;
- “Communities of color will likely face increased challenges accessing COVID-19-related testing and treatment since they are more likely to be uninsured and to face barriers to accessing care than whites; and
- “Communities of color face increased financial and health risks associated with COVID-19 due to economic and social circumstances.”

Samantha Artiga et al., “Communities of Color at Higher Risk for Health and Economic Challenges Due to COVID-19,” Kaiser Family Foundation (April 7, 2020)

Five things to know about COVID-19 and people with disabilities

1. “The people most often cited as being at serious risk are largely, by some definition, people with disabilities ...
2. “It can be harder for disabled people to take prudent steps to protect themselves from the coronavirus outbreak ...
3. “COVID-19 ... threatens not only disabled people’s health, but their independence ...
4. “This outbreak has the potential to add new perspectives and urgency to a number of long-time disability issues ...
5. “You can help a lot just [by] being aware and sensitive to the specific risks and obstacles faced by disabled people in an outbreak of contagious illness like COVID-19.

“Panic is neither warranted nor helpful. But don’t minimize the risks or try to talk disabled people out of being worried.”

Andrew Pulrang, “5 Things to Know About Coronavirus and People With Disabilities,” *Forbes* (March 8, 2020)

Ensuring support of ELL students

“It is critical to keep the impacts of this situation on English language learners (ELLs) and immigrant students in view so that they can be included in all responses and plans ...

- “Ensure that students who are still in school are receiving reminders on preventative measures regularly.
- “Encourage teachers to use visuals, videos, and demonstrations with ELLs ...
- “Ensure that families know to be especially careful with vulnerable populations such as grandparents who may be caregivers or live with their families ...
- “Keep in mind that families will have different preferences on how they wish to communicate.”

Lydia Breiseth, “School Responses to COVID-19: ELL/Immigrant Considerations,”
Colorín Colorado

Center language around inclusion, empowerment, and justice.

“We recommend using a VPSA (Value, Problem, Solution, Action) format when talking about the coronavirus and its response ...

- **Value:** ... We are all in this together, and therefore must make sure our messaging around this virus and its containment avoids racist, xenophobic, and biased thinking ...
- **Problem:** ... If left unchecked [racist, xenophobic, and unscientific language and messaging] will create a culture of fear and discrimination that hinders efforts to stop the virus.
- **Solution:** As social justice leaders and communicators, it is our job to calmly and directly push back against the fear and stigma surrounding COVID-19 with powerful language of inclusion, unity, empowerment, and justice.
- **Action:** We must work together in collaborative conversation to make sure that communities and populations most at risk are receiving the attention and services that they deserve.”

The Opportunity Agenda, “Talking About COVID-19: Value, Problem, Solution, Action” (2020)

Three Key Resources for Schools

1. NAIS: [Student Health and Well-Being and the Intersection of Race, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion](#)
2. U.S. Department of Education: [Addressing the Risk of COVID-19 in Schools While Protecting the Civil Rights of Students](#)
3. Iowa State University: [crowdsourced resources](#)

Three Key Questions for School Leaders

1. Do our policies for remote learning consider differences in impact to all groups?
2. How are we proactively addressing implicit and explicit xenophobia in our school community?
3. How can we use the COVID-19 crisis to empower social justice initiatives by students and staff?

References

- Debra P. Wilson, Miguel G. Marshall, Charles Shaw, Susan R. Perry, and Lydia F. Maier, "Crisis Through the Lens of Student Health," *Independent School Magazine*
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