



Rebuilding for a New Normal:

A Study of the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic
on Trauma-Responsive Schools and Key
Recommendations for Communities

About the Partnership for Resilience

The [Partnership for Resilience](#) (the Partnership) is a statewide, cross-sector initiative in Illinois that works to improve academic, health, and social outcomes for children by fostering trauma-responsive schools and effective family, school, health, and community partnerships.

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About the Illinois Education Association

The [Illinois Education Association](#) (IEA) is an association of more than 135,000 members composed of Illinois elementary and secondary teachers, higher education faculty and staff, educational support professionals, retired educators and college students preparing to become teachers. The IEA-National Education Association's mission is to effect excellence and equity in public education and to be THE advocacy organization for all public education employees.

About the Education Redesign Lab

The [Education Redesign Lab](#), housed at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, is leading a network of communities across the country who are working across sectors to prepare all young people to thrive in and out of school. We are advancing a new model for education, one that integrates a comprehensive system of supports and opportunities from cradle to career.

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary.....	3
Introduction and Study Rationale.....	5
Study Description... ..	7
Findings.....	9
New Directions and Recommendations... ..	23
Conclusion... ..	26
Appendices... ..	27

Executive Summary

Based in Illinois, the Partnership for Resilience (Partnership) is a statewide, cross-sector initiative that works to improve academic, health, and social outcomes for children by fostering trauma-responsive schools and effective family, school, health, and community partnerships. During May-June 2020, the Partnership undertook a qualitative study to better understand the implications of school closures resulting from the pandemic, particularly as it relates to the future of trauma-responsive schools in its three networks (the Southland Initiative, Resilient Southern Illinois, and the Springfield Resilience Initiative). Participants in the study included parents, administrators, teachers, and support staff from districts connected to the Partnership as well as experts working in the area of trauma-responsive and whole-child schooling. This report provides a summary of research procedures, study findings, and recommendations to inform the future work of the Partnership and networked schools. It may also be of interest to other schools or districts contemplating the introduction of trauma-responsive practices during the pandemic.

The Impact of the Pandemic on Educators and Families - Focus group data identified three major themes most relevant to the experiences of families and educators:

- Despite some silver linings, families and educators experienced emotional distress, financial instability, and threats to basic needs; most harbor many fears about the future of schooling.
- During the stay-at-home period, virtual learning provided more challenges than successes; many of these challenges carry implications for trauma-responsive efforts.
- Educators are still in the process of recovering from a tumultuous spring semester; administrators and teachers are at high risk for burnout and face an unprecedented challenge in the 2020-2021 school year.

While many of the challenges of resuming school are yet unknown, there is no shortage of issues that require immediate attention. Teachers and families have been severely impacted socially, emotionally, physically, and financially by the pandemic. Schools will need time and opportunities to address the immediate issues while learning how to establish productive relationships while socially distanced, how to facilitate a culture of care and safety despite an overwhelming fear of the virus, how to thread social-emotional learning throughout academic opportunities in a substantive and timely manner, and how to connect with families and communities in new learning environments.

Advice from Experts - During analysis of interview data, four major themes were identified:

1. Now is the time for schools and others to “wrap safety and care” around students and adults.

2. Social-emotional learning, Tier I or universal supports, restorative practices, cultural relevance, and relationship-building should be central to teaching and learning in the 2020-2021 school year.
3. Educators seeking to implement whole-child teaching and learning will require new supports and learning opportunities to overcome the challenges presented by the 2020-2021 school year.
4. Although appropriate supports and resourcing will be key, the pandemic has provided some new opportunities for trauma-responsive schools.

Educators and experts alike identified bright spots in the challenges presented by the pandemic, including the opportunity to release pressures imposed by traditional school systems and expectations. While many of these concerns will be reality in the upcoming school year, it will be of crucial importance for schools and school leaders to afford educators the time, resources, and support necessary to cultivate adult wellbeing. Anything less would be irresponsible and unresponsive to the needs of the moment.

A recurrent question emerged during the study: What would it look like to rebuild schools in a manner that centered the holistic needs of students and educators? This question needs to be the bedrock of further research and discussions, guiding the work of trauma-responsive schools moving forward.

Introduction and Study Rationale



Based in Illinois, the Partnership for Resilience (Partnership) is a statewide initiative that works to improve academic, health, and social outcomes for children by fostering trauma-responsive schools and effective family, school, health, and community partnerships. The Partnership includes the Southland Initiative, a partnership with 10 school districts and five health care providers in the southern suburbs of Chicago, Resilient Southern Illinois, a network of 17 school districts and unions in the far southern counties of the state, and the Springfield Resilience Initiative, a network of trauma-responsive schools under development in Springfield School District 186. As a member of the Education Redesign Lab's By All Means initiative, the Partnership participates in a growing network of communities across the country who are undertaking similar cross-sector work to improve outcomes for children.

The COVID-19 pandemic upended public education, including efforts like those of the Partnership for Resilience designed to help schools become "whole child"-oriented and trauma-responsive. Due to school closures and stay-at-home orders, the last months of the 2019-2020 school year were organized remotely and educators and parents had to quickly adapt to new circumstances and significant stress.

In addition to the stress related to school closures, the pandemic has seriously impacted many of the students and families connected to the Partnership for Resilience through changes in or loss of employment exacerbating already dire financial circumstances, social isolation, high levels of COVID-19 infection or risk in areas already considered health deserts, and increased risk of domestic violence. Furthermore, communities connected with the Partnership (and others across the nation) are experiencing significant civic turmoil spurred by the death of George Floyd and other Black Americans at the hands of law enforcement. The intersection of trauma, poverty, and race are now situated in a much more urgent context and need to be considered when imagining the future of trauma-sensitive schools.

To better understand the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on educators and communities and the implications for the start of the 2020-2021 school year, the Partnership conducted a qualitative study during May-June 2020 interviewing parents, administrators, teachers, and support staff from districts in the three network sites (Southland Initiative, Resilient Southern Illinois, and the Springfield Resilience Initiative) as well as experts, researchers, professional development consultants, and thought partners working in the area of trauma-responsive and whole-child schooling. The following report provides a summary of research procedures, study findings and recommendations to inform the future work of the Partnership and networked schools.

Study Description



Study Methods -The study was conducted using the following qualitative methods: 1) Focus groups with school personnel and parents from each of the three network sites (Resilient Southern Illinois, the Southland Initiative, and the Springfield Resilience Initiative) and 2) interviews with experts in the field. It should be noted that the Springfield Resilience Initiative is in the planning stages, in contrast to the Southland and Resilient Southern Illinois Initiatives which have been engaged with trauma-responsive initiatives for five and two years respectively.

Individuals participated in either focus group or individual interview settings which were conducted over phone or Zoom video conference. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed. Questions for the individual interviews and focus group conversations were vetted with Partnership stakeholders and pilot-tested prior to use. Specific questions were adapted according to individuals' roles. Select administrators and educators from focus groups were targeted to participate in more in-depth one-on-one interviews. The tables in Appendix A provide the full description of study participants and protocol.

Guiding Question and Objectives - The guiding question underpinning the study was: What challenges and opportunities do experts, school personnel, and families perceive in providing whole-child and trauma-responsive initiatives in light of the pandemic?

Specific objectives included:

1. Explore the challenges and opportunities facing educators and families as a result of the pandemic.
2. Explore strategies, services, and resources that could be useful to trauma-responsive schools as they face the ramifications of the pandemic.

Findings



Challenges and Opportunities Facing Educators and Families

When interviewing educators and families, three major themes emerged:

1. Despite some silver linings, families and educators experienced emotional distress, financial instability, and threats to basic needs; most harbor many fears about the future of schooling.
2. During the stay-at-home period, virtual learning provided more challenges than successes; many of these challenges carry implications for trauma-responsive efforts.
3. Educators are still in the process of recovering from a tumultuous spring semester; administrators and teachers are at high risk for burnout.

Theme 1: Despite some silver linings, families and educators experienced emotional distress, financial instability, and threats to basic needs; most harbor many fears about the future of schooling.

Many communities connected to the Partnership for Resilience have been hit particularly hard by the pandemic. It is no surprise that the most prominent concerns of both parents and educators in the study focused on the physical and emotional safety of children and adults associated with the COVID-19 outbreak and reopening of schools in fall 2020

I worry about what it will look like to go back to school. We are living every day in uncertainty; we're all exposed to toxic stress at this point and so no one is going to come back completely stable. Have people been well? How many of us will come back with health issues or substance abuse or withdrawal? -- Teacher

How are we really going to know if the kids are going to be safe? Are we going to test everybody? It's another ball game with little kids. I feel really concerned about sending my child back to school before a vaccine is ready. -- Parent

Despite these overriding concerns participants did identify potential opportunities associated with parenting and educating children post-COVID. In many instances, parents have been

Although there were perceived benefits to the stay-at-home order for parents (i.e., more time at home with children, more first-hand involvement in academics), educators and families found this period extremely challenging. The mental and emotional wellbeing of adults was taxed during the spring 2020 semester and will likely continue to be challenged in the coming months. Parents as well as educators whose partners lost employment during the pandemic experienced financial instability.

working from home with their children while sheltering in place, helping to facilitate virtual learning. While challenging, many of the parents were grateful for the increased time at home with their children. One mother shared that she had been working for most of her children's lives and how grateful she was for the opportunity to spend more time with her kids, helping with homework and becoming more engaged in their lives. Teachers and parents also welcomed the newfound opportunities to collaborate with each other.

Parents who work in essential fields, risking the contraction of COVID-19, expressed serious challenges as a result of the school closures, in particular, educators with their own children at home. They were tasked with educating and caring for their own children while working

long and irregular hours to stay connected with their students. As one educator shared, “I’m trying to find the time for me to be a mother, be my kids’ teacher, and other people’s teacher at the same time.” It is apparent that there was outsized pressure on women and educators who are the primary caretakers for their families at home.

Furthermore, several communities connected to the Partnership have experienced widespread virus outbreaks and the trauma that is associated with localized outbreaks. Speaking to one survivor of the virus helped to bring this into focus. This parent described the emotional and physical challenges that occur when a family member contracts the virus. Depression, anxiety, and physical exhaustion were long-lasting impacts from her infection, and are likely to be impacting countless families across the state.

Families *and* educators alike experienced significant disruption in income. Although many educators’ jobs have been maintained, a partner or spouse’s unemployment has led to financial insecurity. For educators connected to the Partnership, this resulted in difficulty meeting basic needs, including food, healthcare, and bill pay. While an exhaustive exploration into these challenges was beyond the scope of this project, it is important to note that financial instability has impacted families *and* educators and will likely continue into fall 2020. One administrator described the shift in responsibility her leadership team has experienced because of this challenge:

We've had several whose spouses have lost their jobs. So, we've had to do some things like help counsel them through the unemployment process and help folks learn how to be able to access food in the community and to get a new level of support. [This is even] for a salaried teacher who was quote, unquote 'lucky' enough to be considered an essential employee and has a continued salary, but yet not lucky enough to support their family with their spouse being laid off. --Administrator

For families connected to the Partnership for Resilience financial instability was a reality even before the outbreak of the novel coronavirus. Unfortunately, these challenges are now placed within an even more urgent context, and school districts have done their best to respond with support for basic needs. One administrator shared the challenges associated with supporting families’ basic needs while keeping staff safe. At times, the needs created by COVID-19 were directly at odds with the risks of an outbreak. This administrator shared that his district, while adapting to virtual learning, was also working on supporting social, emotional, and economic needs of entire families, providing meals and learning packets directly to the homes of students. However, many families in this administrator’s region were employed by a food service company that experienced an early outbreak of COVID-19 infection. This resulted in the district suspending meal distribution because of the number of positive cases that were in two communities so as not to place drivers, volunteers, et cetera, in harm’s way.

The logistical and financial burdens placed on districts and families have been significant. It was clear throughout focus group conversations that prioritization of health and safety sometimes had to trump access to food and other supplies.

Theme 2: During the stay-at-home period, virtual learning provided more challenges than successes; many of these challenges carry implications for trauma-responsive efforts.

Educators and families transitioned to online learning effectively overnight in March 2020. This rapid transition revealed the educational and equity implications of access to technology. Regardless of geographic location, families and educators struggled to access reliable internet service and functional devices. For instance, households with multiple children often had to share one smartphone or tablet, making it difficult for students to access their materials. Many districts have worked hard to provide one-to-one access, but other challenges remain.

As far as addressing the inequities, we know adults and kids don't have the same environment or opportunities or spaces where they can work and learn. Although we have provided tech to all kids, we have to do more. Just because I have all the tech doesn't mean I have the supports that I need at home. That's a challenge out of the gate that we already know exists, and we don't have answers for it. So, we really need resources and learning partners to help us through that.

--Teacher

Connectivity and access to technology were widespread challenges for many schools. Participants in this study represented the wide range of accessibility. Some parents felt that communication was less effective, and grades were at times confusing. Providing specific support for students with special needs or mental health services was particularly challenging in virtual environments.

In short, access to technology was inconsistent, making it difficult for parents to feel confident their children were getting the things they needed to be successful learners at home. Parents worried that their school district would not have the capacity to provide Chromebooks, sufficient Internet service, or other necessities. Likewise, educators found it difficult to make contact with students and families due to disconnected phones, incorrect phone numbers, incorrect email addresses, or other logistical issues. Some teachers began resorting to personal social media and cell phone numbers to contact students just to “check

up on them” and make sure their students were safe. However, these options are not sustainable in the long-term and present ethical concerns.

Furthermore, paper packets, e-learning platforms, and communication procedures were sometimes confusing or inconsistent for families, making it difficult for parents to interpret requirements for an assignment or methods for grading. This also led to a feeling that schools were not doing enough to communicate with parents and students during school closures. This may have accounted for some of the struggles that educators faced in sustaining engagement from students through the end of the school year. The parents participating in this study had very disparate experiences. Some felt that their district had done all they could, while others expressed distrust and dissatisfaction. In one case, a parent experienced very little communication from her daughter’s teachers yet was largely successful in maintaining contact with her son’s teachers.

Inconsistent communication also seeded parents’ fears over learning loss, fairness, and appropriateness of e-learning materials. Even when technology and access were possible, concerns over fairness and appropriateness were especially salient on behalf of students with specified accommodations (i.e., special education), language learning needs, and emotional or behavioral needs. One school social worker described the difficulties associated with facilitating counseling sessions over Zoom. She eventually resorted to curbside visits to students’ homes, just to “get some eyes on them” and make sure they were okay. However, these kinds of adapted services will not be sufficient for the long term.

Put simply, educators and families across Illinois have been confronted with several competing demands. These will most certainly continue to compound as summer comes to an end, and it will be imperative that the holistic needs of adults and children are kept in focus during the upcoming transition.

Theme 3: Educators are still in the process of recovering from a tumultuous spring semester; administrators and teachers are at high risk for burnout.

In educator circles and popular publications, there have already been talks of a possible COVID slide, or a reduction in students' academic capacities due to prolonged absence from a

Most teachers worry about their capacity to provide responsive, whole-child learning opportunities. This concern is due in part to the logistical challenges of virtual or socially distanced learning but is also due to increased pressures and reduced resources in the upcoming school year. Most of the teachers who participated in this study felt that they did the best they could to provide thoughtful and engaging instruction during the spring 2020 semester, despite the circumstances, but worried that accountability for academic demands will overtake work to address the needs of the *whole* student in the fall.

structured schooling environment. While this was certainly on the minds of the educators connected to the Partnership for Resilience, holistic concerns were much more striking. In particular, the overall wellbeing of their students and adults (i.e., teachers, support staffers, and administrators) was a primary topic of conversation.

Teachers felt a great deal of responsibility for their students as *whole* people during the course of the school closures. They were particularly worried about students who were unresponsive or appeared to have completely disengaged from any communication with their teachers or the school district. Administrators were particularly concerned about the emotional and professional impact of the increased sense of responsibility taken on by many teachers. Some reported that their teachers shared feelings of depression, stating that, “*No matter whether they're physically here or not, they're always thinking about their students.*”

It became clear to teachers and support staff alike how thoroughly they had relied on face-to-face contact with their students for checking in on safety, health, and emotional wellbeing. Every educator participating in this study shared a sense of fear and anxiety—in some cases depression—grounded in concerns over the safety, health, and wellbeing of their students. Many understood that too many students were left to traverse the complexities of violence and trauma perhaps alone, and without the buffering relationships of their teachers.

Without the opportunity to connect daily on a relational level with students, educators began to fear the worst. This contributed to a sense of isolation, job dissatisfaction, and loss. They were no longer able to connect with students one on one and struggled to plan engaging learning opportunities online while attempting new methods for assessing and responding to

student needs online. Some teachers had success engaging with most of their students in the early weeks of the pandemic, but participation waned as the months progressed. There was a sense that “without that relationship, they just weren’t going to show up; they were completely gone.” Without the ability to ground academic learning in a productive relationship, teachers reported that many of their students were lost in the online learning environment. And unfortunately, these were the students who needed academic help and a supportive adult relationship the most. This was clearly heart-wrenching for teachers.

It was funny, I counted one day—I went from 53 hugs to nothing [after school closed]. My kids are constantly searching for that relationship. And we do a lot of individual conferencing in my class, which gives me more time to build relationships. Even if it's about math or about reading, I still get to hear their feelings on things. This is crucial. Although I can do individual conferences on Zoom, I've found that they're just not the same. --Teacher

Some educators did feel encouraged by the opportunity to involve parents and families as more involved partners in student learning. With school now situated directly in the home, parents who had the capacity to be directly involved were demonstrating a newfound appreciation for the work of their children’s teachers. One educator felt that the parent-educator relationship was stronger in some cases due to the partnerships forged during virtual learning. With the right communication, structures, and support, it seemed possible for teachers and parents to truly engage in new kinds of partnerships, even in a virtual environment.

On the other hand, some educators feared the implications of videoconferencing for family or student privacy. One educator shared a brief story of trying to facilitate a Zoom session with students while not appearing to infringe on their privacy. He found that, even during specified academic times, students were reprimanded by parents for showing their home to their classmates and teacher. This implied a sense of intrusion on behalf of families, which the teacher understood and attempted to rectify by showing his own house and sink full of dirty dishes.

The very busy task of transitioning to online learning during the spring 2020 semester may have prevented many educators from having the opportunity to grapple with the implications of their experience. One administrator feared that this work was just beginning in June 2020 and would last throughout the summer. She was concerned that teachers may not have the time and energy required to prepare for the 2020-2021 school year due to lingering burnout from the spring. She felt that more time would be required for teachers to rest and recharge before preparing for a brand-new year of brand-new challenges.

Likewise, the emotional toll is particularly heavy on administrators, who often are somewhat more isolated than teachers and other school personnel. One administrator described the overwhelming stress this way:

I can't imagine anybody feeling any more stress than I do on a given day with that one question right there: What are we-- what are we going to do tomorrow? I don't know how to do it. I don't know how to say it's going to be okay. The two biggest things we're dealing with right now are the unknown and change. --Administrator

Administrators face unique challenges in providing holistic, cultural support in the coming school year. All of the administrators who participated in this study saw themselves not only accountable to the students and teachers in their district, but to the families and community as well. Many feel the burden of accountability to entire communities or regions. This presents many logistical, financial, and conceptual issues to address in the upcoming school year. Administrators may need external supports in order to tackle the myriad concerns present in their settings.

Looking ahead to the 2020-2021 school year, educators' concerns go far beyond academics. Teachers of special subjects like PE or music, for example, worried that they won't have a classroom or will be reassigned to teaching roles for which they are unprepared. Support staff and classroom teachers alike worry that there will be insufficient time to allocate to social-emotional learning due to academic concerns.

Similarly, teachers fear that administrators or policymakers will forge ahead with unresponsive accountability demands. While Illinois does not have a statewide curriculum, continued statewide requirements and emphasis on testing and accountability would undermine efforts to center social-emotional learning and community connectedness. Furthermore, educational research demonstrates that no matter what policies are enacted, responsibility often falls on the teachers to put into practice.

In general, the stories shared by teachers and administrators demonstrated just how intensely they were working to maintain productive relationships and social-emotional connection online; they knew that without a strongly forged teacher-student connection very little would be possible academically. Despite these efforts, however, it is difficult to transcend inherent challenges such as the pure transparency of Zoom or other platforms that can result in some students and families feeling vulnerable and teachers feeling intrusive and the fact that virtual learning and social distancing leave much to be desired when working toward relational learning environments. The educators in this study found that whole-child teaching and learning—including relationship building or rebuilding—was incredibly difficult given the constraints of virtual learning.

In the end, the new school year brings the certainty of work that will be extremely emotionally taxing and logistically difficult.

Advice from Experts

Experts, researchers, consultants, administrators, and organizational leaders who have collaborated with and/or whose work has informed the work of the Partnership were contacted for interviews. (The full list of experts is on page 23.) Though most experts expressed similar challenges and issues to those shared by parents and educators, four distinct themes emerged.

Theme 1: Now is the time for schools and others to “wrap safety and care” around students and adults.

Experts and educators agreed that it is important for schools to take time to process the pandemic and their experiences within it. While experts in the field of childhood trauma cautioned against using the word “trauma” to describe the pandemic in overly general terms (this word is better reserved for true traumatic experiences), it is obvious that children and adults have all been through an extended period of collective stress, including potential anxiety and depression.

On a structural level, there appears to be an appetite for prioritizing social-emotional learning. This newfound public understanding in the work of teachers and schools should be capitalized on. Jo Anderson, co-executive director of the Consortium for Educational Change, who has been an active voice in education policy in Illinois and nationally, described a feeling of optimism on behalf of governing bodies in the state. He felt that momentum had been building nationally and statewide for social-emotional learning and whole-child teaching; the pandemic simply amplified those conversations. “We’re as well-positioned as anybody in the country to attend to the social or emotional, relational, and trauma dimensions of teaching and learning. It’s crucial we attend to these before coming down hard on teachers and students to demonstrate improvement on academics.” Several organizations were already engaged in launching training and professional learning toward these ends. School leaders therefore need to allocate professional development money and time toward supporting the holistic needs of teachers so they may do the same for their students.

Experts interviewed for this study agreed that the social and emotional health of adults should be a priority in itself. Such efforts will need to go beyond traditional fixes such as discussions of strategies for self-care. Parents, teachers, support staff, and administrators are all at risk.

ACE Interface Co-Founder Laura Porter, who is well-versed in the science of trauma and its impacts on physiology, pointed out that many adults are subject to overlapping risks. Indeed, many who have more pre-existing vulnerabilities to the virus may also be individuals whose health issues were the result of childhood trauma. Additionally, these very same adults are likely those for whom financial instability and food insecurity are now more urgent concerns. Therefore, school leaders and others must be mindful of the health and safety risks that many school personnel will face. To ignore the holistic needs of school personnel would likely exacerbate the challenges children will bring with them to school in the fall of 2020.

The emotional needs of educators provide one area for particular attention. Every expert interviewed for this study expressed concern over the emotional and professional impact of COVID-19 on teachers and administrators. This concern was echoed in the voices of educators who participated in the focus groups. Burnout, secondary trauma, empathic distress, and similar emotional responses are now at extremely high risk for educators. Many are newly attuned to this issue, and there is an urgent need to address it.

Our first priority is to check on our teachers. It's important that we take the time to really process this out with them. We really need to wrap safety around, not only teachers, but our whole staff. School leaders need to give teachers time to care for themselves. And then when those kids come back, we will better be able to wrap safety around them. If we don't give teachers time to talk about what they're feeling and strategies for how to manage that, then we'll miss the opportunity to give that to the kids. -- Jim Sporleder, Jim Sporleder Consulting

Theme 2: Social-emotional learning, Tier I or universal supports, restorative practices, cultural relevance, and relationship-building should be central to teaching and learning in the 2020-2021 school year.

Experts agreed that it will be important for policymakers, school leaders, teachers, parents, and others to resist the sense of urgency that may accompany the reopening of schools and rush to “make up” for lost academic time. To do so would be to overshadow and undermine the very important work that must be done toward reassessing the holistic needs of students so that efforts can be made to reconnect and recover.

When they come in their issues are going to be even more intense. I think we're going to be surprised. I think we're going to see some kids come to school dysregulated who didn't have issues before. Some families who were somewhat stable before the pandemic and now are facing tremendous stress trying to keep their households afloat. -- Jim Sporleder

Furthermore, the pandemic and racism-related unrest of the spring and early summer of 2020 brought into sharp relief the most pressing issues facing schools and communities. The concerns over physical, mental, and emotional health brought on by COVID-19 have been laminated within our existing social-political issues, exacerbating the formerly problematic “pair of ACEs” with a “pandemic within the pandemic”.

As multiple experts put it, “You can’t be trauma-informed without being racially just. It’s important that we recognize the connection between trauma and racial equity or racial justice work” (Lara Altman). To this end, Tier I supports should reinforce cultural competence and leverage community assets toward establishing positive relationships school wide.

Therefore, *all* learning must emphasize *all* students’ *social, emotional, and cultural* needs and assets.

Dr. Colleen Chichetti, executive director of the Center for Childhood Resilience at the Ann & Robert H. Lurie Children’s Hospital of Chicago, and others described the major shifts that this may require in a school. While schools may have several discrete practices in place, a robust, building-wide or organizational (Tier I) system should be immediately evident at all levels. She urged schools connected to the Partnership for Resilience to reflect on how this goes beyond a great Dean who reformed discipline. Robust Tier I may mean putting together the right group of people, including social workers, to “lead transformational change in a school and create school climate change.” The “hard work” of bolstering Tier I may involve translating teacher awareness of the impact of trauma and how it affects students to the overarching, common practices.

Schools and educators must take care not to layer shaming on top of working with students whose behavior is dysregulated. Seemingly small issues like wearing masks in the classroom have the potential to lead to explosive events, and it will be important for schools to facilitate a culture of safety in the fullest sense of the word.

Bolstering Tier I and universal supports will also mean centering positive relationships as a main priority and one to which time and resourcing are dedicated. A caring relationship—especially with a caring and regulated adult—can be a transformative force in the lives of children. While it’s important to not place outsized pressure on individual teachers to alone alleviate the inequities perpetuated by institutional systems, it is important to center work with students on responsive, positive relationships.

As Paul Reville, the founder and director of the Education Redesign Lab at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, described it, the pandemic revealed systemic inequities in American society in the same way a receding tidal wave reveals all that was hidden beneath the surface of the ocean. It is clear that communities and schools will need to be explicit and

intentional in addressing these issues while working to be responsive to other holistic needs. The racial and economic segregation of our communities and systemic oppression of Black citizens and other people of color has direct implications for families and educators in Partnership for Resilience-affiliated schools. Therefore, schools that are truly whole child will prioritize attention on the social, emotional, and cultural competencies of students in the coming school year.

Theme 3: Analyze and attend to the new needs for educator training.

Logistically, experts engaged in designing and facilitating professional learning for school leaders and teachers described the affordance and constraints of online learning. As a professional learning medium, virtual delivery enables more widespread, less costly convenings and collaborative opportunities for educators. However, virtual environments also pose challenges for teachers seeking to build relationships and support students in co-regulating difficult behaviors and emotions.

Similarly, educators will need training on pedagogies and curriculum that better align with virtual or socially distanced settings. This could include inquiry-based learning, community service-based learning, or flipped classroom models (i.e., using the classroom as a place to practice active, collaborative learning and saving more passive/individual activities for homework).

As it relates to trauma-responsive teaching, experts agreed that teachers will need increased opportunities to learn about the impacts of trauma and its manifestations in behavior as well as how to respond and integrate an emphasis on supportive, nurturing relationships.

Dr. Micere Keels, founding project director of the Trauma Responsive Educational Practices Project at the University of Chicago, provided particular guidance on this issue. In research conducted after Hurricane Katrina teachers reported that they were not prepared for how depression and emotional distress would show up in their students. More students came back to school with externalized trauma. Excessive behaviors and dysregulation are to be expected. It is therefore important for key adults to be proactive and aware of these manifestations so they may avoid re-traumatization. A regulated adult represents safety for a dysregulated child and can create a sense of safety for students who are at risk.

Educators and others may also benefit from training on the ways in which multiple kinds of trauma can be layered in communities. For example, a child may have experienced trauma firsthand while also having inherited historical or generational trauma, lived with racial trauma, and caring for an adult who has health issues resulting from their own childhood trauma.

When we talk about trauma, we really have to talk about historical trauma. And I think in this moment, awareness of historical trauma is vitally important. We have to talk about the trauma that has been exacted upon the Black community by systems and society. We must situate conversations about childhood trauma within an awareness of the violence of poverty; how certain communities became impoverished through systemic inequities; how it has been by design. – Dr. Monique Redeaux-Smith, Union Professional Issues Director, Illinois Federation of Teachers

Teachers and administrators would therefore benefit from, and have asked explicitly for, new learning and opportunities that address this complexity through cross-district collaborations. This could take the form of role-alike counseling or training for teachers and school leaders on how to model empathic, relational leadership.

Although trauma-responsive schools may have been moving toward these emphases and this awareness for a long time, a larger portion of the population of educators will be ready to talk about and act upon these insights. This will need to be provided “just-in-time” and in a manner that is not overwhelming. As experts and educators shared, there is still a risk of overwhelming teachers.

Theme 4: Although appropriate supports and resourcing will be key, the pandemic has provided some new opportunities for trauma-responsive schools.

First and foremost, the pandemic requires that schools allocate the time and space necessary to center teacher-student relationships and social-emotional learning. As Paul Reville described it, schools effectively dropped their academic purpose to focus on caring during the spring of 2020. Indeed, teachers, social workers, and administrators described the efforts that went toward delivering meals, helping pay bills or connect to unemployment benefits, checking in on students and families who had gone silent.

Teacher professional learning expert, Lara Kain of Lara Kain Consulting, a trauma-responsive professional development and leadership organization, shared that schools are now asking for a way to prioritize social-emotional learning, and to focus on connection, relationships, regulation, and racism in more meaningful ways. She suggests spending at least the first two weeks—if not the whole year—focusing on healing, sharing stories, processing grief, and making connections. This work must begin with adults first before folding in students.

One major shift that may be possible is to rethink the prioritization of social-emotional learning. For example, Paul Reville and others discussed the primary importance of establishing a family-and community-centered focus in order for schools to become trauma-informed and healing-centered.

Previously, teachers and school leaders may have had difficulty putting wellness and other whole-student needs ahead of academic concerns due to traditional accountability pressures. However, experts argue that there is a new opportunity to take a step back, to evaluate what was working and what was not pre-pandemic and consider that we may not be able to do things the way we have always done them. While funding and collective bargaining will be necessary parts of this process to avoid overreach, new priorities are now imperative.

One of the things that we really talked about is flipping the narrative a little bit. Let's forget about going back to normal, or let's reframe a new normal. Let's talk about all the things that we have disliked about what we do and what our system is, and this is the time to rethink that. And this is the time to let some of those things go. Let's give our teachers permission to understand that we're not expecting them to come back and just start firing off new content in a world of potentially remote learning. – Dr. Lori James-Gross, Superintendent of Unity Point School District 140

However, leaders and others should be cautioned that change for change's sake may produce anxiety for some teachers and staff. Therefore, new initiatives should be focused more on giving teachers “permission” to try new ideas or drop previously restrictive requirements in lieu of more responsive learning opportunities.

These opportunities will be challenged by other trends brought on by the pandemic, such as the economic damage done to the public and nonprofit service sectors, and underscores the necessity of engaging with students, families, and teachers before rushing into new reforms.

Yet, broader, deeper connections between families and schools may be more possible than ever. As one educator put it:

I've talked about the fact that in my whole career as an educator, this is probably the only time that I've seen the strength of the parent-educator relationship. I mean, it's at an all-time high in terms of supporting one another, understanding our roles with each other. And so, I want to continue that and capitalize on that in the coming school year.

A whole-person, trauma-responsive focus could be uniquely suited to provide the framework for newly integrated systems of community collaboration and responsiveness.

New Directions and Recommendations



Educators and experts agree that there is a new urgency and a growing interest in attending to the social-emotional needs of children and adults. Conversations about trauma have now gained new attention and complexity, including more attention to concepts such as historical and generational trauma, community trauma, and racial trauma. The following recommendations should be embraced with attention to community needs, racial justice, and social equity to build a “new” normal that is more holistically responsive to the needs of educators, students, and families.

Recommendations for the Partnership for Resilience and partner districts

- 1. The new and wide-ranging needs of students will require that districts revise and expand Tier I supports for all students. The Partnership for Resilience should support these efforts, and districts within the Partnership can support each other in implementing them.***

These new supports should include building cultural competence, establishing norms around personal safety (e.g., wearing personal protective equipment and giving space), implementing behavioral health supports that were previously in Tier II (e.g., more intensive support from social workers or in small group settings), and addressing other timely challenges.

2. *Schools will need opportunities to collect and share innovative models for reopening and adapting instruction to the “new normal.”*

School districts within the Partnership for Resilience are working on plans to reopen schools responsively and innovatively. These could include opening partially online to allow time for educators to work with students and parents on the creation of individual plans that identify their strengths and needs—what the Education Redesign Lab refers to as [Success Plans](#)—or other innovations and adaptations. School districts that are new to the Partnerships are especially hungry for opportunities to collaborate across regions, districts, and roles. The Partnership should serve as a catalyst and resource for sharing and collaborative learning among educators and leaders. Educators across the developmental spectrum of whole-child or trauma-responsive teaching would benefit from these opportunities.

3. *Schools have a new opportunity to step up family and community engagement and to build structures for improved community/cultural responsiveness and partnerships.*

Schools (with assistance from the Partnership) may consider exploring tools or models for stronger parent/family and community engagement. The Partnership may also support training and facilitation of best practices for school-family communication and at-home pedagogies. Parents may need opportunities for education on academic, social-emotional, and behavioral learning (e.g., behavior management, stress management).

Recommendations for school leaders

1. *Educator wellbeing and care must be prioritized.*

Attention to the needs of educators and adults working with children must go beyond self-care workshops. School leaders must provide meaningful, cultural, and systematic supports for adult wellbeing before and during the school year. Cultural and systematic supports may include increased time for teacher preparation and collaboration throughout the school year; opportunities for learning about practices for resilience and self-regulation; and access to social and emotional resources for adults. School leaders may consider surveying their faculty and staff periodically to assess additional needs. It is also important to keep in mind that teachers are also struggling with financial and personal stressors. Burnout, demoralization, and attrition are at high risk.

2. *School staffing should keep new social, emotional, and health needs in mind.*

The results of this study speak to the need for additional nurses or at least one per school building to deal with COVID-19-related issues. These needs may arise for students and adults in the building. Likewise, additional social workers may be needed. This may require reallocation of resources from inside or outside of

the school building. School districts should also explore partnerships with mental health providers to provide needed counseling services to students. For example, the Southland Initiative's partnership with the Children's Research Triangle is bringing tele-counseling services to a number of area schools.

3. *Professional learning should be adapted to better respond to current challenges. The following ideas were generated by stakeholders in the Partnership for Resilience in response to the findings shared in this report.*

- a. Incorporate social-emotional learning as a primary component of online and/or hybrid instruction.
- b. Provide ongoing learning for adults and students in anti-racism to build capacity to address equity issues at the school level.
- c. Provide foundational training in ACEs/trauma at the onset of the new school year for all who work in or support a school; everyone should be equipped with a strong understanding of toxic stress and the principles of resilience.
- d. Put special attention on the integration of social-emotional learning at the middle and high school levels, where it previously may not have been an emphasis.

Recommendations for teachers' unions and organizations

- 1. *Unions will be a crucial voice for educators at this time. Leadership at the local, regional, and state levels must advocate for policy changes and more flexibility regarding accountability, working conditions, and resourcing.***
 - a. Continuously advocate for funding for professional learning on restorative practices, trauma-responsive teaching, and remote learning.
 - b. Advocate for increased time for planning, preparation, and transition between adapted face-to-face, hybrid, and virtual teaching.
 - c. Impress upon policymakers the dire consequences of reduced funding for schools at the federal and local levels. Now is the time to increase resourcing.
 - d. Amplify teacher agency, voice, and impact as they carry great responsibility in the implementation of new reforms or initiatives.

Recommendations for policymakers

- 1. *Reduce or pause traditional outcomes-based accountability requirements is necessary while schools move through recovery.***

School districts who participated in this study expressed concern over pre-existing accountability requirements, such as standardized testing. Pausing or adapting these requirements would be prudent considering the significant strain on Local Education Agencies (LEAs). Teacher evaluation may also be a

consideration here. Due to its history and early work in social-emotional learning standards and a supportive gubernatorial administration, Illinois should be well-positioned to leverage efforts toward whole-child/whole-community efforts that attend to the needs of the current crisis.

2. *Expand broadband access, devices, and support.*

LEAs will likely not have the capacity to provide the devices, connectivity, and support to all students and families. This need goes beyond pure academics. Schools need logistical resources and support for enacting a whole-child, trauma-responsive culture and structures while socially distanced or fully online. This was limited in spring 2020 and will be more difficult given the transitions inherent to starting a new school year.

Conclusion

The educators who participated in this study described a coming wave of new demands for trauma-responsive schools. While many of the challenges of resuming school are yet unknown, there is no shortage of apparent crises. Teachers will need time and opportunities to collaborate across contexts in order to learn how to establish productive relationships while socially distanced, how to facilitate a culture of care and safety despite overwhelming fear of the virus, how to thread social-emotional learning throughout academic opportunities in a substantive and timely manner, and how to connect with families and communities in new learning environments. All of this is being done in a heavily politicized, resource-strapped environment.

At the time of this report, the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) recently released initial guidance for the reopening of schools in the 2020-2021 school year. This guidance provides school districts with suggestions for safely resuming face-to-face instruction according to guidelines put forward by the Illinois Department of Public Health and the Centers for Disease Control. Although several school districts in Illinois have yet to announce how these guidelines will be applied within their individual contexts, early conversations with school administrators and leaders connected to the Partnership for Resilience indicate that schools will need to prepare multiple plans for any combination of instructional offerings, including e-learning, hybrid, and adapted face-to-face schooling. When face-to-face schooling is possible, schools will be required to operate with extensive protective practices, including reduced capacity in buildings and busses, and requirements for physical distancing and personal protective

equipment. No matter what decisions are made relative to reopening, be it virtual, blended, or adapted face-to-face, there is consensus among educators, parents, and experts that the 2020-2021 school year will be challenging. They will continue to experience similar (if not exacerbated) hardships from the Spring 2020 semester.

Educators and experts alike did, however, identify bright spots in the challenges presented by the pandemic, including the opportunity to release pressures imposed by traditional schooling structures and accountability expectations. It will be of crucial importance that policymakers and school leaders afford educators the time, resources, and support necessary to cultivate adult wellbeing as well as student wellbeing. Anything less would be irresponsible and unresponsive to the needs of the moment.

Therefore, the new work going forward must be done with this question in mind: ***What would it look like to rebuild schools in a manner that centered the holistic needs of students and educators?***

The “new normal” presents many challenges yet many opportunities. Among the opportunities is the chance for schools to establish a culture that is grounded in whole-person principles. Instructional opportunities, accountability demands, support personnel and/or existing roles and responsibilities must now also attend to the holistic needs of adults and students.

Appendices

Appendix A Participants

Focus Groups with school personnel
RSI Administrators (n=10)
RSI Teachers & Support Staff (n=10)
RSI Parents (n=10)
Southland Administrators (n=8)
Southland Teachers & Support Staff (n=12)

Southland Parents (n=7)
SRI Admin/Steering Team (n=9)
SRI Teachers (n=6)

Experts Contacted for Interviews
<p>Experts, researchers, consultants, administrators, and organizational leaders who have collaborated with and/or whose work has informed the work of the Partnership were contacted for interviews. Experts spoke directly with the Partnership for this project and/or have informed its work substantively over the past several years.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lara Altman, MPH, MSW, Director, Illinois ACEs Response Collaborative • Jo Anderson, Co-Executive Director, Consortium for Educational Change • Kristine Argue-Mason, Instructional Resource and Professional Development Director, Illinois Education Association • Colleen Cicchetti, Ph. D, Executive Director, Center for Childhood Resilience, Ann & Robert H. Lurie Children's Hospital of Chicago • Susan Cole, Director, Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative, MassAdvocates for Children, Harvard Law School • Susan Craig, Founder and President, SEC Enterprises • Lori James-Gross, Ph. D, Superintendent, Unity Point School District 140 • Lara Kain, Lara Kain Consulting • Micere Keels, Ph. D, Founding Project Director, Trauma Responsive Educational Practices Project, University of Chicago • Lauri Morrison-Frichtl, Executive Director, Illinois Head Start Association • Laura Porter, Co-Founder, ACE Interface • Monique Redeaux-Smith, Ph. D, Union Professional Issues Director, Illinois Federation of Teachers • Paul Reville, Founder and Director, Education Redesign Lab, Harvard Graduate School of Education • Jim Sporleder, Jim Sporleder Consulting • Audrey Stillerman, MD, Clinical Assistant Professor of Family Medicine, University of Illinois College of Medicine

Appendix B:

Outline of Focus Group and Individual Interview Protocol

School Personnel Protocol Outline	
1.	Noteworthy distinctions: district
2.	Challenges anticipated for fall 2020

3.	COVID adaptations/Integrations: SEL
4.	COVID adaptations/Integrations: TR
5.	Anticipated needs: opportunities & resources (students)
6.	Anticipated needs: opportunities & resources (adults)
7.	Other ideas for Partnership/RSI/SRI support

Expert Protocol Outline
Organization's focus
New needs & challenges facing TR efforts and families, educators, communities (post-COVID-19)
Organization's response/plans to respond to new challenges
Other suggested contacts/resources
Advice for the Partnership