Staying connected to students and maintaining open lines of communication is especially critical in a time of social and physical isolation. On April 17, 2020, Governor Abbott ordered that schools close for the remainder of the 2019-2020 school year due to COVID-19. When schools initially temporarily closed on March 21, many districts throughout Texas shifted to at-home or online instruction. However, schools provide more than education for students. Absence from school can compound issues for students through the loss of many safety nets that schools provide, including a sense of stability, support, and structure. Relationships between schools and students are vital, but it can be difficult to continue those relationships due to physical distance. How do you preserve crucial relationships when students are physically not on campus?

Staying connected to students and adapting to this shift must include supporting the needs of the whole child. Due to the lack of access to technology or reliable internet service, some students have had minimal to no contact with their school. Students who have significant learning, emotional, or behavioral problems are at risk of further widening achievement and opportunity gaps. The need is even greater when existing problems are exacerbated due to the additional stressors of a crisis.

Children are especially vulnerable to secondary impacts of this pandemic. Social distancing and isolation can be life-threatening for those who are experiencing abuse, neglect, or domestic violence at home. Physically attending school provides staff the ability to observe, intervene, or connect students to community resources prior to problem escalation. Schools also provide coping skills and additional support networks for students, including elective classes, after-school activities, sports, and friends. As a result of efforts to minimize the transmission of COVID-19, students have been deprived of these coping skills and supports. In times of crisis, and when students are physically separated from school, it's important to have systems in place to mitigate this increased risk.

This resource provides a process for schools to ensure they are maintaining relationships with all students, especially those most at-risk, by utilizing the people and resources schools already have. It also includes ideas on how to engage and build relationships in a creative way utilizing technology. A community resource list is provided to assist schools with locating services, including behavioral health services or financial assistance, to enhance schools' ability to support students.

FIVE-STEP PROCESS

This five-step process provides suggested guidelines for schools to assess what resources they have and how to use those resources to reach all students. It also provides a structure for implementation of that process.

**STEP 1: Identify the person who will oversee the process**

This person will keep track of student outreach efforts. Documentation is essential so that staff are not operating in silos and to ensure that no student falls through the cracks. Intervention, administration, or data-focused persons, including members of the RTI team, PBIS team, Data team, or MTSS team, are ideal candidates. This person will ensure that designated staff reach out to assigned students on a consistent basis.
Do you have staff that could shift their work focus to reach out to students and their families and ensure that all students are being contacted? Clerical staff or paraprofessionals could be given a list of students or parents and make outreach through phone or video calls. At-risk students could be contacted by school counselors, school social workers, LSSPs, the assistant principal, dean of students, or school-based law enforcement. SBLE officers are a valuable resource and are well known by students who are accustomed to seeing them every day.

**Identify staff available to connect with students**

**Tier 1: All students**
All students and families will be affected to some degree by the COVID-19 pandemic. Regular check-ins by teachers through teleconferencing or other forms of online learning not only ensure that education is continuing but also help with supporting students and families during this crisis. Alternatively, clerical or administrative staff could be given a list of students to reach out to via phone, Zoom, or email on a weekly basis to ask some questions and offer assistance. These questions can be a form of “check-in” or “pulse check” for students and their families. A list of possible questions is provided below.

Many students do not have access to technology and are therefore unable to participate in virtual learning and will need school materials made available to them via various pick-up options at the school or delivered or mailed directly to their home. Be sure to keep track of the students who are not logging in, answering calls, or responding to emails as they can be at higher risk. These students may need to be placed on a higher tier; ensure this is communicated to the person who oversees this process.

**Tier 2: At-risk students**

Students are often in this category due to psychosocial factors or circumstances that are out of their control. In times of crisis, these students are even more at-risk, including an increased risk for homelessness, malnourishment, or harm to self or others.

Criteria for this tier could include students who are food insecure, come from single parent homes, are in foster care, are being raised by grandparents, have transportation concerns, have parents who are deployed, or those who have other socioeconomic factors. Other criteria could include stressors such as teen pregnancy, health issues, homelessness or lack of stable housing, familial incarceration, history of disciplinary problems, language-related factors, truancy, poverty, history of trauma, substance abuse, divorce, having witnessed or experienced abuse or neglect, or those who have been diagnosed with a mental illness.

This tier can also include students who are on a 504 or Individualized Education Plan. It is important to document all attempts at contact, as well as conversation content, ensuring that all documentation is FERPA and HIPAA compliant. This data will be useful for students who receive services through a school-based mental health counselor, 504/IEP case manager, or for those who may need case management services.

Depending on criteria set for this tier, outreach may take place via weekly Zoom or phone outreach and include a more thorough conversation, or it could take place a few times a week. For students without access to technology, schools may want to provide prepaid phones with restrictions, or work with local internet providers to provide temporary service to reach those students most at-risk. Another type of check-in, such as a home visit, may be a possibility, as long as social distancing guidelines and other protocols are followed. For students who are participating in meal or technology distribution, staff may be able to speak with them in a quiet area during distribution, or during drop off at their house. Students who are homeless may be contacted through family members who are able to stay in contact with the student or through recommendations listed above.

**Tier 3: High-risk students**

Criteria for this tier may include students who are receiving services from a school-employed mental health counselor, who are receiving behavioral health services in the community, or who have been receiving a higher level of psychiatric services (ex: those who were recently discharged from an in-patient hospital or partial-hospitalization program). It could also include those who have multiple risk factors listed in Tier 2.

Depending on criteria set for this tier, outreach may take place via weekly Zoom or phone outreach and include a more thorough conversation, or it could take place a few times a week. Refer to Tier 2 for recommendations on ways to reach students without access to technology or those who are homeless.
As staff are reaching out to students and families, they may be alerted to concerns including allegations of abuse or neglect, lack of food, or mental health crises. It is important to establish a protocol or chain of command so that if a concern arises about a student or family, that information is relayed to the appropriate people and responded to in a timely manner. This protocol needs to be clear so that all staff know where to go and with whom to speak to relay any concerns or questions. The school district's student anonymous reporting system should still be monitored to ensure that all reports are responded to timely but does not take the place of staff relaying concerns or allegations of abuse or neglect to the appropriate people.

For concerns not related to abuse or neglect, staff might be asked to reach out to the school-employed mental health professional (counselor, social worker, school psychologist) the same day to alert them to their concern. The school-employed mental health professional would then reach out to the family to assist with resources or guide the family in next steps, while documenting their efforts and notifying their supervisor, assistant principal, or principal.

Due to social distancing and stay-at-home orders, school-based law enforcement involvement may be impacted. In some cases officers may be reassigned by their departments to other duties. If officers are still conducting school-related activities, how they proceed with requests, including wellness visits or more serious concerns, will likely be affected. Ensure that there is a protocol in place, so officers are aware of what the process is and how to proceed.

For concerns related to abuse or neglect, remember that professionals are required to alert the Texas Department of Family Services (1-800-252-5400 or http://www.txabusehotline.org) if they suspect abuse or neglect. Always call local law enforcement first if there is imminent danger. Texas law requires any person suspecting that a child has been abused or neglected to immediately make a report. Professionals must make a report no later than the 48th hour after first suspecting a child has been abused or neglected or is a victim of an offense under Section 21.11, Penal Code. A professional may not delegate to or rely on another person to make the report (Texas Family Code, Section 261.101).


**STEP 4** Establish a protocol or chain of command for concerns

**STEP 5** Implement, Assess, Adjust

Implement the process, creating a plan for assessment and adjustment, as necessary. This ensures that this process is effective in meeting the needs of your students and that problems are addressed. The goal is to connect with all students as soon as possible.

**Pulse Check Questions**

How can staff start the conversation with families to gauge how well students’ needs are being met and how well families are adjusting to the process of learning at home? The questions below are a starting point; however, this list is not exhaustive. Questions could be tailored for Tiers 1-3 or altered to fit your school’s specific needs.

Be sure to recognize the efforts that students and parents have been making. Thank them for their support and flexibility and appreciate the balancing act that is taking place in the home with work, school, and childcare. Praise them, when appropriate, for their adaptability and resiliency. Recognition, support, and encouragement can establish an even stronger cohesion between schools and families.

- On a scale of 1-10, how well is your family adapting to learning at home?
- What is one success that you have had this week?
- What is one challenge that you have faced this week?
  - How did you overcome it?
  - If you have not yet overcome it, what is one thing you can do to meet this challenge?
  - Do you need assistance with overcoming this challenge?
- Is there anything you would like us to know?
- Are there resources that you might need assistance with? (Prior to beginning these calls a list of community resources such as a local food bank can be provided to the person making the call in order to assist the family.)
  - Do you have food?
- What is one thing that we can do to make learning more manageable next week?
- On a scale of 1-10, how well is your family coping?
- What are some things you have found that help you?
- On a scale of 1-10, how connected do you feel to (school name)?
- Do you feel like you are getting the support you need from (school name)?
  - If yes, ask what has been helpful.
  - If no, ask in what ways the school can better support them.
COMMUNITY RESOURCES

Covid-19 updates and resources:
• Texas School Safety Center: https://txssc.txstate.edu/featured/covid-19
• Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration: www.samhsa.gov/coronavirus

211 Texas:
• Dial 211 or 877-541-7905 or www.211texas.org
  o Information and community resources via zip code.
  o Food pantries, housing, childcare, medical or behavioral health services, and more.

Mental health support:
• Statewide hotline: 833-986-1919
  o Offers COVID-19-related mental health support for all Texans.
  People can call the Statewide COVID-19 Mental Health Support Line 24 hours a day, 7 days a week toll-free at 833-986-1919.
• NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness): www.nami.org
• Health and Human Services: https://hhs.texas.gov/services/mental-health-substance-use/childrens-mental-health
• Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration: www.samhsa.gov

National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement:
• www.schoolcrisiscenter.org

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline:
• 1-800-273-TALK (8255)
• www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org

Health and Human Services:
• https://hhs.texas.gov/hhs-services
  o Services related to aging, housing, mental health and substance abuse (adult and children), financial, disability, health, and safety

Texas Department of Family Services:
• 1-800-252-5400 or http://www.txabusehotline.org

Special education/Special populations:
• Texas Education Agency: https://tea.texas.gov/texas-schools/health-safety-discipline/special-education-and-special-populations
Virtual activities*:
- Book clubs
- Breakfast club
- Lunch bunch
- Dance party; dance battles
- Messages from the Principal
- Field trip/tour: many museums and zoos are offering free virtual tours
- Scavenger hunts (indoor or outdoor/backyard)
- Parent groups: for support and encouragement (e.g., Skype, Zoom, IG Live, Facebook Live, Facetime)
- Game night (or day)
- Write a book together
- Have a concert
- Talent show
- Movie night
- Counselors can organize a "lunch and learn" or "parent night" videos or chats and provide information on stress management, ways to connect to feel less alone, what to do if they feel overwhelmed, relaxation techniques, or self-care.
- Counselors or special education staff can host small group check-ins with students who are in similar circumstances.
- Don't forget about teachers and staff; virtual events to provide connection and encouragement will boost morale and provide support.
- School-based law enforcement officers could provide virtual education on safety tips or local updates.
- Home visit porch check-ins for those students who cannot engage virtually.

*Some of these activities can be adapted for those students without internet access.

Parents may need to be present for some of these activities depending on age of student and activity. Please note all the items listed above should follow current local health authority guidelines including, but not limited to, proper social distancing protocols. A district must comply with all recommendations or orders from the local health authority, local governing body, Texas Department of Health Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Governor's Office.