Starting Strong with a Focus on Social-Emotional Wellness

By: Lori Lynass Ed.D.

As schools prepare for the start of a new school year, there is no better time to focus on staff and student social and emotional wellness. Utilizing a Culturally Responsive Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports (CR-MTSS) framework, the emphasis should start with whole school prevention efforts and on the systems needed to deliver these supports. It is key to remember that MTSS focuses on everyone in the building, so we are prioritizing wellness for staff, families and students. While schools are likely feeling the pressure to make up academic losses that students may have experienced due to Covid, the research tells us that we must attend to their social-emotional needs first. Consider organizing your efforts across these areas:

* **Establish predictable environments.** Predictable environments in which staff and students know how to successfully navigate the daily routines create a sense of safety for us all. When we experience this sense of safety, it can decrease the high alert that people experience when they feel stress and make it more likely that student’s brains are ready for learning.
* **Invest in relationship building.** Truly transformative learning is grounded in relationships. We can’t prioritize covering content over connecting with students and making the content relevant to their daily lives. To do this we have to make the establishment and maintenance of relationships an ongoing priority. The use of restorative community building circles and activities are great tools to consider.
* **Integrate social-emotional learning into daily routines and academic content.** Social-emotional learning should not be a stand-alone activity that is disconnected from academic learning. The six OSPI [SEL Standards](https://www.k12.wa.us/student-success/resources-subject-area/social-emotional-learning-sel) are essential tools for the development of the whole child. Consider how to best integrate these standards across the day. For example, using self-regulation strategies such as mindfulness when beginning the day to settle students into learning; or using the benchmarks of Social Awareness to help students understand and respect each other various perspectives and valuing differences in class discussions. It’s vital to remember that students need to truly see how SEL skills fit into their lives and can benefit them.
* **Put students at the center.** All the strategies listed above will be ineffective if we don’t put students at the center, especially those students who have been traditionally marginalized. How have the various perspectives and cultures of your students been considered? Who has had a voice and representation at the table? The use of restorative circles and listening sessions are great tools to better understand the perspectives and needs of those we are serving.

Using this systems approach to wellness, consider mapping out the strategies and activities that could help your school have its strongest start yet. A [sample six week plan](https://soundsupportsk12.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Sample-6-Week-Plan-Integrating-PBIS.pdf) to launch the school year can be found here. School leaders should consider how whole district systems focused on wellness can be developed. A helpful article to guide these systems for district leaders, which also features the work of two Washington State districts, can be found [here](https://www.pageturnpro.com/AASA/101956-November-2021/sdefault.html#page/28).