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Tough Economic Times: Supporting Student Well-Being and Academic Progress Information for Elementary School Principals

It's been a difficult semester for Principal Adele Escudero. Supplies are low; the free lunch budget is overspent; the school board has announced staff cuts for next year; and she sees growing anxiety among her students, parents, and staff members. In just one day, two usually self-controlled students were sent to her office for disrupting class, one of her grade-level leaders came to her in tears to say that her husband had been laid off, and a mother called to ask if her 9-year-old son could stay in school even though they needed to move in with relatives up county. The economic crisis that has enveloped the country is taking its toll. Escudero worries about the individual students and staff members, but she also wonders how she will be able to maintain her school's hard-won academic progress in the face of increasing pressures and declining resources.

Research has shown that students' social, emotional, and behavioral health affects their academic achievement. This has enormous implications for teachers, school mental health providers, and the students themselves. A student body that is hungry, disengaged, preoccupied, or behaviorally disruptive simply is not going to respond as well to even the best instruction. Teachers cannot meet all of the needs of their students alone. The responsibility to manage this crisis may seem daunting, but resources that meet immediate needs and bolster a school community's resilience and effectiveness over time are available to principals. Such resources include action planning and using school-based mental health support, such as school psychologists and other professionals who can help during these difficult times.

Feeling the Effects

Families and students. As many schools are already seeing, families are losing their incomes, homes, and medical coverage. First-time use of food stamps and food banks, transience, and homelessness have all increased. The perceived loss of dignity and stress associated with such difficult life changes can cause parents to become frustrated; angry; depressed; or in rare cases, abusive. Some turn to alcohol and other drugs for relief—commonly known as “self-medicating.” Many parents are worried about how they will take care of their children.

Most children sense that something is going on around them and, depending on family circumstances, will bring their anxiety into school. How they respond to a crisis situation depends primarily on how they perceive the adults—parents and teachers—in their lives are responding. Many will be worried about their parents as much as themselves, which is extremely anxiety-producing for children of any age. This stress may manifest as increased absenteeism, a drop in classroom performance, or more frequent physical complaints (e.g., stomachaches, headaches, etc.). Even students whose families are not directly affected by economic problems may be feeling stress because of friends or neighbors who are affected, the general increase in tensions at school, or the ongoing wave of bad news. Children may not be able to articulate what is bothering them and may become disruptive, inattentive, or moody without knowing exactly why. Families and students who were having problems before the economic crisis are especially vulnerable.

Faculty members. In many respects school staff members have become their students' frontline crisis caregivers. Teachers may be coping with an increase in individual student and classroom issues that interfere with learning. School-based support staff members may be seeing increased demands for their

services, especially as community service agencies grapple with skyrocketing demand. This means that greater burdens are being placed on school safety officers, school nurses, and school mental health staff members (e.g., school psychologists, counselors, and social workers). Many families and students will be more transient and school staff members will need to support both incoming and outgoing students. On top of the added workload, staff members may be experiencing their own family problems.

Leveraging Resources

In the last election, many voters responded to President Obama's straightforward acknowledgement of the emerging crisis tempered with calmly expressed confidence and a positive message of collaboration. A principal who can deliver a similar message of leadership will go a long way toward easing the stress felt by students and faculty members.

Principal leadership. The principal can set an optimistic tone in a school by acknowledging but not dwelling upon the realities of the economy and by building a sense of connectedness among students, faculty members, and families. It is important to maintain the stability of school routines and normalcy: school may well be the most stable part of a student's life right now. Although these steps may seem to take precious time, they can protect the well-being of students, faculty members, and families. It is also important that principals utilize every resource that is available; in many cases, this means tapping into school mental health services to address growing problems.

Effective mental health support. Effective school mental health supports meet the needs of individual students and also provide prevention and early intervention for the entire student body. For example, school psychologists can address counseling and referral needs, but they are also well-equipped to work on school climate issues and improve behavioral health of the whole classroom. Principals should also empower them to implement schoolwide approaches to prevent or recognize emerging problems. Schoolwide approaches, such as positive behavioral interventions and supports and social-emotional learning, integrate well with other support services and, most importantly, promote academic achievement. This may seem like a questionable use of resources right now but such realignment can produce immediate and ongoing benefits in terms of academic and health outcomes, school climate, and reduced stress on finances and school staff members.

An Action Plan

Some effects of economic hard times are being felt in schools already; others will develop over time. Principals need both short- and long-term strategies for meeting the social, emotional, and behavioral needs in their schools to protect hard-won achievement gains. Meanwhile, those strategies must be feasible without additional cost and possibly under a reduced budget. In this environment, programs need to be refocused, resources reallocated, and priorities reassessed. School psychologists and other mental health staff members may be underutilized resources. Principals can take every opportunity to leverage their unique skill sets to help offer solutions to struggling students and faculty members.

Be there for your students. It's easy to forget the most obvious: students need you. You cannot do everything, but you can model caring and engagement. Greet students in the morning and ask how things are going. Walk the halls. Attend school events. Hold informal discussion groups. Encourage students to become involved in after-school activities. Always reinforce successes, no matter how small. Invite students to be part of the helping community.

Determine basic needs. Work with staff members to establish supports for students who have increased basic needs. This can include allowing students to shower at school; holding a clothing drive within the community to bring in changes of clothes for students; or establishing a partnership with parent groups or community resources whose members might be able to provide basic items or services, such as additional after-school tutoring. Extended or more flexible before- and after-school care options may also be needed. For some students, they may simply need the ear of a caring adult to have a general discussion not related to the daily stress they and their families are experiencing.

Free up and refocus support staff members. Research tells us that most children receive mental health services in school or they do not receive them at all. Administrators should work with support staff members to determine students' immediate needs; anticipate future needs; and explore ways to maintain, increase, or reallocate resources and reassign duties as necessary. School psychologists in particular can provide teacher consultation and training on classroom behavior; establish group counseling sessions (e.g., Coping with Stress); create a team to work with newly homeless or transient students and their families; provide stress management workshops for parents and teachers; and provide social-emotional learning programs. If and when some students exhibit more-serious mental health problems, including depression and anxiety, school mental health staff members should be prepared and available to identify and respond to these students, particularly because these behaviors can lead to long-term difficulties in school.

Equip your staff members. Everyone in the school needs to be aware of the potential social, behavioral, and emotional problems that are associated with the financial crisis and how they can immediately affect student achievement. Ideally this information should be shared in a faculty meeting that is facilitated by your mental health staff members and allows for discussion. Support staff members can provide handouts that identify the red flags that indicate that a child or a family is in trouble; the resources that are available in the school and school community resources, with contact numbers; and ideas for how teachers can be present, positive, and available for students and one another. Ask your school psychologist for resources like these. It is important to recognize the vital role that all staff members play in promoting healthy student behavior and the direct link that successful teaching and learning has to such behavior. Be sure to acknowledge and appreciate the extra effort on everyone's part and be sensitive to staff members who may be struggling themselves. This can be a stressful time for everybody, so it is important to provide stress management resources to whomever needs them.

Engage parents. Many parents are feeling anxious about how to help their children cope with their family situation. School-based mental health staff members can help facilitate parent information sessions or develop handouts that provide guidance on how parents can talk to their children about their financial situation, how to help their children and themselves manage stress, and how to access school and community resources.

Seek parents' input and participation. Some can and will want to be a resource of support for the community. All staff members should be prepared to interact with parents who may be reluctant to share their circumstances, hard to reach, difficult to deal with because of their stress levels, or need intervention because of the impact of their behavior on their child. Mental health staff members can provide guidance on effective outreach, communication, and resources. It is imperative to be respectful and nonjudgmental and work from the belief that parents have their child's best interest at heart and are doing the best they can. Finally, plan to keep families connected to the school over the summer. Continue to provide information through the school's Web site and by e-mail. Consider keeping an information clearinghouse available in the front office.

Move to a prevention orientation. Unfortunately, in times of increased pressure and shrinking resources, people are tempted to forgo proactive approaches and respond to only the worst or biggest problems. In the case of social-emotional-behavioral health supports, however, the old adage "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure" could not be more true. School mental health staff members can be underutilized if their services are fragmented and not prevention oriented. From a staffing point of view, support staff members can often influence more students when they adopt a prevention perspective and develop interventions that help all students cope with difficult times. Although their role in assisting individual students will always exist, contemporary models of school mental health delivery emphasize the importance of addressing interventions toward the entire school (Doll & Cummings, 2008).

Incorporate social-emotional learning into the curriculum. Elementary school students may need help separating fact from fiction with regard to the financial crisis, and explanations need to be given in age appropriate, nonthreatening terms. The information they get from television or their friends is probably not reliable and may actually increase their anxiety. Being factual and reassuring is critical, particularly for young children who can often imagine things are worse than they are. For older elementary age students, this can include explaining other difficult times the country has overcome and helping them identify times when they and their family have coped with challenges. Young children may need to express their feelings through play or art activities. Teachers are in an ideal position to integrate this information into health education, social studies, and other classes. School mental health staff members can help teachers incorporate strategies for helping children cope with stress.

Educating the Whole Child

Crisis is a time of risk and opportunity. The opportunity for principals lies in the possibility of using the strategies outlined in this column to advance the agenda of educating the “whole child” in their school. Research shows that programs of social-emotional learning coupled with positive behavioral supports, home-school collaboration, and a school mental health program integrated into the functioning of the whole school results in better achievement for all students. In the short term, such action is necessary to maintain the progress schools have made in recent years. For the long term, taking some of the proposed actions may increase student achievement and coping skills for years to come. This difficult time will pass, and if principals seize upon the crisis as a chance to enhance how they deliver services to students, the effects of their efforts will be seen long after the economy begins to recover.

References

Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL). Retrieved February 4, 2009, from www.casel.org

Doll, B., & Cummings, J. A. (Eds.). (2008). *Transforming school mental health services: Population-based approaches to promoting the competency and wellness of children*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

Sidebar 1: Stress Symptoms and Protective Factors

Symptoms of Stress and Anxiety in Children

- Irritability or unusual emotionality or volatility
- Increased behavior problems
- Sleep difficulty or nightmares
- Inability to concentrate
- Drop in grades or other functioning
- Headaches or stomachaches
- Unexplained fears or increased anxiety
- Regression to earlier developmental levels
- Isolation from family activities or peer relationships

Factors That Help Prevent Stress and Anxiety

- Positive problem solving and coping skills
- Close, supportive relationships at home and school, with peers and adults
- Clear expectations
- Permission and ability to learn from mistakes
- Developing competencies (e.g., academic, social, cocurricular, and life skills)
- Consistent, positive discipline

Sidebar 2: Self-Care in Stressful Times

Educators are used to managing stress, but given the road ahead, it might be useful to review your own strategy checklist: sleep and nutrition, friends and social activity, exercise, hobbies and time “off-line,” and a healthy family life. It is impossible for any of us—parents, teachers, or even principals—to care for others unless we care for ourselves. Many of these same self-care strategies apply to students as well.

Understand your reaction to stress. Everyone reacts differently in stressful times. Think about how you gauge your own stress level. Pay attention to your physical reactions (e.g., muscle tension, fatigue), thoughts (e.g., difficulty concentrating, thinking negative thoughts), and behaviors (e.g., wanting to avoid situations).

Recognize your sources of stress. There are usually multiple factors that interact with one another to increase your stress at a given time. Become aware of your triggers to stress.

Consider your coping strategies for stress. High levels of stress can increase unhealthy coping behaviors (e.g., drinking alcohol, over- or undereating). It is important to self-assess your behavior: are your behaviors in response to stress or are they routine?

Find healthy alternatives for coping with stress. There are many healthy alternatives to help reduce stress. If you have engaged in less healthy coping strategies, keep in mind that change may be difficult and will not occur overnight. Change can occur in small steps, however, if you focus on one specific behavior at a time. Suggested healthy stress-relieving strategies include exercise, taking a walk, meditation or yoga, or talking with supportive people.

Meet your own needs. When we are actively helping others, we often forget about our own needs. Lessening stress involves maintaining healthy living, such as eating right, getting enough sleep, drinking water, and being physically active. It is also important to recognize when you need to take a break or even time away from work. Even short breaks in the middle of the day to listen to music or to engage in light reading can make a big difference.

Get support. Although it is difficult, there are many times when we need support from family and friends to help reduce our stress level. This may include visiting and talking, or just being around others who serve as a support system. If your stress levels continue to be overwhelming, you may want to consider seeking assistance from a mental health professional who can provide further resources for dealing with stress and changing unhealthy behaviors.

Sidebar 3: How Parents Can Help

- Maintain as much of a normal family routine as possible.
- Be available and open to talk when your child is ready.
- Answer questions honestly and calmly while staying optimistic.
- Be aware of changes in your child's behaviors and emotions.
- Encourage your child to tell you if he or she feels overwhelmed.
- Give your child extra hugs. Children feeling anxiety may need extra physical affection and one-on-one time such as reading books with you and having you sit with them at bedtime.
- Encourage healthy and diverse friendships and staying involved in cocurricular activities.
- Encourage physical activity, good nutrition, and rest.
- Keep your child aware of anticipated family changes. Acknowledge that change can feel uncomfortable but reassure him or her that the family will be OK.
- Do not hide the truth from your child. Children sense parents' worry and the unknown can be scarier than the truth, but avoid unnecessary discussions in front of your child that might increase his or her stress or anxiety and keep all conversations at a developmentally appropriate level.
- Help your child be part of the decision-making process when appropriate.
- Some children will feel better if they can help; identify tasks that are reasonable and don't overburden them.
- Reassure your child that it is not his or her job to fix the problem and that you will take care of the family.
- Emphasize the family's ability to get through tough times, particularly with the love and support of family and friends.
- Find time to relax and have fun together. Family dinnertime may be especially important.
- Discourage an excessive focus on the news.
- Monitor your own stress level. Take care of yourself.
- Communicate with school. They need to know if your child is struggling. They have resources to help.

What Next?

The National Association of School Psychologists has developed a series of brief resources for schools to use in support of students and families during these difficult economic times. These are available for download at www.nasponline.org/educators/economic.aspx and may be adapted to the specific needs of your school. In addition, principals can refer to related Student Services columns from Principal Leadership at www.nasponline.org/resources/principals/index.aspx.

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