

***As in-person classes resume, pandemic-triggered stressors may take their toll on student behavior and security's response.***

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# GRACE PERIOD





ILLUSTRATION BY STEPHANIE DALTON COWAN

**Students around the world learned a harsh lesson in 2020:**

pandemics can have devastating impacts on lives, economies, and schools. As a result of the coronavirus pandemic, schools closed, academic terms were truncated, routines were broken, and uncertainty and anxiety permeated students' home and social lives. Many school systems considered how best to reopen and weighed physical health and safety measures, but school psychology and security experts cautioned not to discount students' state of mind.

Most teachers and school officials acknowledge there is a typical re-adjustment and relearning period for students after any break—whether it's a three-month summer vacation, a two-week holiday, or even a snow day. The first few weeks of term are often spent reviewing lessons from the previous year.

However, the series of events related to the COVID-19 pandemic are decidedly different. Schools had to shift gears quickly—often with limited resources—to prepare for virtual learning instead of classroom education. In the United States, school buses were reconfigured to deliver school lunches or Wi-Fi to students at home. Academic performance was frequently judged on a pass-fail system, and students were isolated from their friends, peers, and role models at developmentally critical times.

Students are also at additional risk during the pandemic due to potential parental unemployment, food or housing uncertainty, financial stresses, or illness or death in the family, says Dr. Franci Crepeau-Hobson, an associate professor and director of clinical training at the University of Colorado Denver School of Psychology. Crepeau-Hobson is also cochair of the National Association of School Psychologists' School Safety and Crisis Response Committee.

"Folks who were already stable, had some resiliencies, and had some really strong support systems are going to weather this adequately well," she says. "But those kids who were already vulnerable are the ones we're going to have to be the most concerned about, whether that was because of a preexisting mental

health challenge, a disability, or what was going on at home."

Thirty-two percent of California students in grades 5-12 who were not receiving mental health services felt they may need them during and after the pandemic, according to a survey by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of Southern California in late April 2020.

Before COVID-19, 65 percent of students rated their mental wellness—defined for the survey as the ability to cope with the normal stresses of life and work productively—at 7 or above on a 10-point scale. But at the end of April, less than 40 percent of students rated their mental wellness at the same level; 23 percent of students rated their mental wellness at 3 or lower, signaling a need for action and assistance.

The survey noted that students frequently described their mental state as bored, lonely, overwhelmed, and anxious, particularly noting concerns about schoolwork, the wellbeing of their families, general uncertainty, and missing out on typical school experiences.

"Students have been so very isolated from their peers at such important social development periods, and they have been disconnected from the larger community, while parents are struggling," says Michele Gay, cofounder and executive director of Safe and Sound Schools. "No matter how functional a family is or how well suited it is to withstand this type of challenge, parents have been distracted. If they're lucky, they are able to work from home, but it's been a challenge to support their kids, to keep them on track with academics, to deal with their frustrations, anxieties, and depression, all while handling their own responsibilities within the family. Kids have been sponging these effects up.

"So, when we are able to reconnect—hopefully in the fall—we

know schools are not going to be the same. We know kids will be coming back with a lot of negative experiences," she adds. "They will have felt the effects of stress on the family—financial stress, the day-to-day stress of being locked in together. There will be academic regression, and we know to expect social-emotional regression. Oftentimes these things manifest in negative behaviors—bullying, being grumpy, disconnected, or oppositional. School is going to be more about reconnecting and developing a supportive culture and learning how to communicate again."

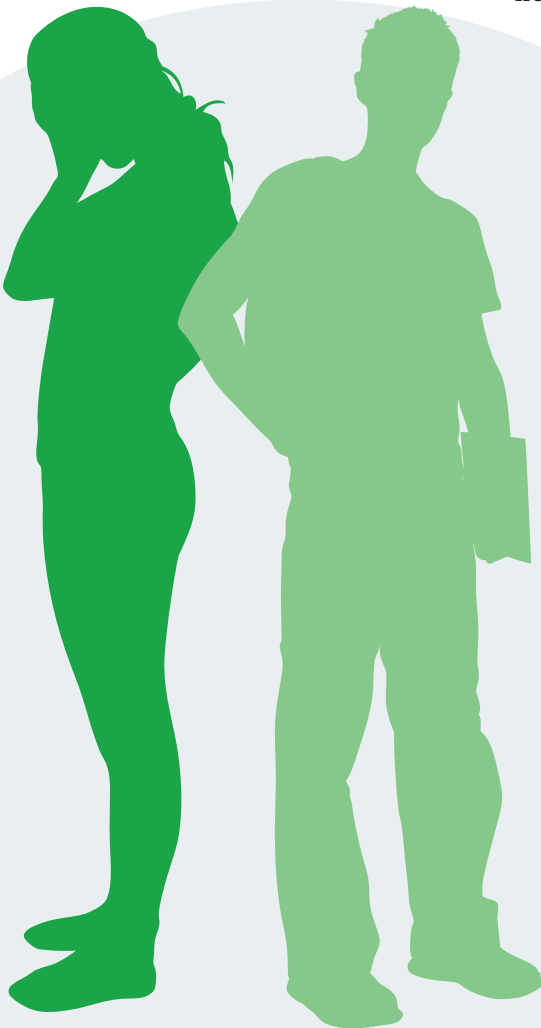
There is also the uncertainty of not knowing what the fall will look like because "we don't have an expiration date on COVID-19," Crepeau-Hobson says. To cope with this uncertainty, it is helpful for school districts to remind personnel and educators about existing processes for reporting warning signs that a student is struggling, as well as refreshing procedures around school security, student support, hygiene, and education.

Security's role in this process might seem invisible to most stakeholders in the community, Gay says, "but we know that the school environment has a tremendous impact on the sense of safety, the feeling of safety. The underlying foundational feeling of safety is even more important than ever, especially when emotions are high and students and staff come back to school with anxiety. To simply be able to show that the space is as safe as it possibly can be, that supports the sort of social-emotional environment that we to build."

### **Stress and Student Behavior**

Once the realities of the pandemic started to set in among American school districts, Safe and Sound Schools almost immediately started getting reports of emotional effects on students, educators, and administrators.

As schools reopen, school officials need to "be prepared for the emotions," Gay says. "People can be very unpredictable when experiencing unknown emotion. As excited as we all are about the prospect about returning to school,



it's not going to be the school that we left. We're going to return with different experiences. Security and safety personnel, administrators, and teachers all need to be prepared for that. Be on the lookout for warning signals or signs that someone might need support or help—students, parents, or staff members—and have prepared safe spaces. People might need a safe, quiet place to retreat, regroup, or have a conversation with a counselor or peer.”

In addition, be prepared for challenges to school officials' authority. In the early stages of the pandemic, schools were bombarded with information and guidance—much of it nebulous or conflicting. Students were paying close attention to the misapplication of information, and they may be distrustful of new guidance once schools reopen, says Paul Timm, PSP, president of Facility Engineering Associates, P.C., and a member of the ASIS International School Safety and Security Council. Some students might even be more well-informed than school officials about the virus, and they might walk into the building and question new measures in a show of defiance or disagreement, he says.

Students will wonder what to expect when coming back to school, and it is likely that school staff will experience a period of students' testing the limits of new measures, Crepeau-Hobson adds.

Upon their return to school, students might be emotionally shut down or worried, or they could become disruptive and aggressive. In response, schools need to provide tangible signs of how safe the school is, both physically and psychologically, and create a caring and connected environment, she says. This might involve performing some tasks—like cleaning and sanitizing—during the school day to ensure that students see the precautions being taken, on top of measures such as physical distancing, Plexiglas barriers in lunch lines, or staggered school schedules.

At the end of this honeymoon period, Crepeau-Hobson says, if adults have done their jobs, students will feel safer and act out less.

A united front will go a long way to heading off these behavioral challenges. When the school district speaks with one voice and communicates openly about new measures and the rationale behind them, it can help diffuse any student-faculty tension over health and safety measures.

When disruption does occur, however, make sure school discipline is woven in with support—both at the academic and social-emotional levels, she adds.

### **Physical and Psychological Safety**

Students are processing the effects of the pandemic in a number of different ways, Crepeau-Hobson says, but the warning signs of a child in trouble remain largely the same: sudden changes in personality or behavior, withdrawal, aggression, changes in academic levels, indications of lethargy, and self-harm.

Children with the tendency to externalize their emotions might exhibit a constant state of alarm, requiring additional reassurance.

“All this uncertainty is really tough for people—we don't feel safe because we don't know what's going to happen. We're walking around in this constant state of alarm where our brains are communicating 'I'm not safe, I'm not safe,' so we're kind of on edge anyway,” she says. “Some folks are better at managing that and regulating themselves, but kids often need help. You may see more dysregulated kids, which means they can't manage their own behavior and their own emotions.”

In response, faculty can be trained to watch for warning signs and changes in behavior and learn how to respond. It's key not to jump to conclusions—if a student acts out in the classroom, for example, he or she might simply be having trouble readjusting to school routines due to their anxiety. At the beginning of the year, Crepeau-Hobson recommends cutting students some slack.

Additionally, provide some means for students to regulate their emotions. This could include modifying academic

expectations so the first few weeks of school have less pressure to achieve, restructuring the school day to add more breaks, or adding calming activity sessions between classes.

It's also fundamental that adults themselves are emotionally regulated. “If you have dysregulated adults, you are not going to have any regulated kids; they're going to be a mess,” she adds. “So, we have to make sure that adults are walking in feeling safe and supportive, and that they know what to do, because that's empowering.”

School security personnel should also partner with social-emotional leaders such as school counselors and psychologists, Timm notes.

“This is a collaborative effort, and we should be relying on their expertise more than ever,” he says.

Pandemic-related stress is likely to heavily affect students with mental health challenges, says Guy Grace, director of security and emergency planning at Littleton Public Schools in Colorado. Over the remote learning period at the end of the school year, Grace and his security team performed welfare checks and virtual check-ins with students who missed virtual classes or exhibited signs of stress.

“Suicide risk and mental health risk have not decreased at all; they may have increased. We wanted to make sure we didn't let those kids fall through the cracks,” he says.

Schools play a pivotal role in getting at-risk students help, even if stressors originate from outside sources, says Dr. Scott Poland, co-director of the Suicide and Violence Prevention Office at Nova Southeastern University. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, suicide is now the second-leading cause of death for individuals between the ages of 10 and 34 in the United States. In 2017, 517 children aged 10-14 died by suicide in the United States; among 15- to 24-year-olds, 6,252 died by suicide.

School districts can set aside a 45-minute briefing for staff to review mental health crisis warning signs and procedures for how to refer a student to

get help. Giving the school counselor time to address the faculty about how to escalate the issue can clarify both warning signs and next steps for school staff. It will also increase awareness of mental health and suicide risks in schools, particularly when considering the additional stressors introduced by the pandemic, Poland says.

When classes resume in person, however, schools are likely to feel the financial burden from COVID-19 mitigation measures, which could take a toll on school safety initiatives like mental health or school violence prevention, Grace warns. It will be a difficult balancing act in the near-term to respond to the immediate threat of COVID-19 without losing sight of long-term, ongoing risks.

In addition, he says it is security's role to ensure students are comfortable with the new health and safety measures put in place. After the shooting at Columbine High School in 1999, schools across the United States introduced hardening measures like metal detectors or high fences, which

was frightening, especially to younger students. If students are met at the door by a medical professional during the pandemic, it could scare them away from returning to school, Grace says.

"School systems can't avoid the responsibility of relieving fear and

existing anxiety, Grace adds. For elementary school children, schools can emphasize handwashing, hygiene, and physical distancing, and keep other mitigation methods in the background—similar to what school security personnel do for severe weather

**“Educational empowerment is critical to maintaining a functional school environment.”**

anxiety as much as possible when students come back,” he says. “We have to be careful about how we do this. We have to put the best practices in that will protect kids and staff members, but also help ensure that this is a place teachers want to come to teach, students want to learn, and parents won't worry about their kids in school.”

Education around COVID-19 mitigation measures can be tailored to students' developmental levels to ensure mitigation is not compounding

drills and education. But at the middle and high school levels, students can be more empowered to take care of themselves and others.

“It's all about empowering students and staff on how they can deal with emergencies,” Grace says. “Education goes a long way in mitigating the fear and the angst that people are going to have on a day-to-day basis. Educational empowerment is critical to maintaining a functional school environment.”

## Caring for the Caregivers

Students are far from the only ones under significant pandemic-triggered strain. School budgets are stretched, educators have grappled with the shift to virtual learning, and school personnel have been forced to cope with personal loss, financial uncertainty, and emotional stress.

In this respect, Dr. Scott Poland, co-director of the Suicide and Violence Prevention Office at Nova Southeastern University, recommends following the advice of airplane safety: Put your own oxygen mask on first.

“Kids are going to look to the adults in their life to see how upset to be about something, and understandably a lot of adults are fearful and anxious,” he says.

Poland suggests adults remember the simple mnemonic CALM: Control, Availability, Listening, Managing.

In the midst of uncertainty and change, remember what you can control: your responses and following recommended medical guidelines. Second, be available for children. “Most kids just need an opportunity to talk about their experience,” Poland says.

Third, listen closely to what students say, and when

possible, limit media consumption to avoid overstimulation and stress. Finally, manage your reactions and emotions as best you can because children are monitoring actions as much as words for cues on how to respond to stress.

Using this model, school security personnel can serve as role models for students, intervening in emerging conflicts and demonstrating appropriate behavior.

Security personnel are “supposed to be a resource, they're supposed to be a symbol of safety, they're supposed to take active steps to keep kids safe,” says Dr. Franci Crepeau-Hobson, an associate professor and director of clinical training at the University of Colorado Denver School of Psychology.

While many school stakeholders primarily associate security with physical safety, they are key to psychological safety as well, she adds. “By being a connected member of the community, by being out in the hallways and lunchroom and on the playgrounds, they are visible, connected, and seen as a resource for kids, to let them know they're okay.”

**Communication**

Students will look to parents and teachers to see how to react to stressors, Poland says, and nothing undercuts a safety message quite like politics.

In presenting a united front around school safety measures, teachers and faculty should strive to keep political opinions, emotional responses, and personal views out of the way. Poland recommends displaying confidence in the people making decisions—especially the scientists and subject matter experts searching for solutions—and collecting input from students and staff on how to make existing school-specific measures even better.

“The wisest decisions are made by a group of people,” Poland says.

At Milton Hershey School, a pre-K through 12th grade residential school for underprivileged children in Pennsylvania, collaborative

communication has been essential in pandemic response so far. Of the school’s 2,200 students, 500 remained on campus during the initial months of the pandemic in the United States. This required the reconfiguration of student housing to focus on social distancing and virtual learning, and as of *Security Management’s* press time, the school is finalizing a system to safely reintroduce students returning to campus.

“Communication was one of the key things right out of the gate,” says Rick Gilbert, senior director of campus safety for the Milton Hershey School. “A lot of schools, like us, felt like we had some good pandemic plans in place, but not to this magnitude...We always revisit what kind of communications can we get out there and how quickly can we get it out without causing a panic, and providing accurate information at the same time.

Given that information was evolving so quickly, within a matter of 48 hours, things would change all over again.”

In response to the rapidly shifting health crisis, the school established a COVID-19 taskforce under the incident response function. Through that taskforce, the communications team collected input and content to share with parents, sponsors, staff, and leadership in a cohesive message.

When students’ parents or sponsors had specific questions, they could send them through a dedicated email address. Daily emails with relevant updates were sent out to staff, leadership, and parents or sponsors respectively, and more timely information was shared via mass notification tools, Gilbert says.

Communication with students is also vital, he adds. Milton Hershey’s family resources department has established

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rapport with students and their families to keep in touch and address challenges while students are off-campus. The counseling department is available to help address any student anxiety or angst, either remotely via teleconferencing tools or on campus.

Campus safety is tasked with how to keep COVID-19 mitigation efforts, such as physical distancing measures, in line with existing security.

“I know we will get called upon to enforce some of that,” Gilbert says. “It’s critical for our folks to understand that our students are coming in with lots of pressure and anxiety. We’re not here to crack down. They’re not in trouble. They’re kids—this is a challenge for them as they see their friends and try to interact. It’s going to be critical for us to educate our students on why we’re

doing this, but we’re not looking to come down and enforce what that social distancing looks like. We want to explain that this is for their health and for their classmates’ health.”

Depending on how the new measures are treated, heavy-handed enforcement could quickly escalate into confronta-

tion, Gilbert warns. “The situation’s already tense enough without us raising the anxiety level.”

With residential students, campus safety staff already has an established relationship with students and can de-escalate conflict more effectively. At initial signs of defiance or misbehavior, security personnel can talk with the student, and after a few quick questions they learn why that behavior shifted.

“Their routine has completely changed, and they have learned to grow and understand that this is the new norm, and we’re all trying to figure this out,” according to Gilbert.

“Take an extra two or three seconds to explain the why,” Gilbert says. “Our students are very resilient, and I think sometimes we underestimate them. Sometimes they just want to be part of the process.”

Students have a lot of insights to bring to the table when developing, adjusting, and deploying new safety measures, Timm says. School districts can bring students into briefings about security systems and new safety measures, he advises.

In addition, districts can recruit student subject matter experts to teach school personnel about emerging technology (learning

how to navigate the latest social media like TikTok can help schools respond to digital bullying or threats and help students adjust faster, Timm says) or challenges within the student body.

These sort of short training sessions—whether a three-minute briefing on new video surveillance coverage, a

## “Empathy can build bridges.”

social media primer, or an open discussion on how new COVID-19 mitigation measures are working—can have long-term effects on program buy-in and participation.

“School is all a preparation for vocations and learning and becoming contributing citizens. This is the best time ever to bring students in and get their feet wet in leadership roles,” Timm explains.

In the midst of widespread uncertainty during the pandemic, tapping students for these briefings can also empower them and help them regain some control and confidence.

To connect further, Timm recommends being frank and open with students about challenges and concerns that administrators, faculty, and educators have had during the pandemic, whether that’s expressing regret over missing out on a baseball season or acknowledging uncertainty about what comes next.

“As much as we want a united front, and we want to speak with confidence about our decisions, I do think there’s a part of us that has to be transparent,” according to Timm. “If adults and administrators are able to be relationally transparent—just letting kids know that we’re in the same boat—I think that’s going to cause there to be some camaraderie that we’ve missed out on until now...Empathy can build bridges.” ■

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