Pandemic-Related Transitions:
P-3 Learning Contexts

Across the nation, young students, pre-school through 3rd grade, are experiencing transitions in their learning contexts due to the COVID-19 pandemic. "School" may be in-person, at-home, on-line, or a hybrid of these arrangements. And the school year may have begun in one format and have shifted, once or multiple times, since then. While these "rolling" changes may be initiated when individual students, families, teachers, principals, or other staff experience personal or family illness, their effects are felt by many. Sometimes these changes affect classrooms or clusters of students/families because of, for example, exposure to COVID-19 and resultant quarantines. Other times, they affect entire schools, districts, or communities when public health requirements are updated. These changes may last for a few days, a few weeks or months, or for the entire school year. Families with privileges may weather these transitions without major issues. However, many who are disproportionately affected by the pandemic could face devastating consequences that impact their financial stability, family well-being, or child's learning and development.

Elementary schools and districts that serve PreK-3rd graders are constantly trying to ease these transitions for students, families, teachers, and staff. While there is no manual providing the "right" solutions, research points to helpful strategies. In addition, given that every district in the country faces similar challenges, they can learn from one another while making these tough decisions. To this end, this document has been informed by both research and crowd-sourced ideas from numerous districts across the country.

Support young students' fundamental needs

Child development provides essential guidance about effective ways to support young children.[i] Young children, from birth through age 8, need to feel supported, safe, and have close emotional attachments to adults who are important in their lives in order to flourish. The levels of stress and uncertainty during the pandemic are unprecedented. At toxic levels, stress can impede a child's behavior, cognitive capacity, and emotional and physical health. Moreover, young students cannot be expected to learn when their basic needs (e.g., safety, food, housing, medical care) are not being met. Young students learn best by doing, when they are engaged in dynamic ways that help them make sense of and connect to their world. Importantly, during this time, school systems need to be most concerned with building their own capacity to be "ready for children," by responding to children's and families' needs.

Examples of pandemic-related changes to learning contexts:

Individuals/Families:
- Need to quarantine due to COVID-19 symptoms or exposure (for students, families, teachers, or staff)
- Need to stay home due to heightened risks of getting sick (for students, families, teachers, or staff)
- Face housing and/or home instabilities (e.g., loss of income, housing, or changes in schedules)

Schools/Districts institute:
- Changed or extended holiday schedules
- Rolling school/program closures
- Hybrid schedules of in-person and remote learning

Communities experience:
- Mandatory stay at home orders (e.g., public health requirements)

Strategies for Districts and Elementary Schools

Districts and elementary schools play important roles in meeting their students' fundamental needs. Across the country, districts are leaning into core strategies that reflect research. During times of transition, school districts, elementary schools, and their early care and education (ECE) partners help ensure children's fundamental needs are met when they:

- **Prioritize relationship building across all learning contexts.**
  - Ensure learning contexts (whether on-line or in person) provide students with opportunities to develop positive and supportive relationships with adults and peers.
  - Create ways for teachers and staff to provide calm, reassuring interactions with students and their peers across all delivery mechanisms, especially during times of transition.
  - Through homework assignments and other school-provided guidance, encourage families to interact and spend quality time with their children (e.g., provide questions/prompts for families to ask children).[ii]
  - Make efforts to connect with families who are not accessing educational services by engaging school social workers and conducting community outreach to message the importance of school and the available resources.

- **Provide predictable routines for students (to the extent possible).**
  - Prioritize student populations with greater needs for in-person learning (e.g., youngest students, students who receive special education services).
  - Establish reliable routines (e.g., morning circle time) that are practiced no matter the learning context and rely on the same teachers as much as possible.
  - Support families in building structure and routine at home as needed.[iii]
  - Continue to improve and simplify distance learning offerings—for example, limit the number of online platforms used, host shorter sessions, and offer synchronous and asynchronous learning options.

- **Focus on meeting students' basic needs.**
  - Create multiple avenues for families to communicate with teachers and schools (e.g., website, text messaging, telephone), providing ample opportunity for students and families to ask for help.
  - Prioritize working with family support specialists, counselors, medical professionals, and other local services to meet family needs.
  - Focus on meeting basic needs through the provision of meals, technology, internet hotspots, etc.

- **Ensure learning is active and experiential, reflecting the whole child.**
  - Prioritize learning activities that promote socializing, movement, and play.
  - Analyze curriculum to prioritize lessons that are most important and relegate those that are not, and consider which lessons are practical to teach in multiple formats.[iv]
  - Invest time and money in social-emotional supports and instruction (e.g., mental health professionals, social-emotional general education instruction).
  - Continue to devote time to integrated arts instruction (e.g., art, music, physical education), even in virtual settings.

- **Have developmentally informed conversations with students.**
  - Talk with students about pandemic-related closures and other transitions in an age-appropriate way that engages their scientific minds.[v]
  - Provide opportunities for students to access books, websites, and other activities that present child-friendly information about COVID-19, and ensure adults are available to answer their questions and talk about their concerns.[vi]

Partner with families

Consistently, research points to the positive impacts that family engagement and meaningful home-school relationships have on student well-being and outcomes.[vii] Under normal circumstances and especially during the pandemic, it is important to provide a range of opportunities for families to serve as able partners in and knowledgeable advocates for their child's learning, recognizing the assets each family holds.[viii,] Given the myriad of pandemic-related transitions, it is critical for school staff and families to build "dual capacity" to support each student's success and well-being.[ix] This means that both schools and families will be strengthened by the collaboration and that, through these partnerships, families have shared agency and leadership to impact change.

Strategies for Districts and Elementary Schools

The uncertainty caused by the pandemic, as well as the ever-changing context of "school," is extremely stressful for many families with young children. During pandemic-related transitions, authentic engagement with families can be strengthened when districts, schools, and their ECE partners:

- **Recognize and honor the immense stress families are facing.**
  - Support the well-being of families and help them find their calm.[x]
  - Validate what families are feeling/experiencing and help them plan how to cope with transitions.
  - Dedicate time to engage with and coach families at times that work best for their schedules (e.g., during the school day, evenings, weekends).
- **Communicate early and often, in a streamlined fashion.**
  - When transitions are being considered, communicate as early as possible so families have time to adjust their plans.
  - Coordinate communication from the district with schools, teachers, PTOs, and other groups communicating with families.
  - Utilize a central communications platform that allows for two-way communication with families, so their questions are answered quickly and efficiently.
  - Keep communication channels active and provide multiple ways for families to reach out with questions and concerns; however, use caution not to cause confusion by sending inconsistent messages through different platforms.
- **Acknowledge and coordinate with their child care needs.**
  - Be sensitive to the fact that families may struggle with ensuring their children are in supervised, safe places when learning moves to all- or partially-remote.
  - Help families identify where and how they can access licensed child care and share resources about financial assistance that may be available to them.
  - Develop strategies with child care programs and providers to promote student learning and share distance learning content.
  - Host virtual roundtables with the child care community and families to discuss their needs, build understanding, share curriculum, and partner on distance learning content.
- **Support and simplify learning at home.**
  - Reduce the number of virtual tools families need to utilize (e.g., learning platforms, video technologies).
  - Provide families with the physical materials and resources they need to support learning at home (e.g., digital devices, curriculum materials, books).
  - Provide at-home learning kits with materials that promote experiential play and utilize the basic materials families already have at home.

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- **Find ways to stay socially connected and build community.**
  - Connect with families by partnering with community partners such as libraries, faith-based organizations, museums, and others to co-host virtual activities (e.g., play and learn groups).
  - Find ways to encourage and facilitate social connections among families and student peers by sharing contact information (with permission) so they can, for example, have video calls with one another or meet at a playground, in accordance with local public health recommendations.

Address teachers' and staff's needs

Teachers and other staff who work with young students are required to have knowledge of many subjects, to be able to nurture their students' motivation to learn, and to base both on a deep understanding of how young students develop and learn. During the pandemic, there are increased pressures for them to be effective using multiple formats, adjust their lesson plans or simultaneously plan for both in-person and online formats, and be responsive to the needs of families more than ever before. At the same time, they are juggling their own families' needs and changing circumstances. Research shows the impacts of stress and workplace fatigue on teacher satisfaction and student learning are significant.[xi] It is important to be mindful about how much teachers are being asked to learn and adapt right now.

Strategies for Districts and Elementary Schools

Teachers and other staff need just as much support during pandemic-related transitions as students and families do, and districts, schools, and their ECE partners can help when they:

- **Prioritize self-care.**
  - Message and support the importance of teachers and staff taking time for self-care. Encourage them to "put their oxygen mask on first" to be able to sustain their support of others.
  - Pay attention to the emotional state of teachers and staff in relation to their jobs and check in regularly about their personal circumstances.
  - Promote a culture that values high levels of trust and appreciation; share successes, celebrate when things go well, and use humor when appropriate.
  - Normalize the stress reactions teachers and staff may be experiencing and offer options for self-care to do individually and/or with a group (e.g., mindfulness activities, opportunities for physical movement, information/training on social-emotional wellness).
- **Provide professional learning and hands-on support.**
  - Limit professional learning content to the most essential topics and ensure it is responsive to teachers' and staff's immediate needs.
  - Use professional learning time wisely to engage teachers to reflect on their own practices, observe and engage with other teachers, and co-construct shared strategies.
  - Hire teachers to work remotely in coordination with in-person teachers.
  - Utilize para-professional staff to support teachers with remote learning (e.g., lead small groups, help with classroom management).
- **Facilitate collaborative teamwork and shared leadership.**
  - Prioritize collaborative time to work in teams (e.g., reserving a half day each week); it is more important than ever to ensure teachers do not become isolated.
  - Provide opportunities to share their personal success stories about teaching during the pandemic, especially teachers of special education, dual language and English language learning, and PreK and kindergarten.

- **Streamline and simplify communications and planning.**
  - Utilize a central communications platform that allows for two-way communication between teachers/staff and families so information can be shared, and questions can be answered, quickly and efficiently.
  - Support teachers to use a centralized learning management system to streamline professional and technological supports provided.
- **Work with their child care needs.** Similar to many families, teachers and staff may struggle with ensuring their children are in supervised, safe places when learning contexts shift.
  - Provide flexible work arrangements as much as possible, and help them identify where and how they can access licensed child care and financial assistance.
  - Offer on-site, free or low-cost child care at school.

Summary

Many of the issues facing elementary schools and districts during the pandemic are out of their control. The diffuse levels of decision making related to the spread of the pandemic means that changes to learning contexts may be required with little to no notice. It is important to acknowledge that many schools and districts are also struggling with staffing shortages and budget cuts that make this work even more challenging, and it is more critical than ever to prioritize equity and inclusion for students and families with greatest needs. Leaders in elementary schools and districts are making decisions to the best of their ability and there is no plan or answer that will appease every stakeholder. The recommendations and strategies above are intended to inspire new thinking or validate good work that is already being done.

This resource will be updated as we gather additional wisdom from the field. We welcome feedback and suggestions at pthru3@ucdenver.edu.

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