Using the WSCC Model to Address COVID-19's Impact on Schools

The pandemic redefined learning for almost all of the nation. As the world came to a halt, schools shut down and rushed to find a way to keep connected with students. Now that the education system is coming up on a year of hybrid or online learning, best practice are being found and documented. But what are these practices and what is the most impactful way to teach and support children and families. Many schools have been successful in their re-entry efforts and have been able to assess and change plans as needed.[i] There are several priorities that are addressed when discussing the wellness of students and staff; safety regulations, educational growth, and physical and mental health.

Although there is not a universal best-practice for online or hybrid learning, there are ways to create a safe school environment. In every school's pandemic plan, the first goal is to address the safety and health protocols. Once these protections are put in place, the framework for the rest of the plan can begin. Engaging students will look different for almost every school. Programs can develop over time as teachers find what does and does not work for their students. Videoconferencing for long periods of time can cause stress and fatigue in students, especially younger children.[ii] A key factor in resource focus are the students experiencing greatest challenges. Remote or hybrid learning can be difficult or students with learning disabilities, families with low social and economic status, or difficult home environments. Although many schools may have been re-opened and education is back in session, there are continued ongoing challenges for families due to the pandemic. Feeding America notes that one in four children is at risk of hunger during the pandemic.[iii] Reaching students and families can have many challenges, however there are ways to break the barriers. Commitment to individual families is

shown when schools personally reach out and maintain communication regarding wellness and education expectations. Feedback from families is key for schools to know how things are actually going at home. "Our students knew what to do—we just had to transfer that expectation to families." —Dr. Burth, Assistant Principal, West Homestead K–8 Center, Miami-Dade County Public Schools. i-Ready, the learning institution conducted interviews of over 150 schools to find the best practices. The following themes were found: 1. Schools eliminated all technological barriers, 2. There was a commitment to reaching out and talking with every single school family and maintained communication throughout the year, 3. Feedback loops were integrated into all assessments regarding COVID-19 learning and prior years, 4. Educator followed up and help each other accountable, celebrating the wins and problem-solving the criticisms. [iv] Although these findings show that there are successes in online learning, it is also important to note that virtual learning cannot replace great teachers.

Adults, children, teachers, and students alike have experienced the internal stressors of the pandemic. The emotional toll of COVID-19 has raised awareness of the need to address anxiety, depression, and other mental-health issues as a precondition to helping students learn. [v] This begs the questions, what areas should schools address to promote holistic wellbeing? The KIPP Foundation charter schools have developed a character framework featuring the seven traits most predictive of academic success: zest, grit, optimism, self-control, gratitude, social intelligence, and curiosity ("Focus on character," KIPP Foundation, kipp.org). KIPP Foundation schools outperform peers in both test scores and college enrollment[vi]. For schools that haven't yet integrated those lessons, now would be a great time to start. Remote, hybrid, or in-person models, it is important to address relationships and emotional check-ins to ensure students are

mentally ready to learn in their environments. Dr. Martinez with the American School Health Association states, "Youth engagement presents an exciting prospect for school leaders, policy makers, and program planners to gain a deeper understanding of the factors that influence individual and community health and wellbeing and, in turn, helps them to develop responsive policies and programs" (Martinez et al., 2020). The holistic wellness approach is addressed in the Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child model (WSCC). The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) states that the WSCC model "focuses on the child to align the common goals of both sectors to put into action a whole child approach to education" (CDC, 2014). Dr. Tempkin discussed the trauma students may face because of COVID-19 altering their learning styles.[vii] She emphasized the WSCC model's approach to dealing with change with such a magnitude as the pandemic. Dr. Tempkin states, "Schools can create learning environments in which students' basic needs are met and where instructional practices and cultural norms create a safe and welcome space for all students" (Tempkin et al., 2020). This model can be viewed as the grass-roots approach to building a healthy and better school. The pandemic has taken away many opportunities, however the chance to rebuild schools' programs may just be a blessing in disguise.

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