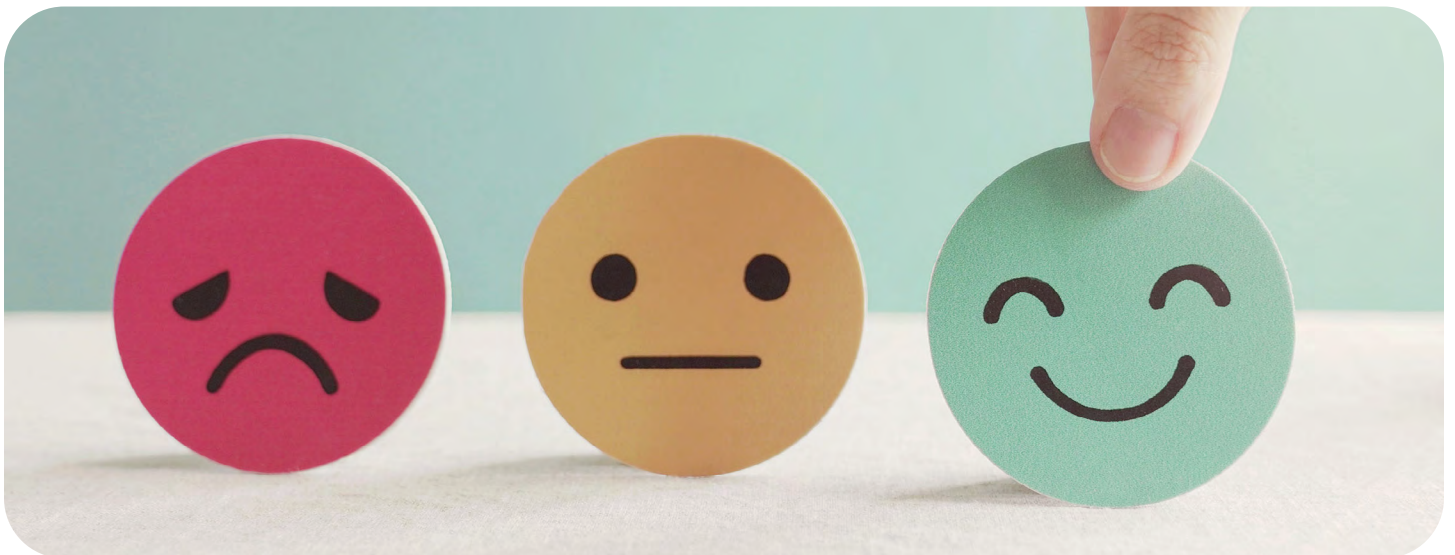


The COVID-19 pandemic placed tremendous pressure on the mental health and well-being of students, families, and educators alike. As schools navigated these novel challenges, the critical importance of supporting every student's individual social and emotional needs emerged. Innovative practices from throughout the pandemic have shown that meeting these needs not only equips students to navigate challenges of the current moment, but serves as a [prerequisite](#) for all students to engage in academic learning. Thus, when schools intentionally center student mental health and well-being, they reimagine inclusion and belonging as a broad, school-wide commitment to fully supporting all students, including students with disabilities.

To foster school cultures that are fully inclusive of all students, educators and school leaders should:

- ✓ [prioritize staff well-being as a foundational component of inclusive school cultures,](#)
- ✓ [center trusting relationships as foundational to learning,](#)
- ✓ [value social and emotional learning alongside core instruction, and](#)
- ✓ [streamline structures to engage families as partners in student learning](#)

When schools make these shifts toward building inclusive cultures, they cultivate a widespread sense of belonging that is critical to improving educational outcomes and advancing equity for students with disabilities.



Key Shift 1: Prioritize staff well-being as a foundational component of inclusive school cultures.

The extreme conditions of education during the pandemic placed enormous, new stress on school leaders and educators, as well as on students. As a result, both staff morale and retention have rapidly declined. Before schools can effectively cement cultures of inclusion and belonging for all students, school leaders must first ensure that staff—especially those who work with students with disabilities—feel valued and supported in their work.

School Leaders should:

- Equip educators with resources and support for meeting the social-emotional needs of students across learning environments. For example, create a survey for educators to measure students' sense of belonging within their classrooms, rather than asking each educator to develop surveys themselves.
- When using flexible [staffing models that plug in staff to support students](#), work collaboratively with educators to design schedules that are responsive to their needs as well as to the needs of students. For example, schools are experimenting with flexible start and end times for teachers that allow them to shift their working hours earlier or later so they can balance personal responsibilities.
- Collect regular feedback from staff on well-being and use this data to make improvements to educators' experiences. For example, a recent staff survey suggests teachers are being forced to spend after-school and weekend time planning for personalized learning approaches. School leaders should support teachers in using resources for individualized instruction within high-quality instructional materials, rather than creating resources from scratch, and reexamine planning time to ensure teachers can use it to focus on the most imperative planning tasks.

Why It Matters

Inclusive school cultures that meet the needs of all students require teachers to work in new, challenging ways. In this context, it is critical that educators are fully supported by school leaders so that they can effectively support the learning needs of their students. This holistic view of support is foundational to inclusive school cultures in which students and staff alike can succeed.



Key Shift 2: Center trusting relationships as foundational to learning.

In the absence of school-based connections for students with disabilities during the pandemic, educators thought strategically about building relationships grounded in trust and understanding that would carry across learning environments. Building on these approaches, educators and school leaders can purposefully plan for these relationships to streamline past practice and build a critical foundation for student learning.

School Leaders should:

- Redesign educator student-facing time and provide resources for personal teacher-student and student-student engagement. For example, support teachers on lunch duty in overseeing lunch buddy programs, or help educators structure time for one-on-one student-teacher check-ins within a [station teaching model](#).
- Encourage educators and related service providers to collectively build relationships with students by scheduling time for service providers to join classes, whether in-person or virtually, and collaborate with teachers to build supportive relationships with students.
- Streamline school-wide methods to collect feedback on students' sense of belonging, and use these data to adjust current practices or develop new routines to foster inclusion. For example, a leader might develop school-wide classroom entrance routines based on monthly survey data that diverse learners feel excluded when entering classrooms.

Educators should:

- Use existing classroom schedules and structures to provide opportunities for social engagement and trust-building with students such as activities like morning meetings, community circles, or lunch buddies.
- Embed [relationship-building activities into instruction](#) to build social relationships with students while delivering core content.
- Normalize regularly collecting and acting on feedback on students' socioemotional experiences, using either high-tech (ex. Zoom polls, surveys in Canvas) or low-tech (ex. Paper surveys as exit tickets) options.

Why It Matters

The COVID-19 pandemic has made it abundantly clear that meaningful connection is critical for student success: trusting relationships with educators and school leaders form the foundation for students to engage in learning. When educators and school leaders explicitly plan for and measure student belonging, they make clear the value of student experience and connection. This novel focus on relationships redefines inclusion from academic participation into a deeper sense of valuing the belonging of all students, which is critical to equitable outcomes for students with disabilities.

Key Shift 3: Value social and emotional learning alongside core instruction.

The pandemic bore new social and emotional challenges for students, especially for students with disabilities, while also illuminating and exacerbating existing challenges. While many schools implemented SEL before and during the pandemic, SEL often functioned separately from core instruction, placing additional, disjointed demands on educators and students alike. Moving forward, educators and school leaders can legitimize SEL's importance and impact by systematizing implementation in alignment with core instruction.

School Leaders should:

- Select high-quality SEL curricula for schoolwide use (ex. [Second Step](#)), and provide professional development to all educators on how to utilize resources for digital learning and individualized support within the curricula.
- Include measures of socioemotional learning alongside academic evaluations (ex. walk-throughs and observations) and count socioemotional learning as a core indicator of student and school-wide success.
- Guide IEP teams to routinely include a review of SEL needs as part of the annual IEP team meeting, and bring in additional expertise (e.g. counselors, school psychologist) and/or data to make well-informed decisions on emerging student needs. If the IEP team develops SEL goal(s), provide support to reach them, in alignment with other instructional goals.

Educators should:

- Within SEL instruction, provide individualized support to students to meet specific needs by [leveraging resources for personalized learning within SEL materials](#).
- Build in opportunities for students to practice SEL skills within the delivery of individualized support. For example, if a student is frustrated with reading because of foundational learning gaps, support them to identify and express their emotions while also providing additional instructional resources or related services support.

Why It Matters

The challenges of the pandemic have made social and emotional skills critical for student success. When schools align SEL to core instruction and personalize delivery to meet specific student needs, they ensure that all students, including those with disabilities, can learn these crucial skills. This unprecedented level of equity and inclusion within SEL ensures all students are supported in successful learning.



Key Shift 4: Streamline structures to engage families as partners in student learning.

When school buildings closed and homes became the new classrooms, educators and school leaders needed to work more closely with families than ever before. To meet this unprecedented need for close communication between school and home, schools developed novel ways to partner with families in working toward students' educational goals. Schools can more fully support all students, including students with disabilities, when they streamline these practices of family engagement.

School Leaders should:

- Continue to use and evolve school-wide systems for families to stay updated on their student's learning, leveraging technology schools adopted during the pandemic. For example, use a school's LMS for families to track academic progress, and use social media pages to provide school-wide updates.
- Develop school-wide structures to build relationships with families and develop their capacity to support student learning at home. For example, offer online workshops for families on using assistive technology to help students with homework, or develop parent groups for families of students with similar support needs to share resources and build community.
- Make family resources available in multiple languages and formats (ex. offer workshops with both in-person and asynchronous, virtual options) to ensure all families can fully participate.

Educators should:

- Build tools to engage with families and collaboratively support students in reaching their goals into in-person and virtual teaching models. For example, use a school-wide LMS system to provide updates to families on student progress, use a running google doc to provide weekly updates on classroom progress, or use a [classroom social media page](#) to streamline virtual communication with parents.
- Building on school-wide family support opportunities and resources for individual instruction within high-quality instructional materials, work with families to offer additional support to meet student needs. For example, if a student is struggling with math skills, offer a personalized learning platform that students can use at home for extra practice, and refer parents to a school-wide training on supporting students in using the technology.

Why It Matters

All students, including students with disabilities, learn best when families, educators, and school leaders align their support at school and at home. By building systems for close, collaborative, and inclusive relationships with families into existing structures, schools can ensure that educators have the capacity to engage with families, families feel involved and equipped to support learning, and students are fully supported in their education.

Want to learn more? Email support@spedstrategies.com for more information.

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