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Supporting Successful Transitions Following School Closures: Considerations for School Personnel

BY KATIE N. B. SEARS, CARINA R. TURNER, & GINA COFFEE

School closure is a relatively recent epidemic affecting thousands of students nationwide. In 2011 alone, more than 1,900 schools closed nationwide, displacing in excess of 320,000 students (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). Students and families experiencing school closures present with a unique set of circumstances that may significantly impact students' academic, social, emotional, and behavioral success. Given the unique needs of these students, school personnel have an obligation to prepare for transitions related to school closure and carry out effective and evidence-based practices. This article will address the unique challenges faced by students affected by school closure; provide suggestions for evidence-based practices to reach students within a framework of multitiered support; and also address the importance of professional self-care, including a discussion of strategies by which school personnel can ensure their own personal and professional well-being during school closure.

THE EXPERIENCE OF STRESS FROM SCHOOL CLOSURE

Stress is one way the human body responds to the demands of the environment, relationships, and an individual's perceptions (National Association of School Psychologists [NASP], 2012). Although some stress is considered "good" in that it motivates an individual to work hard and be productive, too much stress, which occurs when the body is unable to physically cope (NASP, 2012), can have deleterious effects.

One significant source of stress for children and adolescents that crosses the school, home, and peer domains is change or transition in the student's life (Suldo, Shaunessy, Thalki, Michalowski, & Shaffer, 2009). Although little to no research has been conducted on the stress related to transitions due to school closures, several researchers have assessed stress in terms of family transitions (e.g., divorce, parent job transfer), natural transitioning between grades (e.g., elementary to middle school; middle school to high school), transitioning students in military families, and transitions as the result of natural disasters (Bradshaw, Sudhinaraset, Mmari, & Blum, 2010; Suldo et al., 2009). Given the similarity of transitions due to school closures to other types of transition, specifically the students' loss of stability, connectedness, and support (NASP, 2010), this research can guide best practice of school psychologists and other school personnel supporting students and families experiencing a school closure.

During times of transition, researchers have noted that students often experience significant stress as a result of separating from close friends, having to create and maintain positive peer relationships in their new schools, attempting to infiltrate social systems and networks already in place at their new schools, and adapting to the school's culture (Bradshaw et al., 2010; Suldo et al., 2009). Additionally, students may experience stress related to logistical concerns, including learning the new school building's layout and schedule, understanding new policies and academic requirements, and potentially catching up with missed academic content (Bradshaw et al., 2010; Suldo et al., 2009).

Despite these commonalities, other aspects of the transition may influence the amount of stress experienced, and students and school personnel may differ in their views of the actual cause of the stress. For example, Elias, Gara, and Ubricco (1985) surveyed middle school administrators and sixth-grade students transitioning to middle schools and found the administrators primarily viewed academic issues as the most significant sources of stress, specifically increased schoolwork and more stringent expectations from teachers. However, the students actually viewed conflicts with authority figures (such as not getting along with new teachers), missing friends from their previous schools, and not having their correct class materials as potentially the most stressful aspects of transitioning (Elias et al., 1985).

Similarly, individual students likely also feel and display stress in different ways, as there is no single profile for a child who is feeling stress. Signs of elevated stress may include increased symptoms of psychopathology (in particular externalizing behaviors), irritability, and unusual emotionality in addition to academic problems, such as drops in grades and difficulty concentrating (NASP, 2012; Suldo et al., 2009). Some students may also isolate themselves from their family members or peers, while others may experiment with substances. Depending on the child's age, he or she may regress to earlier

developmental levels and present with toileting or eating concerns, somatic symptoms, and difficulty sleeping or having nightmares (NASP, 2012). In addition to these signs, students may also be at increased risk for truancy, grade retention, dropout, and delinquency (NASP, 2010). Children in transition after a school closure may experience any number or combination of these signs or risk factors. In fact, they may be exacerbated if other significant sources of stress of transition are also present in the child's life (e.g., physical transience, family stress due to poverty, lack of stable parenting; NASP, 2010).

SUPPORTING STUDENT OUTCOMES

School personnel, including school psychologists, are in a unique position to support successful student outcomes in transitioning after a school closure. Broadly, in addressing concerns related to social support, parents and teachers should focus on helping develop a sense of connectedness and belonging to the child's new school and community (Bradshaw et al., 2010; Elias et al., 1985; NASP, 2010; Powell & Marshall, 2011). Specifically, the development of positive, trusting relationships with peers or adults at the new school can promote continuity and improve student outcomes following this transition (Elias et al., 1985; Powell & Marshall, 2011).

A sense of connectedness can be created in several ways. First, parents and school personnel can promote participation in extracurricular activities to help the child quickly assimilate to his or her new environment (Bradshaw et al., 2010; NASP, 2009), as such a connection to other peers and adults in the school building can predict success after a school transfer (Powell & Marshall, 2011). Additionally, administrators and teachers can foster students' connection to other peers who are going through a similar ordeal (Bradshaw et al., 2010). In the context of school closures, it is likely a student will transfer to a school with some of the students from his or her original school.

Additionally, peer mentoring programs have been found to be effective in helping new students learn their new school's layout, learn information about programs and extracurricular activities offered at the school, and build networks of support among peers (Bradshaw et al., 2010; Cushman, 2006). School administrators who are aware of several students transferring to their schools as a result of school closures can prepare for this by working with support staff to proactively develop such a program to be implemented before the school closure event takes place. In many circumstances, school closures are announced several months before the closure takes place. In such cases, students who know a transfer to a new school is imminent can meet peers and learn about the school before they leave the current setting. This can help the students get excited about the new environment.

Finally, students may also have special education needs that must be addressed, and some students may require more direct support from school psychologists, depending on their ability to cope with transition and stress. Specifically, some students may benefit from participation in social groups or individual counseling to address mental health concerns they are experiencing as a result of their transition to a new school (NASP, n.d.). In fact, *School Psychology: A Blueprint for Training and Practice III* (Ysseldyke et al., 2006) outlines school psychologists' roles in designing and implementing prevention and intervention programs to address specific issues related to overall wellness, including stress management, healthy diet, and physical health (NASP, n.d.), which may be impacted during transition to a new environment.

A MODEL FOR STUDENT SUPPORT

Ensuring that proactive practices within a multitiered framework are in place at the school for all students can help new students transition more smoothly. On a universal level, this includes implementation of school-wide positive behavior supports, which foster supportive and positive relationships between students, families, and school personnel, as well as mental health screening and interventions for those students in need (NASP, n.d.); however, some students will need more intensive support. One model that can be used as secondary or tertiary support for students is Collaborative and Proactive Solutions (CPS; Greene, 2008).

CPS is designed to help teachers and parents work specifically with students with behavioral challenges. Although the examples provided by Greene often focus on students who have longstanding behavior problems, CPS is a technique that can be used with students experiencing temporary difficulties as well, such as a school closing. Students who learn that the school they are attending will be closed or who have already transitioned to a new school following a closure face stressors that can make coping skills they already have less accessible. The uncertainty about their new school, whether or not they will be able to maintain the friendships they have formed, and if they will have the same level of support they currently have can lead to a level of anxiety and stress students may not know how to handle, which may result in a wide array of behavioral, social, emotional, or academic difficulties.

It is difficult to predict specific ways in which students will react to a school closure. Fear of losing friendships may lead students to be more talkative in class, causing normally quiet students to become disruptive. Conversely, students may withdraw from peers and adults, or teachers may begin to see more interpersonal conflicts between students. Academic problems could arise as student investment drops, or stress may cause students to complete work less carefully or not complete work at all. The flexibility and individuality of CPS, however, makes it a useful strategy for school personnel to implement with students affected by school closure no matter what the behavior may be, allowing edu-

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cators to work more closely with these students to teach them the coping skills needed to manage their stress and anxiety. It is based on one fundamental principle: Children do well if they can. Following this logic, if children are not doing well, it is because they cannot do so. In other words, children do not purposefully get into trouble. Rather, it is the lack of skills that leads them to behave in ways inconsistent with expectations.

Greene holds that the way many people think about how to approach student misbehavior (e.g., requiring increased structure, more consequences for misbehavior, and more rewards for desirable behavior) assumes that the student already has the skills necessary to meet the expectations placed upon him or her. CPS, on the other hand, is based on the exact opposite assumption: The student lacks these skills, and the role of the adult is to teach the student these lagging skills (Greene, 2008). Only after learning these skills will the student be able to improve his or her behavior.

A challenge in using CPS is identifying exactly which skills a student may be lacking. For example, how can a teacher understand why a student is disruptive in class or why she “blows up” when asked to do a problem on the board? To help educators identify these skills, Greene developed the Assessment of Lagging Skills and Unsolved Problems (ALSUP) checklist (<http://www.lostatschool.org/pdf/ALSUP.pdf>). The one-page form provides a number of examples of lagging skills, ranging from “Difficulty handling transitions, shifting from one mind-set or task to another” to “Difficulty appreciating how one is coming across or being perceived by others” (Greene, 2008, p. 283). The ALSUP also provides space to write in unsolved problems that may serve as triggers for undesirable behavior. The unsolved problems may be anything from a specific location or activity where the problem occurs most often (e.g., carpet time, silent reading time, or the lunch line) to a situation that elicits the undesirable behavior (e.g., being redirected or being called on to answer a question). Identifying both the lagging skills and unsolved problems provides a foundation on which a plan can be developed.

The ALSUP is a crucial component of CPS, but the core of CPS is collaboration. As NASP’s *School Psychology: A Blueprint for Training and Practice III* (Ysseldyke et al., 2006) indicates, school psychologists are trained to collaborate with other professionals and parents to help students succeed. However, rarely do educators collaborate with students. CPS, on the other hand, emphasizes the need to work with the student to find a mutually satisfactory solution to the unsolved problem a student is experiencing. Greene calls this “Plan B” (Greene, 2008) and distinguishes it from other problem solving strategies that find a solution that is either satisfying to the adult only (Plan A, which simply forces the adult’s agenda on the child) or satisfying to the child only (Plan C, which allows the child to continue the inappropriate behavior without consequences). Plan B focuses on acknowledging the concerns of both the student and the adult and developing a plan that is satisfactory to both parties. The plan includes both emergency and proactive techniques for dealing with unsolved problems and teaching lagging skills in the process. The hope is that, in finding this mutually satisfactory solution, both students and adults can work together to remediate the students lagging skills, thus increasing the student’s ability to do well because he or she can.

CPS is a practical, inexpensive, and personalized approach to helping students with behavioral, social, emotional, or academic difficulties. Its focus on lagging skills makes it especially appropriate for use with students in transition due to a school closure; many students have not experienced such an event before and, therefore, may not know how to handle the stress and anxiety they are feeling. CPS helps students to build these skills while decreasing the impact these lagging skills have on their day-to-day performance in school. The support provided to the student, as well as the increased ability for a teacher to manage problem behaviors, can make the transition process less stressful for all.

SUPPORTING SCHOOL PERSONNEL

Of course, students are not the only individuals affected by school closures, so it is essential that school personnel impacted by a school closure also take important steps to ensure their own self-care.

Self-care is not an indulgence. It is an essential component of prevention of distress, burnout, and impairments. It should not be considered as something ‘extra’ or ‘nice to do if you have the time’ but as an essential part of our professional identities. (Barnett, Johnston, & Hillard, 2006, p. 263)

To effectively support the social-emotional needs of students, school personnel must also care for themselves. Certainly, establishing and maintaining a balance between other-care and self-care throughout one’s career as a helping professional is beneficial to one’s well-being. However, self-care is especially necessary during times of heightened stress or crisis, such as school closings, as uncertainty, change in employment, or loss of employment can instill intense feelings of worry and helplessness, among others. This sense of helplessness or overwhelm may also be experienced by school personnel working with students at their new schools, especially at those schools which receive multiple transitioning students. To this end, the development and use of self-care strategies is of critical importance.

Self-care involves actively sustaining one’s professional and personal selves through the intentional use of self-care strategies. Skovholt and Trotter-Mathison (2011) identified multiple factors that sustain and deplete the professional self. For example, sufficient salary and benefits may sustain one’s professional self, whereas insufficient salary and benefits may deplete it. Similarly, low levels of organizational conflict may sustain

one’s professional self, but high levels of organizational conflict may deplete it. Although systems factors such as these can be out of one’s control, other individual factors are more malleable and can directly influence professional self-care during a school closing. In particular, during a school closing, school personnel may wish to seek peer and supervisor support; maintain a sense of humor and playfulness, to the extent possible and appropriate; and attempt to create a positive closure experience with others.

In addition to factors that may sustain and deplete one’s professional selves, multiple factors may influence one’s ability to care for one’s personal self during a school closing. Whereas professional self-care ensures, to some extent, that one feels fulfilled in his or her work, Skovholt and Trotter-Mathison (2011) suggest that personal self-care permeates one’s life and “should focus in part on producing feelings of zest, peace, euphoria, excitement, happiness, and pleasure” (p. 196). As such, personal self-care involves nurturing multiple selves, including the emotional, financial, humorous, loving/being loved, nutritious, physical, playful, priority-setting, recreational, relaxation/stress reduction, solitary, and spiritual or religious selves (Skovholt & Trotter-Mathison, 2011). Although this list is extensive, yet arguably not exhaustive, it does begin to highlight the need to care for oneself on multiple levels. During a school closing, it may be especially beneficial for school personnel to nurture their emotional selves by fostering self-compassion and also recognizing that they, too, benefit from the types of care and supports they provide for students.

Admittedly, it can be quite difficult for helping professionals to shift their attention and care inward rather than outward toward students during a school closing. One initial step to promote self-care may be the development of a self-care action plan (Skovholt & Trotter-Mathison, 2011). A self-care action plan consists of two parts: (a) the assessment of one’s other-care versus self-care balance and (b) the development of an individualized action plan. In assessing balance, school personnel reflect upon and proceed through six steps including the assessment of stress level at work, other-care-self-care balance, professional self-care, personal self-care, positive strategies, and self-care strengths and weaknesses. School personnel then use the data from the assessment to inform the development of an individualized action plan focused on one or two specific self-care goals. Furthermore, for each identified goal, one specifies the plan for meeting the goal and the planned consequence or reinforcement for maintaining the new behavior. Finally, during implementation, one may wish to use goal attainment scaling to monitor self-care progress (Coffee & Ray-Subramanian, 2009).

CONCLUSION

In summary, school closures may be a significant source of stress for students and school personnel alike. Students and families present with unique concerns related to stress from their transition to a new school community. School personnel at both the home and receiving schools must collaborate to ensure that positive peer supports and home-school connections are in place for all affected students, with additional support given to students requiring more intensive academic, behavioral, or mental health services. To do so effectively, it is of critical importance that school personnel experiencing school closure also ensure their own self-care during this time in order to maintain professional balance and wellness. ■

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