Northeastern Family Institute
Bringing Vermont Children, Families, and Communities Together

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While COVID-19 is a novel virus and potent stressor in the lives of most people, many components of our social-emotional recovery are baked into our biology. Our families, cultures, faith, schools, and organizations have passed down practices to deal successfully with adversity and struggle. Equipped with these traditional practices, the pandemic will provide an opportunity to develop innovations that can be integrated with the existing ways we recover from, and build resilience to, community crises. What will be most remembered by those we raise, lead, and connect with is our humility and humanity during this crisis.

End Well, Plan Well, Begin Well: Re-establishing the School as Community
General Considerations: Healing from Collective Crises and Trauma

1. **We heal collectively and we need our leaders/caregivers to promote, support and resource our well-being**. When our parents, caregivers, leaders, supervisors, coaches, and mentors optimize their *own* well-being, then our workforce and students will benefit. Adult well-being is an act of altruism, both in families and organizations.

2. **We have great wisdom about healing from collective crises and trauma.** It is time to consult our roadmaps, wisdom practices, faith, family lore, and safety plans as beacons during difficult times.

3. When we celebrate, reinforce and engage in family connections, friendships, and professional affiliations, we can improve the healing potential of our interconnections and interdependence.

4. The priority for schools and other social institutions is to *both* address health/ mental health *and* promote achievement. **Positive academic outcomes has to be a priority and students will catch up fastest when we prioritize the emotional well-being of everyone in schools.**

5. **Resilience is relational**, at both the individual and organizational level. Our success largely depends on the network of supports we have; the more support we have, the more interconnected we are, the more resilient we become. Resilient people and resilient groups need three things: a sense of purpose, a sense of belonging or interconnection, and the capacity to make meaning from experience.

6. Resources may initially be limited in schools, and our human capital will be even more important than ever.   Creativity, re-allocation of resources and relying on the abundance of healthy adults in our schools will help counteract these challenges. We will not be able to outsource SEL; all adults and capable students will have to work together to moderate stress, collectively. To this end:

   ⇒ Consider how using Reflective Practices, Participatory Leadership, and Relational Leadership skills can contribute to workplace and organizational resilience.
   ⇒ Consider how using Restorative Practices and Mindfulness will help to develop student resilience. We will need to rely on the strength of our students as part of the problem solving and stress reduction equation when school re-starts.

End Well: Making Meaning

The four-phase process of restoring well-being after a collective crisis is a dynamic, interrelated one. While each of the phases are represented individually, they are interconnected. Individuals and agencies rarely heal in a linear fashion, as stressors re-emerge, are re-examined and worked through during the process.

Schools typically do a terrific job of ritualizing the end of the school year with traditions that help the workforce and students celebrate accomplishments, reflect on efforts, and consolidate academic and social-emotional gains. During collective crises, it is even more important to **make meaning** *of the events that have occurred. Meaning making is a process of reflecting about, learning from, integrating knowledge, and improving oneself following significant events.*

> **Themes:** Responding, Recovering, and Reflecting

1. **Responding**: This refers to the process of establishing safety and security during a crisis. First responders, parents, educators and other professionals are tasked with addressing basic needs for food, water, housing, money, medicine and with re-connecting with loved ones and providing psychological first aide. The need to respond to the pandemic will continue, yet most schools/districts are *transitioning* from their initial response to recovery. Responding is actualized through processes like Psychological First Aide, Triaging, Critical Incident Debriefing, Safety Planning, and Child Safety Teams.

> **Skills & Tasks:** Data gathering, prioritizing, problem solving, Continuous assessment and identification of populations at high-risk.

2. **Recovering:** Recovering is centered on re-establishing norms, habits, schedules, and routines. Crises are destabilizing and our routines and structure provide us with a sense of purpose and a means of helping address uncertainty. We recover by telling the truth about facts and feelings, and we recover when we grieve and acknowledge our losses. Recovery rests on our capacity to re-engage with important people and activities. It is an active process; talking sets the stage, yet action is transformative. We estimate that between 60-80% of the strategies and interventions needed for recovery are well known to us. That leaves about 20-40% for innovation and trial and error.

> **Skills & Tasks:** Problem solving, managing reactions, promoting positive activities, re-establishing connections, meaning making and silver linings

3. **Reflecting:** The practice of reflection is critical to recovery and is designed to help us examine our own actions, beliefs, feelings, and thoughts in order to improve, grow, and heal. On an individual, group, and organizational level, reflection is necessary for progress and change. When experiences, whether intensely positive *or* negative, are metabolized, processed, and examined, we have a chance to learn, adapt, consolidate, and improve. The process of reflecting allows us to move on, acquire individual and institutional wisdom, and let go of mistakes and miscalculations. **With the urgency of the pandemic comes the urgency to learn from our experiences.** One outcome of reflecting is that we get to tell stories that shapes our views, builds resilience, and helps guide future action. Without shared stories of fear, grief, triumph, and recovery, we risk starting

school with unaddressed 'pre-existing emotional conditions', threatening the tone of the 2020-21 school year.

> **Skills & Tasks:** Reflective practice, time capsules, 'circling up', journaling, relational leadership, radical inquiry

For Students: Children and teens of all ages will need help making meaning of this pandemic. We are a meaning making species; for our survival and health, we constantly try to understand, contextualize, learn from, or avoid based on the meaning we make of events. Generally, the younger the child, the more help they need in this process. The more they process feelings about school being 'virtual', the better the chances they arrive feeling secure, excited, and ready to learn. It is an ideal time to ask questions like:

- o What have you learned about yourself during the pandemic/school-closure?
- o How has the experience changed you? For the better? In concerning ways?
- o What have you missed about school? What have you not missed?
- o What is stressing you the most while school is 'virtual'?
- o What is helping reduce your stress? What is making it worse?

For the Workforce: It is critical that the workforce, all leaders, staff, and faculty alike, have multiple opportunities to talk about their experiences, feelings, worries, fears, and intense reactions about the pandemic and its effects. The more effectively this is done, the better the chances people and organizations will learn valuable lessons from this pandemic. The questions above, as well as the following, can help:

- o Based on what you have learned during this pandemic, which practices, approaches, and beliefs will you change when school re-opens? Describe these as specifically as possible.
- o Who at work will best influence your ability to make and sustain these changes? Can you tell that person, and ask for their support with these changes?
- o What were your successes during this time? What areas were challenging?
- o What do you need from colleagues and leaders next year?
- o What will you remember most about the last few months of school?
- o What are some of your biggest worries for next year?

The end of the school year, particularly this one, **may provide unprecedented opportunity to evaluate our practices, methods, and ways of connecting** with one another and with students, especially those considered high-risk.

> ## Ideas Heard from Around the State: Ending Well

⇒ Encourage all staff/faculty to participate in 3-4 reflective circles facilitated by a member of your school's mental health, resilience, Catalysts/Champions group. It is critical that everyone on the workforce articulate 'their story' as a professional during the pandemic.
⇒ Adapt end of year rituals to do virtually. Capture the spirit if not the in-person experience.
⇒ Pick an hour, one day per week for workforce well-being activities centered on movement, art, fun, and joy. Many districts are doing wacky, silly, and engaging things.

⇒ Leaders are consulting more with the workforce to hear about their experience, collecting information about their performance as leaders and ways to plan best for next year.
⇒ PLC time is being used for reflective practice, social-emotional support, and a spirit of creating space for the workforce to be the 'object of the conversation'.
⇒ Share silver linings and other areas of progress from the year.

Prepare Well: Optimize Summer Preparation

The summer will be, as always, a critical time to continue recovering from the school year, reflecting on gains and missed opportunities, and planning for the new school year. It is likely that there will still be unknowns; flexibility, adaptability, and versatility will be more necessary than ever. A central motto in trauma-informed practices is paraphrased as 'if it is predictable, it is preventable'. With so much unknown, it is more important than ever to weave together our best professional opinions about what to expect.
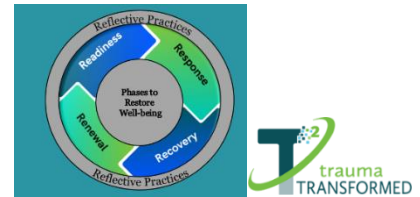
> **Themes:** Recovery, Reflecting and Renewal

1. **Recovery:** At this point, it should be very clear whom in the workforce and student body needs extra support. We all recover at different rates, mostly depending on our access to resources and available protective factors (resilience). The summer affords the time to think about outreach to those with whom we are still worried. **It is essential to identify those in the workforce and student body who are experiencing *relational poverty* because they have a disproportionate burden when school begins again**. We recover best collectively. To this end, the summer affords the opportunity to build or rebuild coalitions with other human services professionals: Mental Health, DCF, physicians, law enforcement, social services, and advocacy agencies. For the students who continue to be acutely concerning, it is time for agencies to work together on their service delivery systems.

> **Skills & Tasks:** Collaboration, data **gathering,** prioritizing, problem solving, assessment and identification of populations at high-risk

2. **Reflecting:** Recovery is improved through *reflecting*. The importance of Reflective Practices is continuous as it is central to quality improvement at all levels of an organization. The summer should allow leaders to examine what they have heard from other leaders, workforce members, families, and students. It is an ideal time to consider practices that enable connection, SEL, belonging, and a central priority. The quality of any school or district re-entry will largely be built by the strength of relationships and connections.

3. **Renewal:** The central task of the renewal phase is to **focus on how we are becoming 'better, but different'**. Resilient people emerge from adversity and suffering changed in profound ways. It is time to rely on traditions and practices that are time tested *while integrating* new ideas generated through the process of reflecting and listening to one another. The nature of trauma and collective crises is that they exposes fracture lines, those areas in an individual, group, and organization where vulnerability appears.

Ideas Heard from Around the State: Summer Planning

⇒ Consider changing Professional Development days by putting trainings in the hands of each school. Individual schools have expertise about what they need most. Survey the workforce to clarify what they need going into the school year.

⇒ Educational leaders should meet with leaders at DCF, Mental Health, Law Enforcement and VDH to build a coordinated services plan going into the school year. It is both unfair and unwise for schools to shoulder too much of the service delivery system.

⇒ Continue to reach out to students at highest risk. Relationship building with some of our youth and families has to be a continuous process.

⇒ Talk about how to optimize Tier 1 interventions. The greater fidelity to Tier 1 interventions, the more likely that a classroom/school will develop a positive rhythm together upon the return to the building. Basic Restorative Practice 'circling up' skills will be amongst the most useful, efficient, and practical ways to re-orient students back to school.

⇒ Many educators have reported great progress in their relationships with *caregivers*. Many stated that they have been extremely optimistic about carrying these relationships with caregivers forward into the next school year.

⇒ **Consider re-assigning school counselors, social workers, special educators, and other mental health staff to classrooms**. While running circles is efficient and effective, it will be complicated in the classes with larger pockets of students at risk. Access to individual sessions will remain important, but not nearly as efficient and effective early on in optimizing Tier 1 supports within classrooms.

⇒ Respite for parents – nothing builds the alliance with a caregiver better than giving them a break from their kids. Provided this is allowable, can school employees go to homes to provide respite? Can the district hire 'local heroes' to connect with kids?

⇒ **Keep caregivers engaged – many educators report amazing surprises connecting with parents during shelter at home.** Start a book group, an on-line chat, or other way of interacting. There is great potential in beginning school with strong alliances with caregivers.

⇒ Highlight and celebrate the incredible progress made in the last months of school during an intensely stressful time. Leaders who send emails, card etc. to their workforce provide great motivation for starting the year well. Catalogue progress as a way to build organizational wisdom.

⇒ Write letters and speak with local politicians and to educational leaders about relaxing academic expectations for the upcoming years. No one in schools needs more stress and pressure.

⇒ Commit summer planning time to teaching the workforce Restorative Practice skills, and beef up fidelity to this and other Tier 1 interventions

Begin Well: Reestablishing the School as Community

Starting the year by building a sense of belonging is essential, as are abundant use of compassion, empathy and validation. When schools do resume, there will be intense feelings of all kinds—relief, anger, fear, excitement, apprehension etc. There will be times when reassurance is critical, as well as times when we just validate and authenticate what others are going through.

> **Themes:** Renewal, Reorienting, Restorative Practices, Resilience

1. **Renewal:** This should be a primary focus as the school year begins—how are we 'better and different'? How are we maximizing the process of *change* to make concrete shifts in our practices? The most resilient people and organizations become so because of how they navigate through and learn from adversity. **Renewal occurs when we restore and then integrate *what was already working* with new and innovative ideas that emerged from adversity and suffering.** This is a great time to re-imagine, appreciate, and indulge innovation.

> **Skills & Tasks:** Relational leadership, radical inquiry/curiosity, circle practices, times to reflect, connections before curriculum, structure, routine, and ritual

2. **Reorienting:** For most students returning to school, the 6-month break represents the longest time away from educators. A majority of will adapt and orient quickly. For a sizable minority, the re-entry to school will be wrought with anxiety, fear, rage, detachment and numbness, and a sense of betrayal. **Some youth will blame educators for the closure, and for all the adversity and suffering that they may have endured. This is an emotional response, not a logical one.** It is born from the reality that some students have not been able to share feelings at home, not escape the heightened levels of stress. Patience, compassion, and repetition will be the fastest way back to helping students adjust to school.

> **Group Process:** The sequence of Forming→ Storming→ Norming→ Performing is instructive here. Generally, these are the inevitable phases of group development on the way towards classroom cohesion.

3. **Restorative Practices**: These will be amongst the most important skills to cultivate when school returns to session, particularly adherence to Tier 1 interventions. Building community, improving accountability, feeling some control over one's environment, combatting uncertainty, practicing executive functioning and self-regulation skills are all enhanced through morning meeting and 'circling up'. It is one of the most effective methods to enhance well-being, and create a sense of belonging and intimacy. These practices act as a firewall that enable us to protect youth from all types of adversity.

4. **Resilience:** One of the most misunderstood aspects of resilience is the focus on individual characteristics like grit and growth mindset. While these can be important, they account for a small percentage of what enhances adaptability and our capacity to thrive and experience posttraumatic growth. **Instead, think about resilience as relational and enhanced most effectively by**

a facilitative *environment*. It is far more effective to change the environment than to focus on changing an individual person. A facilitative environment is one that is relationally enriched, adherent to structure/routine/rituals, and one that enables a sense of control (voice and choice). A facilitative environment has firm limits, high expectations, and clear consequences, is communal and enhances belonging, and is safe and secure. Change the environment, control the context, and people change for the better. Facilitative environments are reflective; people 'circle up', think about their actions and needs, and have access to resources that are important to them.

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Ideas Heard from Around the State: Beginning Well

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⇒ Distributed Leadership/Participatory Management: The pandemic has left many people feeling disempowered, helpless, and uncertain. One way that leaders/teachers can reduce this is to be **more inclusive about decision-making, whether with the workforce or in classrooms.**

⇒ Place members of your mental health team (e.g. counselors, social workers, special educators, trauma experts) directly into classrooms. Identify those classrooms that will need extra support and pre-plan the staffing.

⇒ Do not expect to outsource SEL: Now, more than ever, the entire workforce needs to feel equipped to address SEL needs within the classroom as much as is possible.

⇒ School/district leaders should be advocating very strongly with the state and federal governments to ease academic expectations. We still need expectations but accommodated ones. SEL is a prerequisite for learning for all students. Both typically developed and students at risk are likely to have substantially more SEL needs which must be addressed for effective academic learning

⇒ **Initially taper academic expectations**: Schools have to think more about some type of balance between SEL and Academics such as—Week One 70-30% (SEL-to-academics); Week Two of school 60-40% etc. This is just a conceptual idea. School cannot become summer camp, and the SEL time can certainly integrate with academics. The central point here is to enable relationship building and the process of *forming—storming—norming—performing*. Allowing teacher discretion about this is critical. The point is that SEL, community building and relational health should to be a priority, and when it is, learning will flourish.

⇒ Workforce Well-Being: The quality of care and educational services our students receive is <u>dependent upon the well-being of our workforce.</u> This has to be a priority.

⇒ **Expect Regression**: This is a natural part of dealing with sustained adversity.
Re-examine your reflection from the end of school. Re-establishing school/classroom norms, repetition, and patience will be critical components that aide "catching up".

Final Considerations

⇒ Some students will return with addictive like patterns of substance use, media use, excessive self-reliance, rage, fear, and an 'I don't need you' affect. Truancy make spike.

⇒ Some kids and adults will return to school changed in significant ways.

⇒ The workforce will need to strengthen their capacity to 'hold' powerful feelings from the students. Tolerance, compassion, empathy, validation, and firm boundaries all have to co-exist.

⇒ Children and teens do need unstructured time to play and socialize. However, initially it is wise to limit time that is not mediated by adults. It is essential the there is more adult presence and fun engagement with students in the hallways and other transition times.

⇒ Consider how to use "open gym time" and pre/post school activities, provided this is allowed by the VDH.

This document was created through our collaborative work with the following Districts/Schools (identified with their high school), as well as other Organizations and Scholars:

⇒ BUUSD: Spaulding HS
⇒ Champlain Valley Educational Center: BOCES (Plattsburg, NY)
⇒ Maplehill School and Community Farm
⇒ RNESU: Otter Valley HS
⇒ SVSU: Mount Anthony Union HS
⇒ TRSU: Green Mtn and Black River HS
⇒ WCUUSD: U32
⇒ WCSU: Leland and Gray
⇒ WCSU: Woodstock UMHS
⇒ WSESU: Windsor HS
⇒ Trauma Transformed (SF Bay Area)
⇒ Scholars: Michael Ungar, PhD.; Kelly McGonigal, PhD.; Alicia Lieberman, PhD.; Sandra Bloom, MD; Daniel Hughes, PhD.; Daniel Siegel, MD; Brene Brown, LCSW; Peter Senge, Ken Epstein, LICSW, PhD.; NCTSN; SEARCH Institute; Parker Palmer, PhD., etc.

COVID-19 ~ End Well, Prepare Well, Begin Well: Reestablishing the School as Community (Dave Melnick, LICSW)