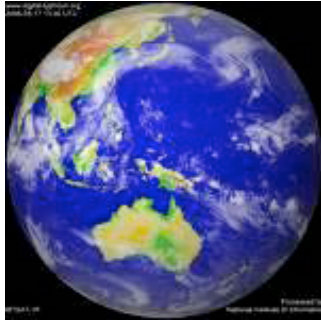




International Network for School Social Work

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Back to School: Slow and Steady

Schools in most countries closed for up to three months to help prevent the spread of COVID-19. Some countries including Vietnam, Switzerland, Denmark, New Zealand and others that were affected early cautiously started to re-open classrooms using wide-ranging modifications that are intended to reduce the likelihood of exposure to the virus. At the end of June, 62% of total enrolled learners are still out of school compared to a maximum of 91% in April, according to UNESCO, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

It is acknowledged that children who are not attending school may suffer adverse effects educationally and psychologically. Children who are already at risk due to disabilities, poverty or family problems suffer the most. There is concern also about an increase in child abuse, in part resulting from increased stress and lack of the monitoring that schools alone can offer. School social workers everywhere are focused both on the children who are known to be at risk and also the total population of schoolchildren whose education has been severely interrupted.

It is known that an abrupt halt of precautions against COVID-19 would result in a spike of infections. Consequently every health agency, jurisdiction and school system is currently attempting to craft measures for re-opening schools in such a way that transmission is avoided. These measures include guidelines for personal hygiene and school cleaning, screening sick staff and children, communicating with families, physical distancing through changes to class size, schedules, calendars and continued distance learning, and providing support services. School social workers will be especially needed as part of the plan for communicating with families and providing support services. Teamwork with all school staff will be more important than ever to avoid sending mixed messages to children and parents and to tackle changes as they happen.

For school social workers the key will be to remain flexible and ready to change gears frequently to meet the changing situation, and to provide the complete range of social work services and avoid a narrow interpretation of the role. The COVID-19 crisis is an opportunity to demonstrate how school social work provides comprehensive support to the whole child, family and community. School social workers are known for handling school issues that no other staff member is responsible for or willing to tackle. These are the difficult problems that frustrate schools the most. There will be more of these tough and sensitive issues when schools re-open. These wide-ranging issues include the

physical, financial, social, medical and psychological health of the students, their parents, caregivers, teachers and all school staff. Some of the probable tasks for school social workers in re-opened schools are:

- Helping schools provide food for children at school and for families in need
- Assisting families in financial difficulty
- Reaching homeless students to provide information about re-opening of school
- Renewing child protection responsibilities of schools
- Helping to determine the educational needs of vulnerable children
- Developing individual educational plans for special situations
- Communicating with families regarding return-to-school policies
- Handling school attendance issues
- Contacting students who are dropping out of school
- Helping schools develop physically distanced activities for playtime
- Providing mental health and support groups
- Helping teachers monitor children for signs of distress
- Teaming with teachers to handle difficult situations that arise

Now is a good time to create lesson plans to use in helping children with their readjustment to school. The lesson plans created at the University of Auckland for coping with the changed environment when children return to school provide a good example. Based on what has been learned about helping school children following disasters such as earthquakes and bush-fires, these lesson plans use the arts to help children express feelings and handle uncertainty regarding the changes around them. The lesson plans beautifully use art, drama, music, poetry, stories and dance.

When the children return to school it will not be possible to ignore the events of the past 2 months. The arts can help the children and their teachers to deal with this and to direct the confusion, fear, anger etc. that may be in the air. The TE RITO TOI website provided by the University of Auckland <https://www.teritotoi.org/> is a resource to get you thinking about developing lesson plans to use when you finally return to school and try to help the children make sense of what has been happening in their lives and the changed world they are living in. TE RITO TOI has numerous lesson plans for all age groups. They are suited to use with an entire class, a small group or can be adapted to use in individual counseling. There are activities involving movement and drama that are especially welcome after children have been confined to their homes with too little physical activity.



Schools in every country aim to teach children positive personal qualities and good citizenship. Steve Hartman and his two young children teach short, online classes about these abstract concepts that help children become resilient and ethical human beings.

<https://www.cbsnews.com/feature/kindness-101-steve-hartman/>