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David C. Anchin Center for the
Advancement of Teaching

STRESS, WELLBEING, AND SUPPORT FOR **STUDENTS &** **SCHOOL STAFF**

Alexis Sanchez, M.A.
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THE IMPACT OF STRESS ON WELL-BEING

Stress is a naturally occurring physical and psychological response¹ from the accumulation of short- or long-term demands placed on individuals.² Physically, the body will react to stress-induced hormones by increasing heart rate, respiration, and muscle tension.³ Psychologically, stress will prompt the body to respond with heightened alertness and attention to what caused the stress.⁴ Stress that is appropriately managed through effective coping mechanisms contributes to well-being⁵, but prolonged stress can lead to chronic conditions: high blood pressure, compromised immune systems, and brain changes (e.g., anxiety, depression, and addiction).⁶ In the context of the COVID-19 crisis, there has been a disruption of typical school activities and an increase of social and emotional distress on educators, caregivers, and students alike. The level of stress has been heightened during the COVID-19 crisis by increased anxiety and uncertainty from months of isolation, abrupt changes of daily routines, and worry about health.⁷

THE ROLE OF STRESS

Teachers play an important role in creating conducive learning environments;⁸ however, teacher stress is also one of the main factors influencing a teacher's performance. Teaching is described as a stressful profession, in which most teachers report being under prolonged stress several days per week and having low job satisfaction.⁹ Multiple stressors are imposed on the teaching profession, including work overload¹⁰, high stakes testing accountability policies¹¹, mental and emotional demands¹², and caseload responsibilities.¹³ Prolonged stress leads to high teacher burnout and attrition¹⁴, with up to 50 percent of beginning teachers resigning within three years of teaching.¹⁵ Higher stress also crucially impacts teachers' surrounding classroom environment and affects the stress and emotional wellbeing of students.¹⁶

IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE STEPS

With only increasing amounts of stress being added to the role of

educators, especially with the unique challenges that the COVID-19 crisis presents, without significant change there will be more educator burnout and worse outcomes for students. Schools and school districts should initially prioritize providing mental health and socio-emotional wellbeing supports for students as they shift back into school buildings and online learning in the coming academic year. To achieve the best results, teachers' and school staff's mental health and socio-emotional wellbeing should also be considered and made a priority as well.

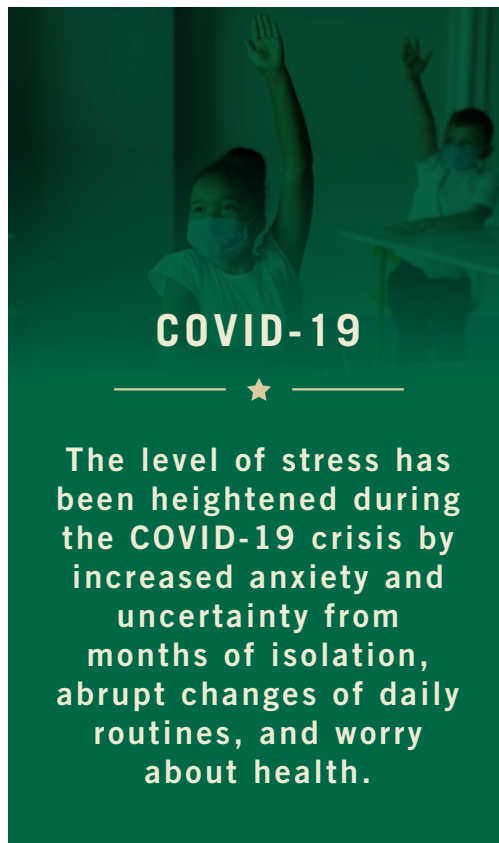
When teachers' well-being is impacted, specifically depression, competence, and emotional exhaustion, the emotional support they are able to provide for their students is negatively affected.¹⁷ Students' perception of their teachers' emotional state, competence and socio-emotional receptivity impacts their behavioral, socio-emotional, and academic performance. For example, teachers' anxiety from the pressure of high-stakes testing can increase student test anxiety and actually result in lower test performance.¹⁸ Thus, a focus on reducing teacher stress to increase teacher well-being can increase students' own sense of well-being and their ultimate school performance. While more research is needed to determine the impact of specific extra supports for both students and teachers in increasing conditions for learning, it is evident that supportive interventions can help boost teachers' students' socio-emotional outcomes.¹⁹

HOW TO SUPPORT EDUCATORS

The need for educator and student supports is clear, yet addressing what these supports will actually look like in the school setting requires additional consideration. Specifically, coping factors, stress reduction, and individual educator and student-level factors should be considered in the schools' resources, programs, and interventions. In order to support educators and students during school re-entry in the COVID-19 crisis, the following guidelines will help to maximize the effectiveness of school efforts.

Establish Support Teams.

Each school should have a



COVID-19



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HOW TO **SUPPORT** **EDUCATORS**



multidisciplinary support team that will help foster the accountability and fidelity of their mental health and socio-emotional support initiatives. This team should be composed of different members of the school and include a school administrator, school psychologist, school nurse, special education teacher, and parent/caregiver, to share their content knowledge, expertise and experience. This multidisciplinary support team will help ensure that program and intervention supports are helping students, and if not, what modifications or changes needs to be made to help assure students' well-being.

Create Safe Spaces. Creating an anonymous safe space through an online form or write-in drop box will help students and school staff be able to reach out for help. An online form would not only help students reach out for help, but also get responses through the school's website including appropriate mental health resources and hotlines that students can access at school or outside of school. Educators would also benefit from the same ability to receive aid in the school environment and at home. An online form can also lead to the appropriate inclusion of conversations, professional development, and lessons for staff about providing mental health support.

Use Proactive Approaches. All schools, with their multidisciplinary support team leading the way, should research and prepare proactive approaches to mental health and promoting wellness. Multidisciplinary support teams should have personnel with content expertise in mental health and socio-emotional health, such as school psychologists and school counselors, and access to evidence-based interventions and school-wide programs. The multidisciplinary teams should then consider the potential benefits and barriers to implementing these mental health interventions and programs, and plan ahead how these interventions and programs will operate. Success ultimately depends on distributing the necessary training and information to the teachers and school staff that will be implementing them.

Incorporate Family Collaboration. Since stress from the COVID-19 crisis will not be felt just at school, it is important to incorporate the students' families

when considering mental health and socio-emotional support services. Schools should check on families' wellness because their physical and psychological health will potentially impact the students' wellness very directly. Schools can also serve as a resource center to ensure that all families can inquire about mental health services, social services, and basic needs. In order to increase the likelihood of success, comprehensive school-based mental health programs need to incorporate families systematically so that the school and family can collaborate on providing effective socio-emotional support strategies for students.



SUPPORT EDUCATORS



ESTABLISH SUPPORT
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CREATE SAFE SPACES

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INCORPORATE FAMILY
COLLABORATION

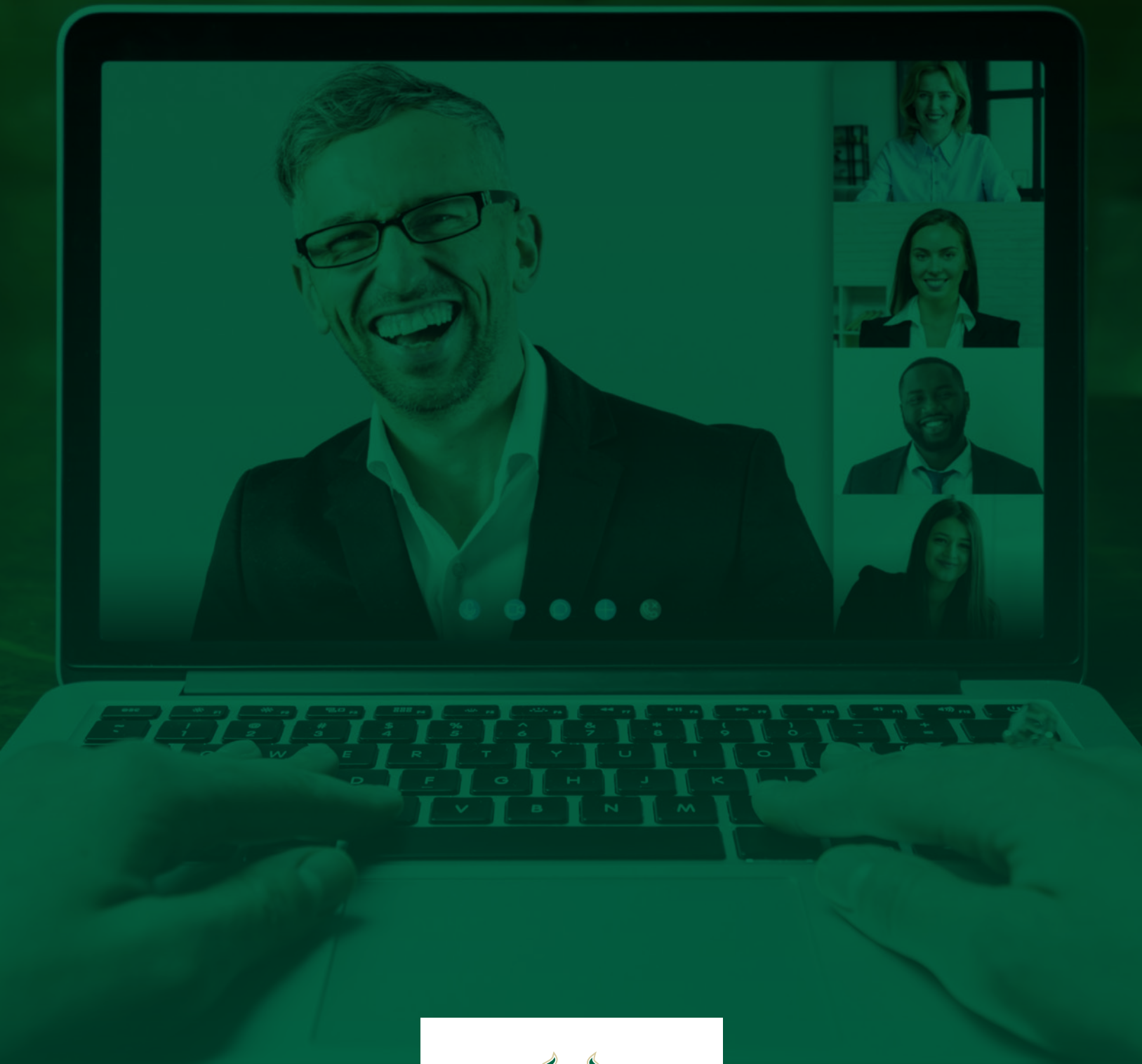
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