



# CONNECTION TIPS

## Welcoming Back Elementary Students

### What's Going On?

Preparing to welcome younger students back to school will ease their transition, especially with the major safety and scheduling changes.

### Tips to Consider

#### Before the First Day of School

- Consider a classroom Zoom “Open House”, to meet with parents/grandparents/family members.
  - Greet families warmly, and individually if possible.
  - Incorporate a video of classroom design with appropriate social distancing measures and sanitizing stations in full view.
  - Explain how you will develop classroom expectations regarding new behaviors including mask wearing, social distancing, and sanitizing.
  - Describe how learning may look a bit different this year, as well as what new engaging teaching methods you may be using. Put on a mask and show the children what you will look like when they arrive.
  - Explain that a first priority will simply be getting comfortable in the new environment and connecting with old and new friends. Instruction will follow.
  - Set expectations about changes to the physical environment (i.e., fewer toys, materials, things on the walls, etc.) that may be necessary so that parents can help their children prepare.
  - Reassure families that children will be instructed at their learning levels. Many families are worried that their kids experienced learning loss and are now “behind.” They will need to hear that the school will be supportive.
  - Remind families that while there will be many classroom changes this year in terms of the number of children, and the way that the furniture will be spaced, you look forward to everyone in the smaller group having more space and knowing one another better.
  - Name social and emotional health as a priority for children and staff and identify school-wide and classroom specific SEL aligned practices. Ask families to consider sending a family picture that can be displayed in the classroom.
  - Share your school district’s or your personal commitment to identify and work against bias and racism in interactions and in the teaching of subject matter.
  - Extend an offer to parents to connect with you privately if they would like to share concerns. Many families have experienced trauma in the last months; some more than others. Let parents and grandparents know that understanding more about a child’s needs helps you do your job better. Provide contact information.
  - Save time for Q and A as it will help you learn what general concerns your parents and students have! If you do not have all the answers, just listening to the concerns is helpful. Assure families that you will get back to them as you learn more.

- ❑ Welcoming the youngest students to school for the first time ever, as is the case for pre-k or kindergarten, presents unique challenges as the rules, routines, and level of comfort with school are not yet present. These changes are challenging every year, but more so during this time.
  - Prior to school starting, consider a second Zoom open house targeted toward the children. At this meeting, teach a simple song, read a culturally diverse “welcome book” or teach a virtual welcome “high five.” Say children’s names and show them what you will look like with a mask off and on. Show a few fun areas of the room so that they have a visual of what to look forward to seeing or doing.
  - If your school allows it, offer families a socially distanced (i.e., masked, during designated hours) chance to visit the classroom before September. This provides another opportunity to welcome children and helps them to become comfortable seeing you in person, and masked. Families can also view the social distancing seating and other safety measures. If possible, provide a simple “make and take” project, or just give children a sticker. For very young students, a chance to walk through their new classroom with a parent or grandparent at their side is important to their social and emotional wellbeing; an early visit supports a future successful transition when family will not be at the child’s side.

### **The First Day of School**

- ❑ Show up with warmth, patience (for yourself and the kids), and a smile (children can still tell that you are smiling with a mask on). Be nurturing and sensitive in the moment. Try not to create too ambitious of an agenda. Remind yourself that you are prepared, that what is happening is new for everyone, and that these first days are all about connecting/ re-connecting with one another.
  - Greet each student individually and by name. Let students know how happy you are that they are in your class.
  - Provide art materials so that each child can decorate a name tag. Keep the art materials available for later so that the children can draw a picture—of their family or just anything.
  - Give children time to ask questions and share observations about what is different. Processing is very important for younger children and they may just need to be able to name what is different. Be sure to also highlight what is the same to promote a sense of safety and comfort (e.g., you have a teacher and classmates just like before, we will learn math and reading just like before, we will read books aloud and practice listening just like before, etc.)
  - Establish your classroom routines for a safe and welcoming re-entry. Use visuals to guide students into classrooms. Elicit volunteers in role-playing a few easy scenarios addressing how to move safely within the classroom.
  - Accept that the youngest children will have greater difficulty with understanding and adhering to social distancing regulations and will need more visuals, and more time to begin following them. Also accept that young children are more likely to “violate” social distancing protocols because, by nature, they clump together and often need higher levels of touch to feel secure. Understand that there will be a learning curve here and that extra patience with the children and yourself will be needed.
  - Plan for movement, art, interaction and “play” within the day.
  - Have a school-wide “all hands on deck” approach to circulate adults through classrooms. Make sure that administrators, school counselors and other mental health professionals peek in to say hi, greet individual children, and or provide additional supports to the children—who invariably—will need more.