

## **The Importance of Attending to and Enhancing Relationships Between Stakeholders During School Re-Opening: Saying and Hearing Everything**

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The basic psychological principles of saying everything, willingness to listen to everything, joining, and sustaining/building relationships apply even more than usual during the COVID period. With so much uncertainty, Margaret Wheatley (2004) points toward the possibility "...to prepare for the future without knowing what it will be. The primary way to prepare for the unknown is to attend to the quality of our relationships, to how well we know and trust one another (Casel.org)."

The above is not trite nor is it a "touchy/feely" statement. In order to navigate the complexities, unknowns, and pitfalls of returning to school, the first step is to take a reality check on the status of our relationships with each other. Why is this important? Without strong, trusting relationships, how can we engage in dialogues with one another that are meaningful and give us a sense of safety and security? We begin by initiating with stakeholders, faculty, teachers, parents, and community leaders, a process of listening to what each has to say about their experiences thus far with virtual learning during COVID and what they would like to see going forward. Through surveys or focus groups, the following questions should be posed:

- What has your experience been like since school has been closed?
- What is on your mind as you think about next school year?
- What are your biggest hopes or worries?
- What has our school done well during the past months, and what could we have done better?
- How might you like to contribute as we prepare to transition to a new school year?
- What will help you learn this upcoming year?
- What can we do to make school feel even more like a community that cares for you? (Casel.org)."

Listening to the responses to the above helps us to understand what people are feeling and thinking, and joining with them allows us to be accurately emotional responsive to their needs, a state that imparts a feeling of being heard and cared for. Without communicating our understanding and acceptance of stakeholder's personal experiences, there is no basis for them to engage with us in the long process of getting back to some degree of normalcy. Similarly, without this kind of understanding and acceptance, we have no leverage in asking for their cooperation and collaboration in making the hard choices ahead because they will not feel heard or trust in our willingness to take care of them along the way. Including people in this way gives them a feeling that they are dealing with entities that have their best interests in mind.

Building on this means establishing or reaffirming an openness to an ongoing relationship characterized by a reciprocal interchange of thoughts and feelings without fear of retribution or reprisal if opposing or different ideas were to be expressed. This, too, requires trust. Meetings

where lip service only is given to honestly expressing thoughts or feelings are received as ingenuine and push honest communication under the rug.

Moreover, forums for ongoing and honest discussion between stakeholders need to be established and sustained as we are not out of the woods with COVID. We are going to need to be engaging with one another to navigate our way through the potential twists and turns, and doing so in a way that engenders trust. These will be particularly important when there are disagreements about how to proceed. For example, stakeholders wanting in-person instruction may be out of sync with those who have to provide it. Here is where psycho-education, another basic principle, comes into play. Straight, accurate, and honest information needs to be obtained and disseminated about things like infection rates in the community and their impact on re-opening. While governmental and legal obligations may need to be followed, these may, too, be out of sync with how stakeholders are feeling. Compliance, but not cooperation, may be the result.

To truly live the principle of “we are all in this together,” dialogues between stakeholders must be established and sustained so the feeling of togetherness can be actualized. That is, we need, more than ever, to rely on our trusted relationships as we talk our way through the pandemic. This can be done by creating working groups that contain stakeholders from across the spectrum who meet regularly and discuss how reopening plans are working, to tweak them when they need adjusting, and to proactively anticipate problems and issues that may arise and create solutions that can be implemented as needed. Honest, open discussion must be encouraged otherwise unspoken feelings of dissent will cause difficulties. Without permission to “say everything,” dissenting feelings and points of views will go underground and often take the form of acting out, failure to cooperate, half-hearted implementation of plans, etc. While we do not always need to agree, we need to be heard, and those in decision-making positions must explain their actions, particularly if they are unpopular.