

School Changes: Tips for Teachers

Due to recent announcements of school closures and consolidations, students, families, faculties and staffs may experience stress and sadness regarding the news. In addition, there may be some confusion regarding the next steps of the process and how it will affect school communities.

While stress is a natural response to change, internal or external, positive, or negative, it takes time to address and adapt to the feelings stress can bring up. Managing this stress takes time and patience. Providing options for addressing the stressors caused by change helps all of us adjust to changes with which we are confronted.

Below are some things to consider to assist school communities during this time of change.

Tips for Managing Stress

Identify the situation that is causing the stress.

Adjusting to a new school structure may be only part of the stress faculty and students are feeling. The following will help adapt to potential changes.

- Recognize that part of the stress may be caused by not knowing what will happen in the future. This is the first step in coping with stress.
- Focusing on facts is also helpful.
- Acknowledging our sadness further assists in dealing with change. Students may not be able to identify their experience as “stress,” but may be able to articulate their sadness at transitioning from one site to another. Recognizing our own sadness will not only assist us, but also assist students -- and their families -- adjust to upcoming changes.

Identify the coping skills that will work for you:

- Find a support network. Talk with family members, friends and/or colleagues. Emotional support is a huge assistance in dealing with stress. Talking about the stressor – and brainstorming ideas to deal with change will be a big help.
- Exercise. Physical activity helps a person adjust to changes caused by stress.
- Breathing Exercises. These can be helpful in decreasing stress related symptoms, including irritability, muscle tension and anxiety.
- Do things you enjoy. Hobbies, being with people we enjoy, movies, music, are all great ways to help cope with stress and changes.

Helping our students adjust to change:

- Remember that adults can make a difference helping students when they have an impending change.
- Listen and empathize. Acknowledge what is said.
- Respond with age appropriate authentic, feelings. It is acceptable to express sorrow to a child.
- Remember that ignoring stress or sadness will not make it go away. Research shows a relationship between antisocial behavior among adolescents and unresolved sadness.
- Refer students and families for assistance when necessary. There may be some students who need additional help adjusting to the changes of moving schools from one school to another. Normal sadness may look like a more serious illness. At this time, assistance and support are needed.
- Remember that sadness over school closure may be in part because students and families will miss you. The connections we make with our students as educators are important. Recognize the relationships you have successfully built with students and families. Remind them that school change does not mean you cannot be contacted. In addition there will be other teachers who will welcome them into their new school communities.

Classroom Discussions

Consider accessing the Classroom Crisis Response Discussion Lesson Plan, located in the School Crisis Response Manual. This can be found in the Support Activities (green tab) chapter of the manual. Create a simple statement that can be read aloud in each class, and facilitate a brief discussion regarding the changes the students may experience.

Some extension activities, by grade level, are also available in the Support Activities chapter.

Ways for Families to Help Youth with Sadness and Change

Your child may be feeling sad and confused over recent announcements of school changes. Every child will adjust to this differently. It is most important that we remember to offer empathy and nonjudgmental responses to children who might talk about the sadness they are feeling. Talking about these feelings is helpful, and when children see adults expressing their feelings in a healthy way, they learn how to do it, too.

You might see some of the following behavioral changes in your children as a response to the pending school changes:

- Restlessness and change in activity level
- Expression of security issues: Will this happen again
- Clinging to parents, fear of strangers
- Withdrawal and unwillingness to discuss the loss
- Fearfulness, especially of being left alone
- Symptoms of illness: nausea, loss of appetite, diffuse aches and pains
- Feeling guilty that it may be their fault

Response of Parent/Caregivers

Children need a sense of security during times of change. It is important to keep the family routine as much as possible.

Spend some extra time with children, and after children express their frustration or sadness at the proposed changes, try to consider positive aspects of the school changes. These may include new friends, teachers, an exciting beginning. In this way, children can consider that the change may not be completely difficult, while we acknowledge that change has some challenges. Finally, phone and make an appointment to visit your child's newly assigned school. This will increase children's familiarity with the school setting and teachers.

Parents may also want to consider referring to the SF Action Guide for further resources and helpful suggestions regarding how to communicate with children. The SF Action Guide was distributed to all students in the fall of this school year.