

# EDUCATION AS A SPECIAL CONSIDERATION

Reconnect, Assess,  
and Prepare

May, 2021



**NORTH AMERICAN CENTER  
FOR THREAT ASSESSMENT  
AND TRAUMA RESPONSE**

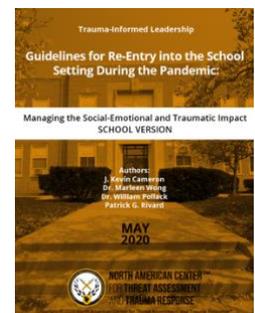
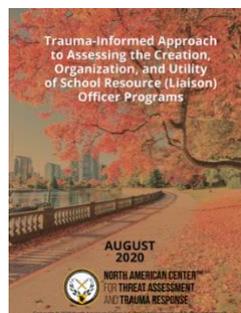


## EDUCATION AS A SPECIAL CONSIDERATION

From a public health perspective, schools in any community are an anchor institution around which the majority of people are involved and concerned. After any natural or man-made disaster, the constituents of a school 'community' can account for up to and over 70% of the population, factoring in students and their families, educators, school staffs such as building managers, secretaries and clerks, education aides and their families. The operational budgets of schools and provincial funding sources make schools a leading contributor to any local economy. No recovery plan can exclude an assessment of pre and post pandemic functioning of these institutions.

Viewing schools and the populations they serve through this lens is essential as the pandemic hit schools and health organizations hardest because they are two institutions that needed to pivot immediately to continue operations. Earlier in this document, the 'honeymoon' period was referenced with the theme of 'we are in this together'. For schools and health care, that honeymoon was short-lived. Educators experienced the extremes of disconnection with their students and many school employees were cut off from the physical locations of their work. Cumulative stresses rapidly increased in number and intensity, especially for teachers who had to confront the level of their own comfort or limitations in regards to the technology, technical skills, and modified teaching required in distance learning. Compounding the challenges of their professional roles and responsibilities were the increased marital, family and parental responsibilities of partners who might have lost their jobs, aging parents in high-risk congregant environments and one or more children needing support and supervision to attend different schools. All of these activities and changes within a home environment underscores the complexity of the burnout of emotional energy.

Reflecting the unique reality of schools during the pandemic, the first three Guidelines released by the North American Center for Threat Assessment and Trauma Response (NACTATR), were heavily focused on the education system including addressing the effects of remote learning on student, family and school dynamics. However, these current Guidelines are intended to focus on all of the agencies, programs, disciplines and governments necessary for a whole community response to prepare for post-pandemic recovery beyond what education could ever do on their own. Yet, from a Multidisciplinary Violence Threat Risk Assessment (VTRA) perspective and a Multidisciplinary Crisis and Trauma Response (TES) perspective, no one profession has been more fully dedicated to leading out in these collaborative areas than education.



## **Context**

Regions across the country that have formal Community VTRA Protocols have an advantage in applying these Guidelines as they already have vehicles for collaboration, including at the multi-Ministry level of Provincial and Territorial Governments. Many regions also have successful “HUB”, “Situation” or “FOCUS Tables” that involve several partners not included in most VTRA protocols. As such, these Guidelines will enhance already existing practices with a trauma-informed lens and pandemic-specific applications in which education has been well versed.

The Guidelines are considered “Interim” because there are two parallel areas of converging concern unique to successful post-pandemic learning. The first, for many, is the “learning” or “education gap” that has been widened for some due to the pandemic with associated containment measures, primarily remote learning. The other equally concerning area is the “connection gap”<sup>1</sup>. The connection gap is manifest by the many students who have “gone truant on us” in the past year and a half. However, it is foundational to our work in education that there can be no effective closing of the learning gap without first addressing the connection gap. As such, this special section of the Guidelines is “Interim” in that we are placing our initial focus on closing the relational gap first (a task we can make great gains in by the end of June) after which we will release comprehensive trauma-informed recommendations for “Convergent Learning Plans” that will combine aspects of the learning and connection gaps for the strategic creation of optimal learning environments for post-pandemic education.

## **Current Circumstance**

It became evident by the time we entered the second wave of the pandemic that it wasn't just students who went truant on us but it was the entire family in many cases. By the third wave the reality was setting in that many families were distanced from education and other helping services also. But not just because they were overwhelmed by the pandemic but because some of the service providers went truant on them. We have since changed the term truant to a more humanistic understanding that many people are simply having “a natural human response to a worldwide trauma” and cannot “do it” right now. As noted, the impaired closeness-distance cycle combined with death-related and non-death-related losses have taken their toll on some. Emotional energy is low.

With that, we have wondered, if society were to assess the education system today, what grade would it give? In many ways, schools are microcosms of our communities and as such have been caught in the extreme polarization between containment and anti-containment perspectives, as well as ideological perspectives that have also surfaced as pro-government (establishment) and anti-government (establishment) sentiments. Frequent cycling between “students in seats” and then “fully remote”, “hybrid” and back again learning has fueled anger in some and chronic stress in many. Education has sadly become somewhat of a “projected child” and taken their unfair share of abuse. Suffice it to say that for society to test and grade education right now would be far from

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<sup>1</sup> This term was coined by our colleague Trish Hastings with the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation during our early discussion on the impact of quarantine and overall disconnection from some of our students in education

optimal test conditions. We would say that grading education regarding student achievement would be the equivalent to grading the airline industry on how well their profit-making was during the past sixteen months: it is wholly unreasonable.

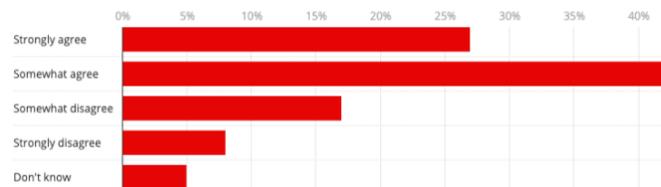
A year-and-a-half long pandemic that has required educators to disrupt the delivery of education multiple times while managing a long list of ever-changing health protocols to kept children safe at school is a big thing! Giving education a grade based on the pre-pandemic system markers or rubrics such as provincially mandated summative exams, successful graduation rates, transition to post-secondary and workplace is contextually incongruent during a global pandemic. So if it is unreasonable to grade educational leaders on completing an impossible task than why are trying to do the same to students? From the second wave of the pandemic, our primary message has been that we must have “reasonable expectations of self and systems”.

As the education system grapples with the impact the pandemic has had on learning or as some have suggested “The Learning Gap”, educators must first approach the challenge of learning loss in the context of which the loss has occurred. First, to understand that “learning gaps” existed prior to the pandemic is important. Prior to the pandemic, educators and the systems they functioned in were and still are fundamentally designed to answer three questions: a) What are students learning? b) How do we know they are learning (assessment)? c) What do we (system) do when students are not learning? As we focus on the third of these three questions, committed

educators and education partners understand their ethical and fiduciary responsibilities of creating optimal learning environments for students. We also understand that educators are deeply conscious of the implications the pandemic has had on student learning. In the graph above, teachers express their concerns related to learning loss during the pandemic, and echo the collective concern of parents, administration, trustees and education departments that have identified that some students may not “catch up”.

**Students left behind**

Responses from local educators to the statement “Some students will not catch up academically.”

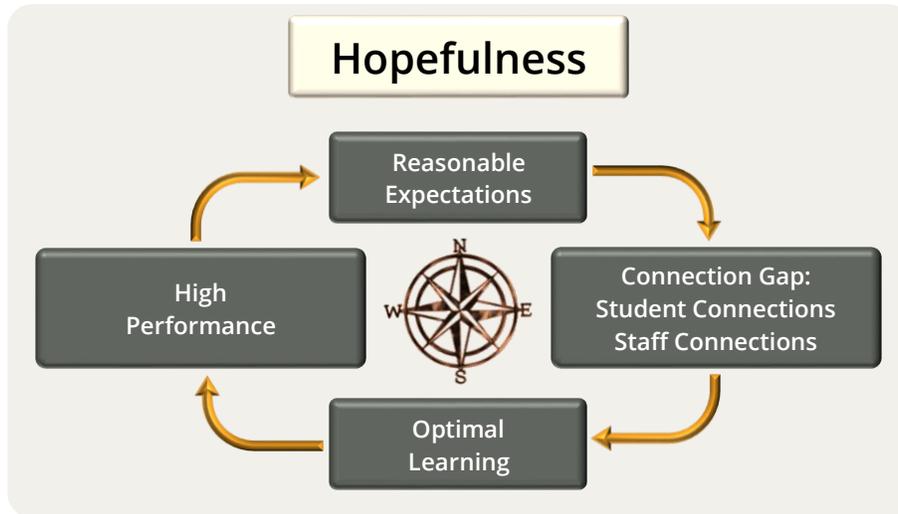


Based on 684 responses in Hamilton, Halton, Niagara and Brantford.  
CBC NEWS

**Click on Image:**

***“Students have fallen behind during the pandemic, teachers say, and some may never catch up”***

If one could attribute a common emotional and physical state to the education system in our current circumstance, it would be “chronic stress”. By design the education system is generally in a perceptual race against time. With the ultimate finish line being Grade 12, curricula are scaffolded and designed to accommodate the various learning needs of students. For the purpose of these interim guidelines, we have defined “optimal learning” as: educational settings that address the needs of every learner with ever possible attention paid to equity and continuous educational, and social and emotional growth.



Because the theoretical construct of optimal learning evolved in pre-pandemic conditions, understanding that post pandemic re-calibration will require the education system to establish a culture of “reasonableness” combined with a whole community response to reconnecting students and families to the learning environment is essential. In reference to the above diagram, we say “go to the right if you want to create the optimal conditions for high performance (unique to each student). Human connection with those we are the most concerned about is the springboard to success. In other words, “going right” and making a contextual adaptation to maximize connection will ultimately set the education compass to “true north” as the system continues to navigate through this historic time. If we go to the left and demand higher performance without meaningful connections, we will inadvertently widen both gaps we are concerned about: education and connection.

Grounded in constructivist theory, contextual learning environments provide students with learning opportunities that create meaning relative to the current context. Prior to the pandemic, a contextual learning example might look like a science class exploring the effects of erosion after an intense rainstorm. This authentic learning experience allows students to see the impact of erosion in the context where the storm occurred. For the purpose of these guidelines, however, we are proposing that the origins of contextual learning be reframed to a different storm - that being the social-emotional storm that is emerging due to the substantial disruption in the connectivity between the learner and the school.

The conduit used to transport learning in the aftermath of COVID 19 will require more dedicated space within it to accommodate for “connection, connection, connection” than it did prior to the pandemic. As education leaders and their teams gather whole community data that tells them the “truth” of the pandemic’s impact in their community, contextual learning adjustments should be considered. We will expand on this area in the follow-up ***“Comprehensive Trauma-Informed Recommendations for Contextual Learning in Post-Pandemic Education”***, to be released for use during preparations for the 2021-2022 academic year. Some areas to be addressed are:

- Triaging students from pre-pandemic to post-pandemic.
- Reasonable expectations of self and systems.
- Generating hopefulness in students.
- Generating hopefulness in parents and caregivers.
- Generating hopefulness in staff.
- Contextual Learning: schematics for assessment.
- Convergent Learning Plans (how to combine contextual learning with standardized learning goals).
- Peer mentoring.
- Helping under-functioners to thrive.

However, between now and the end of this academic year those attached to education can do a lot to close the connection gaps and lay the foundation for improved post-pandemic mental health and greater academic success. During the summer months there are further efforts from the **MPAC** team than can build on what is begun today.

This pandemic is not the school's fault nor is it a school trauma only. It is a protracted community (provincial and national) trauma that requires multi-ministry and therefore multi-disciplinary collaboration to treat the whole-student so educators can teach and students can learn. One solution to optimize collaboration is the development of a "Pandemic-Specific Complex Case Committee" that will assist mental health, child protection, probation and other helping agencies to conduct their own reviews of active cases and determine if there are pandemic-related risk enhancers that educators should be aware of to support students such as the effects of quarantine and the impaired closeness-distance cycle. In many cases non-school professionals can rely on their already established relationships with their clients and can easily advocate for openness and collaboration with schools, with consent, if the professionals understand ALL the dynamics addressed in these Guidelines. It is the reason for a "Whole Community" response.

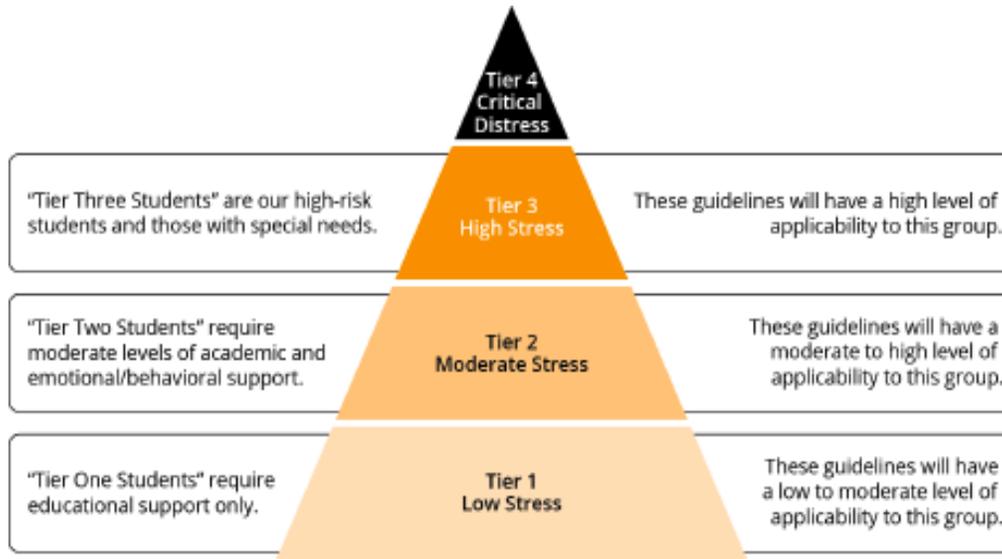
This should include the development of multiagency, school district and community consultation teams that can make recommendations for whole-student, whole-family and whole-school responses. Initial membership could include all VTRA and crisis response leads as well as psychiatry, pediatrics, nursing and others to address:

- a) Specific cases in a confidential setting and
- b) More thematic mental health issues in a more open forum.

## **STUDENT CONNECTION**

In our first guidelines "Rising to the Challenge: Matching Resources to Risk" we presented the following diagram to clarify which students we were primarily targeting for strategic connection. Although the "Tiers" representing pre-pandemic functioning are still relevant for predicting who will need support post-pandemic it must be understood that because of the effects of quarantine and the impaired closeness-distance cycle there may be "Tier One" students who have been exposed to complicated family circumstances who will not be able to maintain pre-pandemic levels of achievement until they are wrapped around and supported in their journey to disclosure, safety,

and mental wellness. This means that counsellors, social workers, psychologists and others will play an expanded role in the year(s) to follow.



What follows are insights and strategies for reconnecting, or more meaningfully connecting, with students we are concerned about. This includes revisiting “matching resources to risk”: student version.

### Modern developmental neurobiology and the potency of adult-child connections

Bruce Perry, a developmental neurobiologist, has declared, “A child’s capacity to think, to laugh, to love, to hate, to speak—all of it is a product of interaction with the [...human] environment [italics added]. Sensory experiences such as touching . . . literally stimulate activity in the brain and the growth of neural structures.” Alan Schore, a clinical psychiatrist and biobehavioral scientist, places the central needs of developing children within this context of emotional connection, which I believe the adult nurturing/connecting figure must provide and which children require for their physical and mental health: “The idea is that we are born to form attachments, that our brains are physically wired to develop in tandem with another’s, through emotional communication, even before words are spoken. If things go awry, you’re going to see the seeds of psychological problems, of difficulty coping, stress in human relations, substance abuse . . . later on.” Caretakers in adult-child systems not only affect personality, but do so through direct impact on neural development. Attachments formed within the matrix of a adult-child connection affect young children as people through their developing brain structure: “The self-organization of the developing brain occurs within the context of a relationship with another self, another brain. This relational context can be growth-facilitating or growth-inhibiting, and so it imprints into the developing right brain either a resilience against or a vulnerability to forming later psychiatric disorders.”

#### Dr. William Pollack, Ph.D., Senior Advisor, NACTATR

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## The Crisis of Childhood and the Salience of Adult Connection

Culled from a basic national survey of close to 100,000 adolescents from grades 7 through 12, Resnick and his colleagues found that what affected adolescent behaviors most was whether their social contexts were mediated by caring adult relationships. According to the study, “parent–family connectedness” dramatically influenced the level of emotional distress adolescents suffer, their level of depression and suicidality, how much they abuse drugs and alcohol, their academic success, general criminal proclivities, and even to some extent how involved in violence they may become.

Indeed, if one parenting figure was positively present within the family, adolescents had two times the protective factors to sustain their health and well-being. If the children felt love or affection from these parents, the protective factor rose to four times.

Resnick’s group also found that if adolescents felt connected to an adult who listened to their troubles in the school environment and felt they fit in, there was yet another four times the rise in emotional protectiveness. They found that youth will thrive at school if there is a pervasive sense that they are welcome, that they are liked, and that who they really are—and how they really enjoy learning—is embraced in a genuine way by their teachers. They demonstrated that the largest factor protecting young people from emotional distress, drug abuse and violence—in addition to the closeness they were able to achieve within their families—was “perceived school connectedness.”

The more students feel connected, understood, and treated fairly at school, the less likely they are to become suicidal, abuse drugs and alcohol, become addicted to nicotine, or engage in impulsive sexual activities. Youth do best when they feel cared for and understood by their teachers and when they sense that teachers have high hopes for them academically. By designing an inviting (that is, emotionally connected) educational experience for students, schools can help them boost not only their academic performance and self-esteem but also their hopefulness about the opportunities ahead of them.

The potency of loving adult-child relationships is as strong as even the best (and potentially useful) antiviolence program; and certainly, greater than any simple-minded, required, zero-tolerance curriculum, and more productive and less traumatic than any magnetometer or gun-sniffing dog.

So as this research supports the basis for the VTRA and TES programs we provide it sheds important light on the potential traumas created by the educational connection gap of the pandemic and points the way toward understanding the issues to be observant of and the programs to implement as we re-open to more direct connection with our students and staff.

### **Key Strategies for Meaningful Conversation Recreating Connections and Diminishing Stress**

- a) Each student should have a genuine connection with at least one significant adult at school. This would not necessarily be their assigned teacher or counselor, but should be someone where there is at the very least a nascent sense of comfort and genuine interest—what we refer to as matching resources to risk
- b) Give each student opportunities for regular periods of undivided attention and listening.
- c) Encourage the expression of a full and wide range of emotions.

- d) When you observe aggressive, bullying, teasing, angry or “acting-out” behavior, look for the pain behind it and the STRESS which may be the cause lurking behind “the mask.”
- e) Balance the important emphasis on Resilience and Hopefulness with the clear message that the student doesn’t have to be tough or “stoic” to be genuinely strong.
- f) Support the key concept that tears and vulnerability are not only a natural and healthy part of the sharing and expressions of a wide and normal range of human emotions most especially after this pandemic, but they may well be the healthiest pathway to the expression of grief and health inducing mourning.
- g) Some student’s losses of loved one’s or special opportunities, will be more obvious; but keep in mind that the that pandemic has, indeed been, a gigantic loss/disconnection in most cases, certainly a set of, at times, many unwanted changes and that: ALL CHANGE IS LOSS AND ALL LOSS NEEDS TO BE MOURNED and GRIEVED

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LEAD THE WAY, NOT JUST BY CONVERSATION, BUT BY EXAMPLE. To paraphrase Ralph Waldo Emerson" YOUR ACTIONS SPEAK SO LOUDLY, THEY CAN HARDLY HEAR YOUR WORDS'

Do not go it alone. That is exactly where young people are getting stuck. We need to reach out to our colleagues, other school personnel and our loved ones during this process for their support and connection. Mentors from outside the immediate network are as important for educational leaders as they are important for children

Chaim Ginnott, the great parent/teacher educator, used to advise adults vouchsafed with the lives of teens that at times of turmoil, "Don't just do something, stand there."

Obviously, he didn't mean remain passive. He was conveying that: Being there for our students in a deep and empathic way is way more than half of the story; showing overt caring is the other half. Youth who have a connection to a caring adult, and feel genuinely understood, have higher self-esteem and higher success rates in school and life. They are more psychologically resilient. Do not feel as if the weight of the world is all on adult shoulders, but do recognize that the potency of empathic caregiving which has ten times the power of biology or peer culture — not only in making our students' worlds safer but ultimately in making their lives and ours more joyful and meaningful.

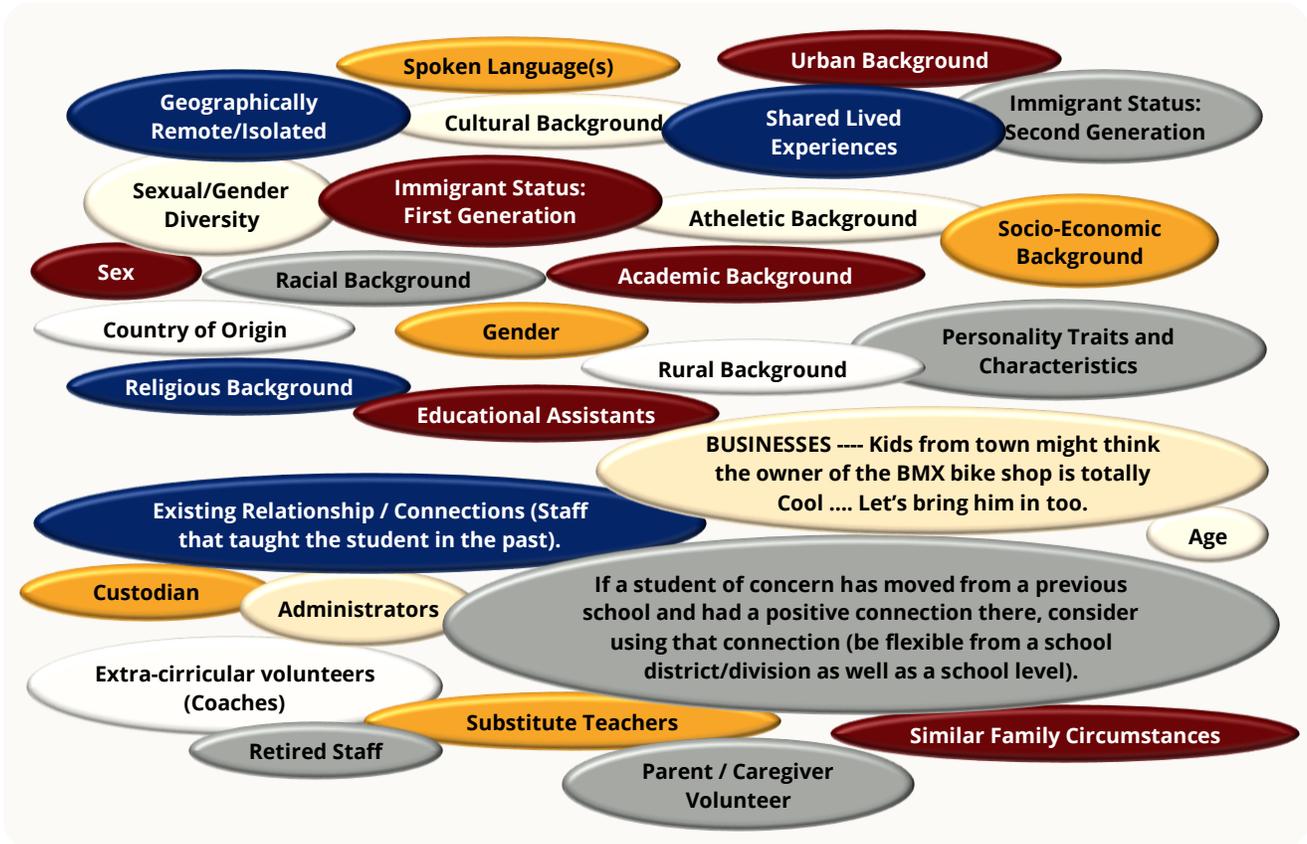
Not just reopening post-pandemic but truly RECONNECTING.

***"At the core of the Learning Gap is the fear of many students, parents and caregivers that they cannot win the education race to the finish line. That is because education has become a timed competition and some students are in a speed boat, some are in a canoe and some are standing on the shore deciding they just can't swim that far! We need to change the narrative so that educational success is not about turning 18 and being full of knowledge, it is about turning 18 and hungering for more."***

***J. Kevin Cameron***

### Appendix A - Matching Resources to Risk

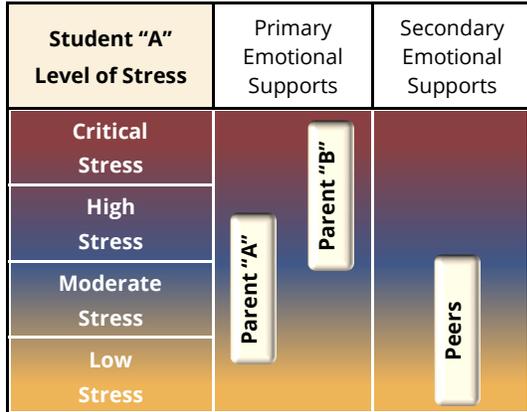
Below is a visual montage and formal checklist of some examples for matching resources to risk:



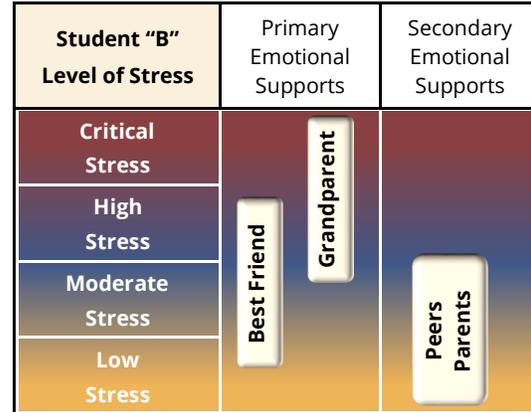
Matching Resources to Risk					
	Cultural Background		Racial Background		Sexual/Gender Diversity
	Socio-Economic		Urban Background		Rural Background
	Geographically Remote/Isolated		Shared Lived Experiences		Spoken Language(s)
	Immigration Status: First Generation		Immigration Status: Second Generation		Personality Traits and Characteristics
	Age		Sex		Athletic Background
	Religious Background		Gender		Country of Origin
	Administrators		Bus Driver		Custodian
	Substitute Teachers		Educational Assistants		Extra-cirricular Volunteers
	Retired Staff		Academic Background		Parent/Caregiver Volunteer
	Other:		Other:		Other:
	Other:		Other:		Other:

<b>Deciding How to Match IOC's and their Families for their Mental Health Inoculation (E = MC<sup>2</sup>)</b>				
	Pre-Pandemic	Pandemic	Post-Pandemic	*Matching Resources to Risk
Primary ESS, Personal				
Secondary ESS, Personal				
<b>ESS – Emotional Support System</b>				
Primary ESS, Professional				
Secondary ESS, Professional				

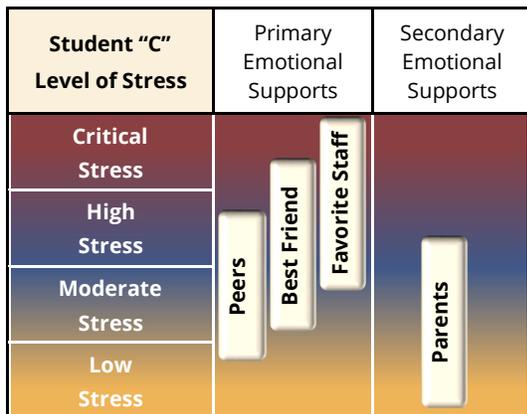
## Appendix B – Student Primary and Secondary Support Systems



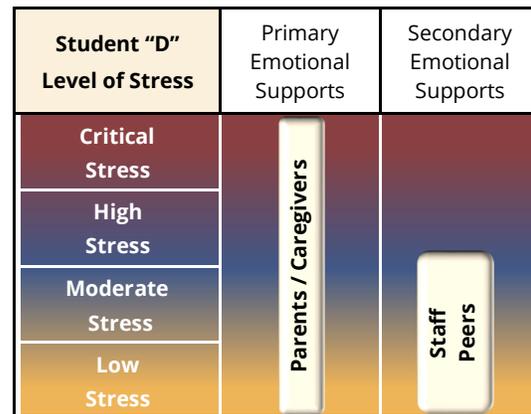
**Student "A"** Graph represents a student who is living in a shared (joint) custody situation. Parent "A" is the primary caregiver and has a good connection with their child while Parent "B" has a busy career, so their child only reaches out when they are experiencing high levels of stress. They feel very safe with Parent "B" but believe they should only justifiably connect when totally necessary. This same child spends a lot of their time with peers but always defaults to parents. This is a good family connection that can be strengthened during the pandemic. (What could happen if Parent "A" dies during the pandemic and Parent "B" is now the primary caregiver who is under tremendous stress as a health care professional? How might you match resources to risk?).



**Student "B"** Graph represents a student who has more of a friendship relationship with both parents/caregiver(s) and their peers. They rely on one peer only (best friend) to bear the weight of their concerns but if they feel emotionally overwhelmed, they will default to their grandparent. (What could happen if the grandparent becomes ill during the pandemic, both parents lose their job and the best friend is emotionally unavailable due to their own family circumstances? How might you match resources to risk?).



**Student "C"** Graph represents a student who spends a lot of time with peers and one best friend. Parent / caregiver relations are around basic needs with no meaningful conversations or connections. School and peers are the primary emotional support systems and being physically disconnected from school could dramatically elevate their anxiety. The relationship with their teacher denotes that particular staff member will be the most stabilizing adult support during the pandemic. (What happens, if under the stress of work, the teacher goes on long-term disability? How might you match resources to risk?).



**Student "D"** Graph represents a student who quietly goes to school with no real emotional connection to peers. Their primary and secondary emotional support system is their parents/caregivers and their family system as a whole. If they were doing good academically before the pandemic, they should do very well during the pandemic. (What happens if the effects of quarantine and an impaired closeness-distance cycle rekindles prior domestic abuse dynamics the child was previously unaware of and their parents' divorce? How might you match resources to risk?).