

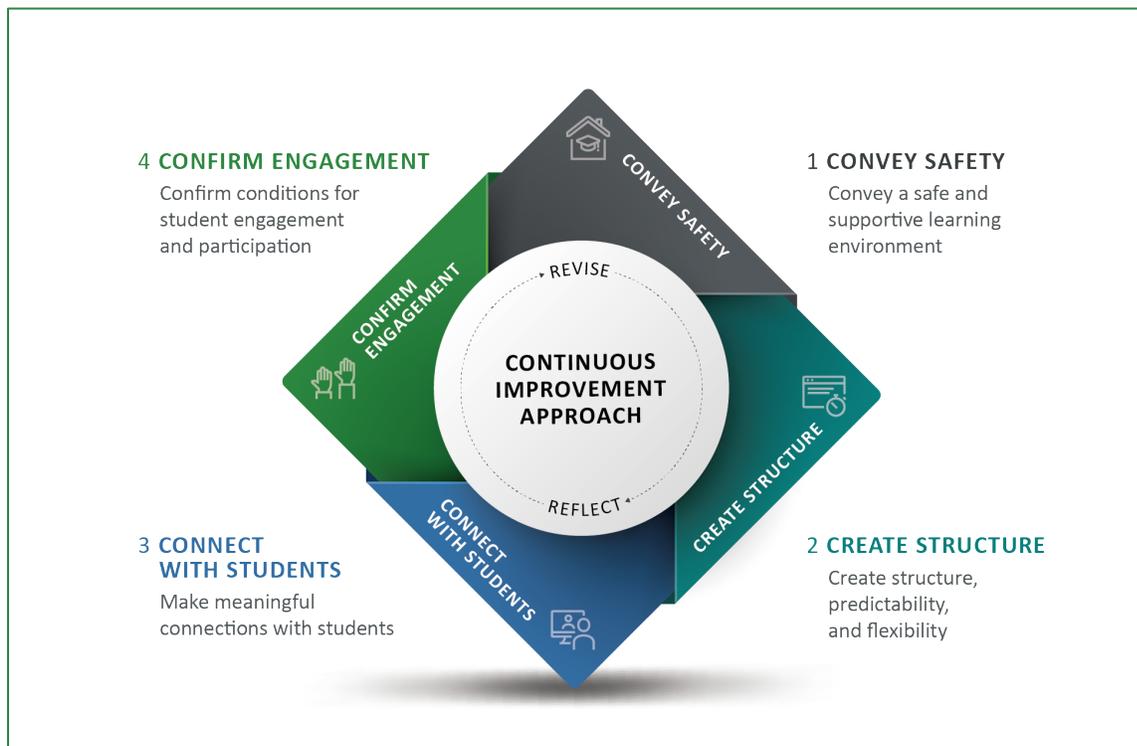


## Student Engagement in Online Classes: Tips for Teachers Based on Trauma-Informed Approaches and Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Strategies

As the 2020 school year begins, student engagement in the virtual environment is critical, but challenging. Strategies grounded in Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) and Trauma-Informed (TI) approaches<sup>1 2</sup> can support educators to cultivate safe and supportive environments that improve students’ ability to engage and learn, even when teaching students remotely. This tip sheet offers four sets of concrete strategies, categorized as the 4C’s, for teachers to engage students in their online classes at the middle and high school levels. These tips are ideas to consider, not a checklist.

The goal, whether classes are in-person or online, is for students to feel safe, supported, and ready to learn. It is generally recognized that effective learning takes place in the context of positive relationships and a sense of safety and connectedness. When students feel supported in these areas and are provided opportunities to regulate their emotions, they can become more focused and engaged, and are better able to learn (see Exhibit 1).

### Exhibit 1. Implementing the 4 C’s



<sup>1</sup> <https://www.321insight.com/category/trauma-informed/>

<sup>2</sup> [https://casel.org/sp\\_faq/distance-learning/](https://casel.org/sp_faq/distance-learning/)



## **Framing Your Approach: Have a continuous improvement approach for yourself and your students**

Distance learning (and teaching) in this current COVID climate will likely be a struggle for both students and teachers. It may be important to regularly acknowledge to yourself and to your students that this is a tough situation, but emphasize that together you can make it work and get better at it.



### **Tip 1: Convey a safe and supportive learning environment**

- » Try to envision what a safe and supportive online environment looks like through conversations with other teachers and your students. Recognize that students will bring to class a variety of experiences related to COVID, school closures, family difficulties, etc. Some students may be excited to reconnect with teachers, some may be tired and wary, and some may be there physically but focused on other things going on in their homes. Their reactions to online learning may not be a reflection of your teaching, but more on what they have experienced or are bringing to the online classroom personally.
- » Visualize different scenarios such as a student experiencing sudden distress or being overwhelmed or anxious during online instruction, and have a plan for how you might respond (e.g., let the student know that they can turn off their camera for a few minutes if needed to calm down).
- » Students who have had multiple adverse experiences over the last 6 months may have difficulty sitting still, attending, and concentrating and may need support from a mental health professional. Connect with school counselors prior to class to learn about warning signs that indicate a student is struggling emotionally or psychologically with the current situation. Be ready to refer a student to their counselor.
- » Incorporate lessons about tolerance into lesson plans – such as conversations about tolerance (e.g., not interrupting someone who has different opinions) and strategies for promoting equity in the classroom.<sup>3</sup>
- » Students, especially high schoolers, can be self-conscious about how they look or sound on camera, or what their screen background shows, and how they are perceived by their peers. You can de-emphasize these self-concerns by continually stressing the importance of adopting a non-judgmental approach and showing empathy and compassion to each other. Let them know your preferences for the screen background (e.g., blurred, or a landscape the student likes), and how to change it, if needed.
- » Talk about your expectations for online student behavior such as being respectful to each other, being respectful of the online space, and allowing others to speak without interruption. Institute the online classroom as a place where it is OK to disagree without being argumentative.

<sup>3</sup><https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/publications/the-march-continues/the-five-essential-practices-for-teaching-the-civil-0>



## Tip 2: Create structure, predictability, and flexibility

- » Outline a structured format for the online class (e.g., face-to-face instruction, classwork time, breaks, use of chat box, if/when recordings to be available, how discussions will happen, how to ask questions of the teacher individually).
- » Set some basic rules or “netiquette,” and have a moderation system in place to enforce them. Make the rules clear and continue to reinforce them with examples of what online classroom behaviors you expect. Consider involving the students in “owning” the quality of the classroom community when it makes sense.
- » Institute procedures for how you conduct classes online such as:
  - › Have a strategy for students to ask questions—raise “hand,” type in chat, etc.
  - › Ask students to take a moment before class begins to ensure the view of their camera captures things that are appropriate in the background of the video chats (either a screen background or appropriate pictures, objects, etc.).
  - › Explain how/when cameras can be turned off and how to notify the teacher when a student needs to leave the “room.”
- » Predictability is important in a time of trauma like the one we are facing. Students need to know how the online classroom environment will look, what is going to happen, why, when, and how. Establish structure and consistency just as you would in a physical classroom (including communications, routines, schedules, etc.) but at the same time let students know that you are flexible if they experience technological, family, or housing issues.
- » Be flexible and adaptable with assignment completion: students and families have different issues with technology, parental support, and supervision. Allowing for flexibility in how and when work is completed may reduce stress on some students and increase their behavioral engagement (completion of assigned work).
- » Keep the balance between maintaining high expectations for the quality and timeliness of student work, and being flexible due to technological or other unexpected events or lack of resources.



## Tip 3: Connect with students

- » Try to share information about yourself with your students in ways you are comfortable with and while maintaining your own personal boundaries. Consider starting the class by posting a short biography of yourself. This may include education, background, interests, and your latest photo.
- » Consider introducing students to your kids, pets, showing them a plant you’ve grown from a seedling, or sharing an activity you’ve been working on outside of teaching. You might also want to share with your class some things you are finding stressful about the current situation and the ways you are coping.



- » You can request that your students develop a personal and quick mood board; or assign a specific section on your class website for posting pictures and brief bios of all of your students.
- » Use quick online surveys or polls during, after, or between classes to ask students about their questions, reactions, difficulties, social emotional wellbeing, current situations or help they need. Use responses from students to better understand their technological, academic, or social emotional needs and respond accordingly so that they understand you care about them.



## Tip 4: Confirm conditions for student engagement and participation

- » Look for any of the following three components of student engagement:<sup>4</sup>
  - › **Affective or emotional engagement** (e.g., Do students like the class, enjoy or show interest in the class or topic, have a sense of belonging in the class, and feel respected?)
  - › **Cognitive engagement** (e.g., Do they show persistence in the face of challenges or difficult material, use critical thinking and self-regulation<sup>5</sup> in getting their work done?)
  - › **Behavioral engagement** (e.g., Do they attend class, participate, pay attention, prepare for class, do the work assigned, and study for tests?)
- » Insert breaks during and between lessons that involve movement, reflection, or connection with other students to help them reset, re-engage, and re-focus. Be sure to offer activities away from screens, as excessive screen time can lead to restlessness, distractibility, and fatigue.
- » Help students to solve problems with the technology interface. Frustrations with technology, if left unaddressed, can be a significant barrier to student participation or homework/assignment completion.
- » Build in experiential and peer learning opportunities. Emphasize student-to-student interaction and create opportunities for work in small teams. Use tools such as breakout rooms for students to work with their peers in groups or partners.
- » Engage students in co-designing lessons and activities and allow for voice and choice in the “how” while maintaining the “why” and “what” of lessons. Allow them to demonstrate competency and mastery in various ways.
- » Talk with students about the online experience as an opportunity to develop a “growth mindset.” Focus on the process of how to best learn the class/unit content given their individual learning preferences. This online class experience might be an opportunity for them to realize school isn’t just about compliance and “getting the grade,” but an opportunity for students to increase their knowledge and improve their skills for life.

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<sup>4</sup> Fredricks, J., McColskey, W., Meli, J., Mordica, J., Montrosse, B., and Mooney, K. (2011). Measuring student engagement in upper elementary through high school: a description of 21 instruments. (Issues & Answers Report, Regional Educational Laboratory Southeast, 2011–No. 098). Retrieved from <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs>.

<sup>5</sup> Ability to calm oneself when upset (or cheer oneself up when feeling down), and change behavior according to the situational demands.



### Framing Your Approach: Reflect and Revise

- » At some point during the day, after you have had a chance to decompress from your classes, reflect on what worked and what didn't in terms of class structure, and engaging your students (behaviorally, cognitively, or emotionally).
- » Draw on the educator community or meet with your colleagues to share lessons learned, and other strategies to enhance your own well-being and the well-being of your students.

Here are a few links to resources to support online teaching.

| Title with hyperlink  | Description  |
|---|--|
| <a href="#">Strategies for Trauma-Informed Distance Learning</a>                  | A tip sheet of strategies for trauma-informed distance learning. Gives an overview of how trauma affects learning and the brain, and gives suggestions on different ways to prepare students to learn.               |
| <a href="#">Core attributes of a trauma sensitive school</a>                      | A short document on trauma-sensitive schools and strategies to help children feel safe and supported.  |
| <a href="#">How to identify students who disengage</a>                            | An article about the importance of an early warning system for student disengagement, and how to get them to reconnect.  |
| <a href="#">Ideas for talking about the pandemic in class</a>                     | A short article about the importance of discussing the COVID pandemic in class with students.  |
| <a href="#">Resources and Strategies for SEL and School Culture &amp; Climate</a> | An article with resources and sample strategies for social emotional learning and improving school culture and climate. Contains link to other resources about the topics for a more in depth understanding of them. |
| <a href="#">Trauma-Informed School Strategies during COVID-19</a>                 | A document describing how schools can adapt or transform their practices by using a trauma-informed approach in the time of COVID-19 pandemic.   |

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