

Make Mental Health A Priority As Students Return To School

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SPRINGFIELD - This August, many students in Illinois will venture back to the classroom. For some, that classroom looks dramatically different in a COVID-19 environment. The challenges of remote learning, social distancing, and new classroom restrictions can cause emotional stress for both our students and teachers. That's why this month, the Illinois Emergency Management Agency and local emergency managers are highlighting various resources to help the public make mental health a priority during these unprecedented times.

“When we think of school safety, we often think of violence or storm preparedness, but the mitigation measures associated with COVID-19 underscores the importance of

mental health awareness,” said IEMA Director Alicia Tate-Nadeau. “Behavioral Threat Assessment Teams are great resources to identify behavior and trends that can lead to early intervention, but when students are not in class more tools are needed to check on the wellbeing of our students.”

The Illinois Terrorism Task Force (ITTF) School Safety Working Group was created in 2018 to help improve safety in Illinois Schools. This group of subject matter experts has focused their efforts on providing practical and helpful recommendations for schools to adopt. These [recommendations](#) range from physical school improvements, policy suggestions, increasing mental health services, information sharing and more.

Now, more than ever, our parents and educators need reliable information to help protect our students. Everybody experiences mental health issues in different ways. Students who are contemplating hurting themselves or others frequently give warning signs of their distress. Some common signs of distress include not acting like they normally do, a loss of interest in things they used to enjoy, talking about feelings of hopelessness, being more reckless, or isolating from family and friends.

The Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) recognizes that student well-being extends beyond learning and nutrition. To that end, the [ISBE website](#) features additional tools that can help provide care for mental/emotional wellbeing of our educators and our students.

The [National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement](#) has several resources specifically related to mental health and coping with pandemic. These resources are specifically tailored for educators, school staff and parents. These videos and presentations have been adopted by the Illinois Association of School Administrators (IASA) and the National School Superintendents Association (AASA).

The Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) also has a helpline for residents who need emotional support during the COVID-19 pandemic. Illinoisans can text "TALK" to 55-2020 (or "HABLAR" for Spanish) for the Call4Calm service. The text line is free of charge and designed to support residents who are experiencing stress.

To learn more about how you can help a friend, student, parent or co-worker, visit ready.illinois.gov.