

**Back to School Amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic:
Considerations and a Call to Action to Support School Communities Worldwide**

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The International School Psychology Association (ISPA) promotes principles and practices that aim to advance unprejudiced and inclusive personal, social, and cultural values and attitudes, and act in ways that are in the best interest of children and youth, educators, parents, institutions, communities, and the profession. School psychologists are committed to the principle that the contributions of school psychology need to be available to everyone. School psychologists facilitate free access to educational, social, and psychological services (ISPA, 2021). As the school year begins in 2021 amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, it is essential that we continue to address current and emerging needs of the populations of children we serve and work with to ensure the well-being of our communities. An ISPA leadership workshop was convened preceding the annual conference in July 2021, to discuss key considerations, priorities, and recommendations taking into account local, national, and transnational needs during the pandemic and post-pandemic era. The leadership workshop included participants from many different countries, collaborating in workgroup discussions, which collectively informed the issues and statements included in this document.

Implications of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Children and Education Around the World

In 2015, the United Nations (U.N.) released the Sustainable Development Goals as the core of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, among which several goals are aligned with the profession of school psychology around the world. In particular, goals related to promoting good health and well-being, quality education, reduced inequality, and partnership tap into domains in which school psychologists around the world can facilitate progress and change. The COVID-19 pandemic is having immediate and expansive impacts on the social, emotional, and economic well-being of families and children, and frequently essential social justice principles are disregarded (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, n.d.; Song et al., 2021). The pandemic threatens several decades of advances in global public education (International Commission on the Futures of Education, 2020). The pandemic has a greater impact on vulnerable groups of children and youth (Song et al., 2020); the *“impact will disproportionately affect certain groups, including children living in poverty or the poorest countries and neighbourhoods, in street situations, migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee children, child victims of trafficking or smuggling, children affected by conflict, minority and indigenous children, children with underlying health conditions ... and children with disabilities”* (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, n.d., p. 2).

The ISPA Leadership acknowledges that:

- The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is a major public health crisis of international concern which places significant psychological burdens on people around the world (World Health Organization, 2020).
- One of the many consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic has been the extended school closures which have led to a significant reduction in the provision of educational and psychological services and resources

to children. Consequently, and as reported in numerous studies, there are increased mental health needs for all members of school communities (especially for the most vulnerable ones) and increased educational/learning needs for student populations (Anderson et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2021; Gregus et al., 2021; Hatzichristou et al., 2021; Nearchou et al., 2020; Marques de Miranda et al., 2020; Racine et al., 2020; Styck et al., 2021; Wu et al., 2021).

- As members of the school community, we aim to ensure that schools can meet the varying needs of all students and their families, especially during school re-opening times.
- A focus on systems-level change in the schools is important to meet the needs of children and families. Advocacy is needed for changes to happen in schools or other educational practice settings that are beneficial to children and families as well as educational staff and minimize biases.
- As we are experiencing a global crisis, there are both similar and unique challenges and needs in school communities and communities at large, thus, international collaboration is important to benefit all members of the communities and students we serve. We need to advance global solidarity to promote all students', youth', and children's participation, rights, school performance, mental health, and well-being.
- We need to have a strategic/recovery plan for supporting children in need especially those in the most vulnerable groups (World Health Organization, 2021).

Addressing Current and Emerging Needs for Children, Youth, Families, and Educators

In order to reach our goals and fulfill our responsibilities as school psychologists, the following key considerations, priorities, and recommendations are suggested with the understanding that additional actions may be warranted.

- School psychologists advocate for overcoming social inequalities. They promote the participation of students in the schools and strengthen them for the challenges of life. They support the most vulnerable families and how professionals can connect with these families and their children.
- School psychologists advocate for equity and social justice in the educational system and for a balance between mental health, physical health, and academic learning.
- School psychologists function as catalysts of change. School psychologists facilitate change by preparing professionals for new roles beyond their traditional assessment role; by collaborating with school leadership to promote children's rights, social justice, and other efforts that support student well-being and resilience; by helping teachers and administrators who are focused on learning loss due to the extended school closures understand the importance of a holistic approach that goes beyond academics and emphasizes social, emotional, behavior, and mental health aspects; by identifying the next frontiers and working towards addressing current and anticipated student and school needs.
- Using a systems approach, school psychologists engage in evidence-based practices that proactively promote safety and positive school climates, preventing behavioral and discipline issues and in the prevention of all forms of victimization and violence including cyberbullying.
- School psychologists engage in self-care practices and promote such practices among other school personnel.

When it comes to the COVID-19 support actions, the following are proposed:

- The current pandemic has brought economic hardship, health problems, grief, bereavement, and numerous additional challenges to members of the school community and to the community as a whole. School psychologists support coping with stress among students and staff by providing psychoeducational supports for teachers, parents, and students.
- School psychologists engage students, family members, teachers, and other stakeholders in a dialogue that allows them to share their experiences and identify their strengths and needs. Listening and fostering engagement with family, community, and school support systems can facilitate healing.
- This pandemic has especially highlighted the need for school psychologists to assist in developing and disseminating evidence-based resources that can be applicable transnationally and in generating a vetting process to evaluate the efficacy and appropriateness of these resources so as to support educators in discerning existing resources.

Concluding Remarks

Concluding this position statement, as school psychologists we acknowledge that the pandemic has not only brought forth a multitude of challenges, but also provided the opportunity for action and growth. As a school psychology association, ISPA encourages the collaboration with other organizations and institutions at national and international levels to continuously support school communities and education professionals worldwide. Uniting to overcome adversities can strengthen the relationships with our students and their families as well as other educators and professionals.

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