Navigating K-12 educational challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic: Working together to identify resources and supports to strengthen families through this crisis

November 5, 2020

In these unprecedented times

- Remote instruction due to COVID-19 – concerns over decrease in reports to child protective services hotlines nationwide

- Conversely, concerns were expressed over heightened monitoring for some families – being "regulated"

- How strike a balance between child safety and family support during remote instruction?

Objectives

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Objectives

- Examine importance of collaboration and shared goals between school personnel and child welfare workers
- Identify expectations/best practices for school personnel and child welfare workers
- Understand the role of the NY Statewide Central Register for Child Abuse and Maltreatment (SCR) regarding educational neglect calls
- Identify strategies both systems can use in working together to support families and keep children safe

Collaboration and Shared Goals – OCFS and SED

Collaboration at the state level

- OCFS Commissioner Sheila J. Poole and SED Interim Commissioner Betty Rosa held joint call with staff
  - Discussed need for cross-agency strategies
  - Build an understanding around educational neglect, when to call in a report and when to collaborate to provide support
  - Importance of data-sharing at the state level and information-sharing at the local level – what are both systems seeing and where is the overlap?

Collaboration and Shared Goals – SED

Thank you for keeping New York State students safe, healthy and educated through COVID-19

March 2020 NYS school building closures: Transformation of the educational experience

Unprecedented and abrupt shift from a traditional school experience to providing students and families with:

- Education technology tools, training and internet access
- Remote instruction and online learning
- Meals (picked up and/or delivered to home)
- Childcare (for children of essential workers)

Continued communication, creativity and collaboration between education and child welfare

- School reopening in remote, in-person and hybrid settings during the pandemic requires continued understanding, communication and collaboration between the education and child welfare systems

- Personally, professionally, educationally and collectively as New Yorkers, we, our loved ones, and the children and families we serve continue to face pandemic-related challenges and traumas together

Student Attendance and Best Practices

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Fall 2020 NYS school reopening:

Student attendance barriers

- Schools continue to report and respond to student attendance barriers resulting from learning in remote, in-person and hybrid educational settings exacerbated by a global health crisis

"Schools are responsible for developing a mechanism to collect and report daily teacher/student engagement or attendance regardless of the instructional setting."

School Reopening Guidance

Fall 2020 NYS school reopening:

Student attendance barriers (*continued)*

- Local departments of social services (LDSSs) are concerned over rising volume of school personnel contacting the Statewide Center Register of Child Abuse and Maltreatment (SCR) to report possible educational neglect due to student absence from online instruction

- More effective responses and services to student absenteeism would better support students and families

Fall 2020 NYS school reopening:

Chronic absenteeism

- Extensive research indicates that, excused or unexcused, being absent 10 percent of school days is the "tipping point" to declining student achievement

- SED collects aggregate chronic absenteeism data from schools:

  ➢ Unexcused and excused absences

  ➢ two school days per month or 18 school days per year

Fall 2020 NYS school reopening:

Chronic absenteeism *(continued)*

- Research from the National Center for Education Statistics tells us that students who are chronically absent:

  - In grades K-1, are less likely to read proficiently by the end of 3rd grade

  - By 6th grade, demonstrate early warning signs of dropping out of high school

  - By 9th grade, are at risk of dropping out of high school

Fall 2020 NYS school reopening: Excessive absenteeism

School districts:

- Set local parameters for defining and determining excessive absenteeism and determine need for follow up and support

- Determine school-based and community-based policies and procedures for responding to universal and individual student attendance matters

- Collaborate with local departments of social services to identify community-based strategies

Student attendance policies, strategies and communications

To remove barriers to students attending school, it is important that all attendance policies, strategies and communication plans needed to work with students and families convey:

- Trust and positive relationships
- Collaborative problem-solving and resourcefulness
- Genuine concern, understanding, empathy and support
- Developmental, cultural, linguistic and experiential responsiveness

Educational neglect reports by schools to the Statewide Central Register of Child Abuse and Neglect (SCR)

A report of suspected educational neglect should be called in to the SCR as a remedy for excessive absences **only as a last resort** and <u>after</u> school personnel have collaborated with the following to identify needs and resources and exhausted all other possible strategies:

- Student and family
- Community agencies and the LDSS

Person in need of supervision (PINS)

PINS truancy or school misbehavior:

- Student younger than 18 who does not attend school or is incorrigible, ungovernable or habitually disobedient in school
- PINS mandatory diversion lead agency – the LDSS or Department of Probation

Person in need of supervision (PINS) (continued)

PINS petitions can no longer be based solely on truancy.

- Special provisions regarding school-based behavior:
  - ➤ Petitions that include allegations of truancy/school behavior must detail steps taken by the school district to address the issue(s)
  - ➤ School districts will be expected to cooperate with lead agency and all court proceedings if the school/district files a petition

Person in need of supervision (PINS) (continued)

A PINS petition may not be filed unless diversion services have been exhausted.

- Diversion services may include, but are not limited to:
  - ➤ Multi-disciplinary teams to strategize community-based solutions
  - ➤ Family support services programs
  - ➤ Prevention services through the LDSS

Person in need of supervision (PINS) (continued)

School should make PINS referrals as a remedy for excessive absences **only as a last resort** and <u>after</u> school personnel have collaborated with the following to identify needs and resources and exhausted all other possible strategies:

- Student and family
- Probation and the LDSS

Excessive student absenteeism: Strategies and resources

- Restorative attendance policies, strategies and communications include:
  - ✓ Effective messaging on the adverse effects of all excused and unexcused student absences
  - ✓ Linking attendance and student achievement
  - ✓ Acknowledging barriers to getting to school
  - ✓ Creating a welcoming school climate

Excessive student absenteeism: Prevention strategies – a sampling

- Ensure each student and family has equitable access to technology, internet and troubleshooting support

- Assign each student an "ally" – an adult responsible for checking in on the student every day at home and in school

- Collaborate with community partners (e.g., LDSS points of contact) to conduct virtual and in-person meetings/events to identify student and family needs

- Student wake-up calls, texts and social media

Excessive student absenteeism: Intervention strategies – a sampling

- Call, U.S. mail, email, text, personal message on social media with/to students, parents, family members, relatives, friends and identified emergency contacts

- Offer and provide translation and interpretation services to families who speak a language other than English at home

- Use existing positive relationships with school social workers, athletic coaches and community liaisons to make sidewalk, porch or driveway visits

Student attendance resource:
Every Student Present

- [Every Student Present](#) is a public awareness campaign of the [New York State Council on Children and Families](#) that promotes awareness of excessive student absenteeism and offers prevention and intervention resources and strategies to build capacity among schools, families and communities

Student attendance resource: Attendance works

- Attendance Playbook: Smart Strategies for Reducing Chronic Absenteeism in the COVID Era

- Ideas for how to encourage and track attendance during distance learning

- 25+ effective and readily scalable approaches to reducing chronic absenteeism

- Implementation guide for schools and districts

From the Field: Successful Partnerships

Successful partnerships

- NYC Department of Education Chancellor's regulations detailing protocol for addressing suspected abuse or maltreatment

- If educational neglect is suspected, staff must conduct outreach and take related steps before reporting

- Mandated reporter guidance: call the SCR if you suspect child abuse or maltreatment

- If imminent threat or danger: call 911

Successful partnerships *(continued)*

- Educational neglect: Must take these steps prior to reporting:
  - Outreach to the child's family at different times of day, using multiple means
  - Talk to other teachers or classmates who may have information
  - Assess the barriers! Technology/connectivity? Transportation?

- Tiered response protocol: attendance monitoring obligations for child-welfare-involved students

- ACS Office of Safety First and Education Unit: working together to support a child-welfare-involved student in non-emergency situations

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Assessing Child Abuse/Maltreatment in a Virtual Environment

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Child welfare workers

- OCFS-issued guidance to CPS staff on protocols to adopt in relation to COVID-19[1]

- These protocols emphasized:
  - Using screening for COVID-19 symptoms and following safety protocols to avoid transmission
  - Addressing the risk of COVID-19 before going out to conduct a home visit
  - Electronic platforms (such as Skype, Zoom, FaceTime) may be used depending on allegations, information in record review and information received from initial contacts

1 https://ocfs.ny.gov/main/news/2020/COVID-2020Mar15-Guidance-for-CPS.pdf

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Child Welfare *(continued)*

- These protocols emphasized *(continued):*
  - Local partnerships and consultation with local departments of health when it is suspected or known that there is a positive COVID-19 case in a household where CPS feels they must go in person
  - Elevating any denials to enter a home to a supervisor
- Initial contact(s) must be sufficient to determine whether the child may be in immediate danger of serious harm
- These guidance documents still apply

School Personnel

Rapport

- Disclosure by a student who is experiencing abuse or maltreatment is much more likely when there is a trusting relationship

- Working through challenges with remote learning may pose unique opportunities to build rapport with students and their caregivers

School personnel *(continued)*

Assessing Safety

- When assessing safety of children in a virtual environment, is there anything regarding the child's behavior, environment or affect that would give you reasonable cause to suspect:
    - The child(ren) has or is at risk of a serious or life-threatening physical injury
    - The child(ren) has been sexually abused or sex trafficked
    - The caregivers for the child(ren) are not exercising a minimum degree of care in providing for the child(ren)'s basic needs to the extent that they are in danger or are in imminent risk of danger?

School personnel *(continued)*

Clarify

- Is there an explanation for the presenting concern from the student and caregiver? Are they congruent?

- How does the student indicate that the concern makes them feel?

- Are there resources who should follow up with the student, like a school-based social worker? Do other professionals share your assessment?
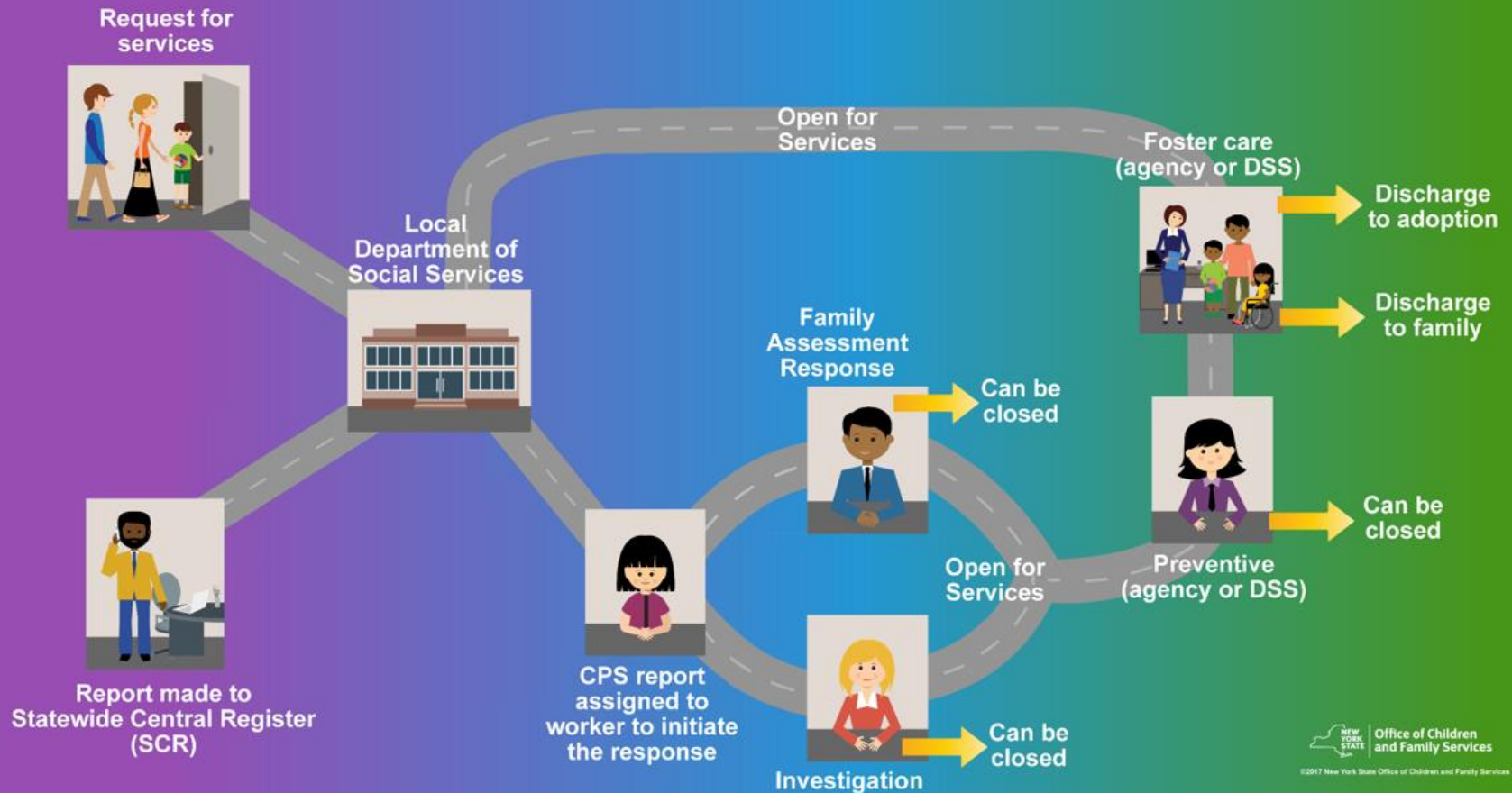
Child Welfare Pathways

The New York Statewide Central Register for Child Abuse and Maltreatment (SCR)

If you suspect child abuse or maltreatment – report it!

- Reports of suspected child abuse or maltreatment should be made immediately to the New York Statewide Central Register of Child Abuse and Maltreatment, commonly known as the Child Abuse Hotline, at 1-800-635-1522

- This hotline operates 24 hours-a-day, seven days a week, 365 days a year

- Please visit https://ocfs.ny.gov/main/prevent_child_abuse.asp to learn more

Educational neglect

- A child's "physical, mental or emotional condition has been impaired or is in imminent danger of becoming impaired" due to the parent's failure to exercise a minimum degree of care in providing the child with an adequate education (Family Ct Act § 1012[f][i]; see Family Ct Act § 1046[b][i])
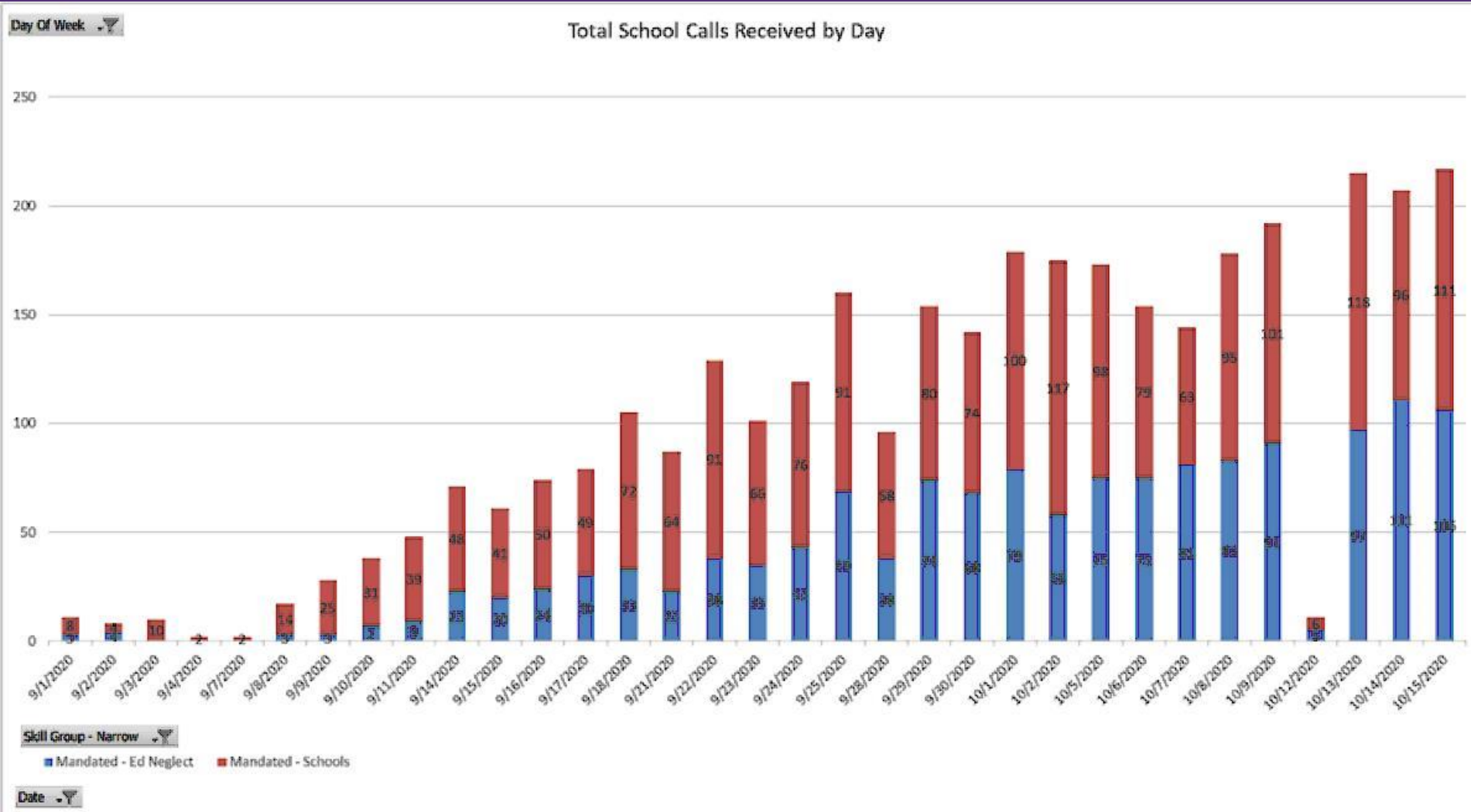
Total School Calls Received by Day

Day Of Week

Skill Group - Narrow
■ Mandated - Ed Neglect   ■ Mandated - Schools

Date

SCR and educational neglect calls: Registered

The following is an example of an educational neglect call that would be registered (accepted) by the SCR:

Ten-year-old has not participated in any remote learning sessions (25 days) since the beginning of the school year. She has missed significant academic content and is currently failing at the five-week point of the marking period. The mother is aware the child is not participating and has taken minimal action to facilitate the child's participation. The child had excessive absenteeism last year as well.

Miscellaneous information: School staff have had multiple phone conversations with the mother. Two letters have been sent and a home visit was conducted. The school has provided the child with a chrome book and a mi-fi. The child knows how to operate the device and how to log in to participate in remote instruction. No other concerns for the child/family.

SCR and educational neglect calls: Not registered

The following is an example of an educational neglect call that would not be registered:

Seven-year-old has had sporadic absenteeism for the past three weeks, totaling eight missed days of in-person schooling. The child is missing instruction, and there is concern he may fall behind. The parents have stated to school staff they are having recent challenges with transportation and child-care coverage, and they are trying to work things out. The parents have picked up make-up work from the school but have not turned anything back in.

How can the school and child welfare work together to support this family?

Preparing to make an educational neglect call to the SCR

- Information to have ready before calling:
  - Demographics including the address
  - Number of absences and when
  - How was the family contacted
  - Did you speak with the parent
  - What are the family's challenges
  - Actions school has taken to assist family
  - What was the parents' response
  - What is the harm to the child

Making an educational neglect call to the SCR

- SCR interview process – additional questions SCR is asking about remote learning and steps the school has taken to engage with the family
- In order for an educational neglect report to be accepted for investigation, the following is required:
  - Child of compulsory school age
  - Excessive absences

Making an educational neglect call to the SCR (*continued)*

- Parent has been made aware
- Efforts school has made to contact and engage the child/family
- Parent has not taken action to rectify the situation
- There is harm/impairment to the child's education
- Identifying and locating information for the child/family
- NYS jurisdiction

NOTE: A report will not be accepted without this information

Making an educational neglect call to the SCR *(continued)*

- Caller offered an opportunity to speak (consultation) with a supervisor any time a report is not accepted

- When a report is registered (accepted) – it is assigned to the local child protective services for investigation

- Expectation is for the local child protective services to accept the report and investigate

Collaboration and Shared Goals – OCFS

Mandated reporters as mandated SUPPORTERS

- Challenges presented by COVID-19 made an already difficult job even more challenging – THANK YOU!

- Shared goal – children are safe; families are supported

- Work being done between schools and local departments of social services – points of contact

- Hope is both systems working with families prior to a call to the hotline

- Want those families requiring child protective services intervention to receive it – others may need school-based and community-based services – not CPS

- How to support our school partners…

Supporting our school partners

As prevention partners:

- Partner with school personnel and local community-based providers to identify resources and supports available within localities for all students

- Be aware of potential risk factors such as staff layoffs, changes to accessibility/capacity/linkages in community-based services

- Be data-informed of your county's performance/indicators to help inform where the potential for increased risk for child abuse and neglect may exist

Supporting our school partners
As partners for students known to, or referred to, child welfare

- Examine existing caseload and provide outreach to families where there is potential for increase risk of abuse/neglect

- Attend school meetings when needed to identify needs of family and children

- When educational neglect reports are accepted, LDSSs strongly encouraged to use Family Assessment Response (FAR) to assist families

- Contact OCFS regional office leads and request TA/support (OCFS is also reaching out and asking how we can support the field)

Supporting children and youth already in foster care with education needs during COVID-19

Students already in foster care face unique educational challenges – these are exacerbated by the pandemic.

- **Supporting caregivers**:
  - Schools and child welfare should frequently reach out to caregivers to understand needs and challenges to support education
- **Supporting students who are struggling**:
  - Tracking and monitoring progress and regression; connecting with tutoring and academic supports when needed
- **Special attention to students in foster care in special education**:
  - Progress and regression within IEP should be tracked and monitored
  - Strong advocacy necessary for students who qualify for special education to receive appropriate supports and services to make educational progress

Supporting children and youth already in foster care with education needs during COVID-19 *(continued)*

- Local education agencies (LEAs) and child welfare agencies – continued joint responsibility to ensure **educational stability** under ESSA and Fostering Connections, including to ensure students have **appropriate school placements**, are **making academic progress** and have **access to materials and technology**

  - New factors to consider with COVID-19 when looking at best interest determination

  - For more information see ABA Center on Children and the Law resource: [Preparing for the New School Year During COVID-19: A Checklist for LEAs and Child Welfare Agencies](#)

- **Information sharing** even more vital between schools and agencies
  - Know your respective point of contact; updated lists can be found here under "Educational Points of Contact": https://ocfs.ny.gov/main/fostercare/education.asp

Family Assessment Response (FAR)

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What is FAR?

Family Assessment Response (FAR) is a differential response that may be used for CPS reports that have been accepted by the SCR where there is no safety concern that rises to the level of immediate or impending danger for the child and/or family

FAR: How does it work?

- Under the FAR model, a case is diverted from a traditional CPS investigation

- LDSS assesses circumstances and needed services, and collaborates with the local stakeholders and services providers, including school districts, on how to support the child and family; then the LDSS links the family to available community-based services

- Participation in FAR is voluntary for a parent

FAR and alleged educational neglect

- LDSSs may move FAR cases back to a CPS investigatory track; in fact, LDSSs **must** move a case they have decided to use a FAR track for back to a CPS investigatory track if there are any safety concerns that rise to the level of immediate or impending danger for the child/family

- Participation in FAR is optional on the part of LDSSs and by statute requires OCFS approval; not all LDSSs presently use FAR

FAR and alleged educational neglect *(continued)*

FAR is a particularly strong tool to provide needed supports to families when a school has exhausted efforts to engage the family and the LDSS determines that the family needs community-based services following an allegation of educational neglect only.

- OCFS is committed to providing expedited approval for these FAR applications, training and technical assistance that would help LDSSs use this model in these unprecedented times

FAR and alleged educational neglect *(continued)*

- Recognizing FAR as an existing important resource in our toolkit to address educational neglect and challenges resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, OCFS developed a streamlined application for LDSSs that presently do not use FAR, so that they could opt into this program for cases where the only allegation of abuse or maltreatment is educational neglect

Trauma, Children, Families and COVID-19

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Trauma, children and families

- 60% of adults report experiencing abuse or other difficult family circumstances during childhood

- 26% of children in the United States will witness or experience a traumatic event before they turn four

- More than 60% of children were exposed to at least one type of violence within the past year

- Because of prevalence of trauma – children, families and colleagues should be approached assuming that they have likely experienced at least one instance of trauma[2]

2   Office of Children and Family Services Introduction to Trauma Web-Based Training

Trauma in COVID-19

- COVID-19 has amplified current stressors, such as poverty, discrimination, traumatic grief and loss

- Additionally, many families have experienced illness, death, unemployment and food insecurity

- COVID-19 has qualities that qualify as a traumatic event in itself[3]
  - Fear
  - World is unsafe
  - Isolation
  - Disruption in normal routines

3 https://www.healthline.com/health-news/the-world-is-experiencing-mass-trauma-from-covid-19-what-you-can-do#How-common-is-this-reaction?

Trauma-informed and responsive best practices for schools – NYS guidance and resources

- SED's School Reopening Guidance
  - Social Emotional Well-being (pp. 8, 64)
  - Mental Health and Trauma-Responsive Practices (p. 67)
  - Multi-tiered Systems of Support (p. 67)

- SED's Social Emotional Learning (SEL) Website
  - SEL and Trauma-Responsive Guidance and Resources

- New York State School Mental Health Resource and Training Center
  - Mental Health Association of New York State (MHANYS)
  - Schools@MHANYS.org

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Trauma-informed and responsive best practices for schools – US guidance and resources

- [Essential Elements of a Trauma-informed School and Child Welfare Systems](#) The National Child Traumatic Stress Network

- [Recognizing and Treating Child Traumatic Stress](#) US Department of Health and Human Services' Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)

✓ Identifying, assessing, addressing and treating traumatic stress

✓ Trauma education and awareness

✓ Creating culturally responsive trauma-informed learning environments, policies, procedures and partnerships between schools, students, families, communities and child welfare systems

✓ Resources for families, caregivers, schools and child welfare systems

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Trauma-informed and responsive best practices for child welfare – US guidance and resources

- Maximize physical and psychological safety for children and families[4]
- Identify trauma-related needs of children and families
- Enhance child well-being and resilience
- Enhance family well-being and resilience
- Enhance the well-being and resilience of those working in the system
- Partner with youth and families
- Partner with agencies and systems that interact with children and families

4 The National Child Traumatic Stress Network, https://www.nctsn.org/trauma-informed-care/trauma-informed-systems/child-welfare/essential-elements

There is only one you: Take care of yourself

- Probability of being born – you are a miracle[5]
- Cannot take care of others unless you take care of yourself
- Self-care strategies, physical or behavioral:
  - Running, yoga, working out, hiking, dancing
  - Deep breathing, meditation
  - Eat well
  - Get enough sleep

5 https://www.huffpost.com/entry/probability-being-born_b_877853

There is only one you: Take care of yourself *(continued)*

- Relational strategies:
  - Express feelings in relationships with friends, colleagues, supervisors, therapists

- Cognitive strategies (deliberate distraction of attention):
  - Movies
  - Music
  - Surf the web
  - Avoid trauma exposure outside of work
  - Limit exposure to details of traumatic event

There is only one you: Take care of yourself *(continued)*

- Feeling stressed by the COVID-19 pandemic? You are not alone. Call the NYS Emotional Support Helpline 7 days a week, 8 a.m.-10 p.m. at **1-844-863-9314.**
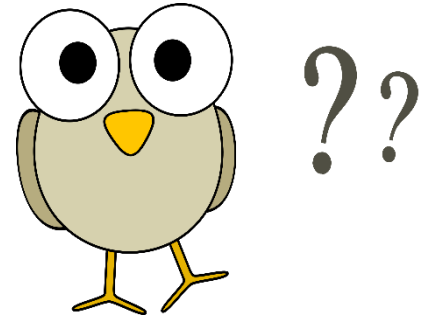
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Q & A

Send additional questions to . . .

- Education: studentsupportservices@nysed.gov

- Child Welfare: CWCS.Ed.Neglect@ocfs.ny.gov