

August 2021

ONcall

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inside

Bringing them back: Reengaging students after COVID

Absentee rates were too high before the pandemic and have only increased during the disrupted school year. Schools must increase their efforts to bring students back to the classroom. The community will support schools that help students succeed.

Can good public relations substitute for marketing?

Public relations and marketing go hand-in-hand, but they are not the same. Simply put, public relations is a steady, careful focus on developing and maintaining relationships and the district's reputation, and marketing is sales. Both have a place in school district communications plans, but the foundation of community outreach should be based on the honesty and two-way engagement of PR.

Leading in a crisis — lessons learned

COVID restrictions are easing, but the pandemic disruptions are not over. Ongoing health and safety guidelines will still affect normal operations to ensure that students and staff are safe. School leaders can benefit from carefully reflecting on what worked and what didn't. Writing a few notes about the lessons learned will be a useful resource for the next crisis.

Plan your parent update system

To reach your parents with important information, you don't just need to know what to say; you need to know where to say it. Understand the communication tools to help you reach your parent population.

Reminding staff about public records laws

The new school year is a great time to remind staff about rules, and public records laws are among the most important. Make sure your staff members understand the specific rules and requirements for public resources and records, including what a public record is, how staff should respond to requests for public information and the district's public records policy.

INSIGHTS FOR PARENTS: Starting a new school year and returning to buildings

Most schools should be back to normal in the fall after the long pandemic disruption. Students may need some help transitioning to regular school building routines. Parents can help by planning carefully and providing emotional support. Read tips for starting the school year smoothly.

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Bring them back: Reengaging students after COVID

School absenteeism was a problem before the pandemic started and has doubled during the last two disrupted school years. According to a survey conducted by Education Week, an average of five percent of students were absent on a typical day before the pandemic. The estimated number is now 10 percent, with higher rates of no-shows at the secondary levels.

“According to the survey, absenteeism rates are higher for schools and districts that have stuck with full-time remote learning, but they’re also up in schools doing full-time in-person instruction or a mix of remote and in-person learning. In fact, absenteeism rates appear to have nearly doubled between this fall and before the pandemic across the board, regardless of whether remote learning is in place or not.”

www.edweek.org/leadership/5-things-you-need-to-know-about-student-absences-during-covid-19/2020/10

Absenteeism affects student achievement

Schools can’t be effective at helping students succeed if they can’t reach the students. High drop-out rates and low scores affect the reputation and community support of schools. This is a problem that has a wide-reaching effect on community partnerships and election support for finance measures.

There are many reasons students miss school. Remote learning was challenging, and there were technology access issues for some students. Many older students stepped in to help with family obligations; the younger students struggled with virtual classrooms. In some cases, the actual absentee rates may not be accurate due to the difficulty in taking attendance for remote sessions.

The why of the absences does not matter as much if those issues have been resolved and are no longer preventing school participation. Schools that avoid blame and punitive action for those students may be more likely to entice them back in the fall.

“Some states, like Washington, have advised schools that attendance data should not be used in a punitive manner but rather to inform schools about students missing opportunities to learn. The nonprofit Attendance Works recommends using attendance data to partner with families to develop plans reflecting a student’s situation, including health, academics, and relationships.” *www.edweek.org/leadership/5-things-you-need-to-know-about-student-absences-during-covid-19/2020/10*

Targeting, finding and communicating with absent students

There is already concern over potential learning loss — the “COVID” slide — that may change teaching and learning when school resumes in the fall. Combined with a focus on absenteeism, districts may need to shift the focus and some funding to address these concerns.

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Experts recommend a number of interventions, but the most effective ones are based on targeted support, not blame. Many students report feeling extra stress and a lack of confidence. Reaching them will require a commitment to positive interactions.

Reports by Edutopia and Georgetown University's think tank, FutureEd, recommend several strategies to reverse absenteeism:

1. **Home visits.** Focus on relationship-building through in-person or virtual visits with a student's family. Reach out to the students to show concern and interest in their school success. Consider developing an initiative or campaign to set expectations for these home visits, such as Mobile Mondays, where home visits are planned every Monday.
2. **Nudges.** Send letters and texts to alert parents about absences. Often, parents are not aware of the total number of absences their children have.
3. **Tutoring and mentoring.** Start or publicize a tutoring or mentoring program. Some students may need a confidence boost if they are discouraged about their progress. Helping them catch up with their studies could be the key to getting them back on track.
4. **The right school climate.** Schools with a welcoming messaging campaign about attendance create positive climates for students and parents.
5. **Leveraging community partnerships.** Community partners are essential to school success, and they can expand opportunities for students. Joint projects could include: finding additional volunteers to support students, prize campaigns for attendance from restaurants and stores, or transportation options from transit companies.
6. **Data.** Sharing data reports with all teachers and administrators can paint a clear picture of the scope of attendance and absenteeism issues. Regular reports can show patterns of absenteeism and pinpoint students who need interventions.
7. **Intervene at registration.** School registration is a great time to target students who need extra help and give them support. Another effective way to reach students is to assign a staff contact to all students. Staff could send periodic encouraging messages to their group and be available to lend a supportive ear if needed.

Edutopia: <https://edut.to/3wdnrZV>

FutureEd: <https://bit.ly/3AdvkSa>

Communicating your absentee efforts

For some schools, absenteeism interventions will require significant resources and support. It is important work that should be shared through communications channels as a program highlight or update.

Keep the attention on this priority focus through messages and feature stories about the district's efforts to:

- Prioritize students and help ensure the success of all students.
- Continue to point a laser-like focus on achievement.
- Share the community's pride in their schools.
- Partner with parents and community members to support young people in the community.

Including these efforts in your communications channels will help parents, staff, business leaders and community members understand funding allocations, operational decisions and special programs, good stewardship of resources and the dedication of school staff to student success.

In addition to committing to transparent communication, these messages could help support or find community partnerships to persuade hard-to-reach students to return to school.

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Can good public relations substitute for marketing?

A school district's communications department is generally responsible for as many aspects of communications as they can handle — and more. From letting kids know what the dress code is for the prom to keeping parents informed of upcoming bond issues, communicating with the community can seem like a 24-7 job.

What do we choose to share on our social platforms, and could we do it more effectively? Where are we spending our communications dollars, and is it in the most effective places? The answers to those questions lie in what your administration's goals are — and whether they are better achieved through public relations or marketing.

It's easy to confuse marketing and PR. They can sometimes look so similar they might as well be twins. Especially with the advent of social media, where a press release and a marketing campaign are released on the same platforms. The difference is, where public relations is a steady, careful focus on developing and maintaining relationships and reputation, marketing is sales, pure and simple.

So... it sounds like schools really only do public relations?

Not anymore! Throughout the school year, the emphasis is on keeping parents, staff and students informed about events, requirements and special honors. And keeping them happy with the way their schools are running. That all falls under public relations. But marketing is important, too. School districts have to focus on getting and retaining students in a way that administrations 20 years ago never had to think about.

The American Marketing Association (AMA) Board of Directors defines marketing as “the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large.” (www.ama.org/AboutAMA/Pages/Definition-of-Marketing.aspx) Communicating offerings that have value for society at large... that certainly sounds like today's schools, right?

By contrast, here is how PRSA (Public Relations Society of America) defines PR: “[Public relations] helps an organization and its publics adapt mutually to each other. Public Relations broadly applies to organizations as a collective group, not just a business; and publics encompass the variety of different stakeholders.” (<https://bit.ly/3wL97Is>) In other words, public relations is not about the specific offerings that marketing is communicating — it's about relationships. For schools, that's the relationships between the district and the community.

Traditionally, PR was the art of getting a person, company or other organization mentioned in the media, namely print, radio and television. With social media, the difference between “The

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Media” and media that is self-produced is so fine as to become almost unrecognizable to your target audience.

What are we selling?

Bond measures always need selling, and schools in general are in greater need of marketing than they ever have been. Charter schools, voucher programs, private schools, and state laws that allow parents to enroll their students in schools outside their normal attendance boundaries have all had an impact on districts. And, as students leave a school system or a school, state money often goes with them. The last year of online schooling and household upheavals has made the situation for many districts even more precarious.

At the Novato Unified School District offices in Northern California, staff have been aggressively wooing departed families to return. “For months, district staff and parent volunteers have been using social media, school tours, YouTube videos, phone calls, email blasts and community meetings to persuade families that the district will be back in business post-pandemic — in-person and full time — when the 2021-22 school year begins on Aug. 17.” They also engaged a marketing firm and are running digital ads on television and social media platforms. “Because the state reimburses Novato and other similarly funded school districts at roughly \$10,000 per student, the decline [of 275 students] represents a loss of up to \$2.75 million — a budget hit the district cannot afford to take.”

www.marinij.com/2021/06/26/novato-school-district-expands-effort-to-restore-enrollment/

“It’s not unusual for many districts to have fewer than 30 percent of households with children in the public schools. Losing their core parental constituency has forced school boards and administrators to embrace social media and move beyond traditional newsletters to explain their value to the broader community.” *<http://bit.ly/2aBhFLA>*

What does your community want?

While the school board is responsible for shaping an educational program that the community can be enthusiastic and excited about, it falls on the communications department to identify community priorities for the board.

If you’ve done the PR part of your communications strategy well, you know your community pretty well. If you’re still figuring things out, polling is increasingly a good first strategy to see where people stand on an issue.

“Polling has increasingly become a way for school districts to engage citizens and ensure they feel heard. The resulting feedback can be invaluable for understanding community sentiment and which messages will resonate with which audiences.” *<http://bit.ly/2aBhFLA>*

Are the parents in your community leaning towards local Montessori or home schooling support options? Are they frustrated with graduation rates, or disappointed in SAT scores? Polling can let the school board know what areas need a greater focus to retain and attract students.

If your school has competitive programs to offer or has made improvements it wants the community to be aware of, that’s where a marketing campaign comes in. Most people in your community would be hard-pressed to know all the opportunities available through their public schools without your help. Schools need to not only provide a competitive product; they need to also sell it to parents and taxpayers. Marketing is how you let your community know that you can provide what they need.

So... public relations or marketing?

PR vs. Marketing

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The bottom line is that the steady drumbeat of good PR makes marketing possible. The relationship you build with your community through two-way communication and honest and timely information means that your marketing campaigns will be well received, ensuring that your enrollment will increase and you will have more funds to keep serving the needs of your community.

Contributed by Megan J. Wilson, Los Angeles-based freelance writer and communications consultant

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Leading in a crisis — lessons learned

The pandemic is not over, and the upcoming school year will present new challenges. Schools will need to deal with ongoing changes to health and safety guidelines while welcoming students back after a year in remote learning. However, it is important to reflect on what we can learn from the pandemic. What worked and what missed the mark? Take time to write down what went well and what you'd like to do differently. This will become a useful resource for the next crisis.

Here are a few lessons learned from education leaders to get you started:

Ask for help

You have community members, staff and a school board to help you. Use them. Ask for their input. Solicit different opinions. Difficult decisions are easier when you have support behind you.

Morcease Beasley, Clayton County Public Schools superintendent, located in the metro Atlanta area, was faced with pressure to reopen, anxiety about student and staff safety and escalating HVAC costs. “For big issues that involve the public, including significant expenditures and life-and-death questions about school safety, you don’t have to be the Lone Ranger. Indeed, you shouldn’t be. Find allies on the board and in the community to shoulder some of the heavy load you carry.”

www.edweek.org/leadership/opinion-superintendent-pandemic-lesson-1-don-t-go-it-alone/2021/07

Build relationships

Getting student online, distributing student meals and providing remote instruction takes teamwork. Build relationships with school administrators and your school board, labor unions, the county health department, state officials and the U.S Centers for Disease Control. To harness these relationships, create working groups to tackle pressing issues.

Zandra Jo Galván leads Greenfield Union School District in California where 95% of students are socioeconomically disadvantaged. The district convened a 75-member reopening task force and, within the first two weeks of the 2020-21 school year, the district had provided a hotspot within 300 feet of every home with a student.

“Leaders have to take responsibility for their own performance. But we can’t do it alone. Responding to crises requires engagement from across the district. If it’s done right, the payoff is enormous. Your teams become stronger and more cohesive, banding together to do whatever it takes to serve their community. And, in turn, the community appreciates the

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district's efforts. Most importantly, your students and their families know you love them, will do whatever it takes to support them, and will never lose faith in them because we are stronger together.”

www.edweek.org/leadership/opinion-superintendent-pandemic-lesson-2-get-all-hands-on-deck/2021/07

Remember your duty to serve and protect

The health and safety of staff and students is the most important duty of a school leader. During the controversy over reopening timelines and following health and safety guidelines, the community's health and safety needs guided difficult decisions by school leaders. Remember your duty to serve and protect students and staff, even while facing opposing viewpoints by your community.

Mark Lane, Decorah Community Schools superintendent, learned this lesson when the governor of Iowa signed legislation banning mask mandates. The Decorah school board voted to follow U. S. CDC guidance on reopening, which recommended wearing face coverings. While his district could no longer require masks, Lane continued to wear his mask and encouraged others to do so. He had staff who were pregnant, who took care of elderly parents, or who had students who lived with at-risk family members. Lane said, “Our mask mandate was in place to give those staff members the comfort to serve others while still serving those they love most.”

He advises making future decisions based on care and concern in order to create a safe learning and work environment for staff and students.

www.edweek.org/leadership/opinion-superintendent-pandemic-lesson-3-remember-your-duty-of-care-to-others/2021/07

Continue practices that worked

Everett Public Schools in Washington found that many of the changes made in reaction to the pandemic were positive. Practices that will likely continue in the district include:

Clearer communication with parents

- Remote options for school and other activities
- Making the most of after-school hours
- Immediate, more personal feedback
- Thinking about the students' user-experience

www.edweek.org/leadership/lessons-from-the-pandemic-that-can-improve-leading-and-teaching/2021/03

Contributed by Erin Good, communications consultant

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Plan your parent update system

Communicating quickly with accurate information is critical in any school emergency. But how do parents know how to receive those messages?

Do they go to the website? Or the district's Facebook page? Or is there a notification system, such as FlashAlert?

Make it easy on your parents and simply tell them how you plan to communicate about important issues. Spell it out in a letter or one-page flyer at the beginning of the year.

Technology provides a wide array of tools to communicate, and it can be fun to try them out. Telephone calls, email, text messages, social media and electronic newsletters are just a few. Some are more effective than others for certain messages.

But when schools use too many different communication tools, it can be bewildering for parents to stay on top of them all. And when different methods are used for different kinds of messages, parents may forget where to access the specific information they need.

So keep it simple. Choose a handful of tools that are effective and efficient in communicating specific types of messages. Inform parents, and then stick with your chosen tools.

Prioritize your website

The one tool that belongs in every communication toolbox is a robust school/district website. That should be the "go-to" for the latest, most complete school and district news. Parents should know that the website will include accurate calendar dates, news releases and general information about programs and policies. Whether sending out printed or electronic messages to parents, always include a link to your website for more information.

So, what other communication tools should you use?

The best tool depends on the message you want to convey. Social media is a great choice for sharing fun photos of students and special events, but it isn't effective for relaying information about more complicated topics, such as budget cuts.

Backpacks can be a good way for elementary teachers to send examples of student work, but can be a black hole for meeting notices, parent letters and other information if parents don't remember to check them regularly.

FlashAlert and similar text notification systems are great for disseminating information quickly in a crisis, but are useless if parents haven't actually signed up to receive the notifications. If this is your tool of choice, be sure to make a push at the start of each year to get parents to sign up for notifications.

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Other options for communicating with parents might include:

- **Text messages** — Parent cell phone numbers are listed in the Student Information System and can be used to generate text messages to all families. While this can be a good way to contact parents quickly, you're limited to a certain word count, so it's not effective for all types of messages.
- **Phone calls** — Telephone calls are the next best thing to face-to-face conversations. Phone calls are often used to relay concerning news about attendance, slipping grades or disturbing behavior. But they are also a wonderful way to build relationships with parents by conveying good news. Make it a practice to call at least one parent a week to relay good news, such as when Johnny consistently finished his homework on time or impressed you by helping another student.
- **Email** — Electronic notes are quickly becoming an important link between teachers and parents because they allow for two-way communication. Parents can respond to emails, ask questions and seek further information.
- **Newsletters** — Electronic newsletters provide a means of quickly sending information about events, upcoming meetings and good news about what's happening in the schools.
- **Letters to parents** — If producing a regular newsletter seems a little daunting, a simple letter can accomplish the same thing. Teachers may want to send a general letter to parents at the start of the year, outlining expectations and listing important dates. Send other letters throughout the year to make special announcements or ask for volunteers, etc.

The list of communication options is long, but remember, you don't need to use them all. In fact, a leaner communication arsenal can be better, especially for districts without a large staff to monitor and maintain them.

Communications are only effective when someone actually receives and reads them. Once parents know where and how to access information and receive alerts about the district, they are better able to stay engaged with their school.

Contributed by Connie Potter, communications consultant

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Reminding Staff about Public Records Laws

The start of a new school year is a good time for a refresher on legal requirements for public schools. Staff members need to know that there are specific rules and requirements that apply to public agencies and public resources — like public records law.

The employee handbook and new staff orientation usually inform staff that email is considered a public record and is therefore not private. A periodic reminder about this may be helpful to avoid potential problems or embarrassment.

But email is only one public record. Most public school district documents are subject to public records laws. All 50 states have public records laws to ensure transparency and access to government documents. The laws are set by each state. This overview includes general guidelines. Check your state's public records requirements for details on your state laws.

What is a public record?

Almost everything your district produces is a public record. Public records are not just meeting notes and reports. Public documents are emails, written documents, audio and video recordings, and other computer files such as Excel, PowerPoint, and information in databases. Draft documents are also public.

However, state and federal laws have provided exemptions to protect confidential information or personal privacy. Most personnel records are protected. Health records for students and staff and all student academic records, including discipline records, are protected. Other exemptions may include information related to contracting and real estate transactions.

The tricky part is sorting the public information from the protected information if those types of records are mixed, as in the case of staff emails. If someone requests all of the emails from a certain teacher for a year, those emails would need to be reviewed to ensure they do not contain information related to a student's academic performance, discipline records and health information. However, all of the emails that do not contain legally exempt records must be released to the media/public upon request.

Student information and FERPA

Student information is specifically protected by the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). Except in very limited cases, written parental permission to release information from a student's educational record is required for personally identifiable information. The entire record is not protected; the district must redact student information to maintain student privacy while meeting the requirements of the records request. The protected information includes student ID numbers, test results, special education status, free- and reduced-lunch status and grades.

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Under FERPA, schools and districts may disclose what is referred to as “directory” information on their students. Directory information includes things such as a student’s name, address, telephone number, honors and awards, etc. However, you must allow parents the opportunity to opt-out of having this information released.

For more on federal privacy rules, go to:

www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/fpco/ferpa/index.html.

Review or revise your public records policy

Creating and sharing your public records policy will help you streamline your response when faced with a request for public information. Follow the laws and respond in a timely manner. The goal is to protect student and staff privacy while operating transparently to build trust.

Does your district have a policy?

Creating a public records policy is the first step. State school board associations should have sample policies to help you get started or revise existing policies.

Policies should include:

How to make a public records request. Whether you use an electronic system or a hard-copy form, the request should be in writing.

Do you charge fees? State law specifies what allowable fees are. They may include charges for making copies or for staff time. Some requests are for vast amounts or records or require arduous, time-consuming redaction to maintain confidentiality. Reasonable fees to cover the workload may be allowed. And fees for some records that benefit the public good, such as for research or news stories, may fall under allowable fee waiver provisions. This option should be mentioned in policy.

To help minimize excessive records processing, be sure to clarify exactly what the requestor is seeking. Narrowing down what they are looking for may save a significant amount of time fulfilling the request.

What is your response time? Your policy should include an estimate for response time. Immediate fulfillment is not required, but specifying a reasonable, timely response is. If there is a delay, be sure to share that with the requestor. If the response is unreasonably slow, the requestor may seek to file a formal legal complaint. The primary business of schools is not to handle public records requests; it is to educate children. But it is part of school district business and should be a priority.

Who handles public records requests? District legal counsel can guide districts on the requirements they need to fulfill, and having a legal review of the request is a good idea, but the response will need to come from district staff. It is more efficient to have a designated staff member who coordinates and directs or fulfills public records requests. It will ensure consistency and minimize mistakes to have this person become your records expert. They can also create a record of the request and any follow-up questions.

Post your policy

All district policies should be easily searchable and accessible. Be sure to share this policy through your regular channels and in your indexed policy database on your website.

Remind staff about the policy in your start-of-school staff information. Public employees are serving the public. Transparent operations that follow clear policy will make their jobs easier and build trust with the public.

Contributed by Jay Remy, communications consultant

For Families



Starting a New School Year and Returning to Buildings



**August
2021**

INSIGHTS FOR FAMILIES is provided by your child's school in recognition of your role as a partner in education. Insights is produced by Marcia Latta, communications consultant.

Students should be returning to a mostly normal school year in the fall after the long disruption of the pandemic.

Most districts should be able to offer standard school operations. This is great news, but students may need a transition plan to help them ease back into a regular school program. The plan should also help the youngest students, who will be learning a daily in-person classroom routine without restrictions for the first time.

Know what to expect

A new school year is always a source of anxiety for some students. The current challenges amplify the stress that can affect students, parents and school staff.

Students should understand what their school experience will be like when school resumes. Knowing what to expect can relieve the worry about the unknowns of the new school year and create a calmer school environment.

Parents can watch for updates and information via normal parent communication channels and share relevant information with their children, including:

- School schedules and calendars
- School meals
- Buses and bus routes
- Special programs and activities
- After-school care
- Open houses and start-of-school events
- Health updates

Plan ahead

Start-of-school jitters are normal in any year, and COVID has contributed to increased anxiety. These expert tips can help ease anxiety:

- **Talk to your child.** Check in frequently and validate their emotions by assuring them that their emotions and frustrations are understandable.
- **Remind them to focus on the things they can control.** These action items are: following health protocols, being ready to learn, and having school supplies and homework ready for the school day.
- **Be sure they get enough sleep and eat healthy food.**
- **Discuss what you know about the year.** Share the updates from the district with your child.
- **Visit the school and try to meet the teacher.** Take a tour if they

- are available. Otherwise, drive your child by the building. Reach out to the teacher via email. Attend any scheduled virtual introductory meetings.
- **Encourage your child.** Give them regular positive feedback. Consider slipping an encouraging note in their backpack or lunchbox.

Kids should not stress about the “COVID slide”

A new worry comes with this school year: the COVID slide, an expected slip in academic progress because of the abrupt and prolonged disruption to normal learning.

Educators and parents should be aware of the need for students to catch up academically, but students should not add it to their list of worries. Too much focus on instructional loss will worsen anxiety for students who are already stressed. Instead, teachers will have plans to collaborate with parents to help students reach individual or grade-level learning goals.

Overemphasizing school success can be counterproductive and actually undermine the student’s successful school performance. Students should instead plan for a successful year, make adjustments as needed, and then follow the plan.

The school success plan should address individual student needs. It could include goals for sleep, snacks, homework time, a dedicated study space, social and leisure time, backpack organization, homework reminders, calendar systems, and teacher communication strategies.

Watch for signs of anxiety

There is a greater focus on anxiety in students this year. Educators and mental health experts are warning parents about higher rates of anxiety, depression and loneliness. This is understandable. Kids have been affected by changes to routines and general feelings of uncertainty.

According to Children’s Health, the signs of anxiety include changes to mood and behavior, including:

- Increased defiance or irritability
- Disturbances in sleep
- Loss of appetite
- Lack of concentration
- Less energy
- Physical symptoms like nausea, muscle tension or dizziness
- Refusal to go to school
- Sadness or crying

www.childrens.com/health-wellness/back-to-school-anxiety-during-covid-19

These symptoms are more serious than mere back-to-school worries. Anxiety is a mental health issue that can make normal functioning difficult. It is treatable. Your school counselor may be able to help if you have questions. You should also seek help for your child from a mental health professional. Ask your family physician for guidance.