

Supporting Students and Teachers in the Transition ~~Back~~ Forward to School



Around the world, many schools are making plans to reopen their doors to students and teachers in the coming weeks. Here at Geelong Grammar School, for instance, on-campus learning will recommence for senior school students on 25 May.

This process of returning to school will look a bit different for different schools – such as phased resumptions, and new rules around physical distancing and protective gear. Mindful of the different contexts and experiences, we would like to offer some thoughts about how all schools can navigate this process in a supportive way.

Arianna Huffington, Founder and CEO of Thrive Global, recently posted to social media some thought-provoking words of advice:

Nothing should go back to normal.

Normal wasn't working.

If we go back to the way things were, we will have lost the lesson.

May we rise up and do better.

Our world has faced (and is still facing) a significant challenge. With the prospect of returning to on-campus learning, many of us are understandably hopeful that things will 'go back to normal' – that life and work can resume as they were before. It is important, however, that this process not be about *going back* but rather about *moving forward*. Things will be very different, whether we want them to be or not. The goal is to transition to the new normal with the lessons from this experience as our guide. How can we integrate our new insights and behaviours into our old ways of being, as well as embrace new opportunities?

As we return to campus, all of us – teachers and students – might experience what psychologists call a 'reverse culture shock'. Returning to our 'home' culture (in this case, our physical school environment), can be jarring and anxiety-provoking when that culture has changed and when we have changed as a people while away from that culture. Readjusting to our home culture takes time. In order to help our students (and ourselves) deal with the shock of transitioning back to school, try to curb expectations and instead focus on supporting autonomy and student wellbeing.

Supporting autonomy

One of the biggest contrasts likely to have been experienced in time away from school is a change in autonomy. Remote learning has allowed many students and teachers to work flexible hours and engage in more self-governance. In our return to school, students and teachers will be expected to shift back to structures, rules and regulations. Getting used to these constraints will be an adjustment for everyone, no matter how familiar we are with the policies and practices, and some may even question the value and usefulness of certain approaches. It's important to consider how we might best support autonomy and maintain some flexibility in the transition to a new normal. After all, autonomy is a basic human need and decades of research have shown that it is vital to the wellbeing of children and adults. As teachers, perhaps we might revise the classroom rules with our students, or allow students to engage in more self-directed learning. As school leaders, we might adjust the timetable to give students longer breaks, or relax management policies to allow teachers to work from home during free periods. We encourage you to consider what this looks like in your context.

Supporting wellbeing

This period of isolation may have caused significant disruption to the academic, family and social lives of our students, and may have significant, pervasive effects on mental health and wellbeing. Therefore, now more than ever it will be important to take deliberate action to support the wellbeing of all of our students. Here are some practical ways you can do this in your school:

- Allow for space and time to acknowledge that, even though we are returning to a familiar environment, things are not exactly as they were before and changes may continue for a while yet. Change is hard and it can bring up big, difficult emotions, like fear and anxiety. Help students understand that feeling negative emotions is a normal response to stressful experiences. Even if we are moving in a positive direction, any change can be stressful and we may experience ups and downs in our emotions for some time. It may take a while to adjust. The UK's Mental Health Foundation has some useful tips on understanding and managing stress.
- Normalise the challenge of this time by reminding your students that we are all experiencing and navigating these changes together. Highlight that humans are naturally resilient -throughout history humans have faced and overcome many great challenges, such as The Great Depression and the Australian bushfires. Perhaps your school has stories that could be shared of having faced and overcome adversities together in the past. Humans have an amazing ability to adapt to new situations and grow from hardship.
- Encourage your students to identify and use their 'signature strengths' – that is, the Character Strengths that come most naturally to them. Whether it's zest or creativity or kindness, using our signature strengths helps us feel more energised, engaged, and happier. In challenging times this can help us feel more in control.
- Look for opportunities to increase your students' positive emotions. Positive emotions, like hope and joy, 'broaden' our ability to think and act in creative and flexible ways, and 'build' our social and psychological resources (Fredrickson, 2004). These emotions may even undo the harmful physiological effects of negative emotions. Make time to engage students in such activities as telling awe-inspiring stories, celebrating student accomplishments, and getting them to share funny videos that made them laugh during isolation.
- Engage your students in a daily practice of gratitude. Focusing on what we are grateful for can help shift our attention away from negative thinking patterns, help us appreciate the good things in our lives, and boost our wellbeing.

- Engage your students in a discussion about the silver linings of the pandemic, such as greater levels of global unity. Brainstorm together ways we might harness these positive aspects, create new opportunities and avoid taking things for granted.
- Relationships are pivotal to our wellbeing. Allow time for connection in the classroom. This might involve morning reflections, pastoral check-ins, more group-based learning, or get-to-know-you activities. Help your students feel known, seen and supported.
- Ask your students for ideas on ways they would like to be supported. Encourage them to ask for help and to let an adult know if they are worried about someone else. Clearly communicate the support structures your school has in place.
- Be mindful of and look out for the vulnerable students who have suffered greatly during this pandemic - from financial hardship to the loss of loved ones, some students may be experiencing severe anxiety, grief, or trauma and may need to be referred to psychological services for extra support.

When the school doors open, things will not be exactly as they were before – policies, practices, and people will be different. As we transition *forward* to school in the coming weeks and months, our willingness to embrace and harness change, will provide unique opportunity to grow as a community and to create more empowering, thoughtful and caring schools.

Our thoughts will be with you and we wish all school communities the very best.


Jen Hanson-Peterson 135 Jennifer Hanson-Peterson

Jennifer Hanson-Peterson is a Consultant with the Institute of Positive Education. She completed her Masters in Human Development, Learning, and Culture, with a concentration in Social-Emotional Learning and Development at the University of British Columbia, Canada.

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