

Stay connected during crisis

BY AMY NICHOLSON AND KATIE BRACKENRIDGE

The novel coronavirus is disrupting the way we live, work, and experience school. To halt the spread of infection, to be *physically safe*, we must distance ourselves from many of the people in our lives. But to be *emotionally safe*, we need to maintain social connections.

As educators, the most important thing we can do for students during this stressful time is maintain emotional closeness despite physical distance. Similarly, an essential role of education leaders right now is to maintain connection with teachers, support staff, and other colleagues.

The Virtual Banking Time Tool is a strategy modified from a tool for in-person connections to help maintain relationships during school closures. It is based on a similar tool for tracking in-person connections. It was designed for scheduling and tracking check-ins with students, but it can also be used for check-ins with staff.

WHY PRIORITIZE RELATIONSHIPS?

Neuroscience gives us a peek into why relationships are so important, particularly during this stressful time. Learning happens in the limbic system of our brain. It includes the prefrontal cortex (control center), hippocampus (learning and memory), and the amygdala (emotions and reactions). These parts are interconnected and cross-wired, which helps explain why cognitive, social, and emotional development are interdependent.

The limbic system is loaded with receptors for two types of hormones, one responding to stress and one that responds to love and trust. Under stress, high levels of the hormone



cortisol flood the limbic system and prevent the three parts from working together. The amygdala — emotional reaction center — is quick to take over, keeping the individual from planning, remembering, regulating, and learning. This reaction is particularly hard for children (and adults) who experience frequent or chronic stress.

Fortunately, the other hormone — oxytocin, which is released when people experience trust, caring, and love — counteracts the effects of cortisol. It allows the limbic system to get rebalanced so that cognitive, social, and emotional functions can be restored. Because caring relationships trigger the release of oxytocin, they are very important for buffering stress, especially now.

WHY SCHEDULE CHECK-INS?

In the midst of a crisis, we're all juggling many responsibilities. Despite our best intentions to connect with all of the people we care for, it can be easy to lose track of those we have — and haven't — talked with and when.

The Virtual Banking Time Tool can help you organize individual, virtual check-ins to ensure consistent

and predictable time for personal connections, whether with students or staff.

Some key principles of this tool are:

- The check-ins you schedule should be short but happen on a regular schedule; the key is that they are dependable.
- The check-ins should focus on social support, not instruction or evaluation.
- These connections should be noncontingent; they should not be related to behavior or performance, and not used as rewards or punishments.
- They are intended to be youth-directed (or staff-directed if you are conducting a leader-staff check-in) as much as possible. You may need to do some prompting and offer options to start, but be sure to gradually release control.

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VIRTUAL BANKING TIME TOOL

DIRECTIONS

1. Set up time to meet with individual students (or staff members) for 10 to 15 minutes, one to three times a week depending on their need. You may choose to use the calendar below to schedule these opportunities. Record the scheduled time. You can highlight meetings that didn't occur to remind yourself to check back in with the student or staff member. **Reminder:** Be sure to confirm that the times you outline work for them (and their families).
2. The point of the session is to designate a sacred time to provide informal connection and social support.
3. Follow the student's (or staff member's) lead and do not attempt to teach. Listen, narrate what the person is experiencing, and validate emotions.
4. You may choose to leverage and share other tools during these conversations to help the person establish new routines, structure his or her time, or manage emotions.

Here's how it might look for a teacher or support staff member to use the tool with students:

- Call every student every week or, if you don't have enough time, choose a few students who particularly need help. Record the name of the student and the phone number in the tool to help stay organized.
- You can start the conversation by asking questions, inviting the other person to ask you questions, playing a game, or reading a story. You can suggest these options and let the student choose.
- Some students may need additional prompting to get started. Here are some basic questions you can ask. Note that they are not about schoolwork but intended to tap into something the student is interested in.
 - o What was the favorite thing you did today?
 - o Who are you spending time with? What kinds of things are you doing?
 - o What games have you played recently?

If you are meeting with many students or many staff members, you might also want to record a few notes about the conversation. This will help refresh your memory when you talk the next week and allow you to demonstrate genuine care and engagement.

BANKING TIME SCHEDULE					
Time slots	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday