



WESTWOOD HILLS ELEMENTARY STAFF GUIDE

Supporting Students As They Return to School

When students return to school following a crisis event, caring and supportive school staff can play an important role in helping them feel safe, connected, and ready to re-engage in learning. This guide provides practical information and strategies to help staff feel prepared to welcome students back, recognize and respond to their needs, and create a supportive sense of stability during a difficult time.

The goal is not to make everyone feel better.

The goal is to help students feel safe, supported, and connected while the school community begins to return to routines. You do not need perfect words. Being a calm, predictable, and caring adult is one of the most important supports you can provide.

Our Shared Priorities

In the first days back, staff are not expected to provide therapy or to lead students through a detailed discussion of the incident. Instead, focus on three things:

- **Connection:** Help students know that trusted adults are present, available, and glad to see them.
- **Predictability:** Re-establish familiar routines, explain changes, and let students know what to expect.
- **Support:** Be available to listen to students and notice students who may need additional help and connect them with the appropriate school-based support.

It is okay to acknowledge that something difficult happened without asking students to talk about it. Students will respond differently. Some may want to talk; others may want to get back to a familiar routine. Both responses can be normal.

A Few Things to Keep in Mind

- Students may react immediately, later in the day, or weeks after the event. A delayed response does not mean a student was unaffected.
- Not every student who is worried, sad, distracted, or upset needs a mental health referral. Many reactions settle with time, support, connection, and a return to predictable routines.
- Avoid making assumptions about what a student is feeling. A student who appears calm may still be processing the event, while a student who is upset may simply need reassurance and a trusted adult.
- Use developmentally appropriate, factual language. Do not speculate, repeat rumors, or provide details that have not been confirmed and approved for release.
- Follow the school's established communication, crisis-response, threat-assessment, and student-support procedures when a concern goes beyond routine classroom support.

The First Day Back

A brief, calm opening is usually enough. The purpose is to acknowledge the event, normalize a range of reactions, identify available support, and transition students into a predictable routine.

Consider these four elements:

1. Acknowledge what happened without describing unnecessary details.
2. Normalize a range of reactions: students may feel worried, sad, angry, distracted, relieved, or not noticeably different.
3. Remind students that trusted adults and supports are available.
4. Explain any changes they may notice and then move into the normal structure of the day.

Morning Meeting Message

Do not ask the whole class to describe what they saw, heard, or were told.

"I'm really glad to see you today. Something very scary happened at our school last week. The adults worked together to keep people safe, and we have taken time to make sure our school is ready for you to come back.

You may have lots of different feelings today. You might feel happy to see your friends, worried, sad, confused, or maybe you don't feel very different at all. All of those feelings are okay.

There are lots of grown-ups here whose job is to take care of you and help keep you safe. Today we're going to do some of the things we normally do...learn, play, talk, eat, and spend time together. If you have a question or need to talk to someone, you can talk to me or another trusted adult."

When Students Notice Changes Around School

Students may notice police presence, temporary barriers, changes to doors or rooms, staff they do not usually see, or other physical changes. If a change is safe and appropriate to explain, give a brief, factual explanation and move on.

Sample Language:

"You may notice that some things around school look different today. You may see additional adults or changes to some areas of the building. Those changes are part of our plan for supporting the school community. If you have a question about something you notice, I will help you find an answer."

Avoid making promises about safety. Instead of saying, "Nothing bad will happen," emphasize the adults, procedures, and supports that are in place.

Responding to Questions About Safety

Students may ask direct questions such as, “Could this happen again?” or “Can someone get into our school?” These questions are often attempts to regain a sense of safety and predictability.

Sample Language:

“It makes sense to have questions about safety after something scary happens. It is important to remember that events like this are rare. We have practiced our safety procedures and when we followed those procedures last week, they were effective. Every adult in this building, people in our community, and our local police officers work together every single day to keep our school safe. If you have a specific concern, I can help you find an answer.”

If you do not know what information has been approved for release, do not guess. Tell the student you will find out what can be shared and follow up.

When Students Want to Talk About the Incident

Some students will want to talk. A brief, supportive response can be helpful, but teachers should not feel responsible for conducting a group debriefing or asking students to recount what they saw or heard.

You, as a teacher, are not responsible for providing therapeutic conversations for individuals or groups of students. There may be times where you need to redirect the classroom discussion and that is okay. Using phrases like, “Thank you for sharing that,” and then introducing the next classroom activity is an appropriate and helpful strategy.

When individual students continually bring up the incident, that is a time to reach out for the building-level supports that are being provided.

Considerations for Talking With Students

- Listen without pressing for details.
- Acknowledge the student's feelings or concern.
- Correct misinformation only when you have accurate, approved information.
- If you do not know something, say so rather than filling the gap with a guess.
- Redirect graphic or unnecessary details and return the student to a supportive, predictable activity.
- Connect the student with a school mental health professional when the concern is significant, persistent, you don't feel comfortable, or it requires more than classroom support.

Sample Language:

"It's okay to have questions about what happened. I want to make sure we stick with information we know is true and avoid rumors. If there's something you're worried about, tell me what you need help with."

When a Student Says, "I'm Scared."

Start with connection rather than correction. Validate the student's experience, thank them for telling you, and ask what would help right now.

Sample Language:

"It makes sense that you might feel scared. I'm glad you told me. I'm here with you. What would help you feel a little safer right now?"

Provide options for students. Think about things you already do!

A student may need a short break, access to a trusted adult, a drink of water, time with a friend, reassurance about the day's routine, or simply a little time. Make a plan to check back in later.

When You Are Not Sure How to Answer

You do not have to have all the answers and that's okay.

Sample Language:

"I don't know the answer to that yet, and I don't want to guess. I'll find out what information we're able to share."

"I can understand why you might wonder about that."

"I cannot promise you anything except that we are all here to do our best to keep everyone safe every day."

This is especially important when students ask about the investigation, a person's motive, specific details of the incident, or future security decisions. Refer questions outside your role or comfort level to Dr. Harris or Mrs. Henry.

If a Student Shares Something Concerning

A traumatic event can prompt students to disclose concerns directly related to the event, as well as concerns unrelated to it. Treat disclosures seriously and alert the building's school counselors.

1. Stay calm and listen. Give the student your attention without interrogating them.
2. Thank the student for telling you. Let them know that you are glad they came to you.
3. Do not promise secrecy. Explain that you may need to involve other adults whose job is to help keep them safe/support them.

4. Ask only the questions needed to understand the immediate concern and determine what assistance is needed. Avoid conducting your own investigation.
 5. Immediately follow the school's established process for requesting assistance and documenting/reporting the concern.
 6. If there is an immediate safety concern, follow the school's emergency response procedures without delay.
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Signs That Students May Need More Support

Many students may show some change in behavior, mood, attention, or energy after a frightening event. What matters is the student's overall pattern, the intensity of their behaviors, how long they last, and whether they interfere with daily functioning.

- Increased irritability, anger, outbursts, or uncharacteristic defiance or aggression.
- Heightened anxiety or hypervigilance, including being unusually tense, worried, or easily startled.
- Clinginess, regression, or an unusual need for adult reassurance.
- Withdrawal, isolation, or loss of interest in friends and activities.
- Difficulty transitioning between activities or returning to ordinary classroom routines.
- Repeatedly reenacting, talking about, writing about, or playing out the event in a way that appears distressing or interferes with functioning.
- Difficulty concentrating, following directions, or participating.
- Sudden changes in academic performance, memory, or organization.
- Frequent physical complaints such as headaches, stomachaches, nausea, or racing heart.
- Fatigue, sleepiness, or reports of nightmares or difficulty sleeping.
- Persistent or worsening distress, especially when it interferes with attendance, relationships, learning, or daily functioning.

These signs are not a diagnosis. They are cues to pay attention to, check in, and consider whether the student needs additional support. When in doubt, consult the building's mental health professionals and follow division procedures.

Quick Response Guide

Student says...	You can say...
"I'm scared."	"It makes sense to feel scared after something frightening. I'm glad you told me. What would help right now?"
"I don't want to be here."	"I hear you. Coming back may feel hard. Let's talk about what you need right now and who can help."
"Is the shooter coming back?"	"It makes sense to have questions about safety. The adults responsible for school safety are working to keep the

Student says...	You can say...
	school safe. I can help connect you with someone who can answer specific questions.”
Incorrect information (rumor).	“Thank you for telling me. Let’s talk privately so I can understand what you saw or heard.” If the rumor is inaccurate and you have information (that is publicly available) that can be appropriately shared, provide a brief, factual correction.
“My mom/dad/grandma said the school isn’t safe.”	“It sounds like your family is worried too. It’s okay to have questions. Let’s talk about what you’re worried about.”
“I’m not scared. I think this is cool.”	“People can react very differently to scary events. You don’t have to feel a certain way. Let’s focus on what you need today.” Alert school counselors.
“Can someone get into our school again?”	“That’s an important safety question. The adults at WHES have safety plans in place, and we all work hard to do everything we can to keep you safe here at school.”
“Why did he do it?”	“That is a question that a lot of people have right now, and I don’t want to guess about someone’s reasons. We can talk privately about what you’re wondering, or I can get another adult here at WHES to talk with you more about this.”
“Why did ____ get shot?”	“That is a very difficult question. I may not have any information to share about the investigation. I can help you find an adult who can support you with your questions.”
“Where is ____? Is she okay?”	“I know that she is safe. Remember that people need to be away from school for different reasons at different times.”
“Are we going to have another lockdown?”	“I know that possibility may be worrying you. If there is a safety concern, adults will follow the school’s safety procedures. Let’s talk about what you need to feel more comfortable right now.”
“Why are the police here?”	“You may notice additional law enforcement or new adults in the building. They are here because they want to support our school community and help all of us feel safe and cared for. If there is something specific you are worried about, you can ask me.”

What to Avoid

- Do not ask the whole class to describe what they saw, heard, or were told.
- Do not ask students to share what their parents or caregivers told them.
- Do not repeat rumors or unverified information.
- Do not speculate about motives, causes, investigation details, or future events.
- Do not tell students they should not be afraid or that they need to “get over it.”
- Do not promise that everything is completely safe or that nothing bad will happen again.

- Do not show news coverage, graphic images, or social media posts about the event.
- Do not make a classroom assignment that requires students to draw, write, or publicly process the incident.
- Do not turn a routine classroom conversation into a forced emotional check-in.

Better Alternative to a Whole-Class Emotional Check-In

Instead of asking, “Everyone tell us how you feel,” offer a low-pressure invitation:

Sample Language:

“You may be having a lot of different feelings today, or you may not feel much different at all. If you need a break, have a question, or want to talk with an adult, let me know.”

Helping the Classroom Feel Predictable Again

Routine is not about pretending the event did not happen. Predictability can help students regain a sense of control and know what to expect.

- Keep the day’s schedule as familiar as possible.
- Preview transitions and changes before they happen.
- Provide reasonable flexibility with attention, work completion, and breaks.
- Use calm, matter-of-fact language when unexpected sounds, announcements, or changes occur.
- Build in ordinary moments: learning, movement, lunch, play, conversation, and positive connection.
- Notice effort and participation rather than expecting students to perform exactly as they did before the event.
- For the first few days back, avoid any academic tasks that are too rigorous. Students may not be ready to retain or process a lot of new information. Consider reviewing previously taught concepts or slowly introducing new ones.

Supporting Yourself Matters, Too

As part of the school community, you may be carrying your own fear, grief, anger, or exhaustion. You do not have to hide every emotion, but students benefit when adults remain calm, regulated, and appropriately supported.

- Use the staff supports available to you.
- Talk with a trusted colleague or designated support person rather than processing difficult details with students.
- Take breaks when possible, eat, hydrate, and attend to basic needs.

- Ask for help if you find yourself struggling to stay regulated or to meet your responsibilities.
- Remember that recovery is not a one-day process. Continue to notice changes in yourself and your students over time.

A Final Reminder

You do not need perfect words.

Students need adults who are steady, honest, caring, and present. A calm greeting, a predictable routine, a willingness to listen, and knowing when to connect a student with additional support can and will make a meaningful difference. We will take this one day at a time and continue to support one another as our school community heals.

Resources for Staff

The following resources provide additional guidance for educators and school leaders responding to traumatic or violent events. They are especially useful for staff who want to learn more about Psychological First Aid, common student reactions, and longer-term recovery.

[Psychological First Aid for Schools \(PFA-S\) Field Operations Guide, 2nd Edition](#) (**National Child Traumatic Stress Network**): Practical guidance for school administrators, educators, and staff supporting students, families, and school personnel after a school crisis, disaster, or violent event.

[Teacher Guidelines for Helping Students after Mass Violence](#) (**National Child Traumatic Stress Network**): A concise resource describing common student reactions, ways teachers can help, and considerations for educator self-care.

[Helping Youth after Community Trauma: Tips for Educators](#) (**National Child Traumatic Stress Network**): Practical suggestions for educators supporting students after community trauma, including effects on learning, behavior, and relationships.

[Children and Disasters](#) (**SAMHSA**): Information on common reactions in children and adolescents, the value of routines and supportive adults, and when additional professional support may be appropriate.

[Children Exposed to Violence: Tips for Teachers](#) (**U.S. Department of Justice**): Provides information on the adverse effects on children exposed to violence, followed by listings of warning signs of such exposure for various age groups, along with recommendations for how teachers, who play a critical role in children's lives, can assist in preventing or mitigating the adverse effects of exposure to violence.

This guide is intended to help staff respond consistently and confidently as students return to school. It draws on Psychological First Aid for Schools (PFA-S) and trauma-informed school guidance from the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN), SAMHSA, and the U.S. Department of Education.