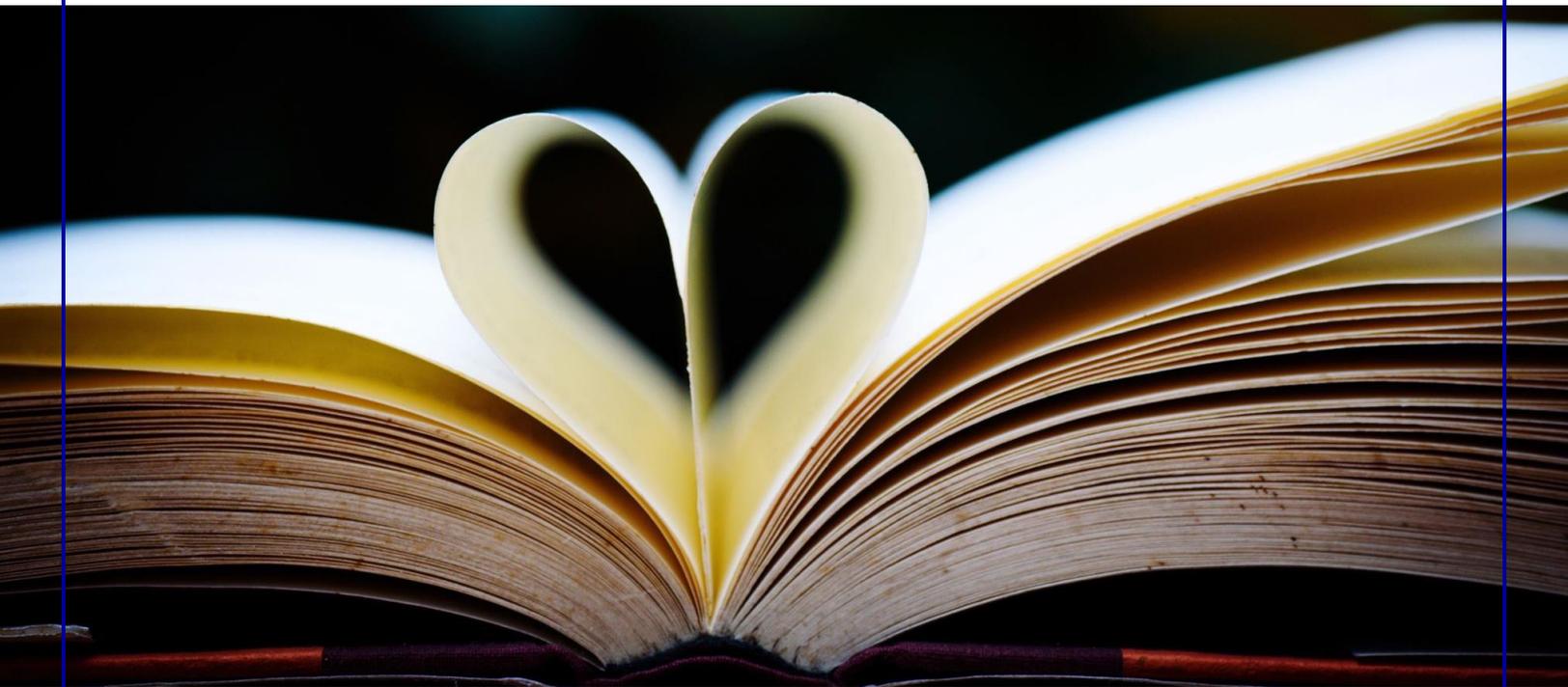


# Back to School for Good

Essential Behavior Analytic Tools for a Safe Return to School



Jessica Thompson M.Ed., BCBA, LABA  
Constellations Behavioral Services, LLC.



## INTRODUCTION: SCHOOL IS OUT

Throughout the spring of 2020, due to the SARS-COV-2 Coronavirus Pandemic in the United States, 48 out of 50 states closed or were recommended to close their public-school buildings. By May 15<sup>th</sup> of 2020, almost 100,000 schools across the US had closed their doors to slow the spread of the disease (Peele, H., Riser-Kositsky, M., Kim, H. 2020). According to EdWeek's Coronavirus and Closings Map, more than 55 million students remained home and educators across the country pivoted to support the needs of their students, their own families and themselves (Peele, H., Riser-Kositsky, M., Kim, H. 2020). In the days following mass district shutdowns, educational leadership teams found themselves in a position they had never imagined. Four months later, given the "unique and critical role that schools play [which] makes them a priority for opening and remaining open," US school leadership teams find themselves in the process of developing re-opening plans based on the guidelines developed by their state heads (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). They are facing pressures from political leaders, families, staff, and communities to create plans that will not only maintain the educational effectiveness of a pre-COVID world, but also to create a safe environment that will minimize the risk of contracting the coronavirus.

The debate to re-open schools and educational facilities has been widely impacted by the potential risks that the settings themselves present. There needs to be consideration for indoor spaces that require proper ventilation and high-occupancy spaces where there is close contact with other people, both aspects inherent in the majority of physical school buildings. In consideration of both those environmental conditions, leadership and administration have to consider the schools' ability to create and adhere to new routines, procedures and protocols that reduce the potential risk of contracting the coronavirus (CDC, 2020). In a review of the Center for Disease Control and Prevention School Considerations document and the World Health Organization's Considerations for School-Related Public Health

Measures in the Context of COVID-19, the following recommendations were highlighted as crucial practices necessary to support risk mitigation in the school setting (2020).

- Health Screenings
- Hand Hygiene
- Respiratory Etiquette
- Cloth Face Coverings
- Adequate Supplies
- Signs and Messages
- Reduced Object Sharing
- Ventilation
- Close Water Systems
- Modified Layouts
- Physical Barriers and Guides
- Modified Food Service
- Group Cohorting
- Social Distancing Practice

And while school leadership teams are quickly accepting, creating policies around and communicating these new practices to their school communities, they must also consider that these practices are not only new protocols or procedures, but that they are new behaviors that will need to be taught, supported and maintained in order to reduce the risk of community spread of COVID-19. Leadership teams can use behavior analytic principles to influence the success and outcomes of these new practices, potentially leading to safer and healthier school environments. For educational communities, the school they return to may not be the familiar environment they left behind. The following key steps are critical in the development of new behaviors and the establishment of a supportive culture of safety.

## CREATE YOUR CULTURE OF SAFETY

A vital step in the re-opening of schools, and necessary to the success and fulfillment of safety procedures and protocols, is the establishment of the “safety culture” of a particular educational community. A safety culture communicates to all members of the educational setting, “This is how we do things now and we are in this together.” (Rodriguez M.A., Bell, J., Brown, M., Carter, D. 2017 adapted from Krapfl and Kruja, 2015). The establishment of a safety culture sets the stage for the wellbeing and safety of others to be the foundational value of all new, expected, required behaviors. Creating a safety culture can significantly impact the success in the implementation of safety processes (e.g., appropriate use of PPE, hand sanitization procedures, environmental modifications, environmental sanitization procedures).

There are three vital factors educational leadership teams can consider when seeking to develop an educational community’s safety culture:

1. *Model Leadership: “Demonstrating commitment to all of the organizational constituencies involved” (Rodriguez et al, 2017, p.311).*

The ability for all members of an educational community, from Custodian to Principal to Student to Teacher, to be successful in the implementation of new expected behaviors in the school setting, rests heavily on the safety culture being bled down to all members from their leadership team. This means the leadership team talks the language of safety behavior, models safety behavior, and encourages and supports safety behavior in others. If

the leadership team does not support or model the expected behaviors that they want the members of their community to engage in it signals either: a.) they are not committed to the safety of others, or b.) these new behaviors are not important. The overall success in the implementation of new safety procedures starts and at the top.

2. *Trust and Communication*: “Establish a belief system where management and employees trust each other, and the trust is centered on a system of communication that allows both top-down delivery systems as well as bottom-up feedback mechanisms” (Thatcher, 2003).

All members of an educational community will be encountering new routines, procedures and behaviors that are unfamiliar and may be even uncomfortable for them to engage in when they return to school this fall. It is more important than ever to spend time fostering trusting relationships with teams through active and regular communication. And while surveys are an incredibly helpful tool in understanding the concerns or trepidations of a whole group, do not forget the power in one-to-one or small group conversations with individual members of the community. Having an open-door policy during this time allows individuals to share their thoughts or ideas in a trusting environment. It communicates that all members are part of a team and that leadership is not just imposing new and potentially harder procedures on individuals, but rather participating in these new procedures with their team.



3. *Top Down, Bottom Up Accountability*: “New actions have to be reinforced through acknowledgment, celebration and external monitoring” (Smith, 2007).

The term “reinforced” means that following a target behavior some consequence or results of that behavior caused it to occur again or strengthened it. Now more than ever, with the development of new behaviors and routines, members of an educational community need to rely on the use of reinforcement. Most simply stated, people (all people! superintendents and students!) need to be acknowledged, thanked, and recognized for their ability to adhere to new policies and to engage in new safety behaviors. Identifying and teaching individual community members how to observe and recognize one another’s new behaviors will help support in the development and maintenance of new routines and procedures that contribute to the success of the safety culture within their educational community.

*An Educational View of Leadership Behaviors to Support New Safety Related Behaviors*

*Modified from Krapfl and Kruja Menu of Leadership Behaviors (2015)*

<i>Modeling Leadership</i>	<i>Trust and Communication</i>	<i>Top Down, Bottom Up Accountability</i>
Actively building culture	Sharing information clearly	Enabling skills
Seeking buy in from team members	Listening to others	Providing opportunities for team building
Modeling expected behaviors	Executing (making things happen)	Planning for deviation/adversity
Thinking outside of the box		Recognizing determinism in others

## IDENTIFY AND DEVELOP PROCEDURES FOR ALL

Laying the groundwork for novel routines, procedures, and target behaviors is never an easy task, never mind adding in the additional layer of safety concerns from community members. When identifying and developing novel routines, procedures or target behaviors in the educational setting, leadership teams must be specific in the identification of steps to complete new expectations. The challenge comes when there seems to be an overwhelming number of new procedures that have to all be in place and implemented accurately and simultaneously to reduce overall risk. In order to support the success of these new procedures and to increase the likelihood of these new behaviors within the school environment, leadership teams should start with the KEY behaviors that will be most impactful to your educational setting and consider these 3 factors:

1. *Knowledge is Power:* Empowering members of an educational community with the 'WHY' or the rationale behind why a procedure or protocol is in place supports their ability to actually engage in that behavior. If they do not understand or agree with why a particular behavior is necessary, they will likely engage in the behavior inaccurately or not at all. Providing training procedures that not only label what the new procedures are, but also why they are necessary or important, will improve individual's motivation in accurately engaging in the new behavior (Agnew, 2015).
2. *Do Not Assume Competence:* Educational settings are filled with bright, educated and motivated individuals who want to support students and the educational environment the best that they can, but this does not mean that they will be able to do this without being trained or shown how to engage in the new routines or behaviors that are expected of them. One's level of education does not indicate an ability to don or doff a mask appropriately to reduce potential contamination, wash one's hands in a prescribed manner or sanitize and ventilate an area sufficiently. All individuals in the school setting will be re-entering school with varying levels of understanding and training in safety procedures. New routines and behaviors will be far more successful and impactful if explicitly taught and trained within the context in which they need to occur. This allows for questions and active problem solving regarding how these new behaviors fit or make sense in these novel routines (Reid et al 2006).

3. *Effort Matters*: The term “response effort” refers to the effort required to complete a response or a particular behavior. If the response effort is too high, meaning the new routine or behavior is too difficult or too effortful to engage in, individuals are less likely to engage in that behavior. Leadership teams should consider the potential response effort needed to complete a new routine or behavior when developing their new procedures and protocols, when evaluating the environmental set up of an educational setting and when identifying the amount of reinforcement needed to ensure the behavior is maintained over time. Even changing the location of where equipment is stored could impact individual’s likelihood of engaging or NOT engaging in a particular behavior (Casella, 2010).

*Considerations to Decrease Response Effort for Key Behaviors*

*Interpretation from Casella 2010 and Reddy*

*PPE: Mask Use*

- Location of where masks can be put on or taken off
- Availability of mask storage container or disposal unit
- Whether a mask will need to be washed each night

*Hand Sanitization*

- Location of materials (sink, soap, paper towels, trash)
- Location of hand sanitizer
- Pressure needed to pump hand sanitizer

## MONITOR PROCEDURAL IMPLEMENTATION

Monitoring newly developed procedures, routines, or behaviors, is just as important as the procedures themselves. Leadership teams should be cautious not to assume that once new procedures are prescribed and taught that these behaviors will continue over time. Monitoring procedures allows for further development and maintenance of a particular behavior, in turn, supporting the continuation of risk mitigation in the school setting. Most successful systems for monitoring include the following 3 elements:

1. *Plan for Procedural Drift*: Procedural drift is a phenomenon that may contribute to the deviation from a particular procedure or protocol. Novel procedures are at the biggest risk for procedural drift, because the newly developed behavior does not have a long history of reinforcement, and other more familiar, easier behaviors may become the default. Leadership teams can plan in advance for procedural drift by creating procedures that match up with the way a new routine should look. For example, if the expectation is to wash one’s hands following the removal of a mask, not touch the front of the mask and store the mask when it is removed, but there is not a sink in the area where the mask is removed (say outside) or storage for the mask, an individual may create their own procedures that work for the environment in which they are in, potentially risking contamination. Educators will also grapple with conflicting priorities, weighing the educational risks or benefits to engaging in a particular behavior. For example, if social distancing is required in a classroom setting, but the student requires closer proximity in order to be supported, a teacher will need to make the choice to adhere to a procedure or engage in the behavior that they feel might best benefit a student. Some members

of the educational community may stray from the procedure with minor deviations and these small adjustments will become normalized (Galloway, 2014).

4. *Recognize and Reward:* In combination with proactive plans for procedural drift, leadership teams can be planning in advance how they will reinforce, recognize, and reward new routines or behaviors that are being implemented appropriately and as prescribed by individuals or groups. This not only has the benefit of reinforcing that individual's or group's behavior, but also the potential benefit of others seeing what reinforcement or recognition is available when they engage in a particular behavior or routine. This should only be done through monitoring and observing and should happen as immediately as possible. For example, a principal observes a teacher transitioning her class for a mask break. As prescribed, all students and teachers are wearing face coverings which cover their nose and chin. When they get outside, they move into areas that allow 6 feet distance. Each student and teacher remove their masks while not touching the front and stores them in appropriate containers. Each student and teacher use hand sanitizer after they store their mask. The principal approaches the class and thanks each of them for being model members of the school community and praises them for their efforts (Rodriguez et al, 2017).
  
5. *Consequence and Change:* In addition to proactively planning for procedural drift, and ways to reinforce newly established behaviors, educational leadership teams can be focused on the question of, "What to do if people just will not follow a prescribed procedure?" This ties in to top down, bottom up accountability and a safety culture, because identifying that someone is not adhering to a procedure can become more and more comfortable for everyone that participates in a community. This should not be in a shameful way but rather in a supportive way. For example, take the example above, but rather than having the teacher wearing the mask appropriately, the teacher was wearing it under her chin as the class transitioned in the hallway. This does not have to be a situation in which the teacher is reprimanded by any means. In fact, what if the community has come up with and agreed to a signal they will use to identify "mask check?" What if the students were empowered to support their teacher to engage in this behavior and the behavior was already corrected by the time the teacher got to the hallway? This goes from a potentially awkward encounter, to a supportive reminder. Now this is not to say that more restrictive procedures might not be necessary in order to get some individuals to adhere to new procedures, but this is a prompt for educational teams to consider responses to deviations in procedures in advance and together (Rodriguez et al, 2017).

## SEEK FEEDBACK AND REMOVE BARRIERS

Two of the most important ongoing procedures an educational leadership team can engage in, that also supports the motivation and morale of their teams, is seeking feedback from their educational teams and removing barriers to their team's ability to be successful with novel procedures and policies. This can be done by soliciting informal or formal

feedback from individual members of an educational team or through the creation of a stakeholder's group that meets regularly in representation of the community. A leadership team's ability to be successful relies heavily on their ability to engage in the following behaviors:

1. *Informal Survey "Pulse checks": "Frequent interactions with staff increase the likelihood supervisors will know what staff like and dislike about the job" (Reid et al 2006, p.117).*

Every interaction between a leader and one of their team members is an opportunity to identify what is working and what is not working. Through regular and intentional conversation and interaction with their team members, leaders can gain greater insight into what individuals need to successfully engage in behaviors that will reduce risk and maintain a healthy work environment. Leaders can consider planned phone calls, web calls or check ins with their teams to increase their opportunities to engage in meaningful conversations that might inform procedures and policies.

2. *Formal Survey and Stakeholders Group: "If staff have concerns... [leadership teams] must work actively to make changes in the workplace" (Reid et al 2012, p.221).*

Behavioral safety researchers have attempted to identify some of the leading causes of incorrect or absent use of PPE in the work environment. A Kimberly Clark survey released in October of 2012, gleaned that most workers are not wearing protective equipment because of the following reasons:

- Employees did not believe safety equipment was needed
- Equipment was too hot
- Equipment prevented employees from completing tasks
- The location of the equipment was far from the work area
- The equipment did not fit right
- The equipment was unattractive looking

When soliciting information regarding new procedures or routines, consider asking questions that relate to their understanding behind why the procedure is necessary, whether the procedure causes them discomfort in any way and the environment in which that they will be required to engage in the new procedures.

3. *Make Change: "Make as many of the specified changes within the work task as reasonably possible" (Reid et al 2012, p.216).*

Small changes in procedures or protocols that recognize the concern or discomfort of a staff can make a big difference in a team member's ability to engage in a particular behavior. This impacts the overall morale of a team which makes them more likely to engage in desired behaviors. If changes to a particular procedure or protocol cannot be implemented given the necessity of a particular routine, ensure that an additional follow up conversation and recognition of the feedback occurs. This gives leaders the opportunity to acknowledge that

they heard the concern and to provide additional rationale for why the specific procedure or routine is necessary and important in maintaining the safety of an educational community.

4. *Evaluate Change- Never Assume Success: “Review the changes that have been made with staff and solicit their feedback regarding whether the changes have been successful” (Reid et al 2012, p.216-217).*

When making changes to a specific procedure or policy, be sure to follow up to ensure that the change was for the better and actually led to more effective implementation of a procedure, routine, or behavior in the educational setting. If the change did not result in better follow through or action, leadership should re-evaluate response effort, reinforcement, or supportive consequences.

5. *Encourage Morale Through Communication: “Reduce staff worry about possible bad events by routinely keeping staff abreast of forthcoming changes in the work environment” (Reid et al 2006, p.127).*

During times of uncertainty, frequent communication and touch points with team members fosters a supportive and reassuring work environment, reducing potential anxiety and fear of the unknown. In order to provide regular and quality information to their educational teams, leaders should actively and persistently seek the most up to date and relevant information that might impact their educational community (e.g., state and federal mandates, department of education guidelines, town community transmission rates etc.). Identifying a regular mode of communication (e.g., newsletter, email, announcement page) and committing to a routinely scheduled communication time allows team members to obtain regular communication, even if it is not in person.

## CONCLUSION: BACK TO SCHOOL FOR GOOD

School leadership teams have been entrusted with one of the most challenging responsibilities in their career- creating re-opening plans that reduce the most amount of risk, while also providing the most effective educational setting for their students and educators during a worldwide pandemic. While this task may seem insurmountable at times, leaders can rely on a behavioral approach to safety, staff training, and procedural development and implementation to improve on the overall success and outcomes in the coming school year. Creating and maintaining a culture of safety is possible when considering the most critical variables that impact behavior. And when the time is right, educational communities will have the tools necessary to achieve the ultimate goal of being back to school for good.



## References

- Agnew, J. (2015). *Effective Keys to Creating and Sustaining a Safety Culture*. Retrieved from Aubrey Daniels International:  
[https://www.aubreydaniels.com/sites/default/files/EffectiveKeys\\_SustainingSafetyCulture\\_2015\\_0.pdf](https://www.aubreydaniels.com/sites/default/files/EffectiveKeys_SustainingSafetyCulture_2015_0.pdf)
- Casella SE, Wilder DA, Neidert P, Rey C, Compton M, Chong I. The effects of response effort on safe performance by therapists at an autism treatment facility. *J Appl Behav Anal.* 2010;43(4):729-734. doi:10.1901/jaba.2010.43-729 Smith, S. (2007). *Behavior Based Safety: Myth or Magic?* Retrieved from EHS Today:  
<https://www.ehstoday.com/safety/article/21908747/behaviorbased-safety-myth-or-magic>
- Center for Disease Control and Prevention. (2020). *Deciding to Go Out*. Retrieved from Center for Disease Control and Prevention:  
<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/deciding-to-go-out.html>
- Center for Disease Control and Prevention. (2020). *Preparing K-12 School Administrators for a Safe Return to School in Fall 2020*. Retrieved from Center for Disease Control and Prevention: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/prepare-safe-return.html>
- Galloway, D. (2014). *Why do people violate rules? The concept of procedural drift*. Retrieved from Continuous Mile:  
<https://www.continuousmile.com/safety/violate-rules-cultural-norms/#:~:text=Procedural%20drift%20is%20defined%20as,to%20be%20followed%20and%20sustained.>
- Industrial Safety and Hygiene News. (2012). *Why workers aren't wearing PPE*. Retrieved from Industrial Safety and Hygiene News:  
<https://www.ishn.com/articles/94294-why-workers-arent-wearing-ppe>
- Peele, H., Riser-Kositsky, M., Kim, H. (2020). *Coronavirus Map and School Closures*. Retrieved from Education Week:  
<https://www.edweek.org/ew/section/multimedia/map-coronavirus-and-school-closures.html>
- Reddy, S.C., Valderrama, A.L., Kuhar, D.T. (2019). Improving the Use of Personal Protective Equipment: Applying Lessons Learned. *Clinical Infectious Diseases*, Supplement 3\_S165–S170.
- Reid, D.H., Parsons, M.B., Green, C.W. (2006). *Motivating Human Service Staff: Supervisory Strategies for Maximizing Work Effort and Work Enjoyment*. Morganton, North Carolina: Habilitative Management Consultants, Inc.
- Reid, D.H., Parsons, M.B. (2012). *The Supervisor's Guidebook: Evidence-Based Strategies for Promoting Work Quality and Enjoyment Among Human Service Staff*. Morganton, North Carolina: Habilitative Management Consultant, Inc.
- Rodriguez M.A., Bell, J., Brown, M., Carter, D. (2017). Integrating behavioral science with human factors to address process features. *Journal of Organizational Behavior Management.* 37:3-4, 301-315. Retrieved from  
[https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Manuel\\_Rodriguez80/publication/320658952\\_Integrating\\_Behavioral\\_Science\\_with\\_Human\\_Factors\\_to\\_Address\\_Process\\_Safety/links/5aac4929aca2721710f8a4ab/Integrating-Behavioral-Science-with-Human-Factors-to-Address-Process-S](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Manuel_Rodriguez80/publication/320658952_Integrating_Behavioral_Science_with_Human_Factors_to_Address_Process_Safety/links/5aac4929aca2721710f8a4ab/Integrating-Behavioral-Science-with-Human-Factors-to-Address-Process-S)
- Thatcher, J. J. (2003). *Culture or Behavior: Which one comes first?* Retrieved from EHS Today:  
<https://www.ehstoday.com/safety/article/21909916/core-practices-culture-or-behavior-which-comes-first>
- World Health Organization (2020). *Considerations for school-related public health measures in the context of COVID-19*. Retrieved from World Health Organization: <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/considerations-for-school-related-public-health-measures-in-the-context-of-covid-19>