



WELCOME BACK, TEACHERS!

Back-to-School Educator Toolkit



A guide for
creating space
for self care and
intentional
connection with
colleagues

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“My mission in life is not merely to survive, but to thrive; and to do so with some passion, some compassion, some humor, and some style.”

Maya Angelou

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Starting the Year Strong

Back-To-School Onboarding Checklist for Teachers



The following was designed to help you by providing a number of items to consider and accomplish as you start the year. The intent is that accomplishing the items on the checklist will help you to feel more confident and prepared for a new school year, regardless of the operational setting.

Build your own social network and communication.

- You can use free tools such as [Slack](#), group text messages, or email chains to create a social network for your team. Doing so allows you to easily communicate about both social and work-related topics.

Access and familiarize yourself with your school and/or district policies.

- Knowing what protocols, resources, and expectations exist helps when and if you need to activate resources or enforce policies.
 - Health policies, and specific COVID-related policies
 - Accessing social-emotional support/counseling for students
 - Discipline policies
 - Grading, attendance, and participation policies
 - Mandated reporting policies
 - Virtual Policies (texting, using synchronous virtual platforms, etc.)

Know what resources exist for yourself.

- Exploring your employee benefits (EAP, district wellness initiatives for teachers, etc.), and potential organizations that have formed locally to support teachers.

Familiarize yourself with this year's technology.

- Ensure you know the ins-and-outs of Zoom, Google Classroom, Microsoft Teams, etc. so you can maximize their benefits. The more comfortable you feel with the technology, the less stressful delivering your content will feel. It is also validating to be able to answer questions that students or parents will have when they ask them.
 - Don't be afraid to ask questions or to enroll in a free webinar to learn the technology. Many companies provide free tutorials.
- If you are teaching virtually or delivering video lessons, check out these articles and reminders
 - Being on camera can be stressful. Remember that we are noticing ourselves more than others are and consider these ideas to help:
 - [Why You Can't Stop Staring at Yourself on Zoom Calls](#)
 - [Why You Hate Seeing Your Face in Video Meetings](#)
 - Screen burnout is a real thing. consider these [Six Ways to Find Balance and Stay Connected.](#)

Be aware of free Crisis Support Resources and hotlines.

- You never know when they may come in handy to share with a student, parent, or colleague.
 - National Suicide Prevention Lifeline - 1-800-273-TALK (8255)
 - National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (Spanish) - 1 (888) 628-9454
 - National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) HelpLine - 1-800-950-6264
 - National Domestic Violence Hotline - 1- 800-799-SAFE (7233)
 - National Child Abuse Hotline (Childhelp) - 1-800-422-4453 (4ACHILD)
 - National Sexual Assault Hotline 1 (800) 656-4673
 - Crisis Text Line - Text HELLO to 741741
 - Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) Helpline - 1-800-662-HELP (4357)
 - National Hunger Hotline - 1-866-3-HUNGRY
 - National Parent Hotline - 1-855-427-2736 (4APARENT)

Identify and get to know your team members.

- Schedule a “Beginning of Year” team meeting to get everyone together, share contact information, and introduce new team members.
- Identify team members who may be in need of mentoring or support, and team members who have the expertise/experience to provide that support.
 - Be a mentor to a less experienced teacher or seek a mentor for yourself
- Don’t forget to identify and connect with your support staff (guidance counselors, nurses, school psychologists, social workers, attendance specialists, office administrative assistants, etc.).
 - Include them as much as possible as it enhances team cohesion.

Leverage professional development week by finding time to calibrate with colleagues around various topics.

- For example, find time to meet with your grade-level team and discuss grading policies, especially if there is not a school or district policy already for late work or participation.
 - Having this figured out at the beginning will eliminate stress when late work starts coming in or students engage in different ways.
- Bonus: students will benefit from consistency across teachers as well.

Self-reflect on your comfort and skill in meeting students' social-emotional needs.

- Given the importance of relationships and social-emotional learning (SEL) in starting the year off successfully, CASEL has created some self-reflection tools to identify your strength areas within SEL.
- Both tools below are short and helpful in gauging where your comfort and skills are:
 - Adult SEL Self-Assessment: provides a framework and process for reflecting on personal social and emotional growth.
 - SEL through Distance Learning: Teacher Self-Assessment: provides a checklist for teachers to assess their strengths and growth areas as it pertains to promoting SEL through distance learning.

■ Take time to set up your workspace.

- Take the time to set up your work space in a way that feels calming and organized for you (whether that's your classroom, desk, or work-from-home space).
- Consider your lighting, background, and view from your seat.
- When using a webcam, place it at eye-level whenever possible.
- Include items that make you smile (pictures, mementos, artifacts from previous teaching years, etc.).

■ Join the larger educator community.

- There are many options online for connecting and sharing ideas with your fellow educators.
- Consider joining the private [BARR Educators Facebook page](#) as a way to engage with your fellow BARR educators across the country.

You've Got this!

And we have your back.
Read on for more ideas for self-care and
relationship-building with colleagues.



ACTIVITIES MENU

The following menu is intended as a list of activities for educators to draw from in navigating the upcoming school year. From ideas for engaging in self-care to enhancing your team meetings and staying connected with your colleagues, suggestions are outlined below. Strategies have been consolidated from across the internet, various free resources and agencies, and from within the BARR network.

SELF-CARE AND STRESS MANAGEMENT 9

Hassle-free ideas for promoting self-care, meeting your own basic needs, and effectively managing stress as it comes.

CULTIVATING CONNECTION WITH COLLEAGUES 12

Staying socially connected with your colleagues is more important than ever, and we've gathered some ideas on easy ways to do it.

ENGAGING MEETINGS FROM NEAR OR FAR 13

Strategies for enhancing engagement and infusing fun into your team meetings, whether you're meeting virtually or face-to-face.

USING I-TIMES AS ADULTS, TOO! 14

Choose from the many I-Time lessons that involve activities that are fun for adults to do together.

SELF-CARE AND STRESS MANAGEMENT



Remember:

- Self-care doesn't have to be anything time-intensive or enormous.
- Use the lens: what will help me to minimize the stress I am experiencing? What makes my heart, body, mind, and/or soul feel refreshed?

IDEAS FOR PROMOTING SELF-CARE

Identify at least three activities that bring you joy and then work them into regular rotation in your life.

Be consistent with this.

Set self-care goals to start the year! Pick 3-5 things you would like to do, write them down, and revisit them periodically to make sure you are meeting your goals.

Find ways to laugh! There's a reason that the phrase, "laughter is the best medicine" is so commonly-used.



Free write or journal your thoughts.

MORE IDEAS FOR PROMOTING SELF-CARE!

Reorganize your desk or work space so it feels less cluttered

Prioritize sleep over perfecting projects and let go of any guilt associated with taking care of your health.



Get outdoors!

Take a walk, ride your bike, go for a run, do some nature journaling, or simply breathe in the fresh air.



Spend uninterrupted time with family.

Create some boundaries and intentional opportunities for enhancing work-life balance. This can include engaging in activities to increase feelings of accomplishment and finding time to decompress, among other things.



Designate time that is Smartphone-free.

It's ok to detach!

Cuddle with a furry friend.



Take lunch outdoors or hold a meeting outside.

Looking for more?

Check out this super helpful resource page on Teacher Wellbeing from the Resilient Educator.



Give yourself grace

Taking care of ourselves must come before taking care of others. While we know this to be true, putting it into practice can be challenging. Be kind to yourself and remember that learning is a lifelong journey and we are all human.

Ensure you are meeting your own basic needs – food, water, exercise, connection.

- Be sure to hydrate regularly.
- Don't skip lunch and if you are crunched for time, pack nutritious snacks.
- Go for "walk-and-talk" meetings for brief conversations to get the blood flowing and body moving.

After a crisis or a major stressor, maintain a sense of normalcy wherever possible. Routines, schedules, setting clear expectations – all of these things limit extra stress and allow us to navigate the complexity of back to school more effectively.

- Similarly, having consistent expectations across classrooms/teachers, and sharing the load will help staff just as much as it helps students.

Set healthy and clear boundaries for your physical, emotional, and social health.

- Recognize your boundaries and what's right for you – everyone deals with stress in their own way.
- Find a place and time for yourself to have space and reflect.
- Communicate your boundaries – to family, colleagues, and friends – and respect your limits.

Mindfulness, Mindful breathing, Yoga – each are well-known to improve mental and physical health, relieve stress, and connect the mind and body.

- [Breathe 4 Change](#) is an organization led by educators offering free videos and resources for mindful breathing, guided meditation, and yoga focused on teachers' well-being and self-care for educators and students.
 - [Educator Well-Being](#) resources
- [Loving Kindness Meditation](#) is designed to increase empathy and compassion
- [Three-Minute De-Stressor for Teachers](#)
- The [UCLA Mindful Awareness Research Center](#) offers several free resources for practicing mindful awareness, including a free downloadable app, guided meditations, and COVID-19 related webinars.



CULTIVATING CONNECTION WITH COLLEAGUES

Be Intentional

Be intentional and thoughtful about connections with colleagues.

- Consider reflecting on the connections that you have enjoyed most using [this activity](#).

Event-Planning and Collaboration

Form a committee that leads celebrations for birthdays and special events (virtual or socially-distant gatherings)

- Back-to-School Social Event
- Recognition celebrations for peers
- Best Virtual Background competition
- Virtual competitions (photo, cooking, etc.)
- Virtual Spirit Weeks - this could be done with photos of teams and make it a competition across teams/grade levels.

Merge classrooms and join in co-teaching experiences whenever possible - this change in routine will be fun for students and staff.

Take on a special project together:

- Consider both in school and out of school projects
- For example, your team could volunteer at a community event or fundraiser, participate in a step counting competition, or create a team for a local charity walk.



One-on-one Connection Ideas

Consider partnering with a colleague and schedule regular check-ins - no work, just engaging socially. Each week, pick a new activity to try.

- Virtual or socially-distant coffee dates
- Have prompts ready if conversation starters are needed (see icebreaker suggestions on page 13)
- Complete a collaborative "work of art" - gather supplies quickly and use what you have to create a masterpiece together in no more than 30 minutes.
- Back-and-forth activities, such as writing a story line-by-line, or taking turns drawing something on a white board can be a fun way to get creativity and laughter flowing.

Make time for chatting

Create a schedule to ensure that you visit with each team member individually. If you don't make a schedule, you will likely get busy and forget to visit.

- Virtual "office hours" for the teachers only
- Eat in the teachers' lunchroom rather than your classroom alone or have virtual lunch together.
- Keep your door open - it makes it much easier for others to stop in to visit.

Communication

Short, sweet, and positive communication:

- Leave a sticky note on a desk with a positive note
- Send a quick text or email with an uplifting message, GIF, or meme
- Passing along information and celebrations



Engaging Meetings From Near or Far

ICEBREAKERS

Icebreakers serve as easy community-building activities. Even when used with teams who have worked together for years, these can infuse some fun into your routine.

- Icebreaker questions - there are never-ending examples of these online. A quick Google search will give you ideas from which to pick for your team, or check out this [free online resources](#) with over 300 ideas for icebreakers based on how well your team knows each other.
- Icebreaker share-out activity: Have team members identify their favorite icebreaker, then find a partner and answer each others' questions.
 - This can be done virtually using breakout rooms or by having participants submit their questions to the team lead and randomly selecting a few to start of each meeting.
- Finding commonalities: Divide team members into small groups and ask them to come up with a certain number of items (5-10) that they ALL share in common, outside of work.
- Greater Good in Education offers several other ideas including, [Staff Meeting Rituals that Build Trust and Community](#) and [36 Questions to Increase Connectedness at School](#).

"HOUSE RULES"

Create "House Rules" for teams and agreed upon expectations for team meeting operations at the start of the year

- E.g., be on time, come prepared, assume positive intent, etc.

BUILDING COMMUNITY

- Start meetings off with a [Mindset Check-In](#), using several of these reflective questions. This encourages team members to be present, and to feel like they have a voice and it is safe to be human.
- Have some team PIES! Do a check-in on where your teammates are Physically, Intellectually, Emotionally, and Socially/Spiritually (*Idea courtesy of North Lawndale College Prep, Collins Campus, Chicago, IL*)
- Build in time for team self-care periodically during meeting times. This could look like talking only about success stories, growing your personal connections, or actually engaging in a school-appropriate activity that brings your stress level down (music, dancing, sharing snacks, etc.).
- Create a team group text - share memes, GIFs, and communicate information about relevant work/students.
- Facilitate a team I-Time activity (See page 14 for ideas)

VIRTUAL MEETINGS

Virtual Meetings can be fun, too!

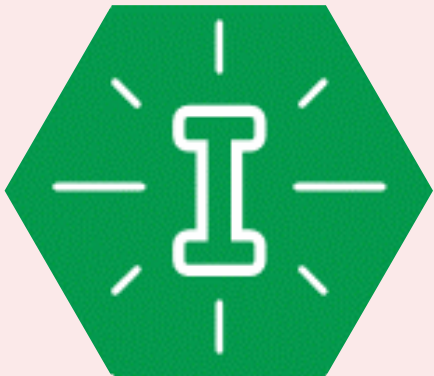
- Share a photo or do a virtual tour of your "work from home" space.
- Share the funniest situation you have experienced at work, or in a virtual setting.
- Share a positive story from distance learning last spring.
- Virtual "scavenger hunt" for household items
- Use your virtual backgrounds or profile pictures. You can have themed photos as profile pictures (e.g., pet day, childhood photo, movie character you wish you were, etc.)
- Hold dress-up days for staff meetings
- Virtual team bingo - you could do traditional bingo, or jazz it up and use a theme.

USING I-TIMES AS ADULTS

Many of the I-Time lessons throughout all three volumes involve activities that are fun for adults to do together. Facilitating the lessons (or abbreviated versions of the activities) with your BARR team, grade-level team, or content team provides an opportunity to connect in new ways, and allowing teachers to get to know one another in more depth.

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* denotes that the lesson has been adapted for virtual delivery.

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