

The 60-Second Check-In What Every Educator Can Do Right Now

Brain Health and Wellness | An Educator's Guide from We R H.O.P.E.

78% of teachers report frequent job-related stress — yet teachers remain the adults most likely to notice when a student is struggling. You do not need clinical training. You need 60 seconds and the right approach.

This is not therapy. It is noticing — and noticing changes everything.

THE THREE-STEP CHECK-IN — 60 SECONDS OR LESS

1

0–20 SEC

Name them.

Say: "Hey [name]. Good to see you today."

Watch for: Changed energy, avoiding eye contact, sitting differently, quieter or louder than normal.

The neuroscience: Being named activates the brain's social engagement system. For a dysregulated student, hearing their name spoken warmly by a trusted adult is the first step toward regulation.

Source: Porges, Polyvagal Theory, 2011; Hattie, Visible Learning, 2009.

2

20–40 SEC

Ask one real question.

Say: "How are you doing today — like actually?"

Watch for: A pause before answering. A flat 'fine.' Eyes filling. A deflection. These are signals.

The neuroscience: Open questions that invite honest responses activate the prefrontal cortex and lower cortisol. The quality of the question determines the quality of the data you get.

Source: Lieberman et al., Psychological Science, 2007; Hattie & Timperley, Review of Educational Research, 2007.

3

40–60 SEC

Reflect and hold.

Say: "That makes sense. I'm glad you told me that."

Watch for: Relief. Tears. A story that keeps going. Any of these tells you the check-in mattered.

The neuroscience: Validation — not advice, not problem-solving — reduces the amygdala's alarm response. The student's nervous system registers: this adult is safe. That is the whole intervention.

Source: Siegel, The Developing Mind, 2012; Lambert & Barley, Psychotherapy Research, 2001.

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PART TWO — WHAT TO WATCH FOR EVERY DAY

You do not need to diagnose. You need to notice. These behavioral shifts precede crisis — sometimes by weeks.

Withdrawal from peers they used to engage with.

The neuroscience: *Social withdrawal is one of the earliest and most consistent early warning signs across anxiety, depression, and trauma responses.*

Source: Kessler et al., Archives of General Psychiatry, 2005; NIMH Early Warning Signs, 2024.

Decline in work quality or sudden disengagement from learning.

The neuroscience: *When cortisol stays chronically elevated, the hippocampus — the brain's learning center — is suppressed. Disengagement is often a neurological response, not a behavioral choice.*

Source: Lupien et al., Nature Reviews Neuroscience, 2009; McEwen & Sapolsky, 1995.

Irritability, snapping, or emotional reactions that seem outsized.

The neuroscience: *Dysregulation presents as anger in children and adolescents far more often than sadness. What looks like defiance is usually a dysregulated nervous system.*

Source: Gross & Thompson, Handbook of Emotion Regulation, 2007; CDC YRBS, 2023.

A student who used to talk to you and has gone quiet.

The neuroscience: *Silence from a previously communicative student is a high-signal warning sign. When a child stops reaching toward trusted adults, it often means they have stopped believing help is available.*

Source: Durlak et al., Child Development, 2011; National Center for School Mental Health, 2024.

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WHEN YOU SEE SOMETHING — WHAT TO DO NEXT

Tell the Brain Health and Wellness Coach.

That is exactly what the coach is there for. You do not need a formal referral process. Just share what you observed. 'I noticed Marcus seemed really off today' is enough to start.

Document what you saw — not what you think it means.

Note the behavior: 'quiet, avoided group work, left lunch early.' Not the interpretation: 'seemed depressed.' Your observation is data. The coach uses that data to inform the coaching plan.

Follow up the next day.

A 10-second check-in the following morning — 'I'm glad you're here today' — tells the student that yesterday mattered and someone is paying attention. Consistency is the mechanism of change.

**You are not expected to be the counselor.
You are expected to be the adult who notices.**

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