

REPORT: TRAUMA-INFORMED SCHOOLS

The Campaign for Trauma-Informed Policy & Practice (CTIPP)
August 2022



Foreword

At least 60 percent of students that enter our classrooms daily have been impacted by Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). Many of these students are impacted by chronic stress that impacts their ability to function successfully at school.

These kids and young adults are at a great disadvantage in their social development and ability to regulate healthily. They need caring adult relationships to help regulate their nervous system and provide opportunities for their brains to calm down so that they can learn and problem solve within and beyond the school environment.

Research tells us that a higher percentage of kids who experience chronic stress may fail in school and struggle in life without a caring adult in their lives to model and teach the skills that will help these students move from hopelessness to HOPE (Healthy Outcomes from Positive Experiences).

When we look at the schools that have had the courage to change their mindset from a traditional approach rooted in fear and punishment, we see students making significant changes in their behavior and academic achievement. When we review the data, positive development clearly happens within a trauma-responsive school model.

Research also shows traditional practices contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline for students of color and students who do not have a caring adult providing resilience and hope. The data is consistent with schools that have committed to becoming trauma-informed: discipline office referrals significantly decrease, attendance rates increase, student engagement increases, and graduation rates rise.

Why wouldn't we attract more support for these daily practices and cultures of compassion?

And yet, despite the research, we continue to hold tightly to our traditional practices, which I call riding the dead horse. When we dismount from the dead horse, we realize that we have experienced no growth and are at the same spot as before. Following the research, trauma-responsive schools succeed in areas other schools do not see possible.

From my professional experience, if we do not make the necessary changes, then we will continue to fail students and staff. It is time to take a hard look in the mirror to see how we can make a difference in the lives of the kids we serve.

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Jim Sporleder
National School Trauma Responsive Consultant
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Introduction

When people experience and/or have experienced trauma, following strict rules, sitting still at a desk, or focusing on specific assignments can be extremely challenging.

Is it reasonable to expect students in these circumstances to meet every expectation as if nothing is going on outside of school? No.

Unfortunately, without a trauma-informed school environment, students who have experienced trauma or adversity are more likely to be labeled and punished than receive compassion and support.

Trauma-informed school environments and out-of-school-time programming can be a refuge for children experiencing trauma and bolster individual and collective resilience in the face of ongoing hardship, ultimately creating more opportunities for all students to experience well-being.

It is well-established that when school environments provide the context and conditions for all students to learn, heal, and grow, young people live better, healthier, happier, and more successful lives, which supports a stronger society in the long run. Under ongoing stress and adversity, the human brain - particularly the young, developing mind - cannot easily perform complex and long-term thinking. Additionally, without the presence of healing or reparative resources, supports, or actions, trauma can be transmitted from generation to generation.

As social creatures, the greatest buffer we have to address and prevent trauma is supportive relationships. The education system in the United States could fill that role but is not currently given the support to promote healthy and positive relationships, nor do common school policies and practices reflect the reality of brain development.

There is a growing movement in schools nationwide to become trauma-informed. This report explains the why and how of trauma-informed schools and provides concrete rationale, possible action steps, and examples for creating thriving school environments.

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Trauma-Informed Approach: 6 Guiding Principles



SAFETY



TRUST &
TRANSPARENCY



PEER
SUPPORT



COLLABORATION
& MUTUALITY



VOICE
EMPOWERMENT
& CHOICE



CULTURAL
HISTORICAL
& GENDER
ISSUES

How Pervasive is Trauma?



More than two-thirds of children reported at least one traumatic event by age 16. (SAMHSA)

Experiencing complex trauma (I.E., prolonged, repeated, or multiple forms of trauma) can impact healthy development. Without proper support, complex trauma can lead to changes in the brain that impact the body and mind throughout the lifespan and influence behavior and relationships.

EXPERIENCES MAY INCLUDE:

- Physical, emotional, and/or sexual abuse
- Neglect
- Experiencing and/or witnessing domestic violence
- Substance use and/or mental health challenges in the home
- Community violence
- Medical trauma
- Loss of a loved one to death and/or abandonment, including child protection cases, divorce, incarceration
- Bullying and/or unjust treatment
- Poverty, hunger, and/or housing instability
- Natural disasters and/or terrorism
- Refugee and/or war experiences

How Does Trauma Show Up in the Classroom?

People who have experienced trauma may exhibit symptoms including (but not limited to) hyperarousal, intrusion, or constriction, which can manifest through:



HYPERAROUSAL: Exhaustion, being easily overwhelmed or unable to concentrate, being jittery or paranoid, general irritability



INTRUSION: Outsized reactions, emotional distress, outbursts



CONSTRICTION: Being shut down or avoidant, appearing uninterested or unengaged, underperformance

In non-trauma-informed schools, students with trauma histories who exhibit these symptoms are more likely than their peers to be labeled as “disruptive.” They are also more likely to encounter disciplinary measures, struggle to complete assignments, score poorly on tests, have trouble with language skills, and can be wrongfully referred to special education programs.

Why the Status Quo isn't Working

The existing policies and practices used in schools are not serving the large number of students and staff who experience and have experienced trauma. Traditional strategies to address student behavior are inadequate and contribute to the rates of school drop-out, suspension, expulsion, dysfunctional classroom environments, poor teacher retention, and low performance.

Antiquated practices like behavioral charts, public discipline, retributive punishment, and placing heavy emphasis on attendance records are still being used in most classrooms today. Practices like these can re-traumatize students, often exacerbating trauma responses and worsening symptoms.

Instead, methods that provide opportunities to hone resilience and emotional regulation skills among students and staff are critical. Stability is of the utmost importance for traumatized children, and teacher retention is one of the best ways to achieve this.

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The Solution: Trauma-Informed Schools

The term “trauma-informed school” refers to school environments that create a culture and conditions of healing by engaging every school community member in deepening their understanding of trauma and interacting with each young person compassionately.

Trauma-informed schools are not about a specific program or curriculum; but rather an ongoing process that is individualized for each school community.

The trauma-informed transformation includes ongoing professional development and training among all staff, as well as new policies and practices to meaningfully support the implementation of lessons learned throughout the whole school.

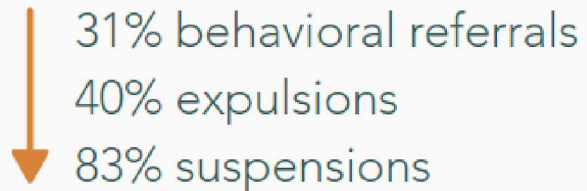
Members of a trauma-informed community include students, teachers, paraprofessionals, administrators, parents, caregivers, social workers, counselors, custodians, youth workers, bus drivers, cafeteria workers, and other external partners. Members of the community receive training on the impact of trauma on the human mind, body, and spirit.

They are also given the skills to practice thoughtful and intentional kindness, show authentic care for others in structured, measurable ways, respond to unwanted behavior as an opportunity to teach self-awareness, and constantly seek solutions to remove barriers for support.

Trauma-informed policies and practices are designed to help school community members build self-awareness, self-regulate and co-regulate in healthy ways, meet their basic safety needs, and learn new behaviors over time. Such policies and practices remove barriers to support, not just for those who have experienced trauma, but for everyone in the school community.

Students and staff experience adversity and stress outside of school, which impacts the entire school community. Schools are uniquely positioned to reach nearly every child and family to provide positive experiences and healing support. And yet, to fully prevent trauma and heal people, additional trauma-informed initiatives must take root throughout the community and across many sectors.

TRAUMA-INFORMED POLICIES WORK:



Source: Education Law Center and Trauma-Informed Oregon

Transformation Elements

- Members of school leadership prioritize psychological safety for students and staff throughout the school environment. This commitment must be modeled from the top.
- School staff have a baseline level of training and take part in process conversations to understand how stress impacts the brain, the prevalence and impact of ACEs and trauma, regulation skills (to support themselves, students, and colleagues), the difference between therapy and therapeutic intervention, and reflection about what is working and what needs to improve.
- Relationship development and maintenance are valued within the school, with students' caregivers and other community stakeholders working to create a community of support.
- School personnel view behavior as an adaptive way of communicating unmet needs rather than as an act of defiance. Appropriate measures are taken to repair harm when harm is done, but punishment without opportunity for restoration is avoided at all costs.

EXAMPLE: Hawaii



The Nānākuli-Wai'anae Complex Area (Hawaii) began its trauma-informed transformation in 2014 to disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline, improve students' future career prospects, and decrease suspensions.

TRANSFORMATION:

Through training, a school in Hawaii created trauma-aware and trauma-skilled administration, faculty, staff, parents, and partners to see behaviors resulting from trauma and intergenerational poverty that could be reversed. Training and workshops in restorative practices, de-escalation strategies, self-care, restraint and security, youth mental health first aid, and trauma-informed practices were provided. They shifted school policies from discipline to relationship-oriented and exclusionary to inclusionary practices.

RESULTS (SY 15-16 to 18-19):



Suspensions for all students decreased 33.4%



Suspensions for students with disabilities decreased by 24.6%

"If there ever were any confusion about academics and behavior, we understand that we work with the WHOLE child; relationships are at the heart of what we do." - 6th-grade teacher

EXAMPLE: Texas



Until 2017, John T. White Elementary School (Texas) failed state exams, experienced constant behavioral explosions in the classroom (E.G., fighting, throwing chairs, meltdowns), and had a high-class removal and walk-out rate. Seventy-six percent of students reported trauma, and many could not focus on academics due to their home life and food insecurity.

TRANSFORMATION:

In 2017, a school district in Texas mandated and spent the first five days on relationship-building and teaching emotional regulation activities. Teachers and staff had a full day of training by specialists, several refresher training sessions throughout the year, and weekly emails with relevant tips. For students, the day now starts with a morning greeting routine where each student is greeted by at least five adults, which creates a welcoming atmosphere. They then participate in a morning circle to build connection and practice self-regulation. The school offers free water and snacks, calm corners in the classroom, a wellness room, and physical activity and movement breaks built in throughout the day. Teachers are encouraged not to remove recess as a punishment. Self-regulation posters line the hallways. Rather than traditional discipline methods, they teach students what they could have done differently. They practice re-dos and apologies, reinforce self-regulation, and suspensions are a last resort.

RESULTS (SY 17-18)

- ↓ Suspensions decreased from an average of 445 a year to 19
- ★ School passed its state exams for the first time
- ↑ Teacher retention dramatically increased
- 🌸 School culture became calmer



The Campaign for Trauma-Informed Policy and Practice (CTIPP) is a national nonprofit committed to creating a trauma-informed society where individuals, families, and communities have the support and resources necessary to thrive. Through advocacy, policy, and education, CTIPP is building a movement that integrates trauma-informed, resilience-focused, and healing-centered prevention, intervention, and treatment approaches across all sectors and generations.

Connect with CTIPP on Twitter, LinkedIn, Flipboard, Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram.

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