

THE NINE FACETS OF A COMPREHENSIVE TRAUMA-INFORMED SCHOOL ORGANIZATION

by Susan J. Ciminelli, Executive Director
White Waves Education Consulting

Feb 23rd, 2020

Examples of mindfulness activities, youth programs that include yoga, restorative circles and other strategies utilized in various classrooms fill education news articles across the country. These are what we are likely to hear about when we look for trauma-informed practices – the focus is on what is being done with the kids. However, becoming a trauma-informed organization is a process that runs much deeper and is much more than a few strategies. The Nine Facets ensure the training and adopted practices are more than a flash in the pan, but enduring,



positive change. The comprehensive plan I describe here compared to the well-intended, but isolated tactics that the media features is as different as two forms of elemental carbon: A diamond endures forever while coal is easily incinerated.

As a consultant, these “Nine Facets” comprise the map that will guide your District through the complexities of implementing significant change. The Nine Facets ensure your staff arrive at their destination together and become a highly-effective trauma-informed organization. In this blog article I explain what these Nine Facets are and why these overarching processes lead to a more comprehensive and sustainable approach for school organizations.

FACET NUMBER ONE – BUILD A TASK-GROUP OR STEERING COMMITTEE WITH COMMUNITY PARTNERS.

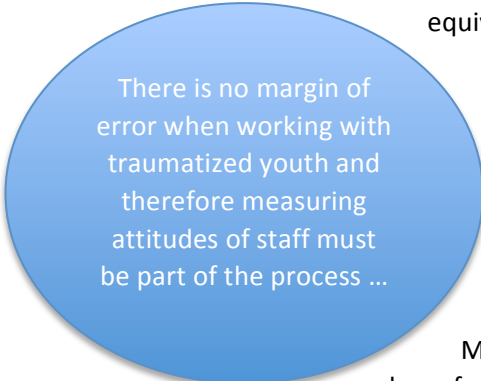
In New York State, this type of community-school planning team has been mandated for many years. The stakeholder model is still important and especially so when we are talking about the process of leading a school to new practices. There is quite a bit of research on the difficulties of change and school reforms. The process of becoming trauma-informed is no less difficult and requires much of the same best practices involved in other comprehensive reforms. The difference with efforts in trauma-informed implementation is the urgency of addressing a rising mental health crisis in our children. This task group with school officials should include liaisons

Susan Ciminelli, White Waves Education Consulting

from community partners in law enforcement, judicial, and/or legal services, mental health, medical/pediatric representation, pre-schools, youth organizations, wrap-around childcare, and local community leadership. My approach to this task group is to ensure those who serve in this capacity receive an orientation and in-depth training so each member understands well beyond their own area of expertise that they bring to the table. Once their orientation and initial training is complete, this leadership group has three tasks to perform.

The first task *before* beginning any training for staff, is to ***gather facts regarding the state of student mental health and trauma within your school and community***. What is gathered should paint a picture of how students are impacted by trauma. In addition to school reports on attendance, discipline referrals, suspensions, and disaggregated student academic performance, a community scan should include reports on youth and crime, number of referrals to mental health, suicides, domestic violence, drug and alcohol abuse, and family dysfunction. I recommend schools include a school data manager with the skills and capacity to lead data analysis and have that data person also serve as a team member. A Nine Facet plan requires on-going data gathering and analysis. Monitoring your progress and measuring the impact of the training you put in place is essential to your successful implementation and crucial for a paradigm shift toward a truly trauma-informed culture.

The second task is to ***conduct an attitudinal survey of all adults in the organization*** to reveal any misinformation or biases that are detrimental to providing a trauma-informed school environment. This step includes surveying the initial team members themselves before their training. The survey I recommend is the [ARTIC Scale Survey](#) developed by the Traumatic Stress Institute with Tulane University. In my opinion, there is no other equivalent survey tool for measuring the effectiveness of training staff in becoming trauma-informed.



There is no margin of error when working with traumatized youth and therefore measuring attitudes of staff must be part of the process ...

This survey is so important to the process, that I will only work with organizations who agree to administer this survey. Why? Because “Our Beliefs Shape Our Actions”. Most mental health organizations recognize that staff biases, misinformation, and assumptions have an impact on how they interact with the clients in their care.

Misunderstanding can negatively shape expectations staff have for client behavior and how staff responds. There is no margin of error when working with traumatized youth and therefore measuring attitudes of staff must be part of the process to truthfully call your organization trauma-informed.

Susan Ciminelli, White Waves Education Consulting

The third task is the **decision-making and planning of training**. The training calendar should span more than one year to ensure follow-through and seamless ongoing training. The team should review various training materials, determine which best serves their goals, find a provider and determine dates and logistics for the training. Yes, having been a district-level staff developer, I can tell you there's a lot of work involved. I have invested years looking at training resources and can share the options and merits of each of the resources. Or I can just give them my preferred resource recommendations. Either way, a consultant can whittle the decision-making process down considerably saving both time and money.

Imbedded within this third task is the ongoing, sustainability factor of addressing incoming new staff and assessing training needs. I recommend identifying significant intervals to re-administer the ARTIC Scale survey of all staff about a year apart. Additionally when the team prepares a multi-year training plan, this naturally ensures the paradigm shift sustains momentum to become trauma-informed. When the entire organization is informed of the multi-year plan rather than a one-year cycle, staff will understand this is not another new flavor of the month. Everyone will realize this training is the fundamental basis for every aspect of school culture and how this organization will function from this point forward.



FACET NUMBER TWO– A UNIVERSAL PRECAUTION APPROACH

Trauma is endemic across all age groups, not just teens. Trauma-informed practices are most efficacious when these are taught to all staff and applied at all levels – pre-school, elementary, middle school and high school. Understanding trauma must become common knowledge for every employee, not just teachers. From school board members, to incoming new hires, to bus drivers and cafeteria staff, no employee is exempt from learning about trauma and Adverse Childhood Experiences and the subsequent science we know about trauma’s life-long effects and how what we do can either mitigate or re-traumatize someone.

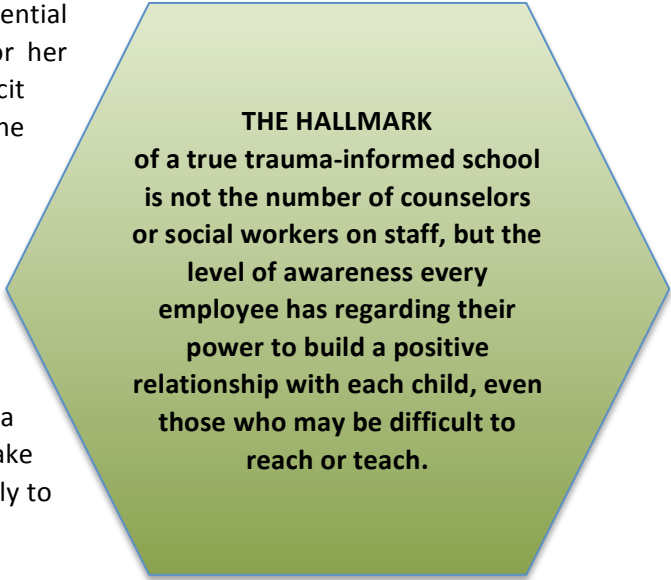
A universal precaution approach is not just about the number of children and adults who may have ACES. It is about permanently changing our own responses and interactions with others. We cannot afford to assume we know which children may have trauma and which do not. In a school setting, whether it is in a classroom, the lunchroom, playground, or the bus, how the supervising adult responds to one student is observed by and affects all the other students present. A universal precaution approach is a prescribed, consistent method of responding. A universal precaution approach is exactly how “Blood-borne pathogens” training was designed. Everyone must know what to do when confronting a situation that poses a risk of possible exposure to infectious diseases. One does not assume there is no risk, but respond every time by putting on gloves and following medically sound protocols for any situation involving bleeding or cleaning body fluids. The nurse cannot be the only person who puts gloves on to help a child with a nose-bleed. Without exception, all adults must learn the protocols for their own well-being and to protect others.

Just as we did not expect all employees to become nurses to adopt an appropriate response to blood-borne pathogens, in trauma-informed practices we do not expect all adults to become therapists. Mental health practitioners are licensed professional, so we are not expecting bus drivers, principals, teachers or any other staff to provide therapy or counseling to our students. What a universal precaution approach to trauma means is that every employee is made aware of trauma and is trained to make informed choices in carrying out their respective roles for working with children.

Susan Ciminelli, White Waves Education Consulting

With this approach, every adult has the potential for a positive impact on each child in his or her care. Historically, schools rely on a deficit model of addressing student needs. This is the opposite of a trauma-informed approach.

In a deficit model, those students with lagging skills are referred to a specialist who focuses on helping the child learn or compensate for those lagging skills so they can still achieve the academic goals. The intention is to provide extra support in a targeted area and I have seen children make progress academically that otherwise is unlikely to occur without the specialist.



**THE HALLMARK
of a true trauma-informed school
is not the number of counselors
or social workers on staff, but the
level of awareness every
employee has regarding their
power to build a positive
relationship with each child, even
those who may be difficult to
reach or teach.**

With trauma however, the deficit model does more harm than good. It is not good enough for a teacher or principal to refer a child to a counselor and remain uninformed and unaware of how your own interactions can negatively impact that child. The Nine Facets remind school staff that all children, whether they have experienced trauma or not, need positive relationships with caring, self-regulated adults. These relationships not only help children receive the care they need, they also serve as a model for what it means to be a positive, caring adult. Children learn how to behave from the adults around them. Trauma-informed training helps schools provide the best example of caring, and trustworthy adults to our children.

So the hallmark of a true trauma-informed school is not the number of counselors or social workers on staff, but the level of awareness every employee has regarding their power to build a positive relationship with each child, even those who may be difficult to reach or teach. In fact, these are the very children that most need a caring and trustworthy adult in their lives.

Susan Ciminelli, White Waves Education Consulting

THE SIX TOUCHSTONES OF TRAINING – FACETS THREE TO EIGHT

These topics are listed in the order I prefer staff to proceed through the training. While some of these trainings can be done with a diverse audience of employee roles, some are best presented to a homogenous group with their peers (e.g. just administrators, just bus drivers) to ensure examples are relevant to the situation. As I mentioned before, as a consultant, I provide more detailed information and guidance for the Task Group who are drafting a comprehensive professional development plan. For each of these training facets, the resources and training materials that I recommend to my clients simplifies the decision-making process so your school leaders and move forward with a comprehensive plan sooner.

Facet Number Three: Adverse Childhood Experiences training – also known as ACES science. Without exception, training in ACES is essential for ALL school employees including every member of the board of education. Later, once all staff have been trained, I recommend providing this training to parents.

Facet Number Four: Building Positive Relationships Begins with Communication. This training helps all of us to change habits of speaking to youth that undermines trust-building and listening skills. Choosing our words, our reactions and even our body language makes a big difference in building relationships. This training also includes how to remain self-regulated in emotionally charged situations. This is best taught to targeted homogenous groups and personalized for their role.

Facet Number Five: Recognizing Secondary Trauma Staff, especially teachers and administrators, need to be aware of Caregiver Fatigue or Vicarious Trauma symptoms. We need to understand how this affects family members who care for children, spouses or other relatives. We also need to recognize our own stress response and build in preventative measures that guard against our own secondary trauma.

Facet Number Six: Applying Research from the Search Institute to build strong relationships for youth in our classrooms and community.¹ I recommend this training for all staff first, then subsequently offered for parents and community leaders, local business and youth organizations.

¹ I am authorized by the Search Institute to deliver two workshops, “Everyone’s an Asset Builder” and “Sharing the Asset Message” to my client schools as part of my consulting services. All materials for client participants must be purchased directly from Search Institute.

Susan Ciminelli, White Waves Education Consulting

The [Search Institute](#) is a non-profit education research and training organization with over 50 years of research on youth, families, communities and schools. This training focuses on two hallmark research studies.

1. [40 Developmental Assets for Youth](#)
2. [Building Developmental Relationships](#)



Facet Number Seven: The Brain's Natural Learning and Response System

We have much more detailed information today about how the brain actually operates thanks to the development of medical devices that help scientists see the brain in action. Understanding the fundamentals of how the brain responds to trauma and what normal functioning is has a profound impact on how educators work with students to facilitate learning. This training in multiple sessions is designed for all teachers and administrators, but the initial training sessions can be

opened up to include any staff (bus drivers, aides) who want to better understand behavior in a crisis and be prepared to respond effectively.

Facet Number Eight: Addressing Student Behavior Problems

Teachers will tell you the second most difficult impediment to student learning and successful teaching, (absenteeism is first) is difficult student behaviors and attitudes. It's not necessarily classroom disruptions, but a student's self-perception about their own ability to learn that is the most intractable behavior that teachers encounter. Students with learned helplessness behaviors, who don't put forth the effort that would ensure success because they feel they are not capable are the most common thorny behavior issues that frustrate teachers' efforts. This training is two-part, the first includes classroom practices, building trust and day-to-day interactions with students. The second part deals with behaviors that result in referrals to the principal and the process for addressing infractions of the code of conduct. I have received advanced training in the CPS behavioral model directly from Dr. Ross Greene himself. This is the main focus of how I approach disciplinary actions in school. I teach Dr. Greene's model comprehensively to teachers and building administrators followed by scaffolded practice with an advanced team of teachers and administrators who will subsequently serve as turnkey trainers for the District.

Susan Ciminelli, White Waves Education Consulting

FACET NUMBER NINE: ADOPT CLASSROOM AND SCHOOL-WIDE PRACTICES
THAT...

- a. reduce trigger behaviors for students (and adults)
- b. teach students how to understand their own natural brain, body and emotional responses
- c. teach students grounding techniques for self-regulation
- d. proactively foster self-confidence, positive relationships, and empathy
- e. teach social-emotional skills – K-12 curriculum that includes non-violent communication skills for success throughout school years and for life outside and beyond school
- f. model Non-Violent Communication Skills of all school employees with both students as well as with other adults, parents and colleagues
- g. teach healthy interpersonal skills to students in choosing, making, being and keeping friends
- h. teach students social norms in various settings and situations (manners, ethics, work-related qualities)
- i. teach students healthy practices for mitigating stress and anxiety
- j. emphasize respect for students and value a positive relationship with each child
- k. adopt a SEL curriculum to imbed within instruction and that promotes student dialogue and student-led discussion.

BENEFITS OF TRAUMA-INFORMED PRACTICES AND WHOLE ORGANIZATION
AWARENESS

- Instead of a “referral response model” use a universal precaution approach. Hiring more social workers and counselors is never enough because the number of referrals continues to outstrip the capacity to help children with mental health problems. Train your entire existing staff to build better relationships with students with trauma-informed practices.
- Improve staff interactions not just those in distress, but all students on a day-to-day basis. This is a proactive and preventative measure to reduce and mitigate anxiety and build trust between students and teachers.
- Hiring more social workers and counselors, while not a bad thing for students, is not only costly, it is also not a long-range solution. In fact, this is much more costly than the training described in this Nine Facet plan to become a Trauma-Informed School.

Susan Ciminelli, White Waves Education Consulting

- Upgrade your school climate with system-wide changes that help your staff rethink how best to relate to students and families and return the focus to the business of educating students. An additional benefit is the improved communication throughout your organization. This will positively affect all other functions where staff need to work collaboratively and make decisions together.
- These Nine Facets are a sustainable, long-range, and proactive means to regain your school's original mission to educate.
- Social-emotional skills, effective and empathetic communication skills, and self-regulation techniques better equip students to deal with personal adversity in healthy ways. These "soft" skills when deliberately taught and modeled by staff as a result of trauma-informed training helps students become resilient. These skills not only help student cope throughout their developmental years, but also well into their lives as adults with children of their own.
- With improved communication and understanding anxiety and compounded distress in schools can be abated. Kids can function again in a classroom and turn their attention to their own growth, both academically and emotionally. This reduces the number of disruptions and problem behaviors that impede learning and progress in student performance.
- Schools that become trauma-informed find the number of disciplinary referrals, suspensions and repeat offenders drops. Teachers, counselors and principals have more time to focus on preventative measures, positive progress, and social-emotional learning. With a drop in problem behavior comes new opportunities to form positive relationships with parents, families and communities.
- Strong school performance as a result of becoming a truly trauma-informed school means attracting families to move into your communities. Schools can build positive liaisons with local business leaders for scholarships and leverage the rise in academic performance to increase funds that support your programs and graduates.
- Even if your district is not interested in the consulting services that I offer, I urge you to seek a comprehensive training and action plan toward becoming trauma-informed. There are others out there like me – please don't wait; get started now. Our students and families cannot do this for themselves without the support of our schools and community leaders. Your leadership in forging a path to become a trauma-informed organization will bring hope to all involved. Bring hope back to your students, parents, your organization and community.