

Creating Trauma-Informed Policies: 4 Choice Points for School and Mental Health Leadership



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MHTTC

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How might school leadership leverage policies to improve the experience and outcomes for students and those who serve them?

Effective decision making comes from a place of choice and intention. *Creating Trauma-Informed Policies: A Practice Guide for School and Mental Health Leadership* describes four leadership “choice points” for the creation, development, and implementation of trauma-informed and compassionate school approaches. Consider the following choice points as you develop and implement your trauma-informed policy.



CHOICE POINT 1:

Names & Definitions: What is the intended outcome of the trauma-informed work? What language reflects your mission and vision? **Identify the outcome, name the practice, inform the policy**

Be clear and intentional about language. For example, choose how you define and use:

- Trauma
- Trauma-Informed vs. Trauma-Responsive vs. Trauma-Sensitive Schools or Classrooms OR
- Resiliency-Oriented Schools OR
- Compassionate Schools OR
- Healing Centered Engagement

Choices for leadership include:

- What language will encourage diverse stakeholders to come to the table?
- What values and beliefs are you trying to communicate? What is the outcome of this work?
- Which definitions best fit your vision and mission?
- Is there language your school community would like to use? What language do your partners, funders, or other stakeholders use? How can you ensure alignment?



CHOICE POINT 2:

Platform & Levers: What is the right policy entry point? Which avenue will allow the policy to carry the most impact? **Select the platform(s) for optimal policy change and advocacy**

A policy needs a platform. Platforms include large platforms (large federal or state systems) and local platforms (individual community, school, or district). Choose the platform that will most impact practice shift in a sustainable, equitable manner.

Choices for leadership include:

- Which platform will maximize the culture shift desired?
- Is it more sustainable to create policy from the top down or bottom up?
- How might leadership from both levels collaborate to create policies that are aligned and mutually informing?



CHOICE POINT 3:

Approach: Is it most effective and sustaining to add to, amend, align, or drop current policies, or to add new policy? **Assess where you are to inform the most effective and efficient approach**

Creating trauma-informed school policies doesn't have to start with drafting new policies.

- ADD policies that reflect a commitment to trauma-informed care and principles to implement it (e.g., policies that ensure professional development, pre- and in-service training).
- DROP policies that are recognized as trauma-uninformed and unnecessary (especially those that retraumatize or use seclusion or restraint).
- AMEND necessary policies that can't be dropped because they are required; change the provisions or wording to reflect a trauma-informed lens (e.g., human resources policies).
- ADAPT trauma-informed legislation that exists in another system (juvenile justice, mental health) and re-tool it for school systems and environments.
- ALIGN trauma-informed policy and practices already in place (e.g., crisis response, expulsion and exclusion, school climate, or socio-emotional health policies).

Choices for leadership include:

- What policies and practices need to be added?
- What current policies and practices need to be dropped?
- What current policies and practices can't be dropped but can be amended?
- What role does the school board play in this process?
- Are there other systems from which you might adapt policy or legislation?
- What is your process for identifying and aligning current policy?



CHOICE POINT 4:

Match Process to Product: How might the process of developing the policy embody trauma-informed principles? **Mirror a trauma-informed approach in the development of the policy**

Trauma-informed policy development is most impactful when the process itself models trauma-informed principles and values. The “how” deeply impacts the “what.”

Choices for leadership include:

- How will we collaborate with support staff, teachers across subjects/grades, administrators, parents, classified staff, and union representation?
- How might written policies and procedures include a focus on trauma, safety, and confidentiality?
- How might we require all levels of school systems to have crisis readiness, response, and recovery procedures that are co-constructed by school community members; written and accessible; and iteratively examined for accuracy?
- How do staffing policies demonstrate a commitment to staff training events that are culturally relevant and trauma-informed?
- What policies and procedures are in place for including students and staff in school culture and climate, and instructional planning, governance, policy-making, services, and evaluation?

School Mental Health Leadership

