

Gerald L. Cox, Psy.D.
Licensed Psychologist
Tel: (314) 616-0701
Email: jcox@fz.k12.mo.us

Trauma-Informed Schools

Purpose of schools becoming trauma-informed:

- To improve students' academic achievement and reduce school suspensions, absenteeism, and dropout rates by creating safe learning communities.
- To increase mainstreaming of students and reduce cost associated with special ed.
- To reduce the cost of staff turnover and absenteeism by reducing teacher stress and increasing teacher job satisfaction.
- To increase staff's ability to help students be emotionally available to learn.

WHY

Prevalence of trauma:

- The ACE study showed that 66% of an adult, middle class, well-educated, predominately Caucasian sample had experienced at least 1 significant adversity during childhood. 25% had experienced 2 or more significant adversities, and 17% had experienced 4 or more.

Increased prevalence of mental health conditions in students:

- In 1982, the U.S. Surgeon General reported that 7% of all school-age children between ages 4-17 had been diagnosed with a mental health disorder. In 2001, that number had risen to 19%.
- 33% of respondents to a recent survey in a local, suburban, predominately middle class school district indicated that their children had been diagnosed with a mental health disorder.

Inclusion:

- The push toward inclusion into mainstream classrooms has increased the number of students with trauma and mental health disorders in the general education environment.

Impact of trauma on learning:

- Recent study done by the Johns Hopkins School of Public Health found that children that had experienced 2 or more significant personal or relational adversities were 2½ times as likely to have failed a grade in school compared to those who have not experienced any.
- A study of high risk students in California found that children exposed to 4 or more adverse events were 32 times as likely to experience learning or behavioral problems compared to children who had not experienced any.
- Numerous studies have linked childhood trauma to impaired attention and concentration, impulsivity, anxiety, depression, defiant behaviors, alcoholism, and psychoactive substance abuse.
- Childhood trauma has been shown to have a negative impact on reading scores, children's understanding of cause and effect relationships, school attendance, frequency of discipline, and graduation rates.

Ineffectiveness of traditional classroom behavior management systems and school code of conduct:

- Numerous studies have shown that traditional classroom behavior management systems do not consistently reduce behavioral problems in traumatized students and can actually increase student misbehaviors.
- Recurrent out-of-school suspensions have been shown to lower student academic achievement and contribute to higher dropout rates.

Impact of trauma on teacher stress, burnout, and dropout rates:

- According to the U.S. Department of Education, teacher turnover is the highest in public schools where 50% or more of the students receive free and reduced lunch.
- According to a 2001 study, teacher turnover in high poverty schools is more than 50% higher than in wealthier schools.

HOW

Trauma-informed practices:

- Interventions focus on creating safe learning environments for students through the development of trusting relationships with adults and peers, the establishment of clear and consistent learning and behavioral expectations, and creation of predictable schedules and routines.
- An emphasis is placed on providing students with choices and building on student strengths.

- Rather than trying to fix or control behaviors when problems do occur, trauma-informed practices focus on trying to understand and address the need underlying problematic behaviors.
- Staff understand that behaviors that appear maladaptive in the school setting have been maintained because they have been adaptive in other settings. Patterns of socially inappropriate interactions and methods of coping are identified and new skills are taught in these areas.
- Rather than trying to suppress behaviors through punishment, students are taught how to make restitution for injuries they have caused others and to restore relationships that have been damaged by their behaviors.
- Systems are established to identify and support students with higher than usual levels of social-emotional needs.

Trauma-specific interventions:

- By understanding that every student's history is unique and by carefully assessing potential trauma triggers in identified, high risk students, proactive interventions are put in place to reduce the occurrence of disruptive, dangerous, or nonproductive behaviors.
- Students are taught how to identify their own emotional triggers and internal signs that they are becoming emotionally dysregulated.
- Safe places in the classroom and/or building and safe people are used to help students deescalate when needed.
- Referrals to more intensive within school supports and services and/or to community mental health partners can be made for students who have high levels of need.

Trauma-informed institutional systems:

- Because most adults, as well as children, have experienced adversity, trauma-informed institutional systems focus on creating safe working and learning environments for all individuals functioning within that system.
- Trauma-informed institutional systems are committed to values such as safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration, and empowerment.

FINANCIAL COSTS/SAVINGS

Anticipated areas where financial resources would be needed:

- Administrator, teacher, and staff training
- New teacher mentoring and training
- Parent education
- Collaboration and planning time

- Development and integration of social-emotional learning (SEL) curriculum into academic curriculum
- Potential addition of mental health professionals or retraining of existing behavior support specialists
- Coordination of school and community mental health support services

Potential areas for financial savings:

- Reduced costs from decreased special education and out-of-district placements.
- Reduced teacher replacement costs. Nationwide, approximately 30% of new teachers leave the profession after just 3 years and 45% leave after 5 years. The nationwide cost of teachers leaving the profession or switching schools is an estimated \$5.8 billion annually. According to a 2005 article published in *Edutopia*, each teacher who leaves costs a district \$11,000 to replace, not including the indirect costs related to the school's investment in professional development, curriculum, and school-specific knowledge.
- Reduced teacher health care and sick day costs. A 2012 survey of members' wellbeing conducted by the Association of Teachers and Lecturers found that 73% of those surveyed stated that their job was having a negative impact on their wellbeing, with 64% feeling that their professional ability and confidence was being damaged.
- Reduced lost employment potential costs. According to a 2013 article published in *Education Weekly*, students from low-income families are 2.4 times more likely to drop out of school than middle-income peers, and over 10 times more likely than high-income peers to drop out. If all of the dropouts from the class of 2011 had earned diplomas, the nation would benefit from an estimated \$154 billion in income over their working lifetimes.

Senate Bill 638 Trauma Informed Schools Initiative

161.1050 There is hereby established within the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education the "Trauma-Informed Schools Initiative"

The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education SHALL:

- Provide information regarding the trauma-informed approach to all school districts

"trauma-informed approach", an approach that involves understanding and responding to the symptoms of chronic interpersonal trauma and traumatic stress across the lifespan ~

A "trauma-informed school" is a school that realizes the widespread impact of trauma and understands potential paths for recovery / recognizes the signs and symptoms of trauma in students, teachers, and staff/ responds by fully integrating knowledge about trauma into its policies, procedures, and practices and seeks to actively resist re-traumatization

A trauma-informed school realizes the widespread impact of trauma and understands potential paths for recovery/ recognizes the signs and symptoms of trauma in students, teachers, staff

Responds by fully integrating knowledge about trauma into its policies, procedures, and practices and

Seeks to actively resist re-traumatization

- Offer training on the trauma-informed approach to all school districts, which shall include information on how schools can become trauma-informed
- Develop a website about the trauma-informed schools initiative that includes information for schools and parents regarding the trauma-informed approach and a guide for schools on how to become trauma-informed schools
- Trauma-informed schools pilot program (5 schools subject to appropriations)
 - Train the teachers and administrators
 - Closely monitor the progress of the five schools in becoming trauma-informed schools and provide further assistance if necessary