



Policy and Practice for Trauma-Informed Schools

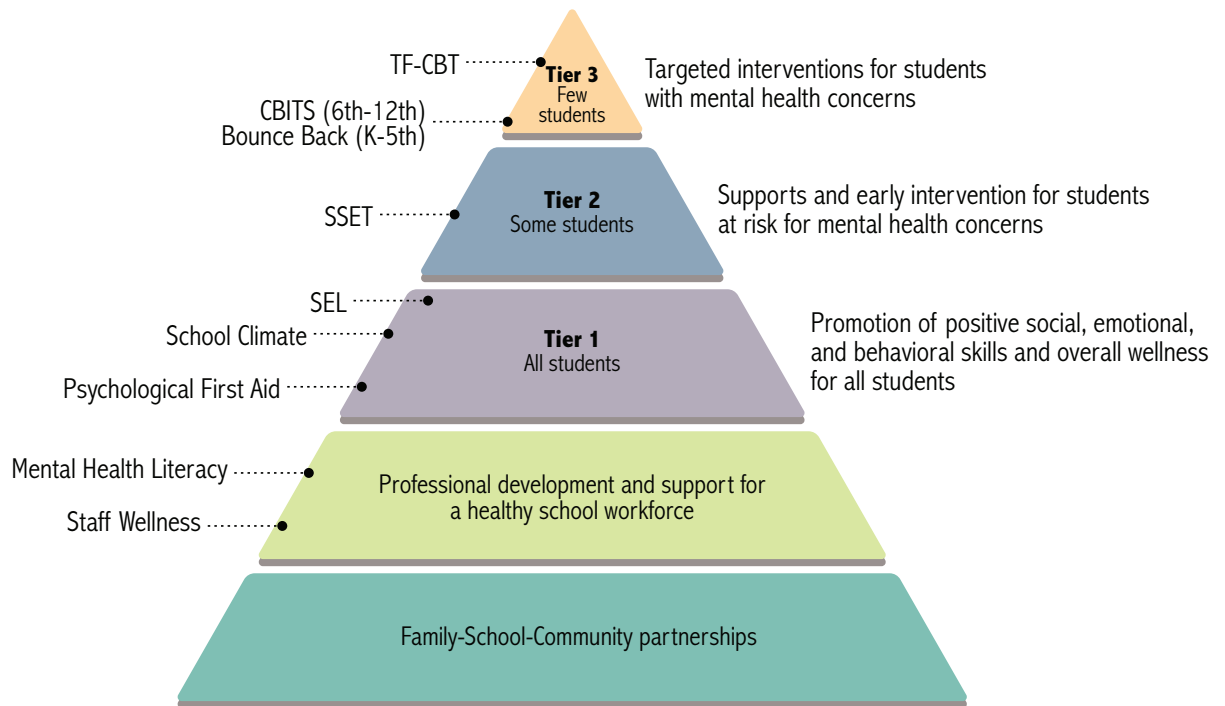
Comprehensive mental health support makes students safer and better able to learn.

Sharon A. Hoover

Recognizing the effects of trauma besetting many of their students, many states, districts, and schools are revamping approaches to making schools physically and psychologically safer. Many of the steps to establish safer, more supportive schools are aligned with those needed to create trauma-responsive schools. State boards of education are well-positioned to caution school systems against focusing exclusively on “hardening” schools through physical safety and security measures and promoting a balanced approach, which embeds comprehensive, trauma-responsive mental health policies and practices in school safety planning.

Child Trends estimates that nearly half of all children in the United States have experienced at least one adverse childhood experience, or ACE (see article, page 11). Attention to these children’s needs pays off in a number of ways. Trauma-responsive schools increase students’ coping skills and graduation rates, and they improve attendance, classroom behavior, and emotional and physical safety.¹ Additional school outcomes of interest include decreased incidents of physical aggression, office discipline referrals, and out-of-school suspensions. Notably, schools that demonstrate a clear commitment to

Figure 1. Trauma-Responsive, Multitiered System of Supports



shifting school climate via trauma-informed approaches and those characterized by strong relationships between school staff and mental health professionals seem to have greater effects than those that do not.²

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network has identified the following components of a trauma-informed school, as well as relevant tiers within each area:

1. Identifying and Assessing Traumatic Stress
2. Addressing and Treating Traumatic Stress
3. Trauma Education and Awareness
4. Partnerships with Students and Families
5. Creating a Trauma-Informed Learning Environment
6. Cultural Responsiveness
7. Emergency Management/Crisis Response
8. Staff Self-Care and Secondary Traumatic Stress
9. School Discipline Policies and Practices
10. Cross-System Collaboration and Community Partnerships

The degree to which districts and schools

implement these components can be assessed using the network's Trauma Responsive Schools Implementation Assessment.³

The foundation of all these components is a comprehensive school mental health system. Such a system requires collaboration between schools and the community, in partnership with students and families, to provide a multitiered system of supports and services (MTSS). The MTSS promotes positive school climate, social emotional learning, and mental health.⁴ It also assesses and addresses the social and environmental factors that affect mental health, including public policies and social norms that shape student mental health outcomes (figure 1).

Many states, districts, and schools employ an MTSS approach toward instructional or behavioral interventions at varying levels of intensity. An MTSS for mental health offers an array of health promotion, prevention, early intervention, and treatment services to meet the needs of all students. A trauma-responsive MTSS integrates services and supports for students and staff with particular attention to supporting trauma-affected staff and students.

The number of tiers in an MTSS can vary, though many districts employ three:

- Universal services and supports (tier 1) are mental health–related activities, including promotion of positive social, emotional, and behavioral skills and wellness, designed to support the mental health of all students regardless of whether they are at risk for mental health problems. These activities can be implemented schoolwide, at grade level, or in the classroom.
- Selective services and supports (tier 2) are provided for groups of students identified through needs assessments and school teaming processes as being at risk for a given concern or problem. When problems are identified early and supports put in place, problems can be eliminated or reduced.
- Indicated services and supports (tier 3) are designed to meet the unique needs of individual students who are already displaying mental-health concerns, problematic behavior, or significant functional impairment. Sometimes these supports are referred to as mental health “interventions” or “intensive services.”

An effective MTSS is built on strong family-school-community partnerships and relies on professional development and supports for staff to ensure their competence in supporting student mental health and fostering their own well-being. MTSS also allows for practices to support target populations, such as trauma-exposed youth. Trauma-responsive school frameworks are increasingly adopting MTSS as a foundation for trauma interventions across the continuum of mental health supports.⁵ Figure 1 also shows how trauma-responsive programming maps to the tiers, including several evidence-based interventions developed by the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, listed below in the resources section.

Evidence for Trauma-Responsive Approaches

Strong evidence supports a multicomponent approach to creating trauma-responsive schools. School staff that receive professional development on trauma, ACEs, and stress demonstrate increased understanding of trauma and increase their use of trauma-informed practices in the school and classroom.⁶ As yet, limited evidence ties these training outcomes to student-level improvements, which may reflect the challenges

of generalizing training knowledge to teaching practices. In general, research shows that collaborative, sustained professional learning is more likely to be effective and directly related to and integrated into teachers’ daily practices.⁷

Efforts to ensure that training translates to classroom practice include “reflection-in-action” approaches that allow educators to practice with real-life scenarios, receive coaching from master teachers, and refine skills as they learn from mistakes.⁸ These approaches have been augmented with technological advances, including web-mediated online coaching and simulations that allow staff to practice talking with virtual students experiencing trauma-related distress.⁹

Implementing the components of trauma responsiveness in schools has demonstrated, positive effects on students’ daily functioning, including academic success. Schools with positive school climate and integrated social emotional learning (SEL) are more likely than comparison schools to achieve higher standards of school safety, including less bullying (verbal, physical, cyber), less student isolation, more positive peer and teacher-student relationships, and less weapon threat and use on school campuses.¹⁰

Students who participate in SEL programs not only demonstrate improvements in self- and social awareness, decision-making capacity, and relationship skills, but also in academic outcomes, including standardized testing.¹¹ Restorative justice approaches, which redirect school discipline practices toward relationship-based accountability and reduced punitive measures, also demonstrate positive outcomes. Schools that employ restorative policies and practices demonstrate improvements in attendance and academics as well as a significant reduction in exclusionary discipline.¹²

Shifts in Policy

Recent federal and state policies offer state and district education leaders opportunities to advance trauma-responsive programming. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) also offers significant opportunity to increase access to comprehensive school mental health services and flexibility to develop policies and programming that address trauma. In February 2018, the U.S. House of Representatives unanimously approved H. Res. 443, a resolution recognizing the importance of trauma-informed care within

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Box 1. State Examples

Several states have established frameworks for trauma-responsive schools. For example, the Massachusetts Safe and Supportive Schools program provides grants to schools to establish and implement trauma-informed practices and to train leadership to foster safe and supportive school cultures. The Washington State Compassionate Schools Initiative offers a blueprint for establishing trauma-responsive schools that promote compassion and resiliency among staff and students. State education agencies in Illinois, Massachusetts, and Wisconsin house a repository of trauma-responsive schools resources.

federal programs and agencies. In addition to designating a national trauma awareness month and trauma-informed awareness day, the resolution cites trauma-informed efforts in nine states: California, Florida, Illinois, Massachusetts, Missouri, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Washington, and Wisconsin. These statewide initiatives to address trauma include new laws to promote trauma-informed approaches and cross-sector collaboration on policies to reduce childhood trauma.

State legislatures have been incorporating language on trauma-informed systems and ACEs in recent bills. A 2017 scan by the National Conference of State Legislatures revealed close to 40 bills in 18 states with language on ACEs and 20 approved statutes in 15 states that referenced ACEs and trauma-informed policies and practices. These bills and statutes promote an array of practices, including trauma screening, staff training and professional development, and creating safe and supportive environments. Many focus on the education system. An Illinois law requires social and emotional screening at school entry. The Massachusetts state legislature established a grant program for schools implementing trauma-informed practices (box 1).

Policy and Practice Recommendations

States that have not yet begun initiatives to address childhood trauma can foster trauma-responsive schools through policies and legislation that support school and district leaders' efforts to do the following:

- assess and systematically improve school climate;
- establish culturally responsive, restorative practices that limit exclusionary discipline;

- implement SEL programming across all grades;
- institute strategies and supports to promote staff self-care and well-being and to address secondary traumatic stress that arises from dealing with trauma-affected children;
- provide professional development on adversity, trauma, and toxic stress;
- establish a full continuum of mental and behavioral health supports, including universal screening for mental health concerns that incorporates an assessment of social determinants of mental health;
- incorporate evidence-based mental health promotion, prevention, and intervention activities, including for students experiencing traumatic stress;
- strive toward national standards for appropriate numbers of school psychologists, school social workers, school counselors, and school nurses; and
- establish memoranda of understanding with community mental health providers to complement mental health services and supports offered by school staff.

Resources

Several organizations offer support for states, districts, and schools in doing this work.

- **The Framework for Safe and Successful Schools** offers policy recommendations to support effective school safety and best practices. It is a joint effort of the American School Counselor Association, National Association of School Psychologists, School Social Work Association of America, National Association of School Resource

Officers, National Association of Elementary School Principals, and National Association of Secondary School Principals.

- **The National Center for School Mental Health** led a rigorous, stakeholder-driven process that resulted in the first National School Mental Health Quality and Sustainability Performance Measures. These standards reflect best practice strategies for systematically developing, improving, and sustaining mental health supports and services in schools.
- **The School Health Assessment and Performance Evaluation (SHAPE)** site is a free, web-based platform that offers a virtual work space to document, track, and advance school mental health at school, district, and state levels. It includes tools and resources to promote quality and sustainability in school mental health, including the Trauma Responsive Schools Implementation Assessment.
- **The Treatment and Services Adaptation Center** develops trauma interventions and supports for implementation in schools. These include Psychological First Aid for Schools—Listen, Protect, Connect, Support for Students Exposed to Trauma, Cognitive Behavioral Intervention for Trauma in Schools, and Bounce Back.
- **ACEs Connection** raises awareness about trauma and resilience. It recently released profiles of major statewide and local ACEs initiatives within the 50 states and the District of Columbia to highlight trauma-informed initiatives across the country.
- A report published by health and social justice nonprofit **Futures Without Violence** details state-level approaches to promote trauma-informed practices.¹³
- The National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments developed high-quality, adaptable **ED School Climate Surveys**, which allow states, districts, and schools to collect and act on reliable, nationally validated school climate data in real-time. A School Climate Improvement Resource Package helps diverse stakeholders understand and improve school climate.
- **The Collaborative for Academic, Social and**

Emotional Learning promotes an integrated approach to academics and SEL for preK-12. Their resources include background, research, and implementation tools to support states, districts, and schools. ■

¹Natalya Verbitsky-Savitz et al., “Preventing and Mitigating the Effects of ACEs by Building Community Capacity and Resilience: APPI Cross-Site Evaluation Findings” (Washington, DC: Mathematica Policy Research, 2016); Meg Walkley and Tory L. Cox, “Building Trauma-Informed Schools and Communities,” *Children & Schools* 35, no. 2 (2013): 123–126; Diana L. Perry and Monica L. Daniels, “Implementing Trauma-Informed Practices in the School Setting: A Pilot Study,” *School Mental Health* 8, no. 1 (2016): 177–88; Trevor Fronius et al., “Restorative Justice in US Schools: A Research Review” (San Francisco: WestEd Justice & Prevention Research Center, 2016); Lisa Phifer Weed and Robert Hull, “Helping Students Heal: Observations of Trauma-Informed Practices in the Schools,” *School Mental Health* 8, no. 1 (2016): 201–05.

²Courtney Wiest-Stevenson and Cindy Lee, “Trauma-Informed Schools,” *Journal of Evidence-Informed Social Work* 13, no. 5 (2016): 498–503.

³The free self-assessment comprises key domains of trauma-responsive schools and districts. It can be downloaded from www.theSHAPEsystem.com/trauma.

⁴Elizabeth Halsted Connors et al., “A National Initiative to Advance School Mental Health Performance Measurement in the US,” *Advances in School Mental Health Promotion* 9, no. 1 (2016): 50–69.

⁵Sandra M. Chafouleas et al., “Toward a Blueprint for Trauma-Informed Service Delivery in Schools,” *School Mental Health* 8, no. 1 (2016): 144–62.

⁶Joyce S. Dorado et al., “Healthy Environments and Response to Trauma in Schools (HEARTS): A Whole-School, Multi-Level, Prevention and Intervention Program for Creating Trauma-Informed, Safe and Supportive Schools,” *School Mental Health* 8, no. 1 (2016): 163–76; Perry and Daniels, “Implementing Trauma-Informed Practices”; Sherry Shamblin et al., “Creating Trauma-Informed Schools for Rural Appalachia: The Partnerships Program for Enhancing Resiliency, Confidence and Workforce Development in Early Childhood Education,” *School Mental Health* 8, no. 1 (2016): 189–200.

⁷Ruth Chung Wei et al., “Professional Learning in the Learning Profession: A Status Report on Teacher Development in the US and Abroad. Technical Report” (Dallas: National Staff Development Council, 2009); Philip E. Poekert, “Examining the Impact of Collaborative Professional Development on Teacher Practice,” *Teacher Education Quarterly* 39, no. 4 (2012): 97–118.

⁸Donald Schön, *Educating the Reflective Practitioner: Toward a New Design for Teaching and Learning in the Professions* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1987).

⁹See, e.g., My Teaching Partner, <https://curry.virginia.edu/myteachingpartner>, and Kognito Trauma-Informed Practices for K12 Schools, <https://kognito.com/products/trauma-informed-practices-for-k12-schools>.

¹⁰Ron Avi Astor et al., *Welcoming Practices: Creating Schools That Support Students and Families in Transition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

¹¹Joseph A. Durlak et al., “The Impact of Enhancing Students’ Social and Emotional Learning: A Meta-Analysis of School-Based Universal Interventions,” *Child Development* 82, no. 1 (2011): 405–32; Marcin Sklad et al., “Effectiveness of School-Based Universal Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Programs: Do They Enhance Students’ Development in the Area of Skill, Behavior, and Adjustment?” *Psychology in the Schools* 49, no. 9 (2012): 892–909.

¹²Fronius et al., “Restorative Justice in US Schools.”

¹³“Changing Minds: Preventing and Healing Childhood Trauma State Policy Guide” (San Francisco: Futures Without Violence, 2018).

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