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Trauma-Informed Practices: A Whole School Policy Framework

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Trauma-Informed Practices: A Whole-School Policy Framework

By now, members of state boards of education will have heard the dire statistics about the rise in students' mental health struggles, which were exacerbated by exposure to added traumatic events during the pandemic. When they are prepared to do so, educators play an important role in helping these students. Applying trauma-informed practices in the classroom can help students build the resilience and emotional intelligence they will need to reduce the impact of trauma on their well-being and learning.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) data collected in 2021 revealed that one in three high school students struggled with their mental health during the pandemic, and nearly half of students "felt persistently sad or hopeless."¹ Yet students have been experiencing mental health challenges and traumatic events at staggering rates for years. Before the pandemic, one in five children reported having a mental, emotional, developmental, or behavioral disorder; one in three high school students reported feeling sad or hopeless, and these rates had been increasing over the past decade.²

Traumatic events, or adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), compound students' mental health burden. ACEs include abuse, neglect, family mental health crises, violence, and caregiver death. Half of students in the 2021 CDC survey reported experiencing emotional abuse at home, and 10 percent reported experiencing physical abuse.³ The pandemic took an economic toll as well, and nearly a third of Black students reported experiencing food insecurity. From April 2020 to June 2021, the CDC found that over 140,000 children lost a parent or adult caregiver to COVID-19; 65 percent of these children are from historically marginalized racial or ethnic groups.⁴

A 2019 study of the impact of ACEs on learning found that children's risk of poor attendance, behavior issues, and failure to reach grade level in math, reading, and writing increases as the number of ACEs they experience increases.⁵ These results are statistically significant even when accounting for gender, race, and levels of school poverty. The researchers suggest that students with many ACEs may be at risk for academic or behavioral issues without officially meeting the diagnostic standards for receiving special education services or interventions.

Creating Supportive Classrooms

We have parsed trauma-informed education practices into six primary areas: identifying and assessing trauma, creating safe and predictable learning environments, cultural responsiveness, positive behavior management, positive relationship building, and social-emotional learning.⁶ In a systematic review of state teacher preparation standards from all 50 states and Washington, D.C., we found only five states that require preservice teachers to receive training in these areas prior to certification, indicating that many teachers are likely unprepared to use trauma-informed practices to support children.

Yet there is some evidence that student outcomes improve when teachers apply trauma-informed practices. In a 2021 study, teachers who implemented and co-designed a model to improve student self-regulation reported increased student participation and greater positive relationship building.⁷ The teachers also reported that modeling emotional regulation increased both teacher and student attention to their personal needs.

In a study of the program Healthy

State leaders can ensure that more school staff are equipped to help children deal with the effects of trauma.

Nicole Reddig and Janet VanLone

State boards ought to review standards for school social workers to ensure they include trauma-informed practices specific to school settings.

Environments and Response to Trauma in Schools, teachers were surveyed about their perceptions of student engagement after its implementation. Researchers found that the training teachers received as part of the program increased their understanding of trauma and the use of trauma-sensitive practices.⁸ It also significantly improved students' ability to learn, attendance rates, and focus, and it decreased the school's overall number of disciplinary office referrals, out-of-school suspensions, and incidents of physical aggression.

A third study evaluated a program in which mental health consultants provided elementary school teachers in rural Appalachia with professional development on implementing trauma-informed practices and interventions to address student behavior. Participating teachers reported that they felt more competent and confident using positive, compassionate strategies to address challenging classroom behavior rather than punitive disciplinary practices.⁹ The teachers also reported that students exhibited increased resilience and improved classroom behavior.

Teachers want this training. We solicited their views of trauma-informed practices in our 2021 study and found them overwhelmingly supportive.¹⁰ One responded:

I feel trauma-informed supports have had a net positive impact on my job satisfaction. Time to accomplish what I need to on a day-to-day basis is limited, so adding trauma informed professional development can add some stress. However, it has allowed me to better understand and connect with my students, which has improved my relationships and positively impacted classroom management. It also taught me to reconsider what is most important when it comes to teaching content, and I have significantly altered my practice and grading policies to be more supportive for students who might carry trauma with them. Taking time to connect with my students, evaluating what is important, and adjusting policies to support all students has reduced more stress than a few extra minutes of professional development have caused.

Recommendations

To equip educators to help students who have experienced trauma, state boards should pursue a policy agenda aligned to the National Traumatic Stress Network's Framework for a

Trauma-Informed School.¹¹ We arrange these policies in tiers, ranging from those that support universal integration of trauma-informed practices to interventions for students most in need (figure 1).

Amending Effective Teaching Standards.

We recommend that state boards update their effective teaching standards for in-service teachers to include trauma-informed practices. For example, in Massachusetts, the board could update Standard II: Teaching All Students, Section B: Learning Environment of the Standards of Effective Teaching to include, "Utilizes trauma-informed practices that recognize the signs and symptoms of trauma in children and respond to the needs of such children with appropriate social, emotional, and behavioral learning interventions."

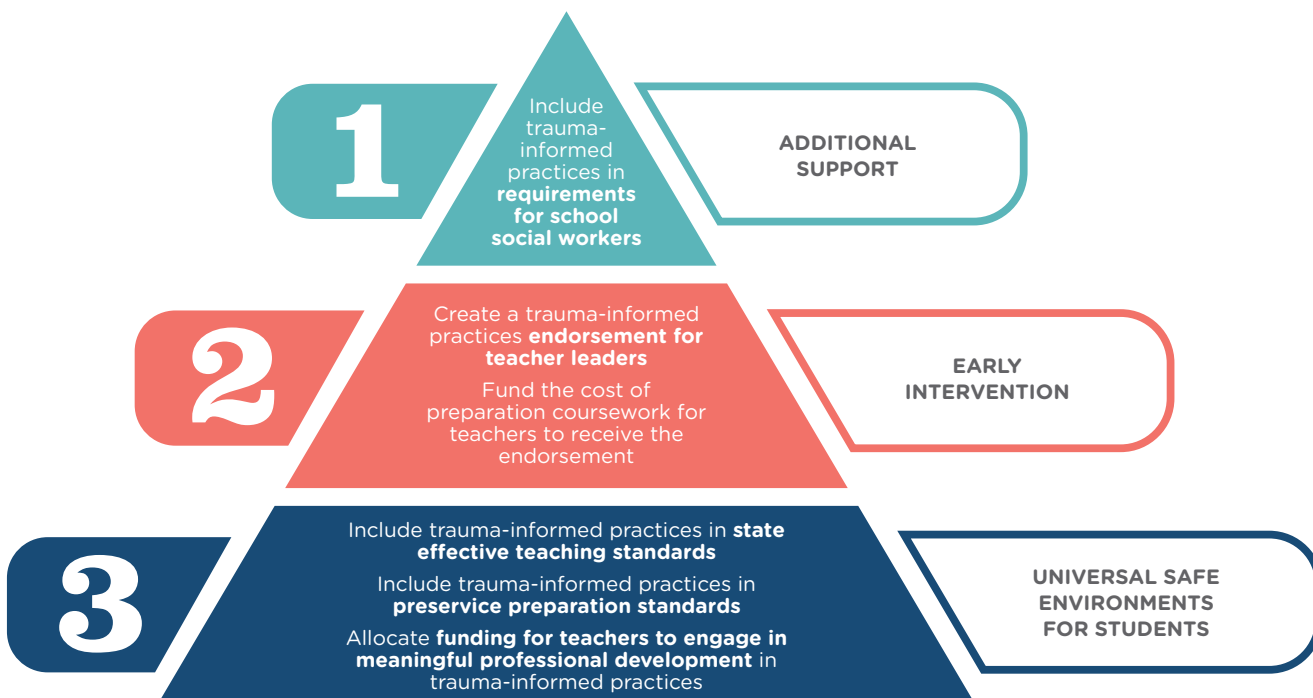
While the decision to add standards for teaching should not be taken lightly, teachers are already being evaluated on skills in classroom management, cultural responsiveness, and social-emotional learning that are integral to trauma-informed practice. Therefore, this new standard would ask teachers to explicitly apply the strong classroom practices they already use to support children who have experienced trauma.

Amending Preservice Teacher Preparation Standards.

To ensure that preservice teachers are trained in trauma-informed practices as well, state boards should also update teacher preparation standards. To align preservice training with in-service practice, these standards should include the same criteria as effective teaching standards. After it adopts new standards, state boards should direct their education departments to create guidelines for how educator preparation programs can embed trauma-informed practices in their coursework. Rather than requiring the programs to add courses, guidelines should detail ways in which trauma-informed practices can be integrated into existing coursework.

Creating an Endorsement. We recommend that state boards create a teacher licensure endorsement for trauma-informed practices. It would require demonstration of subject-matter knowledge through completion of an approved training program or course. Pennsylvania has a social, emotional, and behavioral wellness endorsement that includes social-emotional learning, identification of ACES, behavioral

Figure 1. Trauma-informed Practices in Education Policy Application



literacy, and community collaboration.¹² Such an endorsement may serve as a model for other boards as they create such an option.

Teachers should be able to attain this endorsement through institutions of higher education, expert organizations that offer teacher training, and in-school professional development that encourages teachers to collaborate. Teacher leaders with this endorsement can help other educators develop trauma-informed practices as well as providing interventions for students.

Amending School Social Worker Standards. Mental health providers can be instrumental in supporting students and providing educators with resources.¹³ School social workers are an integral part of a trauma-informed school and serve as a resource for both students and educators. Thus, state boards ought to review their standards for school social workers and amend as necessary to ensure they include training in trauma-informed practices specific to school settings. Such standards should reference the creation of safe spaces for students who have experienced trauma to engage in self-regulation, support services for school staff who experience secondary traumatic stress, referrals to

community health centers and wraparound supports, and culturally responsive strategies.

Directing Funding for Professional Development and No-Cost Endorsement Pathways. State boards can also urge their education agencies to allocate state funding to districts for meaningful professional development on trauma-informed practices. Myriad organizations, including the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, National Child Traumatic Stress Network, Youth Mental Health First Aid, and Trauma Sensitive Schools Project, train educators and school leaders on trauma-informed practices and supporting student mental health. Additionally, federal or state funding should support teachers who would like to earn an endorsement in this area.

Conclusion

We urge state boards to take action to ensure that educators are trained in trauma-informed practices. Using these practices, teachers can promote student mental health and create safe spaces for students who have experienced trauma to learn and grow socially, emotionally, and

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Prediction during Covid-19: Insights from Connecticut" (Attendance Works and the Connecticut State Department of Education, June 2021), <https://www.attendanceworks.org/chronic-absence-patterns-and-prediction-during-covid-19-insights-from-connecticut/>

¹⁰CSDE, "Catalog of Truancy Intervention Models" (March 2018).

¹¹CSDE, "Full, Equal and Equitable Partnerships with Families: Connecticut's Definition and Framework for Family Engagement" (August 2018), chart 5.

¹²Steven Stemler et al., "An Evaluation of the Effectiveness of Home Visits for Re-Engaging Students Who Were Chronically Absent in the Era of Covid-19" (Center for Connecticut Education Research Collaboration, December 2022), https://www.attendanceworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/CCERC-Report-LEAP_01_24_2023_FINAL.pdf.

¹³Attendance Works, "Monitoring Data Matters Even More: A Review of State Attendance Data Policy and Practice in School Year 2022–23," policy brief (June 2023), <https://www.attendanceworks.org/monitoring-data-matters-even-more-a-review-of-state-attendance-data-policy-and-practice-in-school-year-2022-23/>. A table in this brief provides a look at attendance policies and practices in 50 states and the District of Columbia.

¹⁴Attendance Works, "Does Our State Have a Systemic Approach to Reducing Chronic Absence?" (rev. August 18, 2018), <https://www.attendanceworks.org/resources/self-assessment/>.

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track the community members who participate in the work-based learning experiences and the quality of the experiences through reflection forms, surveys, and evaluative rubrics so state leaders can readily evaluate the academic, employability, and technical skills students are gaining. ■

¹National Career Academy Coalition, "Career Academies Change Lives Every Day," web page, <https://www.ncacinc.com/nsop/academies>.

²James R. Stone III and Morgan V. Lewis, *College and Career Ready in the 21st Century: Making High School Matter* (New York: Teacher's College Press, 2012); James R. Stone III et al., "Building Academic Skills in Context: Testing the Value of Enhanced Math Learning in CTE" (St. Paul: National Research Center for Career and Technical Education, University of Minnesota, 2006).

³Data came from a survey of students designed to gauge their emotional, cognitive, and behavioral engagement. In this survey, emotional engagement comprises a sense of belonging and safety and beliefs that students can be themselves and accepted for it. Edward C. Fletcher Jr. et al., "Examining the Engagement of Career Academy and Comprehensive High School Students in the United States," *The Journal of Educational Research* 113, no. 4 (2020).

⁴Edward Fletcher and E. Daniel Cox, "Exploring the Meaning African American Students Ascribe to Their Participation in High School Career Academies and the Challenges They Experience," *The High School Journal* 96, no. 1 (2012): 4–19.

⁵James J. Kemple, "Career Academies: Long-Term Impacts

on Labor Market Outcomes, Educational Attainment, and Transitions to Adulthood" (New York: MDRC, June 2008).

⁶Edward C. Fletcher Jr. et al., "Equity Perspectives of School Stakeholders Regarding the Representation and Access of Black Male Students in an Academy of Engineering," *School Science and Mathematics* 123, no. 3 (2023); Jerrod Henderson et al., "Enhancing Engineering Identity among Boys of Color," *Journal of Pre-College Engineering Education Research (J-PEER)* 11, no. 2 (2021).

⁷Fletcher et al., "Equity Perspectives of School Stakeholders."

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academically. The policy intervention model we propose will ensure that preservice educators are trained before they enter the classroom and help in-service teachers gain new professional knowledge. ■

¹Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Adolescent Behaviors and Experiences Survey (ABES)," web page (March 31, 2022), <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/data/abes.htm>.

²Office of the Surgeon General, "U.S. Surgeon General Issues Advisory on Youth Mental Health Crisis Further Exposed by COVID-19 Pandemic," press release, December 7, 2021.

³CDC, ABES.

⁴Susan D. Hillis et al., "COVID-19–Associated Orphanhood and Caregiver Death in the United States," *Pediatrics* 148, no. 6 (2021).

⁵Christopher Blodgett and Jane D. Lanigan, "The Association between Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) and School Success in Elementary School Children," *School Psychology Quarterly* 33, no. 1 (2018): 137–46.

⁶Nicole Reddig and Janet VanLone, "Preservice Teacher Preparation in Trauma-Informed Pedagogy: A Review of State Competencies," *Leadership and Policy in Schools* (April 25, 2022): 1–12.

⁷Tom Brunzell, Lea Waters, and Helen Stokes, "Trauma-Informed Teacher Wellbeing: Teacher Reflections within Trauma-Informed Positive Education," *Australian Journal of Teacher Education* 46, no. 5 (2021).

⁸Joyce 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.

⁹Sherry Shamblin, Dawn Graham, and Joseph A. Bianco, "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.

¹⁰Nicole Reddig, Janet VanLone, and Molly Mishler, "Supporting Teacher Retention through a Trauma-Informed Lens," *Pennsylvania Educational Leadership* 41, no. 2 (2022): 34–59.

¹¹National Child Traumatic Stress Network, "Creating, Supporting, and Sustaining Trauma-Informed Schools: A System Framework" (2017), https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/creating_supporting_sustaining_trauma_informed_schools_a_systems_framework.pdf.

¹²See Pennsylvania Department of Education, "Framework for Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Wellness of PK-12 Students Endorsement Program Guidelines" (February 2018), <https://www.education.pa.gov/Documents/Teachers-Administrators/Certification%20Preparation%20Programs/Specific%20Program%20Guidelines/Social%20Emotional%20and%20Behavioral%20Wellness%20of%20PK-12%20Students%20Endorsement.pdf>.

¹³Shamblin, Graham, and Bianco, "Creating Trauma-Informed Schools for Rural Appalachia."