

# BUILDING TRAUMA-INFORMED SCHOOLS

A Practice Brief for Anyone who Interacts with Students in Schools by  
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## TRAUMA-INFORMED SCHOOLS PROMOTE:

- Feelings of physical, social, and emotional safety in students
- A shared understanding among staff about the impact of trauma and adversity on students
- Positive and culturally responsive discipline policies and practices
- Access to comprehensive school mental and behavioral services
- Effective community collaboration

## DEFINITIONS AND KEY FINDINGS

Researchers have defined childhood trauma as an event that occurs before the age of 17 and “is experienced as physically or emotionally harmful or life-threatening and having lasting adverse effects on the individual’s functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual wellbeing” (SAMHSA, 2014, p. 7).

Childhood trauma represents one of the greatest risk factors for later psychological difficulties (Briere & Scott, 2014). Child trauma survivors may experience (SAMHSA, 2022):

- Learning problems, including lower grades and more suspensions and expulsions
- Increased use of health and mental health services
- Increase involvement with the child welfare and juvenile justice systems
- Long-term health problems (e.g., diabetes and heart disease)

The National Center for Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) has issued a call to action for schools to play a key role in addressing the needs of traumatized children.

## WHAT IS A TRAUMA-INFORMED SCHOOL?

A trauma-informed school is one in which all teachers, school administrators, staff, students, families, and community members recognize and respond to the behavioral, emotional, relational, and academic impacts of traumatic stress on those within the school system.



## KEY STATISTICS & INFORMATION

- One in three children ages 0-17 (33.3%) experienced at least one parent-reported adverse childhood experience (ACE) in their lifetime, including nearly 1 in 5 who experienced 1 ACE and 14.1% who experienced 2 or more ACEs (HRSA, 2020).
- When school professionals see students through a trauma lens and recognize the impact of trauma, they are able to approach students in ways that improve students’ ability to learn and connect with others.

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## TRAUMA-INFORMED SCHOOLS REFLECT A SHIFT FROM:

WHAT IS WRONG WITH YOU?

- to -

WHAT HAS HAPPENED  
TO YOU?

### KEY OUTCOMES AND OTHER INFORMATION

Addressing the impact of trauma exposure on students and school personnel directly, resisting punitive responses, and providing practical skills and support to manage traumatic stress reactions are essential for building a positive school climate for students and teachers.

#### Benefits of implementing a trauma-informed school approach

- ↑ **Increased** - academic achievement and test scores, school climate, teacher sense of satisfaction and retention, graduation rates, and community and family collaboration with schools (Chafouleas et al., 2016; Oehlberg, 2008).
- ↓ **Decreased** - student behavioral outbursts and referrals, stress for staff and students, absences, detentions and suspensions, student bullying, harassment, and fights, need for special education, services, and classes, and drop-out rates when schools are implementing a trauma-informed approach (NCTSN, 2017).

### GAPS & LIMITATIONS

- This is not a “one size fits all” approach – consider the specifics of each school system and/or district.
- Implementation of trauma-informed practices can contribute to stress within resource-scarce contexts (Arnold et al., 2020).
- Teacher attrition is an issue within the United States and many European countries (Federičová, 2021). Teacher turnover makes it difficult to implement trauma-informed practices with fidelity (Gaffney et al., 2021).

### SUGGESTIONS FOR PRACTICE

10 core areas for a trauma-informed school system (National Child Traumatic Stress Network [NCTSN], 2017):

- ☑ **Identification and assessment of traumatic stress.** School policies that support the screening and identification of students with trauma exposure
- ☑ **Prevention and intervention of traumatic stress.** Where needed, adequate support (referral and access to trauma-informed evidence-based prevention and intervention resources) for all school stakeholders
- ☑ **Trauma education and awareness.** Professional development opportunities to help school stakeholders develop a shared understanding of trauma’s impact on learning and build student coping/protective skills
- ☑ **Partnership with students and families.** Inclusion of students and family members as full partners in the creation of a trauma-informed school system and in the planning of trauma-informed practices to strengthen trust and acceptance
- ☑ **Creation of a trauma-informed learning environment.** Education about the wellness of students, including modeling healthy social-emotional skills and integration of trauma-informed practices across school-wide behavioral programming
- ☑ **Cultural responsiveness.** School policies that promote culturally appropriate responses to trauma and recognize differences in individual experiences and responses to trauma, including help-seeking behaviors following trauma
- ☑ **Emergency management/crisis response.** Clear and well-communicated procedures to mitigate, prepare for, respond to, and recover from emergencies/crises
- ☑ **Staff self-care and secondary traumatic stress.** Training and support for self-care and secondary traumatic stress activities to help staff, teachers, and school personnel respond to and recover from traumatic events
- ☑ **School discipline policies and practices that** begin with prevention and rely on these key components first; a balanced goal for disciplinary actions that combines the safety of others in the school environment and skill-building resources for students that support their reintegration into a school setting
- ☑ **Cross-system collaboration and community partnership.** Policies and practices that encourage school personnel to collaborate to ensure the trauma-informed approaches span all aspects of the school environment, including classrooms, health services, administration, school disciplines and attendance, guidance, and extra-curricular programming, as well as with family and community partners

### SELECTED REFERENCES

- > For the references cited in this brief: <https://bit.ly/3FvOBD2>
- > For more information from NCTSN on “Creating, Supporting, and Sustaining Trauma-Informed Schools”: <https://bit.ly/3Y1GIC5>