Understanding the Importance of Creating Positive School Climates to Support Students Facing Adversity and Trauma

Adversity and Trauma in School Communities

In nearly every classroom and in every school, there are students who have experienced adversity and trauma. In fact, most youth in the United States will be exposed to at least one potentially traumatic event before the age of 18; many will be exposed to multiple traumatic experiences.[1,2,3] Potentially traumatic experiences for youth may include neglect, abuse, and exposure to family violence; family separation, such as parental death or incarceration or placement in foster care; school and community-based crime and violence; economic distress and homelessness; war and dislocation; natural disasters; and identity-based violence associated with being part of a marginalized group. Additionally, schools must contend with the collective impact of the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) and the most recent incidences of racial violence on students, families, and staff.

In addition to what students may experience outside of school, schools themselves can create or augment student experiences of adversity and trauma through unsafe or unsupportive conditions that include bullying; violence; harsh, shaming, and biased discipline practices; lack of effective, timely supports; and practices that marginalize students and minimize their voices and experiences. School staff who face unsupportive conditions for teaching, including insufficient resources, lack of instrumental and emotional supports, and the feeling of being overwhelmed associated with teaching through the pandemic, may struggle to adequately address student needs and to foster a supportive environment.

Trauma and adversity can have profoundly negative effects on social, emotional, and cognitive development; mental and physical health; and capacity for learning.[4,5] Schools play a key role in preventing and helping students to heal from adverse or traumatic experiences by creating safe, respectful, and engaging environments where everyone can thrive. School climate improvement efforts are critical for ensuring that as school communities face various forms of adversity and/or trauma, schools can adapt as needed and continue to foster the optimal conditions for both teaching and learning.

1   Copeland, W. E., Keeler, G., Angold, A., & Costello, E. J. (2007). Traumatic events and posttraumatic stress in childhood. *Archives of General Psychiatry, 64*(5), 577–584.

2   Felitti, V. J., & Anda, R. F. (2010). The relationship of adverse childhood experiences to adult medical disease, psychiatric disorders, and sexual behavior: Implications for healthcare. In R. Lanius & E. Vermetten (Eds.), *The hidden epidemic: The impact of early life trauma on health and disease* (pp. 77–87). Cambridge University Press.

3   Finkelhor, D., Shattuck, A., Turner, H., & Hamby, S. (2015). A revised inventory of Adverse Childhood Experiences. *Child Abuse and Neglect, 48,* 13–21.

4   Osher, D., Cantor, P., Berg, J., Steyer, L., & Rose, T. (2018). Drivers of human development: How relationships and context shape learning and development. *Applied Developmental Science, 22*(1), 1–31.

5   Perfect, M. M., Turley, M. R., Carlson, J. S., Yohanna, J., & Saint Gilles, M. P. (2016). School-related outcomes of traumatic event exposure and traumatic stress symptoms in students: A systemic review of research from 1990 to 2015. *School Mental Health, 8,* 7–43.

How a Positive School Climate Is Essential for Creating Conditions for Healing and Resilience-Building in Response to Trauma and Adversity

All students can benefit from a safe and supportive learning environment. Students who have experienced trauma and/or adversity are particularly sensitive to and influenced by school climate. There is substantial evidence that students who have experienced trauma and/or adversity are disproportionately harmed by a negative school climate but receive a greater benefit than other students from a positive school climate.[6] **A positive school climate benefits all students and provides the most benefit to the students with the greatest vulnerability.**

School climate is a broad concept whose key elements include school safety; a supportive academic, disciplinary, and physical environment; and respectful, trusting, and caring relationships.[7] These key elements that form the foundation of a positive school climate are simultaneously critical elements of healing for students affected by trauma. Here, we focus on a few aspects within these areas of school climate that are especially critical for students who have experienced trauma and/or adversity: the presence of caring adults at school; physical and emotional safety in the school environment; and the promotion of equity in school climate, including disciplinary practices.

- **Engagement:** Safe and supportive relationships are essential for our well-being and a critical vehicle for healing from adversity or trauma. When students feel like they **have caring adults** at school, this builds their resilience in the face of issues such as stressors at home, school, or in the community.[8,9] Caring adults can serve as a stable resource for the student and model effective coping and social skills for students.[10] There is also evidence that teachers can promote a growth mindset in their students, which in turn leads to student motivation to succeed and improved academic engagement, achievement, and social and emotional well-being.[11]

- **Safety:** All students must feel safe to learn. For students exposed to trauma, issues of safety are paramount. This means **ensuring students are safe from physical harm, but also emotionally safe, meaning that they feel seen, heard, and respected.** Promoting safety includes eliminating potential trauma reminders in the environment, including practices that cause students to feel helpless, vulnerable, or out of control in ways that mirror various experiences of adversity or trauma. If a student is from a marginalized group (such as having a disability, being from a racial/ethnic minority population, being in foster care, living in poverty, or having a particular gender

6   OECD (2020). *Improving education outcomes for students who have experienced trauma and/or adversity* (OECD Working Paper 242).

7   See https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/school-climate-improvement.

8   DuBois, D. Portillo, N., Rhodes, J. E., Silverthorn, N., & Valentine, J. C. (2011). How effective are mentoring programs for youth? A systematic assessment of the evidence. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest, 12*(2), 57–91.

9   National Scientific Council on the Developing Child. (2015). *Supportive relationships and active skill-building strengthen the foundations of resilience* (Working Paper 13). Harvard University.

10 Luthar, S., & Brown, P. J. (2007). Maximizing resilience through diverse levels of inquiry: Prevailing paradigms, possibilities, and priorities for the future. *Development and Psychopathology, 19*(3), 931–955.

11 Darling-Hammond, L., Flook, L., Cook-Harvey, C., Barron, B., & Osher, D. (2020). Implications for educational practice of the science of learning and development. *Applied Developmental Science, 24*(2), 97–140.

identity), this can place them at elevated risk for experiences of trauma and adversity, including in school. It is important for school leadership to hold high expectations for teachers to use inclusive practices and protect students from bullying.[12] When students feel that teachers are respectful toward them, this contributes to their sense of well-being and safety.[13]

- **Equitable Environments and Systems:** Creating equitable environments is critical to ensuring that schools **eliminate rather than perpetuate practices that cause harm.** In educational settings, such traumas manifest in the form of microaggressions, culturally insensitive practices, biased discipline practices, and institutionalized prejudice and related assumptions about students and families that compromise engagement, connection, and community. Creating a safe and supportive school culture cannot be achieved without examining and changing those systems and structures that perpetuate trauma.

A key aspect of positive school culture involves having fair and equitable disciplinary policies. This is important for all students and particularly impactful for students affected by adversity and trauma, and who may be at increased risk for displaying problematic behavior at school. Educators may misinterpret these behaviors from students and respond with harsh or unfair discipline.[14] These experiences can add to the student's negative experiences; reinforce or increase the student's sense of danger at school; and provoke or amplify biological stress responses that compromises student learning and decision making. Negative effects are further amplified when discipline is applied disproportionately to already marginalized students.

Exclusionary discipline is particularly problematic. Students who are excluded from school lose access to what should be a protective and supportive environment.[15] Exclusionary discipline also has significant long-term consequences: A comprehensive 2011 study found that after controlling for 83 student characteristics (e.g., poverty, gender, disability, race), experiences of exclusionary discipline substantially increased a student's likelihood of grade repetition, dropout, and juvenile justice system involvement.[16] In contrast, when educators treat students with respect and fairness, and hold high expectations, this builds student resilience and psychosocial well-being.[17]

12 Williamson, S., & D. Osher. (2018). Building a schoolwide foundation for socio-emotional and academic support. In D. Osher, D. Moroney, & S. Williamson (Eds.), *Creating safe, equitable, engaging schools: A comprehensive, evidence-based approach to supporting students.* Harvard Education Press.

13 Burde, D., Guven, O., Kelcey, J., Lahmann, H., & Al-Abbadi, K. (2015). *What Works to promote children's educational access, quality of learning, and wellbeing in crisis-affected contexts.* Department for International Development.

14 Guarino, K., & Chagnon, E. (2018). *Trauma-sensitive schools training package.* National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments.

15 Quin, D. (2019). Levels of problem behaviours and risk and protective factors in suspended and nonsuspended students. *Educational and Developmental Psychologist, 36*(1). 8–15.

16 Fabelo, T., Thompson, M. D., Plotkin, M., Carmichael, D., Marchbanks, M. P., & Booth, E. A. (2011). *Breaking schools' rules: A Statewide study on how school discipline relates to students' success and juvenile justice involvement.* Council of State Governments Justice Center.

17 Burde, D., Guven, O., Kelcey, J., Lahmann, H., & Al-Abbadi, K. (2015). *What Works to promote children's educational access, quality of learning, and wellbeing in crisis-affected contexts.* Department for International Development.

The elements described here reflect key areas of focus for school climate transformation. Given what is known about the effects of adversity and trauma and what it takes to help students and adults to heal, a positive school climate can be a critical form of intervention for supporting healing and resilience-building that has a powerful reach when provided by all and for all in the school community. Using the *School Climate Improvement Resource Package*, complete with tools to assess your school climate efforts to date and plan where to improve from there, can help plan and implement needed improvements.

Integrating School Climate Improvement and Trauma-Sensitive Schools Efforts

In addition to the more general school climate improvement efforts related to safety, engagement, and environment, it is important for leaders and educators to consider what additional steps may be needed to recognize and address the effects of adversity and trauma on students, families, and staff.

The term *trauma-sensitive schools* refers to a schoolwide approach to understanding and addressing trauma in which all aspects of the education environment (e.g., teacher preparation, family engagement, procedures and policies, school climate and culture) are grounded in an understanding of trauma and its effects and are designed to promote resilience for all.[18] This approach encompasses a range of policies, practices, and processes to build staff awareness and understanding of trauma and its effects; support safe and relational environments; eliminate retraumatizing practices; adapt policies and procedures to align with a trauma-sensitive vision; empower youth and families; and build social and emotional skills.[19] At the end of this document, please see a list of freely available resources that provide more in-depth information and guidance on this topic.

Trauma-sensitive schools and school climate improvement initiatives share common aims and practices. Both efforts are guided by shared principles such as safety, supportive relationships, youth and family empowerment, cultural competence, and a focus on well-being. A trauma-sensitive approach adds a layer of awareness, knowledge, and practice that is informed by an understanding of adversity and trauma. Aligning and integrating these overlapping efforts helps to streamline implementation processes and to minimize duplication or fragmentation. Integration may involve developing a shared implementation plan, integrating professional development activities, and identifying shared practices for adoption schoolwide.

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[18]   Guarino, K., & Chagnon, E. (2018). *Trauma-sensitive schools training package*. National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments.

[19]   Guarino, K., & Chagnon, E. (2018). *Trauma-sensitive schools training package*. National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments.

Related Resources

As schools use the *School Climate Improvement Resource Package* to plan and implement school climate efforts, leaders and teams may also consider how to integrate trauma awareness, understanding, and related practice using the resources provided here to ensure a comprehensive approach to fostering the optimal conditions for all in the school community to flourish.

- The National Child Traumatic Stress Network provides a wealth of free informational resources for child- and family-serving systems.

- The Trauma Sensitive Schools Training Package provides guidance on how to build trauma-informed educational environments.

- Harvard's Center on the Developing Child offers guidance on understanding and building children's resilience.

- OECD Working Paper 242 provides an in-depth look at the research on best practices in education for students who have experienced trauma and/or adversity.