



## Trauma-Sensitive Schools and School Social Work Practice

Traumatic childhood experiences are pervasive and the adverse impact of traumatic experiences on the developing brains of children and adolescents has been well-documented over the past 20 years (Jacobson, 2020; Downey & Greco, 2023). Just in the United States, hundreds of thousands of children experience trauma each year (Lembke et al., 2024). An estimated two out of three children and adolescents will experience traumatic adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) by 16 years of age (Phung, 2022). Frankland (2021) found schoolchildren living in rural areas are disproportionately affected by trauma and ACEs, but “trauma-informed approaches in rural schools may mitigate the effects of childhood adversity and help close achievement gaps for rural students” (p.51).

### **Promoting Student and School Well-Being**

There is a growing body of research that demonstrates schools can play a critical role in mitigating the adverse effects of trauma on children and adolescents through the implementation of trauma-sensitive practices (Avery et al., 2021; Cafaro et al., 2023; Chafouleas et al., 2019; Diggins, 2021; Downey & Greco, 2023; Dutil, 2020; Frankland, 2021; Herrenkohl et al., 2019; Loomis et al., 2023; Morton, 2020; Parker et al., 2022; Parameswaran et al., 2024; Phung, 2022; Roseby & Gascoigne, 2021; Sedillo-Haman, 2022; Tabone et al., 2020; Wall, 2020). However, Winninghoff (2020) cautions against the application of the ACEs framework in schools in that staff may identify students with a high number of ACEs as unable to be resilient enough to overcome that level of trauma. Parameswaran et al. (2024) combine the three approaches of trauma-informed care, restorative justice, and multicultural education into what they call “healing schools” with the four key values of relationships, safety, belonging, and agency.

### **Domains of Practice: Home-School-Community Partnerships**

Schools are a critically important setting when children experience stress and adversity in their homes and communities (Avery et al., 2021; Herrenkohl et al., 2019). In addition, parents reported significant reductions in conduct and peer problems in a 12-month, school-wide, trauma-informed intervention (Diggins, 2021). The use of trauma-informed practices in schools can achieve positive short- and long-term outcomes for both students and their communities (Parker et al., 2022).

Equipped with the knowledge of how home, school, and community systems function and interact with each other, school social workers are able to utilize resources and supports across the school district and in the community to address the needs of children, youth, and families that are impacted by trauma. Further, school social workers are skilled in building collaborative strategies between parents and other caregivers, K-12 schools, public health, child welfare, early childhood education, mental health providers, and others serving children and families to create better learning and overall outcomes.

### **Focus Areas: Academics, School Climate, Social-Emotional Well-Being, and Mental Health**

Trauma adversely impacts learning, academic performance, and emotional regulation, as well as school behaviors and relationships (Berger, 2019; Diggins, 2021; Jacobson, 2020; Maynard et al., 2017; Wall, 2020; Wassink-de Stigter et al., 2022). Disciplinary policies used by schools that emphasize punitive practices result in increased exclusion from school and can retraumatize students who have previously experienced trauma (Dutil, 2020; Loomis et al., 2023).

Recent research is showing trauma-sensitive strategies (TSS) and approaches infused into a multi-tier systems of support (MTSS) framework can be effective in mitigating the effects of trauma on students and enhancing their learning (Bellamy et al., 2022; Berger, 2019; Downey & Greco, 2023; Herrenkohl et

al., 2019; Lembke et al., 2024; McConnel & Valentino, 2020; Tabone et al., 2020; Thomas et al., 2019; Wassink-de Stigter et al., 2022). More specifically, Morton (2022) found “implementing mental health strategies based on trauma-response practices in the middle school classroom can promote healthy mind-sets, help students regain safety and stability, and put them back on track for academic and social success” (p.1). Jacobson (2020) reported educators emphasized the importance of relationships, safe spaces, and sensitive responses to improve learner behaviors.

Maynard et al. (2017) found the number of schools implementing trauma-sensitive practices has increased significantly over the past several years. Research into which particular TSS practices or tiers in a MTSS framework are most effective has grown in recent years, but research at the high school level is still scant (Cohen et al., 2021). Herrenkohl et al. (2019) summarized their findings to “suggest that empirical evidence currently favors individual and group-based approaches, although classroom-based and school-wide programs may be better positioned for integration” (p.1). However, later studies have found more evidence supporting classroom and school-wide strategies. For instance, Tabone et al. (2020) found that Trauma-Informed Elementary Schools (TIES) resulted in “significant beneficial effects of TIES services for the classroom environments of young children impacted by trauma exposure” (p.1). Belamy et al. (2022) found a reduction in behavior difficulties in a regional primary school with a high percentage of Native students that utilized a trauma-informed MTSS framework. Furthermore, adopting a restorative justice framework can also be viewed as “a trauma-informed mental health intervention allowing perpetrators, who have frequently been victims of past trauma, to regain a sense of voice and control, and to maintain social connection within their community” (Sedillo-Hamann, 2022, p.1).

### **Professional Activities: Practice, Research, Policy, Leadership, and Advocacy**

School social workers have important roles in supporting students who have experienced trauma. Sweetman (2022) found a collaborative team is important to support teachers in schools implementing trauma-sensitive practices. School social workers play important roles as team leaders and members in schools implementing MTSS frameworks, as well as having direct service functions at all three tiers. Their knowledge of trauma and its impact on learning makes them especially important when a school incorporates TSS practices into its MTSS framework.

Educators working in trauma-sensitive schools need ongoing support for themselves (Luthar & Mendes, 2020). Spence et al. (2021) conclude that “teachers would benefit from having a psychological understanding of trauma models and their component parts in order to identify what lies within the remit of schools for identification and intervention” (p.1). Expulsion risk is reduced for students with low impulse control when teachers have more positive trauma-informed attitudes (Loomis et al., 2023). School social workers are in an ideal position to advocate for the use of trauma-sensitive practices (Sedillo-Hamann, 2022).

### **Recommendations for School Social Workers**

1. Share with educational leaders the growing and recent research that demonstrates a) the pervasiveness of trauma in children and adolescents, b) how trauma adversely impacts learning and overall development, and c) how trauma-informed practices and educators in schools can mitigate the negative impacts of trauma.
2. Identify current strategies that are trauma-sensitive or could easily be modified to be trauma-sensitive within your school’s MTSS framework. At what tiers are they? Are there tiers that are under-represented or not represented at all?
3. Recruit partners within your school(s) to bring the proposal to incorporate trauma-sensitive strategies to your MTSS team(s). Develop a multi-year plan that dovetails with current MTSS objectives and related data-gathering and decision-making. Offer to lead this effort.
4. Identify and reach out to community partners that may support your school’s plan to incorporate trauma-sensitive practices. Emphasize how collaboration will help them achieve their goals.
5. Identify families that are presently disenfranchised from your school(s). Could this be related to an experience with trauma? How will your multi-year plan seek to engage these families?

6. Present your plan to your school board with an emphasis on how this plan will further the school board's identified goals to improve student learning and the district's schools.
7. Volunteer to provide professional development to teachers and other educators to 1) help sensitize them to how trauma impacts students and their learning, and 2) incorporate trauma-sensitive practices into classrooms.

### **Trainings and Resources: Trauma-Informed/Healing-Centered**

Resource	Description
<a href="#">Center on Great Teachers and Leaders</a>	Offers an Educator Self-Assessment & Planning Tool for supporting student resilience with trauma-informed care.
<a href="#">Child Trends by Jessica Dym Bartlett and Kate Steber (2019)</a>	Research brief offering strategies for implementing trauma-informed care to build resilience in children.
<a href="#">Educational Considerations by Alex Venet (2019)</a>	Article on role clarity and boundaries for trauma-informed teachers, providing practical guidance.
<a href="#">National Child Traumatic Stress Network</a>	Framework for implementing trauma-informed practices in K-12 schools.
<a href="#">Northwest PBIS Network – Trauma Informed Schools</a>	Provides trauma-informed practices integrated with Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS).
<a href="#">Resilient Futures</a>	An organization providing tools and strategies to foster resilience and trauma-informed practices in schools.
<a href="#">The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (2017)</a>	"Addressing Race and Trauma in the Classroom" provides resources to help educators address race and trauma.
<a href="#">Trauma Aware Schools</a>	A platform with tools and insights for building trauma-aware educational systems.
<a href="#">Trauma-Informed/Healing-Centered Engagement Teaching Resources</a>	Resources for educators to implement trauma-informed and healing-centered approaches in teaching.
<a href="#">WestEd Creating Trauma-Informed Learning Environments</a>	Guidance on building learning environments that support students with trauma-informed strategies.

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