

POLICY ISSUE BRIEF: TRAUMA-INFORMED SCHOOLS

Issue at a Glance

Data from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services “National Survey of Children’s Health” indicates that as of 2021, 18% of children in the United States have experienced at least two adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) that could be trauma-inducing such as abuse or neglect, violence, discrimination, bullying, natural disasters, or death of a loved one. However, the two most common ACEs are economic hardship and the separation or divorce of a parent or guardian. Nationwide, greater than one in four Black children and nearly one in five Hispanic children have experienced at least two ACEs, compared to only 16% of their white peers.

The COVID-19 pandemic also sharply increased mental health issues and trauma in schools. According to National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) data, in 2022 69% of public schools reported an increase in students seeking mental health services, and only 13% “strongly agreed” that their school was able to effectively provide mental health services to all students.

Physiological changes to children’s brains as well as emotional and behavioral responses to trauma have the potential to interfere with children’s learning, school engagement, and academic success—even years after the trauma took place. Researchers have also identified a “cycle of trauma” in schools when teachers’ rules and consequences are viewed as punishment by children, increasing the likelihood of retraumatization and exclusionary discipline practices. Schools with higher incidents of ACEs also have higher rates of suspensions and unexcused absences and lower graduation rates and postsecondary participation.

By understanding and responding to trauma and acknowledging the potential impacts of stress and adversity, school administrators, teachers, and staff can help reduce its negative impact, support critical learning, and create a more positive school environment. Trauma-informed schools can help children and adults overcome trauma and build resilience by helping educators be responsive to the needs of their students with “seamless, accessible social, behavioral, and emotional supports involving all school community members, as well as access to evidence-based, developmentally appropriate, child and family services,” according to the National Child Traumatic Stress Network.

National Principals Association Position

- National Principals Association supports the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL) which state that effective leaders cultivate an inclusive, caring, and supportive school community that promotes the academic success and well-being of each student.
- Effective school leaders set the conditions for trauma-informed schools by engaging all staff in the process, incorporating trauma-informed practices and strategies into other strategic planning efforts and school initiatives, helping teachers integrate trauma-informed routines into their classroom activities, and ensuring schools address secondary traumatic stress that may affect teachers and other staff.
- State and federal lawmakers must increase funding and support for implementing trauma-informed practices in schools and enhance the trauma-informed training and professional development that educators receive.
- National Principals Association has additional policy issue briefs on Mental Health in Schools, School Discipline, Safe Schools, and Culturally Responsive Schools which offer more recommendations for policymakers and school leaders to promote student safety, well-being, and equity and ensure that all students can achieve their greatest potential.
- National Principals Association maintains the [Principal Recovery Network \(PRN\)](#), a group of school leaders who have experienced gun violence in their buildings and now support other school leaders who endure similar trauma. The [PRN Guide to Recovery](#) is a key resource available to all school leaders who are seeking advice in managing response to trauma.

Recommendations for Federal Policymakers

- Create a technical assistance center at the U.S. Department of Education to assist states and districts in creating trauma-informed schools.
- Conduct research on the impact of trauma on all members of the school community and how it affects student and adult behavior in schools and disseminate best practices on how schools and educators can address the needs of children and educators affected by trauma.
- Increase funding for Title II of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which may be used by school districts to:
 - Provide in-service training for school personnel on how to refer students affected by trauma;
 - Use referral mechanisms that effectively link such children to appropriate treatment and intervention services in the school and the community, and;
 - Form partnerships between schools and mental health providers.
- Adopt legislation to define “trauma-informed practices” and require state plans under the Every Student Succeeds Act to address how states and districts will support efforts to increase the prevalence of trauma-informed practices in schools.
- Provide funding to assist schools in recruiting and retaining school counselors, social workers, and psychologists to support school-based interventions and the coordination of services.
- Authorize legislation to assist schools in offering social and emotional learning and positive behavior interventions and supports.

Recommendations for State Policymakers

- Establish grant programs to support schools in implementing trauma-informed practices and developing schoolwide action plans to address the needs of children affected by trauma and offer professional learning opportunities statewide for educators on evidence-based trauma-informed practices.
- Provide funding for trauma counselors to assist students and educators who experience a schoolwide trauma-inducing event such as a school shooting, natural disaster, or death of a student or staff member.
- Adopt or adapt the PSEL to ensure that principal certification and licensure requirements include a focus on community of care and support for students.
- Encourage preparation programs for school leaders, teachers, and school counselors to include training on the impact of trauma on students' academic, behavioral, and social development, and how educators can help support and effectively educate these students.

Recommendations for Districts Leaders

- Implement multi-tiered systems of support that encompass prevention, wellness promotion, and interventions that are based on student need and promote close school-community collaboration.
- Focus on prevention and effective interventions as responses to disciplinary issues, including Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, social and emotional learning, peer juries, restorative justice processes, diversion, mentoring, mental health counseling, restitution, and community service programs.
- Provide professional learning for principals and other school staff to build awareness and sensitivity about trauma, recognize the warning signs of trauma in children, know when and how to refer students for community-based services, and document and evaluate the effectiveness of prevention and intervention programs.
- Ensure schools have adequate staffing to provide students with sustained counseling or other mental health services; assist children and families in accessing community-based services; and create an effective infrastructure to implement trauma-informed policies, practices, and procedures.
- Develop protocols to obtain trauma histories or other pertinent information for transfer students and students who are new to the school.

Recommendations for School Leaders

- Ensure all school staff, including janitors, cafeteria workers, and administrative assistants participate in professional development opportunities to implement a multi-tiered system of support where all students receive Tier 1 supports.
- Help clarify roles and responsibilities of teachers in acknowledging and recognizing the potential impacts of stress and trauma on student learning, interacting with students affected by trauma, ensuring a balance between maintaining normal classroom routines and giving special attention to students affected by trauma, and when and how to refer students for additional mental health supports.

- In situations where multiple students and staff have experienced a traumatic event such as a school shooting or natural disaster, lead recovery efforts and plan for commemorations or other similar events that could trigger post-traumatic stress.
 - Consult the National Principals Association PRN Guide to Recovery as a resource for advice and guidance on responding to violence and other forms of trauma
 - Contact National Principals Association's PRN and the Policy and Advocacy team for immediate assistance at advocacy@principals.org.
- Review discipline policies and student codes of conduct to ensure they reflect an understanding of how trauma may affect student behaviors and how they address resilience, hope, and skills needed by students to function both in and out of the classroom.
- Practice mindfulness and seek support and counseling for yourself and your staff to prevent "compassion fatigue" or secondary traumatic stress.