NATIONAL CHILD TRAUMATIC STRESS NETWORK'S BREAKTHROUGH SERIES COLLABORATIVE:

SUPPORTING TRAUMA-INFORMED SCHOOLS TO KEEP STUDENTS IN THE CLASSROOM

BRIEF 1. A FOCUS ON TRAUMA-INFORMED PRACTICES

INTRODUCTION

Given the pervasiveness of child trauma, educators and other school staff are likely to have daily interactions with students who have been exposed to and are affected by traumatic events. In fact, it is estimated that by age 17, two out of three school-aged youth have been exposed to a potentially traumatic event such as sexual or physical abuse, sexual or physical assault, or witnessing domestic violence.[1] Exposure to traumatic events is even more profound for students who identify as Black/African American and/or Hispanic/Latinx, as they are more likely to witness and experience community violence[2] and its associated adversities, including poverty, racism, and discrimination.[3,4]

School and district personnel are uniquely situated to identify, respond to, and be impacted by students' symptoms of traumatic stress due to their central role in children's lives. School and district goals—such as student learning, test scores, attendance, and achievement—are directly impacted by the traumatic experiences of students and their families.[4] Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has reshaped how many schools and districts view their role in children's and families' lives by further prioritizing the integration of social-emotional learning and mental health support into their missions and services. Such integration necessitates a better understanding of the roles of educators, administrators, and other school staff in affecting social-emotional and mental health outcomes. Addressing individual, familial, and community trauma is essential for meeting the educational system's identified goals.

One comprehensive strategy to address individual, familial, and community trauma is developing a **trauma-informed school**, which infuses and sustains trauma awareness, knowledge, and skills into organizational culture, practices, and policies.[5,6] Such schools act in collaboration with all those involved with students, families, and staff—using the best available science—to maximize physical and psychological safety, facilitate the recovery or adjustment of students exposed to trauma, and support thriving at all levels.[5] **Given the clear priority of addressing trauma and implementing trauma-informed practices in schools, the NCTSN partnered with schools and districts across the United States from 2019 to 2020 to broaden and deepen the understanding of trauma-informed practices to keep students in the classroom.**

Purpose of Document

This brief describes a number of promising trauma-informed practices that were tested and implemented in five school- and district-based sites during the National Child Traumatic Stress Network's Breakthrough Series Collaborative: Supporting Trauma-Informed Schools to Keep Students in the Classroom (hereafter referred to as the BSC or Collaborative). A breakthrough series collaborative (BSC) is an established implementation and quality improvement methodology that supports the spread and sustainment of evidence-based practices.[7] Any school or district can implement many trauma-informed practices; however, the discrete practices from this BSC are not meant to be considered in isolation. Indeed, each practice tested within classrooms, schools, or districts occurred in the context of larger systems change, such as the infusion of trauma awareness, knowledge, and skills into cultures, practices, and policies. Only in totality can the practices serve to create, support, and sustain a trauma-informed classroom, school, or district.

The data reported in this brief were taken from a variety of sources, including surveys administered after BSC Learning Sessions, in-person visits, notes from group calls, mixed-method participant evaluations, and qualitative interviews and focus groups with BSC faculty and participants.
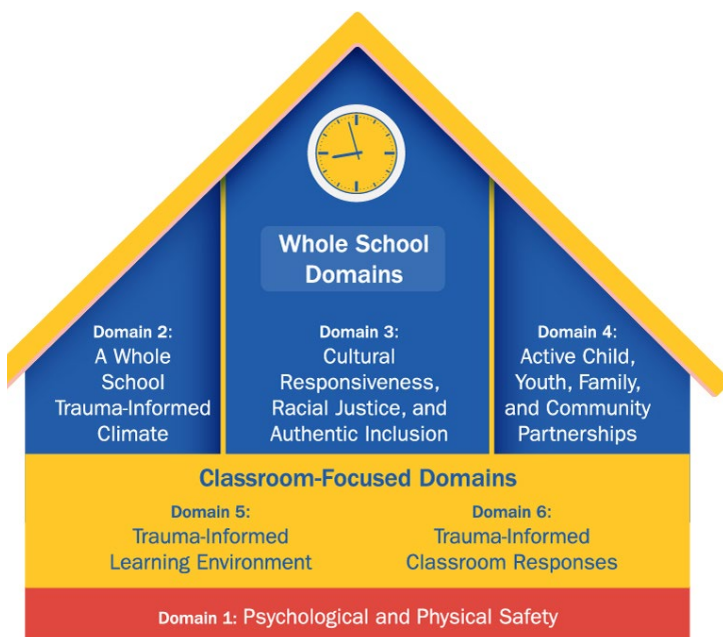
Background: Practice Improvements

A core expectation in any BSC is that participating teams will test practice improvements to achieve the overall Collaborative mission. Practice improvements are change ideas, strategies, tools, processes, or policies that will significantly improve performance when applied within a school or district.[5] The mission of this BSC was specific to the implementation of trauma-informed practices that increase student time spent in the classroom.

Six essential domains were developed and addressed as part of the Collaborative Change Framework (CCF) to translate this mission into action (Figure 1).[6] Although these domains are interrelated and interconnected, for the purposes of the BSC, they were separated into distinct areas to organize teams' implementation efforts into manageable pieces. The first domain (in red) forms the foundation for the other domains. The next three domains (in blue) center on the whole school, while the final two domains (in yellow) focus on what transpires in classrooms between school personnel and students. Together, these six domains outline the comprehensive strategy needed to develop, support, and sustain a trauma-informed school to ultimately keep students in the classroom.

Each domain is described in more detail below, along with the practice improvements tested by participating teams. It is important to note that the intent of this BSC was not to focus on trauma-informed education practice, but practices specific to increasing student time in the classroom. Regardless, a number of teams went beyond this scope, as many practices that were intended to positively impact time in the classroom were also found to positively impact general educational practices.

Whole School Domains

Domain 2: A Whole School Trauma-Informed Climate

Domain 3: Cultural Responsiveness, Racial Justice, and Authentic Inclusion

Domain 4: Active Child, Youth, Family, and Community Partnerships

Classroom-Focused Domains

Domain 5: Trauma-Informed Learning Environment

Domain 6: Trauma-Informed Classroom Responses

Domain 1: Psychological and Physical Safety

Figure 1:
Six essential elements addressed in the Collaborative Change Framework.

Essential Domains

At the completion of the BSC, participants were asked to identify the CCF domain they believed was the most essential to supporting trauma-informed schools to keep students in the classroom.

- Overwhelmingly, 64.3% of participants identified *Domain 1: Psychological and Physical Safety* as the domain most essential to keeping students in the classroom.

- Participants also selected *Domain 2: A Whole-School, Trauma-Informed School Climate* (8.7%); *Domain 3: Cultural Responsiveness, Racial Justice, and Authentic Inclusion* (8.7%); and *Domain 5: Trauma-Informed Learning Environment* (4.3%) as essential.

Other participants specified that it was difficult to select only one essential domain, as some of the content seemed to overlap. For example, one participant noted that COVID-19 illuminated how students and staff must feel psychologically safe for learning to occur, and that racial unrest within his/her/their particular city brought forth hundreds of years of racism in the community. The participant added that, if ignored, racism would continue to threaten the physical and psychological safety of students. Consequently, Domains 1 and 2 were viewed as interwoven and essential for trauma-informed school and district change.

> *"I feel that no effective work in other areas can be sustained if staff and students do not feel safe."*
>
> -BSC Participant

Domain 1: Psychological and Physical Safety
ENSURING EVERYONE IN SCHOOLS FEELS SAFE.

Objective 1. Create and Promote a Safe School Environment
Objective 2. Promote Safety in Proactive Ways
Objective 3. Embrace a Continuum of Trauma-Informed Responses

Overview

Domain 1 provides a robust foundation for trauma-informed change, similar to Tier 1 of Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS).[8] Within the context of the BSC, teams worked to create and support physically and psychologically safe school environments.

- **Physical safety** promotes an individual's sense of bodily safety and physical integrity throughout the school and among school personnel, families, and students. Schools that promote physical safety prepare students for emergencies by practicing safety drills, and maintain the condition of the property to prevent accidents.[5]

- **Psychological safety** refers to creating conditions that ensure that students and staff feel emotionally safe.[5] Individuals with histories of trauma may associate certain people, places, or things with danger that may appear benign to others. Consequently, these individuals often need specific interactions or conditions to feel safe. This might mean having additional staff monitoring certain hallways, the development of a calm corner or classroom, consistent routines, or an environment that prevents bullying with clear policies related to discipline.

> *"[My students] will never remember my English class, but they're going to remember me."*
>
> -Audrey Fox, High School Teacher, BSC Participant

Practices to Test

1. Mapping Hot Spots and Cool Zones: Teams completed a mapping activity for their specific school buildings to identify "hot spots" and "cool zones." Hot spots are locations in which students experience frequent conflict, disciplinary issues, or trauma responses; while cool zones are areas that tend to be safe zones where conflict is minimal and students are generally calm.[9] School staff used incident data and observations to determine the root causes of conflict and traumatic stress reactions in hot spots, and simultaneously examined characteristics of safe spaces for students and staff. Teams then actively enhanced physical and psychological safety, built relationships, and improved conflict-resolution skills in hot zones by implementing small, sustainable policy and practice changes. For example, some teams increased staffing in hot spots and made efforts to create space for discussions regarding what was working effectly in cool zones.

2. Threshold Greetings: School staff began using threshold greetings (warm and intentional welcomes) when meeting students at entryways to the school or classroom. Staff described these greetings as brief check-ins, often acknowledging each student by name and/or allowing them to choose the type of greeting they would like that day (e.g., high-five, fist bump, eye contact).[10] These greetings sought to: 1) establish a personal connection with students; and, 2) set and reinforce positive expectations before students entered a space.

3. Calm Down Corners and Rooms: Calm down corners and rooms (also known as "safe spaces") are designated areas to help students re-regulate when they are upset or distressed. These areas are inviting, comforting, and physically safe for students, separate from spaces used for consequences, and clearly identify coping strategies for students to use. Educators and other staff introduced the purpose of the calm down corners to students, helped them to understand when to use the area, what coping skills to try, how long to use it, and how other students should treat peers when they are using the area.

Demonstration of Promise

Enhancing physical and psychological safety for students and staff can seem like an intimidating goal. With the support of BSC faculty, teams generated and tried specific, targeted practices (e.g., threshold greetings, calm down corners), to quickly promote a safe school environment. One BSC participant noted, *"I think we started out with a high focus on classroom interventions because we thought that would be our 'easiest win' – start with teachers who are ALREADY doing the work and give them support and permission to really focus on those activities. But, in the end, it's the practices that can be seen and felt in the doorway, hallway, playground, and front office that are really having an impact."*

Domain 2: A Whole-School, Trauma-Informed School Climate
PROMOTING POSITIVE SCHOOL CLIMATE AND A RESILIENT SCHOOL COMMUNITY.

Objective 1. Support All Staff Wellness and Resilience

Objective 2. Promote and Support Individual and Collective Resilience

Overview

An essential element of building a robust trauma-informed school climate is recognizing the impact of trauma on students, staff, and the larger community. Domain 2 focuses on providing school personnel with the tools and skills to support, reinforce, deepen, and activate awareness of individual and organizational wellness. In other words, a trauma-informed school climate promotes both self and organizational care (i.e., also known as "We-Care").[11] One way to specifically promote staff wellness and resilience is to recognize and address burnout and **secondary traumatic stress (STS)**. STS is the emotional duress or distress that results when an individual hears about the firsthand traumatic experiences of another.[12] Any professional who works directly with children and families exposed to trauma—and is in a position to hear the recounting of traumatic experiences—is at risk for STS. Within a trauma-informed school and district, the development of STS is recognized as a common occupational hazard for staff working with children and families.

> *"Staff wellness was another [domain] that really rose up. So understanding the value of buying everybody donuts [was important], but also looking at professional learning opportunities, guided book studies, one-on-one coaching; that's all also part of staff wellness. And being really forthcoming with the staff that it's not their job to take care of themselves. It's our job as a system to help them take care of themselves."*
>
> -BSC Participant

Practices to Test

1. School Climate Surveys: School climate surveys are common tools used by schools, counties, and states to comprehensively assess student engagement, the learning environment, and school safety.[13] By measuring school climate, staff are provided with the necessary data to identify school needs, set goals, and track progress toward improvement. Teams that participated in the BSC used metrics and stories from school climate surveys to select trauma-informed tools and other innovations to create and sustain a supportive and professional environment.

2. Address School Personnel STS and Wellness: From the beginning of the BSC, teams understood the importance of school personnel wellness. It became an undeniable focus throughout the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, which was concurrent to this BSC. Teams explored a number of wellness strategies to address STS and promote wellness including, but not limited to, regular screening for burnout and STS, frequent school-level wellness activities (e.g., team building), peer support (e.g., tap-outs), and stress management techniques (e.g., hand-to-heart). The Center on Children & Trauma has a helpful selection of individual and organizational resources to support screening for and addressing STS at the individual and organizational levels, many of which were shared during the BSC. Teams also learned about the importance of organizational care ("We Care"), as compared to typical approaches in prescribing "self-care" to staff.

3. Five-Minute Tap-Outs: In addition to awareness-building strategies for burnout and STS, teams articulated a need for practices to support teachers and other staff in managing in-the-moment stress and difficult student situations. Tap-outs allowed teachers and other staff to call on a peer when they needed to take a break for a few minutes—generally one to five minutes. Schools planned for tap-outs by identifying teachers with complementary schedules, or assigning leadership support for a certain period of the day. This short video from Edutopia is a simple yet helpful illustration of this strategy in practice.

Demonstration of Promise

Although tools such as school climate surveys provide a snapshot of school and district needs, they often are performative or transactional (i.e., checking a box), as compared to transformative (i.e., identifying priorities and changing practices). By pairing surveys and change management supports with deep and authentic relationship building, schools and districts were held accountable for changing practices in meaningful and valuable ways. Indeed, one participant shared: *"By creating a more widespread trauma-informed school climate, the groundwork is laid for building the relationships necessary to support the other domains. It's easier for both staff and students to make steps towards resiliency when the culture is supportive of individual and group efforts."*

Domain 3: Cultural Responsiveness, Racial Justice, and Authentic Inclusion
CREATING AN ENVIRONMENT THAT IS AFFIRMING, RESPONSIVE, AND JUST.

Objective 1. Promote Self- and Community-Level Awareness and Reflection

Objective 2. Recognize and Include Diversity in All Aspects of the School

Objective 3. Support and Reflect the Communities Being Served

Objective 4. Support a Culture that Promotes Racial Justice

Overview

A school or district cannot be trauma-informed without centering equitable and inclusive policies and practices. As such, Domain 3 encourages schools to promote racial justice by reviewing practices and procedures that may adversely and disproportionately impact specific groups of students and exacerbate traumatic stress reactions.[3] Trauma-informed schools work to actively counteract the effects of historical trauma, societal oppression (e.g., implicit and explicit bias), and systemic inequities in order to eliminate disparities in punitive and exclusionary (out-of-classroom or out-of-school) discipline practices. School personnel also cultivate a strong foundation of healing and resilience by recognizing and promoting strengths-based social, cultural, and racial identities. Given that large-scale systemic change takes time, trauma-informed schools encourage self- and community-level awareness and reflection. Establishing **brave spaces**—or environments where all individuals are willing to take risks to engage with one another authentically—can be an important first step to improving discourse and setting realistic goals to shift interpersonal dynamics among students, school personnel, and the community.

> *"Shifting our lens to see kids as part of a whole story instead of just who they are when they are in our building, helped to shift the climate of the school."*
>
> -BSC Participant

Practices to Test

1. District-Wide Trainings on Historical, Racial, and Systemic Trauma: To enhance knowledge and awareness about historical, racial, and systemic trauma, teams offered district-wide trainings to acknowledge the context, history, and manifestations of historical and racial trauma within their communities. These trainings supported schools and districts in identifying and examining systemic inequities, as well as selecting strategies to support school-wide values of cultural humility, diversity, equity, and inclusion.

2. Community Conversations: In addition to district-wide awareness trainings, some teams prioritized cultivating relationships at all levels of the school (e.g., staff-student, staff-caregivers, staff-staff) to honor individual differences and demonstrate the value of racial and cultural inclusion. For example, a team located near a tribal nation partnered with tribal stakeholders to integrate the nation's cultural practices into the school environment. The team hosted focus groups to explore ways to increase engagement with tribal caregivers, integrate tribal ritual items into calm down corners and rooms, and introduce traditional instruments into music curriculum.

3. Disaggregate Data to Identify Disproportionate Practices: The disaggregation of data refers to the process of "breaking apart" data by specific student identifiers including, but not limited to, race, ethnicity, and gender.[14] To identify disparities in the use of disciplinary practices, teams collected office discipline referral (ODR) data—whether in a single classroom, block of classrooms, or at the school level—by hand or using data management systems (e.g., SWIS). Data were disaggregated by race and ethnicity and when disparate practices were identified, teams took steps to support teachers and administrators in developing new practices and policies, such as implementing restorative circles.[15] Several teams identified and addressed school staff behavior that was linked to disparities such as over referral of Black and Indigenous male students to administration by specific staff members for discipline-related concerns.

If your school or district is interested in learning more about addressing racism and trauma specifically in schools, this **NCTSN guide** outlines specific recommendations for school personnel and offers a list of supplemental resources.

Demonstration of Promise

During the BSC, teams were impacted by two intersecting pandemics, or a syndemic:[16] COVID-19 and racial unrest. With respect to data demonstrating disparities, one BSC participant noted: *"The numbers show[ed] that we had a lot of room to grow in this area. We had some pretty heartbreaking, disproportionate discipline data that we knew we had to address. Disproportionate to students with disabilities, disproportionate to students of color. And I don't think anyone felt really good about the way things were going."* If used effectively, ODR data can be an important analytic tool to better identify needs and tailor support strategies to specific teachers, classrooms, and/or schools.

Domain 4: Active Child, Youth, Family, and Community Partnership
REACHING OUT, INCLUDING, ENGAGING, AND SUPPORTING ACTIVE PARTNERSHIPS.

Objective 1. Partner with Students, Families, and Communities in Student Specific Decisions

Objective 2. Partner with Students, Families, and Communities in School-Level Decisions

Overview

Individual and community traumas involve experiences of powerlessness and isolation that can contribute to students and families feeling less likely to trust school personnel, authority figures, and educational institutions.[4] Domain 4 emphasizes engagement and partnership with students, families, and the community to **co-create** policies, protocols, and guidelines related to trauma-informed classrooms and schools, as well as to authentically partner with students and their families in discussions and decisions related to education, school engagement, and discipline. Indeed, research suggests that when student engagement increases, academic achievement improves.[17] Co-creation also leads to relevant and culturally responsive innovations desired by communities and feasible to sustain.[18] It is important to remember that co-creation requires the establishment of trust. Trust is generally not built through sweeping gestures or decisions but through everyday interactions in which students, families, and communities feel seen, heard, and valued. In other words, **change occurs at the speed of trust**.[18]

Practices to Test

1. Frequent Parent Meetings: A trauma-informed approach acknowledges that caregivers are experts when it comes to their children. Some teams partnered with caregivers through frequent parent meetings (e.g., parent-teacher conferences), during which caregivers were encouraged to highlight their children's strengths, and any additional supports needed within the home, school, or community environments. Increased caregiver involvement in the school also influenced school-led decisions and a cultural shift that promoted school personnel-caregiver partnerships.

2. Use of Technology: In response to restrictions associated with COVID-19, teams used technology in innovative and inclusive ways. Some teams offered multiple virtual orientations at the level of the homeroom, grade, and school (see call-out box for additional details). In contrast, others conducted virtual parent-teacher conferences allowing for more flexibility and 100% parental participation in some classrooms. To increase caregiver participation, many teams began texting families 24-48 hours before scheduled meetings and events, or announcing events through social media, enhancing trust through simple, everyday interactions.

3. Family Resource Center: In consultation with families, one team actively reached out and partnered with community organizations to develop a comprehensive system of support that addressed family needs. Specifically, this team recognized the prevalence of food insecurity within the community and built a food bank in the school so that students and families could access much-needed resources.

Demonstration of Promise

As part of the BSC, teams were encouraged to identify caregivers open to partnering and championing change in their children's schools. Of all six domains, teams noted that changes within Domain 4 were often the most difficult to implement. However, small, iterative practices like virtual orientations, reminder texts, or connecting with a particular student can help to establish trusting relationships among students, families, communities, and schools.

Example: Making Time to Connect

"[Our school] engaged more families on multiple levels by having things like virtual orientation. You know, we had the option as a teaching team to set that up anyway we wanted. And we could have just done one orientation and been done with it. But we decided to take the time to have separate orientations for each grade level and even each homeroom.

We ended up doing about seven meetings altogether with smaller groups of students, rather than having just one big orientation that we just invited everyone to where we couldn't really answer specific questions, or we couldn't take the time to go carefully through all of our students and [connect with] them on an individual level."

-BSC Participant

Domain 5: Trauma-Informed Learning Environment
SUPPORTING A CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT THAT NURTURES
ACHIEVEMENT, BEHAVIOR, COPING, DEVELOPMENT, AND RELATIONSHIPS (ABCD-R).

Objective 1. Maintain Consistent, Predictable, Stable, Effective Routines and Relationships

Objective 2. Promote Student Resilience, Wellness, and Social Skills

Objective 3. Promote Positive Interactions Between and Among Students

Overview

Students' traumatic stress reactions may manifest as disruptive behaviors (e.g., interrupting, distracting others, not following teacher instructions, emotional outbursts, aggression). These stress reactions may keep students out of their classrooms due to office referrals, visits to the nurse's office, suspensions, and even expulsions.[6] Not only do these removals limit academic achievement, but they also impact students' abilities to grow socially and emotionally. In other words, traumatic stress reactions and their subsequent effects impact students' ABCD-R: Achievement, Behavior, Coping, Development, and Relationships.[6] Domain 5 nurtures ABCD-R through practices that create predictable and supportive learning environments. By teaching and modeling emotional expression, as well as self- and co-regulation, trauma-informed schools support students' capacity to build emotional intelligence, strengthen developmentally appropriate social skills, and cultivate positive relationships.[19,20,21]

Practices to Test

1. Social Contracts: A social contract is an agreement created by students and teachers with shared behavioral expectations, norms, and values.[22] Contracts differ from traditional classroom rules and consequences in that students are involved in co-creating and designing the agreements (consistent with the partnership described in Domain 4). Behavioral expectations are stated in positives or language that encourages prosocial and collaborative behavior (e.g., "be honest" vs. "don't lie"). Teams created social contracts at the start of the year to build positive and trauma-informed classroom cultures, and integrated these values into classroom activities like group discussions. Teams solidified expectations by regularly reflecting on the social contract—whether on a daily or weekly basis. Please visit this Edutopia link for an illustration of this practice.

2. Social Emotional Learning (SEL): SEL is defined as "the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel empathy towards others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions."[19] Although there are many curricula to support SEL implementation in schools, one team found RULER—an evidence-based approach to SEL developed at the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence—to be particularly helpful.[20] This approach began with staff training, later extending to student-oriented classroom instruction and family education and engagement.

3. Freshman Academies: High school-level teams described freshman academies as an effective program to facilitate and nurture supportive relationships as students transition from middle to high school. Although every freshman academy operates differently, such programs are generally characterized as small learning communities within large high schools that provide individualized support for ninth graders to establish a more intimate community. Specifically, one team described how its freshman academy generated a handful of motivational videos for incoming ninth graders.

Demonstration of Promise

Although SEL interventions have improved academic performance and classroom behavior, managing traumatic stress reactions can be a challenge, even with the most robust SEL program.[19] One BSC participant reflected, *"When a kid is still hiding under the desk, or still eloping from the classroom, or still coming in late every day, teachers, rightfully so, feel exhausted. [Teachers think], 'I am doing all the things you told me to do, and I don't feel like things are really changing in this student's behavior.' So I think we tried to understand the brain-based perspective of how trauma can impact behavior, learning, relationships. But we've really identified that [training in a brain-based perspective] just needs to be an ongoing offering all the time because we do have quite a bit of staff turnover."*

Domain 6: Trauma-Informed Classroom Responses
INTEGRATING A CONTINUUM OF CLASSROOM RESPONSES TO SET STUDENTS UP FOR SUCCESS.

Objective 1. Promote a Variety of Options for Responding to Classroom Behaviors

Objective 2. Promote Equitable Classroom Management Practices

Overview

A trauma-informed school promotes a variety of options for responding to classroom behaviors. Specifically, Domain 6 emphasizes teaching students about the effects of stress, as well as stress management techniques such as deep breathing, mindfulness, effective problem-solving, and asking for help. When student behaviors inevitably escalate, teachers use trauma-informed **restorative justice practices** to help keep students in the classroom. Restorative justice is an alternative to traditional punitive disciplinary approaches that prioritizes the repair of harm over the need to assign blame and dispense punishment.[23] Although applied in various ways, restorative justice practices ask all parties involved: *What happened? What harm was caused? What needs to happen to repair the harm?* Practices include, but are not limited to, peer conflict resolution circles, reflection sheets that guide conversations with a teacher or administrator, and mediated student-student or student-staff conversations.

Practices to Test

1. Tiered Responses to Behaviors: One team identified and operationalized student behaviors at three-tiered levels. Each behavior was explicitly described, and paired with trauma-informed strategies and interventions, as well as possible outcomes. Refer to the call-out box for a specific description of the development of this tiered response system.

2. Alternative Learning Classrooms (ALCs): Teams developed a variety of trauma-informed responses to address significant behavioral disruptions or misbehavior. One school replaced in-school suspensions with ALCs, which promoted the idea that needing out-of-classroom support was not a punishment, but a way to practice stress management techniques and effective problem-solving skills. This team added an "Exit Ticket" to the ALC process that communicated to classroom teachers the successful strategies used in the ALC to calm and return to class. Teachers then used this information to praise students for using these strategies. Another school introduced Wednesday Night School as an alternative to suspension, placing a prominent focus on student-level reflection and planful decision-making.

Demonstration of Promise

Oftentimes, school staff feel overwhelmed by the "big" or "scary" behaviors that students exhibit. By describing and operationalizing all student behaviors and pairing them with a specific set of trauma-informed responses, teachers reported feeling more empowered and comfortable with behavior management practices. At one site, staff mapped specific classrooms that were hot spots and then provided educators with tailored coaching and guidance to respond to challenging behaviors in the classroom, reportedly reducing office referrals by 80%.

Example: Tiered Responses to Behaviors

"By collecting and reporting on data using SWIS, we had a tool to unpack what was happening behaviorally in our school. We used this to both target teacher support and to completely revamp our behavior response system.

*We realized that **staff at our school did not have a whole lot of tools, skills, or even guidance about how to respond to challenging behaviors in the classroom**. For many years, the culture had been: when kids are struggling, just call the office. And so there was a big shift that had to happen. At first, the shift was met with a lot of resistance, but then leadership brought in the whole team and said, 'Guys, we have to do it differently.'*

*It took time to reset our values and empower the staff to create a matrix, or tiered response to behaviors. The staff identified behaviors that often showed up in their classrooms, and it was the job of the administrative team to give them tools to respond to the behaviors. We rubric-ed it out. We worked to align definitions of the behaviors, because my definition of disruption or insubordination is very different from others in the building. We took the time to **name each behavior, wrote descriptions of what that behavior actually looked like in the classroom, and tiered it.***

In Tier 1, we identified what staff would probably see from every kid in their class, and paired those behaviors with response strategies. In Tier 2, staff were taught to identify bigger behaviors in a smaller group of kids, with paired response strategies. And then, of course, our Tier 3 behaviors that may be a little scary and uncomfortable, with paired response strategies.

*We then **designed professional development targeting the behaviors that were uncomfortable and obviously needed more support**. And I think that was a complete and total game changer. Finally, we had uncomfortable conversations with staff after debriefing sessions like, "OK, what can you do on your own in this situation and what's on the student?" These sorts of conversations were huge and led to strong feelings of understanding and empathy with staff."*

-BSC Participant

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- Toledo Public Schools (Ohio)

Related Resources

Five short videos highlight principles, strategies, activities, and lessons learned developed by school teams involved in this Breakthrough Series Collaborative:

- Understanding Key Components to Support Trauma-Informed School Change
- Using a Framework for Creating Sustainable Trauma-Informed Change in Schools
- Supporting Schools to Test and Implement Tailord Trauma-Informed Practices
- Building Relationships as a Foundation of Trauma-Informed Practices in Schools
- Looking at Strategies in the Classroom to Support Students

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