

# How Can Educators Support All Students to Succeed?



Leaders across education reform are coming to understand the critical role school culture plays in bolstering student success. Academic outcomes, social and emotional competencies, critical thinking skills and the habits of democratic citizenship are all enhanced by school environments where students feel safe and enjoy a sense of belonging and connectedness.

Research also documents the prevalence of traumatic experiences in the lives of children and demonstrates the impact such experiences can have on learning, behavior and relationships at school. Recognition is growing that safe and supportive school environments must address trauma's impacts.

While the growing evidence base explains *why* safe and supportive school cultures are necessary for the success of all students, central questions remain: *How* can educators create trauma-sensitive cultures in their own buildings? What types of support do they need? And what barriers must be overcome?

## Trauma-sensitive school cultures are a pathway to success for all students.

In the present study, educators in four elementary and one middle-high school sought to improve their schools by **becoming trauma sensitive**. Over two school years they worked to promote a shared understanding among all staff about the prevalence and educational impacts of childhood trauma. They engaged in an ongoing action planning process that was focused on locally identified priorities, grounded in collaboration and reflection, and designed to shift school operations toward trauma sensitivity. Researchers documented resulting changes in educator mindsets, shared ownership of culture change, and trauma-sensitive shifts in practice that were becoming embedded in the cultures of the schools.

### What is a trauma-sensitive school?

A trauma-sensitive school is one in which all students feel safe, welcomed and supported, and where addressing trauma's impact on learning on a school-wide basis is at the center of its educational mission. Educators in the study sought to create trauma-sensitive school cultures by weaving six core values throughout the operations of their schools:

- Leadership and staff **share an understanding** of trauma's impact on learning and the need for a school-wide approach.
- The school **supports all students to feel safe** physically, socially, emotionally and academically.
- The school **addresses students' needs in holistic ways**, taking into account their relationships, self-regulation, academic competence, and physical and emotional health and well-being.
- The school explicitly **connects students to the school community** and provides multiple opportunities to practice newly developing skills.
- The school **embraces teamwork** and staff share responsibility for all students.
- Leadership and staff **anticipate and adapt** to the ever-changing needs of students and the surrounding community.

# Research Findings

## 1 A process-based, whole-school approach can help educators create trauma-sensitive school cultures that establish conditions for teaching and learning.

Educators—led by school administrators, a steering committee of key teachers and staff, and an outside facilitator—implemented a process for creating trauma-sensitive schools developed by the Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative and described in *Helping Traumatized Children Learn, Volume 2*. This process consists of sharing learning and grappling with deep questions designed to: cultivate a sense of urgency; identify staff priorities for change; select action steps to address staff priorities; and evaluate outcomes and assessing progress. Researchers documented several key findings.

- Collaborative and committed school leadership is essential for successful implementation.
- Working as a team to identify action steps directly related to a school's urgent priorities builds staff ownership of culture change.
- Implementing TLPI's inquiry-based process can produce shifts in educator mindsets that lead to changes in practice.
- Creating a safe and supportive community for adults appears to be critical for creating a safe and supportive learning community for students.
- The inquiry-based process offers tools that are helpful and easy to use, tolerates variability, and can be aligned with existing initiatives.
- The inquiry-based process provides a structure that enables educators to talk with each other about their practice and articulate why particular approaches are or are not trauma-sensitive.
- Providing educators the opportunity to be reflective, empowered practitioners appears to be key to changing school culture.
- By the end of the study, educators had taken full ownership of the inquiry-based process.
- There are substantial challenges inherent in transforming school culture and a threshold of readiness needs to be present for schools to engage effectively in the inquiry-based process.

### Trauma-Sensitive Schools Descriptive Study

#### Participating Schools

- 4 traditional public elementary schools
- 1 middle-high charter school
- Enrollments: 350+ to 900+
- Students of Color: 14.6% to 86.3%
- Free or Reduced Lunch: 13% to 85%
- Students with Disabilities: 11.7% to 22.8%
- English Language Learners: 0% to 32.1%

#### Data Analyzed

- Interviews with school leaders
- Focus groups with school staff
- Staff surveys
- School-generated resources (action plans, meeting minutes, implementation tools)
- Video footage
- Initial applications, readiness assessments, and meeting notes

## 2 Shifting a school's culture toward trauma sensitivity can result in observable positive changes in school climate and improved outcomes for educators and students.

Schools that effectively implemented TLPI's inquiry-based process over two school years saw remarkable positive effects on the teaching and learning environments in their buildings and on teachers' and students' experiences. Some of the changes researchers observed include:

- **More supportive approach to discipline.** As they shifted their mindsets toward trauma sensitivity, educators in several schools began to move away from managing student behavior to a focus on supporting students to develop their own self-regulation skills. They began to see behavior challenges as a "learning opportunity" rather than a cause for punitive consequences.
- **Positive changes in student behavior.** Schools reported fewer behavioral crises, decreased disciplinary incidents, and a decline in daily detentions and office referrals. As a result, staff reported that schools felt "safer" and "calmer."
- **Improved relationships.** Educators reported increased staff cohesion, including improved communication, staff being more supportive of each other, and more consistent implementation of school-wide expectations. They also reported better student-staff and student-student relationships. Some schools also saw increased student and parent engagement.
- **Empowered educators.** Educators were given the opportunity to be reflective practitioners. Staff reported increased participation in decision-making and shared ownership of school climate and culture change. Teacher leaders emerged and generated creative, local solutions to their schools' urgent needs.

## 3 Engaging educators in school culture transformation can empower them to develop creative, cost-effective, trauma-sensitive solutions to locally identified problems.

As trauma-sensitive thinking and practices started to become embedded in the cultures of their schools, educators devised many strategies, tools and activities to address school-based priorities in trauma-sensitive ways. Some examples include:

- Revising the homework policy to better reflect the needs of students and families
- Offering a broader variety of activities at recess to engage all students
- Providing "calming corners" with sensory tools in each classroom to support students with self-regulating their emotions and behaviors
- Designing a system to increase regular communication between academic teachers and caregivers
- Creating videos that demonstrate teachers using the school's trauma-sensitive practices
- Developing a "looks like-sounds like" chart to convey concrete examples of what it means to be a trauma-sensitive school

# Implications for Policy and Practice

TLPI advocates for education laws and policy grounded in the experiences of families and the professional wisdom of educators. For 15 years, TLPI has worked directly with families and educators to learn what schools need to create trauma-sensitive cultures where all students can succeed. This work informs a strong advocacy agenda. The study has several important implications for policy drawn from the experiences of educators who worked to create trauma-sensitive schools:

- **Trauma sensitivity as a pathway.** Providing educators with a deep understanding of how traumatic experiences can impact students' learning, behavior and relationships at school can serve as a catalyst for increased empathy, creativity, flexibility and a sense of urgency about transforming the culture of a school. Continually assessing school operations in light of the six core trauma-sensitive values can support development of a school culture that is safe and supportive for all staff and students.
- **Readiness.** Schools can engage effectively in the inquiry-based process when six readiness indicators are in place: (1) a general understanding of the process and commitment to a whole school approach; (2) a sense of urgency and motivation; (3) dedicated regular meeting times; (4) alignment with other initiatives; (5) leadership commitment; and (6) awareness of barriers to implementation (e.g., capacity). Where one of these indicators was missing, two schools in the study had more difficulty generating momentum to move forward despite well-intentioned efforts.
- **Locally tailored solutions.** Rather than striving for every school to implement the same actions, this study confirms that a whole-school process, stewarded by collaborative leaders who provide time for collective reflection, discussion, inquiry and action planning, can generate achievable, effective solutions tailored to the needs and priorities of each individual school.
- **Collaborative leadership.** Effective culture transformation requires school leaders who value the expertise of educators and who are committed to developing strong teacher leaders.
- **Measurement.** Education reform leaders should consider new ways to accurately and comprehensively document school culture and climate. Traditional variables (e.g., achievement scores, attendance, discipline data) may not fully capture the quality of a school's culture and may limit educators' creativity as they seek solutions to problems. Qualitative variables such as shifts in educator mindsets and practices, and improvements in relationships between staff, students, and families may be more valuable.

## ABOUT THE RESEARCH

Information and evidence above are derived from:  
Jones, W., Berg, J., & Osher, D. (2018). *Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative (TLPI): Trauma-Sensitive Schools Descriptive Study: Final Report*. Washington, D.C.: American Institutes for Research.

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For more information and to read the underlying research:  
<https://traumasensitiveschools.org>

## ABOUT TLPI

The Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative (TLPI) is a collaboration of Massachusetts Advocates for Children and Harvard Law School whose mission is to ensure that all students, including those traumatized by exposure to violence and childhood adversity, succeed in school.

### TLPI Publications:

Cole, S. et al. (2005). *Helping Traumatized Children Learn, Volume 1: Supportive School Environments for Students Traumatized by Family Violence*. Boston, MA: Massachusetts Advocates for Children.

Cole, S. et al. (2013). *Helping Traumatized Children Learn, Volume 2: Creating and Advocating for Trauma-Sensitive Schools*. Boston, MA: Massachusetts Advocates for Children.



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