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## Trauma-Informed Schools: A Strategy for Problem Behaviors in the Classroom

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Trauma-Informed Schools: A Strategy for Problem  
Behaviors in the Classroom  
by  
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## **Abstract**

Students that are making poor behavior choices in school generally are performing lower academically. The growing number of students that are coming to school that have experienced trauma is one reason why students are misbehaving in class. Schools have the opportunity to address this issue by implementing a trauma-informed school methodology. Trauma-informed schools work with students to be aware of the trauma that they have faced and teaches them ways to cope with the symptoms of trauma. This project discusses what trauma is and how it affects students and what schools can do to meet the needs of these students. The project is a framework for administrators to begin the process of creating a trauma-informed school. The project includes a professional development plan that instructs teachers what trauma is and how schools can better serve students.

## Table of Contents

Acknowledgments .....	i
Abstract .....	ii
Table of Contents .....	iii
Chapter One: Introduction	
Problem Statement .....	1
Importance of the Project .....	2
Background of the Project .....	3
Statement of Purpose .....	4
Goals and Objectives of the Project .....	5
Definition of Terms .....	5
Scope of Project .....	6
Chapter Two: Literature Review	
Introduction .....	7
Theory/Rationale .....	8
Trauma-Informed School .....	8
Research/Evaluation .....	10
Trauma .....	10
Ideal Classroom Behaviors .....	12
Addressing Trauma in Schools .....	14
Summary .....	17
Conclusion .....	19

Chapter Three: Project Description

Introduction.....	20
Project Components .....	21
Project Evaluation.....	23
Project Conclusions .....	24
Plans for Implementation.....	25
References.....	27
Appendixes	
Appendix A – Trauma Professional Development Presentation .....	33
Appendix B – Implementation Calendar .....	38
Appendix C – Social-Emotional Learning Resources .....	39
Appendix D – Discipline Practices Resources.....	40
Appendix E – Mindfulness Resources .....	41
Appendix F – Parent Letter.....	42
Appendix G – Student Survey .....	43
Appendix H – Staff Mid-Year Survey .....	48
Data Form .....	50

## **Chapter One: Introduction**

### **Problem Statement**

The goal of secondary education is to ensure schools are providing students with the education that they need in order to be successful after high school. In order to do keep students on-task and ready to learn in the classroom teachers use various teaching methods and classroom management practices that tends to lead students towards high academic achievements (Back et al., 2016). However, many times students exhibit poor behaviors in the classroom. In the state of Michigan there is a problem of poor behaviors in schools. From the 2016-2017 until the 2018-2019 school years there has been on average 15,500 incidents of bullying or victimization of pupils in Michigan schools each year (Michigan Department of Education, 2020). Also, the average number of expulsions in Michigan schools from the 2010 until 2019 is 1,457 expulsions per school year (Michigan Department of Education, 2020).

In addition to problem behaviors in the classroom, two-thirds of students are exposed to some form of trauma by the time they are in secondary schools (Von Dohlen et al., 2019). These students that are exposed to trauma are also experiencing high levels of behavior issues in the classroom. In fact, students that experience trauma tend to have higher levels of aggression which lead to disruptive classroom behaviors (Von Dohlen et al., 2019). When students practice poor behavior in the classroom they tend to struggle more academically (Malecki & Elliot, 2002).

## **Importance of the Project**

Studies have shown that students who demonstrate poor behavior in the classroom generally struggle to be successful with making academic achievement (Fall & Roberts, 2012; Lepore & Kliewer, 2013). Research also shows that when students are exhibiting problem behaviors in the classroom, they are more likely to be suspended or expelled from school (Von Dohlen et al., 2019). Eventually, these students are then making up a larger percentage of students that drop out of school (Porche et al., 2011). When these types of behaviors persist in the classroom, the students performing these behaviors struggle to be successful after high school, with nearly 60% of high school dropouts being unemployed (Christle et al., 2007).

Grasso et al. (2016) has found that students that have been exposed to trauma or adverse childhood experiences are more likely to express problem behaviors in the classroom. In the United States, nearly two-third of all adolescents have experienced at least one type of traumatic event in their lives (Grasso et al., 2016; Von Dohlen et al., 2019; Greeson et al., 2013). Dealing with the issue of trauma has the potential to reduce the problem behaviors in the classroom, ultimately, providing students a greater opportunity to be successful academically.

Trauma-informed schools strive to recognize and respond to the traumatic stress that students are faced with when having experienced trauma and work towards developing skills for students to cope with stresses of trauma (Ijadi-Maghsoodi et al., 2017). Record-Lemon and Buchanan (2017) found that when trauma interventions took place in schools the students had large improvements in posttraumatic

symptoms, anxiety, depression and functional impairment. Even though the skills taught in a trauma-informed school are focused on students that have experienced trauma, all students can benefit as they are likely to face some sort of trauma throughout their lives. Brunzell et al. (2016) states that schools that practices trauma-informed care see a positive impact with their teacher-student relationships. These positive relationships then result in student academic achievement, which is one of the main goals of schools (Brunzell et al., 2016).

### **Background of the Project**

In the past, schools have used a vast amount of strategies for dealing with problem behaviors in the classroom. One method in which schools used in the past, and some still utilize, is the use of corporal punishment for misbehavior in the classroom. Gershoff and Font (2016) define corporal punishment as “the physical force with the intention of causing a child to experience pain so as to correct their misbehavior.” In fact since the 1977 U.S. Supreme Court ruling in *Ingraham v. Wright* that corporal punishment is constitutional, there are still nineteen states that student allow the use of corporal punishment (Gershoff & Font, 2016). In the 2013-2014 school year, 106,055 received some form of corporal punishment in the United States (“Number of students receiving selected disciplinary actions in public elementary and secondary schools, by type of disciplinary action, disability status, sex, and race/ethnicity: 2013-14,” 2018). Other ways schools are dealing with discipline in schools is through suspensions and expulsions. In the 2013 – 2014 school year, over 2.6 million students faced suspensions and 111,000 students were

expelled (“Number of students receiving selected disciplinary actions in public elementary and secondary schools, by type of disciplinary action, disability status, sex, and race/ethnicity: 2013-14,” 2018). Both of these methods focus on the action the student is making rather than focusing on the cause of the behavior.

### **Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this project is to create a positive learning environment for students by reducing the number of behavioral issues in the classroom. This will be obtained by creating a framework for the implementation of trauma-informed practices where students that have experienced trauma are able to cope and manage the symptoms of their traumatic experiences. This project will develop methods for a school to teach and create a culture of trauma-informed practices. These methods will strive to create a classroom setting in the school where positive behaviors are taught to students through the lens of trauma informed care. The project will create procedures for identifying trauma symptoms in students, teaching coping skills to students, and encouraging positive behaviors in the classroom. The project will also create a school culture that recognizes the vastness of trauma and strive to provide an environment where trauma is avoided and managed appropriately.

The development of the trauma-informed practices in the school will take place over the school year, with implementation taking place the following school year. Over the first year of development school staff will attend professional development that will inform staff of what trauma is and the behaviors of students that have experienced trauma. Staff will also work with health professionals in

creating norms for the school and classroom that are centered on trauma-informed care. This partnership will assist teachers and school staff with ensuring the needs of the students are being met and expectations are reasonable for students that have experienced trauma.

### **Goals and Objective of the Project**

The objective of this project is to reduce problem behaviors in the classroom and improve student academic success by implementing a system in the school that treats the issue of student trauma. Student behaviors will be handled through the lens of trauma and actions will be taken to reduce future occurrences of the behavior by focusing on the cause of the behavior. The goal is to teach students to cope with their past experiences in order to engage in positive classroom behaviors.

### **Definition of Terms**

**Trauma:** The exposure to neglect, abuse (physical, sexual, or emotional), substance abuse, mental health issues, violence, divorce, low socioeconomic status, natural disasters, displacement of family, death, or any other event that disrupts one's routine for an extend period of time (Ortiz & Sibinga, 2017; Greeson et al., 2013).

**Trauma-Informed Schools:** A school that recognizes and responds to the fact that traumatic events in children's lives have an effect on their behaviors and academic achievement (Ijadi-Maghsoodi et al., 2017).

**Academic Success:** Measured by students growth in knowledge.

**Problem Behaviors:** Student behaviors that negatively affect the learning environment for students.

**Engagement:** The behavior, cognitive, and emotional engagement of the student. This includes areas of student attitude towards school, student participation in class, and the student's want to do well in school (Cooper, 2014).

**Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS):** A system in place in schools to proactively encourage students to exhibit positive behaviors through a multi-tiered approach (Houchens et al., 2017).

### **Scope of the Project**

The project will be centered on both classroom and school culture within a middle school and high school setting. The project will strive to create an environment in the school that focuses on teaching students how to cope with trauma in efforts to reduce the number of problem behaviors. This project will not replace all current behavior consequences, but work to manage behaviors before they become an issue. Also, this project will focus on why students are choosing to make poor behavior choices and work to correct those actions.

Even though this project will work to collaborate with the community, it will not remove all traumatic exposures for students. It is very likely that students will still be placed in traumatic situations. This project is geared around teaching these students to cope with the symptoms of trauma.

This project is dependent of the buy-in from many parties to ensure success. The project will need the support of teachers, school staff, administration, local health organizations, and the school community. The teachings of this project are focused on all of these individuals working together to help empower students to positively manage their behaviors and actions.

## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

Adolescents struggling with trauma continues to be a rising issue in secondary schools in the United States. Nearly two-thirds of students in American students having faced trauma (Von Dohlen et al., 2019). Students affected by trauma have issues with aggressive behaviors in the classroom, exhibit disruptive behaviors in the classroom (Von Dohlen et al., 2019), perform lower academically (Lepore & Kliever, 2013), and experience higher rates of dropouts (Porche et al., 2011). This literature review will look examine trauma as it plays a role in the secondary school system and the implications that go along with trauma. It will examine what trauma is and how it impacts a child in the scope of a student. It will then look at the ideal classroom and what students should be doing to ensure academic success. Finally, this review will look at what schools are currently doing to address this issue of trauma in the school setting.

## **Theory/Rationale**

### **Trauma-Informed Schools**

Schools are often seen as the frontline for addressing the symptoms of students that have experienced trauma as they tend to have the most contact with these students. One way in which schools are taking on this challenge is by implementing a trauma-informed school approach. A trauma-informed school recognizes that traumatic events in a children have an effect on the behaviors and academic achievement of the adolescents as well as the schools need to responds by providing skills for the students to handle and cope with past traumatic experiences (Ijadi-Maghsoodi et al., 2017). According to Brunzell et al. (2016) when a school implements a trauma-informed program, it must address both the special and complex needs of students that have experienced trauma.

Cavanaugh (2016) states when implementing trauma-informed practices there are four components: realize the impact of trauma and the process that goes along with recovery, understand the symptoms of trauma, fully integrate knowledge of trauma into policies and procedures, and seek to resist being in traumatic situations. When implementing a trauma-informed approach, schools must observe student behaviors through a different lens (Von Dohlen et al., 2019). Educators must start to see that certain behaviors, especially those from students that have experienced trauma, are a result of the trauma itself, and not just the student acting out. Educators must also be able to recognize what the symptoms of trauma may look like. There are a variety of symptoms that are a result of trauma including aggressive behavior

and inability to follow classroom expectations (Von Dohlen et al., 2019). Additionally, students may also show signs of depression, anxiety, anger, and low self-esteem (Hodges et al., 2013; Hagenaars et al., 2011; Cavanaugh, 2016). As schools develop plans and procedures in the implementation of a trauma-informed system, it is very important for school administration to collaborate with mental health professionals and school psychologist (Ijadi-Maghsoodi et al., 2017). This partnership helps create a system that is designed to meet the need of the trauma-affected students by setting realistic expectations for these students. As schools work to assist students in finding ways to resist experiences that cause trauma, they can achieve this by educating and empowering not only students, but families and the community with safety, support and wellness training (Record-Lemon et al., 2017).

Students that have experienced trauma also struggle with self-regulation. Schools can incorporate experiences in the classroom that work to repair the regulatory abilities. Teachers can do this by providing students opportunities to work side-by-side with the educator or other students, have students work to self-monitor and practice their self-regulatory skills, encourage students to work with difficult emotions by having them understand what their stress triggers are and how to shift that emotion, and finally, empower students to manage their behavior (Brunzell et al., 2016). When classroom provide these opportunities in which students work on their coping skills through these sometimes-difficult situations, the students are learning more about their emotions and behaviors that the trauma they have experienced makes challenging for them.

Brunzell et al. (2016) also discusses another key aspect to trauma-informed schools is restoring disrupted attachment capacities. Schools can do this classroom by creating strong relationships with students. Brunzell also states that a positive student-teacher relationship is imperative in creating a safe learning environment.

## **Research/Evaluation**

### **Trauma**

In the United States, millions of children and adolescents are exposed to some sort of traumatic event each year (Greeson et al., 2013). In fact, Von Dohlen et al. (2019) states two-thirds of children have experienced traumatic events by the time they are 16. With so many children and adolescents experiencing traumatic events, it is important to understand what experiences are constituted as a traumatic event. Ortiz and Sibinga (2017) state that there are many types of traumatic events that cause stress for children that range for neglect, abuse (physical, sexual, or emotional), experiencing substance abuse, mental illness, violence, divorce and low socioeconomic status. Other events that can induce trauma for students arise when faced with natural disasters, displacement of family, death, and any event that disrupts a child's routine for a long period of time (Greeson et al., 2013). When children are faced with these traumatic experiences they tend to have higher risk for depression, issues with self-confidence, a decline in coping abilities, challenges with social relationships, anxiety, and experience trouble with emotional regulation (Hagenaars et al., 2011; Cavanaugh, 2016). Furthermore, the type of trauma a child experiences may result in the symptoms the child may exhibit. According to Hodges

et al. (2013) sexual trauma can be associated with sexual fears and maladaptive sexual behaviors, physical assault can cause a child to have issues with anger or aggression, and psychological abuse can produce low self-esteem.

Another aspect of trauma on child or adolescent comes when analyzing the frequency of traumatic experiences. However, there is little research on whether on the impact of chronic exposure to a traumatic event has on a child compared to a single event. Hagenaars et al. (2011) states that much of the research conducted on childhood trauma focuses on repeated trauma making it difficult to distinguish the effects of chronic traumas compared to a single traumatic event. Although, studies have shown that when there are multiple occurrences of the traumatic event the symptoms of the trauma become more complex or at a higher level (Green et al., 2000).

Additionally, children that have experienced trauma are coming to schools and expressing behaviors in the classroom that are associated with the trauma experiences that impede on their learning. Students that have experienced trauma may tend to exhibit aggressive behaviors in the classroom as a symptom of the trauma which often times disrupts the classroom environment (Von Dohlen et al., 2019). When these poor classroom behaviors escalate or go unmanaged, these students face suspensions or even expulsion (Von Dohlen et al., 2019). In addition to classroom behavior, students that are exposed to violence tend to perform lower academically (Lepore & Kliwer, 2013). Ultimately, students that are exposed to trauma as a child have high risk to drop out of high school (Porche et al., 2011).

## **Ideal Classroom Behaviors**

Students with trauma don't always exhibit the ideal behaviors in a classroom setting. Due to this, teachers want to create a classroom environment that is welcoming to all students and creates an atmosphere that promotes learning for all. In order to do this there are certain traits that condone student learning. McDaniel et al. (2017) states that positive social relationships are imperative to creating academic success. Although, arguably, one of the most influential aspects of the classroom is student engagement which tends to relates directly with the student academic success (Wang & Holcombe, 2010).

## ***Student Engagement***

There are three main dimensions of a middle and high school student to examine when looking at an ideal classroom environment: behavior engagement, cognitive engagement, and emotional engagement (Cooper, 2014). Ideally in the classroom all three of these aspects of engagement should be at a high level for all students. In fact, Li and Lerner (2013), have found that each of these three areas of engagement can work together in particular if emotional engagement is high is can work to have a positive effect on behavior engagement over time. Appleton et al. (2011) found that there is a positive correlation between school engagement and school success with students. Hence, when a student exhibits behaviors of engagement they will show success in the classroom. This demonstrates the importance of examining these three areas of engagement: behavioral, cognitive, and emotional.

**Behavioral Engagement.** Cooper (2014) identifies behavioral engagement as how a student listens, completes assignments, follows directions, and participates in classroom activities. According to Engels, et al. (2016) some indicators for determining a student's behavioral engagement can include student attendance habits, classroom participation, and number of office referrals, detentions, and suspensions. Students that have a high level of behavior engagement adhere to school rule, avoid problem behaviors in the classroom, and attend school regularly (Wang & Holcombe, 2010). Students who are behaviorally engaged in the classroom are less likely to participate in fighting with other students, and treating others in the school with disrespect towards peers and teachers. Also, student that are engaged in the classroom behaviorally are more likely to complete classroom activities. When a student has high behavioral engagement they tend to increase in their grades, conflict resolution skills and their social skills (Engels, et al., 2016). Falls and Roberts (2012) state that when students have a positive feeling about going to school and are interested in the subjects they are learning, then behavioral engagement increases. Conversely, having a low level of behavioral engagement is a precursor for dropping out of high school (Fall & Roberts, 2012).

**Cognitive Engagement.** Cognitive engagement is defined as the mental energy that the student applies to their work, or the thinking process of the student (Cooper, 2014). Cognitive engagement focuses on how well a student thinks about their learning or the student's want to learn. Wang and Eccles (2012) state that cognitive engagement examines how a student thinks about how they relate to what

they are studying, or how a student thinks about what their plan is for completing their work. Like behavioral engagement, cognitive engagement also positively correlates with GPA (Wang & Eccles, 2012). Thus as a student shows more ownership for their learning, the more likely they are to be successful in their academic studies. However, according to Archambault et al. (2009), cognitive engagement does not predict student dropout rates.

**Emotional Engagement.** Emotional engagement refers to the students feeling towards the class and their interest in wanting to do well in the course (Copper, 2014). According to Ulmanen et al. (2016), students who view school as important and valuable to make them a part of the school community have a high level of emotional engagement. In other words, this level of engagement looks at how a student feels about their classes, how well they enjoy their classwork, and they want to do well in the class (Copper, 2014). In addition, Li and Lerner (2013) stated that student who express emotional engagement had higher levels of behavioral engagement, but not vice versa. However, students who have a negative perception of school and do not view themselves as a part of their school community, thus having a low level of emotional engagement, tend to have more disruptive classroom behaviors, poor attendance, and ultimately have a higher chance of dropping out of school (Ulmanen et al., 2016).

### **Addressing Trauma in Schools**

Due to a staggering number of students who have experienced trauma that are attending school, many schools have made it a priority to find ways to confront the

issue of trauma. Unfortunately, according to Thomas et al. (2019) there are no dominating frameworks when it comes to dealing with trauma at the school level. Instead, schools must assess what their individual needs are and select a system that will work best for the needs of the school and community. However, schools have found different ways to address trauma by implementing trauma-informed care, Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) programs, and the use of restorative practices (Plumb et al., 2016; Harden et al., 2015).

### ***Trauma-Informed Practices***

One way in which schools have chosen to address the issue of students experiencing trauma is through the implementation of trauma-informed practices. These practices that schools are taking on tend to be a partnership with local mental health organizations and universities (Thomas et al., 2019). In fact, Record-Lemon and Buchanan (2017) state trauma-informed practices should be a collaboration between clinical professionals, teaching staff, administration, as well as, parents and students. According to Thomas et al. (2019), there are three components of a trauma-informed school, professional development, changes in organization and changes in day-to-day practices. When schools implement a trauma-informed care program their first step is to build an understanding of what trauma is and how it impacts a student in the classroom (Thomas et al., 2019). Schools then must then develop a culture where everything is seen through a trauma lens where everyone is treated with compassion and are empowered in the school community (Thomas et al., 2019).

### ***Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports***

Another way in which secondary schools are addressing the issue of trauma is by implementing a Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) program. PBIS is described as a proactive way to encourage positive behaviors in students, centered around a tiered system using data-driven interventions (Houchens et al., 2017). PBIS is a three-tiered system where the first tier is a school-wide intervention, the second tier involves small groups consisting of students who need more focused interventions, and the third tier is for students that require individual interventions (Plumb et al., 2016; Houchens et al., 2017). Another key component to PBIS systems is that the interventions that are set in place at each tier are evidenced based practices (Weist et al., 2018). Schools have elected to use a system like PBIS to support students that have had traumatic exposures because of the tiered system. According to Weist et al. (2018) schools are using the Tier 1 interventions to teach behaviors to the whole school that support coping with traumatic experiences. Tier 2 small group interventions are used when students are still struggling with problem behaviors due to their past trauma (Weist et al., 2018). Weist et al. also states that the Tier 3 level interventions are used by schools where trauma related interventions can be taught to students in a one-on-one setting.

### ***Restorative Practices***

Schools have also used the concept of restorative practice to address students of trauma. According to Harden et al. (2015) restorative justice a way in which a school or individual can build social capital and discipline by teaching decision-

making skills to build community. Students are taught how to express themselves emotionally and physically in a way that can create a safe environment in the school and community for learning. One aspect of the decision-making process that is taught in restorative practices includes problem solving skills (Harden, 2015). As these skills are taught, teachers, students, and parents work together to uncover the true case of the academic or behavior issues (Gregory et al., 2017). This is imperative when dealing with students who have faced trauma, as the traumatic events may arise as the reason for the problem behavior, which can lead to trauma-informed interventions for the student (Gregory et al., 2017).

### **Summary**

With the number of students coming into schools today who have experienced some form of traumatic experience in their lives schools must take action to address the issue of trauma. One way in which schools are addressing students affected by trauma is the implementation of trauma-informed practices. These schools are looking at the needs of the student and establish policies and procedures to address all needs of the students both special and complex (Brunzell et al., 2016). Schools are looking at all behaviors of the students through a trauma lens, where the root of the behaviors are address rather than just the behavior (Von Dohlen et al., 2019). Students are taught with ways to deal with their trauma with improving self-regulation and restoring disrupted attachment capacities (Brunzell et al., 2016).

Trauma is affecting nearly two-thirds of the students under the age of 16 in the United States (Von Dohlen et al., 2019). Trauma can be caused by a variety of events

in a child's life. These events can be from neglect, abuse (physical, sexual, or emotional), substance abuse, mental illness, violence, divorce, low socioeconomic status, natural disasters, displacement of family, or death (Ortiz and Sibinga, 2017; Greeson et al., 2013). Students that have experienced trauma may show symptoms of challenges with relationships, anxiety, depression, issues with self-regulations, anger, aggression, and low self-esteem (Hodges et al., 2013; Hagenars et al., 2011; Cavanaugh, 2016). Ultimately, these symptoms of trauma can be brought out through negative classroom behaviors which disrupt the classroom environment (Von Dohlen et al., 2019). When these poor behaviors escalate in the classroom these students that have experienced trauma then tend to perform lower academically (Lepore & Kliewer, 2013).

Ideally, teachers and students want to create and uphold a classroom environment that promotes learning for all. One way in which this can be achieved is by increasing student engagement in the classroom (Wang & Holcombe, 2010). Cooper (2014) introduces three areas of student engagement that play a role in the classroom environment: behavior, cognitive, and emotional engagement. Behavioral engagement is how well a student listens, completes assignments, follows directions and participates in class (Cooper, 2014). Cognitive engagement is the mental energy that a student applies to their work and the thinking process of the student (Cooper, 2014). Cognitive engagement also looks at the student's wanting to learn. Emotional Engagement is how a student views schools and the value that school has to the student (Ulmanen et al., 2016).

Because schools view trauma as a challenge when educating students, they have found various ways to address the issue of trauma. One way in which trauma is being addressed is the implementation of a trauma-informed care program. These types of practices are a collaboration of clinical professionals, teaching staff, administration, as well as, parents and students (Buchanan, 2017). Often times these programs include professional development for staff, changes in daily procedures for staff and students, and changes in the organization of how student behavior is handled (Thomas et al., 2019). Another way in which schools are handling trauma is the implementation of a Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) program. PBIS is a multitiered system that encourages positive behaviors in students (Houchens et al., 2017). Generally, there are three tiers what the first-tier entails school-wide interventions, the second tier is for small group interventions, and the third tier is for individual intervention. Lastly, schools are using restorative practices to handle trauma. In restorative practice systems, schools are teaching students how to express themselves emotionally and physically to create a safe school environment (Harden et al., 2015).

### **Conclusions**

In order for schools to address the issue of some many students coming to school that are affected by trauma they must implement a trauma-informed system school-wide. This system should incorporate not only the school staff, but is should include health professionals as they work to create a school environment where students are taught how to handle their emotions and find ways to self-regulate. This

review then looked at what trauma is and how it affects students emotional and behaviorally. It also highlighted what an ideal classroom looks like through the lens of student engagement. Finally, this review examined what schools are currently doing to address the issue of trauma by implementing trauma-informed practices, Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support systems, and restorative practices.

### **Chapter Three: Project Description**

#### **Introduction**

The goal for secondary schools is for all students to be academically successful, and with all of the challenges that arise in the classroom schools must establish an environment where problem behaviors are managed appropriately in order to provide student a greater chance at being successful (Malecki & Elliot, 2002). One of the reasons students are displaying poor behavior choices in schools is due to the trauma they have experienced in their lives. With schools having the most daily contact with students, there is a call for schools to teach these students how to manage the trauma they have faced. This project is being created to implement a trauma-informed program in a secondary school that teaches both staff and students what trauma is and how to cope with traumatic experiences and make positive choices inside and outside of school. This project will start with teaching school staff what trauma is and how it affects students. The school staff will then work together in creating and implementing expectations and procedures for how trauma will be managed in the school through recommended programs and research. The school community will be notified on changes that are being made to the school

environment and will be encouraged to join in learning about trauma and how it can be managed at home. Finally, the project will be implemented at the start of the next school year.

### **Project Components**

Students that are exposed to trauma tend to struggle more academically than their counterparts, have issues with problem behaviors, and find it challenging to cope with emotions and difficult situations (Ijadi-Maghsoodi et al., 2017). Nearly two-thirds of students have faced trauma by the age of 16 in the United States (Von Dohlen et al., 2019). Implementing a trauma-informed school program recognizes these challenges that students with trauma experience and find ways to help students become more successful (Ijadi-Maghsoodi et al., 2017). This project will create a framework for schools to begin the process of implementing a trauma-informed school.

Teachers are the ones that tend to have the most contact with students throughout the school day. These teachers are also the ones the have the most opportunities to develop relationships with the students. Brunzell et al. (2016) states that one of the key aspects to a trauma-informed school is to create a positive relationship with students. As these teachers are striving to create positive relationships with students, they must understand trauma and how it affects students. The first component of this project is to inform staff and students what trauma is, how trauma can affect students, and what a school can do through professional development (Appendix A). This presentation will use research-based information,

engaging videos from health professionals, and steps for the future in what the school will be doing to address trauma. The next component is a calendar for implementation (Appendix B) that will provide staff with upcoming professional development on trauma and workshops where staff will collaborate in creating a system for the school in managing trauma.

Before the implementation of the trauma-informed school can begin, staff needs to buy into the idea of adopting new procedures. In order to establish buy-in from staff, they will be a part of the planning that will go into the trauma-informed program. Staff will be provided with resources that can guide in the direction that the program will take. Staff will start with the idea of teaching students on social-emotional learning. Staff will attend a workshop focused on social-emotional learning where they will use a list of resources (Appendix C) that will provide staff with ideas of what social-emotional learning is and how they can incorporate these teachings into the classroom. Subsequent workshops will take place in the areas of discipline practices (Appendix D) and mindfulness (Appendix E).

Another key aspect to trauma-informed schools is the involvement of the community. A parent letter (Appendix F) will be provided to families in the school regarding the implementation of the trauma-informed school before the start of the school year. This letter will focus on informing the parents what a trauma-informed school is, and what changes they can expect to see. The letter will also invite parents and community members to attend future meetings where they will be provided with different resources in order to strive to create a trauma-informed home.

At the beginning of the school year students will take a screener (Appendix G) which will inform the school what the student population looks like through the lens of trauma. The questions focus on situations that are traumatic, as well as symptoms of trauma that students may face. Finally, staff will provide a mid-year evaluation (Appendix H) of the changes they have taken and their noticing after a half year of implementation.

### **Project Evaluation**

The project will be evaluated in two ways. The first way in which this project will be evaluated is through teacher and staff observations. The staff will complete an evaluation of the program half-way through the school year. This evaluation will ask staff what they have been able to change in the teaching to be more trauma-informed, and if they have noticed changes in student behaviors in the classroom. Another aspect that staff will examine is student performance. Ideally through the implementation of the trauma-informed program there would be fewer behavioral issues and thus fewer behavior referrals, and higher academic achievement for students.

The second way in which this project will be evaluated is by looking at student discipline data. The previous school year will be used as a benchmark for discipline data. One of the goals of this project is to improve student behavior. Discipline data will be compared by looking at the number of incidents overall, the frequency of incidents by individual students, and consequences for discipline. Using this model, the goal is that if students are acting out, they are thinking about their

behaviors more due to interventions that are taking place after each incident. Also, consequences should look different as the goal is to suspend fewer students and focus on the cause of the problem behaviors.

### **Project Conclusions**

Problem behaviors in the classroom are one of the factors in students performing poorly academically in the classroom (Malecki & Elliot, 2002). One of the major causes of problem behaviors in schools today is the growing number of students that are exposed to trauma throughout childhood (Von Dohlen et al., 2019). Thus, when students choose poor behavior many times it is due to the trauma they have experienced. Schools, therefore must act on this by creating a school environment where students are taught how to handle the stresses they have experienced in order to make better choices, and ultimately performing higher academically. Schools have the opportunity to implement trauma-informed procedures to work with students that have experienced trauma by teaching them how to cope with the emotions and behaviors that go along with their past trauma.

Despite a schools attempt to provide a safe environment that strives to teach students how to handle trauma, there are still some unanswered questions in this project. One of those questions is the buy-in from all parties involved. This would include administration, teachers, students, parents and community. Also, there are questions as to how much a school can do with the vast number of factors that can go along with different kinds of trauma. Due to the difference among all school districts, there is no one way to handle trauma. Because one thing which works in one district,

may not work in all districts. Teachers and staff must also continually communicate what is working and what is not working to meet the needs of the students. Also, there is question of support from school board and the approval of policy changes that may need to be made through the implementation of the project.

### **Plans for Implementation**

The project is ideally designed to be implemented in all secondary schools as a framework towards becoming a trauma-informed school. The implementation of this project would start at the administration level, but in order to ensure buy-in staff would be included in much of the planning and adoption of new programs. With staff feedback is considered, leaders in the implementation will make final decisions as far a new policy and programs are developed.

The plan for implementation will start in winter of the 2020-2021 school year. Staff will begin with professional development stating the purpose of the implementation and the goals for the trauma-informed school. All staff will be included as each aspect of the implementation is presented and researched in the areas of social-emotional learning, discipline practices, and mindfulness during teacher workshops. Once the workshops are completed, administration will use staff feedback to finalize policies and procedures. Once new policies and procedures are approved by the local school board, staff will be presented with training during the summer prior to the 2021-2022 school year when the implementation will start with students. At the beginning of the school year students will take a survey that assess

the trauma and impacts of trauma on the students. This information will be used to reassure the need for the program in the school.

As with any program, constant evaluation and adaptations are needed. The first formal evaluation of the program will take place half-way through the school year. Following the evaluation, changes may be made to the program to better meet the needs of staff and student well-being. This will start during the second semester of the first year of implementation. The goal of this project is always to decrease the number of discipline issues within the school, but also to increase the academic achievement of all students and to teach the students to cope with the traumatic situations they have or will experience.

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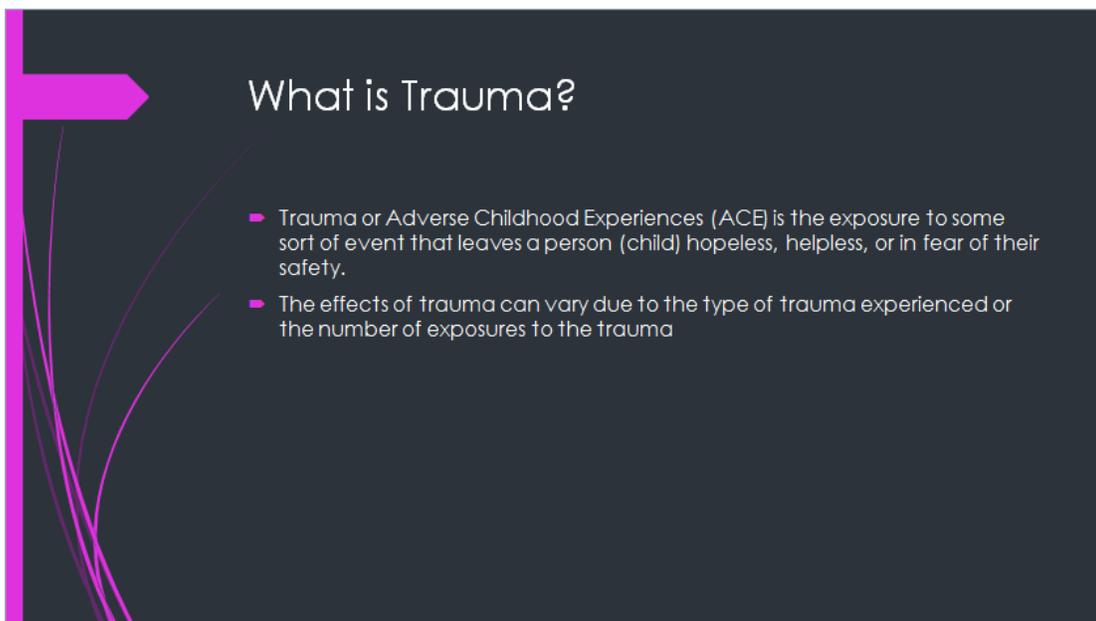
## Appendix A

### Trauma Professional Development Presentation

Slide 1



Slide 2



## Slide 3

## Examples of Traumatic Experiences

- Neglect
- Substance Abuse
- Mental Illness
- Violence
- Divorce
- Low Socioeconomic Status
- Natural Disasters
- Displacement of Families
- Death
- Pandemics
- Abuse
  - Physical
  - Emotional
  - Sexual
- Any event that disrupts a child's routine for an extended period of time

## Slide 4

## Do Our Student's Experience Trauma?

Two-Thirds of children have experienced trauma by the age of 16 in the United States.

■ Experienced Trauma

## Slide 5

## Why Address Trauma?

- ▶ Trauma exposure can have many effects on the victim in the classroom
  - ▶ Decline in coping abilities
  - ▶ Depression
  - ▶ Struggle with social relationships
  - ▶ Anxiety
  - ▶ Difficulties with emotional regulation
  - ▶ Aggressive Behaviors
  - ▶ Higher rates of Suspension/Expulsion
  - ▶ Tend to perform lower academically

## Slide 6

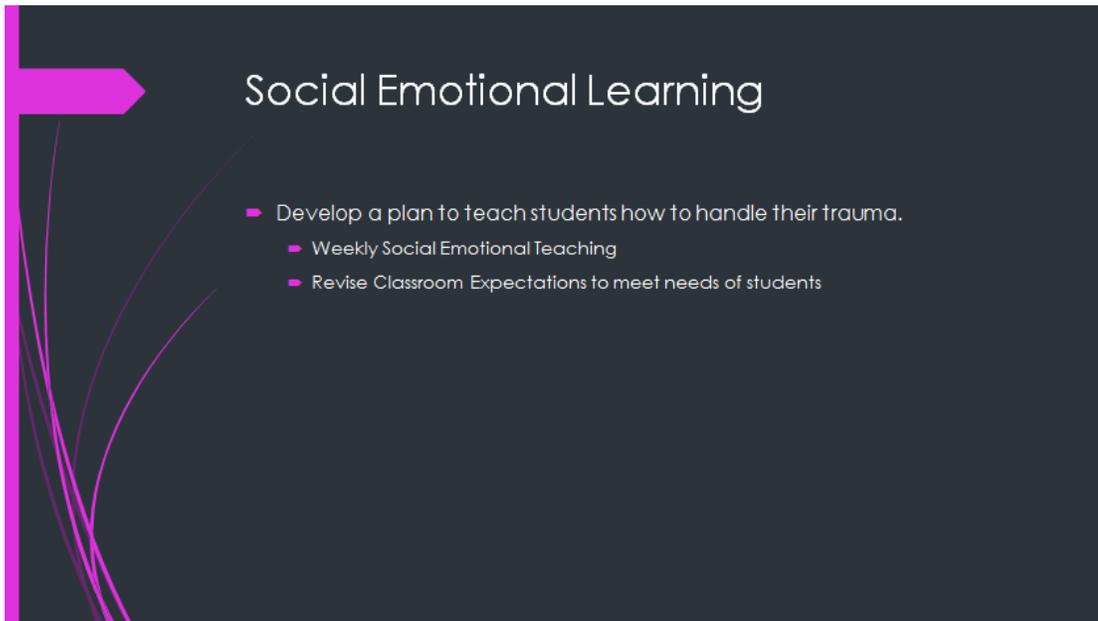
## What Can We Do?

- ▶ [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gv\\_SxtpPY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gv_SxtpPY)



**3 TRAUMA INFORMED PRACTICES THAT WORK WITH DR. NADINE BURKE HARRIS**

## Slide 7

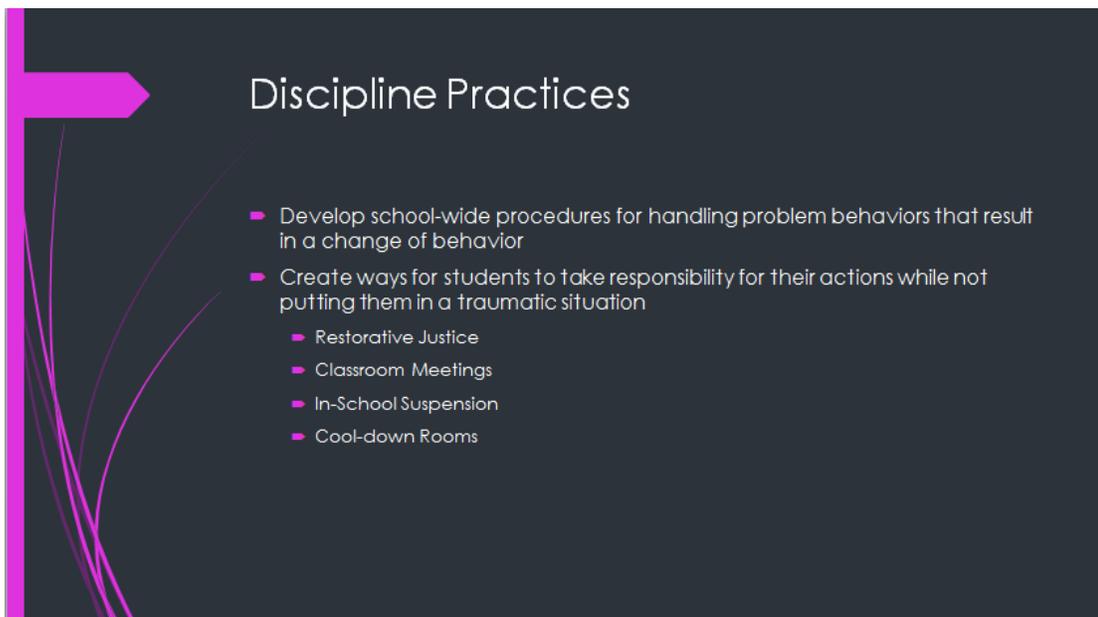


Slide 7 features a dark blue background with a vertical purple bar on the left side. A purple arrow points to the right from the top of the bar. The title "Social Emotional Learning" is written in white. Below the title, there is a bulleted list of three items, each with a purple square bullet point.

## Social Emotional Learning

- Develop a plan to teach students how to handle their trauma.
  - Weekly Social Emotional Teaching
  - Revise Classroom Expectations to meet needs of students

## Slide 8

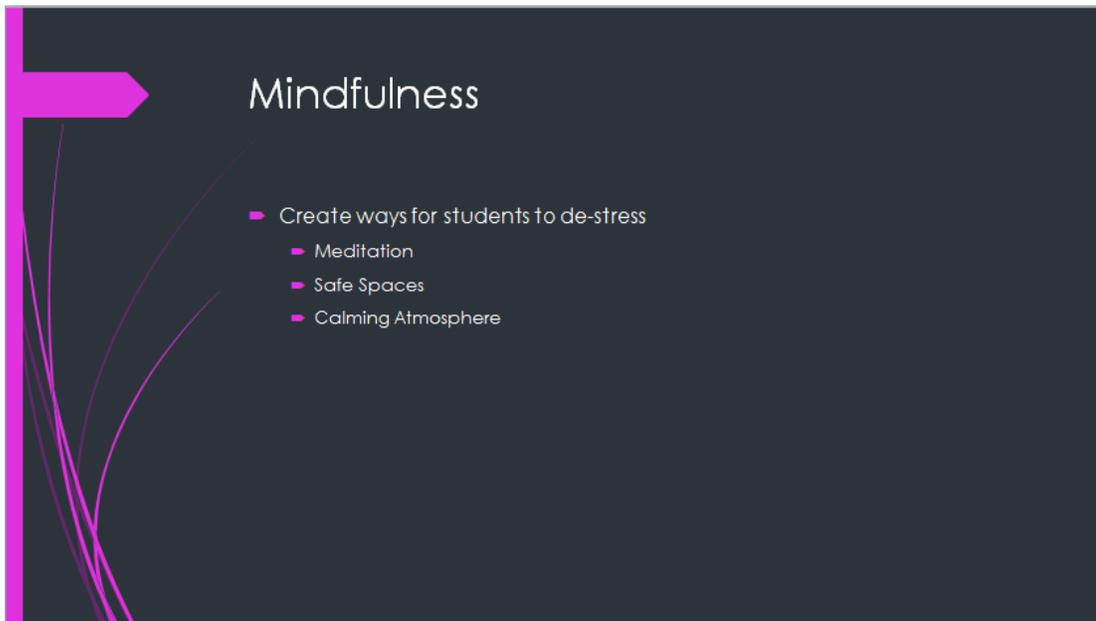


Slide 8 features a dark blue background with a vertical purple bar on the left side. A purple arrow points to the right from the top of the bar. The title "Discipline Practices" is written in white. Below the title, there is a bulleted list of three items, each with a purple square bullet point. The second item has a sub-bulleted list of four items, each with a purple square bullet point.

## Discipline Practices

- Develop school-wide procedures for handling problem behaviors that result in a change of behavior
- Create ways for students to take responsibility for their actions while not putting them in a traumatic situation
  - Restorative Justice
  - Classroom Meetings
  - In-School Suspension
  - Cool-down Rooms

Slide 9

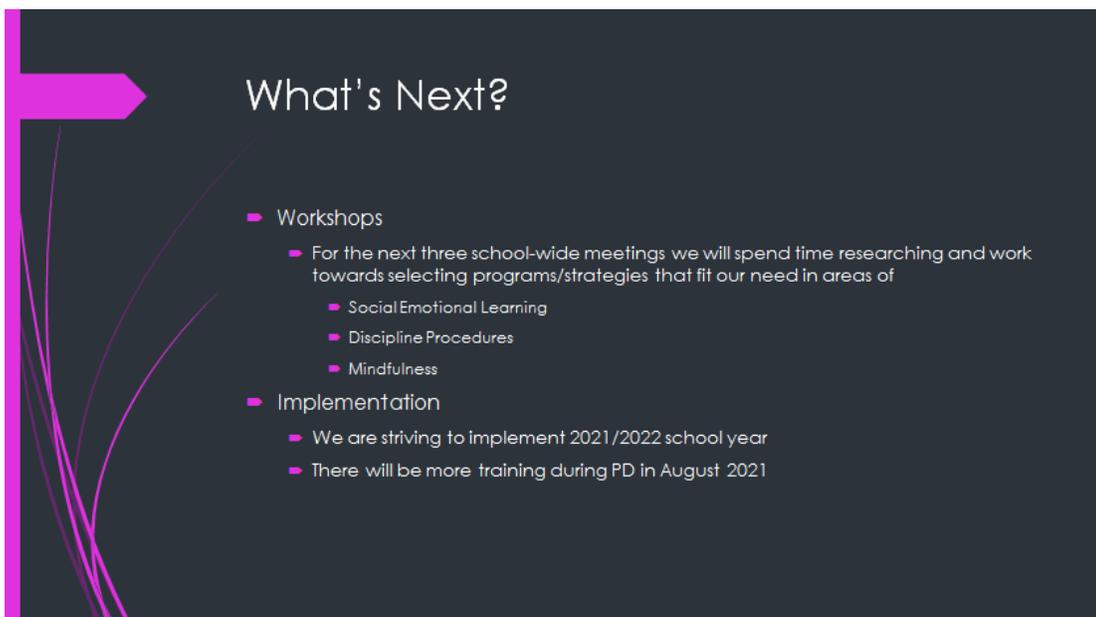


Slide 9 features a dark blue background with a vertical purple bar on the left side. A purple arrow points to the right from the top of the bar. The title "Mindfulness" is written in white. Below the title, there is a bulleted list of items, each preceded by a purple square bullet.

## Mindfulness

- ▶ Create ways for students to de-stress
  - ▶ Meditation
  - ▶ Safe Spaces
  - ▶ Calming Atmosphere

Slide 10



Slide 10 features a dark blue background with a vertical purple bar on the left side. A purple arrow points to the right from the top of the bar. The title "What's Next?" is written in white. Below the title, there is a bulleted list of items, each preceded by a purple square bullet.

## What's Next?

- ▶ Workshops
  - ▶ For the next three school-wide meetings we will spend time researching and work towards selecting programs/strategies that fit our need in areas of
    - ▶ Social Emotional Learning
    - ▶ Discipline Procedures
    - ▶ Mindfulness
- ▶ Implementation
  - ▶ We are striving to implement 2021/2022 school year
  - ▶ There will be more training during PD in August 2021



**Appendix C**  
**Social-Emotional Learning Resources**

<b>Program Type</b>	<b>Resource</b>
<b>Article</b>	Terada, Y. (2015, June 3). <i>What is the right sel program for your school?</i> . Edutopia. <a href="https://www.edutopia.org/blog/casel-sel-guide-youki-terada">https://www.edutopia.org/blog/casel-sel-guide-youki-terada</a>
<b>Article</b>	Schonert-Reichl, K. A. (2017). Social and emotional learning and teachers. <i>The Future of Children</i> , 27(1), 137-155. <a href="https://www.jstor.org/stable/44219025">https://www.jstor.org/stable/44219025</a>
<b>Program Review</b>	CASEL - <a href="https://casel.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/2013-casel-guide.pdf">https://casel.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/2013-casel-guide.pdf</a>
<b>Program</b>	Second Steps - <a href="https://www.secondstep.org/second-step-social-emotional-learning">https://www.secondstep.org/second-step-social-emotional-learning</a>
<b>Program</b>	Sanford Harmony - <a href="https://www.harmonysel.org/">https://www.harmonysel.org/</a>
<b>Program</b>	Growing Leaders - <a href="https://growingleaders.com/">https://growingleaders.com/</a>
<b>Video</b>	SEL in Secondary Schools - <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I-CErAZU-Ok">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I-CErAZU-Ok</a>
<b>Video</b>	“How Do You Feel?” Teaching Emotional IQ in School - <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gqAZuOqBXgw">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gqAZuOqBXgw</a>

**Appendix D**  
**Discipline Procedure Resources**

Program Type	Resource
<b>Article</b>	Davis, M. (2013, October 4). <i>Restorative justice: Resources for schools</i> . Edutopia. <a href="https://www.edutopia.org/blog/restorative-justice-resources-matt-davis">https://www.edutopia.org/blog/restorative-justice-resources-matt-davis</a>
<b>Article</b>	Harden T., Kenemore, T., Mann, K., Edwards, M., List, C., & Martinson, K. J. (2015). The truth n’ trauma project: Addressing community violence through a youth-led, traum-informed and restorative framework. <i>Child &amp; Adolescent Social Work Journal</i> , 32(1), 65-79. <a href="https://doi.org/10.1007/s10560-014-0366-0">https://doi.org/10.1007/s10560-014-0366-0</a>
<b>Article</b>	Gregory, A., Skiba, R. J., & Mediratta, K. (2017). Eliminating disparities in school discipline: A framework for intervention. <i>Review of Research in Education</i> , 41(1), 253-278. <a href="https://doi-org.ezproxy.gvsu.edu/10.3102/0091732X17690499">https://doi-org.ezproxy.gvsu.edu/10.3102/0091732X17690499</a>
<b>Program</b>	Restorative Solutions - <a href="http://restorativesolutions.us/schoolprograms/schools/k-12">http://restorativesolutions.us/schoolprograms/schools/k-12</a>
<b>Training Program</b>	Restorative Justice Education - <a href="https://www.restorativejustice.com/">https://www.restorativejustice.com/</a>
<b>Training Program</b>	National Center for Restorative Justice - <a href="http://www.nationalcenterforrestorativejustice.com/education-3">http://www.nationalcenterforrestorativejustice.com/education-3</a>
<b>Video</b>	Restorative Circles: Creating a Safe Environment for Students to Reflect - <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1-RZYSTJAAo">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1-RZYSTJAAo</a>
<b>Video</b>	Restorative Justice - <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MSy-qOiYjrA">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MSy-qOiYjrA</a>

**Appendix E**  
**Mindfulness Resources**

Program Type	Resource
<b>Article</b>	Ortiz, R., & Sibinga, E. M. (2017). The role of mindfulness in reducing the adverse effects of childhood stress and trauma. <i>Children</i> , 4(3), 16. <a href="https://doi.org/10.3390/children4030016">https://doi.org/10.3390/children4030016</a>
<b>Article</b>	Pannoni, A. (2018, January 1). <i>Teachers: Use mindfulness to help students' academics</i> . U.S. News. <a href="https://www.usnews.com/high-schools/blogs/high-school-notes/articles/2018-01-01/teachers-use-mindfulness-to-help-students-academics">https://www.usnews.com/high-schools/blogs/high-school-notes/articles/2018-01-01/teachers-use-mindfulness-to-help-students-academics</a>
<b>Program</b>	Mindful Schools - <a href="https://www.mindfulschools.org/">https://www.mindfulschools.org/</a>
<b>Program</b>	Mindful - <a href="https://www.mindful.org/mindfulness-in-education/">https://www.mindful.org/mindfulness-in-education/</a>
<b>Video</b>	“What Is Mindfulness?” – Awakening Kindness and Curiosity at School - <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uezOV_D8bSk">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uezOV_D8bSk</a>
<b>Video</b>	“Room to Breathe” – Transforming a Public School Community - <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jWNSOU_mP4s">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jWNSOU_mP4s</a>

## Appendix F Parent Letter



<i>Principal</i>	<i>Jason McVoy</i>
<i>Assistant Principal</i>	<i>Brian Bennett</i>
<i>Assistant Principal</i>	<i>Brent Jandron</i>
<i>Athletic Director</i>	<i>Rick Ruel</i>

8/15/2021

Dear Parents/Guardian,

At Oakridge High School our focus is on educating the whole child, not just focusing on academics. This school year we will be implementing a new Trauma-Informed School model. In this model we are geared towards working with all students in becoming more aware of the situations they have been in and how to deal with past and future experiences with traumatic situations. We want our students to know how to make positive choices inside and outside of the classroom and find ways to cope with emotions brought on from difficult situations. We will be starting with teaching these strategies to students weekly in designed lessons. In addition to lessons teachers and staff will be reminding students of these techniques throughout the school year in all activities that we do.

In addition to new social-emotional learning, this school year we will be working with new procedures for handling disciplinary issues. Our goal and focus will be on treating the cause of the problem behavior. Also we want to ensure that the needs of all parties that are involved are met. We will be starting a new process looking at restorative practices where students will be given the chance to discuss and remediate instances that are in question during a disciplinary meeting. Actions that are taken place will be geared on ensuring students are still capable of learning and will work to put students in a successful environment.

We will also be encouraging staff to take time throughout the day to provide students with opportunities to clear their mind and become mindful of their surroundings. Staff has been trained on these techniques and is looking forward to sharing this with your student. Please be on the lookout for more exciting ways for us to work with the whole child this school year. We will also be holding parent/community meetings throughout the school year where we can share what we have been doing at school and how we can transfer these strategies to the home.

Sincerely,

Tim Hall

**Appendix G**  
**Student Survey**



## Trauma-Informed Student Survey

I feel that I experience low self-esteem.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly Disagree	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly Agree				

I feel that I am good at solving problems.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly Disagree	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly Agree				

I have recently experienced a loss of appetite.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly Disagree	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly Agree				

I am easily startled.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly Disagree	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly Agree				

I have frequent headaches or stomachaches.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly Disagree	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly Agree				

I am in a constant state of alert.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly Disagree	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly Agree				

I feel detached from others.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly Disagree	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly Agree				

I have trouble focusing in class.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly Disagree	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly Agree				

I tend to have many conflicts with other students.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly Disagree	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly Agree				

Sometimes I have uncontrollable feelings of anger.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly Disagree	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly Agree				

I feel anxious most days.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly Disagree	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly Agree				

Someone in my family cares about how I am doing in school.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly Disagree	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly Agree				

I care about how I am doing in school.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly Disagree	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly Agree				

There is someone at school that care about how I am doing in school.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly Disagree	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly Agree				

I enjoy coming to school.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly Disagree	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly Agree				

I enjoy being at home.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly Disagree	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly Agree				

I see violence on a regular basis.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly Disagree	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly Agree				

I have lost someone that is close to me.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly Disagree	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly Agree				

I often feel hungry.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly Disagree	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly Agree				

I feel that I am able to handle my emotions well.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly Disagree	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly Agree				

Someone close to me has a problem with alcohol or drugs.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly Disagree	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly Agree				

I have rules at my house and I am expected to follow them.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly Disagree	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly Agree				

I have rules at my house and I am expected to follow them.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly Disagree	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly Agree				

I am generally polite to adults.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly Disagree	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly Agree				

**Appendix H**  
**Staff Mid-Year Survey**

## Trauma-Informed School Implementation Mid-Year Survey

\* Required

Students are using more appropriate behaviors in the classroom. \*

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly Disagree	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly Agree				

Students are using more appropriate behavior in the hallways. \*

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly Disagree	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly Agree				

Students are showing more signs of academic success in the classroom. \*

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly Disagree	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly Agree				

I feel that new discipline procedures are effective. \*

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly Disagree	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly Agree				

What do you feel has been going well with the implementation of our Trauma-Informed Program?

Your answer

---

What areas do we as a school need to focus our attention to becoming more trauma-informed? \*

Your answer

---

What changes have you made to your daily instruction to be more Trauma-Informed? \*

Your answer

---

What support or training would you like to grow in order to make this program successful? \*

Your answer

---

What do you feel should be the school's next step? \*

Your answer

---

Submit