

## Creating Trauma-Sensitive Schools

Potentially traumatic experiences in childhood are incredibly common and can have lasting effects on children's health and well-being. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Adverse Childhood Experiences Study (ACES), a majority of students have had at least one adverse childhood experience, and a third have experienced three or more.<sup>1</sup> These experiences have a substantial impact on students' ability to behave appropriately and learn in school. In a 2011 study, Nadine Burke Harris and colleagues found that a child who had experienced four or more adverse childhood experiences was 32 times more likely to be labeled with a learning or behavior problem than a child who did not report having experienced any ACEs.<sup>2</sup>

In 2014, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education developed a Behavioral Health and Public Schools framework to increase the capacity of schools to collaborate with behavioral health providers as well as provide supportive school environments that improve educational outcomes for children with behavioral health needs.<sup>3</sup> Based on the framework developed by the Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative, a collaboration between Massachusetts Advocates for Children and Harvard Law School,<sup>4</sup> it consists of six core components for making a school environment safer and more supportive for all students, including those who may be experiencing traumatic or toxic stress.

Approaches geared towards making school environments safer and more supportive have not only shown enormous benefits for students who have experienced adverse events, but they also benefit all students and school personnel. Documented school-wide benefits include improved academic achievement and test scores for students and improved teacher sense of satisfaction and safety.<sup>5</sup>

The new approaches represent a significant shift from previous models geared towards identifying impacted students and providing treatment or supports to those specific students. There are many models for implementing trauma-sensitive/safe and supportive practices within a school or district. All of the models include the need for a school-wide focus, a dedication to a safe school environment, and work to build on existing student as well as staff capacities.<sup>6</sup> In addition, most models focus on how this new approach should not be one more initiative that schools take on, but should be "part of an overall framework for how schools identify needs, utilize resources, and provide services and supports."<sup>6</sup>

For those who are interested, Riverside Trauma Center provides a training on Trauma-Sensitive/Safe and Supportive Schools as well as consultation on becoming a trauma-sensitive/safe and supportive school.

<sup>1</sup>Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and Kaiser Permanente. (n.d.). Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study. Retrieved from: <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/acestudy/>

<sup>2</sup>Burke, N.J., et al. The Impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences on an Urban Pediatric Population. (2011). *Child Abuse & Neglect*. Retrieved from: <http://www.nwcphp.org/documents/training/maternal-and-child-health/burke-article>

<sup>3</sup>Massachusetts Behavioral Health and Public Schools Task Force and Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. (2011). Behavioral Health and Public Schools Self-Assessment Tool for Schools [online], Retrieved from: <http://bhps321.org>



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<sup>4</sup>Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative. (n.d.). The Flexible Framework: Six Elements of School Operations Involved in Creating a Trauma-Sensitive School [online]. Retrieved from: <https://traumasensitiveschools.org/trauma-and-learning/the-flexible-framework>

<sup>5</sup>Longhi, Dario and Barila, Theresa. (2015, April). A Strategy Paper on Improving School Performance - Increasing Resilience to 'Trump ACEs.' Lessons Learned and Policy Implications from a Review of Traditional and Innovative Practices. Retrieved from: [http://www.resiliencetrumpsaces.org/images/docs/A\\_short\\_strategy\\_paper\\_with\\_end\\_notes\\_April\\_28.pdf](http://www.resiliencetrumpsaces.org/images/docs/A_short_strategy_paper_with_end_notes_April_28.pdf)

<sup>6</sup>Eklund, Katie, MD and Rossen, Eric, MD. (2016, September) Guidance for Trauma Treatment in Schools: A Product of the Defending Childhood State Policy Initiative. Retrieved from: <http://www.t2bayarea.org/docs/Screening-Eklund.pdf>

