# Trauma-Informed Supports for Rebuilding School Communities

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At the time of this writing, there have been 6.9 million confirmed cases of Coronavirus Disease 19 (COVID-19) in the United States, with over 200,000 deaths (CDC, 2020a). This pandemic has forced school closings affecting over 56 million students and prompted large-scale efforts from teachers and administrators to restructure and rebuild school communities to provide some level of safety, support, and academic opportunity for students. Although these efforts have provided continuing academic opportunities for students in either face-to-face or online learning spaces, mental health experts expressed their concerns over the potential impact of the pandemic on the mental health and emotional well-being of students (CDC, 2020b).

Children's exposure to disaster can lead to physical, cognitive, and emotional changes soon after the experience or even years later (Peek et al., 2018). Students must balance multiple relationships throughout the community, including teachers, parents, extended family members, and local organizations such as schools, churches, recreational outlets, and peer groups. When healthy, these relationships can buffer the effects of trauma. However, the likelihood of maintaining healthy relationships lowers significantly during or following traumatic events (Fothergill & Peek, 2015). The strategies used by school leaders and teachers to relate to students and rebuild the school community during or after a disaster can be crucial for their mental health now and in the future. Thus, it is important to consider how the school community addresses the potential risks posed to students and creates supportive environments for academic and emotional-behavioral growth during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In typical times, mental health counselors and clinicians provide supports and interventions for individuals undergoing crisis, but when massive disasters result in thousands of affected children any community faces limited resources. As a result, the needs of children and families can overwhelm the mental health system. In the face of this scarcity, building school communities with trauma-informed supports hold promise in preventing post-traumatic stress syndrome and healthier emotional-behavioral functioning of students. The literature regarding the school's role in helping students to recover from a variety of disasters establishes the efficacy of schools as community centers for emotional and behavioral interventions (Lai et al., 2016). The scale of the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects upon millions of students requires not only mental health experts but also key stakeholders within communities, such as teachers and administrators. Although many students will navigate this difficult time with little additional support needed, other students will experience distressing reactions that interfere with adaptive coping skills and emotional well-being. School communities that are compassionate, caring, and informed can help these children by transforming schools into safe havens. This manuscript describes four principles of trauma-informed supports that can guide school leaders in rebuilding school communities that have been fractured by the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on the work of Hobfoll et al. (2007), these principles are: a) promoting a sense of safety, b) addressing safety within behavior support practices, c) building relationships, and d) promoting self-efficacy and instilling hope.

### Promoting a Sense of Safety

A safe environment makes up a complex set of attributes including consistency, reliability, predictability, availability, honesty, and transparency (Guarino, K. & Chagnon, E., 2018). School communities led by teachers and administrators who express compassion, empathy, and value problem solving abilities for themselves and others set the healing context for designing school policies. School policies generated from multiple community members, including teachers, students, their families, and administrators help to establish a sense of

accountability and ownership. As schools navigate the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, an important step toward promoting a sense of safety is for schools to establish a formal work group including the stakeholders mentioned above. By including students and family members, the team is better positioned to address the holistic safety concerns of the broader school community (Guarino, K. & Chagnon, E., 2018).

A primary role of the work group is to design trauma-informed policies and procedures that establish emotional well-being and mental health as a priority within the specific context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Attendance policies are one area for the work group to consider. Trauma-informed attendance policies focus on the reasons for student absences rather than imposing negative consequences for absences. Students who experience trauma may hesitate to separate from their parents fearing their own safety or that of their parents (Balaban et al., 2005). Policies based upon a healing perspective that acknowledges the trauma associated with the COVID-19 pandemic should be designed to be flexible and therapeutic. This approach allows students to reestablish a sense of safety and trust within the school community. The team can also establish protocols to ensure that students who are experiencing significant distress at reintegrating back to school are referred and connected to more specialized supports such as counseling and therapy.

Counselors and teachers can help create a psychologically safe environment by acknowledging students' anxiety and structuring the school day in predictable ways. They can provide a calming atmosphere by communicating to the students that post-disaster reactions such as general anxiety, separation anxiety, incident specific fears and sleep disturbances are understandable and expected under the circumstances (Cole et al., 2009). Post-disaster reactions can also be mitigated by using reality reminders to enhance students' sense of safety (Hien et al., 2004). Because children and adolescents who experience trauma can link harmless images to dangerous stimuli associated with the original traumatic event, teachers can help by re-connecting the image or event with safety. For example, a teacher might remind students that COVID-19 was threatening, but all viruses are not. Helping students to discriminate among implications of danger remains a core aim for developing healthy coping skills.

Although social support within the school and community can have a healing effect, the opposite can also occur. When accurate and complete information is not provided to the general public in the aftermath of a disaster, people are more likely to share rumors and sensationalized stories of the event. Children and adolescents are particularly susceptible to these rumors and stories, as they are often still developing their own understanding of reliable information sources (Guidry et al, 2021). This type of sensationalized social activity increases psychological distress. Teachers and school leaders will want to minimize disturbing images from the media and within classroom discussions. They will want to ensure accurate information without exaggerating or distorting conditions which will reduce threats and instill a sense of safety. Young students who see repeated images of past disturbing events in the media may believe the events pose a present danger. School leaders should caution teachers against debriefing or encouraging students to relive the events of the disaster as this can increase arousal and anxiety when students need to focus on being calm and regain their emotional balance (Hobfoll et al., 2007). By considering these factors, administrators and classroom teachers can gradually restore students' view of school as place of relative safety and security.

A final consideration related to promoting a sense of safety relates to food insecurity. Many districts have risen to the challenge of ensuring that students have access to meals throughout the COVID-19 pandemic by expanding free and reduced-price meal programs and

the way these meals are distributed (CDC, 2021). As the pandemic eventually subsides and students return to in-person instruction, members of the COVID-19 work group can work proactively to ensure families know that these offerings are available. Many families will continue to experience long-term financial difficulties resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, some families and their children may be eligible for free and reduced-price meals who had never previously accessed this support. The work group can provide resources to families to help them work through the application process. The team can also serve as a centralized communication point for teachers or other school staff to make student referrals for meal support. When teachers suspect that family circumstances have changed and students may need additional support with access to meals, the work group can channel these referrals to the appropriate individuals so that they can reach out to the families to help meet their basic nutritional needs. By recognizing these wide-ranging effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on students and families, school personnel can create a community built on safety and support that strives to meet the needs of students both within and outside of the immediate school environment.

**Addressing Safety within Behavior Support Practices**

Students who experience trauma or prolonged levels of stress are often at higher risk for school disciplinary actions, including suspension and expulsion (Dorado et al., 2016). The COVID-19 pandemic has served to increase the number of students experiencing stress and trauma, as well as increasing the intensity of their effects in students who were already experiencing trauma and high levels of stress. As a result, it is possible that the number of students engaging in behaviors that lead to school disciplinary actions may increase as schools resume in-person instruction in the months ahead. It is therefore critical for school leaders and behavior support teams to implement behavior support practices that recognize the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly for students most vulnerable to the effects of trauma and stress.

Schoolwide, multi-tiered behavior support systems have an established track record of creating school environments that promote positive, pro-social behavior and reduced levels of exclusionary disciplinary actions (Dorado et al., 2016). Frequently termed Schoolwide Positive Behavioral Supports (SWPBS), this approach complements the perspective of trauma sensitive school environments. A proposed definition from Kincaid et al. (2016) describes SWPBS as an approach to behavior support based upon data that creates supportive contexts to prevent problem behaviors. The emphasis within a SWPBS approach is on preventative and proactive strategies designed to recognize the dignity and value of each individual by building on their strengths and supporting at-risk students across all environments within the school.

SWPBS programs are typically designed around three tiers of support (Dorado et al, 2016; Horner et al, 2010; Kincaid et al., 2016). Primary intervention comprises the first tier. It is focused on schoolwide and classroom-based behavioral supports that are geared toward all students. Examples of accomplishing this in a trauma-informed context would be providing a workshop series for school staff that focused on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on student mental health and safety, and then supporting teachers in implementing a stress-management curriculum to all students in their homeroom.

The second and third tiers of SWPBS provide targeted supports to students most at-risk for disciplinary actions. To implement these supports, schools often form teams consisting of some combination of teachers, counselors, school psychologists, social workers, and administrators. These teams can receive referrals for students whose social-emotional well-being

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and behavior have been negatively affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Secondary intervention strategies in tier 2 might include small group interventions that focus on building coping and stress-management skills for students who are having difficulties. If student disciplinary referrals are occurring at high levels, the team may choose to re-examine and potentially revise discipline policies and procedures (Dorado et al., 2016). This leads into the tertiary intervention strategies in the third tier of SWPBS. At this level, the team identifies individualized, trauma-informed therapeutic supports for students in the most need. For students involved in disciplinary actions that may result in suspension or expulsion, the team can identify programming options that allow students to remain in school while receiving therapeutic supports. The goal of each level is to provide trauma-informed supports that restore the school as a place of safety and belonging for all students, including those who are experiencing the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic most acutely.

## Building Relationships

The scale and longevity of the COVID-19 pandemic has led to significant upheavals in the social relationships of students. As a result, students may experience more intense periods of social isolation and loneliness. For some students, returning to school will not be enough to restore their social connections with peers and adults. Shalev et al. (2004) emphasized intentionally fostering social relationships as soon as possible after a crisis and to continue supporting these connections as they are critical for recovery. This is a priority for children and adolescents reuniting with parents, family members, classmates, and teachers.

The ways that teachers and school leaders communicate with students can provide the needed social support necessary for building student resilience factors. First, students' voices need to be heard and their feelings validated. Rather than denying students' feelings, educators will want to help students identify and communicate common reactions to disasters. Teachers who share information about the typical reactions to stress can help to normalize the situation. They will also want to point out how people can manage and cope during and after a crisis (Pfefferbaum & North, 2020). When students share their feelings, teachers will want to convey a sense of care and interest in the student's message. They can paraphrase the student's message to gain an accurate understanding of how the student perceives the situation. When teachers ask open ended questions such as, "What things do you see yourself doing to cope with the uncertainty of the situation?" they can gain a wide range of information from the student. It is also important that teachers convey to students that these communicative acts contribute to the social support network with peers and their families. Whether or not a student perceives social support during and after a crisis can predict how well they cope with their stress.

Teachers can create a positive classroom emotional climate by showing sensitivity to their students' needs, creating relationships comprising warmth, care, nurturance and congeniality. They take their students' perspectives into account, and do not use sarcasm or harsh disciplinary practices (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). Teachers who foster student comfort by expressing warmth toward, respect for, and interest in students while encouraging cooperation and support with one another can contribute to students healthy coping responses. Teachers will want to talk about how social support such as communicating with empathy towards each other within the classroom and using reflective listening can be an important ingredient to social support. Helping students recognize what social support consists of can allow them to view the school as a buffer against negative mental health development after adversity (Brewin et al., 2000).

## Promoting Self-Efficacy and Instilling Hope

Self-efficacy and hope are critical elements for helping children and adolescents navigate and manage responses to traumatic events (Hobfoll et al., 2007). The concept of self-efficacy refers to the individual's perceived ability to manage their responses and actions in the aftermath of a traumatic event (Bandura, 1997). Self-efficacy provides children and adolescents with the sense that they can exercise some manner of control over their actions and environment. Self-efficacy beliefs are essential for determining if a child will engage in thought processes and choices that lead to positive outcomes or if they will engage in self-defeating thoughts and behaviors that further exacerbate the adverse effects of traumatic events (Benight & Bandura, 2004).

The COVID-19 pandemic will cast a long shadow over children's perceptions of their health, safety, and well-being. From the perspective of children and adolescents, the relative routine and security of school as both a physical place and foundational tenet in their lives was disrupted. As a result, it is important that teachers engage in practices that help students re-establish their sense of self-efficacy as it relates to the school environment and activities. In order to accomplish this, schools can help teach students to regulate and manage their emotional responses in the wake of the pandemic. As students return to in-person instruction prior to the availability of a vaccine, continued outbreaks of COVID-19 will serve as trauma reminders that can undermine attempts to develop self-efficacy.

To help students improve their emotional regulation, teachers and counselors can engage students in mindfulness practices. A rapidly growing body of research supports mindfulness practices as effective methods for improving social-emotional competencies and emotional self-regulation in children and adolescents (Cachia, 2016). Mindfulness activities can have beneficial effects for teachers and parents too. Standard mindfulness exercises include formal activities, such as body-breath awareness exercises, and more informal activities, such as mindful walking. These can be provided at both the whole-class and small-group levels. These contemplative exercises involve sustained attention, attention switching, and inhibition of elaborative processing of thoughts, feelings, and sensations as they arise (Bishop et al., 2004). Mindfulness exercises integrate cognitive control and reflective strategies helping to further increase self-awareness and manage an individual's attention, emotions, and behavior (Greenberg & Harris, 2012). These are skills associated with improved self-efficacy and control over how we emotionally react to stimuli within our environment. There are a variety of mindfulness programs and practices available online that have been used to help students and teachers. The programs focus on a variety of mindfulness techniques, including guided meditation practices and breathing exercises.

As Hobfoll et al. noted, "Self–efficacy cannot occur in a vacuum; it requires successful partners with whom to collaborate, join, and solve the often large–scale problems that are beyond the reach of any individual" (2007, p. 294). It is important for school leaders to realize that self-efficacy is more than an individual belief- and skill-set. In some ways, it is a cultural norm that pervades a larger system. Schools that openly acknowledge the fears and uncertainties associated with traumatic events such as the pandemic are better positioned to engage in systematic responses to improve self-efficacy among all community members, including students, teachers, and administrators. Investing in professional development and other resources to help teachers and counselors implement strategies such as mindfulness practices, positive behavioral supports, and school-wide dialogues about the challenges associated with traumatic events is a necessary step for building a culture that supports self-efficacy and therapeutic responses to trauma.

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Instilling hope is another critical element for helping children and adolescents navigate and manage responses related to large-scale traumatic events such as a pandemic (Hobfoll et al., 2007). Hopelessness is often associated with feelings related to traumatic events. This sense of a loss of control and inability to imagine better circumstances for the future can be debilitating for children (Cole et al., 2009). It is important to note that hope has an interactive effect with the environment. Hope is not simply an internal emotional or belief state. It is a way of responding to circumstances based on both environmental and internal influences (Hobfoll et al., 2003). The broader school culture plays a key role in fostering hope.

Schools should adopt a variety of strategies to restore and instill hope for students in the aftermath of traumatic events. Therapeutic interventions at the individual level such as cognitive behavioral therapy and exercises can improve the sense of hope within adolescents who have experienced traumatic events (Saltzman et al., 2006). Group and class-level trauma interventions can address issues of hope and hopelessness (Hobfoll et al., 2007). Larger scale conversations that discuss the feelings and actions associated with events such as the COVID-19 pandemic can have the effect of bringing together a school community by acknowledging a shared sense of loss and fear. In these conversations, students, teachers, and administrators can collaboratively identify action steps they can take to reunite their school community. This proactive, forward thinking work can instill a sense of hope throughout the school through the development of shared goals and responsibilities.

## Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly altered the educational landscape across the United States. As families, students, and school personnel continue to navigate the pandemic, mental health experts have expressed their concerns over the potential impact on the long-term mental health and emotional well-being of students (CDC, 2020b). As we move closer to returning to in-person instruction, the lingering and long-term effects of the isolation and stress experienced by students during the COVID-19 pandemic may go unrecognized. Based on the work of Hobfoll et al. (2007), four principles of trauma-informed supports can guide school leaders in rebuilding school communities that have been fractured by the COVID-19 pandemic by a) promoting a sense of safety, b) addressing safety within behavior support practices, c) building relationships, and d) promoting self-efficacy and instilling hope. Strategically implementing these supports schoolwide can help school communities once again serve as supportive, welcoming environments for children and families.

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