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Trauma-Informed Practices: Professional Development for Elementary School Teachers

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Trauma-Informed Practices: Professional development for elementary school teachers

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Capstone Project: A School Improvement Plan

Northwestern College, Orange City, Iowa

Abstract

This school improvement plan addresses the need for trauma-informed practices to be implemented at Timber Ridge Elementary School in Johnston, Iowa. Students who have experienced adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are more likely to have poor attendance and lowered academic achievement compared to students without ACEs. Trauma-informed practices allow educators to understand such experiences and have resources available to teach students who have experienced trauma. Trauma-informed practices allow students to be present in school; therefore, increasing academic and behavioral success. This school improvement plan includes a detailed literature review surrounding trauma-informed practices. Additionally, this plan outlines a three-tiered professional development plan spanning three school years that allows educators to learn about and implement trauma-informed practices across all school settings.

Keywords: trauma-informed practices, elementary, childhood trauma, student success, professional development

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Trauma-Informed Practices: Professional development for elementary school teachers

“Students are unable to learn new information when they continuously operate in a fear state because the brain, when affected by trauma, is significantly limited in its capacity to receive and integrate new information” (Pawlo et. al., 2019, p. 38). Students in elementary schools face countless obstacles every day. One obstacle, that is ever evolving, is the impact of trauma on young students in elementary schools. Throughout the past 5 years, students across the elementary level at a suburban kindergarten through fifth grade school in Johnston, Iowa, have been exposed to images of school shootings, war, political unrest, refugees fleeing from war, and the COVID-19 Pandemic and schools are the setting in which students receive the majority of their services (Franko, 2018, p. 552). The problem is schools are ill equipped to navigate the trauma that their students are faced with, yet are required to teach through the trauma and ensure that every student succeeds while students are not meeting benchmark levels due to external factors impacting their education.

One way that discipline is enforced at the school is to remove disruptive students from the classroom; however, “Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), signed into law in 2015, specifies that one way to support learning is to curb the overuse of disciplinary practices that remove students from the classroom” (Gregory and Fergus, 2017, p. 118). By implementing trauma-informed social emotional learning practices, disruptive behavior may be reduced and students will spend more time in the classroom. At my school, FASTbridge reading data indicates that 73 percent of students met benchmark at the end of the 2022 school year. The goal for students across Iowa is that 80 percent of students meet benchmark. Teachers have not received adequate professional development to feel prepared to teach students with significant trauma and do not have the resources they need to help students succeed. Teachers are leaving

the profession at increasing rates due to lack of resources and the stressors that accompany teaching. Willett et al., (2014) state: “50% of teachers will leave the profession in the next five years, and 45% of teachers will not be teaching in ten years’ time” (as cited in Brunzel et. al., 2021, p. 91). Adequate training and resources are critical to teacher and student success.

The purpose of this school improvement plan is to address the professional development needed for elementary school teachers in regard to trauma-informed instruction and meeting the needs of students with trauma. This involves implementing research-based social emotional learning (SEL) interventions that correlate with trauma-informed education, and providing educators with the training and resources needed to implement a trauma-informed approach. Stegelin et. al. state:

“Trauma-informed early education requires all professionals to (a) understand the impact of trauma on early brain development, (b) construct school and classroom environments that support trauma-impacted young children’s emotional and developmental needs and those with mental health issues, (c) implement instructional and assessment strategies that are developmentally appropriate and attuned to the social-emotional needs of these children, (d) follow up intervention as a team and with written documentation of progress, and (e) engage and educate parents and families about trauma and the team effort to intervene and maintain consistency in expectations between the home and classroom” (Stegelin et. al., 2019, p. 10).

This school improvement plan will focus specifically on implementing instructional and assessment strategies that are developmentally appropriate and attuned to the social-emotional needs of elementary students. By utilizing trauma-informed practices across an elementary school building, in all settings, student achievement in academics and behavior will improve.

Throughout the process of designing this school improvement plan, multiple data bases were utilized, including the DeWitt Library at Northwestern College in Orange City, Iowa, in order to find the most recent and relevant information regarding trauma-informed education, teacher perceptions, and student success. After finding relevant resources from the past 10 years, themes were collected and a literature review was compiled. Research was carefully evaluated for significance to this school improvement plan. Studies that were not considered in this school improvement plan included research involving trauma-informed practices in health fields and research involving adult learners. The themes were compiled in an annotated bibliography and were transformed into a review of literature outlining trauma-informed practices, student achievement, teacher perceptions, gaps in the research, and a plan for future research.

The need for implementing evidence-based, trauma-informed teaching practices at the elementary level is critical. With a quickly evolving demographic of students, many of whom have experienced traumatic events including fleeing from war, tense political environments, and the COVID-19 Pandemic, teachers need to be engaged in a plan to help students navigate school and overcome the adversity that traumatic events bring. Author Cheryl Rosenbaum-Nordoft states that in a study relating to adverse childhood experiences: “Authors found that as the number of adverse childhood experiences increased, so too did the exposure to high-risk behaviors” (Rosenbaum-Nordoft, 2018, p. 3). Engaging in professional development sessions and implementing trauma-informed practices across the elementary school setting will encourage academic and behavioral growth for all students.

The literature review will outline current research in the field of trauma-informed teaching. Definitions of trauma, elements of trauma-informed teaching practices, implementation of trauma-informed teaching practices, student engagement, and student success will be

discussed in depth. Current gaps in research and recommendations for future research will also be included. In order to determine why the school improvement plan is necessary, several components will be involved. These components will be included in the school improvement plan and will comprise a detailed literature review to discuss current research regarding trauma-informed instruction; a school site profile to outline what the demographics and academic achievement levels are at the school; a needs assessment to determine current academic and behavioral levels and teacher perceptions regarding trauma-informed teaching; data analysis to break down the current reality of the school; an action plan to determine next best steps for the school; and an implementation overview of trauma-informed practices at the elementary school level.

Review of the Literature

Trauma-informed teaching is an ever-evolving framework in education. It ensures that children with childhood trauma are able to learn and succeed inside and outside the classroom by confirming that educators understand trauma and are able to teach students with traumatic experiences. The trauma-informed framework provides supports to both teachers and students alike in order to guarantee that all stakeholders succeed. This literature review will outline the definition of trauma and trauma-informed teaching, discuss best practices in the trauma-informed teaching framework, discuss how trauma-informed teaching impacts student engagement, and discuss how trauma-informed teaching increases student success rates in students with traumatic experiences in childhood.

Definition of Trauma-Informed Teaching

In order to define trauma-informed teaching, it is important to understand how childhood trauma is defined in current literature. Jaycox (2006) Bell et al. (2013) state: “Trauma occurs

when a child perceives themselves or others around them to be threatened by serious injury, death, or psychological harm. This in turn may cause severe stress, fear, and feelings of helplessness” (as cited in Bell et al., 2013, p. 140). Childhood trauma can be categorized into two different groups- acute trauma and chronic trauma (Bell et. al., 2013, p. 140). Acute trauma is defined as: “events (that) occur at a particular time and place and are usually short-lived” (Bell. et. al., 2013, p. 140). Acute trauma could be an event such as a car accident, an isolated assault, or a death of a family member. Chronic trauma is defined as trauma that occurs over a period of time. Examples of chronic trauma include long term child abuse, neglect, or a chronic illness (Bell et. al., 2013, p.140).

Additionally, in order to define trauma-informed teaching, it is vital to know and understand adverse childhood experiences (ACEs); and to understand how a students’ behavioral health relates to the school experience. Authors Kaye et. al. describe behavioral health as: “‘Behavioral health’ is often used to describe the connection between a person's behaviors and actions and the wellbeing of their body and mind” (Kaye et. al. 2022, p. 867). Recent literature suggests that children with positive behavioral health are more likely to have a lower number of adverse childhood experiences (Kaye et. al. 2022, p. 867-869). ACEs are: “the prolonged exposure of children to potentially traumatic events that may have immediate and lifelong impact” (Blodgett & Lanigan, 2018, p. 137). Such experiences include child maltreatment, family substance abuse, community violence, absence or loss of a parent, and natural disasters (Blodgett & Lanigan, 2018, p. 137). Adverse childhood experiences are increasingly relevant in elementary aged children. Bethell, Newacheck, Hawes, & Halfon (2014) quote: “48% of children experienced one ACE and 22.6% experienced two or more ACEs” (as cited in Blodgett & Lanigan, 2018, p. 138). School aged children who have experienced ACEs have a more difficult

time in school due to the inability to focus on instruction. “In some children, the inability to contend with the negative impacts of ACEs manifests in classrooms as students’ inability to successfully learn and can appear to teachers as heightened, off-task, resistant, aggressive and/or withdrawn behaviors” (Brunzell et. al. 2021, p. 91). By utilizing trauma-informed practices, teachers are better able to combat the effects of adverse childhood experiences and create a more inclusive environment for students in need.

Trauma-informed teaching takes what is known about childhood trauma, adverse childhood experiences, as well as best practices in education, and creates a framework to help students who have faced trauma succeed in the classroom. Trauma-informed teaching includes an understanding that students have and will continue to be faced with traumatic situations. Trauma does and will continue to impact education; and therefore, teachers must be willing and able to use approaches to help students succeed in spite of the trauma they have faced (Pawlo et. al., 2019, p. 38). Pemberton and Edeburn (2021) add that there is a strong correlation between social emotional learning, college and career readiness, and student success. The key factor between the three is trauma-informed teaching. Taylor et al. (2017) found that specific social-emotional interventions aligned to specific social-emotional assets result in an increase in academic success and an increase in appropriate social behavior within the school learning environment.

Trauma-informed teaching includes components for teachers, students, and schools. Current research recognizes that in order for students to be successful, there must be supports in place for teachers. Brunzel, Waters, and Stokes (2021) found that such supports include “interventions designed to assist teachers working in trauma-affected classrooms should have a dual-purpose to (1) help teachers address their own distress/wellbeing and (2) provide teachers

with strategies that allow them to support their students when students become heightened, escalated and/or dysregulated in class (Brunzel et. al. 2021, p. 94). Morton and Berardi (2017) add that trauma-informed teaching is not necessarily a set of activities or lessons, but rather a paradigm shift for educators and communities that requires educators to apply the trauma-attachment-neurobiological conceptual model of trauma response to the school environment (Morton & Berardi, 2017, p. 489). Trauma-informed teaching is a partnership between stakeholders that requires a paradigm shift for educators and community members alike. Morton and Berardi define and summarize trauma-informed teaching as:

[a] framework [that] allows the educator to hypothesize that children's defiant or non-engaged behaviors in the school environment may be logical stress reactions congruent with the nature of sustained loss and trauma. Before instruction can begin, overly stressed students need safety and stabilization in order to return to a state of calm. (Morton & Berardi, 2017, p. 490)

By allowing educators to embrace the paradigm shift and interact with the trauma-informed teaching framework, schools can provide a safer space for students who have experienced ACEs and trauma to learn and grow.

Trauma-Informed Practices

Trauma-informed teaching is an instructional framework that benefits students who have experienced trauma in their life. In order to execute the instructional framework, teachers are required to switch their paradigm of teaching as well as switch their school-wide teaching pedagogy. One way to implement these practices is through a school-wide multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) model where interventions can take place at the classroom, small group, or intensive level (Herrenkohl et al., 2019, p. 375). Such programming includes: "mental health

treatment, behavior modification, and social skills training to reduce conduct problems, increase prosocial peer interactions, and promote academic achievement among students requiring intensive support and intervention at the individual, group, and classroom levels” (Herrenkohl et al., 2019, p. 375). Authors Stokes and Turnbull (2016) outline 5 approaches to the trauma-informed classroom. They include self-regulation of the body, including identifying emotions and behavior in response to those emotions; relationships and whole-school relationships; stamina and resilience; engagement of students in the learning process; and identification of strengths of students.

Lieberman (2015) states:

Trauma-informed educators become keen observers of the child to identify trauma triggers and avoid retraumatization. They are aware of past or ongoing occurrence of trauma, so, when faced with a child who might be ‘acting out’, instead of asking ‘What is wrong with you?’ they approach the child with curiosity and the willingness to know what experience shapes their behavior (as cited in Rocha & Ruitenbergh, 2019, p. 134-135).

Trauma-informed practices include learning about the child and forming a relationship in order to understand what the child is going through, where the child’s behavior is coming from, and where the educator can go next in order to shape the behavior. Green et al. (2021) state: “Relationship skills refer to the ability to establish and maintain healthy relationships, communicate well with others, negotiate conflict, and seek and offer help when needed” (p. 533). In a study conducted by Opoila et al. (2020), research was conducted to determine the value of relationship building with students who have experienced ACEs. They found that there is a positive correlation between relationship building and student behavior. Additionally, “This

finding is supported by Marzano et al.'s (2003) meta-analysis, which showed a 31% decrease in students' problem behaviors when teachers formed strong relationships with them" (Opoila et al., 2020, p. 7).

Student stamina, self-efficacy, and self-regulation are additional areas of focus in the trauma-informed practice framework. Cook et al. (2015) state: "Students with a trauma history often experience lack of trust and low self-efficacy beliefs, which may interrupt their ability to form positive developmental relationships and resilience necessary to overcome the impact of childhood adversity (as cited in Frankland, 2021, p. 60). Trauma decreases the brain's capacity to self-regulate naturally "a loss of core capacities for self-regulation and interpersonal relatedness" (Cook et al., 2005, p. 390). In order to increase self-efficacy, students and teachers need to understand their bodies and utilize self-regulation practices. Schonert-Reichl et al. (2015) found that: "giving children mindfulness attention training in combination with opportunities to practice optimism, gratitude, perspective-taking, and kindness to others can not only improve cognitive skills but also lead to significant increases in social and emotional competence and well-being in the real-world setting of regular elementary classrooms" (p. 63). Mindfulness practice in the trauma-informed framework allows students to learn to self-regulate and in turn increases a students' sense of self-efficacy.

Despite the countless studies that suggest trauma-informed practices are beneficial to children, there are studies that argue that there are missing pieces in the trauma-informed framework. Trauma-informed practices tend to focus on identifying and emotion and self-regulating a reaction to the emotion. Rocha and Ruitnberg (2019) argue: "A focus on socializing children risks standardizing and pathologizing emotions rather than encouraging their expression" (p. 133). This could be harmful as students may be discouraged from expressing all

their emotions and instead forced to regulate those emotions. This in turn could lead to students shutting out emotions. Rocha and Ruitnberg (2019) go on to argue that there is too strong of a focus on trauma and not enough focus on the whole child. The implications include losing sight of the whole child and decreasing a sense of singularity in a child (p. 133). Although there are arguments against the use of trauma-informed practices; research and evidence make it clear that trauma-informed practices are beneficial for all stakeholders involved.

The Effects of Trauma-Informed Practices and Teacher Involvement on Student Engagement

Trauma plays a substantial role in the day-to-day life of students and teachers play a major role in assisting students in regulating their emotions, working through their trauma, and engaging in school work. Farmer, Burns, Phillips, Angold, & Costello (2003) suggest that “teachers may serve as a linking pin between families and clinical services as schools are children’s most important entry point to mental health care” (as cited in Alisic et al., 2012, p.98). Research indicates that when teachers feel supported in trauma-based practices, they are more likely to feel prepared to engage students in school work who have been impacted by trauma. Authors Blitz et al. (2016) state that: “School-based mental health support was noted as an important resource, not only for direct student support, but also help teachers better understand student behavior and improve engagement in learning (p.531). Trauma-informed teaching incorporates practices that have shown to increase student engagement. Practices such as establishing relationships, building upon strengths, and utilizing a students’ culture and heritage create a sense of belonging and in turn increase student engagement in learning (Blitz et al., 2016, p. 521).

Another vital piece of trauma-informed teaching is the use of mindfulness practices to encourage students to self-regulate. Pemberton and Edeburn (2021) state: “overall programs that address the whole child are important, such as including nutritional programs and sleep hygiene” (p. 191). They add that mindfulness programs have also been found to be beneficial to student engagement throughout all grade levels (p. 191). Student achievement stems from student engagement. Brunzelli et al. (2019) note: “framing this work [trauma-informed teaching] as a response to challenges faced by teachers, rather than a response to problematic teacher behavior, can increase engagement” (as cited in Reiersen & Becker, 2021, p. 131). Research shows that student engagement is also impacted by an increase in self-efficacy and self-reflection (Reiersen & Becker, 2021, p. 132).

Trauma-informed teaching utilizes all components of student engagement in order to create the most positive outcome for students. Students are able to engage in learning when their bodies are calm and regulated. Djambazova-Popordanoska (2016) and Kwon et al., (2017) discuss that students who have experienced trauma have a more difficult time regulating their emotions and therefore, are less engaged in learning (as cited in Green et al., 2021 p. 544). Green et al. (2021) add “By helping children to understand the connection between their thoughts and their emotions, they can learn to recognize when they need to quiet down and allow their innate well-being and common sense to re-surface, thus allowing them to effectively manage how they respond to their emotions” (p. 544).

The Effects of Trauma-Informed Teaching on School-Wide Success

Student success comes in many forms. Trauma has been shown to have a significant impact on student success; and trauma-informed practices have shown to have a positive impact on student success. Cozolino (2013); Rossen and Hull (2013) note that: “Educators have long

known that many students face significant challenges engaging in academic and social tasks of the school environment due to severe and /or chronic traumatic stress “(as cited in Morton & Berardi, 2017, p. 487). However, “our understanding of the interconnectedness of safe and sustained attachment and the neurobiology of stress and trauma has increased, offering confirmation that trauma- informed methods of response are healing and increase resilience” (Morton & Berardi, 2017, p. 487).

Social Emotional Learning (SEL) goes hand in hand with trauma-informed teaching. SEL “helps students develop *resilience*, the capacity to acknowledge and attend to personal difficulties while working toward expectations” (Frankland, 2021, p. 58). Green et al. (2021) conducted a study around the SPARK mentoring program- a social emotional curriculum that focuses on trauma-informed practices for elementary aged students. The goal of SPARK is to increase resilience in students. This study found that the program increased students’ self-efficacy and resilience, and showed success in the area of emotional regulation (p. 544).

Parental participation is an additional component included in the trauma-informed practice framework that contributes to student success. Morton & Berardi (2018, p. 492) discuss that parents are an essential part of student success as they are oftentimes the first to see when their student is struggling. Trauma-informed teaching helps foster community and family relationships as well as creates an open-door policy in educational spaces. By allowing community members, and families into the classroom, students are able to be wrapped in support from all stakeholders in their lives. Furthermore, trauma-informed teaching encourages a partnership between mental health professionals, educators, and families.

Research shows that utilizing trauma-informed practices increases the amount of time that students show appropriate behavior and decreases the amount of office referrals and

suspensions. Burke and colleagues (2011) found that “as ACE exposure increased, learning and behavior problems in schools also increased” (as cited in Blodget & Lanigan, 2018, p. 138). It was found that: “an understanding of ACE risk is not only useful for the most vulnerable children but may also be productively used to understand and respond to children who struggle with academic success as a critical developmental process but who may never be formally diagnosed or referred for services” (Blodget & Lanigan, 2018, p. 141). The trauma-informed approach focuses on restorative practices as opposed to traditional disciplinary methods. Noltemeyer et al., (2015) state: “A meta-analysis of 24 studies from 1986 to 2012 determined there was a significant, negative relationship between suspensions and academic achievement” (as cited in Anderson et al., 2019, p. 252). Restorative practices established through trauma-informed teaching are beneficial for students who have experienced trauma. Stagelin and colleagues (2019) state: “After several years of making policy and practice changes, the 2014–2015 academic year reflected a significant shift from higher levels of preschool suspension and expulsion to substantial restorative responses to behavioral challenges” (p. 16). Restorative responses keep students in the classroom, therefore; increasing academic and behavioral success.

Trauma-informed teaching has also been shown to benefit the educators who teach it. In order for trauma-informed education to yield student success, educators must:

- (a) understand the impact of trauma on early brain development, (b) construct school and classroom environments that support trauma-impacted young children’s emotional and developmental needs and those with mental health issues, (c) implement instructional and assessment strategies that are developmentally appropriate and attuned to the social-emotional needs of these children, (d) follow up intervention as a team and with written documentation of progress, and (e) engage

and educate parents and families about trauma and the team effort to intervene and maintain consistency in expectations between the home and classroom (Stagelin et al., 2019, p. 10).

The trauma-informed approach to teaching establishes several best practices to ensure that both educators and student succeed. Rosenbaum-Nordoft (2018) suggests:

By adopting the trauma-informed lens, educators shift their perspective to question the functions behind behaviors so that they can better understand the learning and emotional needs of their students. With a lens that focuses on the impact of trauma rather than the details of the story, educators have the power to support and engage each child, and help them develop the skills to be successful (p. 8).

Educators must be trained; however, to provide trauma-informed instruction. It is argued that teachers do not feel adequately trained to teach students with significant trauma (Alisic et al., 2012). Additionally, teachers may experience a significant amount of compassion fatigue. Alisic and colleagues (2012) go on to argue that: “Finally, half of the teachers indicated a difficulty with emotional involvement. In other professions (e.g., first responders and mental health care providers), the risks of compassion fatigue and secondary traumatization have been described” (p. 100). Although there may be risk of burnout, trauma-informed teaching aims to train educators to encounter student trauma and provide the supports necessary to help students succeed.

Trauma-informed teaching is a well-researched, highly effective framework in education. Teachers are able to help students succeed by working with community members, families, and mental health professionals. Trauma-informed teaching ensures that children are able to enter the classroom and feel safe and secure; and therefore, able to learn. This literature review discussed

definitions of trauma and trauma-informed teaching, outlined best practices in the field of trauma-informed teaching, explored how trauma-informed teaching impacts student engagement, and reviewed how trauma-informed teaching leads to school wide success and increases student success rates in students with traumatic experiences in childhood. Counterarguments of teacher burnout and shutting down students' emotional responses were also discussed; however, the benefits of trauma-informed teaching outweigh the setbacks.

School Profile

Community Characteristics

Johnston, Iowa is a suburb in central Iowa, United States. It is located 9 miles northwest of the city of Des Moines. It has a population of 24,195 according to the 2021 census estimates (United States Census Bureau, 2021). Johnston consists of 85% white, 5% black or African American, 7% Asian, and 3% Hispanic. Additionally, the median household income in Johnston is \$92,984 with a population of 5.1% living in poverty (United States Census Bureau, 2021).

School District Characteristics

As of May, 2022, Johnston Community Schools reports to serve 7,102 students in grades kindergarten through 12th grade. 70.5% of students identified as white, 9.1% identified as black, 8% identified as Asian, 6.9% identified as Hispanic, less than 1% identified as Pacific Islander, less than 1% identified as Native American, and 4.5% of students identified as two or more races (State of Iowa, 2022). 1,756 students qualified for free and reduced lunch. 751 students qualified for the talented and gifted program. 756 students qualified for individualized education plans (IEP). 708 students in the community qualified for English Language Learners services. 222 students qualified for Title 1 services. 252 students had 504 plans. 21 students were identified as

homeless. 1,030 students were identified as at-risk individuals (Johnston Community School District, 2022).

School Building Characteristics

Timber Ridge Elementary School serves 753 students as of the 2017-2018 student head count. Timber Ridge Elementary is the largest elementary school in the district; housing five sections of kindergarten, five sections of first grade, five sections of second grade, four sections of third grade, four sections of fourth grade, and four sections of fifth grade. Additionally, Timber Ridge Elementary serves students with unique needs with two ELL teachers, three reading support teachers, an ESL program, and eight special education teachers. Timber Ridge Elementary's boundaries extend to serve students who have Johnston, Urbandale, and Des Moines addresses.

Student Portfolio and Performance

Students at Timber Ridge Elementary attend school with a 95.7% daily attendance rate (Johnston Community School District, 2022). Johnston Community School District (2022) also reports that during the 2021-2022 school year, there were 404 behavioral incidents reported. Of the 404 incidents, 113 incidents were major (28%) and 291 were minor (72%). There were 57 incidents in kindergarten, 119 incidents in first grade, 92 incidents in second grade, 20 incidents in third grade, 28 incidents in fourth grade, and 88 incidents in fifth grade. Aggressive behaviors and inappropriate classroom behaviors were the top reported incidents in 2021-2022 (Johnston Community School District, 2022).

During the 2021-2022 school year, Timber Ridge Elementary established Continuous Improvement Plan (CIP) goals in the areas of reading and school culture and climate. The goals read: "100% of K-5 students will maintain or improve national percentile score as measured by

FAST reading from Fall 2021 to Winter 2022 and Winter 2022 to Spring 2022” (Timber Ridge Elementary CIP, p. 2). According to reports, Timber Ridge Elementary students did not meet the academic goal. Kindergarten data from the winter showed 73% proficiency. Spring data showed 77% proficiency. In the winter, first graders were 54% proficient. In the spring, first graders were 57% proficient. Second graders scored 65% proficiency in the winter and 74% proficiency in the spring. Third graders showed 90% proficiency in the winter and 86% proficiency in the spring. In the winter, fourth graders scored 78% proficiency compared to 83% in the spring. Fifth graders showed 78% proficiency in the winter and 80% proficiency in the spring. 80% proficiency indicates a healthy core curriculum (Panorama Education, 2022).

The culture and climate goal, established in 2021, read: “100% of K-5 Timber Ridge students will interact with their Leadership Notebooks at least 1 time per week from September 2021 through May 2022” (Timber Ridge Elementary CIP, 2021). Timber Ridge Elementary implemented the Leader In Me framework in fall 2018. Leadership notebooks were introduced in fall 2022. This CIP goal was met; however, the 2022 Conditions for Learning Survey suggested that Timber Ridge Elementary students did not feel connected to school or the teachers who taught there. 75% of responses indicated that students felt like they had strong adult-student relationships. The survey also suggested that Timber Ridge Elementary students were not aware of and did not understand the expectations and boundaries throughout the school. 63.3% of responses indicated that there are easy to understand and consistent rules and boundaries at the school. Furthermore, according to the Conditions for Learning Survey (2022), students did not feel emotionally or physically safe at school (Panorama Education Conditions, 2022).

Parent Involvement

Parents at Timber Ridge Elementary are highly involved. Timber Ridge Elementary has an extremely active Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) who donate endless time and money to better the school and community. Classrooms have the opportunity to have parent volunteers in their classrooms. The majority of classrooms at the school take advantage of this opportunity. Parents also donate supplies and money to make classrooms a more productive place for students. Outside of school, parents are moderately involved with their children's learning. According to the Conditions for Learning Survey (2022), 49% of students reported that they have an adult at home that they can go to for help with homework. 28% reported that there is sometimes an adult at home that they can go to for help with homework, and 23% of students reported that there is not an adult at home that they can go to for help with homework.

School Mission and Vision

Johnston Community School District lives by the mission: "We commit all district resources to guide the learning of all students to graduate as confident learners with character, knowledge, and the skills to excel in any endeavor they pursue" (Mission & Vision, 2022). Johnston Community School District has the vision of "Creating a culture of excellence where students come first" (Mission & Vision, 2022). Timber Ridge Elementary has an additional school specific mission of All Means All. Timber Ridge teachers are committed to serving all students, all the time. They take pride in working together as a team to best meet the needs of all students in all areas of the day.

Current Student Learning Goals

Timber Ridge Elementary has adopted three CIP goals for the 2022-2023 school year. There are goals in the areas of academics, behavior, and culture and climate. The 2022-2023 academic CIP goal states that: By December 2022, 100% of students at Timber Ridge will show

academic growth in these subject areas: reading, math, writing. Action steps include learning around aMath, common writing prompts given three times per year, increasing writing content across academic areas, targeted interventions, and professional learning opportunities. The behavior goal states: By December 2022, 100% of Timber Ridge staff will know and consistently implement building wide PBIS expectations with fidelity. Action steps toward accomplishing this goal include creating a common online referral method for all staff, teaching expectations on day one utilizing rotating stations, teaching The First 8 Days from Leader in Me, utilizing a fidelity checklist, and implementing PBIS surveys throughout the year. The climate and culture goal states: By the end of December, 2022, 100% of Timber Ridge staff and students will feel respected and connected. This goal involves action steps including utilizing passion groups and action teams, assigning building wide leadership roles, establishing Dragon on Fire and PRIDE awards for students and staff, and establishing a system to celebrate students and staff. The goals encompass the work that needs to be accomplished according to the 2021/2022 Panorama reports.

Needs Assessment

What is the Problem?

The problem is schools are ill equipped to navigate the trauma that their students are faced with- yet are required to teach through the trauma and ensure that every student succeeds and students are not meeting benchmark levels due to factors impacting their education. Culture and Climate is an area that growth is needed at Timber Ridge Elementary. Timber Ridge Elementary students did not meet the 2021-2022 continuous improvement plan. The data supports that students at Timber Ridge Elementary were not overall proficient in reading or

math. Furthermore, Timber Ridge students and staff reported that emotional safety and physical safety were areas of weakness at the school.

Timber Ridge Elementary has historically had a narrow focus on academic data. In recent years, Timber Ridge Elementary staff and stakeholders have shifted the focus from primarily implementing and analyzing academic data to analyzing and presenting social and emotional data. In fall, 2018, Timber Ridge Elementary adopted Stephen Covey's *Leader in Me* framework. *Leader in Me* by Stephen Covey:

is an evidence-based, comprehensive model that builds leadership and life skills in students, creates a high-trust school culture, and lays the foundation for sustained academic achievement. There are over 5,000 *Leader in Me* schools in all 50 states and in over 50 countries. Our mission is to unleash the greatness in students, educators, and school communities everywhere (Leader in Me, 2022).

Leaders at Timber Ridge Elementary had the hope that this framework would help build strong student leaders at the school and in turn, students would take more ownership of their own learning and behavior.

In March, 2020, the COVID-19 Pandemic shut down school for the remainder of the school year. Throughout the 2020-2021 school year, students attended Timber Ridge Elementary using a hybrid approach for several months. Students played in recess zones and were only allowed to play with students in their own class. Students were not allowed to interact with peers across the grade level due to the need to minimize exposures. During this Pandemic, students at Timber Ridge Elementary missed hundreds of hours of in-person instruction. In turn, students were not able to practice the social skills needed to interact with peers and problem solve. This Pandemic has also affected social, emotional, and behavioral health (SEBH). "SEBH has also

been adversely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has brought enduring illness, social isolation, and grief, as well as housing instability, the loss of childcare, and changes to health insurance coverage” (Kaye et al., 2022, p. 867). In turn, a decrease in SEBH increases the amount of trauma that young students are exposed to.

Timber Ridge Elementary staff have not been trained in trauma-informed practices, but are expected to teach through and respond to student trauma on a daily basis. Data shows that 75% of students at Timber Ridge Elementary have negative responses on emotional safety according to the Conditions for Learning Survey (Panorama Student Success, 2022). By providing professional development on effective trauma-informed teaching practices, as well as implementing the strategies throughout every classroom at Timber Ridge Elementary, staff will feel an increased confidence in teaching students who have experienced trauma, and in turn, students will feel a better connection to school.

Data Analysis

How Do We Know?

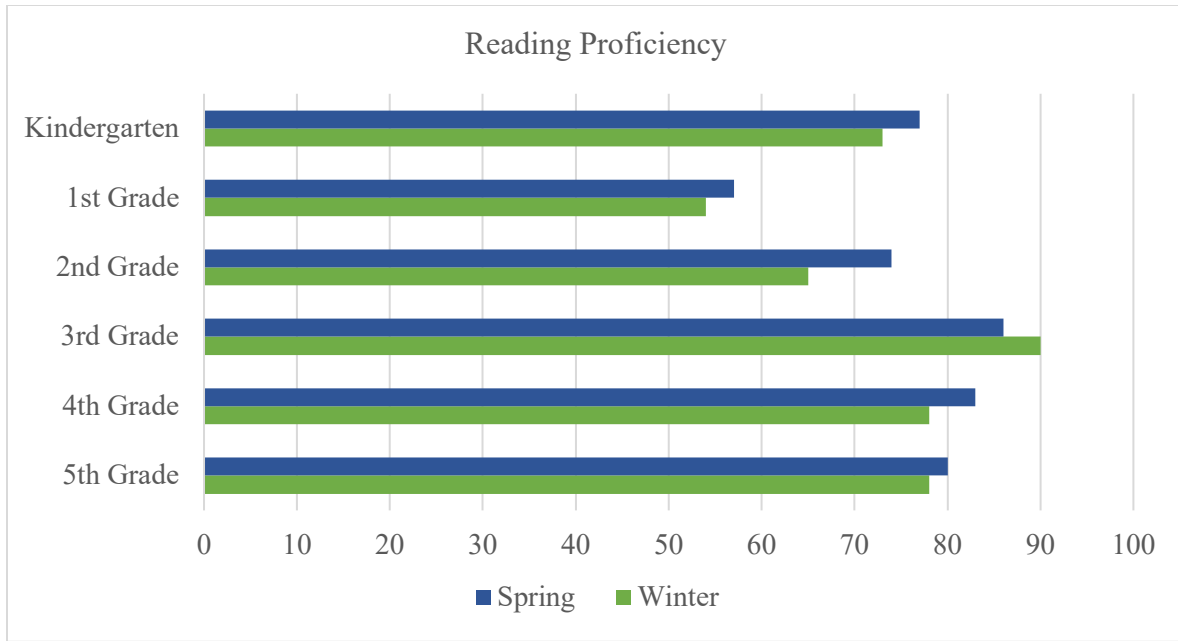
Students at Timber Ridge Elementary participate in multiple surveys and assessments every year to address both academic and social-emotional needs. Such assessments include the Conditions for Learning Survey, Measurable Results Assessment (MRA) through Leader in Me, aMath, aReading, and CBM reading. Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) members assemble the data from these surveys and assessments and analyze the data. The team makes instructional decisions and improvement plans from the data that is assembled. Figure 1 (below), from the 2021-2022 school year suggests that students at Timber Ridge Elementary did not meet the CIP goals that were put in place for the 2021-2022 school year.

Reading Proficiency

After analyzing the data, students at Timber Ridge Elementary did not meet the overall state-wide standard for literacy or mathematics during the 2021-2022 school year (Panorama Education, 2022). Kindergarten reading data from the winter showed 73% proficiency. Spring data showed 77% proficiency. This showed an increase of 4% overall proficiency; however, this did not meet the overall state standard of 80% proficient. In the winter, first graders were 54% proficient. In the spring, first graders were 57% proficient. This data showed an increase of 3% in proficiency, but 46% of first graders did not meet the statewide goal. Second graders scored 65% proficiency in the winter and 74% proficiency in the spring. This means that 26% of second graders were not proficient in reading by the end of second grade. Third graders showed 90% proficiency in the winter and 86% proficiency in the spring. In the winter, fourth graders scored 78% proficiency compared to 83% in the spring. Fifth graders showed 78% proficiency in the winter and 80% proficiency in the spring. 80% proficiency indicates a healthy core curriculum (Panorama Education, 2022). Figure 1 demonstrates the percentage of students who have demonstrated reading proficiency during the winter and spring screening windows in 2021-2022. 80% proficiency demonstrates a healthy core curriculum.

Figure 1

Timber Ridge Elementary Reading Proficiency



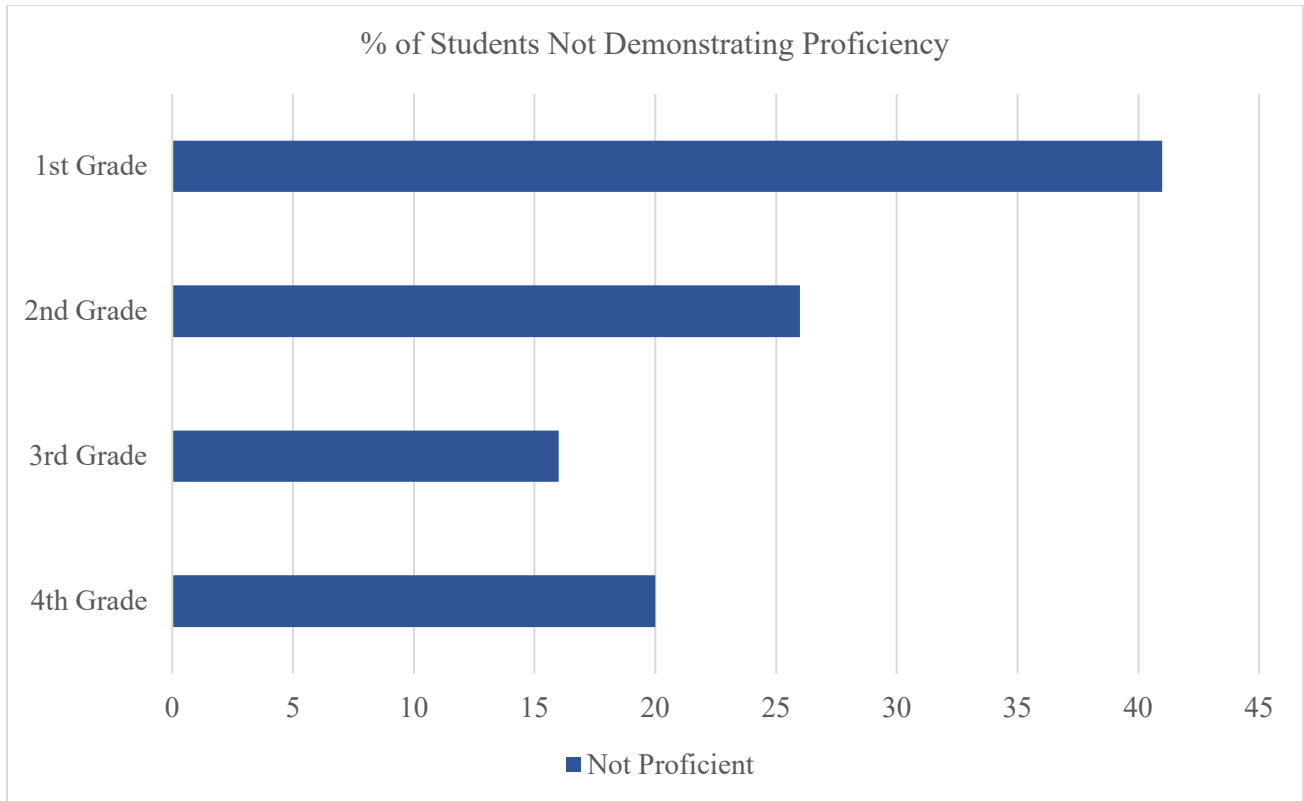
Note. Figure 1 shows the percentage of students in grades kindergarten through 5th grade that demonstrated proficiency in reading during the winter and spring screening windows of 2022.

Mathematics Proficiency

Kindergarten through second grade students showed the least amount of growth in both reading and mathematics. Math assessments are administered three times a year to students at Timber Ridge Elementary in order to assess mathematics proficiency and growth. Assessment data was gathered during the 2021-2022 school year and analyzed to determine student growth and success. See Figure 2.

Figure 2

% of Students Not Demonstrating Proficiency



Note. Figure 2 demonstrates the percentage of students in each grade level that did not demonstrate proficiency by the end of the 2021-2022 school year. Grades kindergarten and 5th were not assessed (Panorama Education, 2022).

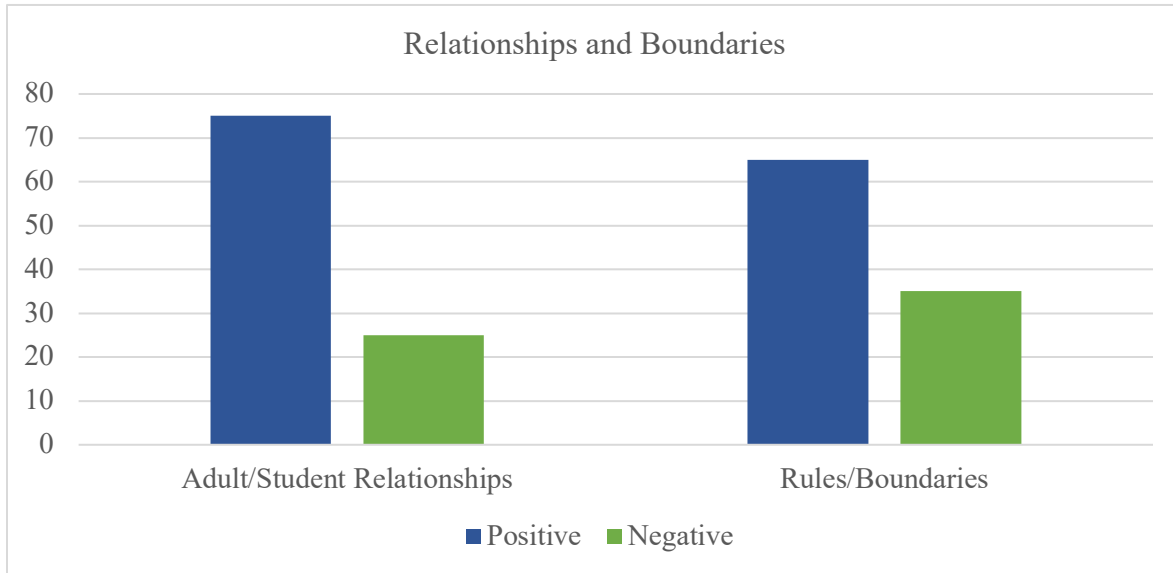
This indicates that students at Timber Ridge Elementary have barriers that have gotten in the way of their academic success and they are not demonstrating overall academic proficiency. This aligns with students who have been most negatively impacted from the COVID-19 pandemic. Students in grades kindergarten through second grade had not received a full year of education in the public school setting up until the 2021-2022 school year. Teachers' perceptions showed that they felt they had major gaps to fill from students not being in school (Conditions for Learning, 2022).

Conditions For Learning Survey

The 2022 Conditions for Learning Survey suggested that 25-30% of Timber Ridge Elementary students did not feel connected to school or the teachers who taught there. See Figure 3.

Figure 3

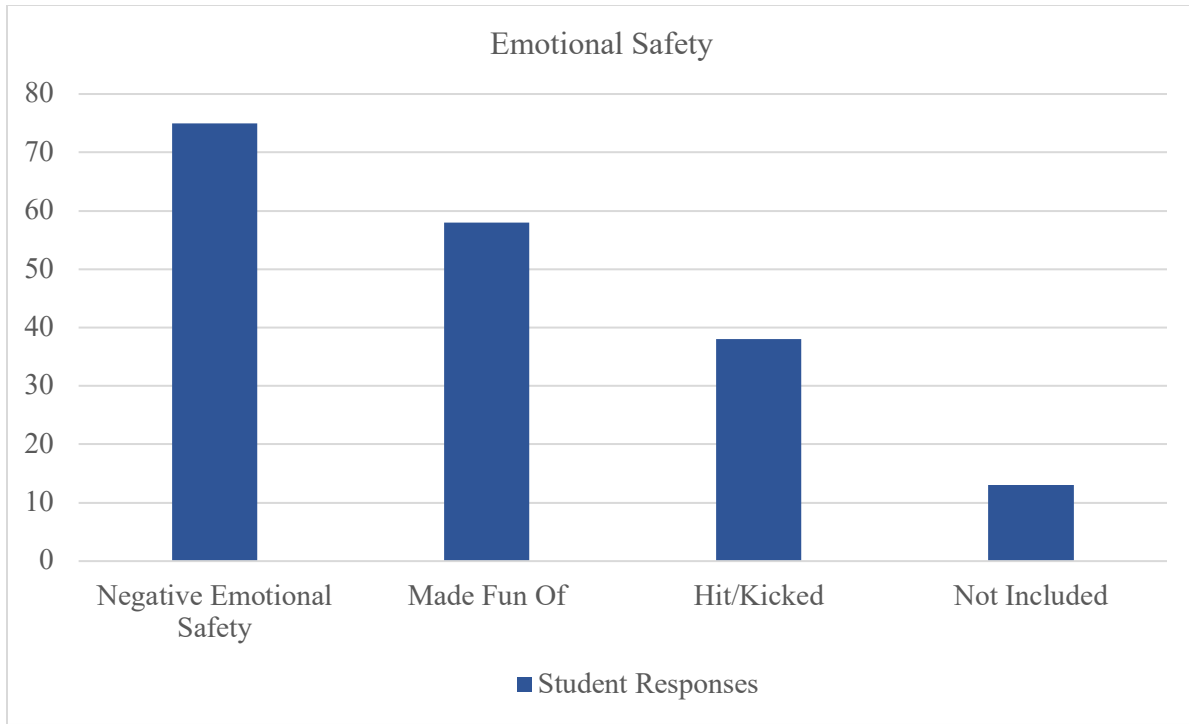
Relationships and Boundaries



Furthermore, according to the Conditions for Learning Survey, students did not feel emotionally or physically safe at school. 75% of students marked negative responses in regard to emotional safety. 58% of students marked that they have been made fun of or been called names at least one time at school. 38% of students indicated that they have been pushed, kicked, or hit by another student at the school at least one time. 13% of students said that they have never been included in a group of friends. (Panorama Education Conditions, 2022). See Figure 4.

Figure 4

Emotional Safety



Note: Figure 3 indicates students who marked negative responses on the Conditions for Learning Survey (Panorama Education Conditions, 2022).

This data indicates that there is a significant need for relationship building and a need for a focus on students’ emotional and physical safety at school. Additionally, there is a significant need for students and staff to know and understand boundaries in the classroom and across all school settings.

School Successes

There are areas at Timber Ridge Elementary that show staff and student success. The results of the MRA survey, administered in the spring of 2022 indicate that 85% of kindergarten through third grade students feel that they are able to share their successes at school. Over 90% of students in kindergarten through third grade marked that they had leadership roles within their classrooms (MRA Survey, 2022). The Conditions for Learning Survey (2022) shows that 90% of students marked that they feel connected to at least one other student at school. Reading and

mathematics data indicates that both third and fourth grade students are more than 80% proficient in meeting statewide goals (Panorama Education, 2022).

The data has been analyzed and summarized to show that students at Timber Ridge Elementary did not meet CIP goals during the 2021-2022 school year. In order to increase academic and social-emotional performance, there is a need for professional learning around the area of trauma-informed teaching. Teachers must understand how to successfully implement trauma-informed practices in their classrooms in order to increase their students' sense of emotional and physical safety. Elementary school students spend the majority of the day with their homeroom teacher and classmates; therefore, homeroom teachers have a unique opportunity to learn about, and receive insight on their students' home life and childhood experiences, yet, students have indicated that they do not feel that they have adequate relationships with the adults at Timber Ridge Elementary. Trauma-informed practices emphasize the importance of relationships between students and teachers. By implementing school-wide trauma-informed practices, students will feel more connected through relationships at school.

Action Plan

What Steps Will We Take to Solve the Problem?

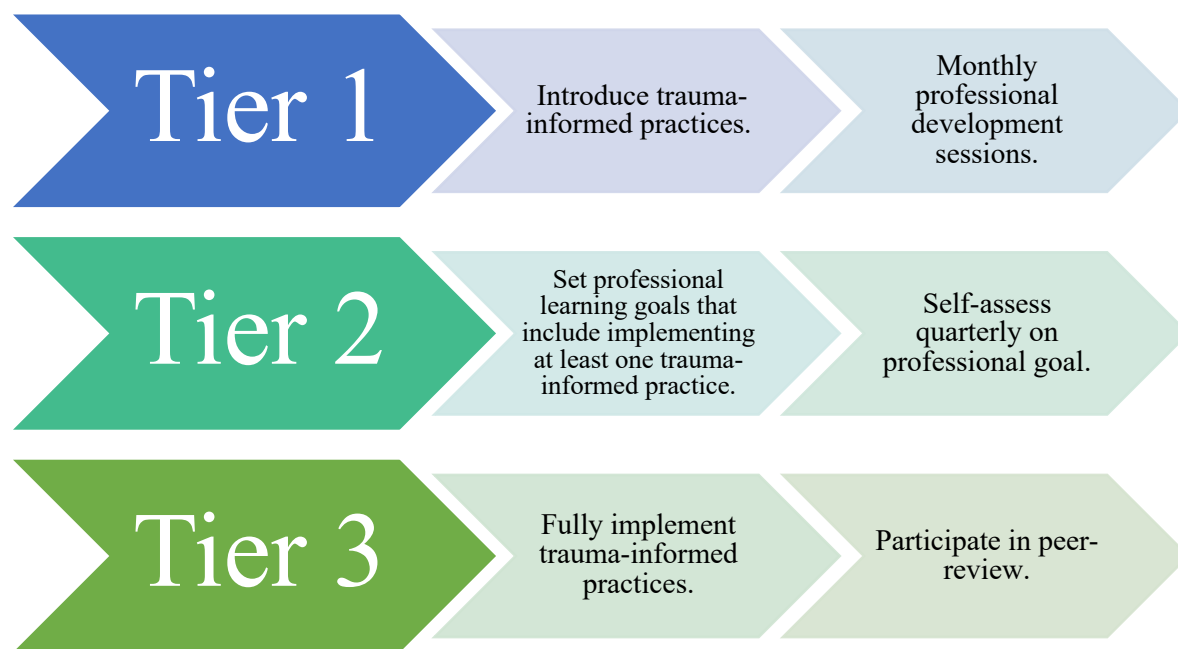
To meet the diverse needs of the unique students at Timber Ridge Elementary School, several steps must be taken in order to implement trauma-informed teaching practices across all settings throughout the entire school day. Timber Ridge staff are committed to meeting the needs of all learners through the vision of All Means All. In order to implement these practices, staff will be invited to participate in a series of professional development sessions on best instructional practices in regard to the trauma-informed framework. Research-based trauma-informed practices may include, but are not limited to: relationship building with students and

staff, social skills instruction, instructional focus on identifying and coping with emotions, and a strong emphasis on ensuring students attend school. Timber Ridge Elementary staff will implement these practices across instructional settings with a focus on best meeting the needs of students with trauma.

In order to fully understand and implement the plan successfully, this school improvement plan will take a three-tiered approach (Figure 5 below), across a span of three full school years. By the end of the third school year, all Timber Ridge Elementary staff will have received professional development surrounding best trauma-informed teaching practices, will have had a full school year of piloting trauma-informed practices, and will have a year consisting of implementing the practices and participating in a peer review of the trauma-informed teaching practices. The multiple tiers will be aligned with building-wide continuous improvement plan goals, as well as the Leader in Me framework and elements of Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS).

Figure 5

Three-Tiered Goal Outline



Tier one includes introducing trauma-informed practices through a series of monthly professional development sessions. Professional development sessions will include a focus on restorative practices, relationship building, social skills instruction, identifying and responding to emotions, and engaging students in school. Restorative practices are critical in keeping students inside the classroom and out of suspensions (Burke and colleagues, 2011 as cited in Blodget & Lanigan, 2018, p. 138).. The International Institute for Restorative Practices describe these practices as: “an emerging social science that studies how to strengthen relationships between individuals as well as social connections within communities” (Wachtel, 2022). Examples of restorative practices that educators can create goals around include affective language, celebration circles, and student-centered discipline routines (Wachtel, 2022). Restorative practices, social skills instruction, and identifying and responding to emotions all correlate in helping students feel safe and secure in the classroom.

Tier two includes setting professional learning goals surrounding and area of trauma-informed teaching and implementing one practice in the classroom or school setting. This tier

also includes a quarterly self-assessment on progress towards the goal. After completing a year of professional learning in all areas of trauma-informed teaching, educators will be asked to create a goal and implement at least one trauma-informed practice during the tier. Teachers may choose to implement a restorative circle, form a goal on establishing rapport with students, or intentionally add engagement strategies into daily lesson plans. This tier allows educators voice and choice in the implementation process and allows educators to slowly become more comfortable in trauma-informed practices.

Tier three consists of implementing multiple trauma-informed practices consistently, across educational settings daily. In tier three of this process, educators will have received full training on implementing trauma-informed practices, will have piloted trauma-informed practices for a year, and will have completed multiple self-assessments in order to identify their own needs. Tier three allows educators to become more comfortable in fully implementing these practices. A peer-review will allow teachers to observe other educators implementing these practices, as well as allowing teachers to collaborate around best practices in the classroom. By the end of tier three, educators will be fully comfortable in identifying and implementing trauma-informed practices across all educational settings.

By approaching trauma-informed practices in a multi-tiered approach, educators and staff have the opportunity to learn about and implement the framework without being overwhelmed. Multiple tiers give staff a full year to learn about different trauma-informed practices and how to best implement the practices across multiple settings. Individual and peer reviews gives educators the chance to reflect upon their work. Allowing three years for teachers to fully implement these practices empowers educators to grasp an understanding of practices and put the practices into play in the classroom.

Implementation of School Improvement Plan

How Will We Know the Plan Worked?

Implementing research-based, trauma-informed practices throughout all settings in the entirety of Timber Ridge Elementary will take a multi-tiered, three-year approach. As outlined in Figure 5 above, implementing these practices will take a total of six steps. Tier one includes learning about trauma-informed practices using a series of professional development opportunities. Tier one is proposed to take one full school year. Tier two advances the learning and encourages teachers to set a professional goal surrounding trauma-informed practices. Additionally, tier two asks teachers to self-assess on a quarterly bases on how well they are implementing their selected practice in the classroom. Tier two is proposed to last an additional full school year. The final tier, tier three, requires all educators at Timber Ridge Elementary to fully implement trauma-informed practices throughout the school day. Tier three also urges teachers to partake in a peer-review that empowers teachers to learn from each other and gain insight to different practices and ways to implement trauma-informed practices in their specific settings. Tier three occurs during a third full school year. From launch to culmination, this plan is outlined to last for full three school years.

Resources

Multiple resources will be required to ensure that this plan works and that teachers feel fully supported in implementing trauma-informed practices in their educational settings. Prior to phase one, educational leaders at Timber Ridge Elementary will review books and educational resources to develop professional development sessions. Throughout phase one, educational leaders will develop professional development sessions for an entire school year accounting for one session per month. Teachers will be required to participate in the professional development

sessions, therefore, time during contracted work hours will be a necessity. During phases two and three, instructional coaches will be available for additional coaching opportunities surrounding trauma-informed practices. Teachers will also have access to professional texts and videos surrounding best practice in the area of trauma-informed teaching.

Responsibilities

Implementing trauma-informed practices across all settings at Timber Ridge Elementary requires all stake-holders to invest in the learning process. Educational leaders play a critical role in implementing these practices. It is vital for educational leaders to be fully supportive of the three-tiered approach. Morale also begins with the instructional leaders; and therefore, it is critical for them to show excitement and be willing to learn alongside their staff members. Furthermore, educational leaders have the important role of developing and providing professional development sessions surrounding trauma-informed practices throughout phase one.

Teachers and staff members also have the responsibility of fully diving into this work. Staff members are required to attend all professional learning sessions throughout phase one. After phase one, staff members will be responsible for setting their own professional goal with a focus on a specific trauma-informed practice that they will implement for the school year. They will also be responsible for self-assessing their progress towards their professional learning goal, and will be required to make trauma-informed practices a priority in their educational setting. During phase three, all staff members have the additional role of participating in a peer-review and fully implementing trauma-informed practices throughout the entirety of the school day.

Monitoring Plan

Timber Ridge Elementary administers many assessments in the areas of reading, mathematics, and social/emotional health several times throughout the year. Currently, data in

Figures 1 through 4 demonstrate that there is growth that needs to happen in all academic and behavioral areas. Continuing to monitor utilizing the same assessments will help create a consistent body of evidence that demonstrates growth throughout all three phases of this school improvement plan. Additionally, staff members will take a self-assessment quarterly in phase 2 of the plan. This self-assessment will determine how staff members are progressing towards their professional learning goals and help determine proficiency in implementing the trauma-informed practices framework. During phase three, staff members will also partake in a peer-review. This review will provide additional data on how well and how often staff members are implementing trauma-informed practices in their setting.

Barriers and Challenges

There will be barriers and challenges that arise when implementing this school improvement plan. To begin, educators already face an incredibly difficult and demanding workload. Complete staff buy-in is critical in meeting the goals of the plan; therefore, it will be imperative that educational leaders communicate the importance of implementing trauma-informed practices across settings. Additionally, staff members may have questions regarding how they will be able to find time during the day to implement the trauma-informed practices while still keeping core standards at the center of all instruction. Implementing trauma-informed practices also has a high risk of compassion fatigue. It will be critical for educational leaders and counselors to be prepared for the emotional hardship that accompanies uncovering trauma.

Although there may be pushback and there will be challenges, it is in the best interest of Timber Ridge Elementary students and staff to implement trauma-informed practices across the school day. Students are faced with an increased amount of trauma, and academics are suffering. Adequate training, many powerful resources, and utilizing colleagues will help staff members

understand the importance of implementing trauma-informed practices across all instructional settings.

Conclusion

This school improvement plan addresses the professional development needed for elementary school teachers in regard to trauma-informed instruction and meeting the needs of students with trauma. Teachers will explore and participate in a three-tiered approach to learning about and implementing trauma-informed practices in their classrooms. Professional leaders will complete the work of developing professional development sessions and providing educators with the training and resources needed to implement a full trauma-informed approach across the school day. Teachers will take on the responsibility of learning about trauma-informed practices and creating professional learning goals surrounding implementation of the trauma-informed approach of their choosing. Teachers will ultimately be responsible for providing students with a safe place to learn and grow by implementing trauma-informed practices throughout all educational settings.

Although trauma-informed practices are researched heavily in the medical and mental-health fields, additional research is necessary in elementary and secondary education. Resources need to become easier to access for educators in order to fully implement these practices in their setting. There is also a need for increased research surrounding teacher perceptions of trauma-informed practices and compassion fatigue. Compassion fatigue comes with teaching students with trauma; therefore, research is needed on how to combat compassion fatigue and to protect our educators.

“Students are unable to learn new information when they continuously operate in a fear state because the brain, when affected by trauma, is significantly limited in its capacity to receive

and integrate new information” (Pawlo et al, 2019, p. 38). It is the primary job of schools to teach children; however, schools also have the important role to keep students safe and create a learning environment where the students feel accepted, safe, and comfortable. In order to push students to a place where they are able to perform academically and behaviorally, teachers must have the resources to teach through and help students cope with the trauma that they have encountered in their lives. Trauma-informed teaching practices allow teachers to connect with students who have experienced trauma and help allow students to excel throughout all areas of their lives.

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