



Creating Trauma-Sensitive, Safe and Supportive School Cultures for All Students

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The Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative (TLPI)



Learning Objectives

After completing this webinar, participants will be able to:

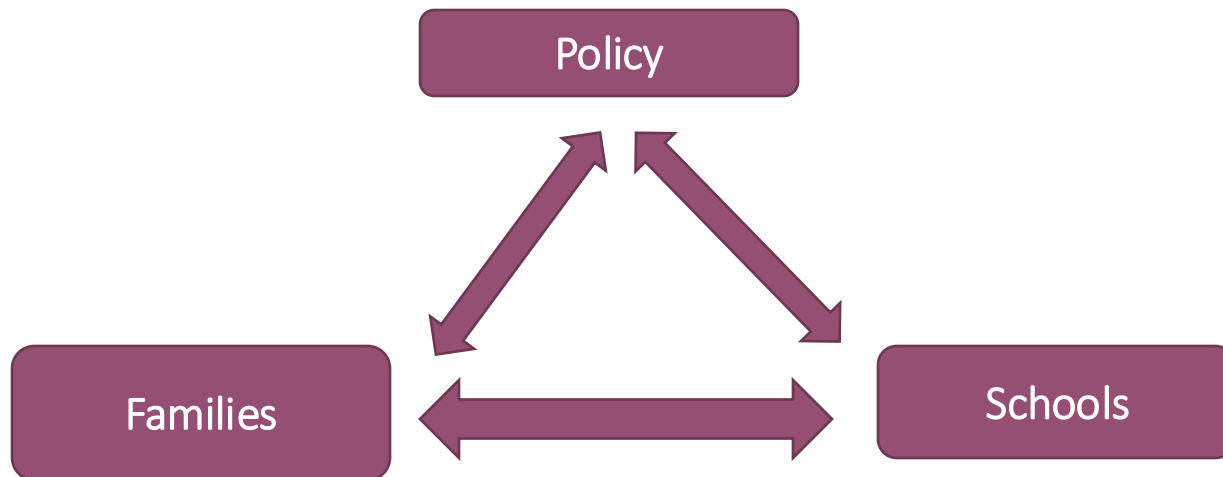
- L01.** Describe how educators can engage in a process of collective inquiry and reflection which leads to shifts in thinking and in practice that result in trauma-sensitive, antiracist school culture change. This school culture in turn affirms students' cultural identity and increases their sense of belonging.
- L02.** List the attributes of a trauma-sensitive school.
- L03.** Explain the efficacy and benefits of TLPI's Inquiry-Based Process for creating trauma-sensitive, antiracist school culture change.
- L04.** Discuss how best to incorporate inclusive, school-based, decision-making practices that promote Safe and Supportive School cultures.

Disclaimer:

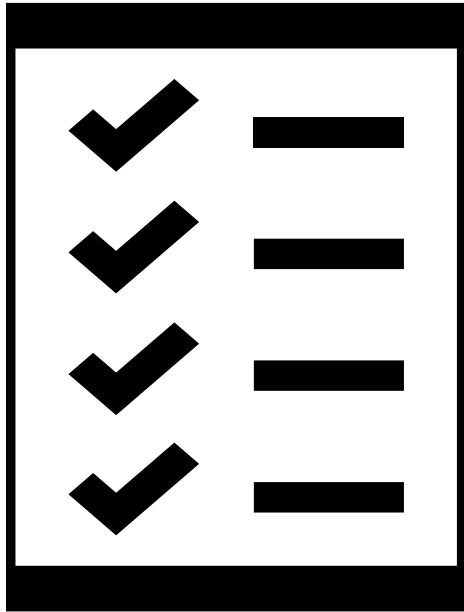
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TLPI's Mission:

Ensure that all students, including those impacted by trauma, succeed at their highest levels in school and in life. We define trauma to include harms stemming from individual adverse experiences as well as from structural inequities like racism.



Overview of Presentation



What is a positive school culture and why is it important? Why must it be trauma-sensitive, safe and supportive?

What does a trauma sensitive, safe and supportive school culture look like?

How can we create a trauma-sensitive, safe and supportive school culture?

An Invitation to Reflect. . .

Think of a time when you felt truly safe and supported in a learning environment (could be a formal setting, like a classroom, a mentoring relationship, or any other setting where you were supported to learn something new).

What did the adults do that made the experience successful?

What is school culture?

- How we work together
- Shared understandings
- Teamwork
- “solving problems together
- Unwritten rules
- Ecology
- Activity behind the scenes
- “the way we do things around here”

See Gruenert, S., Whitaker, T., *School Culture Rewired*. ASCD (2015)

Educators define school culture

"I think you feel it when you walk into the building. The vibe...you can feel that things are running smoothly, it's friendly and welcoming."

"When what you, as a school, value is clearly seen to anyone who walks into the building."

"...school culture is also is the unwritten rules and how things operate behind the scenes.

How do we talk about students behind closed doors? How do we approach certain problems?"

School culture: Students' View

“it feels friendly. A lot of teachers will be communicating with each other and laughing. Then it feels fun, exciting. You’re having fun. You’re not really worried about feeling nervous or shy because you feel comfortable.”

“it feels calm and relaxing, friendly The teacher—you can trust her and stuff, to ask questions and to learn things...because it actually gives you time to get your mind thinking.”

Why a positive culture is important

Students learn best in a safe and supportive environment.

Educators move from being reactive to **proactive.**



Why is it important that the school culture be trauma-sensitive, safe and supportive?

When everyone in the school shares an understanding of how trauma impacts learning, behavior and relationships, it helps us see the whole child and why they may act in unexpected ways.

Think of it as a pathway to positive school culture.



Why is it important that the school culture be trauma-sensitive, safe and supportive?

More young people than we imagine have experienced adversity.

(N=17,337)

Abuse

Physical	28.3 %	(4906)
Psychological	10.7 %	(1855)
Sexual	20.7 %	(3,689)

Neglect

Emotional and Physical	24.7 %	(4,282)
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Household Experience

Substance Abuse	26.9 %	(4,664)
Mental Illness	19.4 %	(3,363)
Mother Treated Violently	12.7 %	(2,202)
Criminal Behavior in Household	4.7 %	(815)

Adverse Childhood Experiences Study (ACE)

Fellitti et al (1998)

Reported at Least One ACE

64%

Felitti, et al. (1998)

Philadelphia ACE Study

2013

Emotional Abuse	33.2%
Physical Abuse	35.0%
Witnessing Domestic Violence	17.9%
Family Member Incarcerated	12.9%

Additional Categories:

Witnessing Violence	40.5%
Felt Discrimination	34.5%
Adverse Neighborhood	27.3%

83.2 %

Covid 19 Pandemic

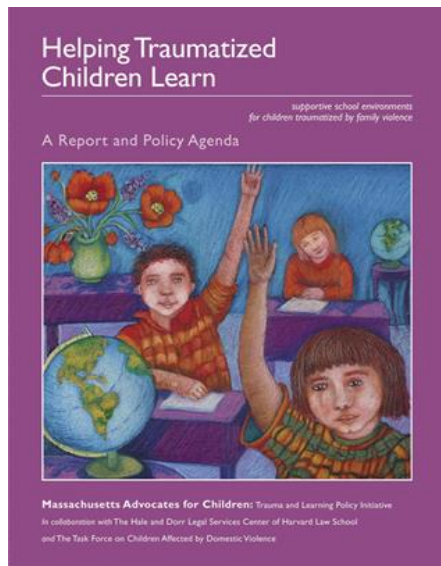
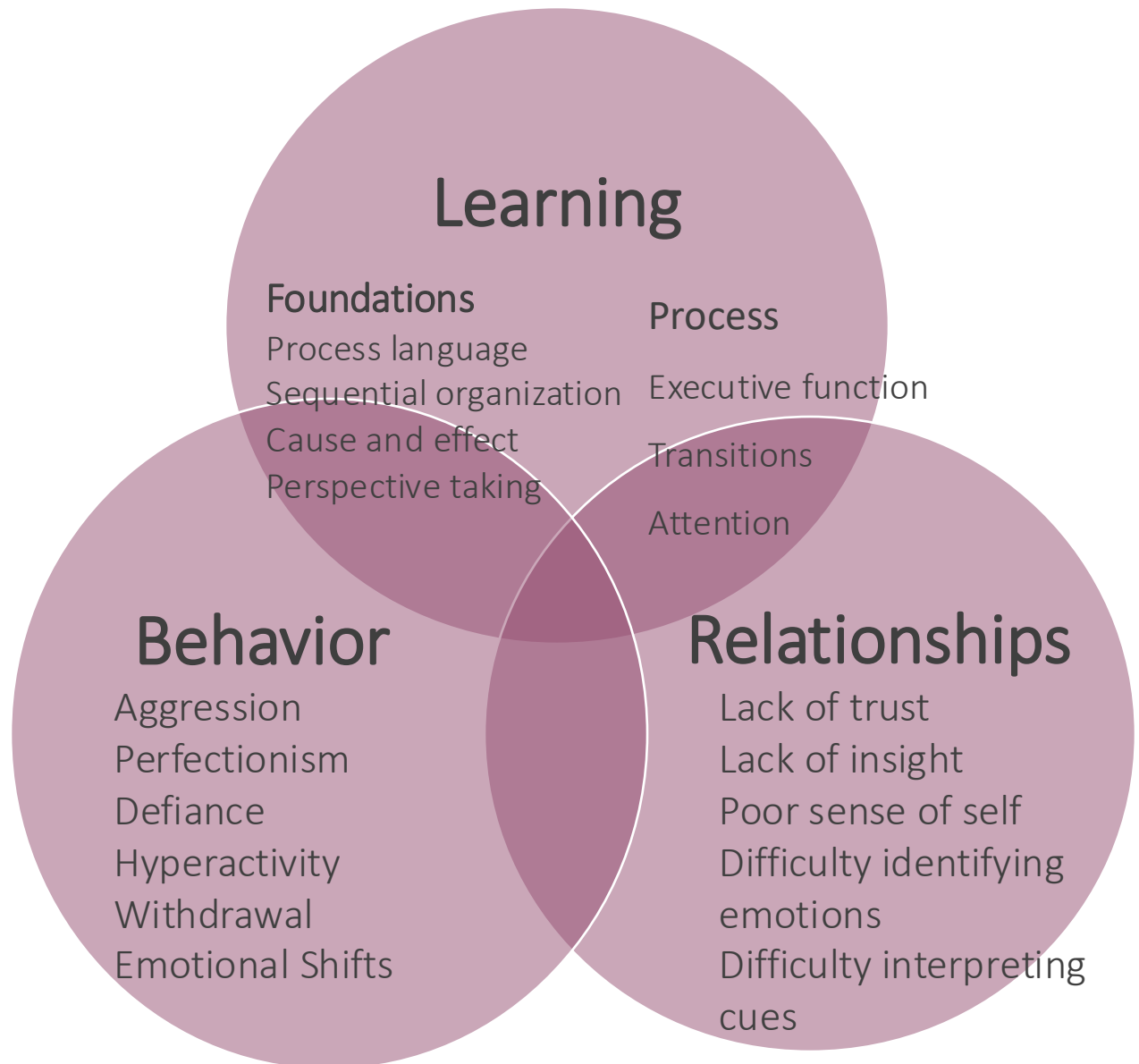
- ❑ Increased Risk of Stress and Loss
- ❑ Disproportionate impacts exacerbated gaps in learning
- ❑ Reduced access to supports
- ❑ Major disruption of social and developmental milestones

Why must a school culture be trauma-sensitive, safe and supportive?

Trauma's Impact On Brain Development

- Natural process to adapt to our experience
- Traumatic experiences can trigger “fight, flight or freeze” response (e.g., arousal, heart rate, numbing, dissociation—the Limbic System).
- Lower the Trigger Threshold
- Chronic Limbic stimulation can
 - Alter **utilization/connection** among brain structures
 - Reduce **size** of certain brain structures
 - Alter **hormone/transmitter** secretion
- Can result in students utilizing **Survival** brain, not **Learning** brain

Trauma can
impact
learning,
behavior and
relationships
at school.



Potential Impact of Trauma on Learning

- Language-Written, read, oral, non-verbal
- Ability to process oral and written information
- Sequential organization
- Memory
- Executive function: Goal, Plan, Do, Review
- Transitions (endings and beginnings)
- Attention

Potential Impact of Trauma on Behavior

- Aggression
- Defiance
- Withdrawal
- Perfectionism
- Hyperactivity, reactivity, impulsiveness
- Rapid and unexpected emotional shifts

Common Thread:

Student sense of safety is a key driver of their behavior

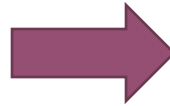
Potential Impact of Trauma on Relationships

- Lack of trust
- Difficulty interpreting verbal/nonverbal information; difficulty reading faces and gestures
- Lack of insight into relationships
- Poor sense of self and perspective taking
- Difficulty identifying emotions—self and other
- Unpredictable behavior

Misunderstandings

Student Perspective

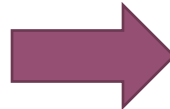
“Danger is everywhere, I must always be vigilant”



Adult Perspective

“He won’t pay attention; he’s smart, but just won’t try enough”

“If I’m perfect, I’ll protect myself and my parent”



“She is such a good kid! She doesn’t need help”

“I always have to be in control, so that I can avoid danger”



“She’s so defiant and aggressive, a bad kid”

“I can’t trust that you have my best interest at heart”



“He rejects any help that I offer him”

All of this contributes to a systemic problem

Adults can

- Unintentionally distance themselves from students.
- Misunderstand traumatic symptoms as character flaws.
- Misperceive students as lazy or unmotivated.
- Impose punitive responses

Impact on Students

- Decreased motivation and engagement in learning
- Poor grades and test scores
- Poor relationships with adults and peers
- Truancy and dropping out
- Suspension/expulsion
- Criminal justice system involvement



Your Ideas?

What can make it
challenging for adults to
recognize behavior as a
response to stress instead
of as “misbehavior?”

How does a trauma-sensitive, safe and supportive school address these impacts?

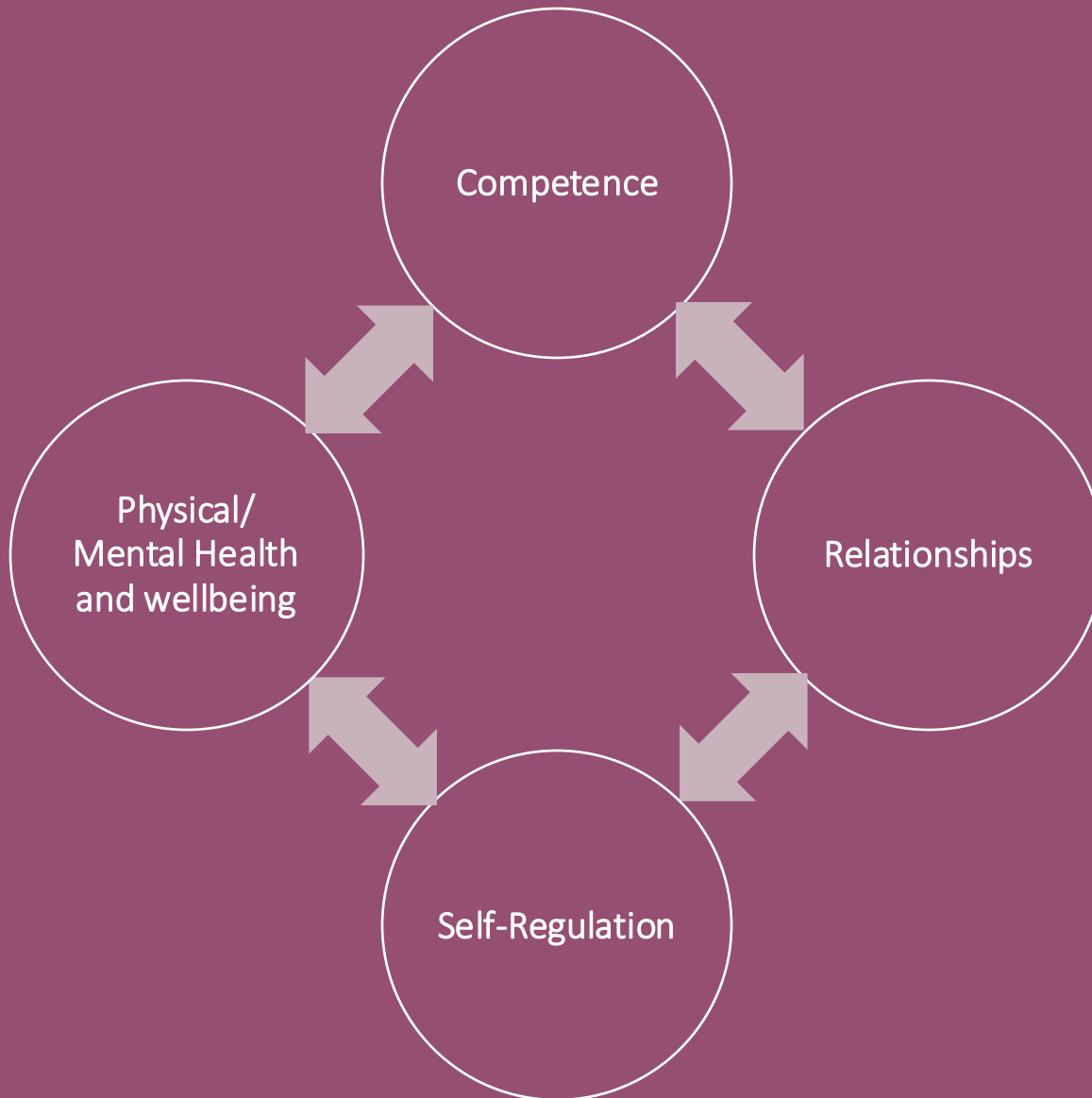
Employ a student-centered model of success (Whole Child) to promote student well-being and academic success.

Foster a sense of connection and belonging among *ALL* students to enhance their well-being and motivation, which are crucial for academic performance.

Create a safe and supportive (trauma-sensitive) school community/ culture through embracing a spirit of inquiry and engaging in action.

Whole Child

4 Domains



Fostering a Sense of Belonging



Fundamental human need,
shapes sense of self-worth.

Supports sense of safety.

Goes beyond connecting
with others, to include
connecting with safe spaces.



Importance of Student Voice

Why Student Voice?

Creates conditions that support young people to feel empowered and connected to their schools.

Decisions reflect students' needs and lived experiences

Shifts existing power dynamics

Supports students' sense of self and belonging

Student Voice in Action





Think & Share

What schoolwide activities, practices, etc. do we have in place that support cultivating a sense of belonging?

Are there groups of students in our school for whom these practices may not be working?

Why Family Voice?

Creates conditions that support families to feel empowered to contribute to their students' success.

Decisions reflect families' needs and lived experiences

Students do better when their families are involved.

Honors parents/guardians as their child's first teacher.

A high-angle, close-up photograph of a dark wooden table in a cafe. Several hands are visible, holding white mugs of latte and a glass of iced coffee. A small blue plate with a chocolate brownie and a white napkin with a croissant are also on the table. A pair of glasses is in the upper left. A semi-transparent purple box with white text is overlaid on the right side of the image.

**Please take a 10-minute
break to re-set.**



Trauma-Sensitive Vision

A trauma-sensitive school is one in which all students feel **safe, welcomed, supported**, and empowered to participate fully in all the school has to offer. It is a school where **addressing trauma's impacts on learning, including trauma from racism** and other structural inequities, on a school-wide basis is at the **center of its educational mission**.

How do we get there?

The **Attributes** of trauma-sensitivity

Leadership and staff **have a shared understanding** of trauma's impact on learning.

The school **supports all students to feel safe (physically, socially, emotionally and academically)**

The school addresses students' needs in **holistic ways**, including their relationships, self-regulation, academic competence, and physical and emotional well-being.

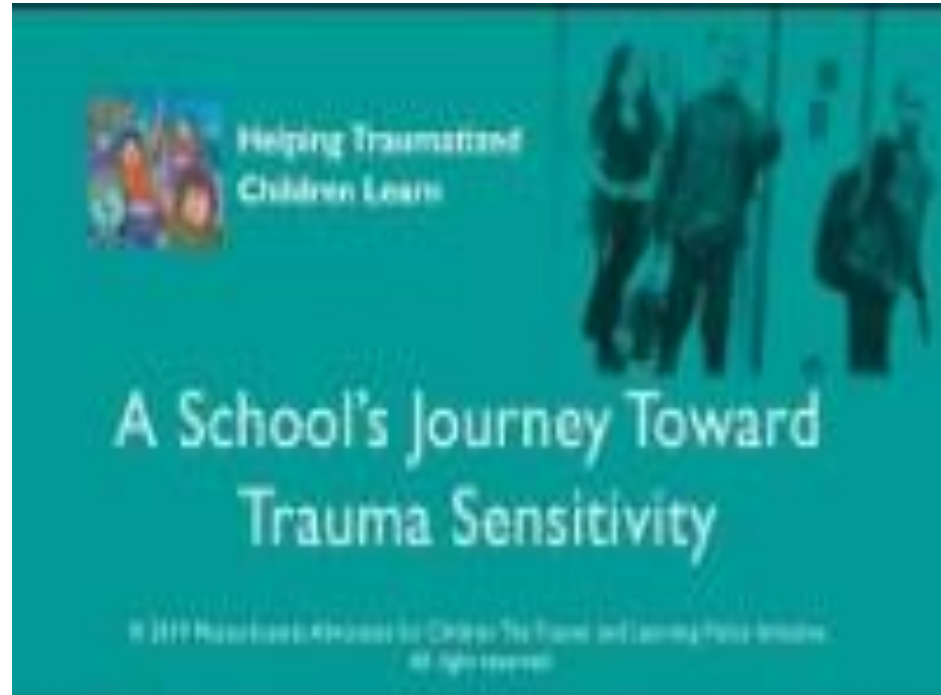
The school explicitly **connects students to the school community, and provides multiple opportunities to practice skills**

The school **embraces teamwork** and staff share responsibility for all students.

Student and staff **voice** matter and are part of the decision- making process

Leadership and staff **anticipate and adapt** to the ever-changing needs of students.

What does a trauma-sensitive school look, sounds like, and feel like?





Video Reflection

What did you notice?

A core attribute of a trauma-sensitive school is that the school supports all students to feel safe physically, socially, emotionally and academically.

How is safety reflected in the video?

Why Inquiry?

Asking “why” supports all stakeholders to engage in questioning, discussion and idea generation

Creates opportunities for all members of the school community- teachers, students and families- to work together

Implies that everyone in the school community is valued for their questions AND answers

Allows the power to shape the school community to be shared and fosters a sense of ownership and voice.



An **action-planning process** can help integrate trauma sensitivity into the school's *educational mission*.

The Inquiry Based Process



The Inquiry Based Process

Learning together as a whole staff

Coming together as a team

Asking hard questions

Identifying common priorities

Action planning

Ongoing reflection

Data-based self-assessment

Trauma-Sensitive Lens

Focuses on creating a school environment that is safe and supportive and that **works for all students**

Helpful tool **for recognizing and repairing present and historical inequities**

Encourages adults to **work to become allies to all students and families** across lines of difference.

Equips school staff with tools, the Attributes and Trauma-sensitive Vision Questions that support educators to create a more responsive and equitable school community.

Shifts in Ways of Thinking

Traditional Lens

Reactive response to students' needs



Focus on individual student support



Managing behavior through punitive discipline



Academic outcomes focus



Siloed and solo efforts to address needs



Trauma-Sensitive Lens

Proactive response to students' needs

Focus on Individual AND Schoolwide supports

Building skills in self-regulation and fostering relational accountability

Whole child focus

Staff working in collaboration with each other

What does the research say?

2 Year Outcomes:

The IBP empowered teachers and helped to build shared ownership for school climate and culture change, produced shifts in mindset that led to changes in practice, and over time appeared to become embedded in the culture

Improved staff cohesion and communication

Empowered educators

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

What does the research say?

Year 3 Outcomes:

"School leadership, faculty, and staff felt they were doing important work and experienced healthy support systems with each other."

"Educators gradually became empowered trauma-sensitive leaders and drivers of ongoing change..."

- Affirming cultural identity and promoting a sense of belonging
- Re-envisioning discipline towards relational accountability



Applying the Trauma — Sensitive Lens

Given today's discussion,
what feels urgent to
address in your school?

In what ways would
becoming more trauma-
sensitive help to address
this urgency?



www.traumasensitiveschools.org

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