

Creating Trauma Sensitive Arizona Schools

Building Resilience to Lessen the Effects
of Adverse Childhood Experiences



March 2021 Arizona students deserve a world-class education that prepares them to succeed in college, career and life. Schools throughout the U.S. are engaged in the work of transforming into trauma sensitive environments – taking deliberate steps to become safe havens for all students and provide safe working environments for all educators.

Executive Summary

In Arizona and around the U.S., a growing number of school districts are transforming their schools into trauma sensitive environments and taking deliberate steps to become both safe havens for all students and safe working environments for all school staff. This report provides a glimpse into the current state of trauma informed policies and practices in schools throughout Arizona and presents recommendations to further advance supportive education environments. Information gathered from education leaders provide insights to promoting effective trauma sensitive schools in Arizona. What comes through clearly from those leading the way in Arizona is that this work hinges on recognizing and supporting all staff in focusing on developing relationships with students, families and the community. The areas of greatest need are increased opportunities and designated time to learn about trauma, cultivate meaningful relationships, develop and implement district and school-wide action plans, as well as increase support for staff wellbeing.



THE KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THIS REPORT INCLUDE:

- 1) Establish a Resilience Coordinating Council
- 2) Require a Baseline of Knowledge for All School Staff and Increase Leadership Development
- 3) Enhance School Employee Wellness
- 4) Establish Funding Mechanisms to Support Trauma Sensitive Arizona Schools

Impact of the Pandemic and Racial Injustice

The COVID-19 pandemic has been devastating for children, and the true impact will not be known for years to come. Prior to the pandemic, it was estimated that up to 1 out of 5 children experienced a mental disorder in a given year in the U.S.¹ While research on the pandemic's effects on mental health is still in the early stages, current evidence shows a surge in anxiety and depression among children and adolescents since the pandemic began.² A mental health crisis is emerging as many students have lost access to support and services that were offered by schools, while administrators and teachers are tasked with educating in an ever-changing environment (in-person today, virtual tomorrow, and hybrid next week).

Amplifying the impact of the pandemic is the long-standing racial inequality throughout the education system. Students of color face increased adversity and are often the subject of low expectations, micro-aggressions and bias.³ Adopting a trauma informed, culturally-responsive lens can help mitigate the impact of these twin crises. According to 2015-2016 data from the U.S. Department of Education, students of color in Arizona are more likely to be suspended from school.⁴ These disparities are the most pronounced for black students. While 5% of the state's students are black, they account for 13% of all out-of-school suspensions. Five percent of the state's students are Native American, yet they account for 9% of all out-of-school suspensions. Hispanic students are suspended at a rate proportional to the population, but still at a slightly higher rate than white students.⁴

"YOU CAN'T KNOW THIS STUFF AND NOT DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT."

Isaac Salcido, Director Tribal Education, Gila River Indian Community

Introduction

Adverse childhood experiences, or ACEs, are potentially traumatic events that occur in childhood (0-17 years). These include: experiencing violence, abuse, or neglect; witnessing violence in the home or community; or having a family member attempt or die by suicide. Also included are aspects of the child’s environment that can undermine their sense of safety, stability, and bonding such as growing up in a household with: substance misuse, mental health problems, instability due to parental divorce or separation or household members being in jail or prison. ACEs are linked to chronic health problems, mental illness, and substance misuse in adulthood, and can also negatively impact education and job opportunities.⁵

The phrase “trauma-informed care (TIC)” has existed since the mid-1980s, but the practice has come into widespread use only in the past decade. TIC assumes everyone has had some trauma in their lives and starts not by asking “What is wrong with this person?” but instead “What has happened to this person?” As a strength-based approach that emphasizes physical, psychological and emotional safety, TIC embraces six key principles to support change not only within service delivery (healthcare or education), but also throughout an organization⁶:



Key Principles:

1. Safety
2. Trustworthiness and transparency
3. Peer support
4. Collaboration and mutuality
5. Empowerment, voice, and choice
6. Cultural, historical, and gender issues

Implementation of a trauma-informed approach is an ongoing organizational change process. It is not a program model that can be implemented and then simply monitored for fidelity. Instead, it’s a profound paradigm shift in knowledge, perspective, attitudes, skills and practices that deepen over time. The trauma-informed approach is a continuum of implementation, beginning with becoming trauma aware, moving to become trauma sensitive, then to trauma responsive, and finally to being fully trauma informed.⁷ While there is variation in preferred terminology, for consistency and to be in alignment with language used by the Arizona Department of Education (ADE), the term trauma sensitive is used throughout this report. ADE has not adopted the Missouri Models definition of trauma sensitive; instead, ADE has chosen to adopt trauma sensitive as the terminology it is using for this work. ADE adopted trauma sensitive to have the same definition as the Missouri models trauma informed. It is the stance of ADE that it is best practices for schools to shift their culture and embody the trauma sensitive/informed principles and approaches. Regardless of the terminology – trauma aware, trauma sensitive or trauma informed – they all reflect that a school has started or fully implemented systems to address the impact of trauma and toxic stress for its students.

TRAUMA AWARE

Becoming aware of how prevalent trauma is and considering that it might impact their students and staff.



TRAUMA SENSITIVE

Beginning to:

- 1) explore the principles of trauma-informed care within their environment and daily work;
- 2) build consensus around the principles;
- 3) consider the implications of adopting the principles; and
- 4) prepare for change.



TRAUMA RESPONSIVE

Beginning to change organizational culture to highlight the role of trauma. At all levels, staff begins re-thinking the routines and infrastructure of the organization.



TRAUMA INFORMED

Trauma-responsive practices are the organizational norm. The trauma model has become so accepted and embedded that it no longer depends on a few leaders. The organization works with other partners to strengthen collaboration around being trauma informed.

Source: Missouri Model: A Developmental Framework for Trauma Informed Approaches, Missouri Department of Mental Health and Partners, 2014.



ZERO TOLERANCE POLICY REQUIRES SCHOOL OFFICIALS TO HAND DOWN SPECIFIC, CONSISTENT, AND HARSH PUNISHMENT, USUALLY SUSPENSION OR EXPULSION, WHEN STUDENTS BREAK CERTAIN RULES. THE PUNISHMENT APPLIES REGARDLESS OF THE CIRCUMSTANCES, THE REASONS FOR THE BEHAVIOR (LIKE SELF-DEFENSE), OR THE STUDENT'S HISTORY OF DISCIPLINE PROBLEMS.

RESTORATIVE PRACTICES ARE ABOUT BUILDING COMMUNITY AND STRENGTHENING RELATIONSHIPS. THEY EMPOWER STUDENTS TO UNDERSTAND THE IMPACT OF UNACCEPTABLE CHOICES, AND HELP STUDENTS LEARN TO RESOLVE DISAGREEMENTS, TAKE OWNERSHIP OF THEIR BEHAVIOR, AND ENGAGE IN ACTS OF EMPATHY AND FORGIVENESS.

Trauma Impacts Learning

Trauma changes the architecture of a developing child's brain and body which impairs their ability to learn. In addition to weakening the immune system, increased stress hormones trigger the stress response and diminish students' ability to adapt to challenges.⁸ When this fight or flight instinct is activated, it essentially takes the learning brain offline to focus on basic survival. Students impacted by trauma need teachers and administrators who understand the biology of stress and who put restorative practices in place, rather than zero-tolerance policies.

Neurobiological changes to children's memory systems, ability to think and organize multiple priorities (executive function), and literacy skills also result in students having difficulty in regulating emotions and reading social cues. This compromises their ability to pay attention, follow directions, work with teachers and make friends with other students.⁹

Childhood adversity often leads to poor performance in school, increasing the risk of dropping out, living in poverty, and involvement in the justice system. These all set the stage for transmission of trauma to the next generation. Teachers and administrators are not immune to their own personal trauma. Heavy workloads, challenging behavior, and lack of support all contribute to ongoing stress and burnout. Trauma sensitive schools are critical in building student, teacher, and staff resilience to lessen the negative impacts of adversity and trauma.¹⁰

What is a Trauma Sensitive School?

The trauma sensitive school movement is gaining momentum and changing educators' perspectives, administrative policy, and classroom practice. For schools to fulfill their primary mission of supporting students in their educational achievement, students must feel safe, supported, and ready to learn. Students exposed to adversity and trauma may not feel safe or ready to learn, which challenges their ability to reach their full academic and personal potential. Adults within the school and other students can also be impacted by interacting with someone who has experienced trauma.

Mental health and wellness are connected to student success in the classroom and to a thriving school environment. A trauma sensitive school recognizes that trauma affects staff, students, families, communities, and systems.

Trauma Sensitive Schools are about understanding three things⁹:

- 1) Exposure to adversity is common in all schools.
- 2) This exposure can cause adaptations in the stress response that make traditional school practices ineffective.
- 3) It is up to adults to understand these adaptations and change school practices in a way that meets the regulatory and relational needs of all students to meet high expectations.

Benefits of Trauma Informed Schools

While more rigorous long-term research is needed, a new study suggests that adopting trauma sensitive practices in schools can lead to profound and lasting shifts in both thinking and practice. While this transformation may take time and effort to cultivate, the outcome it generates may be more sustainable than other education reform approaches.¹⁰

Reported benefits include:¹¹

- Improved academic achievement and test scores.
- Improved school climate.
- Improved teacher sense of satisfaction and safety in being a teacher.
- Improved retention of new teachers.
- Reduction of student behavioral outbursts and referrals to the office.
- Reduction of stress for staff and students.
- Reduction in absences, detentions, and suspensions.
- Reduction in student bullying and harassment.
- Reduction in the need for special educational services/classes.
- Reduction in drop-outs.

Adopting an equity lens for trauma sensitive practices allows educators to create safe environments while also tapping into the strengths of students' culture. This results in students that are engaged in their learning, on-track to graduate, and ultimately increasing economic mobility and life fulfillment. Ensuring educational equity reflects principles of fairness in distributing resources, opportunities, and treatment. Putting these systems in place creates an environment where every student has the support they need to be successful.



“THE MORE HEALTHY
RELATIONSHIPS A CHILD
HAS, THE MORE LIKELY
HE WILL BE TO RECOVER
FROM TRAUMA AND THRIVE.
RELATIONSHIPS ARE THE
AGENTS OF CHANGE AND
THE MOST POWERFUL
THERAPY IS HUMAN LOVE.”

Bruce Perry, MD

Case Study: Holiday Park Elementary School

In Arizona, Holiday Park Elementary School in the Cartwright District started seeing significant positive changes the first year they adopted trauma sensitive practices. They were the only school in their district that year that went up a letter grade, improving from a C to a B and student scores reflected a 7-point increase on the Arizona AzM2 (Arizona's Measurement of Educational Readiness to Inform Teaching). Data collected the first quarter of 2018 compared to the first quarter of 2017 showed a 78% decrease in student office referrals and a 19% decrease in staff absenteeism. Staff retention also improved dramatically. The former Holiday Park principal reflected: “Before we started our journey toward becoming a trauma-sensitive school, our campus was in a state of chaos and confusion. We were experiencing student behavior that we did not know how to mitigate. We were not equipped. We were prepared to teach students that were ready to learn, however, we were not prepared to teach students that were showing up to school each day not ready to learn. When our students weren't learning, we worked on mastering our teaching skills and could not understand why we were not making much headway. Then we were introduced to the ACE study. As we learned about adverse experiences and their impact on the developing brain of our youth, it changed who we were and how we would be in the presence of our youth forever. We began to understand the importance of a regulated body and an integrated mind, both for our youth and our adults as well. We also began to understand that all learning is relational. We understood that we needed to provide safety and connection, first, above all else. And, things started to change, for the positive. And so, we began our journey toward healing.” Watch the 4-minute video: <https://youtu.be/hkxxN67d2pA>.

Why This Is an Urgent Need in Arizona

Arizona ranks 33rd in the U.S. with 17% of children ages 0-17 years having experienced two or more Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs).¹² ACEs are often the root cause of serious learning disabilities, health problems, and social and behavioral problems that impact a child's ability to learn. Students experiencing multiple adversities are more likely to be held back, miss more days of school, perform below grade level, be labeled as special education, be suspended, expelled or drop out of school.¹³

Arizona faces serious teacher retention challenges with one of the highest teacher turnover rates in the U.S. Nearly 1 out of every 4 teachers (24%) leaves each year and a third leave within the first 5 years. Meanwhile, nearly a quarter of the most experienced teachers are nearing retirement age. Arizona schools started the 2020-2021 academic year with nearly 2,000 vacant teaching positions across the state, according to the Arizona School Personnel Administrators Association. More teachers have resigned in the middle of the school year and 1,360 severed employment since the beginning of the 2020-2021 school year, compared with 987 last year.¹⁶ While the pandemic has certainly contributed to retention challenges, the state's struggle to hire and keep qualified teachers in the classroom has persisted for more than a decade.

ARIZONA IS RANKED 47TH IN THE U.S. FOR HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION RATES WITHIN FOUR YEARS WITH 21% DROPPING OUT BEFORE EARNING A DIPLOMA.¹⁴

33% OF ARIZONA STUDENTS ATTEND SCHOOLS WITH A LAW ENFORCEMENT PRESENCE, YET 97% OF ARIZONA STUDENTS ARE IN SCHOOLS THAT FAIL TO MEET THE APPROPRIATE RATIO OF STUDENTS-TO-COUNSELORS.

25% OF STUDENTS IN ARIZONA ATTEND SCHOOLS THAT HAVE A LAW ENFORCEMENT PRESENCE BUT LACK EITHER A COUNSELOR, SOCIAL WORKER, PSYCHOLOGIST AND/OR NURSE.¹⁵

"HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION IS IMPORTANT, BUT WE CAN'T LEAVE KIDS RICH IN KNOWLEDGE BUT POOR IN SPIRIT."

School Administrator



Case Study: The Menta Group

The Menta Group is a non-profit organization that partners with public school districts to provide academic and clinical support to at-risk special education students. In the 2019-2020 school year, The Menta Group partnered with Blue Cross Blue Shield to implement a mindfulness room, social/emotional learning curriculum, and a focus on staff self-care. While COVID made it difficult to collect data, staff and students reported an increase in a positive culture/climate, an increase in student and staff self-regulation, and an increase in staff engagement during problem-solving meetings. The work done pre-COVID served as a foundation of resilience to more effectively support students and staff during the pandemic and related school closures.

Trauma Sensitive School Movement in Arizona

Efforts to advance trauma sensitive schools in Arizona formally began in 2015 after a screening and discussion of the *Paper Tigers* documentary film. The film follows a year in the life of an alternative high school that radically changed its approach to disciplining its students, resulting in decreased behavior issues, increased attendance, and graduation rates. Attendees at the Arizona film screening wanted to continue the discussion on ways Arizona schools could adopt similar practices, leading to the formation of the “Creating Trauma Sensitive Arizona Schools” work group, a standing committee of the larger Arizona Adverse Childhood Experiences Consortium (ACEs Consortium). Since then, the group has been meeting regularly with a mission to ensure that Arizona children traumatized by ACEs succeed in school. Goals of the work group include: increasing awareness, promoting professional collaboration, supporting implementation of evidence-based trauma sensitive policies and practice, and promoting educator self-care and resilience.

The Arizona School Boards Association (ASBA), an early partner in the ACEs movement, has been working towards a strategic goal since 2015 that Arizona education leaders understand educational equity and take action to systemically achieve it. ASBA considers understanding and addressing ACEs as fundamental to the work and incorporates training on ACEs for school board members and district leaders regularly. In 2019-2020, ASBA and Grand Canyon University partnered to present a year-long webinar series focused on trauma informed school systems and schools.

The Arizona Department of Education (ADE) has also been active in the trauma sensitive schools’ movement for several years, offering educational opportunities to school districts statewide. Recently, amidst the pandemic and racial crises, ADE’s School Support and Improvement (SSI) Unit has supported action to address the social and emotional needs of staff and students. Recognizing that COVID has changed the landscape makes support for educators and students an essential first step to support academic achievement. SSI was able to offer a 4-part Building Resilience Workshop series for teachers, teacher teams, administrators, leadership teams, paraprofessionals, social workers, counselors, and other support staff. In addition, funding from the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act and Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER), ADE was able to increase course offerings and offer the Building Resilience Series 2. These sessions supported over 8,000 educators across Arizona who expressed a great need to continue the conversation and bring in content related to equity, diversity, and race. ADE is responding by offering a 2-part equity mini-series.

“SUPPORT THROUGH DISTRICT HEALTH INSURANCE, PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT TRAININGS AND INDIVIDUAL SCHOOLS PROVIDING EDUCATOR SUPPORT IS THE BREADTH OF OUR SELF-CARE SUPPORT. HOWEVER, JUST THE MENTION OF SELF-CARE CAN SEEM TO STRESS OUR EDUCATORS AS THEY ARE JUGGLING SO MUCH.”

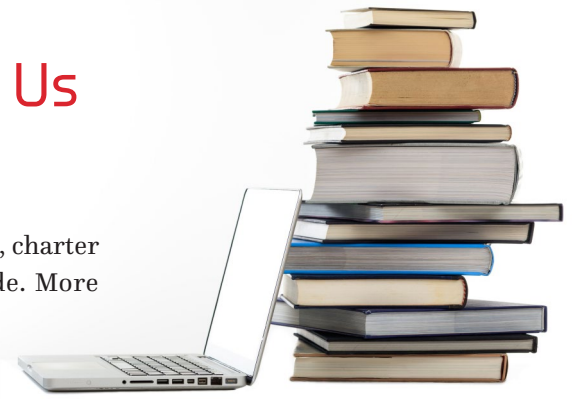
Elementary School Social Worker



What Arizona Educators are Telling Us

Online Survey

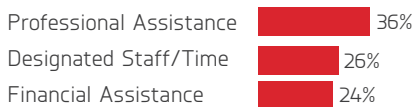
In November 2020 an online survey was sent to Arizona superintendents, charter school administrators, school counselors and social workers statewide. More than 100 Arizona school districts responded.



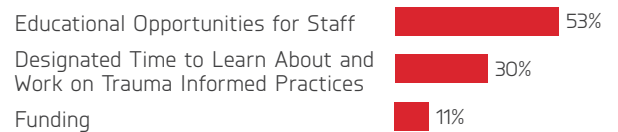
Data Snapshot

<p>88%</p> <p>indicated COVID-19 pandemic made advancing trauma-sensitive practice more important.</p>	<p>60%</p> <p>of districts that have adopted trauma-sensitive practices, indicated efforts to move towards more trauma-sensitive practices have resulted in observable improvements.</p>	<p>51%</p> <p>say their approach to discipline consistently/very consistently aligns with core principles of trauma sensitivity; 35% would like to do more.</p>	<p>44%</p> <p>have discipline policies that balance accountability with understanding of trauma and history of disproportionality of discipline among students of color.</p>	<p>36%</p> <p>train staff in skills for interacting with and supporting traumatized students.</p>
<p>26%</p> <p>consistently/very consistently have a standard approach for building staff awareness of compassion fatigue.</p>	<p>25%</p> <p>have discipline policies sensitive to kids exposed to trauma.</p>	<p>21%</p> <p>have a trauma-sensitive action plan that identifies barriers to progress, and evaluates success.</p>	<p>19%</p> <p>indicate staff are consistently/very consistently receiving training on the relationship between culture, traumatic experiences, historical trauma, healing, and resilience; 54% would like to do more.</p>	<p>7%</p> <p>indicated they very consistently have an intentional focus on evidence-based trauma sensitive practice; 54% would like to do more.</p>

RESOURCES THAT WOULD BE MOST HELPFUL IN ADVANCING EFFORTS:



AREA OF GREATEST NEED:



Increasingly, districts are utilizing a variety of practices to assist students in calming their stress response system and promoting optimal brain function. Practices most frequently mentioned in the survey include: social emotional learning with an emphasis on school climate and culture; mindfulness with opportunities for movement and physical exercise throughout the school day; and calm corners in each classroom.

Key Informant Interviews

Key informant interviews were conducted with representatives from Gila River Indian Community, The Menta Group in Phoenix, Roosevelt School District in Phoenix, Paradise Valley Unified School District, and Union Elementary District in Tolleson. Interviewees consistently stated that the process towards more trauma sensitive practices and policies is a long-term commitment requiring leadership and support of the entire staff. The importance of developing meaningful relationships with students, staff, and the broader community is at the heart of their efforts. They also stressed the importance of staff education and increasing attention to staff support and wellbeing. Complete key informant interview summaries are available here: <http://vitalysthealth.org/trauma-sensitive-schools>.

Key Takeaways

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly impacted Arizona schools and underscores the need for trauma sensitive practices for all students and staff. The challenges students are facing demand thoughtful coordination between education and health agencies, with a coordinated approach to student and staff well-being, along with holistic guidance to districts for supporting students across a range of physical and mental health needs.

Support and buy-in from district and school leadership, including the governing board, is also key. Collaborative leadership and teamwork of the entire school staff is crucial; top-down or bottom-up does not work – it must be a shared commitment and process. Engaging student and family “voice and choice” in developing trauma sensitive policies and environments is essential. Leaders need time to build relationships and the resources to create safe spaces for communities, students, and staff. Equally important is providing training and support for staff. Only when staff learn about the neurobiology of trauma, how to recognize the signs of trauma and ways to practice self-regulation, will they be able to pass along those skills to students. Education is needed for staff and students on the impact of the pandemic and collective trauma. Schools must recognize and address their role in creating or re-creating trauma, and assist staff in resolving and healing from past practices and behaviors that may have caused trauma for students. The focus needs to be on fixing the broken structures, not the kids.

Preparing students for life after the classroom goes beyond standardized test scores and creates opportunities to partner with parents and teachers to build resilience and confidence. While districts adopting trauma sensitive practices are being rewarded with a variety of improvements, ultimately “This is about people’s lives. If you’re not seriously committed to making the necessary changes, don’t mess with it.” advises Isaac Salcido, Director of Tribal Education, Gila River Indian Community.

“WITH 32 SCHOOLS THERE HAVE BEEN MANY SUCCESSES RELATED TO INCLUDING TRAUMA-SENSITIVE INFORMATION TO STAFF AND STUDENTS. SEEING STAFF BE OPEN TO SEEING THINGS FROM A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE HAS BEEN VERY POSITIVE. THIS IS A TOPIC THAT IS AN ONGOING LEARNING OPPORTUNITY.”

Arizona Superintendent



MULTI-TIERED SYSTEM OF SUPPORTS (MTSS) IS A FRAMEWORK THAT HELPS EDUCATORS PROVIDE ACADEMIC AND BEHAVIORAL STRATEGIES FOR STUDENTS WITH VARIOUS NEEDS.

INSTEAD OF THE "WAITING FOR FAILURE" ASSESSMENT MODEL, MTSS TAKES A PROACTIVE APPROACH TO IDENTIFYING STUDENTS WITH ACADEMIC OR BEHAVIORAL NEEDS. EARLY ASSESSMENT AND INTERVENTION FOR THESE STUDENTS CAN HELP THEM CATCH UP WITH THEIR PEERS SOONER.

<https://www.pbisrewards.com/blog/what-is-mtss/>

Key informants made a number of specific recommendations including:

- Encourage Arizona Health Care Cost Containment System (AHCCCS), Arizona's Medicaid, to host webinars for local education agencies on existing opportunities to integrate trauma-informed care into schools, as well as ways to implement evidence-based strategies to mitigate the impact of toxic stress.
- Expand AHCCCS integrated health resources within schools, including on-site school health clinics. Expand education and access to concrete supports such as healthy nutrition.
- Increase opportunities for schools to implement evidence-based strategies to mitigate the impact of toxic stress – exercise, nutrition, mindfulness, interacting with nature, and sleep.
- Support a more unified approach to Multi-Tiered Systems of Support across the state.
- Integrate history and culture into staff education, policy, and practice. Provide education on historical trauma and the role epigenetics plays in the transmission of historical trauma.
- Replace the current mindset with more forward thinking, innovative research-based practice. Move toward schools as healing spaces. Review curricula, policies and practices that might be traumatizing or re-traumatizing and take steps toward healing. Provide healing spaces – calming spaces, mindfulness kits, access to nature, etc.
- Increase supports and wellness resources for staff.
- Provide more local data to districts on the incidence of childhood adversity in their communities.



Conclusion

There is an urgent need to aggressively address the growing challenges our schools face in providing safe, supportive learning environments for students and staff. Based on broad input from Arizona school leaders as well as national research, the following recommendations emerged from this project:

1
ESTABLISH A
RESILIENCE
COORDINATING
COUNCIL

2
REQUIRE A BASELINE
OF KNOWLEDGE
FOR ALL SCHOOL
STAFF AND INCREASE
LEADERSHIP
DEVELOPMENT

3
ENHANCE
SCHOOL EMPLOYEE
WELLNESS

4
ESTABLISH
FUNDING
MECHANISMS TO
SUPPORT TRAUMA
SENSITIVE ARIZONA
SCHOOLS

“SCHOOL PERSONNEL ARE UNIQUELY SITUATED TO IDENTIFY, RESPOND TO, AND BE IMPACTED BY STUDENTS’ TRAUMATIC STRESS SYMPTOMS DUE TO THEIR CENTRAL ROLE IN CHILDREN’S LIVES AND THEIR CONTINUED ASSESSMENT OF CHILDREN’S LEARNING ABILITIES AND RELATIONSHIPS WITH PEERS AND SCHOOL STAFF. THE GOALS OF SCHOOLS THAT PERTAIN TO STUDENT LEARNING, TEST SCORES, AND SUCCESSFUL OUTCOMES ARE DIRECTLY IMPACTED BY CHILDREN’S TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCES, SO ADDRESSING STUDENTS’ TRAUMA AND LOSS SYMPTOMS IS ESSENTIAL FOR MEETING THOSE GOALS.”

Arizona Superintendent

Organizational support, partnerships, and capacity-building are essential. In order to thrive, we must equip our schools and communities with the skills to respond, adapt, and innovate. Nothing serves this goal better than a quality education system with trauma sensitive practices. Though our schools are burdened now by the extra costs of operating safely in the COVID world, we cannot afford to take a shortsighted approach. It is time to invest in teacher training, school nurses and counselors and build trauma sensitive educational systems.

“RELATIONSHIPS MATTER: THE CURRENCY FOR SYSTEMIC CHANGE IS TRUST, AND TRUST COMES THROUGH FORMING HEALTHY WORKING RELATIONSHIPS. PEOPLE, NOT PROGRAMS, CHANGE PEOPLE.”

Bruce Perry, MD

The Recommendations

RECOMMENDATION 1

Establish a Multi-Disciplinary, Public-Private “Resilience Coordinating Council”

The Resilience Coordinating Council will help operationalize the state’s vision for trauma sensitive practices and make recommendations to the Arizona Legislature and leaders in state government, including the Department of Education, to promote collaboration and consistency in practice and policy across child and family-oriented systems (organizations should include Arizona Departments of Education, Health Services, and Child Safety; Governor’s Office of Youth, Faith, and Family; AHCCCS and ACEs Consortium).

Addressing the widespread damage done by the pandemic along with collective and historical trauma, the Council will recommend policies that improve social, health, and well-being outcomes, including blended funding streams.

The Resilience Coordinating Council will assist in developing and enhancing recommendations and policies that:

- Focus on issues around diversity and inclusion, cultural competence, climate and culture.
- Support organizational assessments on policies and practices related to race and gender equity.

- Develop education policies that recognize the importance of executive function and self-regulation as an important strand in the “braided rope” of skills children need to succeed academically.
- Support policies that reduce and replace school practices that traumatize students. Minimize the use of practices that exclude, ostracize, segregate, or physically harm students.
- Support the development of school site leadership who are actively engaged and share learnings across schools.
- Promote strategic collaborations with community partners to prevent ACEs and resist re-traumatization, taking into consideration the multifaceted and interactive effects of personal and environmental factors that determine behaviors.

RECOMMENDATION 2

Ensure a Baseline of Knowledge for all School Staff and Increase Leadership Development

Effective trauma sensitive practice requires that individuals working with children have knowledge of brain development, trauma and promoting resilience. In addition to implementation strategies, a basic understanding of NEAR science (Neuroscience, Epigenetics, ACEs, and Resilience) is necessary to ensure educators balance the “why” with the “how.” Funded mandates should be instituted requiring that all individuals working with children have this training. However, this training is just the first step and must be matched with continuing support, including technical assistance, in-classroom support, resources, and guidance to help schools develop locally tailored action plans. Annual trauma informed education should be a mandatory expectation district-wide, like mandatory suicide prevention training.

While more first-year teachers are entering their careers knowledgeable about the impact of trauma on behavior and learning, Educator Preparation Programs (EPPs) should be further enhanced to include information on ACEs, trauma



“WE HAVE BEEN EMPOWERING STAFF WITH TRAUMA RESILIENT PRACTICES FOR THE PAST 5 YEARS AND THEY HAVE DEFINITELY BEEN USEFUL DURING THE PANDEMIC.”

Executive Director of Student Services

and promoting resilience. A mandatory “Add On” endorsement within the Arizona teacher certification program on ACEs, neurobiology of trauma and resilience should be developed. Programs for school social workers and counselors should include a certification module on trauma and the neurobiology of stress. Licensure questions for teachers, social workers, counselors, substance abuse counselors, and other professionals working with children should include information around trauma and the neurobiology of stress.

In addition to staff education, efforts are needed to increase support and leadership development of school administrators, superintendents, principals and assistant principals so that they can model trauma sensitive practices and practice trauma informed supervision. Districts need direction and support in their efforts to address issues around climate, culture, reducing structural racism, and system-induced trauma. In addition, education is needed on ways to approach sensitive topics from a culturally and trauma sensitive perspective. Guidance is also needed in modifying the physical space of their campuses and classrooms based on trauma-informed principles. A designated position responsible for coordinating trauma sensitive, equitable practice would be helpful. This “Coordinator of Trauma Informed Practice, Social Emotional Learning and Equity” could assist districts and schools in cultivating the ability of teachers and other staff to lead and sustain initiatives within their individual schools.

RECOMMENDATION 3

Enhance School Employee Wellness

Increasingly important in the current pandemic, is the need to focus on the well-being of all staff; encouraging self-care is not enough. For educators to effectively instruct and support students, school personnel must be provided with the supports they need to manage their own stress and maintain healthy lifestyles. Reasonable class sizes, responsive supervision, and skill development are all important elements in assuring that teachers have the ability to meet the needs of their students. Providing opportunities for staff to learn about and practice mindfulness and peer support has been shown to increase teacher retention, attendance and general wellbeing. The formation of a Healthy Living Committee (HLC) is one example being utilized to help design and implement practices that support staff wellness. Enhanced focus is needed on issues around grief and bereavement (staff and students), including examining family leave and bereavement policies. Training and support are also needed on how to respond to and recover from suicide or other traumatic death.



Case Study: Southwest Elementary School

Southwest Elementary School in Roosevelt School District has been implementing a trauma-sensitive school program in collaboration with South Mountain WORKS Coalition. Mr. Juan Sierra, the principal, talks about the self-care of the teachers, “During the pandemic, we have our common lunchtime that allows for teachers to interact and support each other during the day. Over time, stories and narratives build a sense of knowing one another. Then, this leads to other teacher-driven activities such as prayer groups, scripture study, and hiking groups, etc. Teachers’ self-care is multifaceted, but based on building relationships and respecting teachers’ time and voice.”

RECOMMENDATION 4

Establish Funding to Support Trauma Sensitive Schools

Addressing the need for trauma sensitive supports within our schools will require thoughtful discussion, creative partnerships and new opportunities for blended funding. In addition to supporting staff education needs, permanent funding is needed to increase the availability of social workers, counselors, and school nurses through avenues such as transforming Arizona’s school-based Medicaid programs and exploring additional dedicated state investments in our education system.

Key opportunities to achieve funding goals include:

- Optimize federal funds to ensure school systems are trauma-informed, not only to assist the students, but also the adults involved in meeting educational needs, including parents. (i.e., the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security Act (The CARES Act), the Governor’s Emergency Education Relief Fund (GEER), and the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER)).¹⁷
- Advocate with partners for the transformation of the school-based Medicaid model to support payment of services for all Medicaid-enrolled students – not only those with services detailed in Individualized Education Programs (IEP).
- Transform payment structures to include all professionals approved to bill for clinical services provided to students with disabilities (504 plans).

Key areas where funding is needed:

- Establish funding mechanisms to support local action planning and provide financial resources to help individual school communities engage in a learning and planning process to create trauma sensitive schools and communities, including providing support and technical assistance in conducting organizational assessments and the development of educator leaders.
- Expand partnerships and access to funds for quality assurance and ongoing evaluation of trauma sensitive practices and policies.
- Increase dedicated funding to promote employee wellness and supportive working conditions, including supports for staff with vicarious trauma.
- Increase funding for evidence-based programs such as Mental Health First Aid.
- Increase funding for schools to implement evidence-based strategies to promote self-regulation and mitigate the impact of toxic stress – exercise, nutrition, mindfulness, interacting with nature, and sleep.
- Earmark funding to make physical environments more trauma sensitive.
- Increase funding to expand integrated health resources within schools, including communities in schools models such as on-site school health clinics and access to public benefits (AHCCCS, SNAP, TANF).



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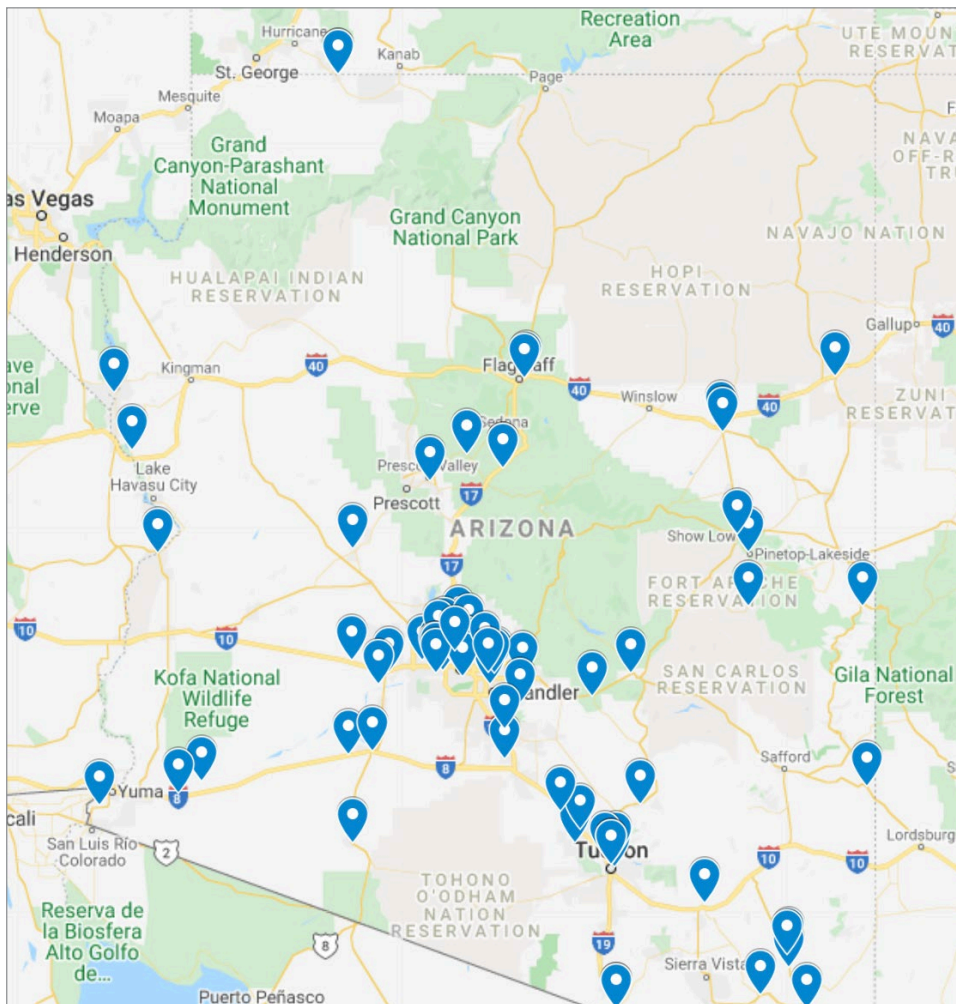
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SURVEY SCHOOLS

The map to the left shows the location of schools that participated in the survey.

A link to the interactive map, survey data, key informant interview summaries, and a national resource list, can all be located here: <http://vitalysthealth.org/trauma-sensitive-schools>

"WE HAVE SEEN SOME IMPROVEMENTS BUT PEOPLE TEND TO GET IMPATIENT AND WANT TO SEE TANGIBLE AND SUBSTANTIAL CHANGES HAPPEN QUICKLY."

School Social Worker

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Arizona Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) Consortium	Arizona School Administrators
Arizona Charter School Association	Helios Education Foundation
Arizona Department of Education	Vitalyst Health Foundation

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