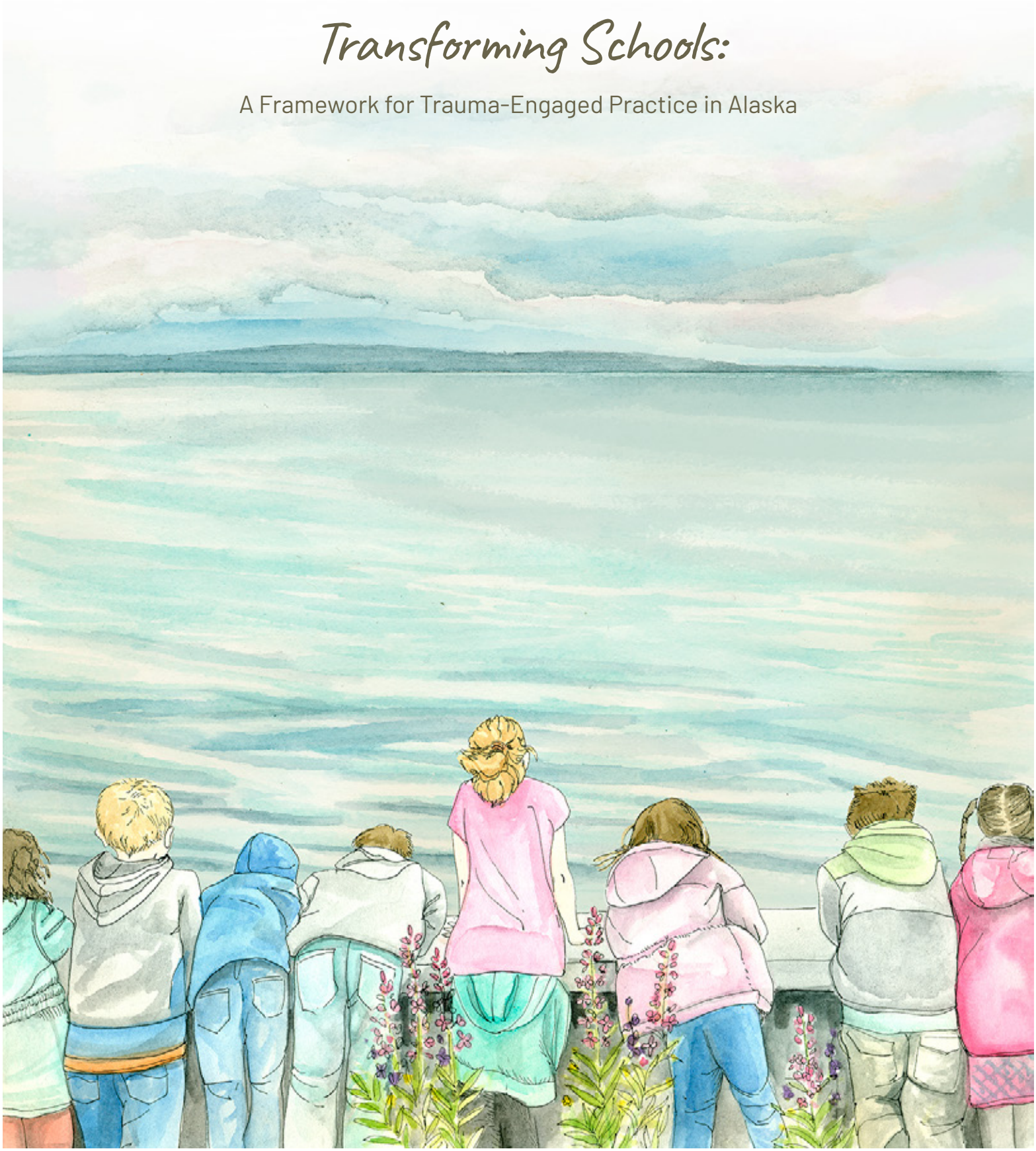
Transforming Schools:

A Framework for Trauma-Engaged Practice in Alaska



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Introduction 5

1: Deconstructing Trauma 11

2: Relationship Building 17

3: Policy Considerations 23

4: Planning and Coordination of Schoolwide Efforts 29

5: Professional Learning 35

6: Schoolwide Practices and Climate 41

7: Skill Instruction 47

8: Support Services 53

9: Cultural Integration and Community Co-creation 57

10: Family Partnership 65

11: Self-care 69

As Alaskans we are **resilient** and on the cutting edge of transforming schools together by supporting the whole student and integrating trauma engaged practices. This framework brings together lessons learned by school staff and community members within Alaska while integrating school-wide trauma-engaged approach to improve academic outcomes and well-being for all students. Using stories, research, and best practices, this resource is designed for use by school-community teams seeking to make our schools a place of positive transformation and significant learning for each student.

INTRODUCTION

"Understanding my students' stories has helped us both to be more successful" -Alaska educator

SUMMARY **Understanding the effects of childhood trauma transforms our understanding of what our students need to succeed, and enables schools to help break rather than perpetuate the cycle of trauma.**

In Our Schools: A Small Change with Deep Implications

Imagine standing just inside the front door of an elementary school at the start of a wintry Alaskan day. It's dark and cold outside and each time a child comes in the wind blows just a little bit of snow in with them. Most of the children pass through the doors and go on to their classrooms; some stop to get breakfast if they haven't eaten. At 8 a.m. sharp, a bell rings, signifying the start of school. A few children continue to arrive, late for school...

COMMON PRACTICE A few children continue to arrive after 8:00 am – late for school. The front office staff tells the children to line up – sometimes they are backed up out the door – while tardy slips are prepared for each child. It takes a few minutes to wait in line for a tardy slip and then it's off to class with no time to get breakfast if they didn't get it at home. The child has to take the tardy slip to class and present it to the teacher in front of her peers.

TRANSFORMATIVE PRACTICE A few children continue to arrive after 8:00 am – late for school. The front office staff greets each child: "I'm so happy you're here. Have you had breakfast?" If not, the student heads down the hall to get a quick breakfast. The children go to class without a tardy slip and are greeted warmly by the teacher and integrated into the classroom activities.

A Change in Thinking

Tardy slips are handed out to teach responsibility; the idea is that getting a tardy slip and having to present it to the teacher is burdensome enough to change the behavior of the child. In reality, not every child starts the day with support from an adult at home. By handing out tardy slips, children who are late to school take the blame for not having the support systems other children rely on daily. This isn't the lesson most schools set out to teach.

By contrast, transformative practice reflects a realization that, for the most part, arriving at school on time for elementary school children is the responsibility of parents or other adult caregivers. Some students get up, get dressed, fix breakfast, and get to school without the help of an adult. A positive, welcoming message from the school is more helpful and productive than a tardy slip, and allows students to get to class more quickly.

Key Research Findings

A growing body of research indicates that students' life experiences deeply impact their academic, cognitive, and social-emotional development.

An estimated two in three Alaskan children are exposed to traumatic experiences.[1] Significant emotional stress and trauma during childhood affects Alaskans across racial, social, economic, and geofigure lines. **Figure 1** shows the percentage of Alaskan adults who report experiencing adverse childhood experiences (ACEs).

Hundreds of studies have found that the more exposure a child has to adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), the higher the child's risk for poor educational, social, health, and economic outcomes in childhood and adulthood. **Figure 2,** based on Alaska research, illustrates the link between increased exposure to childhood trauma and a variety of conditions that present challenges for both the learner and the school.

As **figure 2** shows, children with four or more ACEs – i.e., significant childhood trauma – have 3 to 6 times the rate of learning disabilities, repeating a grade, attention problems, and individual education plans than their peers with no ACEs.

These challenges lead to lower educational attainment: Alaskan adults with four or more ACEs are half as likely to graduate from college as those with no ACEs, and more than twice as likely not to complete high school. **Childhood trauma reaches into our classrooms and impacts every aspect of teaching and learning.**

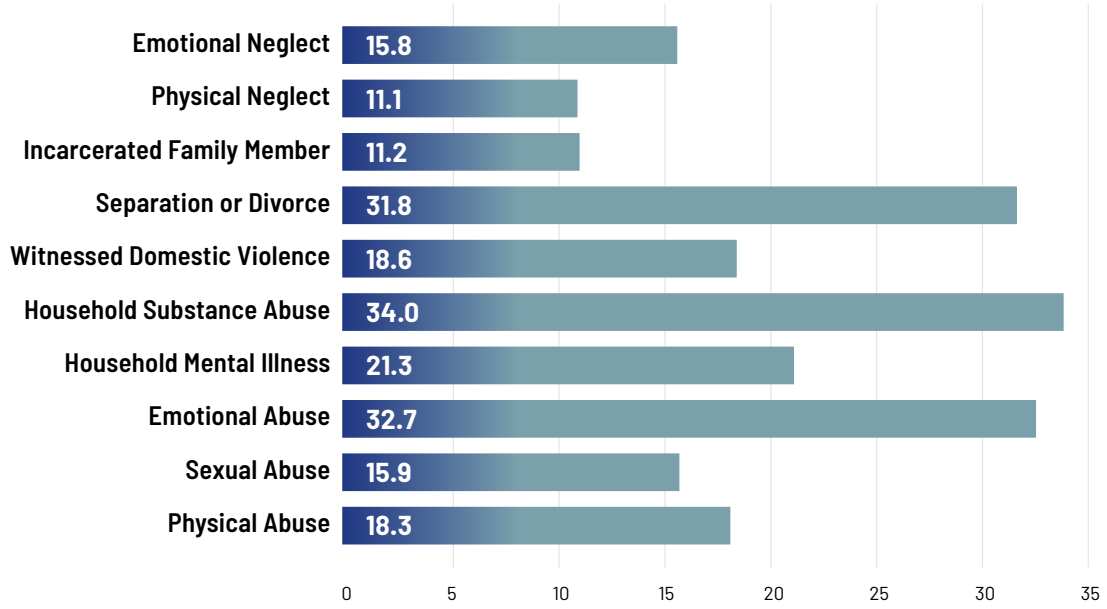
There is hope. Studies have found that the negative impacts of childhood trauma can be reduced through positive experiences and relationships. A 2017 study finds, "Positive experiences and supportive relationships provide the buffering that allows children to withstand, or recover, from adverse experiences."[2]

Schools have a unique role to play because schools are where families and students intersect with the broader community. This framework explores ways schools can work with students, families and communities to reduce the impact of trauma and help all students thrive.

What is Alaska's Transforming Schools Framework?

The vision of this tool is to help Alaska schools and communities integrate trauma-engaged policies and practices that improve academic outcomes and well-being for all students. Improving student outcomes requires us to support the whole child, and to understand how trauma impacts a child's ability to learn and thrive.

1. Percentage of Alaskan Adults who Reported Individual ACEs by Type



Source: 2014-2015 *Alaska Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System,* Section of Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Alaska Division of Public Health, & Centers for Disease Control

2. Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) Incidences Among Alaskan Students and Select Outcomes

Outcomes	0 ACEs	4 or More ACEs	Increase from those with 0 to 4+ ACEs
Learning Disabilities	6.2%	23%	3.6 times greater
Attention Deficit Disorder	4.7%	21%	4.5 times greater
Individual Education Plan	7%	27%	3.8 times greater
Repeated a Grade	2.9%	16%	5.4 times greater

Source: Child and Adolescent Health Management Initiative (2012). 2011-2012 *National Survey of Children's Health*, U.S. Department of Health and Social Services, Analysis by the Alaska Mental Health Board.

The tardy-slip scenario at the start of this chapter illustrates that when our schools are not trauma-engaged, we may adopt practices that compound the stresses on vulnerable children.[3]

Conversely, when we understand trauma and stress, we can act compassionately and take steps that support wellness and help students engage in learning. In the tardy-slip scenario, those steps were to make each child feel welcome, to ensure each child is fed, and to eliminate the potential negative peer attention or stigma of a tardy slip.

This framework is a resource for Alaskans – educators, parents, and community members – who want to help make their schools a place of positive transformation for all children.

Continuum of Change

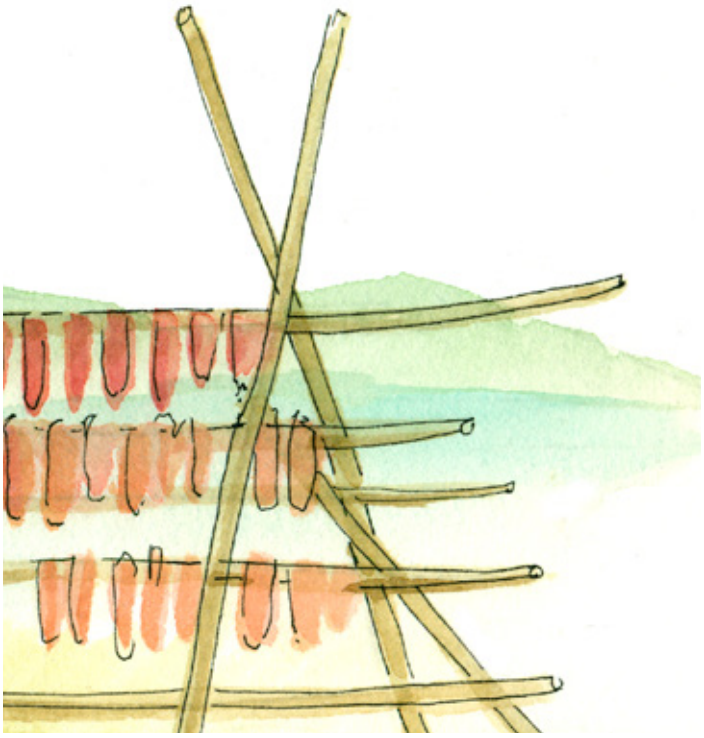
Most trauma-informed work moves along a continuum of change:

Trauma-Organized

Trauma-organized communities and schools are impacted by stress, avoidant of issues, and isolated in their practices, which can exacerbate the impacts of trauma for some students. When functioning in isolation, schools can be reactive rather than thoughtful, can magnify trauma rather than offering an alternative to traumatic experiences, can avoid or discount trauma rather than acknowledging its prevalence, and can be run in an authoritarian manner rather than an authoritative manner.

Trauma-Informed

Trauma-informed communities and schools develop a shared language to define, normalize, and address the impact of trauma on students and school staff. They operate from a foundational understanding of the nature and impact of trauma, coupled with the power of resiliency.



1 Alaska Department of Health and Social Services. (2015) *Adverse Childhood Experiences: Overcoming ACEs in Alaska*.

2 Sege, R., et al. (2017) ***Balancing Adverse Childhood Experiences with HOPE (Health Outcomes of Positive Experience): New Insights into the Role of Positive Experience on Child and Family Development,*** Casey Family Programs.

3 McInerney, M. & McKlindon, A. (undated) *Unlocking the Door to Learning: Trauma-Informed Classrooms & Transformational Schools*. Education Law Center.

Trauma-Engaged

Trauma-engaged communities and schools go a step further. They have policies, procedures, and support services that embed an understanding of trauma. Their approaches to learning and discipline are trauma-shielding or trauma-reducing. They are reflective and collaborative, they promote a culture of learning, and they make meaning out of the past. They are also prevention-oriented and have relational leadership.

Transforming Schools: Creating trauma-engaged, safe, and supportive schools requires holistic change, and a mindset shift for students, administrators, school staff, and community members.

Relationships as the Foundation

Positive relationships are essential for all of us to thrive. These relationships are central to success in trauma-engaged schools. The organization Trauma Transformed explains:

Trauma is overwhelming and can leave us feeling isolated or betrayed, which may make it difficult to trust others and receive support. When we experience compassionate and dependable relationships, we re-establish trusting connections with others that foster mutual wellness.[4]

Developing a successful trauma-engaged system requires relationship-building every step of the way. Each key adult in a student's life has a role in modeling positive, healthy relationships to promote student healing and learning. Similarly, the relationships we build across schools, communities, and with families are critical for supporting the whole child.

Context for This Work

Elders often share that communities across Alaska have been healing, supporting and strengthening children, parents, and all community members for thousands of years. This tool builds on past and current work, integrating what we know about best practices with the unique strengths and circumstances of our communities, schools, and families in Alaska.

For nearly two decades, organizations and communities across the state including behavioral health, public health, youth-serving organizations, tribal organizations and non-profit organizations like the Association of Alaska School Boards have been promoting resilience through community-based efforts.

Alaska public health and behavioral health departments have been a leader in researching and sharing information about adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), and have made significant contributions to the understanding of ACEs, trauma, culturally responsive learning, and brain science.

This framework also builds on recent state-level efforts – the Alaska Safe Children's Act and Alaska's Education Challenge. Alaska's Education Challenge, introduced by Governor Bill Walker in January 2017, brought Alaskans together to think deeply about our education system and decide what an excellent education for every student every day looks like. Cultivating trauma-engaged schools emerged as one of the top three priorities for every state school board member.

Historic and Systemic Trauma

There are special considerations for trauma and resilience in Alaska. Alaska's history is key to understanding the disproportionality of Alaska Native children with high ACEs scores and high dropout rates, and the need for culturally specific trauma-engaged schools. As part of the colonial effort to gain control of lands, resources, and souls, many Alaska Native children were forcibly removed from their homes and communities and sent hundreds or thousands of miles away to boarding schools established and run by the state, church and businesses. Many Alaska Native children were physically, spiritually, emotionally, and sexually abused by those who had taken control of their lives. Many were punished for speaking their languages. Our current systems often perpetuate policies that do not recognize Alaska Native peoples' culture, languages, and ways of life or accommodate for the ongoing impact this historical trauma has created.

Trauma also plays a major role in at-risk and special populations, including children in foster care and the juvenile justice system, LGBTQ children,[5] children whose families have recently immigrated from war-torn regions, and children living in areas of high poverty or crime.

Suggested Steps

Schools and districts looking to become more trauma-engaged are most likely to succeed with thoughtful preparation. Tips for getting started:

1. **Develop a clear rationale and vision.** Consider why this work matters, what your school and community stand to gain through more thoughtful, trauma-engaged practice, and develop a vision for transforming your school, district, and community.
2. **Assess your community's readiness.** Districts need to assess their capacity to move toward more trauma-engaged practices. Identify or develop the necessary infrastructure and supports at the administrative level. Districts also need to determine where they want to start – district, school, classroom, community.
3. **Gain buy-in and trust through communication, collaboration, and commitment to success.** This work will not succeed and endure without broad participation and support from teachers, administrators, families and community members.
4. **Promote a culture of safety and respect for this work**. Childhood trauma, intergenerational trauma, and implicit bias can be difficult to approach. Establish and maintain clear standards for respectful listening and dialog.
5. **Develop a common understanding of terms** to establish and maintain respectful, constructive and open dialog while using this tool. For example, the term "historic trauma," used in this document, may be called "untold histories" elsewhere.
6. **Expect setbacks.** There will be mistakes and challenges in this work. View them as opportunities to learn. This work requires ongoing commitment and perseverance, resilience and reflection – the same skills children need to grow and change.
7. **Use this framework as a resource.** You do not need to work through the chapters sequentially; feel free to pick and choose. Likewise, not every suggested step or reflection question will apply to all users. Take what works, and adapt it as needed.

Reflections

- What does childhood trauma look like in your community? How does it impact your schools?
- Why is this work needed in your community?
- What is your community's vision for transforming schools? What will success look like?
- Who can your schools partner with to help reach the broader community?
- Who needs to be on board for this to work?
- What is needed to be ready to successfully undertake this work?

Key Terms

Childhood trauma: A negative event or series of events that surpasses the child's ordinary coping skills. It comes in many forms and includes experiences such as maltreatment, witnessing violence, or the loss of a loved one. Traumatic experiences can impact brain development and behavior inside and outside the classroom.

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs): ACEs refer to various negative experiences in childhood including medical and natural disasters experienced by children and youth. The original ACE list includes 10 categories of childhood stressors:

- **Abuse**: emotional, physical, sexual abuse
- **Trauma in household environment**: substance abuse, parental separation and/or divorce, mentally ill or suicidal household member, witnessing violence, imprisoned household member
- **Neglect**: abandonment, child's basic physical and/or emotional needs unmet

4 Cordero, S. (2018) *March Principle of the Month: Compassion and Dependability*, ***Trauma Transformed: A Program of East Bay Agency for Children*** (blogpost).

5 Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (or queer)

Social-emotional learning (SEL): The process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.

Self-regulation: The ability to manage one's emotions and behavior in accordance with the demands of the situation. It includes being able to resist highly emotional reactions to upsetting stimuli, to calm yourself down when you get upset, to adjust to a change in expectations, and to handle frustration without an outburst. It is a set of skills that enables children to direct their own behavior towards a goal despite the unpredictability of the world and our own feelings.

Child well-being: A state of being that arises when a child's needs are met, and the child has the freedom and ability to meaningfully pursue their goals and ways of life in a supportive, equitable setting now and into the future.

1 DECONSTRUCTING TRAUMA

"Childhood trauma turns a learning brain into a surviving brain."

–Josh Arvidson, Director, Alaska Child Trauma Center

SUMMARY **High levels of toxic stress impact the development of children's brain wiring, impairing their ability to regulate, or control, their emotions, thoughts and behaviors. Schools can help students learn self-regulation and can support positive brain development through a whole-school, whole-community approach.**

In Our Schools: Sarah's Story

Sarah is a 13-year-old middle school student with average grades. One day Sarah starts a food fight in her school cafeteria. The mess leads to a negative interaction with a lunchroom monitor, and Sarah is unable to calm down and control her frustrations.

COMMON PRACTICE Sarah is suspended from school for three days. She falls behind in her work and feels angry and alienated from school.

TRANSFORMATIVE PRACTICE An adult at the school who fostered a relationship with Sarah learned that Sarah recently found out her mother was going to jail. Sarah's school has been incorporating knowledge of trauma's impact on students and staff into their culture and practices. The adult reports the situation to school administrators, and the school develops a plan to promote accountability and help Sarah develop the skills she is missing. These steps include in-school suspension, support from a school counselor, outreach to Sarah's family, and an opportunity for Sarah to repair relationships disrupted by her behavior in the cafeteria.

Key Research Findings

The brain goes through enormous development during childhood and adolescence in response to a person's environment and experiences.

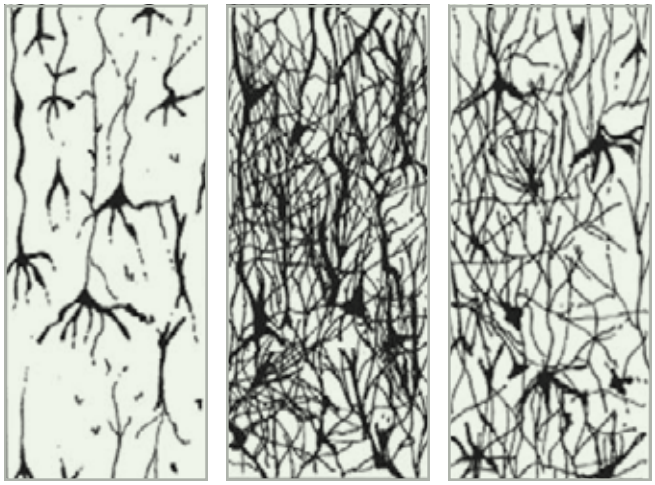
Understanding the biology of stress helps track the pathways from childhood stress to undesirable behaviors and outcomes, and gives us insight into how we might interrupt those pathways and reduce harmful impacts.

Childhood is a Key Time for Brain Development

Figure 3 represents the complexity of the brain's pathways at three stages of development. The early years generate immensely complex wiring in response to experiences. Around puberty a pruning occurs where the most frequently used pathways are hardened and those least used are discarded. Schools are in a position to reinforce positive brain development and significantly mitigate problematic pathways developed from early traumatic experiences.

It is possible to "rewire" the brain at any age, but it is easiest in childhood.

3. Brain Wiring Through Childhood



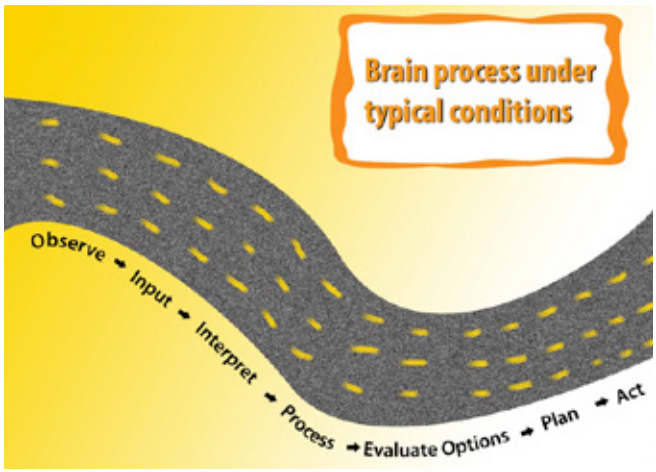
At Birth | At 7 Years of Age | At 15 Years of Age

Source: Adapted from Corel, JL. ***The postnatal development of the human cerebral cortex***. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; 1975.

The Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University describes three types of stress:

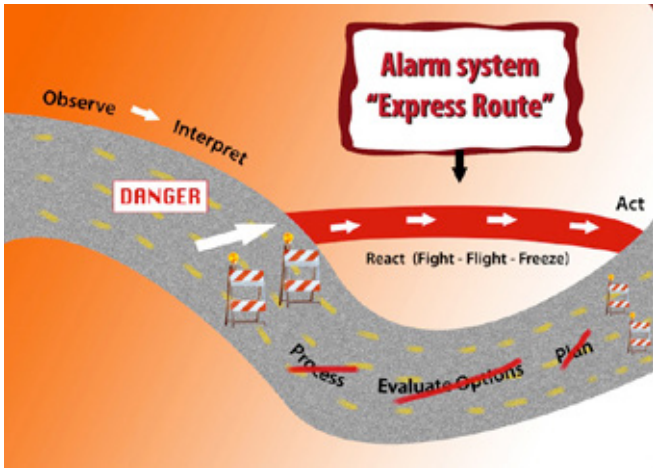
- **Positive stress response** is a normal and essential part of healthy development, characterized by brief increases in heart rate and mild elevations in hormone levels. For example, the first day at a new school might trigger this type of stress response.
- **Tolerable stress response** activates the body's alert systems to a greater degree as a result of more severe, longer-lasting stressors, such as the loss of a loved one, a natural disaster, or a frightening injury. If the activation is time-limited and buffered by relationships with adults who help the child adapt, the brain and other organs recover without lasting damage.
- **Toxic stress response** can occur when a child experiences strong, frequent or prolonged perceived threats or danger – such as physical or emotional abuse, chronic neglect, caregiver substance abuse or mental illness, exposure to violence, or the accumulated burdens of family economic hardship – without adequate adult support. Prolonged activation of the stress response systems can disrupt the development of brain architecture and other organs, and increase the risk for stress-related disease and cognitive impairment.

4. Typical conditions

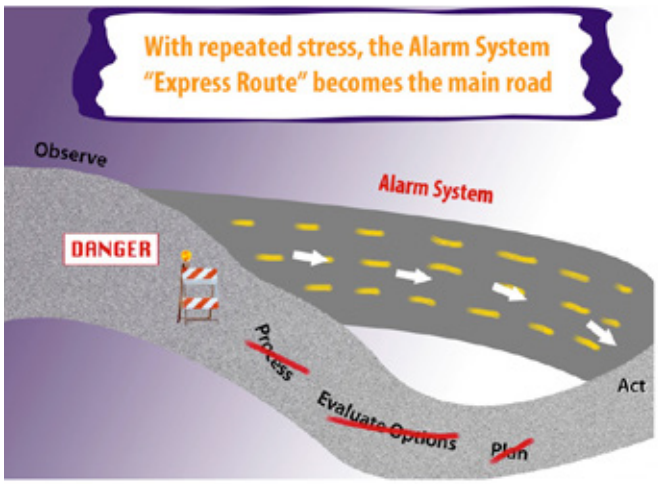


Graphics 4-6: Source: Arvidson, J, et al. 2011, *Trauma 101: Understanding Trauma in the Lives of Children and Adults.*

5. Alarm System



6. Express Route



Graphics 4-6 illustrate how repeated stress can lead to troublesome cognitive habits.

Under typical conditions, we move through our lives taking in the world, interpreting what we experience through our senses, processing and evaluating what we want to do, and finally planning and acting on all those inputs.

When we run into a stressor or potentially dangerous situation, our brain, which is constantly scanning for "trouble," switches to a stress response system. The more contemplative aspects of our usual response are cut out – and instead flight, fight or freeze responses are activated. These responses get us out of trouble fast, and are very effective for situations requiring immediate action.

When we are exposed to repeated or toxic levels of stress, the "express route" becomes the default response for most events. Being on this kind of alert in all settings inhibits thoughtful decision-making and hurts performance in school and in life.

When the developing brain is chronically stressed, it releases hormones that shrink the hippocampus, an area of the brain responsible for processing emotion and memory and managing stress. Recent studies suggest that increased exposure to adverse childhood experiences results in less gray matter in the brain, including the prefrontal cortex, an area related to decision-making and self-regulatory skills, and the amygdala, or fear-processing center.[1] In other words, childhood trauma may damage the developing brain, causing problems with learning, decision-making, and managing emotions

1 Nakazawa, D.J. (2016) *7 Ways Childhood Adversity Changes a Child's Brain*, ACEs Too High News.

There is hope. Just as negative experiences can harm the brain, positive interventions can help repair damaged neural pathways.[2] Active interventions can and do change the life course for individuals exposed to high childhood stress levels. A review of research literature points to **self-regulation**[3] – or learning to control and regulate one's emotions – as the key to mitigating the impacts of stress and trauma.

Schools Have a Key Role

Schools have a critical role in helping build and reinforce neural pathways that support resilience, good decision-making, positive relationships, and lifelong learning. Schools connect children to concepts about numbers, sorting and words, and help children understand how to interact with others and manage their own thoughts and feelings. The impacts of this foundational work stretch across a child's lifetime.

How should schools approach this task? Surveys of Alaska secondary school students suggest some starting points. Alaska high school students who believe teachers care about them and that their schools have clear rules have better grades and participate less often in a host of dangerous activities. These findings support research on the importance of relationships and structure – in the form of clear, fair, and consistent rules – to help children manage and overcome the impacts of trauma and difficult experiences.[4]

Classroom Connection

Provide warm and responsive relationships in school to all students. This includes linking words and actions to unconditional positive regard for students.

The physical environment should be safe both physically and emotionally for students. Consistent, predictable routines as well as clear goals for behavior with well-defined logical consequences for negative behavior are essential.

Self-regulation skills should be a part of the school experience through modeling, instruction and opportunities to practice. Just like math skills, self-regulation skills take time to develop and strengthen.

To help children and youth develop and sustain self-regulation skills, adults need to understand trauma and model specific skills and interventions. Key skills for students and adults are self-awareness, accessing supportive relationships, and self-regulation amidst what can be a very demanding school day. Self-care, addressed in another chapter, is also critical.

This work is not easy given the many demands on teachers and school staff. There needs to be a structure of support and understanding within the broader school and community.

Trauma-Engaged Practice in Action: Sarah's Story

The story at the start of this chapter illustrates that troubling in-school behaviors may have their origin in family stress. Sarah faces an overwhelming change to her family structure. Her mother's impending incarceration is likely not the only difficulty Sarah has faced.

In an ideal world, Sarah would tell an adult, "I am very stressed and need help," and adults in school would have the skills and time to help her. But Sarah doesn't have the skill to take that step, and instead communicates through an outburst of inappropriate behavior.

As Sarah's story shows, stress and trauma impact children's ability to regulate their emotions and thoughts. This is true for adults too. Behavior is a form of communication and high levels of stress can overwhelm us. A trauma-engaged approach focuses on accountability and skill-building so Sarah can learn to manage her stress in a healthier way. Steps might include:

- **Let Sarah finish her school day in an alternative setting.** Rather than send Sarah out of school, provide a safe place for her to gain control of her emotions and assess what happened with a supportive adult. Use in-school suspension if suspension is warranted.
- **Offer a restorative approach for Sarah to make amends.** People whose behavior hurts others need an opportunity to repair broken or strained relationships. This provides accountability and prevents negative relationships from festering. In Sarah's case, apologizing to cafeteria staff might be a starting point.

2 Hosier, D. (2013) *Recovery: How the Brain Can "Re-wire" Itself,* Childhood Trauma Recovery.

3 Murray, D.W., et al. (2016) *Self- Regulation and Toxic Stress Report 4: Implications for Programs and Practice.* OPRE Report # 2016-97, Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

4 Rosanbalm, K.D., & Murray, D.W. (2017) ***Caregiver Co-regulation Across Development: A Practice Brief.*** OPRE Brief #2017-80. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

- **Contact a family member or supportive adult** to get information on Sarah's mother's sentencing. Working with Sarah's family will help the school support and augment what the family is doing.
- **Create a plan of support.** Make a plan Sarah can rely on to help her when feelings get overwhelming.
- **Model and teach self-regulation skills in the classroom and school.** Whole-classroom and whole-school approaches will support all students and adults, and build a more supportive and healthy community.

IDEAL OUTCOMES Sarah gets the support she needs. While she still struggles she begins to learn to regulate her emotions and has a plan she can name to deal with strong emotions. Sarah spends more time learning because school feels like a safer environment and she is better able to control her response to stressors.

Suggested Steps

1. **Assess your classroom or school's current discipline policies and practices.** Consider whether these practices promote accountability and help students repair relationships and improve self-regulation. [See chapters on Policy, Skill Building, and Professional Learning for more.]
2. **Identify the supports and resources available to students in school.** If these resources are inadequate or underdeveloped, consider how they might be augmented. [See chapter on Support Services.]
3. **Identify the supports and resources available within the community at large.** Consider engaging those that may not already be involved with the schools, or strengthening communication and collaboration with those that are already engaged. [See chapter on Cultural Integration and Community Co-creation.]
4. **Share this information.** Change often begins with understanding. The more people understand that stress has real impacts on the brain, the more we can act with compassion and caring toward our students and each other. [See chapter on Professional Learning.]

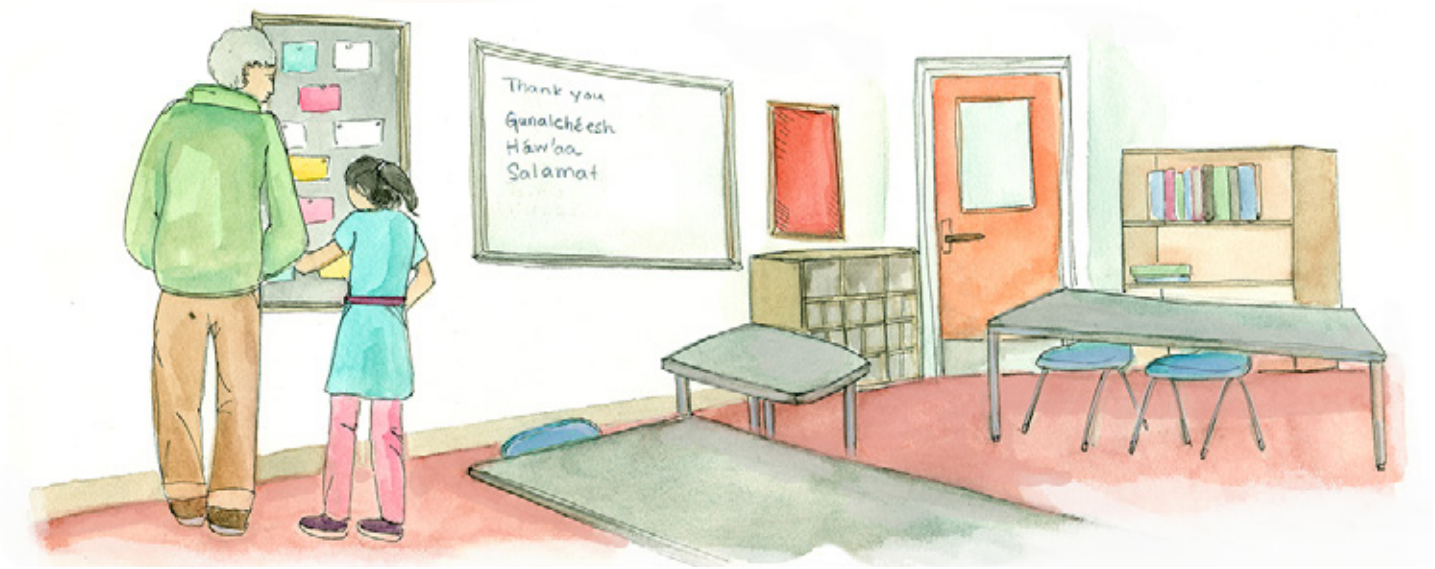
Reflections

- How does the science of stress and brain development described in this chapter shed light on what you see in your schools?
- How do these policies and practices promote accountability and help students repair relationships and improve self-regulation? Could they be improved?
- What is the current level of understanding of trauma among families, school staff, and administrators in your school or community?
- What strengths in your community could be tapped to support students and staff with high levels of trauma?
- What additional information about trauma and its impact on the brain would be helpful?
- In the scenario described in this chapter, what more could be done for Sarah?

Key Terms

Self-regulation: The ability to manage one's emotions and behavior in accordance with the demands of the situation. It includes being able to resist highly emotional reactions to upsetting stimuli, to calm yourself down when you get upset, to adjust to a change in expectations, and to handle frustration without an outburst. It is a set of skills that enables children to direct their own behavior towards a goal despite the unpredictability of the world and our own feelings.

2 RELATIONSHIP BUILDING



There's always a story behind a student's behavior and I do my best to tune in carefully to what the student says or doesn't say. -20-year Alaska educator

SUMMARY **Relationships are at the heart of any trauma-engaged approach. Interventions that foster supportive relationships help students make more positive connections with peers, feel more safe and secure in school, and achieve greater academic success. Transformative schools work to value and foster relationships at all levels — between adults and students, among students, among adults in schools, with families and in the community.**

In Our Schools: Christopher's Story

Christopher is in 9th grade. He comes to school every day but seems uninterested in classes. He does not turn in his homework and rarely speaks in class. He becomes most animated when another student is disruptive—especially in a loud, violent or profane way. Although he is academically capable, he is not doing well in school.

COMMON PRACTICE The math teacher asks, "What's wrong with you? Why are you failing this class?" Christopher shows little apparent concern. His other teachers are equally frustrated with him. Since he is not causing any real trouble in class, Christopher tends to slide by. Over time, Christopher becomes more distant and fails most of his classes.

TRANSFORMATIVE PRACTICE The math teacher, Mr. Smith, notices Christopher sometimes doodles in class, and takes time one day to admire Christopher's drawings. Christopher shares more of his drawings, and Mr. Smith and Christopher begin to develop a relationship. Mr. Smith asks about life outside of school and learns that Christopher is facing major challenges at home. Having learned about trauma, Mr. Smith understands that students who experience trauma may have more difficulty trusting and connecting with adults. He finds this true with Christopher, who tends to give up and get angry with his teachers. Mr. Smith reaches out to other school staff to help support Christopher. Together with Christopher and his family they develop a support plan. Mr. Smith and other school staff show Christopher they care while continuing to set high expectations. With school staff working together with Christopher, they see improvements in attention and perseverance not only in math class, but in all of his classes. They work together to access the best support within and outside of the school.

> ***"Although teachers are not therapists or clinicians, and are neither trained nor prepared to delve into personal trauma histories with their students, there are techniques they can use that can have a healing effect. Indeed, the very relationship they form with students can be a key element of healing in and of itself."***
>
> *-University of Melbourne researchers*

Key Research Findings

Research consistently shows that positive and authentic relationships can counter negative impacts of childhood trauma. One researcher describes safe, stable, nurturing adult relationships as "poison control" for children who experience toxic levels of stress or trauma.[1] A 2008 longitudinal study found that key roles for adults include listening, being available, being positive, and intervening.[2]

Another childhood trauma expert cites a 2015 study of the brain structure of children who had been removed from traumatic homes; several years later, those placed in high-quality nurturing environments showed significantly different brain activity than children in institutionalized care. ***"High-quality nurturing caregiving—safe, stable, nurturing relationships—can actually change the structure of children's brains,"*** explains Dr. Nadine Burke Harris.[3]

A note on implicit bias: In *Culturally Responsive Learning and the Brain*, author Zaretta Hammond explains that many teachers may not be fully aware of their interactions with students. In one study, teachers reported positively interacting with all of their students equally regardless of race, economics, trauma experience, etc. Teachers were then asked to record their positive interactions with students over an extended period. These interactions could not include corrective or instructional interactions. Reflecting on their records, teachers realized they were having many interactions with all students, but there were students that only had corrective interactions, not positive relationship-building interactions.

Guiding Principles for Building Meaningful Relationships with Students.[4]

Following are some examples of principles and practices of trauma-engaged school staff.

- **Always empower, never disempower:** Students who have experienced trauma often seek to control their environment to protect themselves, and their behavior generally deteriorates the more helpless they feel. Classroom discipline can be done in a way that is respectful, consistent, and nonviolent.
- **Express unconditional positive regard:** Consistent and caring adults can help students build trust and form relationships. Even if a student acts out and expresses hatred for or cruel judgments of the teacher, the response must be unconditional positive regard: *"I care about you and will support you in getting your work done."*
- **Maintain high expectations:** Consistency in the classroom helps students differentiate between unsafe rules that led to them experiencing trauma and rules that ensure their safety and well-being. By consistently providing high expectations, limits, and routines, adults send the message that the student is worthy of continued unconditional positive regard and attention.
- **Check assumptions, observe, and question:** Deep listening is more important than your response. Ask questions and confirm your understanding instead of making assumptions. Trauma and toxic stress can affect any student and manifest in many ways.
- **Be a relationship coach:** Help students from preschool through high school to develop relationship skills through modeling and coaching. This will help students learn to regulate emotions and connect with their classmates, family members, and others.
- **Provide opportunities for students to help**: Support student relationships through peer tutoring, role playing, support groups and other guided opportunities to practice and learn social-emotional skills.

All Relationships Matter

There are many relationships that play a role in transforming schools.

Adult-to-Student Relationships. There is a direct relationship between the number of caring adults in a student's life and student outcomes. Adults can begin deepening a relationship through "the little things" – such as welcoming them to school or the classroom, talking about common interests, highlighting students' strengths, or mentioning something a student did outside class.

Student-to-Student Relationships. Fostering positive peer relationships begins with establishing norms and a supportive environment for the school and classroom. Through role playing, healthy relationships programs, and peer mentoring programs, schools can create the right space for students to create their own positive peer climates.

Some examples of peer-led approaches are Natural Helpers, Youth Leaders, You Are Not Alone (YANA), Sources of Strength, and Teens Acting Against Violence.

Adult-to-Adult Relationships. Students see adults model behavior throughout the school day. They look to school staff to see the norms and how staff relate to each other. Adults have a critical role in modeling appropriate and supportive practices and language, especially in high-stress or controversial situations. Healthy conflict resolution practices create productive and supportive school climates.

Family-School Partnerships. Respect and authentic interest in families and community goes a long way toward fostering trusting, collaborative relationships. Create opportunities to build relationships that are equal in power and accessible and welcoming to families from all socioeconomic backgrounds. Some families may have negative experiences with the education system going back one or more generations. Relationships with these families may take extra care to build. (See Family Partnerships section for more information.)

Schools that recognize the central role of relationships often place a strong value on staff retention and continuity. Schools can build learning communities for site administrators and teachers; create meaningful opportunities for community participation in the schools; and support training and self-care among school staff.

"I always talk to students outside class time. If they are hanging out in my classroom during lunch, I have lots of casual conversation.

-Alaska educator

1 Bright, M. (2017) *Why stable relationships are 'poison control' in fighting trauma and stress in kids*, The Conversation.

2 Johnson, B. (2008) *Teacher student relationships which promote resilience at school: a micro-level analysis of students' views*, British Journal of Guidance & Counseling, 36(4): 385-398.

3 Smith, J.A. (2018) *How to Reduce the Impact of Childhood Trauma*, Greater Good Magazine.

4 52 Wolpow, R., Johnson, M.M., Hertel, R., & Kincaid, S.O. (2011). *The Heart of Learning and Teaching: Compassion, Resiliency, and Academic Success*. Olympia, WA: Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction.

Ball

> ***"I never push for an answer. Angry or defiant kids often can't answer, Why are you so angry? I like to leave the conversation door open. 'Come by and talk to me when you have the time. In the meantime, read this...' They usually come back to chat when they've calmed down."***
>
> *-Alaska educator*

Peer relationships in action: Sources Of Strength is a national best-practices youth suicide prevention program. Adapted and adopted by communities across Alaska, Sources of Strength harnesses the power of peer social networks to change unhealthy norms and cultures.

Relationship-Building in Action: Christopher's Story

In the story at the beginning of this chapter, Christopher was disengaged and at risk of failing out of high school. A teacher made some effort to reach Christopher, but did not take the time to build trust and understand what may have led to his lack of engagement in school.

When school staff took time to build trust with Christopher, things began to turn around. This was supported by a team approach with the following key components:

- The teacher reaches out and builds rapport with Christopher. As trust is established, Christopher shares important insights into his life.
- The teacher finds opportunities to recognize Christopher in work he does well.
- The teacher provides a safe place, or alternative learning space, for Christopher in the room when he shows signs of being agitated by loud, disruptive noises.
- The teacher collaborates with other school staff. As a result
  - Christopher's teachers better understand what works for Christopher academically;
  - A school counselor reaches out to Christopher;
  - Ultimately, the school helps the family access outside services and support.

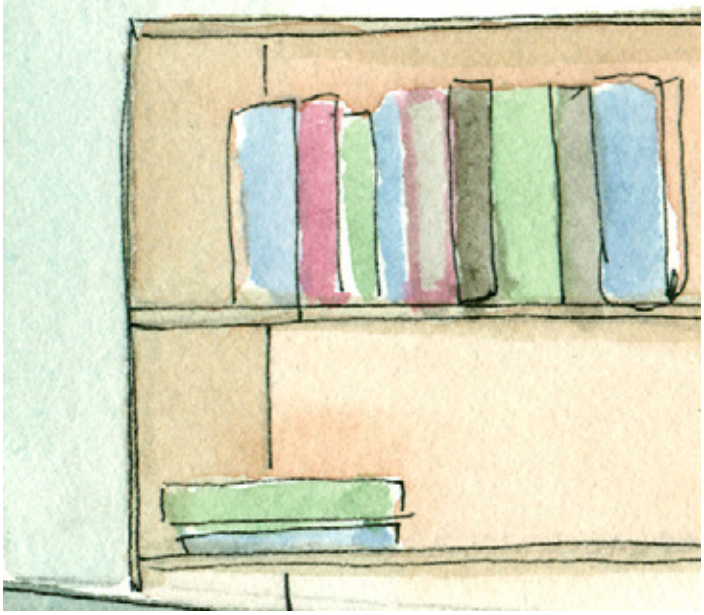
IDEAL OUTCOMES Christopher now feels connected to adults around him. He still struggles with the situation at home, but becomes more engaged in the classroom and earns passing grades. He also gains access to services he needs, and the school establishes a supportive relationship with Christopher's mother.

Suggested Steps

1. **Walk the talk** about building relationships. Model caring and respectful relationships from the top down – among school staff, between staff and families, and between staff and students.
2. **Post cultural or school values about relationships.** These values should be clear, concise, and easy to understand.
3. **Treat each student uniquely.** There is no formula for relationship-building. Authentic listening and treating each person as a unique and valued human is what matters.
4. **Provide professional learning opportunities** about relationship building for staff and families.
5. **Create a positive professional climate** that includes working agreements about staff values, interactions, and collaboration.
6. **Ensure every voice is heard**. Sometimes listening is more important than speaking. Create opportunities to check in with students individually.
7. **Take inventory**. Use the Youth Risk Behavior Survey, School Climate & Connectedness Survey and other data to evaluate your progress.
8. Remember that **relationships are at the heart of any community**. The organization Trauma Transformed offers three points of reflection:
   - **Compassion**: We strive to act compassionately during our interactions with others through the genuine expression of concern and support.
   - **Relationships**: We value and work towards secure and dependable relationships characterized by mutual respect and attunement.
   - **Communication**: We promote dependability and create trust by communicating in ways that are clear, inclusive, and useful to others.

Reflections

- How do you build relationships with students who may be experiencing trauma? What results have you seen?
- What strategies have you tried that have not worked?
- How can you make time for relationship-building without exhausting yourself? Are there ways to build in time to check in with vulnerable students?
- How do you decide when to ask a personal question and when to give a student space?
- What do relationships between staff look like in your school?
- What do student relationships look like in your school?
- What are discipline norms in your school and how do they impact relationship building?
- What does the School Climate and Connectedness Survey or the Youth Risk Behavior Survey tell you about relationships within your school?
- How would students and families describe their experience with staff in your school?
- What does the community value in a relationship?
- What does staff do to repair relationships that have been harmed?
- What could your staff do to infuse restorative practices in your school?



3 POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

"There is nothing inevitable about student outcomes. It is a result of the policies and practices we put into place. We hold a great responsibility."

-Alaska School Board Member

SUMMARY **Policy helps set the tone and tenor of our schools, and ensures consistency of approach and understanding. Polices support the overall goals of education, student safety and well-being. Intentional policies and trauma-engaged policies can help a school system and community integrate trauma-engaged practices and build social and emotional supports.**

In Our Schools: Maria's Story

Maria, a high school junior, comes to school wearing a T-shirt that has a beer logo on it, in violation of the school's dress code.

COMMON PRACTICE Maria is sent home due to her dress code infraction. She misses a day of school and, already struggling, falls further behind.

TRANSFORMATIVE PRACTICE The school's goal is to enforce the dress code without removing students from school. The school has a closet of donated clothes for students who don't meet the dress code. Maria is sent to the principal's office, and a female staff member helps her find something suitable. While they are looking, Maria shares that due to problems at home, she has been staying with friends and does not have access to most of her clothing and belongings. Maria finds a plain shirt, changes in the bathroom, and returns to class. School staff follow up with Maria to make a plan of support.

Key Research Findings

Policy choices impact student outcomes. In some schools, restorative discipline policies – policies that emphasize accountability and repairing relationships – have led to reductions in out-of-school suspensions and increases in student achievement. In one middle school, a pilot site for restorative justice, suspension rates fell from 30 percent to 10 percent within two years, and within four years the school's standardized test scores went up by 74 points.[1]

1 Alameda County School Health Services Coalition. (2011) *Restorative Justice: A Working Guide for Our Schools*.

Policies can be developed in ways that are reactive or proactive: Reactive policy emerges in response to a concern or crisis that must be addressed – health emergencies and environmental disasters are two examples. Proactive policies, by contrast, are introduced and pursued through deliberate choice. [2]

Often, schools and school boards do not make policy changes until an incident – hurtful graffiti, for example – occurs. By working proactively, not reactively, districts can develop policies and practices that create a supportive and sensitive environment for all learners.

Re-examining Policy

Policy exists at different levels and in different forms

- *State-level policy* can take the form of laws or resolutions. Such policies set a tone or expectation from the top-down. These are our state-level statutes that guide or mandate district regulations.
- *School board policy* is an essential governance and management tool to operate districts in a legal, fair, and consistent manner that is focused on student success. Establishing and maintaining thoughtful, clearly written policy helps guide board members and superintendents in decision-making.
- *School regulations* serve as a guide to staff, students, parents, and the local community concerning a school's and district's philosophy, goals, and expectations. These are often published in handbooks.
- *Classroom guidelines* – sometimes explicit, sometimes implicit – help establish and reinforce the classroom culture and expectations for students and parents.

Many policies have administrative regulations or guidance outlining specific ways to uphold each policy.

There are many transformative policies that can be adopted. Some key areas to consider include:

- Attendance
- Discipline
- School climate
- Social and emotional learning
- Philosophies including awareness of Adverse Childhood Experiences and trauma
- Multicultural education
- Partnerships with tribes
- Instruction and curriculum
- Community relationships
- Professional development
- Crisis response
- Multiple measures of student learning

State Policy

Alaska's guiding education policy, set in state law, states:

It is the policy of this state that the purpose of education is to:

- help ensure that all students will succeed in their education and work,
- shape worthwhile and satisfying lives for themselves,
- exemplify the best values of society, and
- be effective in improving the character and quality of the world about them.[3]

State policy compels us to reach all students; to do so requires us to use a trauma-engaged lens and supportive practices throughout our education system.

Alaska lawmakers adopted a health bill in 2018 that adds trauma-engaged language to the Office of Children's Services statutes: "It is the policy of the state to acknowledge and take into account the principles of early childhood and youth brain development and, whenever possible, consider the concepts of early adversity, toxic stress, childhood trauma, and the promotion of resilience through protective relationships, supports, self-regulation, and services." [4] This language can serve as a model for education-related legislation in Alaska.

Some states have adopted education policies specific to addressing trauma, including Wisconsin and California:

Wisconsin: A resolution adopted in 2013 states that policy decisions "will acknowledge and take into account the principles of early childhood brain development and will, whenever possible, consider the concepts of toxic stress, early adversity, and buffering relationships, and note the role of early intervention and investment in early childhood years as important strategies to achieve a lasting foundation for a more prosperous and sustainable state through investing in human capital." [5]

California: A resolution adopted in 2014 urges the Governor to reduce children's exposure to adverse childhood experiences, address the impacts of those experiences, and invest in preventive health care and mental health and wellness interventions; and to consider the principles of brain development, the intimate connection between mental and physical health, the concepts of toxic stress, adverse childhood experiences, buffering relationships, and the roles of early intervention and investment in children as important strategies.[6]

School Board Policy

Most school district policies are designed to address state or federal statutes or to support core philosophies for each district. Fifty-two of 54 Alaska school districts use recommended policies of the Association of Alaska School Boards (AASB). In recent years, 53 districts supported a resolution on trauma-engaged schools.[7] Many Alaska school districts have begun reviewing their policies through the lens of cultural safety and trauma engagement. Some districts have been working on policy changes that address trauma, social and emotional learning, disciplinary approaches, and cultural safety. Specific recommendations are available from the Association of Alaska School Boards.

The Oakland Unified School District's discipline policy[8] is an example of a policy developed through a trauma-engaged lens. In the excerpts below, note the emphasis on positive discipline, equity, staff training, and avoiding missed school.

- The Board desires the use of a positive approach to student behavior and the use of preventative and restorative practices to minimize the need for discipline and maximize instructional time for every student.
- The Board desires to identify and address the causes of disproportionate treatment in discipline to reduce and eliminate the racial disparities in the use of punitive school discipline, and any other disparities that may exist for other under-served populations.
- The Board recognizes the importance of using school and classroom management strategies that keep students in school and in the classroom.
- [With limited exceptions] an administrator or administrator's designee may only impose in-school and out-of-school suspension when other means of correction fail to bring about proper conduct or the student's presence causes a danger to persons.
- Other means of correction include, but are not limited to, conferences with students and their parents/guardians; use of student study teams or other intervention-related teams; enrollment in a program teaching social/emotional behavior or anger management; participation in a restorative justice program or restorative circles; and positive behavior support approaches.
- The Superintendent or designee shall provide professional development as necessary to assist staff in developing consistent classroom management skills, implementing effective disciplinary techniques, eliminating unconscious bias, and establishing cooperative relationships with parents/guardians.
- To ensure that discipline is appropriate and equitable, schools and the District shall collect and review discipline data that is disaggregated by school, race, gender, status as an English Language Learner, status as a student with a disability, and type of infraction on a monthly basis.

The basic process for policy change in Alaska: Each school board reviews a recommended policy change or new policy, takes public input and comment, adapts it if desired, and then votes on whether to adopt the new or amended policy. Policies can likewise be removed. Best practice is for school boards to update district policies annually to stay current with new statutes or to consider new policies that align with the needs of students in the district.

Significant policy changes require legal consultation to ensure compliance with state and federal law. It is also important to consider whether a new policy is consistent with the district's existing policy and guidelines, and school handbooks; if not, consider how the district will align other protocols and documents to ensure a new or amended policy is meaningful.

2 Torjman, S. (2005) ***What is Policy? Caledon Institute of Social Justice*** (now Maytree) (p.3).

3 ***Alaska Statute 14.03.015***, State Education Policy.

4 ***Alaska Senate Bill 105, 2018***, ***Marital/Family Therapy; Health Care Prices.***

5 ***Wisconsin Senate Joint Resolution 59, 2013***, Relating to: Early Childhood Brain Development.

6 ***California Assembly Concurrent Resolution 155, Chapter 144, 2014***, Relative to Childhood Brain Development.

7 ***Where We Stand AASB resolutions***

8 ***Oakland Unified School District Board Policy 5144:*** Students, Discipline.

Policy Consideration: Tribal Governments and Education

Another policy area relevant to some Alaska communities is the relationship between tribes and schools. Tribal involvement has the potential to strengthen school-community bonds and ensure culturally sensitive, trauma-reducing practices. Several school districts are working with tribes to outline specific roles and relationships between the schools and tribes. Outside the policy framework, many districts or schools already work with tribal entities to provide guidance, resources, and cultural enrichment through programs such as visiting Elders.

There is also discussion of compacting with tribes to provide education. Compacts are agreements that enable tribes to take primary responsibility for providing services to tribal members. One of the recommendations that emerged from Alaska's Education Challenge in 2017 is to create an option for education compacting between the state and tribal government or similarly empowered Alaska Native organizations to realize better education outcomes for students.[8]

Washington state has worked closely with tribes on education, and has established several tribal compacts. One of the ideas behind these agreements is that tribes can do the best job providing culturally competent education to tribal members.

Policy in Action: Maria's Story

In the story at the beginning of this chapter, Maria wears a t-shirt that violates her school's dress code. Instead of sending her home, a trauma-engaged school helps Maria meet the dress code so she can stay in school. This relatively simple change prioritizes Maria's learning. In the process, school staff come to understand more about what is going on in Maria's life, and are better able to support her.

IDEAL OUTCOMES Maria feels supported by school staff and feels that they are there to help rather than punish her. School staff reach out to Maria's family and begin to work on a plan to help Maria get the supports she needs.

8 Alaska Department of Education & Early Development (2018) *Alaska's Education Challenge Final Report*; see Self-Governance Compacting, p. 17.

Suggested Steps: Policy Considerations

1. **Review key policies that shape the district and schools.** School boards and district leadership can begin reviewing key school board policies or consider AASB's trauma-engaged policy recommendations package.
2. **Reach out to staff, board members, and community members during policy development**. The more people involved in policymaking, the more likely it is that new policies will be understood and successfully integrated.
3. **When drafting or amending policies, use language that is clear and easy to understand.** Be concise and use words that reflect local usage.
4. **Post policies broadly to ensure broad understanding and acceptance.** Post in schools and public buildings such as post offices and libraries, and online.
5. **Develop a short version of key policies** and post throughout schools and classrooms.
6. **Have a plan to ensure success.** This should include educating staff and the public on the rationale for new and amended policies, and providing the necessary staff training. Update other documents, administrative guidance, and school handbooks to ensure consistency.

Reflections

- How do policies shape school climate and disciplinary approaches?
- How do community members help shape and learn about policies and administrative regulations in your district?
- What policy or regulation changes could improve trauma-engaged practices at the state, district, or school level?
- How does your school district review and make changes to policies?
- How informed is your school board about trauma and trauma-engaged policies?
- What policies exist to support whole-school social and emotional learning, restorative discipline practices, and students experiencing trauma?
- In what ways do your district's policies support community partnerships?
- What measures are in place to break down silos and strengthen partnerships?
- How do schools, tribes, students, and families work together for the best outcomes for students?

Key Terms

Policy: a set of rules or principles that guide a government, business or organization.

4 PLANNING AND COORDINATION OF SCHOOLWIDE EFFORTS

"Too many initiatives die after a year or so. Trauma-informed work needs to be connected to a shared long-term vision and goals." -Alaska educator

SUMMARY **Trauma-engaged practice is most effective with the steady support of the entire school community. Crafting a plan that allows school staff, families and key partners to be part of the transformation process can help generate buy-in and develop consistent language and practices throughout the school and community.**

In Our Schools: Steve's Story

Steve is a middle school math teacher who is resistant to his school's push for trauma-engaged practice. He has let everyone know that he does not believe trauma-engaged practice and social and emotional learning will help him teach math. He said he already has enough to do.

COMMON PRACTICE The principal suggests Steve get on board, because this directive comes from above. Steve is resentful and is often withdrawn from the rest of the school staff except in meetings where he makes it difficult for his colleagues to put structures into place.

TRANSFORMATIVE PRACTICE Steve's colleagues ask questions and learn that Steve values student achievement and does not see a connection between student well-being and student achievement. Some of his colleagues work together to review student data and research on the impacts of trauma-engaged and social and emotional learning practices. In a subsequent planning meeting, another math teacher explains how integrating social and emotional learning has helped her students to work harder and take greater risks in a subject many students find difficult. A scientist at heart, Steve does more research and review, and over time goes from skeptic to willing partner. As the school staff talk through trauma-engaged research and school data, it becomes clear Steve feels confident teaching math but does not feel prepared to use trauma-engaged practices. His colleagues share their tools and resources, and Steve begins to take steps toward integrating trauma-engaged practices in his classroom.

Key Research Findings

Research suggests that education reform is more successful when there is broad buy-in and application of new ideas, policies and practices. A crucial factor in successful reform is to make programmatic change explicit. This provides an opportunity to check assumptions, review evidence, and develop a shared vision and language.

Whole-school approaches and whole-district approaches have greater impact and staying power than changes made in one class or unevenly within a district.[1] Integrated approaches provide developmentally appropriate experiences across grades and help students and families understand that expectations are consistent across the whole school and district. Developing this kind of integrated, consistent approach requires planning and collaboration.

Hallmarks of Effective Planning Processes

An effective planning process usually has the following **attributes**:

- **Collaboration** among administrators, school staff, families, community organizations and students to develop clear expectations, common language, clear tools, and common response strategies;
- **Intentionality** to ensure the work is rooted in a district or site's culture;
- **Theory of change** that outlines the key components of your schoolwide approach;
- Clearly communicated **rationale** to increase staff buy-in and reduce resistance to change;
- Honest, respectful, and productive **discussion** about strengths and gaps; and
- **Ongoing review**: Plan, Do, Reflect (Repeat).

A successful planning process results in the following key **outcomes**:

- A **clear road map** with timelines, milestones, and paths to get there;
- Clear **roles and responsibilities** for implementation;
- A **common understanding** of trauma-engaged language and communication strategies, whole-school supports, and key approaches and strategies;
- **Alignment** of policies, guidelines, handbooks, and practices; and
- **A process to establish norms, practices, and expectations together.**

Planning, Step by Step

Planning involves interconnected steps that can reinforce one another.

- **Preparation**: Invest some time to think about key aspects of your planning process.
- **Participants**: Ideally participants will reflect the diversity of the community. A team might include champions to help spread support, and family and community partners.
- **Time and location**: Determine how often the team will meet, and select meeting times and locations that are convenient for team members. Consider language accommodations if needed.
- **Facilitation**: Some planning teams prefer to use an external facilitator to help ensure all participants have a voice and keep the process moving.
- **Documentation**: Thorough documentation of the planning process builds credibility. Consider whether and how meetings will be recorded, transcribed, and shared.
- **Communication**: Consider how this process and its outcomes will be shared throughout the community. Consider tools such as district and school websites, social media, newsletters, newspapers and public radio.

Community Engagement and Outreach: Expand the planning team beyond school staff. Including community members provides important perspective and helps spread and embed trauma-engaged practice throughout a community. At any stage of development, plans can be an effective tool for facilitating communication.

Data and Information Review: Dedicate staff or contracted support to compile data, inventory strengths and gaps, and identify resources the community can tap. The following information may be helpful:

- school climate and youth risk behavior survey data,
- disciplinary trends,
- attendance trends,
- special education referrals,
- academic outcome measures (graduation rates, test scores, etc.),
- teacher turnover rates, and
- staff and family surveys.

Note: All data must be de-identified. If a population is big enough that data can be split out without compromising student privacy, data should be disaggregated in ways that help identify whether certain populations need additional supports.

Visioning: A visioning process can help bring consensus on a core goal. A shared vision serves as a guidepost to inspire the process and keep everyone on track through what can be a difficult journey.

Plan Development: To truly embed a whole-school approach to support resilience, some districts or schools establish a planning team, champion, and site-based action plan. These plans often lay out roles, activities, timelines, an inventory of resources needed and available, and ways to measure progress.

One way to work toward this plan is through a collective impact lens: what key **results** are you working toward, and what are key **indicators**, key **strategies**, and key **activities**?

Plans might consider the following:

- Understanding adverse childhood experiences, historical trauma and resilience
- Scheduling professional learning for trauma-engaged practices
- Support adults to integrate skill-building for students
- Highlighting and practicing adult modeling of social and emotional skills
- Incorporating schoolwide practices
- Weaving in developmentally appropriate social and emotional skill instruction for students
- Strengthening community and family partnerships
- Integrating local cultural practices
- Identifying individual supports and confidentiality needs
- Developing plans for integrating new staff and new initiatives into a trauma-engaged framework.

Consensus Building: Provide time and opportunities to build consensus among school staff, and to inform and develop natural champions and popular opinion leaders in the school and community. Hold conversations with skeptics as well as natural allies such as health, tribal, and community organizations committed to similar outcomes for children. Engaging community groups reinforces school efforts and can lead to formal relationships with partners to help heal trauma.

Consensus building often spreads through individuals sharing their perspectives on why a change is important to them. Listening is key. It is normal for there to be resistance to change. It can serve as a healthy part of the change process by spurring deeper conversations.

Some models such as CLEAR suggests at least 80 percent consensus among school staff is needed for success. Buy-in can be developed over time. The Culturally Responsive and Embedded Social and Emotional Learning (CRESEL) model suggests starting with district and site planning including school staff, students and the community to have a clear road map with clear actions for each year. These actions might shift policies and practices in the school.

1 Hunt, P. (2015) *A Whole-School Approach: Collaborative Development of School Health Policies, Processes and Practices, Journal of School Health;* 85(11): 802–809

> ***"Planning is about reorienting the ship while sailing."*** *-Alaska educator*

Continuous Improvement: Plan, Do, Reflect, Repeat. Successful trauma-engaged practice is an ongoing process of planning, implementing, and reviewing results. Plans should identify what results are desired, what will be measured or evaluated, who will do the evaluation, and how often. Together the team can look at how widespread its efforts are, what difference these efforts are making, and what changes might further these impacts. *This requires a commitment of staff time for planning, ongoing training, and reflective practice.*

For evaluation purposes, the team should use the indicators selected during plan development. These indicators will likely be a subset of the data and information used at the outset of the process, and may include surveys of staff, students and families; student attendance; discipline data; and graduation rates. Additional tools will be available at https://aasb.org/trauma-engaged-schools/

Leadership and Support Structures

Leadership and support structures are critical to effectively embed trauma-engaged practice within a district and schools, and to ensure that plans translate into action. There are several ways districts have approached this. Following are a few common structures and roles:

Leadership team: Districts may choose to establish or expand both district and school leadership teams to improve trauma-engaged plans and implementation. Leadership teams are natural champions to explain how and why trauma-engaged practice fits in to school and district goals. Participation on these teams should be voluntary.

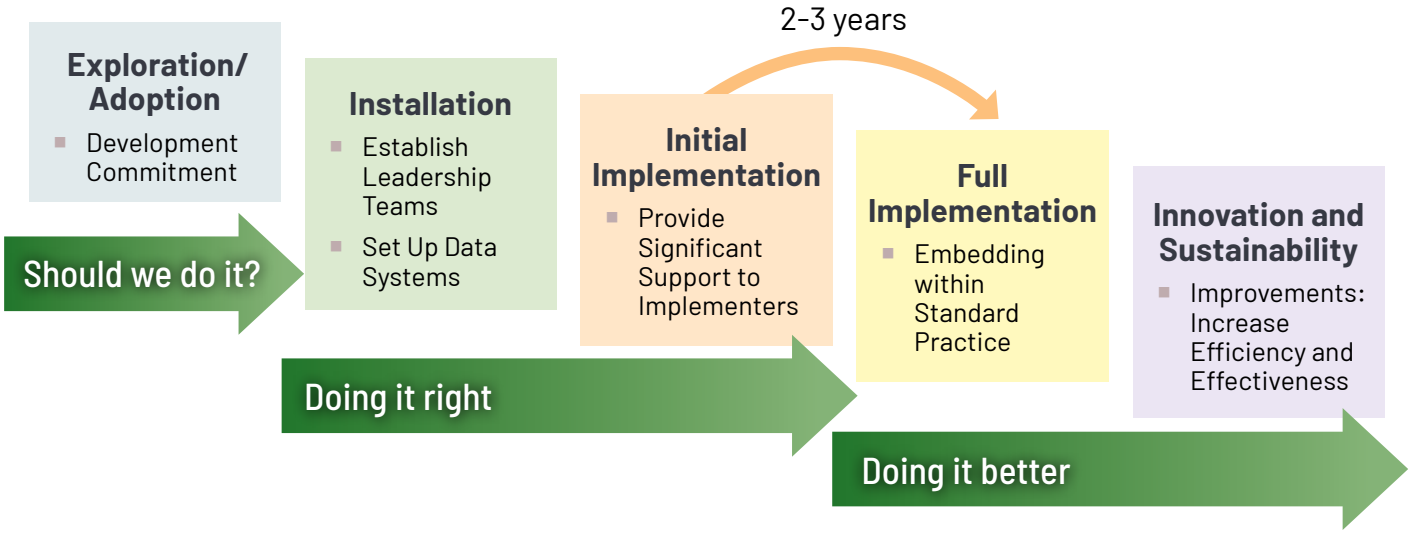
- To establish a district leadership team: Recruit leaders from administrative staff who would like to be part of a Trauma-Engaged Schools Administrative Leadership Team.
- To establish a school leadership team: Recruit individuals on staff who would like to be part of a Trauma-Engaged Schools Leadership Team. This team should include six to eight individuals reflecting broad representation of your school.

Collaborative team leadership: Here leadership teams are expanded, and may include school staff, community leaders, and youth. "Co-creation" helps build community support and ensure sustainability of trauma-engaged initiatives.

Champions: It is critical to have an individual or multiple individuals who spearhead this work, and hold the system accountable for continued progress and system-level change. The passion of a single person cannot carry this work alone, but it can drive momentum that might otherwise stagnate.

Support networks: Statewide learning communities or networks provide peer support and opportunities to reflect, plan and collaborate with other districts undertaking trauma-engaged transformation.

7. Stages of Implementation



Source: Adapted from PBIS.org

It's a Marathon, Not a Sprint

Change does not happen overnight. It takes sustained effort over time to establish effective plans, get buy-in, develop the leadership and infrastructure to support change, implement new practice, and continuously evaluate and improve these practices.

Steve's Story

In the scenario at the start of this chapter, Steve's colleagues helped bring Steve on board by asking questions to try to understand what was important to him, and to think about trauma-engaged work in light of Steve's values.

IDEAL OUTCOMES Steve and his colleagues work together to develop a shared approach that includes a roadmap and action plan. School staff review components of the trauma-engaged framework and decide how to build a shared understanding, develop policies, integrate school practices, and build deeper relationships with students, families, and the community

Suggested Steps:

1. **Consider building a small team** to determine how to approach this process.
2. **Have informal conversations** to gauge awareness and readiness for trauma-engaged policies and practices in your district or school. Include staff and families.
3. **Gather and analyze data and information.** If this is daunting, reach out to the Association of Alaska Schools Boards or Alaska Dept. of Education and Early Development for help gathering or analyzing data.
4. **Work through the process outlined in this chapter.** Customize the steps to fit your community's needs and style, following the broad principles of collaboration, intentionality, and discussion.

Reflections:

- What opportunities have school staff and administrators had to develop a common understanding of trauma and their own role in transforming schools?
- Was data used in this process? If so, how? If not, what data might be helpful?
- What support do you need for this process to succeed?
- How can local and regional partners participate in planning processes? Who has been included and not included in the past?
- What kind of planning tool or supports would help school staff, community members, and student leaders undertake this work?
- Is there someone within the district or outside who has experience and tools to facilitate this process?
- How can your team compile information in a way that will be useful to communicate to others?

5 PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

"Adults have to know it and model it first." -Alaska 5th grade teacher

SUMMARY **School staff members often receive one-time training on topics; real and lasting change requires ongoing professional development and reflective practice. This chapter describes ongoing and embedded professional learning to transform schools through a trauma-engaged and community-responsive approach.**

In Our Schools: In-service

Upon reviewing school district behavior data, school district leaders decide to address trauma-engaged practice as a professional learning topic.

COMMON PRACTICE The district provides a two-hour session on trauma-engaged practice to a handful of teachers at an in-service day. Teachers find it interesting, but daunting to put into practice.

TRANSFORMATIVE PRACTICE The district provides a day of training to all staff on culturally responsive trauma-engaged practices. Each school develops or uses an existing leadership team to plan the content for ongoing professional development throughout the school year. This deepens the learning from the in-service and becomes the main focus for professional learning over the course of the year. Trauma-engaged practices become a topic during every building in-service to help all staff integrate holistic ways of supporting students. Educators use professional learning community (PLC) time twice per month to discuss and refine strengths-based practices. All staff focus on their schoolwide approaches bi-monthly during staff meetings. The school board and site-based council members also receive training so they can take an active role in engaging the community in the holistic approach.

> ***"Now that we have a common trauma-informed language, a conversation at lunch becomes a valuable brainstorming session. It has brought our staff closer together. We wanted [social and emotional learning] to help us change the culture in our school. We've realized that the change starts with us.***
>
> *-AK 5th Grade Teacher*

Key Research Findings

Ongoing opportunities for learning and reflection are critical for all who work with students: school administration, teaching staff, paraprofessionals, support staff, afterschool providers, and community members. According to the Professional Learning Association, a 2017 survey found that effective professional learning boosted both educator effectiveness and student learning.[1] This learning is more effective when staff have opportunities to combine theoretical knowledge with practical experience.[2]

What should districts focus on? When it comes to positively impacting students, research suggests something very simple may be the most important factor: belief. A 2016 meta-analysis found that staff collective efficacy – belief that through shared actions, the school and community team can positively influence outcomes for students – is the factor that most influences student achievement.[3]

Professional learning for trauma-engaged schools should focus not only on effective practice, but on cultivating a shared faith that together the school community can make a difference.

In addition, for trauma-engaged practice, researchers suggest adults need guided opportunities to develop their own social and emotional competencies. Chris Blodgett, of the CLEAR model, calls this ***"placing teachers at the center of practice"***[4] because adult self-regulation skills are a foundation for success.

Transformative Professional Learning

Many teachers in Alaska say they are not prepared to integrate trauma-engaged approaches in culturally responsive ways. Further, frequent migration of teachers in and out of Alaskan communities can have a stop-and-start effect that makes it difficult for schools to move past implementation barriers. Embedding professional learning in school practices can help overcome these barriers.

Professional learning should apply to all adults in the school community. Everyone in a school community has a role – and needs to believe they have a role – in supporting students. This might include Tribes and Elders, superintendent, principals, families, teachers, counselors, specialists, community organizations, bus drivers, custodians, paraprofessionals, support staff, classified staff, cafeteria staff, safety officer, front office staff, recess supervisors, sports coaches, after-school activity providers, and school board members.

Effective learning is integrated with one's work. Ongoing and embedded professional learning enables staff to make direct connections between their learning, their experience on the job, and district initiatives.

Alaska educators and national experts suggest professional learning for trauma-engaged practice address topics such as:

- Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and inequities in Alaska and the impact on learning
- Historical and intergenerational impacts of trauma
- Cultural strength, resilience, and multi-generational models for healing
- Relationship-building with students, staff, families and community
- Adult social-emotional skills (e.g., collaboration, conflict resolution, consensus building)
- Schoolwide practices that create physical, emotional, cultural and academic safety
- Helping students develop self-regulation and social-emotional skills
- Resources and community partnerships for helping students with specific trauma (e.g., parent in jail, military deployment, alcohol and drugs, violence)
- How students' trauma impacts school staff and staff self-care

Keeping Children Safe: Mandatory Reporting

Trauma-engaged approaches ensure that all educators and staff are equipped with the knowledge and skills to support student safety. As part of a schoolwide approach to supporting the whole child, all school staff should receive training on the recognition and reporting of child abuse and neglect.

Under Alaska law, teachers, administrators, counselors, athletic coaches and child care providers are required to report if they "have reasonable cause to suspect that a child has suffered harm as a result of child abuse or neglect." These staff are required to receive training on mandatory reporting.[5]

1 *Learning Forward: The Professional Learning Association* (website).

2 Croft, A., et al. (2010) *Job-Embedded Professional Development: What It Is, Who Is Responsible, And How to Get It Done Well*, National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality, Issue Brief, p. 8.

3 Hattie, J. (2009) Visible Learning for Teachers: A Synthesis of Over 800 Meta-Analyses Relating to Achievement. New York, NY: Routledge. Updated 2016.

4 Blodgett, C. (2017) A Selected Review of Trauma-Informed School Practice and Alignment with Educational Practice, CLEAR Trauma Center.

5. *Alaska Statute 47.17.22*

Professional Learning Formats and Delivery Models

Supportive school districts prioritize time for intentionally structured learning and collaboration. Creating a growth-oriented adult culture for trauma-engaged practice can happen in many ways. Below are a variety of formats for professional learning. ***How will your district create an on-going and integrated professional learning plan for your school learning community?***

- **Professional learning communities (PLC):** structured collaboration time with identified outcomes for student learning and engagement
- **Coaching and observation:** peer coaching and classroom observation or instructional coach position
- **Peer support:** teachers meet to analyze each other's work and discuss challenges
- **Consultant model:** work with consultants to tailor trauma-engaged approaches and coaching
- **Community dialogue:** structure ongoing authentic conversations among stakeholders – school, community, families, Tribe (e.g., First Alaskans Institute's Advancing Native Dialogue On Race and Equity)
- **State-wide education conferences:** participants return and share their learning
- **In-service:** district-wide and site-based training that is reinforced in PLCs or staff meetings in ongoing ways

Second Order Change

One program focused on strengthening adult understanding of self-regulation skills and other social-emotional competency is the community-based Second Order Change Initiative led by the Anchorage Youth Development Coalition. The initiative helps adults who work with youth gain deeper awareness of their social and emotional intelligence. Staff with greater awareness and management of their self-regulation skills are able to better support children who have experienced trauma.

- **Staff meetings:** structured meetings with time dedicated to trauma-engaged practice on a regular basis
- **Book studies:** offer credit for book studies or classes through UAA Professional and Continuing Education (PACE)
- **Online classes or webinars:** staff can take an online class or webinar series together through the Alaska Department of Education and Early Development e-learning modules or the Alaska Staff Development Network

"We need authentic ongoing conversations to integrate training with agencies, tribes, K-12, early childhood and more. Our teachers need time to participate in reflective practice including local cultural activities."

-Alaska school board member

Authentic Learning with Families and the Community

To effectively support students, it is important for families and school staff to share knowledge with one another. By partnering with communities and families, schools align trauma-engaged approaches with community values and strengthen the place-based cultural dimensions of learning and teaching.

Community partners can teach school staff about cultural values, local place-based knowledge, governance structures, sexual assault and domestic violence, and more. Community partners can also link school staff to local and tribal government resources and protocols. This kind of authentic partnership means learning from and with the community. [See chapters on Cultural Integration & Community Co-Creation and Family Partnership for more.]

Shared learning experiences build skills in both the school and community, and strengthen relationships, trust and collective efficacy.

Professional Learning in Action: In-service

The Anchorage School District coordinated a day of learning with the community in November 2017 that focused on trauma-engaged and culturally sensitive practice:

- The training used a series of videos developed by the district and its partners.
- All 66 elementary schools invited parents, community members, and business partners into the schools to learn together. As one of the most diverse districts in the nation, district leaders felt it was important to have community members present to share their stories and perspectives.
- Schools provided lunch for all participants to build relationships and keep the conversation going over a shared meal.

"Watching the modules together prompted discussion among school staff, community members, and families."

Anchorage School District staff member

IDEAL OUTCOMES The conversation will go on long after the day of shared learning, and will strengthen connections among school staff and the community. Shared understanding of trauma and of ways to support resilience fosters a more supportive and connected community within and beyond the schools.

Suggested Steps

1. **Assess your district and school professional learning practice.** Is it connected, embedded and collaborative, or top-down, "one and done"?
2. **Inventory the opportunities** in the district and at school to learn about trauma-engaged practice in a sequenced way throughout the year.
3. **Inventory staff beliefs and knowledge** about trauma. Meet staff where they are and build on staff strengths.
4. **Create a professional learning plan** and timeline based on staff readiness. Connect learning to a shared vision and goals for transforming your school. Strive for learning that relates directly to each position.
5. **Learn together:** Create a model where the whole school, all district and school staff, can learn, share, and reflect together.
6. **Collaborate with the community** (families, Elders, Tribe, support services) to design community-based and culturally-responsive professional learning.
7. **Invite families and community members** to learn together.
8. **Track and evaluate growth.** Consider building in tracking and evaluation to assess progress.

Reflections

- How do you as a district or as a school staff learn, plan and reflect together to improve student learning?
- How can your school community move toward a shared belief that together you can positively impact student outcomes?
- What is the current state of staff knowledge, beliefs, and skills with respect to trauma-engaged practice?
- What kind of professional learning would be helpful to you with respect to transforming trauma?
- How does your school or district collaborate with the community (families, Elders, Tribe, support services) to deliver culturally-responsive professional learning?
- How can your school model a community-wide approach and learn together with families and community?

Key Terms

Collective efficacy: A belief that, through collective actions, a group of people can influence student outcomes and increase achievement.

Professional learning: Effective professional learning refers to structured professional development that results in changes in teacher practices and improvements in student learning outcomes.

6 SCHOOLWIDE PRACTICES AND CLIMATE

"Positive school climate and connectedness is not a program but a way of engaging in the world. How do we make this the foundation of all of our interactions?" -Alaska school counselor

SUMMARY **Trauma-engaged schools cannot be transformed by one person or in one classroom. Schools that are truly trauma-engaged support efforts in and outside of the classroom. These efforts are coordinated across classrooms and in all aspects of the school community to create an environment where students feel safe and supported.**

In Our Schools: Mary's Story

Mary, a third grader, has started to tell her teacher and the school nurse that her stomach hurts and she wants to go home. She is frequently absent from school and is falling behind academically. Mary, who is overweight, is often teased about her weight by her peers.

COMMON PRACTICE Her teacher and the school nurse dismiss Mary's stomach complaints as excuses to leave the classroom or get out of school. The teacher requires her to stay in for recess to make up missed work.

TRANSFORMATIVE PRACTICE Mary's teacher and school nurse recognize that there may be more at play. The nurse talks to Mary, and learns that Mary's father died last year. Mary's mother has bouts of ill health and Mary worries her mother will die. The teacher, nurse, school counselor and principal work together with Mary's mother to make a plan to address Mary's needs and ensure she can make up work without missing valuable play and social time at recess. The school master schedule includes time for social and emotional skill instruction for all grade levels and has older students in a leadership role. Peer mediators from the upper grades use restorative practices to build empathy with students who teased Mary, to repair relationships and make school a safer place for Mary and her peers.

Key Research Findings

Research consistently shows that positive student and staff perceptions of their school climate are linked to increased student academic achievement and graduation rates; increased staff job satisfaction and and decreased student risk behaviors.[1] Positive school climate is good for graduation rates and reducing many negative indicators including dropout rates, violence, alcohol and drug use, and school absences. It is not just students. When staff members feel supported by administration, they report higher levels of commitment and job satisfaction.[2]

Data from Alaska's School Climate and Connectedness Survey, which surveys students in grades 3-12 across the state, show similar patterns. For example, 64 percent of students who received mostly As reported feeling close to adults at school, while only 42 percent of students who received mostly Ds and Fs reported feeling close to adults at school. Similarly, students who reported feeling close to adults reported fewer unexcused absences; and students who reported positive perceptions of school climate had better grades and fewer unexcused absences.

Why Schoolwide Practices?

Trauma violates physical, social, and emotional safety, and can result in feeling threatened and alert to risk. For students who have experienced trauma, having core safety needs met in a stable and predictable environment can minimize stress reactions. This frees students to focus on learning.

Schoolwide practices make it clear that everyone in the school community has a role and responsibility in creating a safe and respectful learning environment. **Schoolwide practices** refer to routines, structures, and strategies that are agreed upon and used across the school throughout the school day.

Schoolwide practices help establish a school's climate. The National School Climate Center describes **school climate** as "the quality and character of school life, the foundation for learning and positive youth development." Every school has a climate, and everyone in the school contributes to it. It can be described as warm or cool, safe or unsafe. Many say you can actually feel a welcome and positive school climate as you enter a school, creating a sense of safety and belonging.

Climate & Schoolwide Practices

A goal of the Safety and Well-Being committee of Alaska's Education Challenge is to create sustainable and positive school climates that are safe, supportive, and engaging for all students, families, staff, and communities. This aligns with the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which recognizes the strong link between positive school climate and student learning.

Figure 8 lists the measures of Alaska's School Climate and Connectedness Survey that contribute to safe and connected school climates (This survey differs by grade band 3-5 or 6-12. The family survey was new in 2018).

8. School Climate and Connectedness Scales

Students	Staff*	Family (new in 2018)
Respectful Climate	Student (Peer) Climate	Cultural Connectedness
Caring Adults	Family and Community Involvement	Family and Community Involvement
Peer Climate	School Leadership and Involvement	Communication
High Expectations	Staff Attitudes	Student Support at Home
Student Involvement	Student Involvement	Family Engagement at School
Family and Community Involvement	School Safety	Opportunities for Involvement
School Safety	Cultural Connectedness	
Cultural Connectedness (grades 6-12)	Observed Student Risk Behaviors	
Community Support (grades 6-12 only)		
Social and Emotional Learning		
Observed Risk Behaviors (grades 6-12 only)		
Caring Others (grades 3-5 only)		

Source: Association of Alaska School Boards, *School Climate and Connectedness Survey*

Trauma-engaged learning environments allow students to bring their culture and whole selves to school. Focus areas for schoolwide practices include

- Safe, predictable and supportive learning environments;
- Practices to increase students' and adults' resilience and coping skills; and
- Focus on relationships.

Trauma-engaged schools transform a paradigm where educators operate in isolation into a paradigm of shared responsibility. In a trauma-engaged school, educators make the switch from asking, "What can I do to fix this child?" to asking, "What can we do to help all children feel safe and participate fully in our school learning community?" [3]

Students also play an important role in school climate. As one Alaska school board member said: ***"We need to encourage student input. Youth can be leaders in prevention and peer mentoring."*** The Bering Strait Youth Leaders program is an example of such an effort [see sidebar].

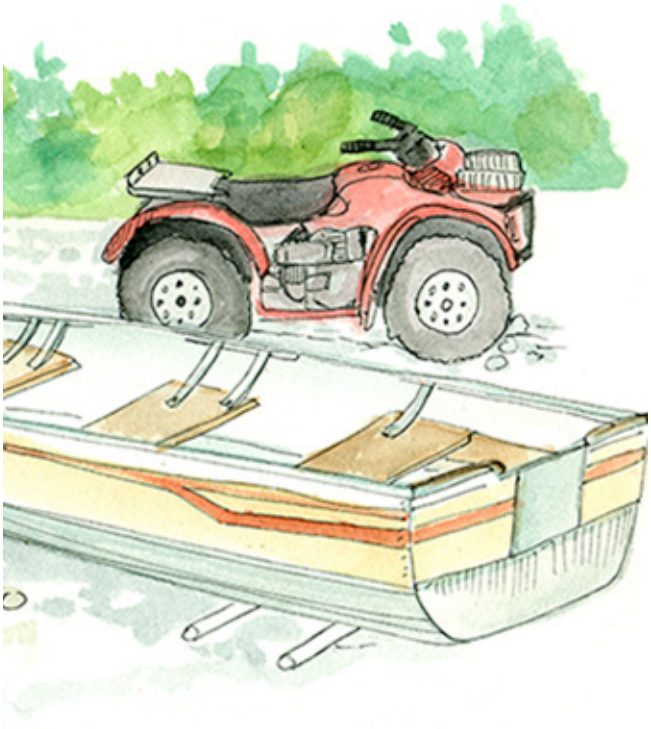
Bering Strait Youth Leaders

The Bering Strait School District helps students strengthen school climate through its Youth Leaders program.

Each year, 50 to 60 youth from across the Bering Straits region attend a two-day youth leadership training. They learn about peer helper skills such as listening, bullying and suicide prevention, referral skills, confidentiality, communication techniques, and self-care, all with the regional cultures in focus. Youth Leaders look at their school's School Climate and Connectedness Survey results and build action plans to improve climate, with help from Association of Alaska School Boards staff.

Back in their home communities, Youth Leaders meet regularly with an adult mentor for guidance and support as they serve their peers, younger students, schools and communities. Activities may include sharing goals, hosting healing circles, providing peer support and suicide intervention.

Transforming practices can be as simple as saying "hello."



1 O'Brennan, L. & Bradshaw, C. (2013). The ***Importance of School Climate,*** Research Brief by Johns Hopkins Center for the Prevention of Youth Violence for the National Education Association.

2 *Ibid.*

3 Cole, S.F., et al. (2009). *Helping Traumatized Children Learn*, Boston, MA: Massachusetts Advocates for Children.

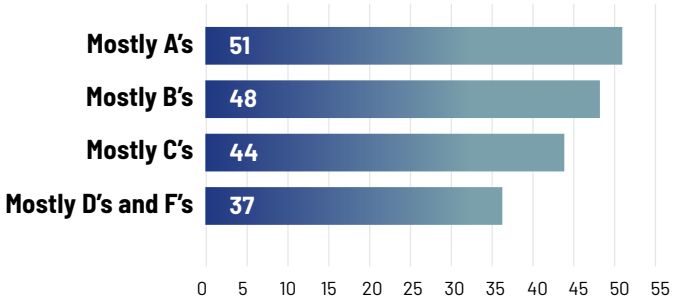
Cultural Connectedness

When schools value the language and culture of families; teach the history and culture of students, and represent students' culture in the school environment, it impacts school climate and academic achievement. In 2018, 48 percent of Alaska students in grades 6-12 taking the School Climate and Connectedness Survey reported positive perceptions of cultural identity, cultural responsiveness/sensitivity and instructional equity in their school. A stronger sense of cultural connectedness is correlated with higher grades, as the chart below shows.

Of students who reported receiving mostly A's, 51 percent reported feeling a strong sense of cultural connectedness. Of students receiving mostly D's and F's, 37 percent reported feeling a strong sense of cultural connectedness. A stronger sense of connectedness is also correlated to fewer unexcused absences.

These links underscore the importance of valuing the language and culture of families in the school community; teaching the history and culture of people who live in the community; and representing culture in the school environment. Partnerships with the community can help strengthen a school's sense of cultural connectedness. See Cultural Connectedness & Community Co-Creation chapter.

9. Cultural Connectedness Scale Chart



Source: Association of Alaska School Boards, *School Climate and Connectedness Survey*

Safe, Predictable and Supportive Learning Environments

Following are some specific ways schools can create optimal learning environments for students.

Safe Spaces: The school develops and designates quiet and safe spaces inside and outside the classroom for students to find calm and balance, or to self-regulate when experiencing behavioral and emotional challenges.

Positive Behavior Supports: Suspending students usually fails to help them develop the skills and strategies they need to improve their behavior and avoid future problems[4]. Alaska's Education Challenge notes that a growing awareness of the impact of trauma compels us to find alternatives that reduce disciplinary actions that remove students from the classroom. Positive behaviors need to be taught, supported, and modeled.[5]

Alaskans who helped create this framework suggest schools

- Provide positive behavioral supports to students in ways that nurture relationships and reflect caring;
- Collaborate with community and families to align school discipline with traditional cultural or community-guided discipline and values;
- Strive to use consistent and predictable staff responses and restorative practices;
- Set clear expectations, routines, and plans for transitions;
- Use common language and points of reference;
- Implement disciplinary procedures in an equitable way;
- Coordinate support services with a student's family and give referrals as needed; and
- Reinforce and model self-regulation skills and mindfulness strategies.

Restorative Practices: Restorative practices should be embedded in disciplinary protocols and can even be embedded into school district policies. Restorative practices serve staff and students best when the practices are integrated into daily routines to promote healthy relationships and social connection, classroom management and disciplinary protocols.

Restorative practices are also useful to navigate difficult situations or times when students have broken school rules. Rather than "failing the test," restorative practices focus on repairing harm, restoring relationships, and building empathy. This is different than common practices that focus largely on the rule broken.[6]

Support in Action: Mary's Story

In the story at the start of this chapter, third-grade Mary reports stomach aches at school. Instead of dismissing her complaints, staff in a transformative school recognize that belly pain can be a symptom of stress or anxiety. Here are the steps her school takes:

- Her classroom teacher takes her complaints seriously and expresses compassion: "I'm sorry your belly is hurting again – let's go to the nurse and see if we can get you some help."
- The school nurse delves deeper to determine what is bothering Mary. Mary feels supported and heard by the teacher and school nurse. This is a first step in healing.
- The nurse shares with Mary's teacher, the principal and counselor that Mary is processing her father's death, her mother's illness, and teasing by peers.
- The principal reaches out to Mary's mother and suggests a meeting. She asks Mary's mother if there are other supportive adults who might like to participate, and follows up by inviting an uncle who is a key support to Mary.
- Together the family and school make a plan to support Mary and to keep lines of communication open.
- The school trains student leaders to improve the school climate. Natural helpers or student leaders work with the younger students to change the peer climate of bullying.
- Over time the school implements workshops for staff and parents. The school staff create morning meetings to focus on relationship building, connectedness, and positive climate.
- All staff, including recess and lunch monitors, are included to help build a more supportive community that does not tolerate bullying.

IDEAL OUTCOMES Mary's stomach aches begin to lessen as the school and her family acknowledge her anxiety and support her more actively. She misses less classroom time and less recess time. With more social-emotional learning happening in the school, over time the school climate improves, and the teasing Mary and others experience becomes far less frequent.

"Mary is better able to learn, and her peers gain better social-emotional skills."

4 U.S. Department of Education. (2014). *Guiding Principles: A Resource Guide for Improving School Climate and Discipline* (p. ii).

5 Alaska Department of Education & Early Development (2018). *Alaska's Education Challenge Report* (p. 26).

6 San Francisco United School District. *Restorative Practices* (web page).

Suggested Steps

1. **Assess the current school climate** using Alaska's School Climate and Connectedness Survey and other information that may be available.
2. **Include social-emotional learning skill instruction** in the master schedule for all grade levels.
3. **Review existing behavior supports** and discipline policies and practices.
4. **Inventory the physical space** for opportunity to create physically, emotionally and culturally safe spaces.
5. **Bring together stakeholders** such as families, Elders, Tribes, support services, youth, and school staff to create a shared vision and goals for improving school climate and connectedness.
6. **Collaborate with the community** to design school discipline practices that are consistent with traditional, cultural, or community values.

Reflections

- What activities does your school do to build intentional school climates?
- Who else could be involved in school climate-building activities?
- How do students, staff and families perceive your school climate?
- How can your school embed restorative practices?
- How does your school or district use youth as leaders to build a positive school climate?
- How does your classroom's or school's physical space promote a sense of emotional and physical safety?
- How does your school or district collaborate with the community (families, Elders, Tribe, support services, volunteers) to create a positive school climate?
- How do district policies support schoolwide climate-building practices?

Key Terms

School climate: The quality and character of school life; every school has a climate, and everyone in the school contributes to it.

Schoolwide practices: Routines, structures, and strategies that are agreed upon and used across the school throughout the school day.

7 SKILL INSTRUCTION

"Social and Emotional Learning is making a difference for our students. We have happy learners – students who can focus on academics because they're not sidetracked by a lot of other issues. Our test scores are higher and we have fewer office referrals."

-Alaska elementary school principal

SUMMARY **Schools have an opportunity to build skills with students throughout the school day. This chapter addresses core skills that build resilience and help students engage in learning.**

In Our Schools: Devon's Story

Devon is a 2nd grader who lashes out with very little provocation. He trips his classmates when he is angry, and is quick to raise his fists.

COMMON RESPONSE Devon is sent to the principal's office repeatedly. Eventually he is suspended for a day and his family is warned that his behavior is unacceptable. His behavior does not improve and he is at risk of being expelled.

TRANSFORMATIVE RESPONSE Devon's teacher finds a quiet time to talk with him. When she asks why he is so angry, he has difficulty explaining. She arranges for him to talk to the school counselor and Devon is able to share that in the past, he witnessed violence between his father and his father's former girlfriend. School staff work together to support Devon through skill building both in the classroom and individually. Because Devon's whole class is learning self-management and calming techniques, the students practice and model the skills for each other. School staff also work with Devon individually to deepen and practice skills to help him manage frustration, communicate effectively, and understand his decision-making.

Key Research Findings

A review of the research literature by Duke University concludes that skill development is key to mitigating impacts of stress and trauma.[1] A key factor common to competent children – including those in adverse conditions – is the ability to self-regulate attention, emotions, and behaviors.[2] Development of social-emotional competencies in early childhood is correlated with improved learning and academic success, mental health, and general well-being.[3]

Social-emotional skills can be taught. A 2011 research review found that students in social and emotional learning (SEL) programs demonstrated improved self-management skills, positive social behaviors, fewer conduct problems, and less emotional distress compared to a control group. Academic performance was also significantly improved, with an 11 percentage point difference between groups on standardized scores.[4]

The effects last. Ongoing research shows that 3.5 years after social-emotional skill instruction, students performed better on standardized tests than their peers who did not have SEL instruction. Behavior problems, emotional distress, and drug use were significantly lower for students exposed to SEL programs; and development of social and emotional skills and positive attitudes toward self, others, and school were higher.[5] These students also had higher high school and college graduation rates; and were less likely to have a mental health disorder, or become involved with the juvenile justice system.

Structured afterschool programs provide students with an additional opportunity to learn and practice social-emotional skills. Programs that deliberately focus on social-emotional skill development have been linked to improved academics and reduced risk behavior. One preliminary study of the Anchorage School District's Youth Risk Behavior Survey found that students who participated in quality afterschool programs at least two days a week were 28% less likely to miss class without permission, 18% less likely to use alcohol, and 39% less likely to use marijuana.[6]

Flipping Your Lid

Watch Dan Siegel's "Flipping Your Lid: A Scientific Explanation" hand model of the brain on YouTube. Siegel uses a simple visual and kinesthetic illustration to show what happens when the "flight, fight or freeze" response is triggered. When we get upset, the emotional part of the brain takes over and flips the thinking and problem-solving part of the brain out of the way.

Consider Sarah's Story in Deconstructing Trauma (Chapter 2). Sarah's support plan includes developing the skills to regulate her emotional brain. This allows her to access her thinking brain and engage in learning. As a result, Sarah feels safer and more in control, and can spend more time learning.

Self-Regulation and Co-Regulation

When students experience toxic levels of stress, their "flight, fight or freeze" responses are activated. Being on this kind of alert all the time inhibits performance in school and in life. Learning to regulate one's emotional responses is key to coping with stressors. These skills can be taught.

Emotional self-regulation is the ability to manage one's emotions and behavior. It includes not overreacting to upsetting stimuli, calming yourself down when you get upset, adjusting to unexpected change, and handling frustration without an outburst. It is a set of skills that enables people to direct their own behavior towards a goal, despite the unpredictability of the world and our own feelings.

Self-regulation can be disrupted by prolonged or pronounced stress and adversity. It can also be strengthened and taught, particularly through "co-regulation" with parents or other adults.[7]

Co-regulation refers to the way a person adjusts their emotions and behavior through interaction with another person, in order to maintain or regain a regulated state. When adults provide warm and responsive interactions, they support, coach, and model emotional self-regulation. Keeping a student's cultural context in mind is critical.

Social and Emotional Learning

Social and emotional learning enhances students' capacity to deal effectively and ethically with daily tasks and challenges. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) has identified five core competencies:

- **Self awareness** is the ability to accurately recognize one's own emotions, thoughts, and values; and the ability to accurately assess one's strengths and limitations, with a well-grounded sense of confidence, optimism, and a "growth mindset."
- **Self management** is the ability to successfully regulate one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors in different situations – effectively managing stress, controlling impulses, and motivating oneself – and the ability to set and work toward personal and career goals. We develop these through instruction and practice, values, and observation.

10: Local Traditional Values Embedded in Social and Emotional Learning Standards

SEL Competencies	Hydaburg City School District Haida Connection	Lower Yukon School District Yup'ik Value Dimension
Self-Awareness	Respect for self, self-help, self-sufficiency, hold yourself up, responsibility for self	Respect for self, knowledge of family tree, humor, respect for nature and animals
Self-Management	Never hold self above another, be humble	Listening, humility, hard work, domestic skills
Social Awareness	Treat children and elders with special care and conduct, Never harm another, Only take what is needed	Respect for Elders and others, love for children, compassion, family roles, helping others
Social Management	Respect for each other, the land, the water, and the air, be caretaker of this world	Sharing, cooperation, community wellness, spirituality

Association of Alaska School Boards, Hydaburg City School District, Lower Yukon School District.

- **Social awareness** is the ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds and cultures; and the ability to understand social and ethical norms for behavior. In many cultures that are collectivist in nature, individuals adjust their own behaviors to meet the expectations of other people and social relations.
- **Responsible decision-making** is the ability to make constructive choices about personal behavior based on ethical standards, safety concerns, and social norms as well as a realistic evaluation of consequences, and consideration of the well-being of oneself and others.
- **Relationship skills** are the ability to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships with diverse individuals and groups and the ability to communicate clearly, listen well, cooperate with others, resist inappropriate social pressure, negotiate conflict constructively, and seek and offer help when needed.

Many school districts have developed standards for social and emotional learning skills, including sample activities. These standards provide a common language for a school and community to engage in conversation about these skills.

Traditional Values and Community Partnerships

Community values can provide a meaningful foundation for self-regulation and social-emotional skill development. Using students' cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and frames of reference makes learning more effective.[8] **Figure 10** shows how two districts modified social and emotional learning standards from the Anchorage School District to align with their local traditional values.

Community collaboration is key to making social and emotional learning place-based and relevant for students. Community partners can teach and reinforce self-regulation and social-emotional skills through subsistence activities, like butchering a moose, and through sharing traditional stories and language. Local or regional health organizations and nonprofits can also be a resource for skill instruction and practice.

1 Murray, D.W., et al. (2015). ***Self-Regulation and Toxic Stress Report 4: Implications for Programs and Practice.*** OPRE Report # 2016-97, Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

2 Cole, S.F. et al. (2009) ***Helping Traumatized Children Learn,*** Boston, MA: Massachusetts Advocates for Children.

3 Rhoades, B.L., et al. (2011) ***Examining the link between preschool social-emotional competence and first grade academic achievement: The role of attention skills.*** Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 26(2): 182-191; Shonkoff, J. & Phillips D. (2000) ***From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development,*** Washington, DC: National Academies Press (US); and Zins, J.E. et al. (2004) The Scientific Base Linking Social and Emotional Learning to School Success. In J. E. Zins, R. P. Weissberg, M. C. Wang, & H. J. Walberg (Eds.), ***Building academic success on social and emotional learning: What does the research say?*** (pp. 3-22). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

4 Durlak, J.A., et al. (2011) ***The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: A metaanalysis of school-based universal interventions.*** Child Development, 82: 405-432.

5 Taylor, R. et al. (2017) ***Promoting Positive Youth Development Through School-Based Social and Emotional Learning Interventions: A Meta-Analysis of Follow-Up Effects,*** Child Development, 88(4):1156–1171.

6 McDowell Group (2018) ***Protective Factors for Youth Substance Abuse and Delinquency: The Role of Afterschool Programs,*** Prepared for Alaska Afterschool Network.

7 Child Mind Institute. (undated) ***How Can We Help Kids With Self-Regulation?*** (blogpost)

8 Kalyanpur, M. (2003) ***A challenge to professionals: Developing cultural reciprocity with culturally diverse families,*** Focal Point, 17(1): 1–6; Bazron, B. et al. (2005) ***Creating Culturally Responsive Schools, Educational Leadership***, 63(1): 83-84; Guèvremont, A. & Kohen, D.E. (2012) ***Knowledge of an Aboriginal language and school outcomes for children and adults,*** International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism, 15(1): 1-27.

Direct Skill Instruction

Just as students can learn math skills, social and emotional skills can be taught and practiced.

Researchers have found the most effective social-emotional learning approaches have four common attributes, abbreviated as **SAFE**: [9]

- **S**equenced: a connected and coordinated set of activities to support skill development;
- **A**ctive: active forms of learning to help youth learn new skills;
- **F**ocused: at least one component devoted to developing personal or social skills; and,
- **E**xplicit: targets specific SEL skills rather than positive development in general terms.

Additional findings indicate that the most effective SEL skill instruction format is educators using evidence-based methods in the classroom.[10] Some school districts in Alaska are beginning to adapt evidence-based approaches for various cultural contexts.

SEL Instructional Practices

Integrating skill development and practice into academic content enhances engagement and the learning process. The American Institutes for Research (AIR) has identified ten instructional strategies, including cooperative learning, that can be used in classrooms to support positive learning environments, social-emotional competencies, and academic learning.[11]

Teaching the skills required for collaboration is key to successful cooperative learning. A conversation with students about the skills they need to work effectively in groups makes the social-emotional learning skills visible. Some Alaska districts have adopted cooperative learning approaches district-wide in all K-12 classrooms.

Choosing a Curriculum

There are many social and emotional learning programs and curricula. Each community has different needs and strengths and should choose an appropriate approach. CASEL offers two guides for choosing an evidence-based approach. A 2017 guide from the Wallace Foundation also provides information on SEL approaches with considerations for adapting approaches to the afterschool setting.

Employment Connection

Social and emotional skills are a priority for Alaskan employers. In the document "Want a Great Career?", the Alaska Process Industry Career Consortium describes the social-emotional skills Alaskan employers expect:

Attitudes such as positive outlook, willingness to learn, and respect for others;

Skills and competencies including communication and problem solving; and

Work ethic including honesty and integrity.

Other opportunities to practice SEL skills include:

- Morning meetings at elementary schools and advisory classes in secondary schools;
- Peer education with youth leaders teaching social-emotional skills (e.g. Natural Helpers);
- Specialists reinforcing social-emotional skills during gym, art, music, library;
- Schoolwide practices such as the Zones of Regulation[12] curriculum or safe zones;
- Techniques such as "brain breaks", breathing, stretching, yoga, and pressure points; and
- Afterschool activities and sports.

As with any instructional area, assessment is important. Measuring and assessing students' self-regulation and SEL skills can help districts and schools identify which supports students need and how effective those supports are. American Institutes for Research provides a resource for choosing an assessment tool to measure district or school SEL outcomes.[13]

Skill-Building in Action: Devon's Story

In the scenario at the start of this chapter, Devon had difficulty regulating his emotions and his behavior. In a trauma-engaged school, a response might look like this:

- His teacher, weary of punitive responses that have no effect, reaches out to Devon in a calm moment when both teacher and student are not agitated.
- Recognizing Devon needs additional support, the teacher involves the school counselor, who meets with Devon and learns more about what's going on for him.

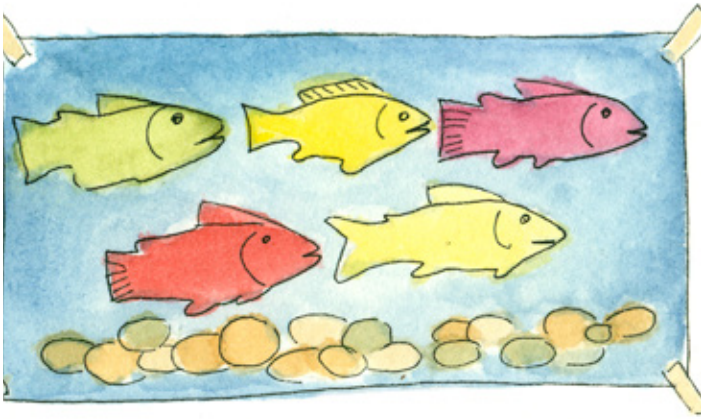
Infusing Social-Emotional Learning into Academic Content

Social interaction is a fundamental aspect of learning. The Edutopia Foundation (edutopia.org) spotlights what is working in education, including videos and resources about cooperative learning. "Deeper Learning: A Collaborative Classroom Is Key" suggests five activities to bring deep, meaningful collaboration in any academic content area:

- Establish group agreements
- Teach how to listen
- Teach the art of asking good questions
- Teach how to negotiate
- Model expectations

- The teacher and counselor along with the principal coordinate a team response for Devon that includes supports in and out of school.
- The class – and ideally the whole school – implements social and emotional skill instruction to help all students improve their ability to manage their emotions and behaviors, and so students can model and reinforce each other's skill development.

IDEAL OUTCOMES Devon's anger and outbursts do not go away, but they become less frequent as Devon gains self-awareness and gradually improves his self-regulation skills. His teacher and classmates learn better self-regulation and learn to better support and communicate with each other. The class is ultimately able to spend more time learning with fewer behavioral challenges.



Suggested Steps

1. **Adopt learning standards** for self-regulation and social and emotional skills.
2. **Make place-based and cultural modifications** to these standards in collaboration with the community.
3. **Inventory current programs** and approaches to teaching students self-regulation and social and emotional skills. Build on strengths and identify gaps.
4. **Adopt evidence-based approaches** to augment existing programs.
5. **Include social-emotional learning instruction** in the master schedule for all grades.
6. **Design and facilitate professional learning** for all staff on the standards, direct instruction approach, and ways to integrate social and emotional skill practice into academics.
7. **Reinforce skill development** by collaborating with after-school activity providers, coaches, youth organizations and families.

9 Meta-analysis by Durlak, et al. (2011). See footnote 4.

10 *Ibid.*

11 Yoder, N. (2014) *Teaching the whole child: Instructional practices that support social emotional learning in three teacher evaluation frameworks*. Washington, DC: Center on Great Teachers and Leaders, American Institutes for Research.

12 Kuypers, L. Zones of Regulation: *A Framework to Foster Self-Regulation and Emotional Control*, website.

13 American Institutes for Research. (2015) *Are You Ready to Assess Social and Emotional Development?* toolkit.

Reflections

- What social-emotional skills (traditional or community values, employability skills, etc.) are important to your community?
- How do you partner with the community to integrate these skills throughout the school day?
- How does your school or district teach self-regulation and social-emotional skills?
- How are these skills reinforced in academics and throughout the school day?
- What are staff beliefs about their role in teaching self-regulation and social-emotional skills?
- How can adults in the school community develop the skills to co-regulate with students and model SEL skills?
- How does your district or school partner with out-of-school activity providers (afterschool, sports, etc.) to reinforce SEL skill development?
- What ideas in this chapter make the most sense for your community?

Key Terms

Emotional self-regulation: The ability to manage one's emotions and behavior. It includes not overreacting to upsetting stimuli, calming yourself down when you get upset, adjusting to unexpected change, and handling frustration without an outburst. It is a set of skills that enables people to direct their own behavior towards a goal, despite the unpredictability of the world and our own feelings.

Co-regulation: The way a person adjusts their emotions and behavior through interaction with another person, in order to maintain or regain a regulated state. When adults provide warm and responsive interactions, they support, coach, and model emotional self-regulation.

Social-emotional learning (SEL): The process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.

8 SUPPORT SERVICES

"One of our high school students went from someone not advocating for themselves and feeling 'lost' to a student who is speaking up and helping others. It is so cool to see them get the help they need. It took one adult to help them see their potential. That adult was the Project AWARE coordinator." - Alaska principal

SUMMARY **Support services – such as school nurses, counselors, and special education teachers – help students and families address academic, behavioral, and mental health challenges that may be barriers to student success. Support services are an important part of a trauma-engaged system, but Alaska schools often struggle with shortages of support services.**

In Our Schools: Tom's Story

Tom is walking to lunch in the cafeteria when a classmate bumps into him in a crowded hallway. The students' 8th grade science teacher, Ms. Clark, hears them yell at one another and steps into the hall just as Tom punches the other student. Ms. Clark and another staff member step in to break up the fight. This is the third fight Tom has been in this school year.

COMMON PRACTICE Ms. Clark reprimands the boys, and escorts Tom to the principal's office. Tom is suspended for nine days, as he is a "repeat offender," and told he will be expelled if he has another offense. The other student is given a three-day suspension.

TRANSFORMATIVE PRACTICE Ms. Clark and her colleague separate the students and bring each to a quiet classroom to calm down before taking the students to the principal's office. Both students are given in-school suspension. During their suspensions, they keep up with school work and receive extra supports. The school counselor meets with Tom and learns that due to chaos at home, he was recently placed in the care of his grandmother. The counselor reaches out to Tom's grandmother and other key adults in and out of school to develop a plan for Tom. The counselor encourages Tom to join an after-school program that provides social and emotional skill building embedded in fun activities, and follows up to try to make sure Tom gets the support he needs.

Key Research Findings

The need for support services in Alaska schools is great. In 2017, suicide was the leading cause of death for Alaskans ages 14-19. Alaska's suicide rate is the highest in the nation, and almost twice the national average. Statewide in 2017, 34 to 45 percent of high school students reported feeling so sad or hopeless almost every day for two or more weeks in a row that they stopped doing some of their usual activities.[1] Alaska's high rates of adverse childhood experiences mean our students are at risk of many health problems including addiction, depression, and poorer physical health.

Of school-age children who receive behavioral and mental health services, 70 to 80 percent receive those services at school.

Studies indicate school supports can be a good investment. A Massachusetts study of school nurses found that every dollar invested in school nursing generated $2.20 in benefits; the benefits included direct health care costs avoided and parent and teacher productivity saved.[2] Studies show school counselors improve student outcomes in academic as well as social-emotional realms.[3] Studies likewise indicate that school social workers are linked to improved student outcomes.[4]

Support Service Roles

What do we mean by support service, and what does each provider offer? Support service providers in schools may include nurses, counselors, and licensed social workers. Schools may also employ specialists like speech, occupational and physical therapists. For the purposes of supporting trauma-engaged work in schools, we focus on nurses, counselors, and social workers, each of whom has a slightly different role, but all work most effectively when they work as a team with other school staff, family members, and community organizations.

- **School nurses:** School nurses are certified health professionals who provide direct care for students who are sick or injured, provide care for students with chronic conditions, serve as a liaison between the school and community on health matters, and provide leadership and guidance in school or district health policy.[5]
- **School counselors:** School counselors are certified and licensed educators with a master's degree in school counseling who support students in the areas of academic achievement, career and social-emotional development with the aim of helping students become productive, well-adjusted adults.[6]
- **School social workers**: School social workers are mental health professionals with a degree in social work who provide services related to a person's social, emotional and life adjustment to school and/or society. School social workers are the link between the home, school and community in providing direct as well as indirect services to students, families and school personnel to promote and support students' academic and social success.[7]

Provider Shortages

Many Alaska school districts have a shortage of support service providers. Small school sizes, remoteness, high costs and statewide provider shortages all present challenges to ensuring students can access the professional supports they need. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control 2012 data and State of Alaska 2017 data:

- 31 percent of Alaska school districts do not have school counselors;
- at least 20 percent of Alaska school children do not have a school nurse;
- another 10 percent have less than the minimum level of nationally recommended services; and
- 82 percent of Alaska secondary schools do not have a full-time registered nurse.

Compounding the challenge, many counselors and school health professionals have other responsibilities and administrative burdens that pull them away from student support.

The shortages impact other staff as well as students. When there are no mental health professionals or nurses available, students may turn to teachers and other adults in a school for help. While all adults have a role to play in building supportive relationships with students, sometimes students need a deeper level of mental health support for which teachers and staff lack training. This can increase stress on the adults in a school and lead to burnout. [See Self-Care chapter.]

Supplementing School Resources

The challenge of meeting students' mental health needs is real. Some Alaska schools are looking at models that incorporate school-based mental health services or braided systems with tribal or local health providers. In addition to helping to fill the provider shortage, partnering with local or regional providers may bring more stability and more cultural and community connectedness to student support. This is particularly applicable in places with high rates of school staff turnover.

In many communities there may be partners who can help provide services to students and families, such as:

- After-school providers
- Cultural educators
- Tribal councils
- Elders
- Office of Children's Services (Alaska Department of Health and Social Services)
- Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium
- RuralCAP
- Local and regional behavioral health services
- Village and community counselors

Students can also be a resource. Districts can train and empower students with leadership and supportive skills to help themselves and their peers. Several programs are training students to provide peer support. One, Sources of Strength, empowers youth with leadership and supportive skills to help themselves and support their peers.

A note on community context: Consider a community's perspective on counseling and mental health, and incorporate cultural tools to build resilience. Build on traditional ways of knowing and healing.

Support in Action: Tom's Story

In the scenario at the start of this chapter, Tom's repeat aggression indicates he needs help. In a trauma-engaged school, he receives the supports he needs, including help from a school counselor. The counselor provides direct support to Tom, reaches out to his family, and connects Tom to an after-school program to keep him engaged and improve his social and emotional skills. The counselor also facilitates communication among school staff to ensure all are supporting Tom consistently.

Conscious of their own social-emotional needs, the teachers and counselor involved in helping Tom also talk to each other about the strain of helping students with trauma, and share strategies for decompressing.

Building Capacity

Alaska's Project AWARE combines enhanced mental health services in alternative schools with training in three large Alaska school districts. The grant-supported project will build schools' capacity to address mental health in a more coordinated and integrated fashion; provide training for early detection and response to mental health issues; connect youth and families with mental health services; and implement effective strategies to promote behavioral health and prevent mental illness.

1 ***Alaska Youth Risk Behavior Survey*** (2017).

2 Wang, L.Y. et al, ***Cost-Benefit Study of School Nursing Services***, JAMA Pediatr. 2014;168(7):642-648.

3 ***Impact of School Counselors***, American School Counselor Association.

4 Alvarez, M. et al, ***School Social Workers and Educational Outcomes***, Children & Schools, 2013;35(4):235-243.

5 The ***National Association of School Nurses*** identifies seven core responsibilities of school nurses.

6 ***The Role of the School Counselor***, American School Counselor Association.

7 ***School Social Work Association of America.***

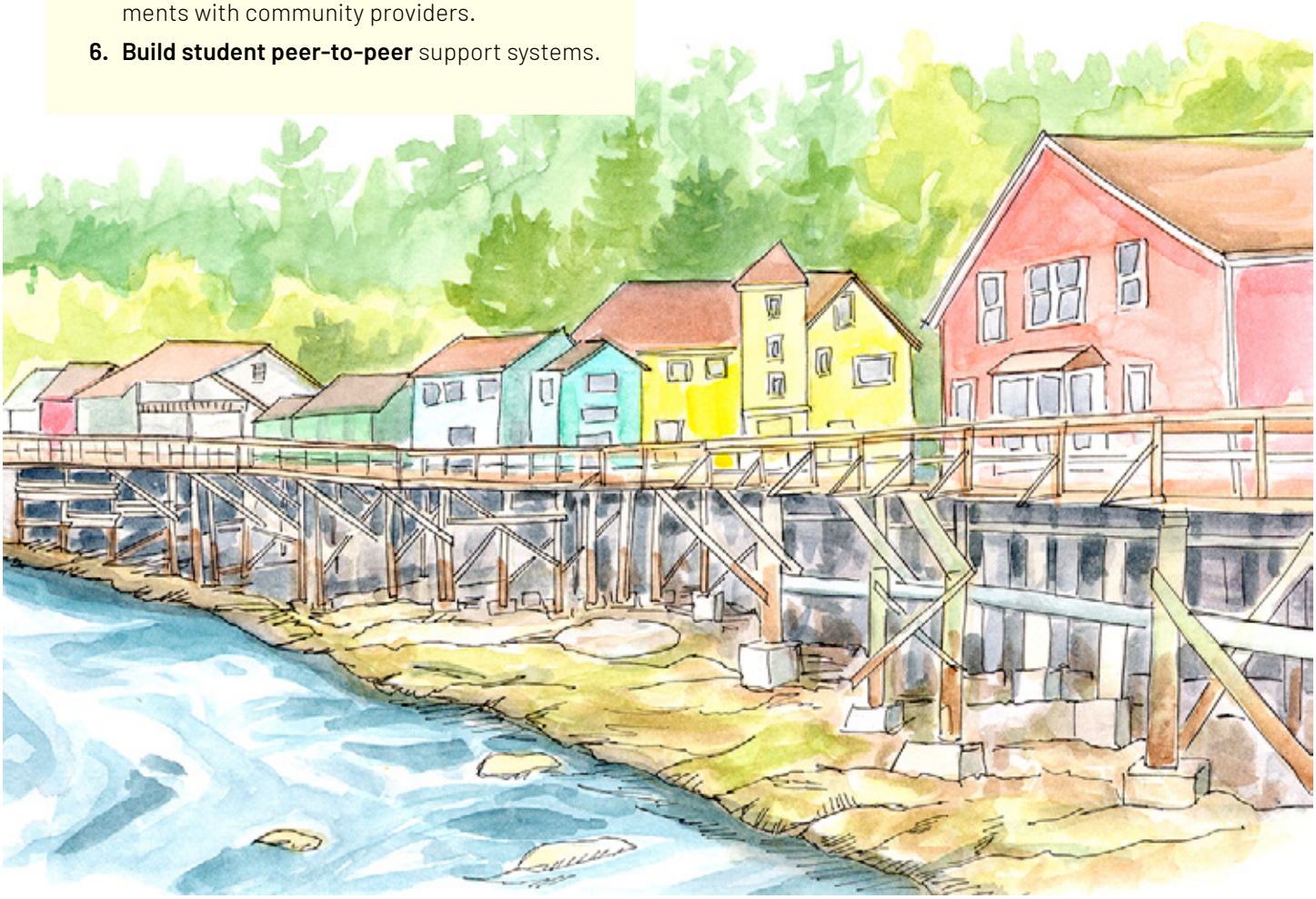
IDEAL OUTCOMES Tom feels more supported by the adults around him, and with that support, begins to learn strategies for controlling his aggression. His behavior improves and he no longer misses school due to fighting.

Suggested Steps

1. **Assess** your school's strengths and gaps in terms of support services.
2. **Brainstorm** ways to harness strengths and address gaps – consider community partners, potential new funding sources, reallocation of existing resources, and any other ideas.
3. **Redefine school counselor job descriptions** to allocate more time for working with students and their families and less time on administrative tasks.
4. **Develop team approaches** to working with students.
5. **Build meaningful partnerships** and agreements with community providers.
6. **Build student peer-to-peer** support systems.

Reflections

- What are some effective support services in your school or district?
- What are the greatest unmet needs for student support in your school or district?
- Does your school or community have good peer-to-peer supports? What is the potential to develop these supports?
- How can existing resources be used to provide better support services to students and families?
- How does staff turnover among teachers and support services impact your school?
- What community resources – individuals or organizations – might be available to expand or improve your support service capacity?



9 CULTURAL INTEGRATION AND COMMUNITY CO-CREATION

"Just like you can adopt children you can adopt Elders or grandparents too. Elder guidance is needed for children and families to live well." - Traditional Healer, Bethel

SUMMARY **Alaska communities have cultural and collective strengths that, when used respectfully, can be foundational for transforming schools. The most effective approaches to implementing trauma-engaged work in schools are developed collaboratively – or co-created – by the school, community, and families. While it is important to understand all of the cultures within your school, this chapter emphasizes Alaska's First Peoples, and can serve as a model for integrating cultural and collective strengths into trauma-engaged work.**

In Our Schools: Deepening Culture and Connection

Schools are working to transform their schools to include language, culture, ways of learning, and ways of life into content areas.

COMMON PRACTICE A school administrator and community partners begin thinking about how to bring culture into the school and incorporate a culture week in the school setting. The school also offers a language class for students.

TRANSFORMATIVE PRACTICE Students and the community want culture fully integrated into the school. School staff from the region work with the community to outline authentic cultural activities and teachings that align with the content and social and emotional standards. Specific culturally fluent school staff work with each teacher in the school to brainstorm how to practice, implement and reinforce these standards in all content areas.

Key Research Findings

Evidence points to cultural and community traditions as an important protective factor in buffering against the negative impacts of childhood trauma. These traditions can provide a foundation for individual and collective identity.

Connecting with culture and community builds strength. According to a study of adults with three or more adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), those who reported enjoying community experiences as a child had significantly lower rates of depression, poor health, obesity and smoking than their peers who did not enjoy community experiences in childhood.[1]

Research also suggests that learning becomes more relevant when cultural knowledge and prior experiences are woven in.[2] Experts advise using students' existing knowledge and strengths, whether teaching math or social-emotional skills.[3]

Authentic relationships – which are at the heart of trauma-engaged work – stem from understanding a person's worldview, cultural background, values and customs. This context is important for fostering trust and healing. This is also important so students can be free to be who they are, and not have to "check their identity at the door" in order to be seen as a successful or model student. Students should have the ability to be themselves culturally at home, in the community, and in school.

Historical Trauma

Many communities have experienced collective and intergenerational trauma through the process of colonization. Alaska's history helps explain the cultural trauma many Alaska Natives experience. Following are a few examples of Alaska's history of institutional racism and cultural dismantling efforts:

- In the Treaty of Cession between Russia and the United States, Alaska's indigenous peoples are referred to as "uncivilized native tribes."
- As part of the colonial effort to gain control of lands, resources, and souls by destabilizing the Native population, boarding schools were established and Native children were forcibly and systemically removed from their homes. These children were often sent hundreds - if not thousands - of miles away, to be 'civilized.' Many Native children were physically, spiritually, emotionally, and sexually abused by those who had taken control of their lives. Many were punished for speaking their languages. Many never returned home.
- A 1915 Act establishing guidelines for Native citizenship required the endorsement of at least five white citizens attesting to the applicant's "total abandonment of any tribal customs or relationship..." in order for a Native citizen to be deemed qualified to vote.
- In 1959, the Alaska Constitution was adopted with the explicit recognition of the pioneers and those who came after. Of 55 convention delegates, only one was Alaska Native, while Alaska Native people represented approximately one-quarter of the population.

Alaska Native peoples still experience systemic and institutional inequalities that were built upon a racially inequitable state constitution. Much of this was first experienced within the education system and disrupted place-based intergenerational teaching approaches that had developed over hundreds of years.

Why is it important to know this? Because this history and these systemic practices have lingering effects in our communities, families and students today.

SAM'S STORY

A National Public Radio piece called "The Conflicting Educations of Sam Schimmel"[11] explores one family's experience of intergenerational trauma and resilience. The following excerpt describes the impact on a child forced from her home in Gambell to a boarding school:

Baby Constance was born into a culture that was rich and well-adapted to the exceptionally harsh environment. Her ancestors had passed down skills for surviving — ways of reading the ice to know when walruses, seals and whales could be caught and methods of fishing in the cold water. Families worked together; subsistence hunting does not favor the greedy. Most people spoke the Alaska Native language, St. Lawrence Island Yupik, with Russian and English words mixed in. That is the language Constance's mother, Estelle, taught her daughter.

When Constance was in middle school, she was forced by the federal government to leave her family and to fly far away to a boarding school operated by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, part of the Department of the Interior. Mt. Edgecumbe High School in Sitka, Alaska was 1,200 miles away. Classes were in English, the teachers were mostly white, and the students were forbidden to speak the languages they had grown up with.

St. Lawrence Island is more than 1,000 miles from Sitka, where many Alaska Native children, including Constance Oozevaseuk, were sent by the federal government to attend boarding school.

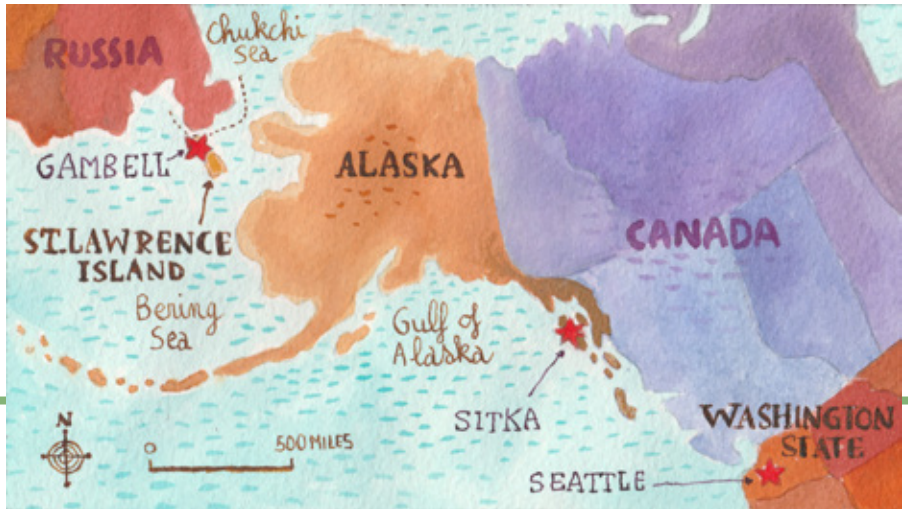
Nathalie Dieterle for NPR

The goal of the boarding school program was simple and destructive. A founder of the program, Army officer Richard Pratt, explained in 1892, "A great general has said that the only good Indian is a dead one. In a sense, I agree with the sentiment, but only in this: that all the Indian there is in the race should be dead. Kill the Indian in him, and save the man."

Constance Oozevaseuk was taught to hate a lot of things about her culture and, by proxy, about herself. The food she grew up eating, the clothes her family wore, the way they hunted and fished, the stories they told, the songs they sang and the very words they spoke were inferior, she was taught. It was traumatizing.

Constance's daughter Rene Schimmel remembers how her mother was affected. "They told her how to dress, how to speak, how to hold herself," says Rene." She said there was a lot of sexual abuse, a lot of physical abuse. If you got up late or you didn't clean how you were supposed to clean, you were beaten."

As an adult, Constance never seemed to recover a strong sense of whom she was or whom she could aspire to be. She died in 2005, but Rene remembers noticing contradictions in her mother's identity. When Constance was away from Gambell, "she would cry to be at home," Rene says. "But when she was at home, she'd be miserable."



Map illustrated by Nathalie Dieterle for NPR. Used by permission.

8 Jones, J., Bethell, C.D., Linkenbach, J. & Sege, R. (2017). Health effects of ACEs mitigated by positive childhood experiences (Manuscript in progress), cited in Sege, R., et al., *Balancing Adverse Childhood Experiences with HOPE (Health Outcomes of Positive Experience)*: New Insights into the Role of Positive Experience on Child and Family Development, Casey Family Programs.

9 Gay, G. (2010). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

10 Morrison, A. et al. (2008). *Operationalizing Culturally Relevant Pedagogy: A Synthesis of Classroom-Based Research. Equity & Excellence in Education*. 41. (pp.433-452).

11 Used by permission from Hersher, R., *The Conflicting Educations of Sam Schimmel*, National Public Radio, 13 May 2018.

Cultural Integration

As cultural destruction harms us, cultural connectedness heals, especially when integrated in deep and authentic ways. Sam Schimmel, grandson of Constance in the story, finds strength in his cultural traditions:

> Sam says his cultural identity – formed during all those hours hunting and fishing with his family – is something to fall back on when things get difficult, a source of resilience.
>
> "You're sitting in a seal blind, you're talking to your uncles, you're telling stories — you're disseminating culture, is what's going on," he explains. "It's not only hunting, it's passing down traditions, stories and ways of life that would otherwise not have a chance to be passed down."

Many traditions – like subsistence hunting – functioned as ways of building individual and community resilience. For example, the people of Western Alaska traditionally used the Qasgiq (Men's and Women's Houses) to honor rites of passage, as a way of connecting, healing, and learning. This tradition is one way Alaska Native people worked to keep familial and tribal relations strong – and it contributed to individual and collective well-being.

Many Alaska families that have migrated to the United States from other countries may feel isolated from traditional kinship ties and culture. This isolation may impact their ability to build resilience as a family, community and individual.

"[W]hen Anchorage School District data showed that Pacific Islanders had a high rate of absence, parents from the community came together to offer an after-school dance program. Attendance for those young people improved."

-Anchorage's 90 Percent Graduation by 2020 initiative

Understanding and supporting students' cultural traditions strengthens our students, our schools, and our communities. Working in ways that integrate content, ways of learning, and students' cultures can ensure that students can build new knowledge sets and achieve higher-order thinking more quickly.

Community Co-Creation

To effectively integrate cultural and community traditions, community involvement is critical. Working with community partners increases opportunities for healing, learning, and positive relationships with caring adults. Many of our most notable "teachable moments" happen outside school. Aligning the work between schools and community partners can bring continuity and common language to healing. Community involvement can help bring healing to the adults who may need it, helping them end a cycle of trauma and model resilience. Partners may have staffing and resources to support higher-level intervention or services for students and families.

With the growing interest in resiliency and wellness, many community partners are already engaged in this work. Potential partners include health organizations, tribes and cultural organizations, youth-serving organizations, faith-based organizations, and businesses and local employers. Collaboration, or collective impact, processes have shared goals and result in deeper impacts for students and their families.

Moving Toward Cultural Integration: Guiding Principles

We come from diverse social and cultural groups that may experience and react to trauma differently. When we approach collaboration with openness and cultural humility we can deepen our understanding of culturally specific experiences and have the ability to respond sensitively and create a space for improved wellness.

- **Understanding Culture and Trauma** – We demonstrate knowledge of how specific social and cultural groups may experience, react to, and recover from trauma differently.
- **Humility** – We are proactive in respectfully seeking information and learning about cultures, community, and family ways of being.
- **Responsiveness** – We have and can easily access support and resources for sensitively meeting the unique social and cultural needs of others.

To better serve all students in Alaska, it is helpful to understand community protocols and elevate locally self-determined solutions for transforming schools.

Cultural Integration in Action

Following are ideas to guide and inspire deeply embedded cultural integration in schools. While many school staff may already engage in these activities, carrying out these activities in partnership with community members can deepen understanding and alignment with community values.

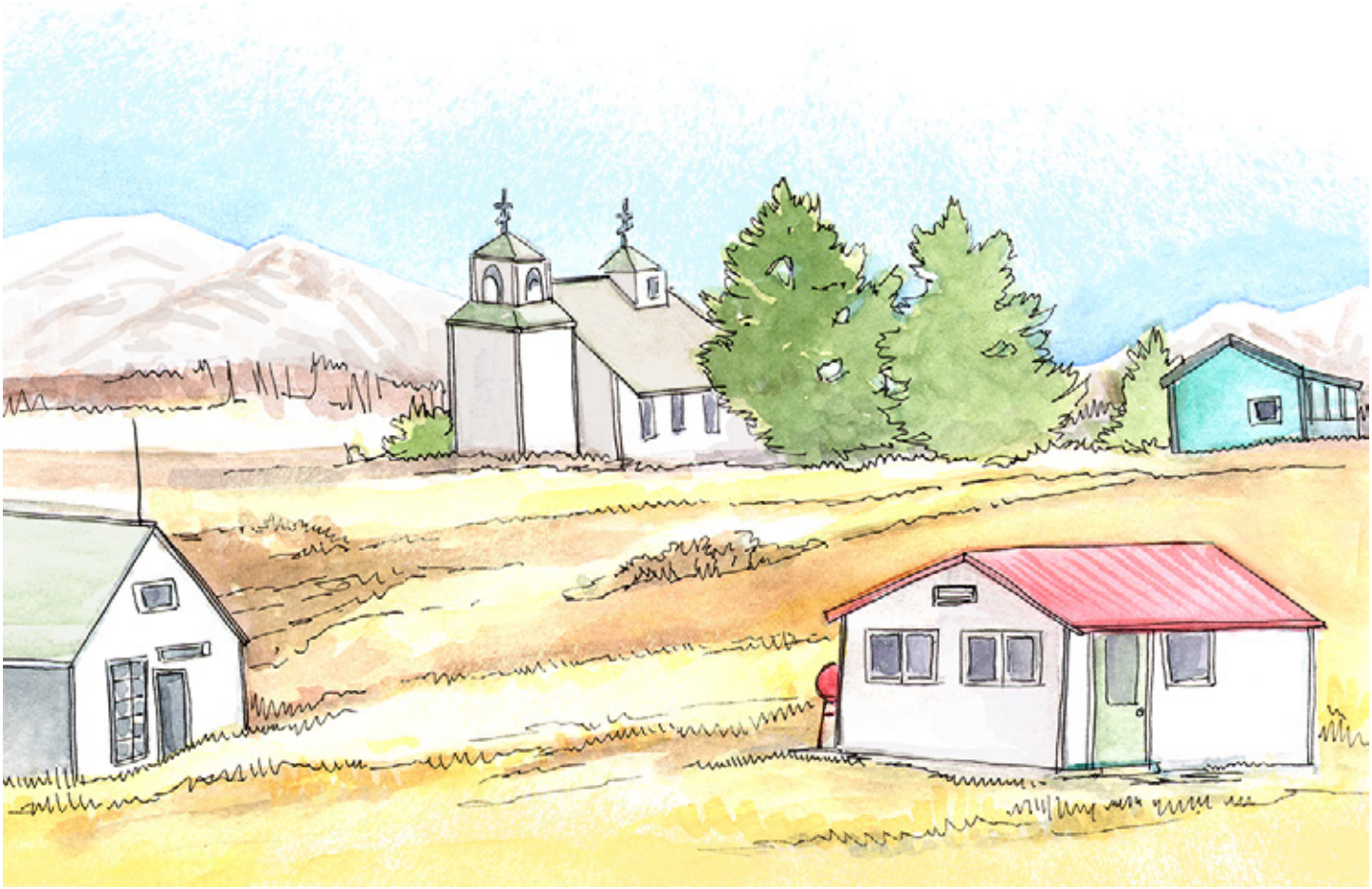
- **Seek genuinely knowledgeable culture bearers.** When Elders, families, local leaders and community members share cultural teachings and local knowledge, cultural integration is more authentic than when school staff alone present the information.
- **Incorporate talking circles.** Provide healing activities and grief support in schools, particularly for bereavement.
- **Use meaningful cultural practices** such as music, drumming, storytelling, art, regional scientific knowledge, etc. Focus on a positive, strengths-based approach.
- **Create opportunities** in each class and practice for students to consider their own family, culture, and community ways of life, teaching, and expectation.
- **Use multiple teaching strategies** including teaching practices that have been effective teaching strategies in your region and cultural context.
- **Give back to the community.** Build a community smoke house and garden for foods. Share food, tea, and potlucks together. Adopt an Elder and check in on them.
- **Encourage students and families** to attend cultural events such as local and statewide Elders and Youth conferences, dance festivals, culture camps etc.
- **Respect the land.** Teach students about plants and animals. Tell stories about respect for the land and food. Teach proper ways to dispose of waste. Increase students' time in nature with gardening, tree care, pest control, equipment maintenance, knots and hitches, erosion control, recycling, and with cultural camps that include activities like hunting, fishing and berry picking. Consider making school schedules compatible with the subsistence lifestyle.
- **Learn about and show respect for local knowledge**. Communities have established knowledge and ways of life over hundreds of years. This knowledge can contribute to science, language arts, social and emotional skill building, art, or integrated learning.
- **Establish district support for language programs**. Dedicate resources to language teachers and recognize their expertise. Hire more bilingual teachers. Encourage teachers to value and use Indigenous languages in school. Create announcements and newsletters in Native languages or the languages spoken in the school. Establish paths for Indigenous languages through distance learning. Begin Native languages with Headstart programs. Apply Native languages in reading, math, writing, and when making tools. Have students say the Pledge of Allegiance in their Native language. Create Native language textbooks.
- **Develop curricula** that integrate traditional values. Include culturally relevant standards and outcomes. Integrate regional history.
- **Find champions** within the community who support local culture and who feel strongly about intergenerational trauma as well as current trauma.
- **Build on what exists:** Much of this has been developed by schools, districts, or local and regional Alaska Native organizations (Rosetta Stone in Inupiaq, Alaska Native Charter School, immersion curriculum, local place maps, Native Youth Olympics etc.).
- **Hire and invest in staff from the community or steeped in the community**: Have staff from the community help to incorporate community values and content into approaches.

To equitably support student achievement and reduce disparities in education, we can co-create an environment of learning that restores respect for students, families and their respective cultures. By transforming our schools, we strive to advance equity for all Alaskans, so that our children and future generations experience their greatest personal and collective potential in the future.

Support in Action: Community and School Together

Now that the community and school are working together much of the language and content is familiar and students quickly understand the standard or value referenced in the class and learn through a cultural framework. This has made it easier for school staff to integrate cultural content and ways of learning into the classroom and easier for families to support students at home.

IDEAL OUTCOMES School staff feel supported and prepared to integrate culture and community knowledge into the classroom both in terms of behavior management strategies and content. School staff work with families to reinforce messaging inside and outside of the classroom. Community members feel more comfortable to share and be a part of the school and students feel like they can bring their whole selves into the school environment.



Suggested Steps

1. **Identify the cultures, ethnicities, and languages spoken** in your school and community.
2. **Understand** your students' community history and relationship to formal education.
3. **Identify existing and potential partners** in the community for collaborative planning and co-creation.
4. **Consider establishing hiring and training** guidelines to ensure a deep understanding of cultural safety and culturally responsive teaching.
5. **Consider incorporating regionally enhanced curricula** including regionally accurate Alaska histories.
6. **Host community conversations** on racial equity, histories and healing.

Reflections

- What ideas and actions in this chapter inspire you?
- How do you integrate cultural strengths in your classroom content and practices?
- How does your school or district build on the cultural strengths of students and their families? (Modify instruction? Physical space in the room? Field trips or activities?)
- How can you integrate traditional practices into teaching, relationship building, or healing?
- What hiring and orientation practices are in place in your school to ensure that school staff are grounded in students' cultures?
- How does your school align content and teaching practices with students' cultures and family experiences?
- How do you use curricula and materials that incorporate local knowledge and content?
- Who are key partners and culture bearers to engage in this work?
- How does a trauma-engaged approach support broader community goals and values?

Key Terms

Historical trauma (also called intergenerational trauma): the cumulative emotional and psychological wounding across generations, including the lifespan, which emanates from massive group trauma. To move forward, this history and its impacts must be understood.

10 FAMILY PARTNERSHIP

"As I learned more, I realized that I could truly partner with parents and that together we could identify and attend to each student's needs more quickly and more consistently." -Alaska educator

SUMMARY **As a child's first and most significant teachers, families are essential partners in helping students navigate school and heal from trauma. There is overwhelming evidence that meaningful school-family partnerships improve student achievement and school effectiveness.**

In Our Schools: Anna's Family

Anna's father tries to attend teacher conferences. He attends some school sports events but does not spend much time in the schools. Since the beginning of the year, Anna has seemed withdrawn in class and from her peers. When Anna's teacher, Ms. Jackson, asks her father what is going on with Anna, Anna's father does not have much to say. When he goes home, he tells Anna she needs to participate more in the classroom.

COMMON PRACTICE Ms. Jackson will continue to work with Anna and talk to Anna's father at conferences.

TRANSFORMATIVE PRACTICE Ms. Jackson uses a variety of methods to get know families. She invites families to her classroom to share their traditions. She invites families to family fun activities, and hosts teas where students share their class work. She attends community events and works to build relationships with families and learn the customs of the community. Ms. Jackson follows up with the family to provide consistent support at home and at school to Anna.

Ms. Jackson talks to school staff from the community and learns that Anna's aunt helps care for Anna and has a significant role in family decisions.

Key Research Findings

Family involvement in a child's education is strongly correlated with improved student learning, attendance and behavior. A 2017 research literature review found the following strategies to be most related to student achievement:

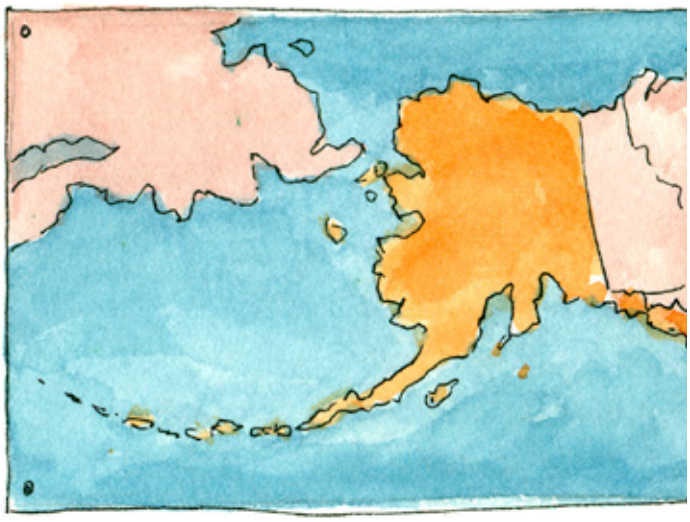
- Engaging parents (or caregivers) in their children's learning through social networks,
- Empowering parents with leadership roles in the school environment,
- Providing parents with classes to help with their own education or their child's education and
- Providing families with opportunities to engage with their children's education at home and at school.

Schools that build strong family-school relationships were found to have a positive impact on students' academic outcomes and well-being.

Some common characteristics include parents with high educational goals and aspirations for their children, and children who perceive that their parents support their education.[1]

Evidence from Alaska echoes these findings. According to the 2017 Alaska School Climate and Connectedness Survey, the more respondents felt that their parents and community were involved, the better grades they earned. Likewise, the less likely they were to miss school without permission.[2]

The U.S. Department of Education emphasizes the importance of building trust to help families and schools build relationships, improve their own skills, and authentically partner to help students succeed.[3] This is especially important in communities that have experienced trauma within educational systems.



"No meaningful family engagement can be established until relationships of trust and respect are established between home and school. A focus on relationship building is especially important in circumstances where there has been a history of mistrust between families and school.., or where negative past experiences or feelings of intimidation hamper the building of partnerships."

-U.S. Dept. of Education

Building Trusting Relationships with Families

Schools often find themselves in a position to help educate and support parents. Some parents ask, *"What can I do for my child at home?"* The Association of Alaska School Boards Initiative for Community Engagement has adapted national models on family engagement for Alaska.

The "C's" of Strengthening Family Partnerships

- **Connection**: Building trust, investing time, and fostering real relationships between families, within families, and nurturing relationships with families and school staff.
- **Confidence**: Building skills for families and school staff to support students and each other and co-create together.
- **Content**: Linking the family partnership to learning and leading in school.
- **Culture**: Embedding the school environment, programs and services in the range of community values and knowledge represented by your families.
- **Co-regulation**: How adults help students to manage emotions, attention, and behaviors.

Children who have not had extensive practice with self-regulation or have had experiences that overload self-regulatory processes have an added need for co-regulation. Families can be taught to provide co-regulation across the developmental stages.

Adults also co-regulate with friends, families, colleagues, and others when we experience emotions or work through difficult challenges. We may talk to a spouse or friend about a stressful situation. Students of all ages continue to need adults and peers to help navigate stress and trauma, and to build a solid foundation for social and emotional skills.

Family Partnership: Guiding Principles

There are many principles to consider. Below are a few compiled from Alaska educators, families, and national research.

Approach families with humility and respect. A foundation of genuine respect is essential to any successful relationship between a child's school and family. Families usually know their own child best. Listen and learn.

Resist assumptions. Families come in every size and shape. Some students' primary caregivers may be grandparents, foster parents, step-parents, an older sibling or other relative. Students may live in multigenerational family units. Whatever the configuration, reach out to the caring adults in a student's life.

Seek understanding. Seek to understand a family's cultural traditions, expectations of their children, and their own past experiences with the education system. Meet families where they are.

Establish strong communication. Establish systems for two-way communication outside of the traditional family-teacher meeting.

Understand family structures. Extended family members can play a key role in education and discipline. Learn more about your families and get permissions to contact key family members.

Celebrate culture. Incorporate culture into each aspect of family outreach.

Consistent and continuous: Relationship building takes time and consistent opportunities to build trust and common understanding. While many times this can be informal it can also be helpful to create expected times and opportunities for relationship building.

Family Partnership Approaches

Following are some ways districts and schools can build and strengthen partnerships with families. Effective practices are continuous and build long-term relationships.

- Offer professional learning for families, school staff, and community members to learn side-by-side. Learning and thinking through adverse childhood experiences together can be a healthy way to learn on an even playing field.
- Outline roles in district or site-based plans for families and communities within each component of a trauma-engaged school.
- Share information in culturally appropriate ways about childhood trauma and resilience.
- Open school doors after hours for family events, such as game night or a harvest fair where families and teachers eat a meal together. These events can make schools a more welcoming place for all and break down barriers between students, families, and school staff.
- Invite families to assemblies and school events.
- Have families "adopt" a new teacher to foster connection and cultural exchange.
- Create a network of mentor parents to help new families learning about the school.
- Provide opportunities for parents to join committees that set school policies, goals, or evaluation of programs.
- Provide training to help families understand and prepare for transitions into elementary, middle, and high school.
- Provide ongoing training for teachers, administrators, and parents on family engagement.
- Have parents or community organizations take the lead on school activities.

The Alaska Department of Education and Early Development's Family Engagement Action Plan[4] provides additional suggestions for effective school-family partnerships at different levels including district, school and classroom level. A revised edition is under development.

1 Wood, L., and Bauman, E. (2017). *How Family, School and Community Engagement Can Improve Student Achievement and Influence School Reform: Literature Review*, American Institutes for Research for Nellie Mae Education Foundation.

2 Coulehan, H. (2017) *Transforming Family Engagement Into Thriving Family-School Partnerships*, Association of Alaska School Boards, blogpost.

3 *Partners in Education: A Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships*, SEDL/U.S Dept. of Education, 2013.

4 *Family Engagement Action Plan*, Alaska Dept. of Education & Early Development, Dec 2010.

Family Partnership in Action: Anna's Story

In the scenario at the start of this chapter, teacher Ms. Jackson tries to help Anna, a student who seems withdrawn. In a transformative school, the teacher's effort to work with Anna's family goes beyond parent-teacher conferences. Ms. Jackson learns that Anna's aunt helps care for Anna and has a significant role in family decisions."

Ms. Jackson speaks with Anna's father to get permission to include Anna's aunt in meetings and conversations. With the family, Ms. Jackson learns more about skills that help Anna ground herself and self- regulate. Anna's aunt shares that the family helps Anna at home to talk and relax while beading. Ms. Jackson shares some tools that are helpful for other students and asks Anna's family for help to figure out which tools to share with Anna.

IDEAL OUTCOMES The school and family are starting to work as a team to support Anna. As Anna's family and teacher help her gain skills for coping with her stress, Anna begins to relax and engage more at school with her peers and her schoolwork.

Suggested Steps

Like all the work in this framework, some of these steps could be undertaken by a school staff member, but for deeper and more lasting benefit, it is best if school or district leadership is involved and the work is approached as a team effort.

1. **Assess current school-family relationships.** School staff, administrators, and community can review family surveys, school climate surveys, and host dialogues, and review existing relationships with families .
2. **Brainstorm** ways to strengthen relationships in various areas: connection, confidence, cultural safety, content, or co-regulation.
3. **Make a plan** that includes a vision for ideal school-family partnerships, and specific activities and strategies for getting there.
4. **Create opportunities** for families to share their knowledge and build confidence as the first and most important teacher.
5. **Find regular and creative ways** to link families to key content.
6. **Include the role of family partnership** in professional learning so staff learn principles and strategies for deepening their relationships with families.

Reflections

- How do staff at your school learn about families' backgrounds, experiences, and history with education?
- How do families get to know teachers and the school community? Are there opportunities for school staff and community to dialog openly?
- What ongoing partnerships already exist with families? What are some strengths in this area?
- How does your district promote family partnership and collaborative learning?
- How can schools help families provide co-regulation and resilience for their children?
- How can families supplement and reinforce key learning outside school?
- How can the community create and reinforce clear expectations for family involvement in their children's learning?

11 SELF-CARE

"Secure your own oxygen mask before assisting others." -Aviation safety wisdom

SUMMARY **Tending to one's own emotional health is a critical aspect of trauma-engaged practice. Self-care practices can help adults avoid secondary trauma and burnout, and provide support and positive role modeling for students.**

In Our Schools: Sabrina's Story

Sabrina has been teaching high school for four years. She feels increasingly burdened by her students' stresses. One student confided to her about a sexual assault when she was younger. Another student is sleeping on different couches and appears to be falling into drug use.

COMMON PRACTICE Sabrina feels helpless and alone. Some days she feels overwhelmed by her students' challenges and some nights she can't sleep. She wonders if she should quit teaching and go into a less emotionally draining field.

TRANSFORMATIVE PRACTICE Sabrina's school prioritizes self-care and supportive relationships among staff. Sabrina has been trained to recognize signs of unhealthy stress and burnout, and realizes she needs to address her own emotional needs. She reaches out to several friends on staff, and they help her make a plan. Her plan includes walking with a friend three days a week after school, finding one fun thing to do each weekend, and turning off her electronics by 9:30 p.m. every night. She also reaches out to her principal, who listens attentively and pairs Sabrina with a veteran teacher for support and mentoring.

Key Research Findings

Working with students who experience toxic stress can be draining. Educators and school staff who work with traumatized children and adolescents are vulnerable to the effects of trauma—referred to as compassion fatigue or secondary traumatic stress. These effects can include feeling physically, mentally, or emotionally worn out, or feeling overwhelmed by students' traumas. Active self-care reduces teacher turnover and depression, anxiety, anger and fatigue among teachers.[1]

1 Figley, C. R. (1995). ***Compassion fatigue: Coping with secondary traumatic stress disorder in those who treat the traumatized.*** New York: Brunner/Mazel, Inc.

Self-Care and Secondary Trauma Reduction

It is critical for adults who work with children who experience trauma to support their own well-being. It's easy for compassionate school staff to become overly involved and engaged – to over-identify – with a student who experiences trauma. For some school staff, this can mean they are unable to stop thinking about the situation; and for others, this can result in irritability or detachment. Paying attention to the balance between healthy empathy and over-identification is essential for one's well-being. Self-care and self-awareness are critical to that balance.[2]

Tips for Educators

Be aware of signs of compassion fatigue. These signs include:

- Increased irritability or impatience with students,
- Difficulty planning classroom activities and lessons,
- Decreased concentration,
- Denying that traumatic events impact students,
- Feeling numb or detached,
- Intense feelings and intrusive thoughts that don't lessen over time about a student's trauma,
- Dreams about students' traumas, and
- Personal involvement with a student outside the school setting.

> ***"If I had one wish for every school in the country, it would be that they made time for teachers to really sit down and talk about how they're feeling in the work. It doesn't serve anybody to pretend that we're teacher-bots with no emotions, which I think sometimes teachers feel like they have to be."***
>
> *-Alaska educator*

Don't go it alone. Guard against isolation. While respecting the confidentiality of your students, get support by:

- Working in teams,
- Talking to others in your school, and
- Asking for support from administrators or colleagues.

Recognize compassion fatigue as an occupational hazard. When an educator approaches students with an open heart and a listening ear, it can be hard not to be affected by students' traumas.

- Don't judge yourself for having strong reactions to a student's trauma.
- Compassion fatigue is a sign to seek more support and care for oneself.
- Establish the boundaries you need to ensure your own well-being.

Attend to self-care. Find healthy outlets for navigating stressful experiences. These include exercise, friendships, outdoor activities, and cultural and creative activities. These activities along with mindful practices can help us to create space from both work and stress.

Other self-care tips:

- Eat well and exercise,
- Write in a journal and reflect,
- Use progressive relaxation techniques,
- Increase Vitamin D to guard against Seasonal Affective Disorder (through supplements, Vitamin-D rich foods, or "happy lights"),
- Take a break during the workday,
- Allow yourself to cry,
- Find things to laugh about, and
- Visit an Elder for advice on how to care for yourself in the local area or ideas for nutrition healthy fun activities in the community.

Educators can avoid compassion fatigue, in part, by letting go of that which we can't control:

Know what is yours to do. Separate what you wish you could do from what you know you can do. You may feel that you are not doing enough—a sure way of developing stress and feeling overwhelmed. While you may not be able to prevent trauma or remove suffering children from their situations, you can do your job to the best of your ability, with love and compassion for both the students and yourself. Focus on the task at hand and be fully present for your students. You might begin the day by setting an intention such as, ***"Today my intention is to do my part in fostering a safe environment for my students..."*** And once your intention is set...

> ***"You cannot pour from an empty cup, you must fill your cup first."***

Let go of the result. This is not to say that you stop caring about the efficacy of your teaching, connecting with students, or community building, it is to say that you can practice being less attached to exactly how you think things should look. When we loosen the grip on our ideas about the way things should be, we are much more open to new ideas and new ways of looking at things. Acknowledge the brain's desire for control with humor and compassion, and you create more space to find creative solutions.[3]

Self-Care in Action: Sabrina's Story

In the scenario at the start of this chapter, Sabrina feels overwhelmed and unsure if she should continue teaching. In a trauma-engaged school, adults are trained and supported in recognizing and addressing their own emotional needs. Here's what happens:

- Sabrina recognizes signs of emotional exhaustion and compassion fatigue;
- She feels safe confiding in her colleagues;
- Her colleagues respond supportively and compassionately;
- Sabrina reaches out to her principal, who responds without judgment and with concrete ideas for support; and
- Sabrina makes a plan with specific actions and accountability (meeting a friend to walk, scheduling check-ins with a mentor colleague).

IDEAL OUTCOMES Sabrina feels less isolated and better able to cope with the traumas her students carry with them. She focuses on the things she can impact, such as her classroom culture. She models self-care with her students, instituting strategies like mindfulness breaks for herself and the class. She builds relationships with students and colleagues. Teaching becomes more rewarding for Sabrina, and her students benefit from her positive role modeling and energetic teaching.

2 Rodenbush, K. (2015). *The effects of trauma on behavior in the classroom* [Presentation materials].

3 *Six Ways for Educators to Avoid Compassion Fatigue*, Lesley University.

Suggested Steps

1. **Prioritize self-care** in professional learning and the school and community culture.
2. **Foster open and supportive peer relationships** among school staff.
3. **Train all staff** to recognize signs of compassion fatigue or secondary trauma, and to understand that self-care is necessary to be able to support students' learning and students' well-being.
4. **Encourage self-care** among staff and community members who support students with trauma.
5. **Build staff peer-to-peer** support systems.

Reflections

- How do staff members in your school care for themselves and each other?
- Have you experienced compassion fatigue or secondary stress? How have you managed it?
- How does your school or community support adults who work with students who experience trauma?
- What resources and assets does your community have to offer for recharging? (e.g., wild or other places, people, events, stories, recreation, etc.)

Key Terms

Secondary traumatic stress: The emotional duress that results when an individual hears about the firsthand trauma experiences of another. Its symptoms mimic those of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Individuals affected by secondary stress may find themselves re-experiencing personal trauma.

Compassion fatigue: The physical and mental exhaustion and emotional withdrawal sometimes experienced by those who care for sick or traumatized people over an extended period of time.

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Appendix B: Suggested Steps, all chapters

Introduction

1. Develop a clear rationale and vision. Consider why this work matters, what your school and community stand to gain through more thoughtful, trauma-engaged practice, and develop a vision for transforming your school, district, and community.
2. Assess your community's readiness. Districts need to assess their capacity to move toward more trauma-engaged practices. Identify or develop the necessary infrastructure and supports at the administrative level. Districts also need to determine where they want to start – district, school, classroom, community.
3. Gain buy-in and trust through communication, collaboration, and commitment to success. This work will not succeed and endure without broad participation and support from teachers, administrators, families and community members.
4. Promote a culture of safety and respect for this work. Childhood trauma, intergenerational trauma, and implicit bias can be difficult to approach. Establish and maintain clear standards for respectful listening and dialog.
5. Develop a common understanding of terms to establish and maintain respectful, constructive and open dialog while using this tool. For example, the term "historic trauma," used in this document, may be called "untold histories" elsewhere.
6. Expect setbacks. There will be mistakes and challenges in this work. View them as opportunities to learn. This work requires ongoing commitment and perseverance, resilience and reflection – the same skills children need to grow and change.
7. Use this framework as a resource. You do not need to work through the chapters sequentially; feel free to pick and choose. Likewise, not every suggested step or reflection question will apply to all users. Take what works, and adapt it as needed.

Chapter 1: Deconstructing Trauma

1. Assess your classroom or school's current discipline policies and practices. Consider whether these practices help students repair relationships, improve self-regulation, and promote accountability. [See chapters on Policy, Skill Building, and Professional Learning for more.]
2. Identify the supports and resources available to students in school. If these resources are inadequate or underdeveloped, consider how they might be augmented. [See chapter on Support Services.]
3. Identify the supports and resources available within the community at large. Consider engaging those that may not already be involved with the schools, or strengthening communication and collaboration with those that are already engaged. [See chapter on Cultural Integration and Community Co-creation.]
4. Share this information. Change often begins with understanding. The more people understand that stress has real impacts on the brain, the more we can act with compassion and caring toward our students and each other. [See chapter on Professional Learning.]

Chapter 2: Relationships

1. Walk the talk about building relationships. Model caring and respectful relationships from the top down – among school staff, between staff and families, and between staff and students.
2. Post cultural or school values about relationships. These values should be clear, concise, and easy to understand.
3. Treat each student uniquely. There is no formula for relationship-building. Authentic listening and treating each person as a unique and valued human is what matters.
4. Provide professional learning opportunities about relationship building for staff and families.
5. Create a positive professional climate that includes working agreements about staff values, interactions, and collaboration.
6. Ensure every voice is heard. Sometimes listening is more important than speaking. Create opportunities to check in in with students individually.
7. Take inventory. Use the Youth Risk Behavior Survey, School Climate & Connectedness Survey and other data to evaluate your progress.
8. Remember that relationships are at the heart of any community. The organization Trauma Transformed offers three points of reflection:
9. Compassion: We strive to act compassionately during our interactions with others through the genuine expression of concern and support.
10. Relationships: We value and work towards secure and dependable relationships characterized by mutual respect and attunement.
11. Communication: We promote dependability and create trust by communicating in ways that are clear, inclusive, and useful to others.

Chapter 3: Policy Considerations

1. Review key policies that shape the district and schools. School boards and district leadership can begin reviewing key school board policies or consider AASB's trauma-engaged policy recommendations package.
2. Reach out to staff, board members, and community members during policy development. The more people involved in policymaking, the more likely it is that new policies will be understood and successfully integrated.
3. When drafting or amending policies, use language that is clear and easy to understand. Be concise and use words that reflects local usage.

4. Post policies broadly to ensure broad understanding and acceptance. Post in schools and public buildings such as post offices and libraries, and online.
5. Develop a short version of key policies and post throughout schools and classrooms.
6. Have a plan to ensure success. This should include educating staff and the public on the rationale, and providing the necessary training for staff. Update other documents, administrative guidance, and school handbooks to ensure consistency.

Chapter 4: Planning and Coordination

1. Consider and recruit allies or a small team to determine how to approach this process.
2. Have informal conversations to gauge awareness and readiness for trauma-engaged policies and practices in your district or school. Include staff and families.
3. Gather and analyze data and information. If this is daunting, reach out to the Association of Alaska Schools Boards or Alaska Dept. of Education and Early Development for help gathering or analyzing data.
4. Work through the process outlined in this chapter. Customize the steps to fit your community's needs and style, following the broad principles of collaboration, intentionality, and discussion.

Chapter 5: Professional Learning

1. Assess your district and school professional learning practice. Is it connected, embedded and collaborative, or top-down, "one and done"?
2. Inventory the opportunities in the district and at school to learn about trauma-engaged practice in a sequenced way throughout the year.
3. Inventory staff beliefs and knowledge about trauma. Meet staff where they are and build on staff strengths.
4. Create a professional learning plan and timeline based on staff readiness. Connect learning to a shared vision and goals for transforming your school. Strive for learning that relates directly to each position.
5. Learn together: Create a model where the whole school, all district and school staff, can learn, share, and reflect together.
6. Collaborate with the community (families, Elders, Tribe, support services) to design community-based and culturally-responsive professional learning.
7. Invite families and community members to learn together.
8. Track and evaluate growth. Consider building in tracking and evaluation to assess progress.

Chapter 6: Schoolwide practices and climate

1. Assess the current school climate using Alaska's School Climate and Connectedness Survey and other information that may be available.
2. Review existing behavior supports and discipline policies and practices.
3. Inventory the physical space for opportunity to create safe spaces.
4. Bring together stakeholders such as families, Elders, Tribes, support services, youth, and school staff to create a shared vision and goals for improving school climate and connectedness.
5. Co-create a map for reaching these goals; engage youth in developing and implementing the plan.
6. Collaborate with the community to design school discipline practices that are consistent with traditional, cultural, or community values.

Chapter 7: Skill Instruction

1. Adopt learning standards for self-regulation and social and emotional skills.
2. Make place-based and cultural modifications to these standards in collaboration with the community.
3. Inventory current programs and approaches to teaching students self-regulation and social and emotional skills. Build on strengths and identify gaps.
4. Adopt evidence-based approaches to augment existing programs.
5. Include SEL instruction in the master schedule for all grades.
6. Design and facilitate professional learning for all staff on the standards, direct instruction approach, and ways to integrate social and emotional skill practice into academics.
7. Reinforce skill development by collaborating with after-school activity providers, coaches, youth organizations and families.

Chapter 8: Support Services

1. Assess your school's strengths and gaps in terms of support services.
2. Brainstorm ways to harness strengths and address gaps – consider community partners, potential new funding sources, reallocation of existing resources, and any other ideas.
3. Redefine school counselor job descriptions to allocate more time for working with students and their families and less time on administrative tasks.
4. Develop team approaches to working with students.
5. Build meaningful partnerships and agreements with community providers.
6. Build student peer-to-peer support systems.

Chapter 9: Cultural Integration and Community Co-creation

1. Identify the cultures, ethnicities, and languages spoken in your school and community.
2. Understand your students' community history and relationship to formal education.
3. Identify existing and potential partners in the community for collaborative planning and co-creation.
4. Consider establishing hiring and training guidelines to ensure a deep understanding of cultural safety and culturally responsive teaching.
5. Consider incorporating regionally enhanced curricula including regionally accurate Alaska histories.
6. Host community conversations on racial equity, histories and healing.

Chapter 10: Family Partnerships

1. Assess current school-family relationships. School staff, administrators, and community can review family surveys, school climate surveys, and host dialogs.
2. Review relationships with families for each classroom and schoolwide. In what ways are families engaged and with who, which staff have strong relationships with families.
3. Brainstorm ways to strengthen relationships in various areas: connection, confidence, cultural safety, content, or co-regulation.
4. Make a plan that includes a vision for ideal school-family partnerships, and specific activities and strategies for getting there.

5. Create opportunities for families to share their knowledge and build confidence as the first and most important teacher with school staff, students, and each other.
6. Find regular and creative ways to link families to key content.
7. Include the role of family partnership in professional learning so staff learn principles and strategies for deepening their relationships with families.

Chapter 11: Self Care

1. Prioritize self-care in professional learning and the school and community culture.
2. Foster open and supportive peer relationships among school staff.
3. Train all staff to recognize signs of compassion fatigue or secondary trauma, and to understand that self-care is necessary to be able to support students' learning and students' well-being.
4. Encourage self-care among staff and community members who support students with trauma.
5. Build staff peer-to-peer support systems.

Appendix C: Reflections, all chapters

Introduction

- What does childhood trauma look like in your community? How does it impact your schools?
- Why is this work needed in your community?
- What is your community's vision for transforming schools? What will success look like?
- Who can your schools partner with to help reach the broader community?
- Who needs to be on board for this to work?
- What is needed to be ready to successfully undertake this work?

Chapter 1: Deconstructing Trauma

- How does the science of stress and brain development described in this chapter shed light on what you see in your schools?
- How do the policies and practices in your classroom or school help students improve self-regulation, repair relationships, and promote accountability? Could they be improved?
- What is the current level of understanding of trauma among families, school staff, and administrators in your school or community?
- What strengths in your community could be tapped to support students and staff with high levels of trauma?
- What additional information about trauma and its impact on the brain would be helpful?
- In the scenario described in this chapter, what more could be done for Sarah?

Chapter 2: Relationships

- How do you build relationships with students who may be experiencing trauma? What results have you seen?
- What strategies have you tried that have not worked?
- How can you make time for relationship-building without exhausting yourself? Are there ways to build in time to check in with vulnerable students?
- How do you decide when to ask a personal question and when to give a student space?
- What do relationships between staff look like in your school?
- What do student relationships look like in your school?
- What are discipline norms in your school and how do they impact relationship building?
- What does the School Climate and Connectedness Survey or the Youth Risk Behavior Survey tell you about relationships within your school?
- How would students and families describe their experience with staff in your school?
- What does the community value in a relationship?
- What does staff do to repair relationships that have been harmed?
- What could your staff do to infuse restorative practices in your school?

Chapter 3: Policy Consideration

- How do your policies shape school climate and disciplinary approaches?
- How do community members help shape and learn about policies and administrative regulations in your district?
- What policy or regulation changes could shape trauma-engaged practices at the state, district, or school level?
- How does your school district review and make changes to policies?
- How informed is your school board about trauma and trauma-engaged policies?
- What policies exist to support whole-school social and emotional learning, restorative discipline practices, and students experiencing trauma?
- In what ways do your district's policies support community partnerships?
- What measures are in place to break down silos?
- How do schools, tribes, students, and families work together for the best outcomes for students?

Chapter 4: Planning and Coordination of Schoolwide Efforts

- What opportunities have school staff and administrators had to develop a common understanding of trauma and their own role in transforming schools?
- What support do you need for this process to succeed?
- Was data used in this process? If so, how? If not, what data might be helpful?
- How can local and regional partners participate in planning processes? Who has been included and not included in the past? What kind of planning tool or supports would help school staff, community members, and student leaders undertake this work?
- Is there someone within the district or outside who has experience and tools to facilitate this process?
- How can your team compile information in a way that will be useful to communicate to others?

Chapter 5: Professional Learning

- How do you as a district or as a school staff learn, plan and reflect together to improve student learning?
- How can your school community move toward a shared belief that together you can positively impact student outcomes?
- What is the current state of staff knowledge, beliefs, and skills with respect to trauma-engaged practice?
- What kind of professional learning would be helpful to you with respect to transforming trauma?

- How does your school or district collaborate with the community (families, Elders, Tribe, support services) to deliver culturally-responsive professional learning?
- How can your school model a community-wide approach and learn together with families and community?

Chapter 6: Schoolwide Practices and Climate

- What activities does your school do to build intentional school climates?
- Who else could be involved in school climate-building activities?
- How do students, staff and families perceive your school climate?
- How can your school embed restorative practices?
- How does your school or district use youth as leaders to build a positive school climate?
- How does your classroom's or school's physical space promote a sense of emotional and physical safety?
- How does your school or district collaborate with the community (families, Elders, Tribe, support services, volunteers) to create a positive school climate?
- How do district policies support schoolwide climate-building practices?

Chapter 7: Skill Instruction

- What social emotional skills (traditional or community values, employability skills, etc) are important to your community?
- How do you partner with the community to integrate these skills throughout the school day?
- How does your school or district teach self-regulation and social-emotional skills?
- What approaches could help strengthen these skills in students?
- How are these skills reinforced in academics and throughout the school day?
- What are staff beliefs about their role in teaching self-regulation and social-emotional skills?
- How can adults in the school community develop the skills to co-regulate with students and model SEL skills?
- How does your district or school partner with out-of-school activity providers (afterschool, sports, etc.) to reinforce SEL skill development?
- What ideas in this chapter make the most sense for your community?

Chapter 8: Support Services

- What are some effective support services in your school or district?
- What are the greatest unmet needs for student support in your school or district?
- Does your school or community have good peer-to-peer supports? What is the potential to develop these supports?
- How can existing resources be used to provide better support services to students and families?
- How does staff turnover among teachers and support services impact your school?
- What community resources – individuals or organizations – might be available to expand or improve your support service capacity?

Chapter 9: Cultural Integration and Community Co-Creation

- What ideas and actions in this chapter inspire you?
- How do you integrate cultural strengths?
- How does your school or district build on the cultural strengths of students and their families? (Modify instruction? Physical space in the room? Field trips or activities?)
- How can you integrate traditional practices into teaching, relationship building, or healing?
- What hiring and orientation practices are in place in your school to ensure that school staff are grounded in students' cultures?
- How does your school align content and teaching practices with students' cultures and family experiences?
- How do you use curricula and materials that incorporate local knowledge and content?
- Who are key partners and culture bearers to engage in this work?
- How does a trauma-engaged approach support broader community goals and values?

Chapter 10: Family Partnerships

- How do staff at your school learn about families' backgrounds, experiences, and history with education?
- How do families get to know teachers and the school community? Are there opportunities for school staff and community to dialog openly?
- What ongoing partnerships already exist with families? What are some strengths in this area?
- How does your district promote family partnership and collaborative learning?
- How can schools help families provide co-regulation and resilience for their children?
- How can families supplement and reinforce key learning outside school?
- How can the community create and reinforce clear expectations for family involvement in their children's learning?

Chapter 11: Self- Care

- How do staff members in your school care for themselves and each other?
- Have you experienced compassion fatigue or secondary stress? How have you managed it?
- How does your school or community support adults who work with students who experience trauma?
- What resources and assets does your community have to offer for recharging? (e.g., wild or other places, people, events, stories, recreation, etc.)

Appendix D: Key Terms

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs): ACEs refer to various negative experiences in childhood including medical and natural disasters experienced by children and youth. The original ACE list included 10 categories of childhood stressors.

Abuse: emotional, physical, sexual abuse

Trauma in household environment: substance abuse, parental separation and/or divorce, mentally ill or suicidal household member, witnessing violence, imprisoned household member

Neglect: abandonment, child's basic physical and/or emotional needs unmet

Child well-being: A state of being with others that arises when a child's needs are met, and the child has the freedom and ability to meaningfully pursue their goals and ways of life in a supportive, equitable setting now and into the future.

Childhood trauma: A negative event or series of events that surpasses the child's ordinary coping skills. It comes in many forms and includes experiences such as maltreatment, witnessing violence, or the loss of a loved one. Traumatic experiences can impact brain development and behavior inside and outside the classroom.

Co-regulation: The way a person adjusts their emotions and behavior through interaction with another person, in order to maintain or regain a regulated state. When adults provide warm and responsive interactions, they support, coach, and model emotional self-regulation.

Collective efficacy: A belief that, through collective actions, a group of people can influence student outcomes and increase achievement.

Compassion fatigue: The physical and mental exhaustion and emotional withdrawal sometimes experienced by those who care for sick or traumatized people over an extended period of time.

Emotional self-regulation: The ability to manage one's emotions and behavior. It includes not overreacting to upsetting stimuli, calming yourself down when you get upset, adjusting to unexpected change, and handling frustration without an outburst. It is a set of skills that enables people to direct their own behavior towards a goal, despite the unpredictability of the world and our own feelings.

Policy: a set of rules or principles that guide a government, business or organization.

Professional learning: Effective professional learning refers to structured professional development that results in changes in teacher practices and improvements in student learning outcomes.

School climate: the quality and character of school life; every school has a climate, and everyone in the school contributes to it.

Schoolwide practices: routines, structures, and strategies that are agreed upon and used across the school throughout the school day.

Secondary traumatic stress: The emotional duress that results when an individual hears about the firsthand trauma experiences of another. Its symptoms mimic those of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Individuals affected by secondary stress may find themselves re-experiencing personal trauma.

Social-emotional learning (SEL): The process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.

Stress: Stress is the physical, mental and emotional human response to a particular stimulus, or stressor. Stress is the adaption or coping-response that helps the body prepare for challenging situations. Stress can be either negative or positive, depending on the context.

Stressor: An experience or event that signals a potentially dangerous situation.

Scan Here for Access to the Full Resources Supporting this Framework.

association of ALASKA school boards

ALASKA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION & EARLY DEVELOPMENT

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