



T R A U M A - I N F O R M E D

MTSS

Creating a trauma-informed MTSS starts like any other program in the school – by examining data.

BY JENNIFER BETTERS-BUBON, PH.D., AND SARAH FLIER

Imagine for a moment walking into a school where trauma-informed ideals and practices are integrated throughout a multitiered system of supports (MTSS). You pop into a classroom and note social/emotional learning is integrated throughout content areas, and there is a time dedicated to building the student/teacher relationship. Students have access to calm-down spaces throughout the school, and you see a line of elementary school children energetically moving through a sensory path in the hallway. Staff wellness is prioritized in the newsletters and in practice. Staff development focuses on mental health, antiracism, neurodiversity and equity.

As you listen to staff talk about students, it's clear they recognize trauma is a lens rather than a label. Family voices are included in decisions, and educators throughout the building take time to know parents, their backgrounds and values. You notice a flyer in the hallway advertising an upcoming family night taking place in the community rather than the school. All students, school staff and families feel welcome and valued.

Now, more than ever, school staff must consider the impact of trauma on students, staff and families. In May 2020, shortly after the pandemic began, 29% of parents said their child's mental or emotional health was already harmed, according to an Education Trust survey. More recent research in October 2020 from the JED Foundation found that 31% of parents said their child's mental or emotional health was worse than before the pandemic. As we move into new phases of the

pandemic, we must consider the very real trauma students and families have experienced and its impact on student learning.

Trauma-informed Schools

Trauma is a general term describing an event experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional or spiritual well-being. The definition of trauma has become more inclusive to recognize the events in schools and systems that lead to trauma. Racial trauma, a form of race-based stress, refers to the mental and emotional injury caused by encounters with racial bias and ethnic discrimination, racism and hate crimes, which can be real or perceived.

As school counselors, our work revolves around helping students who have gone through difficult times. It's not uncommon for us to be aware of traumatic events students have experienced. In fact, you may be the first person students open up to about their trauma.

The integration of trauma-informed approaches into schools to meet students' needs has become more prevalent in recent years. At Willow River Elementary School in Hudson, Wis., and five other elementary schools in the district, the school counselors participated in the Wisconsin Department of Instruction's trauma-sensitive schools online professional development to learn what trauma-sensitive practices should be used in schools. The school counselors took what they learned and educated school staff at each of the six elementary schools through professional development days in the district. All certified and non-certified staff were invited to attend and learned about adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), trauma and brain development, and what schools can do to combat trauma's effects on children. Afterward, school counselors had many conversations with staff about trauma, the presence of ACEs in any given classroom, and even acknowledged their own trauma. The training and conversations led

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to a trauma-informed lens becoming part of how the district's school counselors understood students and family systems

One way school counselors can work smarter is to organize trauma-informed approaches within a multitiered system of supports (MTSS). Using MTSS ensures school counselors' efforts are integrated within a trauma-informed system.

According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, trauma-informed systems are grounded in safety, trustworthiness/transparency, peer support, collaboration/mutuality, empowerment, voice and choice, and cultural issues. Creating trauma-informed MTSS starts like building any other system – by examining data. School counselors are well-versed in examining a plethora of data, including needs assessments, school climate surveys, office discipline referrals and student outcome data. What

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does that data tell you about the needs of your students, families and staff?

Although needs assessments and school climate surveys are great places to start, data should move beyond numbers. Connecting with students, staff and families about their needs is critically important. When thinking about staff, trauma-informed systems must be grounded in staff wellness. Talk with your administrator to figure out how to create a climate in which self-care is a community value. When it comes to students, have minute meetings or hold focus groups to find out their needs, and be sure to include students on your advisory council.

A Tiered Approach

With a clear picture of needs, you can create tiered practices. Building a true trauma-informed system at Tier 1 starts with the adults in the building. What does that look like? As a leader in your school, you can teach staff about important topics, such as mental health, regulation strategies and the impact of trauma. Partner with administration to ensure relationship building is integrated into the school's very fabric. This may look like having a morning meeting time or advisory built into the master schedule. Work alongside school staff to help them understand the effects of trauma on the brain and the impact of implicit and explicit bias and racism on students and families. Make sure all staff understand that it actually doesn't matter if they know a student's specific trauma. Instead, teachers should set up classrooms and schools that assume every student in the room has experienced trauma. Those practices are beneficial to both students who have experienced trauma and those who haven't.

Similar work can happen with parents, guardians and caretakers as you engage in authentic relationship building. Are there ways in which school functions, such as back-to-school nights and information sessions, can happen in community settings rather than school settings? Trauma-informed approaches recognize that caretakers may have trauma responses

from their own school experiences; acknowledge this trauma by finding creative ways to meet caretakers where they are most comfortable.

With the foundation in place for adults, you can then focus your efforts on practices for all students. Tier 1 supports are those available to all, and in trauma-informed systems, what's good for some is good for all. As such, transformative social/emotional learning, relationships and trauma-informed regulation strategies should be integrated into what students learn each day. Offering all students the opportunities to use sensory paths – both as brain breaks as a whole class and individually as needed – serves as a strategy to teach self-regulation and positive coping skills. Another Tier 1 support can be Calm Corners in each classroom for students to use as a tool when needed.

Tier 2 practices are those available to some students who need more

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support. Examine data, including universal screeners and outcome data, with school staff to determine which students may need additional support. Too often when working with students who need

additional support or intervention, school staff may ask, "What's wrong with these students?" School counselors who implement trauma-informed MTSS help change the nature of that question to, "What happened to these students?" In response to data, provide individual check-ins and small-group interventions using evidence-based programs.

Within trauma-informed Tier 3, school counselors serve in collaborative and consultative roles. Relationships with families become that much more important, as families often provide a window into student struggles you and the rest of the school staff may not see. Create relationships with community partners to ensure there are supports outside of school. Some districts are beginning to adopt the co-located mental health model, in which the school provides a space for a therapist to meet with students throughout the school day, although the billing goes through insurance just as if the child were visiting a clinic. This allows those families with barriers that prevent traveling to appointments another opportunity to receive services consistently.

The essence of trauma-informed systems comes down to data and relationships. Don't overthink it; as school counselors, this is what we know and what we do. Follow your instincts. Reach out, connect and network. Take time to learn what other schools/districts have done, and check with your state school counselor association for additional local resources, contacts and ideas. With resources and a bit of teamwork, you can turn your school into one that is trauma-informed and helps all students **A**

Jennifer Betters-Bubon, Ph.D., is an associate professor and program coordinator (school and clinical mental health counseling) at the University of Wisconsin - Whitewater. She can be reached at bettersj@uww.edu. Sarah Flier is a school counselor at Willow River Elementary School, Hudson, Wis., and a 2021 School Counselor of the Year finalist. She can be reached at fliersj@hudsonraiders.org.

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