

ADDRESSING CHILDHOOD TRAUMA IN DC SCHOOLS



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Every day, DC children bring traumatic experiences with them into the classroom. Children in the District experience higher than average levels of abuse and neglect, community and family violence, and homelessness.¹ Whether a child witnesses a one-time traumatic event or feels the cumulative effects of ongoing trauma, these experiences can affect every area of a child's life including their ability to succeed in school.

At a minimum, children who have witnessed gun violence in their neighborhoods, domestic violence in their homes, or are in foster care because their parents are no longer able to care for them often will focus on those events instead of their studies. Many traumatized children also have behavioral outbursts or other problems in their classrooms. These are the children Children's Law Center sees every day.

Our views have been shaped both by research and by our experience. Children's Law Center reaches 1 out of every 8 children in DC's poorest neighborhoods – more than 5,000 children and families each year – who have been abused or neglected or have special health or educational needs that aren't being met. Our young clients are the most vulnerable children in DC; many have experienced significant trauma, and we fight to get them the support they need to recover and thrive at home, in schools and in their communities.

Education reforms in the District will not fully succeed if schools do not address the trauma that students bring with them to class. Put another way: if we fail traumatized students our schools will fail as well. The good news is that research and Children's Law Center's own experience shows

that children can overcome the impact of trauma in their lives and succeed in school and in life.

Teachers and other school staff spend many hours a day with children, are often important and trusted adults in these children's lives, and are well positioned to help mitigate the

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negative impact of children's trauma on their learning. Other states that have implemented trauma-informed schools see improved educational attainment, and decreased suspensions and expulsions across the board. This improves the learning environment for everyone – a necessary step to improve DC's stubbornly low educational outcomes.

Childhood Trauma and Its Impact on Learning

Trauma is defined as a severe emotional response to a frightening or threatening event or series of experiences that leaves a person overwhelmed and unable to cope.² Children can be exposed to a variety of traumatic events including physical and emotional abuse and neglect, community or family violence, homelessness and housing instability, and lack of access to basic necessities like food, water and clothing. While experiencing any one discrete negative event such as physical abuse or witnessing a murder can cause trauma, children also can experience trauma through the cumulative effect of multiple, ongoing events such as experiencing homelessness, being removed repeatedly from one's parents, or moving from one foster family to another.³

Urban poverty greatly increases children's chances of experiencing trauma. Compared to children living in affluent neighborhoods, children living in poor urban neighborhoods are more likely to experience traumatic events such as family chaos, conflict, violence, victimization, incarceration or death of a family member, and abuse and neglect.⁴

Early childhood exposure to trauma also changes the way the brain develops.⁵ This change can result in major problems with the child's executive functioning and self-regulation – causing a traumatized child to overreact in a situation that seems ordinary to others.⁶ Trauma also can affect children's language development, inhibit their academic achievement and make it difficult to form relationships with both peers and adults.⁷ Traumatized children may develop hypervigilance, emotional withdrawal or dissociation, and spend the school day focusing solely on their safety – making it impossible to learn.⁸

The result? Children with trauma do worse in school. The impact of trauma on children in schools have been extensively documented: children with traumatic histories are more likely to be referred for special education, have higher rates of school discipline referrals and suspensions, lower test scores and grades, and are less likely to graduate.⁹

Why Children in DC Are at Risk

Children in urban environments generally and in DC specifically are at a far greater risk of experiencing violence than most children across the country. First, children in DC are at far greater risk of abuse and neglect than children in other states.¹⁰ They are also more likely to witness violence in their neighborhoods. In DC, forty percent of high school students reported seeing or hearing violence and abuse during the past 12 months.¹¹ Many DC children also witness or are victims of domestic violence; there were nearly 33,000 domestic

violence calls made to DC police in 2013.¹²

As noted previously, growing up in poverty also increases a child's likelihood of being exposed to traumatic events. One in four DC children live in poverty – currently defined as less than \$24,000 a year for a family of four – and, in Wards 7 and 8, the figure is closer to one in two children.¹³ The District's lack of affordable housing has led to a rising number of homeless families and children, with no signs of the trend reversing. During the 2013-2014 school year, approximately 4,000 DC public school students were homeless.¹⁴

A child's resilience in the face of trauma can depend on many factors – but having a safe, stable home life with parental support can be a protection against the headwinds of trauma. Conversely, when children lose their parents they lose this protection and also are further traumatized. At the end of 2014, there were over 1,000 DC children growing up in foster care and many more are at risk of entering into care because of parental neglect.¹⁵ Many DC children also lose parents to incarceration. DC has the highest rate of incarceration in the nation (one out of every 50 adults).¹⁶ The poorest areas of the city are disproportionately affected by all of these trends.

What DC Schools Can Do

DC's education system has undergone many structural changes in the past decade and questions about how to boost student performance continue to dominate policy debates and politics in the city. Despite the modest success resulting from some education

reforms implemented in the last decade, students in DC continue to lag behind their peers in other jurisdictions.¹⁷ This gap cannot be closed without comprehensive school and city-wide interventions specifically designed to address children’s exposure to trauma and its impact on classrooms.

Trauma-sensitive schools can improve academics by helping children become emotionally available to learn and improving their behavior. Educators who are trauma sensitive understand that children need to feel safe in order to learn and that “structure and limits are essential to creating and maintaining” this sense of safety.¹⁸ The concept of structure and limits doesn’t mean unbending rules; it instead refers to the need to provide a sense of safety for children through predictable patterns and relationships with adults.

Educators also can help students by focusing on areas where a child does well, taking a strength-based approach, and therefore giving a child the opportunity to feel successful; this can be an important emotional starting point for a child to gain self-esteem and then from there to begin to master academic content and social relations.¹⁹ Educators also can help children focus on learning by teaching them to calm their anxieties and modulate their behavior.²⁰ By training educators to recognize when children are struggling with self-regulation or experiencing intense emotions, and providing them with an array of appropriate supports and responses, educators will be better able to help traumatized children reduce hyper-arousal and to focus and learn.²¹ These interventions also enforce one another; helping children calm



40% of DC high school students witnessed violence during the past year.

down and modulate behavior leads to calmer classrooms, making it easier for teachers to teach, and ultimately increasing academic performance across the school.

Creating trauma-sensitive schools in DC should build on efforts already in place. The concept of trauma-informed practice is not new in DC, and several agencies in the District have already begun work in this area. For example, DC’s Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA) has been implementing a trauma systems therapy model in their practice. CFSA has also worked with the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) to train over 440 DC educators in trauma systems therapy.²²

In addition, over the past four years the DC Public Schools’ (DCPS) Mental Health and Behavioral Support Services team has re-evaluated the mental health services provided by its social workers and significantly increased the number of clinical services they provide.²³

In 2011, DCPS began piloting several practices and now has expanded its programs to offer five evidence-based treatments. Two of these specifically focus on children experiencing trauma: Cognitive Behavioral Intervention for Trauma in Schools (CBITS) and Structured Psychotherapy for Students Responding to Chronic Stress (SPARCS).

What Do Trauma-Sensitive Schools Have in Common?

While schools have varied in how they have designed and implemented strategies to address trauma based on the particular characteristics of their students and community, they have certain elements in common.

The Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative of Massachusetts has identified the following characteristics as essential components of trauma-sensitive schools:²⁴

- ***All school staff understand how trauma impacts learning and are “bought into” the need for a school-wide approach.*** All staff in a school – including educators, administrators, counselors, nurses, mental health providers, cafeteria workers, bus drivers, custodians, athletic coaches and paraprofessionals – must understand how common trauma is and how it affects children academically, emotionally and behaviorally.
- ***All school staff embrace a shared sense of responsibility for helping every child succeed.*** The responsibility is not on teachers to “fix” challenging students by themselves, but rather the goal is to examine how the school community as a whole can support every child to feel safe and to participate in the school community.
- ***School staff create an environment where all children feel safe – physically, emotionally, socially and academically.*** Trauma causes children to feel unsafe. Addressing a child’s physical and emotional safety is key to helping them feel safe in the classroom. Creating a sense of safety in this context means not only securing the physical safety of the school but also setting structures and limits that create consistency and predictability for children who fear uncertainty.
- ***Student trauma is addressed in holistic ways – not in a singular program.*** To thrive, a school must take into account a child’s need for strong relationships with adults and peers, ability to self-regulate behaviors, success in academic and nonacademic areas, and physical and emotional health and well-being. This cannot be achieved through a stand-alone program.
- ***School staff explicitly make children feel like a part of the school community and provide children multiple opportunities to practice newly developing social and behavioral skills.*** Children who have been traumatized need to feel connected to the school community to be able to thrive in school – however, these children are also most likely to reject attempts to engage them. By creating a culture of acceptance and respect and working to explicitly foster positive connections between staff, students and families, schools increase the opportunities for children to practice newly developing social, behavioral and academic skills.
- ***School leaders have their pulse on what’s happening within their halls and outside of their walls and can respond quickly to needs of students and the surrounding community.*** The school must be prepared and able to adapt to escalating trauma in a child’s life (such as becoming suddenly homeless or removed from a parent’s home), or traumatic events happening in a neighborhood (such as a local shooting).
- ***Schools should view suspension and expulsion as a disciplinary option of last resort.*** The school must develop approaches to decrease the behaviors that lead to suspensions. At the same time, schools should utilize alternative disciplinary practices that promote future positive outcomes rather than punitive methods that do little to change student behavior, break the bonds between students and their schools, and lead to further isolation. Suspension and expulsion should be rare.

Individual public and public charter schools also may offer other programs that could serve as city-wide models. However, there is no centralized source of information on the programs and services offered by individual schools to address trauma, nor is there publicly available information on their effectiveness. Now is the perfect time for the District to ensure all of our schools are putting these pieces and resources together in a comprehensive manner to serve the unique needs of their student populations with trauma.

As the District evaluates its approach to building trauma-sensitive schools, there are many states that we can look to as models. For example:

Massachusetts

Massachusetts has emerged as a national leader in creating trauma-sensitive schools. Recently passed legislation supports schools in developing a plan to foster a safe, positive, healthy and inclusive learning environment that promotes student well-being and trauma sensitivity.²⁵ Through a grant process, schools are funded to develop trauma-sensitive training for school staff. Teachers and administrators in schools that received grants and developed action plans describe many changes, big and small, that quickly led to measurable success. For example, staff make sure to greet every child every morning by name or with a handshake and touch on the shoulder.²⁶ In some schools, each day begins with a morning meeting focused on community building.²⁷ Another school developed a pass for students to request if they needed

time to calm down. As part of this system, students would go to the office and be given a simple task to do to help them calm down.²⁸ This new approach dramatically reduced the use of suspensions and improved test scores.²⁹ One school reported that office discipline referrals were down 75 percent two years after implementing their school action plan.³⁰

Washington State

Through Washington State's Attachment, Regulation and Competency (ARC) program, schools integrate socio-emotional learning and trauma knowledge into classroom practices, integrate community behavioral health service providers into schools, and develop policies and practices to help teachers learn trauma-informed practices.³¹ School staff are regularly trained on the impact of trauma on learning and taught tools to address student behavior and learning.³² New teachers are screened during the application process to determine whether their teaching style would foster the trauma-informed practices of the school.³³ After implementing this new approach, one school had a 90 percent decrease in school suspensions and significantly improved grades, test scores and graduation rates.³⁴

San Francisco

San Francisco has implemented a trauma-sensitive schools' program since 2008.³⁵ The program relies on prevention and intervention, and operates on three levels: student, caregiver and school system.³⁶ Children attend classroom presentations on how to calm down under stress, and individual and

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group psychotherapy is available in schools.³⁷ Caregivers can attend workshops and support groups, and school staff can receive trauma-focused professional development.³⁸ Policies and procedures in the school district are examined through a trauma lens, which can mean, for instance, finding alternatives to suspension.³⁹ After four years of implementation, the schools saw an 89 percent decrease in suspensions.⁴⁰ Schools also saw a 27 percent decrease in absences.⁴¹ ■

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DC SCHOOLS

A policy agenda that addresses the issue of trauma at the District, agency and school level, and engages the broader community, is urgently needed to create schools in DC where all children feel safe and supported to learn. While schools may vary in their interventions to fit their unique characteristics, DC public and public charter schools should adopt certain elements common to all trauma-sensitive schools. In addition, DC laws, policies and funding mechanisms must prioritize creating safe and supportive schools. Children's Law Center urges the District to make all schools trauma sensitive by:

1. ***Creating a position to coordinate schools' efforts.*** Similar to the District-wide Anti-Bullying Coordinator, the District should create a position to coordinate the trauma-sensitive initiatives throughout DC schools. The Coordinator should review each school's policy. In addition, the Coordinator should connect individual schools to resources, training and support for school staff.
2. ***Adopting a model trauma-sensitive schools policy that can be tailored by DCPS and the Public Charter Schools*** to fit their student populations. The District also should require every individual school campus to create their own plan.
3. ***Creating a grant program to support trauma-sensitive schools.*** OSSE, or another agency, should distribute the funds and provide technical assistance to trauma-sensitive schools.
4. ***Requiring all Local Education Agencies to train and provide professional development on trauma for all staff that students come into contact with during the school day,*** including educators, administrators, counselors, social workers, school nurses, school psychologists, school-based mental health providers, bus drivers, dedicated aides, custodians, cafeteria workers and security guards. This professional development should begin with understanding the prevalence of childhood trauma in DC and how it impacts children in the school.
5. ***Requiring all Local Education Agencies to screen potential teachers, administrators and staff when hiring new positions to strengthen the trauma-sensitive school model in DC.*** Newly hired school staff must understand the importance of applying a trauma-sensitive model to educating students in DC.
6. ***Increasing access to information about trauma-sensitive plans in schools.*** OSSE should collect all DC public school and public charter schools' trauma-sensitive school plans and, in real-time throughout the year, make this information available to the public on an easy-to-access website. Once the schools have begun to implement their policies, OSSE should develop a mechanism to evaluate outcomes on an individual school and system-wide level and issue an annual report on progress.

ENDNOTES

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