Recognizing the effects of trauma besetting many of their students, many states, districts, and schools are revamping approaches to making schools physically and psychologically safer. Many of the steps to establish safer, more supportive schools are aligned with those needed to create trauma-responsive schools. State boards of education are well-positioned to caution school systems against focusing exclusively on “hardening” schools through physical safety and security measures and promoting a balanced approach, which embeds comprehensive, trauma-responsive mental health policies and practices in school safety planning.

Child Trends estimates that nearly half of all children in the United States have experienced at least one adverse childhood experience, or ACE (see article, page 11). Attention to these children’s needs pays off in a number of ways. Trauma-responsive schools increase students’ coping skills and graduation rates, and they improve attendance, classroom behavior, and emotional and physical safety.\(^1\) Additional school outcomes of interest include decreased incidents of physical aggression, office discipline referrals, and out-of-school suspensions. Notably, schools that demonstrate a clear commitment to

Comprehensive mental health support makes students safer and better able to learn.

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The foundation of all these components is a comprehensive school mental health system. Such a system requires collaboration between schools and the community, in partnership with students and families, to provide a multitiered system of supports and services (MTSS). The MTSS promotes positive school climate, social emotional learning, and mental health. It also assesses and addresses the social and environmental factors that affect mental health, including public policies and social norms that shape student mental health outcomes (figure 1).

Many states, districts, and schools employ an MTSS approach toward instructional or behavioral interventions at varying levels of intensity. An MTSS for mental health offers an array of health promotion, prevention, early intervention, and treatment services to meet the needs of all students. A trauma-responsive MTSS integrates services and supports for students and staff with particular attention to supporting trauma-affected staff and students.

The number of tiers in an MTSS can vary, though many districts employ three:
Universal services and supports (tier 1) are mental health–related activities, including promotion of positive social, emotional, and behavioral skills and wellness, designed to support the mental health of all students regardless of whether they are at risk for mental health problems. These activities can be implemented schoolwide, at grade level, or in the classroom.

Selective services and supports (tier 2) are provided for groups of students identified through needs assessments and school teaming processes as being at risk for a given concern or problem. When problems are identified early and supports put in place, problems can be eliminated or reduced.

Indicated services and supports (tier 3) are designed to meet the unique needs of individual students who are already displaying mental-health concerns, problematic behavior, or significant functional impairment. Sometimes these supports are referred to as mental health “interventions” or “intensive services.”

An effective MTSS is built on strong family-school-community partnerships and relies on professional development and supports for staff to ensure their competence in supporting student mental health and fostering their own well-being. MTSS also allows for practices to support target populations, such as trauma-exposed youth. Trauma-responsive school frameworks are increasingly adopting MTSS as a foundation for trauma interventions across the continuum of mental health supports. Figure 1 also shows how trauma-responsive programming maps to the tiers, including several evidence-based interventions developed by the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, listed below in the resources section.

Evidence for Trauma-Responsive Approaches

Strong evidence supports a multicomponent approach to creating trauma-responsive schools. School staff that receive professional development on trauma, ACEs, and stress demonstrate increased understanding of trauma and increase their use of trauma-informed practices in the school and classroom. As yet, limited evidence ties these training outcomes to student-level improvements, which may reflect the challenges of generalizing training knowledge to teaching practices. In general, research shows that collaborative, sustained professional learning is more likely to be effective and directly related to and integrated into teachers’ daily practices.

Efforts to ensure that training translates to classroom practice include “reflection-in-action” approaches that allow educators to practice with real-life scenarios, receive coaching from master teachers, and refine skills as they learn from mistakes. These approaches have been augmented with technological advances, including web-mediated online coaching and simulations that allow staff to practice talking with virtual students experiencing trauma-related distress.

Implementing the components of trauma responsiveness in schools has demonstrated positive effects on students’ daily functioning, including academic success. Schools with positive school climate and integrated social emotional learning (SEL) are more likely than comparison schools to achieve higher standards of school safety, including less bullying (verbal, physical, cyber), less student isolation, more positive peer and teacher-student relationships, and less weapon threat and use on school campuses.

Students who participate in SEL programs not only demonstrate improvements in self- and social awareness, decision-making capacity, and relationship skills, but also in academic outcomes, including standardized testing.

Restorative justice approaches, which redirect school discipline practices toward relationship-based accountability and reduced punitive measures, also demonstrate positive outcomes. Schools that employ restorative policies and practices demonstrate improvements in attendance and academics as well as a significant reduction in exclusionary discipline.

Shifts in Policy

Recent federal and state policies offer state and district education leaders opportunities to advance trauma-responsive programming. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) also offers significant opportunity to increase access to comprehensive school mental health services and flexibility to develop policies and programming that address trauma. In February 2018, the U.S. House of Representatives unanimously approved H. Res. 443, a resolution recognizing the importance of trauma-informed care within schools with positive school climate and integrated social emotional learning (SEL) are more likely to achieve higher standards of school safety.
federal programs and agencies. In addition to designating a national trauma awareness month and trauma-informed awareness day, the resolution cites trauma-informed efforts in nine states: California, Florida, Illinois, Massachusetts, Missouri, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Washington, and Wisconsin. These statewide initiatives to address trauma include new laws to promote trauma-informed approaches and cross-sector collaboration on policies to reduce childhood trauma.

State legislatures have been incorporating language on trauma-informed systems and ACEs in recent bills. A 2017 scan by the National Conference of State Legislatures revealed close to 40 bills in 18 states with language on ACEs and 20 approved statutes in 15 states that referenced ACEs and trauma-informed policies and practices. These bills and statutes promote an array of practices, including trauma screening, staff training and professional development, and creating safe and supportive environments. Many focus on the education system. An Illinois law requires social and emotional screening at school entry. The Massachusetts state legislature established a grant program for schools implementing trauma-informed practices (box 1).

Policy and Practice Recommendations

States that have not yet begun initiatives to address childhood trauma can foster trauma-responsive schools through policies and legislation that support school and district leaders’ efforts to do the following:

- implement SEL programming across all grades;
- institute strategies and supports to promote staff self-care and well-being and to address secondary traumatic stress that arises from dealing with trauma-affected children;
- provide professional development on adversity, trauma, and toxic stress;
- establish a full continuum of mental and behavioral health supports, including universal screening for mental health concerns that incorporates an assessment of social determinants of mental health;
- incorporate evidence-based mental health promotion, prevention, and intervention activities, including for students experiencing traumatic stress;
- strive toward national standards for appropriate numbers of school psychologists, school social workers, school counselors, and school nurses; and
- establish memoranda of understanding with community mental health providers to complement mental health services and supports offered by school staff.

Resources

Several organizations offer support for states, districts, and schools in doing this work.

- The Framework for Safe and Successful Schools offers policy recommendations to support effective school safety and best practices. It is a joint effort of the American School Counselor Association, National Association of School Psychologists, School Social Work Association of America, National Association of School Resource

Box 1. State Examples

Several states have established frameworks for trauma-responsive schools. For example, the Massachusetts Safe and Supportive Schools program provides grants to schools to establish and implement trauma-informed practices and to train leadership to foster safe and supportive school cultures. The Washington State Compassionate Schools Initiative offers a blueprint for establishing trauma-responsive schools that promote compassion and resiliency among staff and students. State education agencies in Illinois, Massachusetts, and Wisconsin house a repository of trauma-responsive schools resources.
Emotional Learning promotes an integrated approach to academics and SEL for preK-12. Their resources include background, research, and implementation tools to support states, districts, and schools.

1 Nathalya Verbitsky-Savitz et al., “Preventing and Mitigating the Effects of ACEs by Building Community Capacity and Resilience: APPI Cross-Site Evaluation Findings” (Washington, DC: Mathematica Policy Research, 2016);
3 The free self-assessment comprises key domains of trauma-responsive schools and districts. It can be downloaded from www.theSHAPEsystem.com/trauma.
12 Fronius et al., “Restorative Justice in US Schools.”
13 Changing Minds: Preventing and Healing Childhood Trauma State Policy Guide” (San Francisco: Futures Without Violence, 2018).