

# A Safe Haven

## A trauma-sensitive school can be the hub of a vibrant, supportive community

By Susan Cole

Every school has students who have lived with trauma. Ryan Powers, former principal of the Baker School in Brockton, Massachusetts, describes his experiences with “Bobby,” a student who had come to the school after having fled with his mother to a battered women’s shelter. Bobby had spent much of his time at a previous school either in the office or suspended.

“When Bobby first came to us, he constantly pushed the limits, was noncompliant, and had great difficulty with transitions,” Powers says. “What he didn’t expect was that we had worked hard to understand the role of trauma in learning and to use this knowledge

to change the culture and structure of our school.” The school worked as a team with Bobby and his mother to understand his difficulties with trust and relationships, and to help him calm down so that he could learn and make friends.

“We made sure everyone understood how to respond to him,” Powers continues. “We referred his mom to community partners so that the family and Bobby could get the outside supports and services they needed.”

Fast-forward to fifth grade: Bobby was not suspended once and seldom visited the office. He was achieving academically because he was in the classroom and available to learn. “His success would not have been possible if the schoolwide environment [had not been] sensitive to his trauma-related needs and equipped to respond,” says Powers.

Now, as assistant superintendent of the 5,500-student Bridgewater-Raynham Public Schools, Powers’ role is to ensure that the whole district understands the relationship between trauma and learning and the resources and supports children need. “We know [creating trauma-sensitive schools is] not going to be an easy task, but it is a task that is worth committing to.”

### Creating Partnerships

The Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative, a joint program of Massachusetts Advocates for Children and Harvard Law School, has worked with schools, families, and students nationwide for more than 25 years to learn how schools can be welcoming, trauma-sensitive environments that encourage success for all students. What it has discovered is that any collaboration that addresses a student's needs beyond the walls of the school needs to start with the school itself.

Students often enter schools bringing the impact of traumatic experiences with them. The Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative's goal is to support schools in the creation of environments like that of the Baker School, where the staff works together as a team on behalf of all families and integrates the services of outside providers seamlessly into the fabric of the school experience.

Creating partnerships with outside agencies requires that schools create *collaborative*, trauma-sensitive cultures for adults and children that welcome outside supports. Everyone involved should understand the impact trauma has on learning.

Likewise, all leadership and staff must recognize that every classroom has students who live with trauma, and that these experiences can affect learning, behavior, and relationships in the classroom. The principal, regular and special education teachers, lunchroom personnel, custodians, counselors,

psychologists, and support staff must be on the same page.

Not all children are traumatized by events in their lives, and we will never know the full extent of the challenges our students face. But recognizing that the problem is widespread and that adversity can cause a trauma response that might impact learning, behavior, and relationships at school helps school staff see students in new and empathetic ways.

Successful wraparound means sharing this understanding with community partners—and learning together—so that they can join in supporting the school's goals and their students' success.

### Beyond Understanding

Taking time to understand the impact of trauma on learning is just the beginning. Without a plan to integrate this understanding deeply into all operations of the school, staff can get overwhelmed. Before developing an action plan, staff can prepare by reviewing the following attributes of a trauma-sensitive school and deciding together whether they can make these attributes a regular part of the way the school is run:

- **Safety is central.** It is important that students feel safe everywhere: in the classroom, on the playground, in the hallways, in the cafeteria, on the bus, in the gym, and on the walk to and from school. Physical safety is clearly important, but

so is social and emotional safety. Also critically important is that children feel a sense of academic safety—the school should be safe enough for the student to be comfortable making mistakes, rather than covering up gaps through distracting behavior or withdrawal.

- **The school supports the whole child.** This includes supporting students' relationships with adults and peers; self-regulation of emotions, behaviors, and attention; academic and nonacademic success; and health and well-being. Researchers have found that children who are supported in these key areas can overcome great adversity. When outside partners agree to support individual students in these four domains, there is a shared vocabulary that helps schools and partners work together.
- **The school builds explicit connections with students and parents.** All students need to feel that school is a place where they belong—where they can feel free to participate in everything the school has to offer. Equally important is creating a culture of acceptance and respect, where everyone is seen as having something significant to offer and is encouraged to contribute.
- **Teachers and staff share responsibility for all students.** A trauma-sensitive school moves away from the typical paradigm in which classroom teachers have primary responsibility for their children, and toward a paradigm based on shared responsibility, teamwork, and ongoing, effective communication throughout the school. Trauma-sensitive schools help all staff—as well as mental health providers, mentors, and others from outside the school—feel they are a part of a strong and supportive professional community that shares responsibility for each and every child and works as a team to address the impact of trauma on learning.
- **Teachers and staff proactively anticipate change and disruption.** Every school staff does its best to maintain equilibrium, but disruptions to equilibrium, such as acts of violence, are not predictable. A trauma-sensitive school recognizes that people might be thrown off-balance and prepares for these reactions. It views them as opportunities to stop and reflect on the school's goals and successes, then moves forward to accommodate new needs that have arisen.

### Action Planning

Once there is an understanding of, and buy-in for, the use of trauma-sensitive approaches to address urgent needs in the school, it is time to take action. Learning together, coalition-building, identifying priorities, action planning, and evaluation are part of what well-run schools already do. What's different at a trauma-sensitive school is that new awareness about trauma's impact on learning becomes a primary motivator for taking action.

The process begins with an individual's or small group's sense of urgency about the need for trauma-sensitive approaches. Through additional learning and reflective conversations, this sense of urgency grows into a deeper awareness of the pervasive role trauma plays at the school and how addressing it can improve student accomplishment. From this foundation, a small coalition can engage the entire school in trauma-sensitive action planning.

The key is for the staff to agree on what is most urgent to address in a trauma-sensitive way, and how to take on the tasks. Typically, the school does this work on its own and shares the action plan with its community partners, allowing them to join in tweaking it so that everyone can work together effectively on shared goals and objectives.

### Bringing Outsiders In

As the school becomes a cohesive professional community, it can welcome outside providers to integrate their services into the school. Partners can assist the school in making its environment trauma-sensitive and help individual students benefit from the opportunity to belong, make friends, have relationships with adults, engage in academic and nonacademic activities, and feel connected and safe.

As the school and partners work together toward shared goals and values, school-based and community providers must include the goal of success at school in their work with individual students. This requires collaborating with educators and families while respecting confidentiality. A regular process and time for communication between school staff and community-based providers can help calibrate strategies and track student progress toward the common goal of success at school. □

Susan Cole is director of the Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative.



### READ MORE

The Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative's (TLPI) "Helping Traumatized Children Learn" Vols. 1 and 2 offer further details on its inquiry-based process for creating trauma-sensitive schools.

TLPI's website contains tools for getting started, an American Institutes for Research study of five demonstration schools engaged in the process, and details on the results of a Boston University study of the schools after three years that can be downloaded free of charge; visit [www.traumasensitiveschools.org](http://www.traumasensitiveschools.org).

## ABCs OF TRAUMA

Trauma can affect students' learning in three primary areas:

**A) Academics.** Learning to read, write, engage in discussion, and solve math problems requires an ability to trust, organize, comprehend, remember, and produce work. Another prerequisite for achieving classroom competency is the ability to self-regulate attention, emotions, and behavior. Not surprisingly, trauma resulting from overwhelming experiences has the power to disturb a student's language acquisition, attention, memory, understanding of cause and effect, and other areas necessary for learning development.

**B) Behavior.** Unfortunately, many traumatized children develop behavioral coping mechanisms that can frustrate educators or produce exasperated reprisals—reactions that both strengthen the child's expectations of confrontation and danger and reinforce their negative self-image. Many effects of trauma on classroom behavior originate from the same problems that create academic difficulties: inability to self-regulate emotions, distorted perceptions of the behaviors and feelings of others, and inability to process social cues and convey feelings in an appropriate manner.

**C) Relationships.** Children's struggles with traumatic stress and their insecure relationships with adults in and out of school can adversely affect their relationships with school personnel and peers. Students might distrust adults and/or fellow students and be generally unsure of the security of the school setting. These students might suffer delays in developing the healthy interpersonal relationships with teachers and peers that they desperately need.

—Susan Cole