

CONVERSATION GUIDE

Trauma-informed Practice

Part 2: Creating Trauma-Sensitive Schools

(with Margaret Casey, Calgary Board of Education)

Creating a safe and supportive learning environment for all students, including students who have experienced trauma, takes an intentional, coordinated, whole-school approach.

Key understandings:

- In a trauma-sensitive school, all students feel safe, welcomed, and supported and addressing trauma's impact on learning is a school-wide daily practice.
- Trauma-informed practice is good for all students and calls for a whole-school approach, while recognizing that there are students who are especially vulnerable.
- A whole-school approach ensures that students who are vulnerable can feel safe and supported across the learning environment, and with all school staff.
- This inquiry-based process enables teamwork, creative problem-solving, coordination and sharing of responsibilities for all learners.
- Key principles of a trauma-informed practice include: safety; trustworthiness and transparency; peer support; collaboration; empowerment, voice and choice; and awareness of cultural, historical and gender issues.
- A flexible framework to promote trauma-informed practice in school includes:
 - leadership to create infrastructure and culture
 - professional development for all staff
 - access to resources and services
 - academic and non-academic strategies that enable all students to learn
 - policies procedures and protocols that sustain the critical elements of trauma-informed practice
 - collaboration with families.
- A trauma-informed approach in schools:
 - creates shared understanding of how trauma impacts learning
 - supports all students to feel safe
 - addresses student needs in holistic ways
 - explicitly connects students to the school community
 - encourages staff to anticipate student needs and adapt the environment.

Supporting Every Student Learning Series

Creating Trauma-sensitive schools

Key understandings (continued)

- A trauma-informed approach is a multi-tiered response-to-intervention approach that promotes behavioural health for all students, prevents problems through early intervention supports, and provides intensive interventions for students with serious or acute needs.
- There are a number of evidence-based whole school approaches that guide and support trauma-informed practice, including:
 - positive behaviour supports
 - social emotional learning
 - mindfulness practices
 - circle of courage approach
 - restorative practices
 - bullying prevention strategies
 - comprehensive school health approach.
- Rethinking disciplinary policies is part of a trauma-informed approach, particularly policies around suspensions and expulsions.
- When suspensions and expulsions are the default response to misbehaviour, students do not feel safe and supported, the likelihood of academic failure is increased, and other educational goals are undermined.
- Trauma-informed consequences are developmentally appropriate, consider timing and context, and offer opportunities to learn from experience.
- Trauma-informed practice creates a common language, shared understanding, and enables cross-sector collaboration.
- Resiliency and hope is an important aspect of this approach; staff need to feel they can make a positive difference.
- Staff self-care is also an important component of trauma-informed practice. Secondary traumatic stress (sometimes called compassion fatigue or ‘parallel process’) can interfere with teaching excellence and staff well-being.
- Successfully implementing a trauma-informed approach relies on leadership, teamwork and an in-house team of champions.
- A trauma-informed approach is based on the understanding that safety should be the first priority in the school environment. If students don’t feel safe, they are not learning.

Supporting Every Student Learning Series

Creating Trauma-sensitive schools

Questions for reflection and discussion:

- What expertise and resources are available at the school and jurisdictional level to support implementation of trauma-informed practices? What expertise and resources are available in the community?
- What are some alternatives to suspensions that would be more trauma-informed and have more positive results for students?
- What are some ways we can promote staff self-care?
- How could using trauma-informed practice change relationships between students; students and school staff; school staff and community partners; and school staff and families?

For more information:

- See Alberta Education's [resources on trauma-informed practices](#), including a [video](#), [conversation guide](#), and [external links](#).