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Healing School Systems

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This practitioner brief is one in a series highlighting concrete ways that leaders can increase educational equity by building supportive learning environments that meet all students' social and emotional needs. The introductory brief to this series suggests that changes at three levels of the educational system are needed to promote students' social and emotional well-being: (1) the structural and policy level; (2) the level of educators' well-being and capabilities; and (3) the level of specific strategies that strengthen students' social and emotional well-being.[1] This brief focuses on the first and second levels: how school districts can become healing spaces for all by reevaluating system-wide policies and structures and building educators' capabilities and supporting their well-being.

Introduction

School systems throughout the United States need collective healing. The COVID-19 pandemic sent a shock through the nation resulting in many families experiencing job loss, food insecurity, increased financial and emotional stress, and mental health issues for the first time, while exacerbating such issues for many other families who already experienced them.[2] And as schools reopened after extended closures, teachers reported being more stressed than they were before the pandemic,[3] highlighting the cumulative effects of a year of remote and hybrid instruction, COVID-19 variants upending in-person instruction, the need to address students' unfinished learning while also attending to their social and emotional needs,[4] and severe staffing shortages burdening an already taxed workforce. The pandemic also revealed systemic inadequacies that meant many districts did not have the resources necessary to appropriately deal with chronic stress and trauma in their schools.[5]

This brief describes the experiences of three educational systems that are striving to address the adversity that affects their school communities. It begins by describing how adversity alters human development and learning and the opportunity schools have to mitigate those effects for students of all backgrounds. It then describes how these educational systems are recognizing the presence of chronic stress and trauma in their staff members and students, and in response adopting system-wide policies and practices that promote healing from harmful experiences. These policies and practices can include:

- Revising student codes of conduct so that they not only acknowledge the root causes of behavior but also provide healing resources to help students address them

- Providing professional development to educators that emphasizes the science of learning and human development

- Providing staff members with resources for their social and emotional well-being

- Engaging in classroom-based practices that help children regulate their emotions and behavior

The brief is based on lessons learned from conversations with the state and district leaders described in Box 1.

BOX 1 State and District Leaders Consulted for This Brief

Alaska

- **SHARON FISHEL,** Education Specialist II, Alaska Department of Education and Early Development
- **PATRICK SIDMORE,** Healthy Schools Specialist, Alaska Department of Health and Social Services
- **HEATHER COULEHAN,** Social and Emotional Learning Coordinator, Alaska Initiative for Community Engagement, Association of Alaska School Boards

District of Columbia Public Schools

- **MICHAEL LAMB,** Deputy Chief, Learning and Development Sciences

Chicago Public Schools

- **MAURICE SWINNEY,** former Chief Equity Officer
- **HELLEN ANTONOPOULOS,** former Executive Director, Office of Social Emotional Learning
- **BRIAN THOMPSON,** Lead Title IX Field Specialist, Office of Social Emotional Learning

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The Science of Adversity and Resilience

Stress is an aspect of everyday functioning, activating the body's stress-response system in a healthy, positive way by mildly increasing heart rate, blood pressure, and stress hormones. Yet when people experience acute or chronically toxic and stressful environments, their bodies can overactivate their stress-response systems, meaning that they become hypervigilant to their surroundings. Though the stress response is an adaptive process, over time, being in a frequent "fight, flight, or freeze"

state—the body's toxic-stress response—can have a cumulative toll on a person's physical and mental health that diminishes the person's ability to regulate thoughts, emotions, and behavior.[6]

Many people in the United States experience adverse circumstances or events in their childhoods. Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) include sources of stress such as witnessing domestic violence, physical or emotional abuse and neglect, or caregiver mental illness.[7] More recently, the definition of ACEs has also been expanded by some practitioners and national data initiatives to recognize that ACEs can arise from lived social conditions such as witnessing community violence or experiencing overt racism, bullying, or microaggressions.[8] ACEs can be experienced as traumas when children are exposed to situations that overwhelm their ability to cope with what they have experienced and activate their bodies' toxic-stress responses. An ACE that a child perceives as traumatic may be a single event, a series of events, or a chronic source of stress. Whether an ACE is traumatic or causes traumatic stress to a child is highly dependent on the individual.[9]

Research on the effects of ACEs is especially relevant to schooling. Empirical literature finds that in addition to ACEs posing a serious threat to individuals' long-term well-being,[10] children who experience ACEs may also have difficulty regulating their behavior, engage in aggressive acts,[11] or experience language delays, learning disabilities, and low executive functioning skills (the skills that allow people to concentrate, plan, remember and complete assignments, and learn from past experiences).[12] Exposure to adverse events has been linked to poor academic performance as demonstrated by grades and standardized assessment scores.[13]

ACEs were already widespread before the pandemic; in 2017-2018, approximately one in three U.S. children were reported to have experienced one ACE in their lifetimes, and about 14 percent had experienced two or more.[14] Yet ACEs are not equally prevalent among children from different racial or ethnic groups. Some are more vulnerable to experiencing ACEs due to economic inequality, systemic racism and discrimination, or community violence: 51 percent of Hispanic children and 61 percent of non-Hispanic Black children had experienced at least one ACE in their lifetimes, compared with 40 percent of non-Hispanic White and 23 percent of non-Hispanic Asian children.[15] ACEs are also more common among children living in poverty, those living in rural areas, older children, and those with special needs.[16] Experiencing multiple ACEs has a compounding effect: It is estimated that children with four or more ACEs are 32 times more likely to be identified as having learning or behavior problems than children with no ACEs,[17] increasing their chances of being classified for special education. The disproportionate experience of ACEs is one factor that contributes to unequal outcomes observed across students within schools. And when students returned to classrooms after the extended school closures of the COVID-19 pandemic, they returned with greater mental health needs, behavior problems, and increased displays of and exposure to violence,[18] signaling that ACEs had grown more prevalent during the pandemic.[19]

Adversity and the Role of Schools

Experiencing adversity in childhood does not always result in negative outcomes. How a child responds to an adverse experience depends on whether that child's internal competencies (for example, self-confidence and self-regulation) and external resources (for example, supportive rela-

tionships) are adequate for coping.[20] The single most common factor for children who demonstrate resilience in the face of adversity is having at least one stable and committed relationship with a parent, caregiver, or other adult.[21] Strong, supportive relationships can buffer against harmful effects of trauma or toxic environments by restoring children's stress-response systems to a steady state.[22] Schools have the opportunity to be a buffering context for the adversity that children face outside of school in their homes and communities when schools are filled with caring adults who help children process their stress and trauma, nurture trusting relationships, and cultivate a sense of safety and respect for children of all backgrounds.[23] When the conditions at school are optimal and children feel physically and emotionally safe, all are capable to flourish and engage in academic learning.

One challenge to schools becoming such spaces is that some school systems assume that only external stress and trauma influence how students show up to school, without acknowledging that some students are treated negatively by some of their peers and the adults at school because of differences such as those based on race, income, gender, sexual identity, home language, immigration status, religion, and ability, among others.[24] As a result, these students experience school cultures and climates where they feel unheard, unseen, excluded, or unsupported by peers, school staff members, and policies.[25] While school should be joyful, full of new experiences, friendships, and learning, some students experience school as an emotionally cold place of bullying and disrespect, with inequitable policies and practices that result in adults being overly punitive with discipline and exhibiting low expectations of students. These experiences can erode students' trust in the adults at school and ultimately affect their ability to learn.[26]

A Shift to Healing-Centered, Trauma-Engaged Systems

> *"When we talk about wellness, healing, and social-emotional learning, we're really going back to what should have never been removed in the first place. Which is around human connection, empathy, relational trust, play, fun. What has happened ... is that the academic-progress framing has been used to say that we just need to fill kids' minds with information. And then they're supposed to do well on a test, then graduate, and then we hope that they go to college. Then we see that they don't persist. We know that outcomes are racialized, which means that there is something that we're missing about people's cultures, backgrounds, and experiences that need to be part of the fabric of what it means to provide young people with a high-quality educational experience."*
>
> *Maurice Swinney, Chicago Public Schools*

The pervasive nature of academic disparities between groups of students has long been documented.[27] To address these disparities, educational systems have spent much of the past 60 years on reforms to increase academic standards, increase instructional time, promote student-level aca-

demic programs, and add greater academic accountability to teacher-evaluation systems—all with the aim of closing academic achievement gaps between groups of students, but largely with modest success.[28] This brief posits that for educational systems to address the disparities in students' academic achievement, they must address disparities in social and emotional well-being while maintaining a strong focus on high academic standards. And addressing disparities in students' social and emotional well-being means understanding that inequities in school policies and structures and in students' experiences with the adults within the system are also at fault.[29]

Drawing on the science of learning and human development, educational leaders are seeking ways to integrate approaches that develop the whole child, elevating the child's social and emotional development and well-being so they are considered as important as academic development.[30] In particular, they are increasingly aiming to put in place policies and practices that provide students affected by adversity with the support they need from educators once they walk into the school building.[31] Doing so requires not only understanding how stress and trauma affect behavior and learning (being "trauma-informed"), but changing school policies, procedures, practices, and support services so that they actively acknowledge trauma as a possible root cause and promote collective healing (being "trauma-engaged").[32] Examples of trauma-engaged practices that promote healing can include student-created classroom norms, calming areas with soothing materials where students can deescalate big emotions, activities that promote mindfulness such as meditation or art, restorative circles that can be used when conflict arises,[33] or revisions of zero-tolerance disciplinary policies that resort to suspensions and expulsions.

> *"Staff need to be engaged in what they are doing. You can know everything, you can be informed, you can be sensitive to trauma, but unless you are actually changing your practice, it's not going to make a difference."*
> *Sharon Fishel, Alaska Department of Education and Early Development*

Several innovative program models have worked to implement whole-school approaches to trauma and chronic stress in schools. Some have been locally initiated and defined, though they draw on existing models for their frameworks and principles (for example, Compassionate Schools or the Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative's Trauma-Sensitive Schools).[34] Others have used structured, whole-school, multitiered models such as Healthy Environments and Response to Trauma in Schools (HEARTS), which provides external, standardized professional development, coaching, and guided support.[35]

Most examples incorporating trauma-engaged practices are observed in single schools or small clusters of them, however, not whole districts. A challenge with implementing these practices in a small cluster of schools is that they then may not achieve enough depth or breadth to address the level of need across an entire district. And as mentioned above, the need for supportive strategies has increased since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.[36] Recognizing this increasing need, some districts are shifting away from reactive, student-level interventions and exclusion in response to challenging student behavior, and toward whole-system approaches focused on healing, prevention, and cultivating psychologically safe and supportive environments for all.

Specifically, a whole-system *healing-centered*, *trauma-engaged* approach moves beyond viewing trauma as an individual experience and recognizes that there is collective trauma affecting the entire school community, and thus, a need for collective healing. As described above, schools have historically been and often continue to be places that do not buffer the stress students bring to school from the outside but instead, compound or cause chronic stress and trauma for some students. Districts making these kinds of changes are also aiming to make schools into places that promote resilience by building up students' strengths and assets, so they are viewed as more than children who have experienced adversity and trauma. In the words of Shawn Ginwright, the pioneer of healing-centered engagement, the goal of healing-centered, trauma-engaged systems is to shift educators' mindsets to ask children not, "What's wrong with you?" or "What happened to you?" but rather, "What's right with you?"[37]

As described by leaders in Alaska, a healing-centered, trauma-engaged approach is a system-level orientation that: (1) has policies, procedures, and support services that take into account how trauma may be manifested; (2) builds the capabilities of adults in the system; (3) requires that every adult in the school building has the same understanding of how trauma affects others and learning, and gives them the same tools and strategies to address trauma; (4) is reflective and collaborative; (5) promotes a culture of learning; (6) makes meaning out of the past; (7) aims to prevent problems rather than solely reacting to them; and (8) has *relational leaders* (leaders who are attuned to the web of relationships in the system).[38] Those leaders view it as a culture shift created in partnership with district staff members, teachers, students, parents and caregivers, and community members.[39] They believe that when the educational system makes a priority of supportive relationships among staff members and between staff members and students, schools can become places where students can feel psychologically safe to struggle socially and academically and see others struggle, because those relationships with adults help them build their resilience and coping skills.

> *"A system that takes on a truly healing-centered approach is aware of how its past impact has enabled or prevented healing. It builds trust by not shying away from past challenges and owning its role. Further, a system designed for healing integrates the continuous interrogation of its current policies and practices to determine who is hurt by the status quo, and who is healed or privileged, so that every student can meet their full potential."*
>
> *Michael Lamb, District of Columbia Public Schools*

The Structural and Policy Level

The leaders consulted for this brief recognized that a shift to healing and trauma-engaged work needed to begin with the system. They needed to garner the backing of multiple stakeholders, reevaluate policies and structures, appropriately allocate resources, and track whether new practices were implemented. Their insights align with recommendations from other district leaders on how to develop new district visions that promote equity, the subject of an [earlier brief](#) in this series.[40]

Initiatives or Frameworks to Guide System-Level Change

All three state- and district-level systems featured in this brief developed integrated, system-wide initiatives or frameworks to guide the development of healing-centered, trauma-engaged policies, processes, and practices.

■ In 2019, *Transforming Schools: A Framework for Trauma-Engaged Practice in Alaska* was released as a collaborative project of the Alaska Department of Education and Early Development (DEED), the Association of Alaska School Boards, First Alaskans Institute, the Alaska Afterschool Network, the Alaska Mental Health Board, the Council on Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault, and the Alaska Child Trauma Center (see Box 2).[41] The framework brings together perspectives from Alaskan educators and community members on how to use trauma-engaged approaches to improve social and emotional well-being and academic outcomes for all students. The project not only focuses on adverse childhood and community experiences, but also on the collective strengths and resilience that have shaped the lives of multiple generations of Alaskans.[42]

BOX 2 Alaska's *Transforming Schools* Framework

Transforming Schools: A Framework for Trauma-Engaged Practice in Alaska and its accompanying toolkit provide insight into policies, practices, and shared understandings. They are organized into 11 chapters, titled:

1. Deconstructing Trauma

2. Relationship Building

3. Policy Considerations

4. Planning and Coordination of Schoolwide Efforts

5. Professional Learning

6. Schoolwide Practices and Climate

7. Skill Instruction

8. Support Services

9. Cultural Integration and Community Co-creation

10. Family Partnership

11. Self-Care

■ In December of 2020, in partnership with Turnaround for Children and the DC Education Fund, District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) launched *DCPS Becoming*, a five-year transformation effort to become a whole-child-centered, antiracist school system (see Box 3). The focus is on redesigning policies and practices to address the impact of adversity on student development, building "system capacity" based on the science of learning and human development, and developing strong and resilient student identities, including a sense of belonging and a readiness to face life.[43]

BOX 3 The *DCPS Becoming* Initiative

The *DCPS Becoming* initiative features several priority programs:

- Training in the science of learning and human development

- Revision of systems, policies, and practices

- *Becoming* school and classroom practice tool and video library

- High school redesign

- System champions to shift district-level practices

- School champions to shift school-level practices

- Trauma prevention and recovery teams

■ In March 2021, in partnership with Chicago Beyond and the Children First Fund, Chicago Public Schools released its *Healing-Centered Framework* (see Box 4). There was a common understanding that the district needed to work toward collective healing and wellness, emphasizing how all stakeholders—students, teachers, staff members, administrators and district leaders, families and caregivers, and community partners—have roles to play in their own healing and the healing of others.[44]

To learn more about how two of these systems engaged numerous stakeholders to develop their healing-centered and trauma-engaged frameworks, see a forthcoming brief featuring interviews with state and district leaders from Alaska and Chicago Public Schools.[45]

BOX 4 **Chicago Public Schools' *Healing-Centered Framework***

The Chicago Public Schools *Healing-Centered Framework* identifies four major groups of stakeholders in the district community—"students," "all staff," "schools and school staff," and "families, caregivers, and communities"—as being essential healers and agents in their own healing. The framework describes five core dimensions of healing that apply to each stakeholder group:

1. Education and awareness

2. Skills and strategies

3. Culture and climate

4. Resources

5. Crisis support

To implement the framework, Chicago Public Schools created dedicated working groups to build out 10 healing-centered initiatives, called:

1. Comprehensive healing training sequence

2. Healing environments

3. The community-partner network

4. Trauma-engaged teacher leaders

5. Parent and caregiver support

6. Staff wellness

7. Healing-centered measurement

8. Policies and protocols

9. Targeted interventions

10. Mental health framework

"We have a lot of academic visions, but we haven't had one that's really anchored in relational trust in a way that the healing-centered framework is laying out for us. We're now using the framework to course-correct.... And we need to make sure that the framework has a policy to match it because if not, people will look at this framework and say, aww, that's cute, but not do the necessary work as to what happens with students in [school] buildings. If the policy still says to suspend the student [based on the student's behavior], people can disregard the framework and still suspend them. What we're trying to do is disrupt all of that. You have to disrupt the practices, and the policies, and the protocols to get that alignment and academic progress."

Maurice Swinney, Chicago Public Schools

Reviewing District Policies

In recent years, leaders in Chicago Public Schools and DCPS have been reviewing their district policies (such as those related to discipline, school attendance, report cards, and suicide prevention) to ensure that those policies do not harm certain groups of students disproportionately, and are redesigning them using a trauma-engaged perspective. For example, leaders in Chicago Public Schools reviewed the district's student code of conduct to see whether it is taking students' trauma into account or might be inflicting further trauma. Instead of resorting to suspensions, which have lasting, negative effects on students,[46] the policy now asks staff members to consider the root causes of students' behavior and how adverse experiences or toxic stress may affect that behavior. Going forward, at each annual review, leaders in Chicago Public Schools will continue to examine the policy and will update it based on their understanding of the role adversity plays in student behavior. Importantly, the district is creating accompanying guidelines for how to put policies informed by this new approach into action.

DCPS leaders acknowledged that this type of work will take multiple years, as it can take time to shift district policies across many different departments. So far, the district has already undertaken several efforts: Among other things, it has revised elementary school report cards so that indicators for social and emotional skills focus exclusively on strengths, rather than behavioral indicators that can result in some adults viewing students as problems. It has aligned its grade-promotion and -retention policies with recent research showing that holding students back has a detrimental effect on their long-term outcomes; instead, it is emphasizing the academic and social support struggling students receive before teachers or administrators recommend holding them back a grade.[47] And, like Chicago Public Schools, it has revised its disciplinary policies to focus on restoration and healing when conflict arises, and ensuring that exclusionary practices are the last resort.

In Alaska, the Association of Alaska School Boards drafts and legally vets model policies for local school boards to adopt. When creating and reviewing district-level policies, it aims to promote equity and trauma-engaged practices. For example, the policy related to positive school climate says that "school climate is related to how well students feel connected with others at their school and how comfortable the school setting is for them as a student and for their family.... Students experiencing a positive school climate are more likely to achieve success both academically and socially." The policy states that districts should implement practices that support positive school

environments, including: "appropriate expectations that are implemented in a nondiscriminatory manner, social and emotional supports, trauma-informed practices, culturally responsive education and supports, community and family relationship supports, a positive peer climate, caring adult relationships, a school safety program, and opportunities for student involvement."[48]

Using Data to Track Resources and Implementation

Leaders in Chicago Public Schools highlighted the importance of resource mapping: knowing how the current allocation of resources aligns with current needs. This kind of mapping is critical if leaders want to ensure that communities that have historically received too few resources get enough to meet their needs. Numbers such as the total percentage of teachers in a district trained in trauma-engaged practices do not show districts whether teachers in schools with high needs are receiving the resources that would allow them to serve their students better. Tracking and analyzing metrics on their progress implementing trauma-engaged practices commensurate with need makes leaders in Chicago Public Schools better able to identify gaps in resources, create action plans to deliver resources, and work with community partners to ensure that resources are distributed appropriately to achieve the effects they desire.

Leaders in Alaska also realized that school districts need to have tangible benchmarks to track their implementation of trauma-engaged practices. Alaska DEED and the Association of Alaska School Boards are creating "Transforming Schools Milestone Guides" for each of the 11 components in the *Transforming Schools* framework described in Box 2; these guides include rubrics districts and school sites can use to track their progress.[49] The tools describe four levels of action—"preparing," "starting," "applying," and "refining"—and specify which actions are relevant for leaders or staff members. For example, the Deconstructing Trauma component of the framework has an action step focused on reviewing a district's current discipline policies and practices with staff members and families. The *preparing* benchmark includes "identify what the data shows about the district's discipline policies (e.g., the most common reasons for suspensions)," while the *applying* benchmark includes "gather internal and external community resources to respond to discipline issues with opportunities to learn rather than punish."

Similarly, DCPS leaders are creating a guide to school and classroom practices that enables school leaders and staff members to track their progress in implementing the *DCPS Becoming* initiative. Shifts in practices include those related to classroom-based activities, leadership-team structures, trusting relationships, safe and predictable transitions between classes, school-wide systems for student support, and family-engagement strategies. For example, the new practices put more emphasis on relationship building as part of daily morning routines or at the beginning of a new learning activity in the classroom. An accompanying video library will showcase those systems and practices so that all staff members can see them in action and can understand what they look like in all aspects of school functioning.

The Level of Educators' Capabilities and Well-Being

Educators are critical to creating psychologically safe and supportive environments for students. Because the adults in educational systems create the school environment and implement the system's structures and policies, healing-centered change can only occur if (1) educators believe in it, (2) are given the tools and resources they need to create it, and (3) have the emotional resources and time they need to implement it.[50] If teachers and school staff members are burned out, experience individual trauma, or experience trauma from events affecting an entire community (such as community violence or a global pandemic), they will be less able to take healing-centered approaches to interactions, since these approaches require them to be much more attentive to their own needs and the needs of their peers and students.[51] The leaders consulted for this brief therefore said that systems need to both build all staff members' healing-centered capabilities and give them support for their own social and emotional well-being.

Increasing Educators' Capabilities to Heal

> *"It's not just about training teachers—you can't just train a person to solve all the issues—but [Chicago Public Schools] does believe that a lot can be mitigated through strong relationships."*
>
> *Hellen Antonopoulos, Chicago Public Schools*

Professional Development in Healing-Centered, Trauma-Engaged Practices

To ensure that schools are healing and welcoming spaces that do not (re)traumatize students, Chicago Public Schools is working to provide comprehensive and foundational training in trauma-engaged practices to all adults in the system. This training focuses on learning how to understand the prevalence and impact of trauma, recognize when students' challenging behavior may be the result of trauma, understand how trauma affects learning, and create an environment that buffers against the negative effects of trauma. By training all staff members, Chicago Public Schools aims to make it possible for all adults in schools to approach students with the same level of understanding, knowledge, and respect. Having a common understanding also aids teachers and other school-based staff members if they experience the same trauma and difficulties as students arising from events affecting an entire community, such as community violence, a global pandemic, or a natural disaster.[52]

DCPS has also spent the last few years training its staff members in the science of learning and human development and in trauma-engaged practices. Leaders discussed the importance and impact of this training in an earlier brief in this series.[53] The district has furthered these efforts by creating a Whole Child Teacher Academy professional learning community. At the time this brief was written, over one hundred teachers had joined this community to discuss topics related to the science of learning and human development. Many of the same principles covered there are integrated into weekly "LEarning together to Advance our Practice (LEAP)" professional learning meetings in schools, including a four-part training series on trauma-responsive school practices that was offered to all schools and staff members.[54]

Alaska DEED and the Association of Alaska School Boards released their *Transforming Schools* toolkit in 2020, with sections that map onto each component of the *Transforming Schools* framework, (for example, "Deconstructing Trauma" and "School-Wide Practices and Climate"). Its interactive interface allows leaders and other staff members at all levels to engage with different sections and pull up resources relevant to each topic. During the COVID-19 school closures, Alaska DEED and the Association of Alaska School Boards produced a series of webinar sessions on topics also organized according to the framework, which can be viewed at any time for free.[55] Additionally, Alaska DEED hosts 13 online, interactive eLearning courses on trauma-engaged topics such as "overcoming ACEs in Alaskan schools" and "childhood traumatic grief," each of which offers a certificate of training upon completion.[56]

Shifting Mindsets Through Critical Discussions

> *"The [Office of Social and Emotional Learning] values and promotes relational trust and the feeling of connection in classrooms and throughout the school building. The district has already committed to this. But now, codifying it into district-level policies provides an extra level of support. Change in [Chicago] sometimes come through the policies and sometimes comes through the practices, but in both cases, you need to shift people's mindsets. [Chicago Public Schools] has been focused on that for many years, and the healing-centered framework helps to integrate it all together."*
>
> *Hellen Antonopoulos, Chicago Public Schools*

All of the leaders consulted for this brief said that educators must shift their mindsets about students and rethink their role in supporting and creating equitable environments for students. They said that school leaders and staff members need resources, dedicated time, and safe spaces to engage in conversations about how daily microaggressions and teaching practices in classrooms can be sources of chronic stress for students by perpetuating existing biases based on race, home language, sexual identity, gender, immigration status, income, religion, ability, etc. These experiences are detrimental to *all* students' social and emotional well-being.

For example, in Alaska, the Juneau Borough School District offers stipends to teachers to attend book studies on these topics, signaling the value of integrating this work into everyday practice, rather than being something teachers do on their own time.

In DCPS, the equity office launched an Anti-Racist Educator University that provides staff members with shared learning rooted in antiracism to turn the *DCPS Equity* framework into action. Thus far, over 1,000 educators have volunteered to join this effort to make shifts in their individual identities, mindsets, and practices, as well as in the district's collective culture and policies.[57] The district additionally offers online courses and modules so teachers can deepen their learning on these topics and apply them to their classroom practice.

Professional Learning Communities
The Alaska Staff Development Network is a statewide partnership that provides research-based professional development programs for Alaskan educators. It partnered with the Association of

Alaska School Boards' community engagement team to develop an online professional learning community where educators, administrators, counselors, other school staff members, school boards, and community partners could explore social and emotional learning and trauma-engaged practices. In addition to offering recorded webinars, tools, resources, and case studies, the website also has a statewide interactive discussion forum focused on trauma-engaged practices. Current topics include building relationships, family partnerships, deconstructing trauma, and self-care.

Empowering Teachers to Create Trauma-Engaged Initiatives

Since teachers spend most of their time with students, Chicago Public Schools is actively working on getting teachers more involved in promoting healing and supporting their students. Some of the stakeholders involved in creating the district's *Healing-Centered Framework* were teacher representatives from a Teacher Advisory Council. These teacher representatives helped launch two trauma-engaged initiatives for teachers, by teachers. First, they created "Guiding Principles for a Trauma-Engaged Teacher," which identifies five principles that teachers should model as they create safe and respectful environments for students: (1) being well informed, (2) being a relationship builder, (3) cultivating a safe environment, (4) providing equitable instruction to all students, and (5) reflecting on oneself and one's practices. These five principles will be reinforced for teachers in a forthcoming toolkit.[58]

Second, in 2021-2022, Chicago Public Schools is pilot testing a new role of a Trauma Classroom Leader. These teachers are trained in healing-centered, trauma-engaged practices and then take that learning back to their assigned schools where they train and assist their colleagues. This peer training allows these practices to spread. After the pilot test, the eventual goal is to expand the initiative into a specific program granting a credential in trauma-engaged practices.[59]

Mental Health and Behavioral Health Teams at Schools

The leaders consulted for this brief said that in addition to building teachers' capabilities in trauma-engaged work, they expanded efforts to ensure that there would be staff members in school buildings who specialized in trauma-engaged work, and who worked in partnership with community service providers.

DCPS launched a district-level initiative to provide trauma prevention and recovery teams to schools that experience trauma and crises at elevated levels at their sites and in their communities. These district employees provide specialized, in-house support and coordinate school, community, and citywide resources alongside the school's social workers, counselors, and psychologists. The teams aim to foster environments in schools that can buffer these external traumas and prepare them to be more resilient for future crises, so that they will not need to pull in staff members from other schools or roles when crises occur.

In Chicago Public Schools, over 300 schools have some type of multidisciplinary team providing targeted, student-level support. The district has made a commitment—in the *Healing-Centered Framework* and other district initiatives—that every school will have one of these teams. When a student is referred for additional services, the school's team comes together to talk about the student as a whole child: to look at the student's behavior, attendance, and grades; to try to understand

the root cause for the referral; and to consider whether the referral came from a teacher or a parent. These behavioral health teams can build an understanding and awareness among all parties involved in supporting students of the impact of trauma and how to be mindful of the signs and symptoms of suicidal thoughts. And when the district does engage community partners to provide care for students, it tries to include those providers on schools' behavioral health teams because it wants to make sure that there is continuity of care, communication, and collaboration between schools and service providers.

> *"It truly is a whole school, whole child, whole community effort to make sure we are wrapping [our arms around] that child and keeping them safe."*
>
> **Hellen Antonopoulos, Chicago Public Schools**

In the fall of 2020, Alaska DEED was awarded a five-year, $9.1 million grant for Project AWARE (Advancing Wellness and Resiliency in Education) from the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. The goal of the grant is to improve people's understanding of mental health, reduce the stigmas associated with mental health, strengthen the systems that identify student mental health issues so they can identify students who need intervention and provide it earlier, and provide more robust services for students experiencing severe mental health issues. Three Alaskan school districts were selected to use funds to expand their implementation of social emotional learning, restorative practices, and other evidence-based, trauma-engaged practices. Districts can use the money to hire additional staff members who can help them meet mental health challenges.[60] Because there are often no service providers in rural Alaskan communities who can provide mental health support to students, Juneau Borough School District—one of the districts that received Project AWARE funds—hired a trauma-engaged schools specialist to supervise the mental health clinicians at school sites.

Supporting Educators' Social and Emotional Well-Being

Educators need support for their own well-being to do the reflective work necessary to implement these types of changes. The public school system is full of passionate educators who want their students to succeed. Yet the task of teaching is demanding and the needs of students are always increasing, resulting in educators often facing shifting challenges that can lead to stress and fatigue. These challenges can range from directly experiencing violence at school to simply being burned out from helping students through their own experiences of stress or trauma.[61] When teacher stress and burnout are left unaddressed, they can perpetuate a cycle of negative interactions with students.[62] Further, burnout can result in school leaders and staff being too overwhelmed to engage in district-wide initiatives such as equity-focused structural and policy change. Thus, it is important for educational systems to understand how teachers' own social and emotional well-being shapes their practices and interactions with students, and invest in their well-being as a way of indirectly affecting students' social and emotional well-being.[63]

Resources to Promote the Well-Being of School Leaders and Staff Members

Leaders recommended that districts help school leaders and staff to reflect on and tend to their social and emotional well-being. For example, compassion-resilience training offers tools to help

educators manage expectations; set professional and personal boundaries; build trusting relationships with colleagues, students, and families; and care for themselves.[64]

The Alaska *Transforming Schools* framework, for one, emphasizes the social and emotional well-being and self-care of teachers and other school staff members. Alaska DEED has provided professional development on the topics of wellness for educators, for example, by producing an eLearning module focused on self-care. Yet it is not enough to provide professional development; educators need time and space to build relationships and community, support and energize one another, and process their experiences collectively.[65] Thus, the Alaska Healthy Schools Learning Collaborative has also launched a "Thoughtful Thursday" Zoom series to bring educators together to practice mindfulness, reflect, and build community with one another.

In Chicago Public Schools, the district's Office of Social and Emotional Learning created Circles of Support where teachers of all grade levels can be heard, connect with other teachers, build awareness about their experiences with collective trauma, and learn how to promote collective well-being.[66] These groups have been particularly critical given the impact of COVID-19, the national mobilization for social justice that occurred in 2020, and the challenges of reopening schools, which have created a triple dose of stress for teachers. In these circles, teachers can talk with peers, process events, and heal. Further, teachers draw on their experiences in these circles so that they can ultimately lead similar restorative circles with their students in classrooms.

Reflective Supervision

"Reflective supervision" is a clinical strategy that enables supervisors to engage in more purposeful, meaningful, and effective interactions with supervisees who have diverse strengths and needs. The idea is that paying attention to their own emotional responses at work can enable supervisees to cope with job-related stress and improve their work with clients.[67] In school settings, reflective supervision is primarily used to support mental health clinicians. In Juneau Borough School District in Alaska (whose rural communities lack many clinical resources), school-site specialists receive reflective supervision from a remote supervisor in Michigan in a two-hour session each month. This type of strategy could be expanded more broadly to support mental and behavioral health staff members in districts across the United States, even in communities with few service providers. A virtual option like this could even potentially offer this type of supervision to classroom teachers, to help them deal with stress they experience at school.

Conclusion

The U.S. public education system continues to face challenges brought on by the pandemic, with educators and students alike facing increasing needs. The large educational systems featured in this brief are focusing intently on transforming what schooling can be, to support both educators and students. Their leaders are working to strengthen their systems' ability to provide conditions that allow all students to thrive, by redesigning system-level structures and policies from a healing-centered, trauma-engaged perspective. Similarly, since the adults in the system carry out the structures and policies, these systems are providing resources for educators to be healers and to heal.

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