

# Creating Trauma-Informed Schools

Implementation Guide

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## Why do we need trauma-informed professional development?

After surveying more than 1,000 educators, the need for professional development in trauma-informed practices for educators surfaced as a key lever to best support students with trauma. Educator participants consistently expressed a desire to better understand how trauma impacts students neurologically, and many expressed a strong desire to seek out opportunities to gain more competencies. Educators report that the training they do receive is often on a one-time basis or of low quality. The depth of the need to gain trauma-informed competencies far outpaces the availability of such training at a systemic level. This is especially true in our most vulnerable communities, where students are disproportionately exposed to conditions and events that make students more likely to experience trauma. Between half and 2/3 of all students have experienced trauma.

*“Educators will encounter students dealing with trauma issues whether or not we are prepared for them. Without proper training, we are not able to give these students the support that they need.”*

Matt Clark, History Teacher  
at West Roxbury Academy

As educators, we believe trauma-informed practices are fundamental to quality teaching and learning for all students. It is well supported by research that trauma compromises a student’s ability to learn by interfering with brain function. In classrooms, this often presents as aggression, impulsivity, or withdrawal. When trauma is unaddressed, children who need support may instead face excessive discipline. In order to foster schools in which students are supported, are able to access the curriculum, and experience fair discipline, educators and school systems must create policies and make investments that ensure educators are trauma-informed through quality, ongoing a professional development.

## What do educators need to know in order to be trauma-informed?

In order for a school system to create quality professional development on trauma-informed practices it is important to define sub-competencies for what it means to be trauma-informed. In gathering feedback from educators across Boston, we’ve learned that there are five critical sub-competencies for educators to be deemed trauma-informed. Educators first need to understand the impact of trauma on the brain, as well as the prevalence; learn to adapt to students coping with trauma; promote student skill-building; create safe classroom environments; and build relationships with students.

**Note:** It is important to note that educators must develop culturally sustaining practices and see their students through an assets-based lens. This can only be achieved if under each sub-competency, professional development is continually delivered with the intention of building educators’ cultural competencies. This means that educators must believe that all students are resilient and capable of learning. Additionally, identification of students with trauma can become a slippery slope that may

inappropriately target students disproportionately. Rather, assuming that all students can benefit from trauma-informed practices and that all students are capable of experiencing trauma – regardless of background – is best practice.

- **Competency #1: Define and Recognize Trauma.** A key component of professional development must focus on ensuring that all educators understand what trauma is, its prevalence, how it impacts students' brains and the symptoms of students coping with trauma. Between half and two-thirds of all school-aged children experience adverse childhood experiences. Memory, organizational skills, and comprehension are all disrupted by the impact of trauma on the brain. In focus groups, many educators reported being unaware of the neurological impact of trauma on the brain, as well as its prevalence. By understanding the science of how trauma impacts students' brain development as well as coupling it with how trauma presents in the classroom, educators are given the necessary awareness to better understand their students' experiences.

In addition to raising educators' awareness of trauma, it is also important to ensure that professional development adequately prepares educators to both recognize and subsequently adapt when they sense that students are coping with trauma.

- **Competency #2: Adapt to Students with Trauma.** Adapting to students with trauma can be broken down into three main areas, which are described below:
  - **Empathy and Flexibility:** Educators should recognize that students coping with trauma experience seemingly normal events differently than students who are not coping with trauma. Educators should be mindful of these experiences and adapt their interaction with students with care in order to ensure students feel safe and welcome. In addition, students coping with trauma may also show disruption in functional skills, such as trouble with emotional regulation, memory, or concentration.
  - **Choice:** When a student is coping with trauma, their brain is in a state of constant stress, triggering fight, flight, freeze, and surrender instincts. Educators have seen that providing choice in classrooms is an effective tool to help students feel empowered and safe, especially when they are coping with trauma. This includes both behavioral management strategies, as well as lesson-plan design that fosters flexibility and student choice. Educators would benefit from explicit learning more about choice-based lesson planning and behavioral management.
  - **Joy:** Both classroom teaching experience and research has shown that joy and humor help students coping with trauma to feel more relaxed and safe in classrooms. While this may come easier to some educators, explicitly learning more about how to create opportunities for joy and humor in classrooms can help educators see the importance of it as a tool in creating trauma-informed classrooms.

- **Competency #3: Student Skill-Building.** Proactively teaching students how to manage their emotions and stress is an effective way of assisting students in attaining independence and self-regulation. Educators can help students with trauma cope by helping students develop age-appropriate skills to manage their own emotions and stress. Professional development should assist educators in teaching students strategies in peer conflict resolution skills and de-escalation. Strategies can include helping students learn how to find their own safe spaces, communicating their emotions, and developing positive self-talk.
- **Competency #4: Environment.** All students can benefit from safe, supportive, and structured classroom environments, but this is especially true for students coping with trauma. Educators should be provided with explicit professional development on how to design a classroom environment that promotes physical and emotional safety, as well as how to implement routines and create spaces that provide predictability and offer students support for their emotional and academic learning. Educators should know how to create a classroom environment that is predictable and focuses on clear routines and expectations that students know and can do; plan and implement a learning space that strategically manages student behavior and meets a variety of student needs; and design spaces that acknowledge and prepare for a variety of student physical and emotional needs.
- **Competency #5: Relationships.** Educators know very well that the key to having students ready to learn, as well as managing students, is to ensure that students have positive and nurturing relationships with adults. Trauma often disrupts students' abilities to form positive and healthy relationships with adults. Therefore, building relationships with students coping with trauma may often be challenging. While some educators seem naturally gifted at relationship-building, it is a skill that can be learned and improved. Providing professional development that reviews how educators can develop relationship-building skills through a trauma-informed lens can help prioritize the need for educators to focus on this competency, as well as provide educators with tools that they may use immediately.

*“Teaching students how to manage their own emotions and how to help themselves heal is as important to me as teaching students to read or do grade-level math. Students cannot do math or ELA unless their trauma is addressed.”*

Katie Mallon, Cluster Substitute  
at Tobin K-8

## What will prioritizing professional development look like?

After discussing what it would look like for Boston Public Schools to prioritize trauma-informed schools, we identified clear goals that:

*“It is urgent for BPS to prioritize fostering trauma-informed schools, because there is a growing population of children in Boston who are not being served to the best of our ability as educators. They are in need of teachers who are trained in giving students the tools for long-term success.”*

Nina Leuzzi, Pre-K Teacher  
at Bridge Boston Charter School

1. All first year educators, as well as educators in levels 3, 4 and 5 schools should be prioritized in receiving trauma-informed professional development. Trainings should be delivered at least three times throughout the year and align to the competencies outlined above. Educators should be able to define and recognize trauma, adapt to student trauma, help students build skills in emotional regulation and self-advocacy, create trauma-informed classroom spaces, and know best practices in relationship-building with students.
2. Within three years, Boston Public Schools should create a plan to ensure that all educators receive trauma-informed training.
3. School leaders should prioritize and the Boston Public Schools central office should assist schools in creating schedules that allow for authentic educator-to-student relationship-building, such as advisory time, community meetings, and after school activities.
4. All schools must create and follow a plan to implement positive behavioral support. This will include a set of strategies and procedures designed to improve behavioral success by employing non-punitive, proactive, and systematic techniques.

## Conclusion and Next Steps

The devastating impact of trauma on learning and student success is clear. As educators, we know that we are not adequately trained and ready to support the high level of trauma that our students experience. To fill this gap, we urge Boston Public Schools to invest in quality professional development on trauma-informed practices. In doing so, Boston Public Schools can move closer to closing persistent opportunity and achievement gaps.

We know that delivering high-quality professional development will invite a host implementation challenges. In writing this guide, we hope to provide the district with teacher-written recommendations on how to deploy the trainings in a way that is most helpful to teachers in supporting students. We hope to partner with the district in rolling out these supports to educators.

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