

# Schools that Heal

Creating trauma-informed  
school communities

MAY 2017



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## Teacher Action Team

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Special thanks to  
400 Boston teachers,  
administrators, counselors  
and school-based staff  
whose inputs are shaping  
outcomes for students  
experiencing trauma.



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# The challenge and opportunity

## Key definitions

**Trauma** is the response to a negative external event or series of events—such as homelessness, bullying, and witnessing violence—not the event itself. Trauma weakens a person's ability to cope and disrupts brain development, making it difficult for a student to learn.<sup>1</sup>

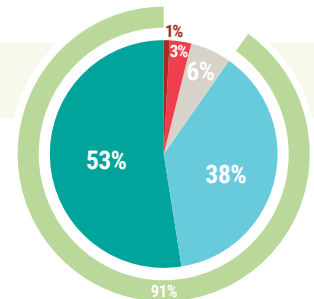
**Trauma-informed schools** are school communities in which all adults (including, but not limited to administrators, teachers, aides, and security) are trained to support students experiencing trauma. Students are provided resources to both understand and cope with stress, and responsibility is shared among students and staff to create a culture of open communication, trust, and respect.<sup>2</sup>

**Social emotional learning (SEL)** is a set of processes through which children and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and display empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.<sup>3</sup>

As educators, we believe that our students enter our classrooms with innate strength, resiliency, and desire to learn and grow. However, we are concerned that for many students, their resiliency and desire to learn can be overwhelmed by the impact of trauma. In order for our students to feel safe and supported, we often take extra measures, from mentoring students to helping our students' families gain access to community resources. Yet despite our best intentions and hardest work, we know that our extra efforts are not enough for students coping with trauma. Instead, our students need us to be drivers in creating systemic supports through policies that create trauma-informed schools.

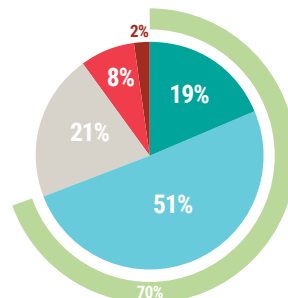
We know from our classroom experiences that student trauma is far too common. When surveying our colleagues across Boston, 91 percent of educators reported that student trauma is a challenge at their schools.<sup>4</sup> Research confirms our observations: between half and two-thirds of all school-aged children experience trauma.<sup>5</sup>

## 160 BOSTON TEACHERS SURVEYED Findings on Trauma



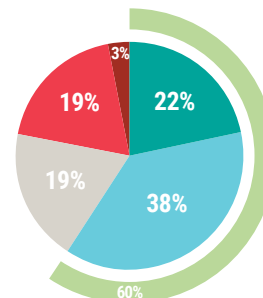
"It is a challenge at my school"

**91%**  
of teachers say trauma is a challenge



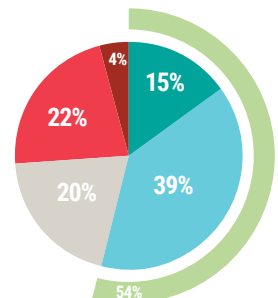
"We do not have **training** to tackle the issue"

**70%**  
of teachers say they lack adequate training



"We do not have **resources** to tackle the issue"

**60%**  
believe they do not have adequate resources



"We do not have **staff** to tackle the issue"

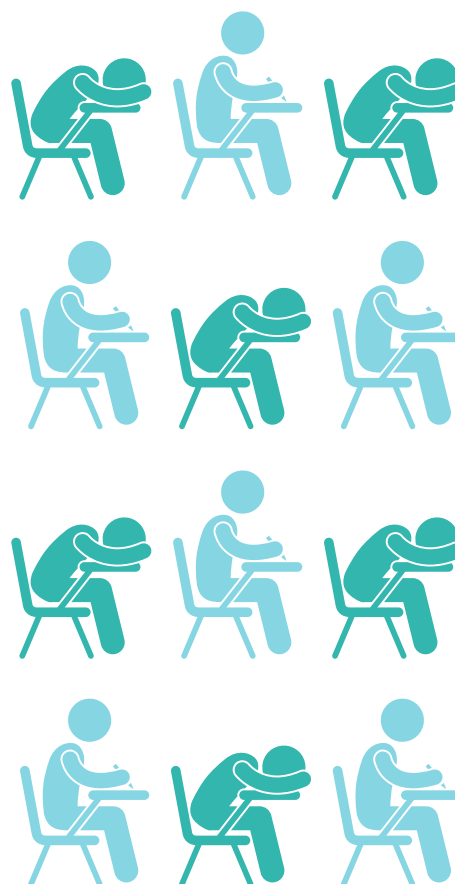
**54%**  
believe there is not adequate staffing



Without a doubt, trauma is a threat to our students' potential to achieve. Memory, organizational skills, and comprehension are all disrupted by the impact of trauma on the brain.<sup>6</sup> In our classrooms, this means that experiencing trauma may make it more difficult for our students to complete tasks, such as taking notes or recalling information. Coping with trauma also affects students' ability to build trusting relationships with their peers and adults, as the stress causes students to feel unsafe and triggers fight-or-flight responses at seemingly ordinary occurrences, such as behavioral corrections.<sup>7</sup> In many cases these symptoms can be met with disproportionate disciplinary responses or overlooked entirely. These responses, in turn, perpetuate a cycle of trauma, where schools often miss opportunities to support students.

Fortunately, responsive relationships and positive interactions are powerful tools in breaking the cycle of trauma.<sup>8</sup> In order to create schools that foster student resiliency, we must first understand and be equipped to respond to student trauma. Safe and supportive school environments help break the cycle of trauma, and we, as educators, are well positioned to design and lead the creation of policies that promote these schools. We are also keenly aware that while we must have a leading role in creating trauma-informed schools through policy, this work is incomplete without engaging family and community members. For this reason, our recommendations go beyond our classrooms toward creating a trauma-informed community.

We acknowledge that state and district-level policymakers have taken important, initial steps to create safe and supportive schools. However, in order to effectively create long-term school- and classroom-based change, educators must be included in the policy-making process. The following recommendations are grounded in research and, more importantly, the experiences of nearly 400 public school teachers from across Boston. Our policy proposals aim to create trauma-informed schools while taking into account the time and resource constraints that educators and leaders face.



**Between half and two-thirds  
of all school-aged children  
experience trauma.**

Washington State Family Policy Council 2009  
Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System

# Deepen practitioner competencies

## OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

### Boston Public Schools should:

- Prioritize professional development of school-based staff in trauma-informed practices by developing standards on trauma-informed competencies.
- Equip school leaders with the resources to facilitate their schools' shift to trauma-informed practices.
- Support educators' learning opportunities by creating a district-wide professional learning network that is focused on trauma-informed teaching.
- Assist educators in implementing culturally competent behavioral interventions by providing anti-bias training.

Studies show that teachers are the most important in-school factor in promoting student academic success, and social and emotional wellness.<sup>9</sup> Positive relationships with adults, such as educators, can help prevent and reverse the effects of student trauma.<sup>10</sup>

“

Once you have a trauma-informed lens, you change your perspective on teaching. I see the impact of trauma every day. It has definitely made me more patient, more nurturing, and more of an advocate for kids. I have a feeling that I can speak more about it to my staff and my administrators.”

Dave Barry, Kindergarten Teacher  
at the Josiah Quincy School

In a survey of more than 160 of our colleagues across the district, teachers identified educator training as the key lever to best support students with trauma.<sup>11</sup> Data from focus groups further supported the importance of training school staff. Teacher 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. Given the importance and complexity of trauma-informed practices, and the gap educators experience in access to consistent and quality professional development, we highly recommend that the district invest in deepening educators' competencies in these areas.

In order to create consistent and quality professional development on trauma-informed practices for all schools, the district should implement research-based, district-wide standards that outline what educators ought to know and do to foster trauma-informed schools. This will guide practitioners to informally assess their own areas of strength and development.

Through focus groups, Boston teachers expressed a deep desire to learn more about trauma-informed practices from one another. In order to facilitate this, we recommend establishing a centralized network that provides educators with the opportunity to gain competencies in trauma-informed practices. To ensure the sustainability of this network, the district could partner with the union. Boston already employs this model of district-union partnership in other professional development areas. In this network, we imagine that educators would have the opportunity to share their practices, learn from experts and researchers in the field, and form connections with colleagues in other schools. As a result, this cross-district partnership will promote a culture of learning around trauma-informed practices across the district, and students would benefit from teachers continually improving in these practices.

“  
**Setting a district-wide vision would be the most beneficial place to begin so that everyone is on the same page.”**

Caroline Ballou, ESL Teacher  
at East Boston High School

Disproportionate disciplinary action hinders student achievement and creates mistrust between students and school-based staff.<sup>12</sup> One cause of excessive discipline is the occurrence of cultural and linguistic misunderstandings between students and staff. Increasing cultural competency through anti-bias training may reduce incidents of conflict that stem from this misunderstanding. We recommend that the district train all school-based staff on awareness of implicit biases to equip educators with deeper cultural and linguistic competencies. By providing implicit-bias training and increasing awareness of our students' cultural and linguistic expressions, we can work to reduce disciplinary action for all students. Reducing excessive discipline school-wide will create safe and supportive schools for all students.

### **What success looks like**

Standards and self-assessment tools for trauma-based practices are available to all school staff, and the district ensures that school leaders are equipped to provide their staff with centralized resources, such as in-house training and a professional development curriculum. The district provides all school-based staff with anti-bias training and other opportunities to enhance their cultural and linguistic competencies.

## **Best practice**

The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction provides educators with self-evaluation tools and checklists to assess whether their practices are trauma-informed. Furthermore, online module trainings support teachers' ongoing development. We would benefit from similarly centralized resources and training opportunities to best support students with trauma.

“  
**I have been teaching for thirteen years and see that trauma has been constantly a barrier to my students' ability to learn. We need to shine a light on trauma; it is one of the biggest threats to student achievement.”**

Nina Leuzzi  
Kindergarten Teacher  
Bridge Boston Charter School

# Cultivate a trauma-informed community

At the heart of a trauma-informed community are compassion and consideration of external factors that impact and inform student behavior. Our students need not only a trauma-informed school-based staff, but also a trauma-informed community. We can move toward this objective by setting a clear district-wide vision, ensuring that each school appoints liaisons with its local communities, and sharing knowledge and training with family and community members through the district's central office and school-level community workshops.

## OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

### Boston Public Schools should:

- Set a district-wide vision for a trauma-informed school community.
- Designate trauma-informed teacher-leaders on School Support Teams to ensure that school culture is strengthened using a trauma-informed lens.
- Empower families and community members with training to understand the impact of trauma on students' learning and behavior.

To promote coherence and a spirit of learning and collaboration, Boston Public Schools' leadership must create a common language to address the issue as a team. Although Boston educators may be familiar with the concept of trauma, we lack a shared vocabulary to explore and solve the related issues together through school partnerships and district-wide discussions. This recommendation, coupled with our recommended district-wide standards on trauma-informed competencies, will define and create a clearer vision for how the district intends to become a trauma-informed system for educators and students.

## RECOMMENDATION

### Trauma-Informed School Communities



With the appointment of trauma-informed teacher-leaders, Boston Public School's Student Support Teams are positioned to create a shared trauma-informed language.



For schools to truly shift into trauma-informed communities, educators must lead the work. When the district empowers teachers, research shows change is more likely to be sustained. In Boston, schools already have established School Support Teams (SSTs) to respond to students' nonacademic needs. We can leverage SSTs to transform schools into trauma-informed communities by designating a point person within the team to lead the necessary work to shift school culture. This SST role also provides a career ladder for teachers while ensuring that schools have the resources and training they need. This appointee can be a mentor for teachers learning to improve their trauma-informed competencies, guide the school's professional development, serve as a point person for students and families to connect with local community resources, and liaise between the school and the district office.

Boston cannot actualize a vision for trauma-informed schools and communities without engaging families and building upon existing partnerships between schools and the community. Students spend more time out of school than in the classroom, and will benefit when the community is aware of the impact that trauma has on brain development. In order to ensure that trauma-informed practices extend beyond the school walls, we recommend that the district provide opportunities for families and community members to learn about how to help students cope with trauma. We imagine that the trainings would be delivered to families through a partnership between the Boston Public Schools' Office of Engagement and community-based organizations. To ensure accessibility, trainings should be held across the city in schools, community centers, and places of worship. When all stakeholders are more trauma-informed, our students will have access to the positive and responsive relationships that are crucial to mitigate the impact of traumatic experiences.

### **What success looks like**

The district would create and communicate a clear vision for building trauma-informed schools. Student Support Teams would appoint key educators to spearhead their schools' shift to a trauma-informed environment with training from the district. Families and community members would receive opportunities to learn about and implement trauma-informed practices.

## **Best practice**

The San Diego County school system has taken steps to become a fully trauma-informed school system by establishing a clear, district-based vision, communicating a strategy to actualize that vision, and providing the training to ensure that educators are equipped to adopt the vision.

# Reinforce schools with resources

## OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

### The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education should:

- Provide learning opportunities on trauma to educators as a required component of all preparation and re-certification programs.

### The Massachusetts legislature should:

- Establish a minimum school counselor-to-student ratio of 1:250 and a school psychologist-to-student ratio of 1:700.
- Create a school funding structure that is responsive to the increased cost of educating vulnerable student populations.

As teachers and districts work to increase our competencies around responding to trauma at the school level, state policymakers should ensure that teaching candidates entering the profession or gaining re-certification are ready to educate students coping with trauma. We recommend that the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education create partnerships with programs to offer courses on how to create safe and supportive schools throughout educators' careers.

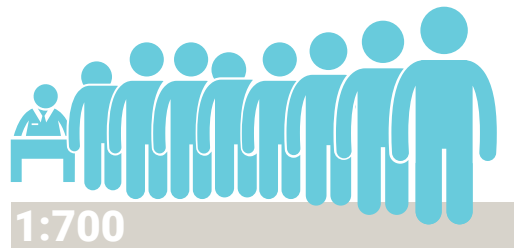
In addition to deepening practitioner knowledge and cultivating trauma-informed communities, elected officials should guarantee adequate staffing ratios and funding structures that are necessary to support trauma-informed schools. Currently, high-needs schools often lack the staff to adequately support students with trauma. As of 2015, Boston Public Schools employed 55 full-time school psychologists serving approximately 54,000 students, which is a ratio of 1:981. Providing additional school counselors and psychologists is a fundamental step to increasing access to mental health services and supports in schools.

## TRAUMA-INFORMED COMMUNITY

### Staff Support Ratios



Boston Public School's ratio of full time school psychologists to students, 2015



NASP recommended ratio of full time school psychologists to students

Research informs us that supportive and responsive relationships provide a buffer and even act as a source of prevention to student trauma. The National Association for School Psychologists (NASP) reports that only a fraction of students in need actually receive mental health services, and among those who do, the majority access those services in school.<sup>14</sup> With this in mind, NASP recommends a minimum school counselor-to-student ratio of 1:250 and a school psychologist-to-student ratio of 1:700. If we increase the number of school-based staff focused on social and emotional wellness, students will have more access to much-needed services that they might otherwise never have the opportunity to access.

“

**For 1,000 students, we have just one school psychologist. Since we are short staffed, she has to spend more time on paperwork and tracking attendance than meeting with students. If we had appropriate student to support staff ratios, students coping with trauma would have more time receiving services.”**

Stephanie Pottinger, Science Teacher  
at Richard J. Murphy School

Further, without adequate funding, Massachusetts will not be able to implement or sustain our recommendations. In order to equitably fund school districts, we recommend that state legislators adopt the 2016 recommendations of the Foundation Budget Review Commission.<sup>15</sup> The Commission found that the way Massachusetts calculates a district's foundation aid—the primary program for distributing the state's portion of K–12 public education funding to local and regional school districts—is outdated and significantly underestimates the costs of educating high-needs students. The Commission recognized that educators across the state believe there is a “staggering” need to improve student mental health. In order to support students with trauma, state legislators must provide funds through a sustainable and responsive school funding structure rather than the current system that underfunds schools serving our most vulnerable youth.

## Best practice

In 2015, the state legislature established the Foundation Budget Review Commission to review strategies to improve the efficiency and efficacy of the state's funding formula.<sup>16</sup> Due to increasing populations of special education students, the Commission found that the state foundation budget underscored and underfunded districts' special education enrollment projections by \$1 billion. Similarly, the original foundation budget did not foresee the dramatic increase in health insurance costs for staff, and underfunded the cost of health insurance by \$1.1 billion. The Commission identifies that this gap in state funding reduces available resources for special populations of students such as English Learners and low-income students.

# Conclusion

As educators, we know that schools can be healing places that break the cycle of student trauma. Given the high portion of our students who are limited by the effects of trauma, and our community's lack of competencies necessary to support students, it is necessary to implement educator-driven policies at the state, district, and school levels. Massachusetts and Boston have long been national leaders in providing students a quality public school education, and now we have the opportunity to once again lead the nation by creating trauma-informed school communities for all students. When educators work alongside policymakers, schools can be places of learning and healing, enabling all students to achieve at their full potential.

## Caveats and considerations

Identifying each student with trauma is not necessary to support students. In fact, all students benefit from trauma-informed practices. We take caution and know that it is not educators' role, or to the benefit of students, to attempt to identify or treat individual students' trauma. This requires tremendous resources, specialization, and time. Rather than isolating and focusing on a subset of students, we are working to create schools that transform school culture through student-centered practices to create safe and supportive schools.

Creating a causal link between trauma and poverty is another common pitfall. It is critical to remember that trauma is not an event, but rather the way a person experiences an event. The conditions of poverty make students more susceptible to experiencing trauma, but poverty itself is not a direct cause. Therefore, students in poverty may be more likely to experience trauma, but trauma is neither restricted to those in poverty, nor is it the direct cause. This is a critical consideration, since students who are not in poverty can still experience trauma, and many students who are in poverty may never experience trauma.

We also want to acknowledge that our work is only a part of many state- and city-wide efforts, and significant work already exists at the school, district, union, and community levels in addressing the needs of students with trauma. Our recommendations seek to encourage, build, and advance current and future work.

# Methodology

## Identifying E4E Boston's policy focus on supporting students with trauma

Educators for Excellence–Boston conducted a series of one-on-one conversations with teachers from across greater Boston to identify the issues at the top of educators' minds. From these conversations, we amassed a list of 10 issues that emerged as themes and conducted a randomly sampled, representative poll of 100 Boston Public Schools teachers to narrow that list. The top four issues were voted on by educators at a caucus-style event where teachers unanimously chose to advocate for research and provide recommendation for how to better support students with trauma.

## About the Teacher Action Team

We are a team of eight teachers who volunteered to meet over the course of four months to propose research-based supports for students with trauma. We reviewed research on trauma, surveyed our colleagues across Boston to hear their insights and recommendations, conducted focus groups, and engaged in important discussions around diversity and inclusion in service of writing policy recommendations to support students with trauma. We strove to write recommendations that are student-focused and achievable while ambitious. Most importantly, our recommendations are the product of input from many educators from diverse school settings who each want to improve the learning environments for our most vulnerable students.

Swapna Bolleboina  
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Higginson-Lewis K-8

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Bridge Boston Charter School

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Special Education Teacher,  
UP Academy Holland

## Policy Focus Selection



one-on-one  
conversations  
with Boston  
teachers

revealed

top 10 issues



100 Boston Public School  
teachers polled

identified

top 4 issues



teacher caucus vote  
on top four issues

revealed



1  
unanimous  
choice

how to better support  
students with trauma



# Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Cole, S. F., O'Brien, J. G., Gadd, M. G., Risuccia, J., & Gregory, M. (2009). *Helping Traumatized Children Learn* (Rep.). Boston, MA: Massachusetts Advocates for Children: Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Durlak, J. A., Weissberg, R. P., Dymnicki, A. B., Taylor, R. D., & Schellinger, K. B. (2011). The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: a meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. *Child Development*, 82(1): 405–432.

<sup>4</sup> Survey conducted by E4E-Boston of 160 Boston teachers.

<sup>5</sup> Anda, R.F. & Brown, D.W. (2010). *Adverse Childhood Experiences and Population Health in Washington: The Face of a Chronic Public Health Disaster—Results from the 2009 Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS)*. Washington State Family Policy Council.

<sup>6</sup> Shonkoff, J. P., Garner, A. S., Siegel, B. S., Dobbins, M. I., Earls, M. F., McGuinn, L., & Committee on Early Childhood, Adoption, and Dependent Care. (2012). The lifelong effects of early childhood adversity and toxic stress. *Pediatrics*, 129(1), e232–e246.

<sup>7</sup> Van der Kolk, B. A. (1994). The body keeps the score: Memory and the evolving psychobiology of posttraumatic stress. *Harvard Review of Psychiatry*, 1(5), 253–265.

<sup>8</sup> Shonkoff, et al.

<sup>9</sup> Kane, T. J., & Staiger, D. O. (2008). Estimating teacher impacts on student achievement: An experimental evaluation (No. w14607). National Bureau of Economic Research.

<sup>10</sup> Shonkoff, et al.

<sup>11</sup> Survey conducted by E4E-Boston of 160 Boston teachers.

<sup>12</sup> Gregory, A., Skiba, R. J., & Noguera, P. A. (2010). The achievement gap and the discipline gap two sides of the same coin? *Educational Researcher*, 39(1), 59–68.

<sup>13</sup> Marzano, R., Waters, T., & McNulty, B. (2005). *School leadership that works: From research to results*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

<sup>14</sup> Valley-Gray, S. A., Lazarus, P., Cash, R. E., & Oganess Murray, M. (2010). NASP Model for Comprehensive and Integrated School Psychological Services.

<sup>15</sup> Demystifying the Chapter 70 Formula: How the Massachusetts Education Funding System Works. (n.d.). Retrieved from [http://www.massbudget.org/report\\_window.php?loc=Facts\\_10\\_22\\_10.html](http://www.massbudget.org/report_window.php?loc=Facts_10_22_10.html)

<sup>16</sup> Final Report, Foundation Budget Review Commission (Rep.). (2015, October 30). Retrieved March 15, 2017, from Foundation Budget Review Commission website: <http://www.mass.gov/legis/journal/desktop/2015/fbrc.pdf>



**For far too long, teachers have been treated as subjects of change rather than as agents of change.**

Founded by public school teachers, Educators for Excellence is a growing movement of 25,000 educators, united around a common set of values and principles for improving student learning and elevating the teaching profession. We work together to identify issues that impact our schools, create solutions to these challenges, and advocate for policies and programs that give all students access to a quality education.

**Learn more at [E4E.org](http://E4E.org).**

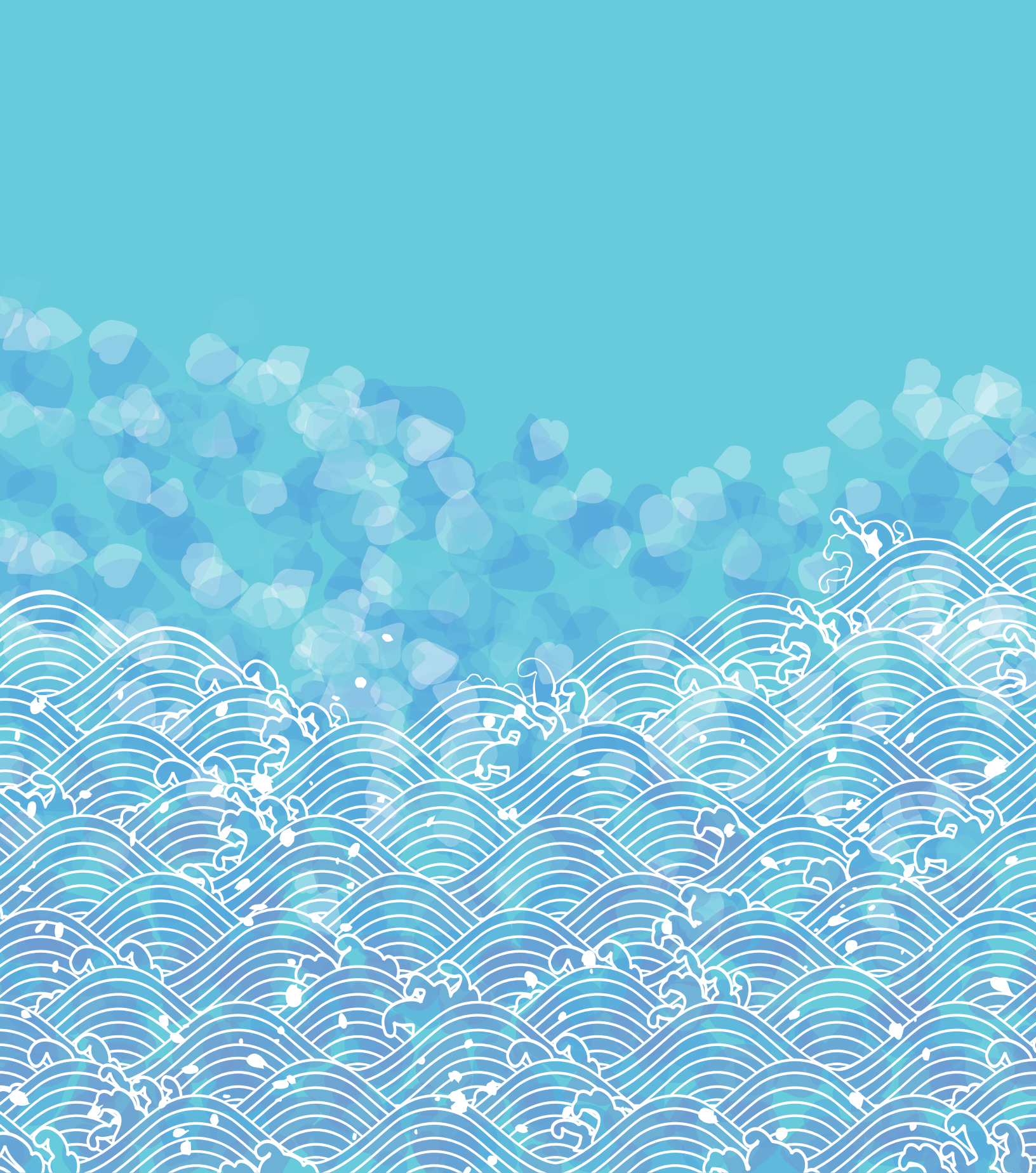
“

We have to get rid of the stigma of trauma. Students are labeled as having behavioral issues without knowing their stories. Hearing my students' stories makes the issue so personal to me. It allows me to understand where they come from and cultivate a closer relationship with each one of them.”

Antonelli Mejia  
Student Support Counselor,  
Fenway High School

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